

CHAPTER FIVE

The Ten Commandments

*Religion is regarded by the common people as true,
by the wise as false, and by rulers as useful.*

—Attributed to Seneca the Younger

It's Yahweh or the Highway

Moses is credited with introducing Ethical Monotheism to Western Civilization. But the idea of an unchanging moral code established by a single all-powerful author wasn't entirely new, even back then. We saw in Babylon how Hammurabi codified legal and ethical behavior and etched it in stone. Maybe he wasn't a genuine god, more of a god-king, but nobody was about to argue with him. We then dropped in on the Egyptian court of the Afterlife, where Osiris judged the fate of the soul according to most of the same moral standards we observe today.

In the same period that the Hebrew Bible was assembled, around the 5th century BC, secular philosophers like Confucius and Socrates developed ethical codes of their own. It was a theme that ran through an era historians call the Axial Age—from roughly 900 to 300 BC. The centuries in which most of the major religions and philosophies we know today emerged.

One advantage of the Hebrew code was its simplicity. A clear list of do's and don'ts from one all-powerful vice cop. In an age of bickering barbarians and competing gods, the concept was a grabber. The marquee value of these basic rules brought ease of understanding and, by elevating the lawmaker from a human monarch to the Lord of Heaven, they'd be beyond criticism. Who's going to improve on them? *You*? All this made for structure and stability in life—something very appealing to a homeless nation of former slaves.

Which List of Ten?

Technically, there aren't ten commandments. They're not numbered in the original text and, by some counts, there are as many as fourteen. This is why the Jewish, the Catholic and the Protestant lists don't precisely match. For instance, the Jewish version has, "I am the Lord God" as the First Commandment, even though it's not really a commandment. This is probably why Catholics and Protestants don't count it. They regard "Thou shall hold no other gods before Me" as the First Commandment.

But Jews and Catholics lump that commandment together with the ban on graven images, which Protestants see as a law all its own. And while Jews and Protestants regard not coveting your neighbor's wife and property as one commandment, Catholics separate them into two, arguing that coveting your neighbor's wife is different from coveting his snowblower. They may have a point.

Anyway, Moses ascends Mount Sinai by himself while his brother, Aaron, is left in charge of the people. As Moses approaches the summit, there is thunder and lightning and the blast of a trumpet. God is summoning him. Once he reaches the peak, Moses watches the Lord God himself write ten commandments on the front *and back* of two stone tablets. God doesn't waste writing materials. Nor does he waste words.

1: Thou shall hold no other gods before Me.

The message comes in loud and clear. It's all about him and him alone. This makes matters simple. But it also tosses religious freedom out the window. Tolerance is now a vice, not a virtue. No more of this pagan, live-and-let-live nonsense with other deities. No more dropping by the neighbor's house to borrow the fertility goddess for the night. Yahweh is the new god in town and the cosmos just ain't big enough for two of 'em. One God fits all. And if there are any doubts about how serious he is:

"Whoever sacrifices to any god, save to the Lord only, shall
be utterly destroyed." [Exodus 22:20]

Oookaaaaay... With the birth of monotheism comes the birth of religious intolerance. Everyone else had many gods to choose from, each with their own jurisdiction. You didn't have to care much about what the god next door was thinking. Now, along comes a group with a new philosophy: There is only *one* God (at least, only one worth paying attention to), he likes us best and, if you don't worship him the way we do, you're part of the problem. This isn't going to make you a whole lot of friends.

It wouldn't have caused too much trouble if the god of the Israelites had remained their own national deity. But when Yahweh decided to become everyone's god, the neighbors started to complain. Pagans didn't want to be governed by this god's followers and be told they weren't his favorite

because they're not descended from Abraham. They could either stand there and take it like a heathen or they could fight. Most of them fought.

Monotheism has its strengths to be sure. But there's something about it that makes people go nuts with the desire to convert everyone else in sight. Even in polytheistic Egypt, a century before Moses, no sooner did King Akhenaten establish his one-god/Sun God cult than he brutally forced it upon everyone. The three great monotheistic faiths have each repeated this behavior in their own time. When monotheism is the law, persecution becomes justice. The highest value is obedience to God and that means obedience to whomever speaks for him—which is the whole problem.

Pious kings, pushy popes and smarmy televangelists have a way of equating their opinion with the will of the Almighty. And who's to say they're wrong? *You?* Your job is to humbly serve God the way his self-appointed spokesmen demand. After all, these men were called by heaven. How do we know? They said so, that's how.

