

tain.”<sup>14</sup> So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes.<sup>15</sup> And he said to the people, “Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman.”

16 On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.<sup>17</sup> Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain.<sup>18</sup> Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.<sup>19</sup> As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.<sup>20</sup> When the LORD descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the LORD summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.<sup>21</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people not to break through to the LORD to look; otherwise many of them will perish.”<sup>22</sup> Even the priests who approach the LORD must consecrate themselves or the LORD will break out against them.”<sup>23</sup> Moses said to the LORD, “The people are not permitted to come up to Mount Sinai; for you yourself warned us, saying, ‘Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy.’”<sup>24</sup> The LORD said to him, “Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the LORD; otherwise he will break out against them.”<sup>25</sup> So Moses went down to the people and told them.

## The Ten Commandments

**20** Then God spoke all these words:  
2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;<sup>a</sup> you shall have no other gods before<sup>a</sup> me.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.<sup>b</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,<sup>c</sup> but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation<sup>b</sup> of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.<sup>d</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work.<sup>e</sup> But the seventh day is a sabbath



**20:1—24:18 covenant:** The key event for the Israelites is the *covenant* God makes with them at Sinai (Horeb). A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties. By freeing the Israelite slaves, the LORD brings them into a new relationship as God’s covenant people. The covenant at Sinai requires a way of life that reflects undivided loyalty to God and responsibility to other community members.



**20:1—24:18 The LORD said to Moses:** The Sinai covenant is patterned after political treaties in the ancient Near East between a suzerain, or powerful king, and a vassal, or weaker king. The suzerain promises good treatment and protection if the vassal is loyal and fulfils certain obligations. In Exodus, God is portrayed as the suzerain and Israel as the vassal.



**What is the purpose of the Ten Commandments?** The Ten Commandments give us the basics for faithful living in relationship to God and our neighbors. In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther expands these commandments from a series of statements—mainly about things we should not do—into a set of positive instructions for a Christian life of service to God and neighbor. Of the laws given at Sinai, Martin Luther believed that only those that agreed with natural law—meaning the moral sensibility imprinted on each human heart—were binding on Christians. All others were intended for a specific people, the Israelites, within their ancient time and culture. *Exodus 20:1—24:18*



**20:2 I am the LORD your God:** In Jewish tradition, this is the First Commandment. Receiving God’s deliverance in the past provides motivation for worshiping the LORD and following the Commandments.



**20:3 you shall have no other gods before me:** “Before me” implies that other gods existed and Israel must not worship them.



**20:4-6 You shall not make for yourself an idol:** Human beings are the “image” and “likeness” of God on earth (Gen 1:26-27, 5:1-3; 9:6). They are prohibited from making and worshiping artistic representations of the divine in the form of any creature.

<sup>a</sup> Or besides    <sup>b</sup> Or to thousands

# Numbering the Ten Commandments

In general, there are three traditional ways to number the Commandments.

	Jewish	Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Eastern Orthodox	Reformed, Anglican, other Protestant traditions
1	I am the Lord your God.	You shall have no other gods.	You shall have no other gods.
2	You shall have no other gods.	You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.	You shall not make for yourself a graven image.
3	You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.	Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.	You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4	Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.	Honor your father and your mother.	Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5	Honor your father and your mother.	You shall not murder.	Honor your father and your mother.
6	You shall not kill.	You shall not commit adultery.	You shall not kill.
7	You shall not commit adultery.	You shall not steal.	You shall not commit adultery.
8	You shall not steal.	You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.	You shall not steal.
9	You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.	You shall not covet your neighbor's house.	You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10	You shall not covet your neighbor's wife; and you shall not desire anything that is your neighbor's.	You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.	You shall not covet your neighbor's wife; and you shall not desire anything that is your neighbor's.

The list used in Judaism begins with the declaration, "I am the Lord your God."

The list used by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Eastern Orthodox Christians comes from Augustine, a fifth-century bishop. Augustine placed the command against graven images (idols) under the first commandment and counted the material about coveting as two commandments.

The list used by the Reformed, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and other traditions started with Origen and other early church leaders. It counts "You shall have no other gods" and "You shall not make for yourself a graven image" as two separate commandments.

to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.<sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

13 You shall not murder.<sup>a</sup>

14 You shall not commit adultery.

15 You shall not steal.

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.



**20:13 You shall not murder:** The word used for murder refers to intentional premeditated murder, not all killing.



**20:15 You shall not steal:** The Hebrew word for stealing includes kidnapping.

<sup>a</sup> Or kill

17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

18 When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid<sup>a</sup> and trembled and stood at a distance,<sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die."

<sup>20</sup>Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

<sup>21</sup>Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

## The Law concerning the Altar

22 The LORD said to Moses: Thus you shall say to the Israelites: "You have seen for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven.

<sup>23</sup>You shall not make gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. <sup>24</sup>You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. <sup>25</sup>But if you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it. <sup>26</sup>You shall not go up by steps to my altar, so that your nakedness may not be exposed on it."


## The Law concerning Slaves


**21** These are the ordinances that you shall set before them:


2 When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt.


<sup>3</sup>If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. <sup>4</sup>If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. <sup>5</sup>But if the slave declares, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person," <sup>6</sup>then his master shall bring him before God.<sup>b</sup> He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life.


7 When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. <sup>8</sup>If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt unfairly with her. <sup>9</sup>If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. <sup>10</sup>If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife.<sup>c</sup> <sup>11</sup>And if he does

 **20:17 You shall not covet:** The word "covet" implies desiring something to the extent of trying to take possession, as in Exodus 34:24 and Joshua 7:21.

 **20:18-19 You speak to us:** The people are afraid they will die if God speaks directly to them. They ask Moses to speak to them on behalf of God.

 **20:22—23:33 Thus you shall say:** This is the Covenant Code, also known as the "book of the covenant" (24:7), the oldest collection of legal materials in the first five books of the Bible (or Pentateuch), dating from the early Israelite settlement in the land. Its family, community, criminal, and religious laws, as well as ethical instructions, show that all of life is part of the covenant relationship with Israel's God, Yahweh. It has similarities with the famous law code of Hammurabi, ruler of Babylon (1728–1686 B.C.E.).

 **20:22-26 an altar of earth:** To worship God, altars made of earth and unhewn stones can be built and used for burnt offerings and offerings of well-being. Later on a whole sacrificial system would be put in place at the Jerusalem temple (see Leviticus). A burnt offering involved sacrificing an animal and offering it to God by burning the entire carcass, causing it to "go up" in smoke—the core meaning of the name of the sacrifice, *olah* in Hebrew. An offering of well-being, also known as the "peace offering," involved an animal sacrifice and a meal with family members and others in the covenant community. In ancient biblical times, before the temple in Jerusalem became the only site for sacrifices, all meat eaten by people was slaughtered in a sacrificial ritual such as the offering of well-being.

 **21:2-6, 20-21, 26-27 Hebrew slave:** Male Hebrew slaves had certain rights, such as a limit of six years of service, unless they became permanent members of their masters' households. In Deuteronomy 15:12-18 the same rule is extended to female Hebrew slaves. The Covenant Code also includes consequences for injuring slaves.

<sup>a</sup> Sam Gk Syr Vg: MT they saw

<sup>b</sup> Or to the judges

<sup>c</sup> Heb of her