

# As It Is Written

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Despite their notoriety and long history, the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) remain only superficially understood. In this, and other articles, we will try to understand the Ten Commandments as they were understood by the ancient Hebrews standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai - and as they are to be understood today.

We begin by reminding ourselves that the first verse, “*Then God spoke all these words, saying...*”, refers to the seventeen verses that follow as statements or assertions (twenty one verses in Deuteronomy 5), not commandments or rules of conduct. Much like the preamble to the Constitution of the United States, these verses were understood to constitute the values upon which God’s subjects were to order their lives. For example, here’s the preamble:

*“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”*

The Ten Statements or assertions, like those of the preamble above, do not constitute a founding legal code. Rather, they were to be an aspirational guide for all human endeavor and to constitute the moral basis for a civil society.

The second verse, 20:2, is arguably the most important assertion because it establishes the context within which the rest of the assertions are to be understood. To this end, the second verse answers three significant questions. Who is God? To whom is God addressing these statements? And what is the significance of having been delivered from slavery? Here is the RSV’s translation of 20:2

*I am the LORD your God, who brought **you** out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*

First, note that in this verse the pronoun ‘you; (colored red) is singular, not plural<sup>1</sup>. Thus, while the English translations are ambiguous, the Hebrew is not. God is addressing each individual specifically. An arguably better translation, therefore, is something along the lines of:

*I am the LORD your God, who brought **each of you** out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*

Why is this assertion so significant? On the whole, it asserts that human agency was not responsible for Israel’s redemption. It is to God that the nascent Israeli people owe their freedom and their gratitude, not Moses nor any other human being. And how are we to use that freedom? By living our lives according to the values expressed in the subsequent fourteen verses. So, who is God? One part of the answer is that God is the One who gave us freedom. A more important aspect of who is God is this: God, as creator, could have said, “I am the LORD your God who created the universe and so you had better listen to me”.

As such, the values being conveyed are manifestly not parochial or institutional. Rather, they establish the claim that it is not simply the nation of Israel God had redeemed, but rather each and every individual

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<sup>1</sup> In English, the word ‘you’ can refer to either a singular or a plural antecedent. In Hebrew, and many other languages, the singular and plural forms of ‘you’ are different words and are spelled and pronounced differently. In the verse in question, 20:2, God uses the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular form. Thus, a more correct translation would be “*I am the LORD your God, who brought **each** of you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*”.

open to hearing God's words -- including, of course, those of us today who can read the text and reflect on its significance. So, just as the preamble to the Constitution of the United States has meaning for all who read it, all these words have meaning for every human person.

God begins by presenting a choice between two alternative ways of living: slavery or freedom and it is no accident that slavery figures prominently in this prologue. In the Old Testament, the word for slavery, *evadeem* (עֶבְדִּים), is often used literally in many of the narratives of the Bible. But, *evadeem* also expresses a deeply metaphorical meaning – a meaning that animated St. Paul's admonition not to be ruled by the desires of the flesh but by the Spirit (Gal 5:17). Make no mistake; Paul was not some zealous prude offended by sexual immorality. Used metaphorically, Paul's *evadeem* signified a slavish obeisance to materialism and therefore a largely pointless existence. He taught that a belief in Christ meant that we become slaves to the Spirit, not to materialism.

Paul's teaching stretches all the way back to Genesis 1 where we encounter the first and arguably the most profound expression of the pointlessness of materialism: in the absence of a transcendent God, existence is finite and the materialism of nature is all there is and all that ever can be. In Exodus 20:2 we experience the echo of Genesis 1 when God teaches that in His absence we are doomed to be slaves to the forces that govern material existence. When God spoke from Mt. Sinai, He was offering a kind of freedom that was heretofore unimaginable. Yes, life would always be hard but, and this is critically important, with God life is not pointless.

Now, go and study