This commandment also reveals something about the era in which it was written. Banning the worship of other gods was necessary because apparently there *were* other gods. At the time, it wasn't clear that Yahweh himself was a true monotheist. Given how touchy he is about competition, he'd be rather loopy to be jealous of non-existent rivals. Maybe those other gods were real. Yahweh might have feared that, if the Israelites were free to compare his performance with that of Baal or Zoroaster or Zeus, he might not stack up so well. Maybe he worried that other gods could offer better guidance in areas where he was weak—like sex education or anger management.

- 2: You shall not make for yourself any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath it, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.**

Okay. No graven images. Except nowadays we tend to ignore this one. The U.S. government has a Bureau of Engraving—your tax dollars at work. Technically, the Second Commandment doesn't just prohibit images of God. It prohibits representational images of "anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath it..." The first time you drew lollipop trees and a house with a curly cue of smoke coming from the chimney you were in trouble with God. See how easy it is?

Long ago, the Catholic Church employed a little judicial activism and interpreted this rule as a ban only against the engraved idols of other faiths. Statues and paintings of Jesus or saints were not idols, especially if the Church owned them. This allowed them to amass biblical artworks by the

ton. They procured or commissioned likenesses of people and nature in every medium from paint and marble to stained glass and human skulls.

Protestant churches usually avoided such ostentation and generally kept their churches modest and art free. They used crosses (with no Jesus) instead of crucifixes (with Jesus). Yet even they sometimes bent the rules when it came to marketing Christian imagery. Today, a quick survey of online Christian tchotchke shops reveals enough Jesus paraphernalia to fill the Roman Coliseum.

It's funny where people draw the line on graven images. Jews living under Rome felt that paying homage to the emperor was idolatry, especially when the emperors started calling themselves gods. Since Roman coins were engraved with the emperor's image, orthodox Jews refused to use them. That's why they had moneychangers—to trade them for non-offending currency.

Today, some Christian sects regard saluting the American flag as a form of idolatry. But plenty of others have no trouble treating it as an icon of religion-like veneration. They support bans on flag-burning, they see flag lapel pins as part of the national dress code, and they imagine Jesus wrapped in Old Glory. Of course, some of them also imagine him carrying an AR-15.

Only Muslims appear to take this no-images commandment literally, which is why you don't see portraits of Allah or Mohammad staring down at you in the streets of Tehran or Damascus. That privilege is reserved for military dictators and vengeance-obsessed mullahs. For strict Muslims, likenesses are forbidden, which is why mosques are ornamented with abstract art and why political cartoons depicting the Prophet can set cities aflame. Typically, no representational images of any kind are permitted. I guess this means moviemakers and TV producers are all destined for hell. But then we already knew that.

It's fair to say that making idols is an acknowledgement of other deities. But why a ban on *all* images? One reason: The ancient Hebrew priests were afraid that people might turn anything that wasn't nailed down into a god. [Christians insert your own joke.] And the record does show that people are easily lured into cultish idolatry—even with stuff that isn't supposed to be religious.

One July 4th, I turned on the Trinity Network and caught the performance of a Christian choir on a small stage, all of them dressed in red-white-and-blue and belting out a gospel rendition of *The Star-Spangled Banner* with enough evangelical pomp to wake Francis Scott Key from the dead. As the song climaxed, dancers in silver spandex and capes spangled with stars and stripes frolicked across the stage like a ballet of Captain Americas. The whole thing ended with an assault of sparkers, flags, tinsel, smoke, and the singers shrieking, "America! America! A-mer-i-ca!! AAA-MEEER-III-CAAAA!!!" It was a display of nationalist idolatry rarely found outside of North Korea. I think the Second Commandment was written for people like this.

In ancient times, pagans regarded their statues as *symbols* of their gods, not gods themselves. But it didn't look that way to the Hebrew priests. If the locals created a religious image, it had to be a false deity.

This is the uninformed attitude taken by many outsiders when observing religions from afar, as when early European explorers in Africa would peer through the bush to see tribesmen conducting rituals around a wooden totem pole or the like. "Dash it all, Humphrey! *Look* at these heathen savages! Groveling before a piece of wood!" Most explorers had no idea what the Africans were really doing.

I've always wondered what cannibals from Papua New Guinea might have said had they snuck into the back of a Catholic mass and saw people taking communion at the altar beneath a huge mahogany Crucifix. "Dash it all, Amakualenalena! *Look* at these heathen savages! Groveling before a piece of wood!" The cannibals might have been equally outraged. On the other hand, if they knew the communion wafer turned into the flesh of Christ, they might have just headed for the altar.

