The Ten Commandments in the Medieval Schools

When, in the generation after Hugh, Peter Lombard (d. 1160), master of the cathedral school at Notre Dame, included the commandments in his highly influential Four Books of Sentences, the position of the Decalogue in the schools' curriculum was virtually guaranteed. It was made certain early in the thirteenth century, when the Sentences was made the textbook for all students studying the Bible in Paris, which had itself become the European centre for biblical and theological research.

See Also*: The Ten Commandments: Interpreting the Bible in the Medieval World* (Leiden and Boston: E. J. Brill. 2014).

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There was surprisingly little discussion of the ten commandments in the period between Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) and the schools that grew up in twelfth-century Paris, which specialised in teaching the Bible and theology. It may have been that Augustine was thought to have covered the subject; or perhaps the Decalogue didn't offer enough interest for commentators who were trained to look for the spiritual senses of the Old Testament text – to find those allegories or typologies which foreshadowed the coming of Christ. But the Paris schools began to read the text in different ways. Hugh (d. 1141), master of the important school at the abbey of St Victor, taught his

pupils that understanding the literal sense of the text was the indispensable foundation for all other readings. With that, texts like the Decalogue, solidly grounded in the literal and practical, and which might have seemed too dull for commentators to bother with, became more interesting. When, in the generation after Hugh, Peter Lombard (d. 1160), master of the cathedral school at Notre Dame, included the commandments in his highly influential *Four Books of Sentences*, the position of the Decalogue in the schools' curriculum was virtually guaranteed. It was made certain early in the thirteenth century, when the *Sentences* was made the textbook for all students studying the Bible in Paris, which had itself become the European centre for biblical and theological research. No graduate student could obtain their degree without lecturing on Peter's *Sentences* – which meant commenting on the commandments.

Peter was influential not only in the subjects that he had chosen to include; the way that he dealt with them was also important. The working method the graduates had to employ was that of commenting on the *Sentences* chapter by chapter. So Peter's preoccupations became, perforce, their preoccupations, too; his divisions of the text and his emphases were carried on by subsequent generations of students. Crucially, Peter chose to address

the Decalogue not only in terms of the individual commandments but as a single entity. Now, the precepts were only ten of the 613 commands (*mitzvuot*) of the Jewish Law – the Law given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai; but since Christians did not follow the other 603 commands, Peter had to show why these ten had not been superseded by the coming of Christ, but maintained their force in the new covenant of grace. His arguments are not original: like the students using the *Sentences* as an authoritative text, Peter used Augustine as the basis of his exposition. But in accepting Augustine's explanation that the Decalogue represented the moral law (*moralia*) of God – that is, those laws which it was never wrong to follow, whatever the time or circumstances, Peter was implicitly reinforcing the orthodox doctrine that the Old Testament – and by extension the Jewish people – continued to have a place in the contemporary Christian world.

Of course, it was obvious to everyone that Christians did not in fact keep even the Decalogue in the same way as the Jews. Indeed, the Franciscan scholar Bonaventure (d. 1274) notes that Jews "ridiculed" Christians for claiming that they observed the commandments, and he is aware that these taunts have some force. In particular, Christians had changed the Jewish Sabbath (God's day of rest after creation) for their own Sunday (the day of

Christ's resurrection). Peter (following Augustine) used the threefold division of the Law into moral (*moralia*), judicial (*iudicialia*) and ceremonial (*caerimonialia*) commands to explain that, although the concept of a rest day was indeed part of the moral law, and therefore always to be observed, the individual day when this was marked was only ceremonial. Since ceremonial and judicial laws did not have the perpetual force of the moral, but were specific to particular times and circumstances – it was perfectly allowable for Christians to institute their own rest day on Sunday instead of keeping the Sabbath.

Peter (again, following Augustine) was also interested in the number and numbering of the commandments, and their division on the two stone tablets Moses had been given. To modern readers these may seem minor matters, but to medieval scholars they were much more significant. To begin with, it was important to show why there were ten, since the total is not obvious from the biblical text. The closest the Bible comes to a number is the 'Ten Words' spoken of in Exodus 34. Modern scholars, if they address the question at all, generally note the mnemonic usefulness of ten fingers, or refer to other similar Near Eastern law codes. No medieval scholar would have regarded these as adequate explanations. In both Greek and Hebrew

thinking, individual numbers had powers and characteristics beyond their arithmetical uses. Ten was a so-called perfect number and denoted both unity and comprehensiveness. The importance of ten can be illustrated by the variety of groups of ten in the Bible – not just the commandments and the plagues of Egypt, but the ten generations of humanity to Noah and the Flood; the ten candelabra, ten tables, ten lavers, and cherubim ten cubits high in Solomon's Temple; Job's possessions numbered in tens (seven sons and three daughters; 7,000 sheep and 3,000 cattle, and so on); and, best of all, the ten times that God calls Creation into existence in the first chapter of Genesis.

So it was necessary to show why ten precepts – no more, no less – were necessary and sufficient for salvation. Different commentators went about this in different ways; this one is from the Oxford Dominican Simon of Hinton (flourished 1240s–1260s):

Simon says that the commandments are there to show humans how to avoid evil to God and to your fellow human beings.

