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The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians, and Others

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REVIEW

Roger E. Van Harn, ed.

The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians, and Others

(Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), pb., xiii+222 pp.

Reviewed by Rifat Sonsino, Boston College

The Ten Commandments have been studied extensively, yet, in the last few decades only a few scholarly commentaries have analyzed them seriatim. For example, in the 1950's, Solomon Goldman examined each "Word" (the Hebrew term for these commandments) one after the other in *The Ten Commandments* (Chicago: Phoenix, 1956), providing valuable rabbinic insights. In the late 1990's, Rachel S. Mikva edited *Broken Tablets* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1999) with emphasis on the contemporary applications of the Decalogue, and David N. Freedman, edited, *The Nine Commandments* (NY: Doubleday, 2000), in which the contributors studied the Decalogue mostly within the context of the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East. The major critical review of the Decalogue, written from an historical-critical perspective is *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, edited by Ben-Zion Segal (English version edited by Gershon Levi, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990). However, this book does not contain an extensive examination of each commandment, but rather deals primarily with textual issues, such as division, cantillation, its use in liturgy, in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish thought and practice.

In Van Harn's book we find a collection of articles on each of the ten "Words", written by various authors. None of the contributors claims to write as the representative of his/her religious tradition, though they all are committed members of their faith. The collection quotes the RSV version of the Decalogue, but Jewish authors point to the Jewish division whenever necessary. Each "Word" in the book is presented by a major essay and a response by another scholar. (For some reason, the "Sixth Word," dealing with homicide, is accompanied by two responses). The collection also has a Foreword by Peter W. Ochs and an Afterword by Richard John Neuhaus. The overwhelming majority of the contributors are academics in reputable universities of the USA.

The collection of articles has a clear "religious" and even a "pastoral" bent to it. As Von Harn indicates in his Preface, "This book is based on the conviction that the 'Decalogue' was given by God to guide the life of God's covenant community." In a thought-provoking analysis of each "Word," participants give us a Christian (Catholic or Protestant) and a Jewish evaluation based on the classical texts of the authors' respective religious tradition. Almost all contributors extend the original meaning of the commandments to other areas of societal life today. For instance, Daniel Polish argues that in the "Second Word," "even the idea of God we hold can become an idol" (p. 34). With regard to the "Fifth Word," Byron L. Sherwin, based on Talmudic teachings, points out that "the honor due biological parents was extended to stepparents, to adoptive parents, and even to an older sibling" (p. 97). Allen Vermes, quoting Calvin, states that the "Eighth Word" prohibits "theft by violence, theft by fraud, theft through craftiness, theft through flatteries" (p. 165). Similarly, Miroslav Volf and Linn Tonstad, state that the "Ninth Word" by extension, forbids all lying, including stereotyping, false advertising, and propaganda, even hypocrisy (p. 185).

Among the writers there is agreement on most of the issues relating to the Decalogue's contemporary relevance, but there are also clearly articulated differences. For example, in the "Seventh Word" dealing with adultery, Carl E. Braaten argues in the spirit of Christian teachings that "According to God's design [marriage] is indissoluble" (p. 143), but Elliot N. Dorff, writing from a Jewish perspective, counteracts by saying that although "divorce is not a sin, it is always sad" (p.155). The two also disagree regarding homosexuality, with Braaten arguing that homosexuality is "abnormal" (p.141), and Dorff denying this claim, averring, "God has created most of us as heterosexual but some of us as homosexual" (p. 154). Similarly, dealing with the "Ninth Word," David Patterson, takes exception to Miroslav Volf and Linn Tonsstad's claim that opposition to the gospel constitutes false witnessing about God. He writes, "It would seem, then, that the Jews, who conscientiously reject the gospel, are in violation of the ninth commandment" (p. 198).

For me, the value of the book would have been enhanced, if it also included even a cursory reference to some of the textual issues that frame the discussion and give a context to the study of the commandments. For example, there is no mention of the possible origin and provenance of the term YHWH in the "First Word;" no awareness that the term "love" at the end of the "Second Word" really means "covenantal loyalty," reflecting the treaty traditions of the ancient Near East; and also no reference to the various meanings of the Hebrew expression "*la-shav*" in the "Fourth Word" (i.e., does the commandment refer to perjury or the frivolous use of God's name?). Missing is a discussion about the possible origins of the Sabbath, and how, why and when this sacred day was moved by early Christians from the seventh day of the week to the first/eighth. Even though Neuhaus, in his Afterword, states that he has "a problem with the very idea of commandments" (p. 118), no one in the book has raised the issue of the *Sitz im Leben* of these so-called "commandments" within the context of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East. Although attributed to God and unique in their setting, could or should these sayings be viewed perhaps as wisdom instructions, and not necessarily as "law"? After all, no penalties accompany them; the Fifth Word comes only with a promise of wellbeing in the future. Maybe this historical approach was left out because attention seems to have been given primarily and successfully to the way in which the commandments were traditionally interpreted by the church and rabbinic scholars, and, with the purpose, as Ochs states in his Foreword, "to offer scriptural guidelines for our responses to today's social challenges and crises" (p. ix). As such, the book is insightful, thought provoking, and engaging.