One hazard of making sacred images, even of your own god, is that they're subjective. Look at the images of Jesus we've grown up with. There's no physical description of him in the Bible. (I don't count *Revelation 1:14-15* because the book is prophetic vision, not an account of a flesh and blood guy.) But we can be pretty sure he wasn't the lanky, fair-haired Anglo we often see. Not many of those guys in first century Palestine. The reality is that he probably looked more like Osama bin Laden than a young James Taylor.

Beyond the problem with imagery, the Second Commandment contains a couple of disturbing ideas. One is that God openly admits he's the jealous type. We could have figured this one out for ourselves, but at least he's up front about it. One of the perks of being God is that you get to make all the rules without having to obey them. Thus, he's free to be jealous while us good moral humans are expected to rise above that sort of thing. Frankly, I was hoping for something more from the Creator of the Universe.

Another iffy idea here is that God will visit "the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation." This hardly seems fair. Why should I suffer for what my great-grandfather did? He was a prick.

The logic of this is, since the Hebrews didn't buy into the Afterlife idea, obedience couldn't be maintained with the threat of eternal damnation. But nothing is more important to a tribal people than continuing the family bloodline. So, threatening to curse one's descendants really hits home.

3: Thou shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

Any believer who hasn't been snagged by the first two commandments probably bites it on this one. If you've ever hammered your thumb, or been cut off in traffic, or watched your team fumble at the goal line, you've

probably taken God's name in vain. But I think there's some room for debate here.

What if you don't invoke his name in vain when you curse somebody out? What if you really *mean* it? Is that okay? Or how about the people who camouflage their curses in family-friendly language? Is it the actual words that count or the intension behind them? "*Gosh darn it! Dagnabbit! Gol dang it! Dad gum it! Crikey! Jiminy Christmas!*" Who are you kidding? Might as well just scream out what you feel and be done with it. You'll certainly feel better. At least until you burn for eternity.

Actually, the Third Commandment isn't just a reason to wash a kid's mouth out with soap. It's a rule against routinely making declarations in the Lord's name—like calling it "divine justice" when a hurricane hits a city you don't like, or claiming God asked you to run for president. God isn't a fan of pious know-it-alls who act like he scripted their entire day. In fact, avoiding the use of God's name altogether was something the Hebrew priests did out of respect; they wouldn't even spell it out on parchment. To this day, when God is referred to outside of a prayer he's called "HaShem," which literally means "the name." The message here seems clear: "God's my name. Don't wear it out."

4: Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

This is everyone's favorite commandment, and possibly the Jewish faith's single greatest contribution to Western Civilization: The Day Off. Yet even this user-friendly rule raises a number of questions.

First of all, Jews and Christians can't even agree on which day of the week the Sabbath is. Jews can literally "thank God it's Friday" because the Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday night and ends on Saturday night. Since the Sabbath marks the end of the week, the next day is considered the beginning of the week, which is why your calendar starts the week on Sunday rather than Monday.

But because Jesus rose on a Sunday, a first century Bishop named Ignatius of Antioch suggested that Christians change their day of worship from The Sabbath (Saturday) to The Lord's Day (Sunday). Maybe it helped with traffic. Whatever the thinking, it was another major divergence between the two faiths.

"Sabbath" comes from the Hebrew word for "desist," as in to cease and desist working. In Orthodox Jewish circles, observing the Sabbath is taken quite seriously. I knew a guy who made money as a kid during the

Depression visiting Jewish homes on Friday nights to light their gas furnaces because even that simple task was considered work. I've done similar favors myself.

Once a nice Hasidic gentleman asked me to move his car out of his driveway on a Friday evening, and I was glad to help. But later I realized that I had been snookered. Sure, *he's* off the hook for violating the Fourth Commandment, but what about me? Frankly, I think this was cheating. It's working by proxy. The rule clearly states that neither you, nor your family, nor servants, nor even your cattle should do any work. Where does that put *me* in The Great Chain of Being? Or, if God isn't offended because I'm not Orthodox, then why become Orthodox? It's really inconvenient.

Modern life is not very respectful of this commandment. Today, civilization depends upon people working on the Sabbath: The Army, firemen, tech support geeks, ESPN cameramen and pizza delivery boys for starters.