Avoiding Doing Evil to God:

Evil can come from three roots, in order of sinfulness:

from thoughts which is avoided by having no other gods

from words which is avoided by not taking the Lord's name in vain

from deeds which is avoided by keeping the sabbath

– giving three commandments for the first stone tablet.

Avoiding Doing Evil to your Neighbour:

For your fellow human beings, the order of the roots of evil is reversed, because whereas with God wrong thought and belief is the worst you can do, for your neighbour, the worst evil comes from actions and deeds:

from deeds to his person which is avoided by not killing

to his wife which is avoided by not committing adultery

to his goods which is avoided by not stealing

from words which is avoided by not bearing false witness

from thoughts of his wife which is avoided by not coveting his wife

of his goods which is avoided by not coveting his goods

– giving six commandments for the second tablet.

But the Decalogue is not only about avoiding evil; you must also do good. For this we add Honouring your Father and your Mother, with honouring interpreted to mean anything from providing physical sustenance to spiritual reverence, and "father and mother" including any person who has ever played a positive role in your life. This takes us to ten commandments in all; and because these ten have been derived from *principles* of good and evil, not just plucked out of thin air, we can agree that they cover all possible situations. As a group they embody the unity of the number ten, and their coverage means they embody its comprehensiveness: in summary, they are both necessary and sufficient for salvation.

The division of the commandments three and seven on the two stone tablets was also important in the Middle Ages. Augustine championed the three-seven split we see in Simon's schema above, but his was not the only opinion. Origen (d. *c.* 254), sticking closer to the biblical text, numbered the commandments differently, giving a four-six cleavage, and Christian scholars also knew (via Philo Judaeus, d. *c.* 50) that Jews (at least some of them) numbered them in the same way but with five precepts on each stone. These decisions were more than number games for medieval scholars:

Augustine linked the three commandments of the first tablet to the three persons of the Trinity, a move which put Christianity at the heart of the Jewish Law, and demonstrated (in the eyes of Christian scholars) that the Trinity was in the Hebrew Bible, if only the Jews had been able to see it.

The commandments on the second stone tablet dealt with relations with your neighbour, and Peter Lombard's discussion was again to reverberate through subsequent scholarship. He took over Augustine's definitions of many of the subjects – such as adultery being "all illicit use of those members", which encompassed simple sex outside of marriage as well as adultery more tightly drawn – but he was particularly influenced by the discussions in Augustine's two short treatises on lying (*On Lies* and *Against Lies*). These provided so much material that Peter's treatment of the second-tablet precepts was irredeemably skewed towards the commandment against bearing false witness. The commandment was made to embrace lies (of which Augustine enumerated eight separate types), lying, making vows, swearing oaths, and perjury. The danger of lying is easy to see: everyone has lied at some time in their life, even if they were white lies, joking lies, or lies told to save someone's feelings or do some good. But it was precisely because lying was so common and so easy that it could become a bad habit

and a habitual sin; so lying was forbidden completely. Swearing oaths, on the other hand, was more complicated. This is oath-swearing not with its modern meaning of blasphemy, but as a statement which calls on God to affirm its truth, as witnesses do in court when they "take the oath". The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5: 33-37) forbade the taking of oaths ("Let your yes be yes, and your no, no"); but medieval society still ran largely on oral promises rather than documentary contracts, and to ban oaths entirely would bring normal life to a grinding halt. So oaths were allowed, under strict terms and conditions. This is an example of an issue where, had the scholars been working in a vacuum, they would surely have come to a different conclusion; but the needs of world could not be kept entirely outside the classroom walls.

Peter Lombard was also concerned with the question of why the desire to sin was forbidden for adultery and theft – in the two final commandments against coveting your neighbour's wife, and coveting his goods – but not for the precept against killing. In Simon of Hinton's scheme, this was the difference in motivation towards thought and deed, and it meant that the desire to steal was apparently prohibited, but the desire to kill was not. This matter of intention is a remarkably tricky question, and it is one that, from

Augustine onwards, no commentator entirely resolved. Nevertheless, it was in the nature of medieval scholarship that once the question had been posed, it could not be abandoned; the "additive" nature of their method meant that everyone who addressed the commandments had to attempt an answer.

What medieval commentators do not consider, on the whole, is punishment. This is because their view of the commandments was not as a series of laws to be kept or broken, but as a medicine or remedy for the disease of sin. The Decalogue had been given to humanity by God as a means of salvation, as a way of coming closer to living with God in eternity. In that reading, the commandments are not laws which can be broken, but advice for living safely in God's world: you could as well break the law of gravity by jumping out of a window as break the commandments by not following them. So the common view of the precepts as a series of killjoy "thou shalt nots" is replaced by a conception of them as a positive prescription for living life with God.

After Peter Lombard's inclusion of the Decalogue in the *Sentences*, it was guaranteed a place in the academic world of the schools. But following the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the commandments were

given a new life as part of the Church's new pastoral ambitions. The precepts were used as the basis for catechesis and as a structure for private penance. Along with the Creed and the Our Father, knowledge the commandments was a keystone of faith. For medieval believers, this meant that they had daily to consider their relations with God and with their neighbour in thought, and word, and deed.

Lesley Smith, *The Ten Commandments: Interpreting the Bible in the Medieval World* (Leiden and Boston: E. J. Brill. 2014)