Even Jesus played fast and loose with this commandment, which is what got him in trouble with the Pharisees. He declared that it was okay for a shepherd to save his sheep on Saturday because, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." [Mark 2:27] It made sense, even if it was kind of a loophole. The Pharisees didn't see it that way.

One last note: The Fourth Commandment is the first to mention the words "manservant" and "maidservant," which are nice genteel terms for slave. Tragically, slavery is enshrined in the Ten Commandments as an acceptable institution, though usually not in the version people post on their front lawns in upstate Georgia. Apologists claim the Israelites practiced a kinder, gentler form of slavery than the Egyptians did. They argue that this commandment was a step forward because it recognized the humanity of slaves by giving them a day of rest. But cows also had the day off. And stories of slaves being regarded as family members sound a bit like romantic accounts of life in the American South before the Civil War. It's a tough word to clean up.

5: Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

First of all, the idea that always listening to your parents will *add* years to your life is a stretch. But in a nomadic tribal culture, the family line is all important. You're defined by your parents. Everyone is known as "Eli son of Aaron" or the like. It's a culture where Social Security is completely privatized. Once you become too old to work, you depend upon your kids to care for you, which is why you have so many of them. Your retirement is a spare tent and steady meals provided by children who know they'll be in your situation someday. Honoring your father and mother is a smart investment in your own future. Plus, it's just nice.

6: Thou shall not Kill.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? Is there a more basic, eternal value in all of Judeo-Christian belief? Well, not so fast. There's killin' and then there's *killin'*. The commandment is just four little words, but there are a surprising number of ways to interpret them.

If we take the commandment literally, it means we can't kill anything. Not people, not animals, not plants, nothing. This means we're going to starve to death. Okay, forget that idea. What if killing plants is okay, but we draw the line at animals and people? That makes everyone a Vegan pacifist—not the folks who typically pack the churches these days. Okay, so howz about we say that animals are fair game and that the ban on killing only pertains to people? This seems more promising because never killing *any* animal means a lifetime of Tofurky and kale.

Alright then. "Thou shall not kill" specifically means we don't kill people. Sounds good. Except now we're all Conscientious Objectors in wartime and there goes half the Hebrew Bible, huge chunks of Western history, and a lot of good movies. Avoiding war is great, but this kind of pacifism makes you a welcome mat for every barbarian horde, Nazi storm trooper, or terrorist insurgent history decides to cough up. Israelites wouldn't be around long if they were all peaceniks.

Traditionally, "Thou shall not kill" is read to mean, "Thou shall not commit murder." Religious conservatives put it another way: "Thou shall not kill innocent life." To be honest, I'm surprised folks would put words in God's mouth like that, but it does give them carte blanche to kill as many people as they want so long as they kill the *right* people. The *guilty* people. And just who are the guilty people? Our enemies, of course. You know... the bad guys. Easy, right?

A ban on killing *innocent* life also provides a rationale to many for banning abortion. But that controversy isn't about whether or not an embryo is guilty of a crime. It's about whether or not it's a human being or something less. Scripture doesn't take sides on this. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament are the unborn and a walking-talking person regarded as the same thing with the same rights. That's a modern idea. Generally speaking, the Bible isn't about human rights at all. It's about obedience to God.

7: Thou shall not commit Adultery.

It didn't take a god to come up with this one. People got upset over infidelity long before Yahweh said they should die for it. The importance of keeping your mitts off of my spouse transcends all cultures and faiths, and the idea was around long before we invented private investigators. Nobody likes a cheater.

While this rule applies to both spouses, it probably started as a guy thing. Women were a man's property and you didn't mess with that. Wives

were meant to produce children, keep house and provide a little sex. Today, of course, we're centuries beyond such attitudes.

There is also a practical value to the Seventh Commandment—to assure a man that if his wife gives birth, it's *his* child. Inevitably, the rules were toughest on women. If a man was married and hankered for a little variety, he got himself another wife. This seems a long-term solution to a short-term problem; wives can be expensive—though not nearly as expensive as ex-wives. But at least there was a legitimate way for men to play the field. Not so for a woman. Her one and only option was her husband, and he wasn't even her choice.

Yet from the earliest days of the Patriarchs, a powerful man's desire for a little extracurricular activity has been accommodated one way or another. Even Christian kings and medieval popes had their concubines. Today, the president of Italy can have one and he lives right next to the Vatican.

So, what exactly is adultery? There's been much hair-splitting over this, often while chatting up cute company at a bar in a strange city. *Webster* defines adultery as "voluntary sexual intercourse between a married man and someone other than his wife, or between a married woman and someone other than her husband." It turns out *The Catholic Encyclopedia* agrees. At least one of the participants has to be married. But the Catholics also include sodomy in their definition of adultery, even between a husband and wife. I think this is rather off the point, and something of a cheat. Sodomy has already been established as an abomination. To lump it in with adultery raises it to the level of a sin, not because God says so but because the pope says so. Popes do this sort of thing a lot.

Adultery is not a sin because it's a sex act. It's a sin because it's a violation of your word. It's the betrayal of a promise you made—the covenant of marriage that has you "forsaking all others." In case you hadn't noticed, Yahweh is big on covenants.

The Catholic Encyclopedia notes that their definition of adultery is more egalitarian than those of other faiths. It says both Jewish law and Roman law called a cheating wife an adulterer, but not so the husband. If the man strayed, it was only fornication. Not a pretty word, but still less of an offense and not a violation of any commandment. By contrast, the Catholic Church calls it adultery no matter who does it. It's a gender-neutral standard, which is much more fair. But then they toss in that sodomy thing, so I guess the Church giveth and it taketh away.

A modern way around the Seventh Commandment, by the way, is a so-called "open marriage." Both parties freely admit that they're seeing someone else, so there's no actual betrayal. Few theologians go along with this technicality, however. And since we don't have the polygamy option anymore, it's tougher to keep this commandment than it used to be.

8: Thou shall not Steal.

A ban against stealing is a universal no-brainer. Nowhere in history has a civilized society found it acceptable to just filch somebody else's stuff. This is a primal idea. Toddlers get into fights when one swipes a toy from another. They don't need to be taught "this is mine." They must be taught to share. Even pets cop an attitude if you occupy their special sleeping spot. It's the territorial imperative. We're all glad that there's a clear rule against stealing another man's property, but it's also kind of obvious.

As a side note—there's an intriguing theory about how religion may be the origin of our ideas about private property. Faiths establish "sacred" spaces for worship—exclusive locations where only a selected few were allowed. The notion of a place of restricted access may have evolved into the broader idea of private property—that is, land over which an owner had exclusive control. Eventually, the concept extended to all material stuff.

9: Thou shall not bear false witness against your Neighbor.

Lying is such a complicated phenomenon it's hard to see how it could be covered by a simple commandment. The wording here makes it sound as if you shouldn't say nasty things about the people next door. But you can see how it might extend to not accusing your boss of witchcraft. The commandment condemns both legal falsehoods, like slander, and just plain gossip. But does "bear false witness" also include the little white lies we tell to those we love to spare their feelings and stay out of trouble? "Honey, how many were there before me?" In some cases it may be safer to risk the wrath of God.

10: Thou shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is your neighbor's.

It's been said that Americans work at jobs they don't like to buy things they don't like to impress people they don't like. If it weren't for coveting, we'd lose half the American economy. How many advertisements are set on a suburban street where Neighbor A (the guy we're supposed to envy) comes home with a new SUV or 8K television or Weed-Wacker, and Neighbor B (representing pathetic little you) feels out-classed and decides he needs the same thing only bigger? Modern America's economic might is built on ignoring the Tenth Commandment.

It's here we also get another reference to "manservant," as in one of the things your neighbor owns that you shouldn't covet. No wonder good Christians could capture Africans, buy and sell them like farm equipment, and still sleep at night. The Tenth Commandment lists slaves as if they were another item cluttering up the garage. Apparently owning a slave wasn't the moral offense. It was coveting your neighbor's slave that made you a real crap-weasel.

The Golden Calf

While Moses is on the mountain talking to God, the Israelites waiting below get impatient. They press Aaron for something to worship and he caves into popular demand. He orders everyone to hand over their jewelry so he can mold it into a Golden Calf, and they make it the center of veneration and revelry. So much for your relatives running the business while you're gone.

But the Golden Calf isn't just any pagan deity. He's Baal—son of the magisterial El. Baal is the popular Canaanite god of storms. His power comes through military conquest. Interestingly, he's identified with volcanoes. Like his dad, he's symbolized by the bull or calf, and he stars in a Canaanite creation myth wherein he battles the dragon of Chaos. As with Babylonian deities, Baal's fight is one of Good against Evil.

Baal is also a fertility god. So, what better way to honor him than to do some good old-fashioned fertilizing yourself? And I don't mean dumping plant food on your petunias. I mean sacred sexual rites. In Greek it was called *hieros gamos* or "sacred marriage." Ancient kings would hook up with temple harlots in religious rituals to dramatize the divine act of creation. At least, that was their excuse. I'll bet church attendance was through the roof.

This may be why Baal turns out to be a major draw for Yahweh's people. Well, when the church marquee says "Live Nude Girls," what do you expect? By contrast, the scriptural god is a prude, disdainful of sexual frolics. This whole Golden Calf blowout means the Israelites are backsliding into pagan worship—a problem that will plague them for the next millennium.

Ironically, to frighten the people away from foreign spirits, Yahweh will quickly evolve into a god of war and conquest, and will keep manifesting as smoke and fire—a whole lot like Baal. Yeah, Yahweh thought it was funny, too.

Furious with history's first toga party, Moses smashes the two stone tablets he's carrying, chews out his brother for screwing things up, then hikes right back up the mountain for another forty days. And it's here that things become intriguing... and confusing.

Ten More Commandments?

You'd think the one part of Scripture that would be the most clear and consistent would be God's own handwritten catalog of rules. Yet, as mentioned, Jews, Catholics and Protestants disagree with each other on how to list the Ten Commandments. Now, in *Exodus 34*, God disagrees with *himself* about them. When Moses returns to the top of the mountain, this is what God tells him to do:

“Cut two tables of stone like the first; and I will write upon the tables the words that were on the first table, which you broke.”
[Exodus 34:1]

The Lord then announces he’s making a covenant and that the people should “*observe what I command you this day.*” It sounds like he’s issuing another copy of the same Ten Commandments he gave Moses on his first trip up the mountain. But Moses is in for a shock. Before he carves a copy of the original commandments to replace the ones he broke, God presents him with an alternative list. Dare to compare the commandments from the first set of tablets, in *Exodus 20*, with the brand-new ones God wants etched in stone now in *Exodus 34*.

<u>Exodus 20</u>	<u>Exodus 34</u>
1. Worship no other gods.	Tear down all other temples and have no other gods.
2. Do not make graven images.	Do not make molten gods.
3. Do not take the Lord’s name in vain.	Keep the feast of unleavened bread.
4. Keep the Sabbath.	All first-born sons, and animals, belong to God.
5. Honor your father and mother.	Keep the Sabbath.
6. Do not kill.	Observe the seasonal feasts. All males must appear before God three times a year.
7. Don’t commit adultery.	Do not offer the blood of sacrifice with leavened bread.
8. Do not steal.	Do not leave a feast until morning.
9. Do not lie.	Bring the first fruits of the ground to God.
10. Do not covet.	Do not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.

Wa... huh? Not only are the commandments in *Exodus 34* different, they’re also really bizarre. They sound like passages from some ancient agricultural religion that somehow crept into the Scripture. Obviously, most of us do not regard *Exodus 34* as *the* Ten Commandments. But why not? Because immediately after God dictates them, the next passage reads...

And the Lord said to Moses, "Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." ... And he [Moses] wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

[Exodus 34:27-28]

To argue that these don't qualify as the Ten Commandments is pretty disingenuous. They're called his commandments. There are ten of them. It says so in black and white. God has Moses write them down on stone tablets and says these are the words of his covenant. What more do you need? If these aren't the Big Ten, why did God have Moses scratch them onto stone tablets? Why does Scripture call them "the ten commandments"? What makes this list any less the real thing than the first?

Fact is, you have to ignore the second list if you want to take the story seriously. Otherwise, if you want to post them in a public schoolroom, you're stuck with two lists. Personally, I think the second list is more fun, especially the one about not boiling a kid in its mother's milk. Where else are the kids going learn something like that?

Anyway, whichever list of rules you want to adopt, the Ten Commandments represents Yahweh's next big career move—lawmaking. He started out as an artist, creating stuff like the universe and us. Then he went into gardening, but that didn't really work out. So, he became a shepherd to lord over the sheep of his pasture (us again), even if he had to thin the herd a bit with a global flood and by vaporizing Sodom and Gomorrah. Then he tried a brief gig as a wrestler with Jacob. Lastly, to liberate the Israelites from Egypt, he assumed the rank of general, defeated their enemy, then led them off to freedom.

So now that they're on their own they'll need some guidelines for civilized life. Consequently, God becomes a lawmaker—and the Ten Commandments are only the beginning. Yahweh, as we'll see, will turn out to be a very ambitious lawyer.

If he had a mother, she'd be so proud.