Deuteronomy: Resources

# Deuteronomy 5: The Ten Words

Whereas other topics from Exodus that recur in Leviticus or Deuteronomy reappear in a new form with new application in light of a new social context, the “Ten Commandments” from Exodus 20 recur in Deuteronomy 5 virtually unchanged. Their recurrence underlines their importance, and they suggest some principles for life that the Torah regards as perennially important, but their modification underlines the way even they are timely not timeless statements. In Deuteronomy as in Exodus they are not called “Ten Commandments” but “Ten Words” or “Ten Statements;” the expression “Ten Commandments” comes from translations into other languages. So we will refer to them here as the Ten Words. Verse references here are to the Deuteronomy version.

These principles for behavior…

## …are related to Israel’s being God’s redeemed people

They issue from the fact that God brought Israel out of a place where they were serfs (v. 6). On the other hand, that very fact means that they become Yahweh’s servants not Pharaoh’s. They imply freedom not serfdom, but commitment and loyalty not freedom (v. 7). They reflect the power and authority of Yahweh as redeemer. The way people have been freed from serfdom has implications for the commitment they show to other people; they do not become free of such obligations (v. 15). Prospectively, too, the maintenance of their own freedom requires that they honor other people rather than view themselves as free of obligation (v. 16).

## …involve a restoration of creation not a flight from creation

In the Exodus version, this point is particularly explicit in the Sabbath commandment with its stress on rest as well as work so that life reflects the way God went about creation (Exodus 20:11). It reflects the ultimacy of Yahweh as creator. Other commands are concerned with attitudes to created life and to created things. The implications of this concern are worked out in the focus on concrete aspects of ordinary created life in the detail of the instructions that follow the Ten Words in both versions.

## …interweave questions about God and questions about behavior.

They imply that one cannot work out how to behave without taking God into account. They raise the question whether ethics has to be theological and or whether it is really possible to make common cause with or argue with the secular world about issues such as justice or marriage or abortion. Or perhaps they point us toward the idea that in discussing such questions the secular world regularly makes assumptions about life that make sense only on the basis of assuming the reality of God.

## …constitute a serious challenge about God to the church.

If we are to worship only one God, then our way of thinking about the one God is important (thus, for instance, if we think of God as male, we skew understanding of God both for women and for men). If Israel was to worship without making images because (Deuteronomy 4 has made clear) an image can only give a misleading impression of God, this raises questions about the way many Christians value images. If Israel is not to apply God’s name to something empty, this raises questions about the ease with which we associate God with our views or desires or plans, and it underlines the scandal of our bringing discredit on God’s name. (The command about swearing has nothing to do with prohibiting profanity in general, though it may raise questions about the exclamation “Oh my God!”). The Sabbath command raises questions about the 24/7 attitude that pervades Christian practice in conformity to secular practice.

## …constitute a serious challenge about behavior to the church.

They name aspects of Christian practice that we do not name, such as abuse in the family, the killing of other believers in contexts such as the two World Wars and in places such as Bosnia and Rwanda, adultery and other forms of sexual immorality, inequity in the possession of wealth and resources, fraud, and the dissatisfaction with what we have that makes believers as addicted to shopping as unbelievers are. Christians often see development in insight on moral questions within the Scriptures and thus see the Commandments’ concern with outward action such as murder, adultery, stealing, and perjury as overtaken by the Sermon on the Mount’s concern with inner attitudes, but the actual life of the church suggests that the Ten Words’ own concern remains important.

## …do need rethinking and expanding in new contexts.

They are timely, but not timeless. They don’t cover everything: for instance, attitudes to nature, to the self, to the needy, and to relationships between men and women (see Fretheim, *Exodus*). Related to this is the fact that they are not actually a summary of the principles that lie behind the instructions that follow. Their concern is to safeguard the community and restrain disorder there. If one asks who they are addressed to, then the answer is, the men who have responsibility and power in the community and who can decide whether their households worship other gods or worship by means of images and who will be tempted to have their households work seven days or tempted to adultery. They are designed to keep middle-aged middle-class men in order (see David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties*).

# Deuteronomy 14—16 as a Starting Point for Studying the Different Versions of the Torah

Some possible implications of the comparisons, starting from Deuteronomy 14—16.

Deuteronomy 14:1-20; Leviticus 19:28; 11:2-23

The two sets of rules are very similar, though Deuteronomy’s is a bit simpler. They don’t come in Exodus, because Exodus focuses on issues of community life rather than issues of religious life, and/or because Leviticus and Deuteronomy are concerned with Israel having observances that distinguish them from other peoples.

Deuteronomy 14:21; Exodus 23:19b and 34:26b; Leviticus 11:39-40 and 17:15

The rule about not cooking a baby goat in its mother’s milk is evidently important! Presumably it’s somehow related to the rule about not eating road-kill. You can’t drain the blood out of road-kill. So these are a variety of rules that are concerned with proper killing and draining blood and respecting life.

Deuteronomy 14:22-29; Leviticus 27:30-33

Deuteronomy relates its tithe instructions to its characteristic concern with focusing on the place Yahweh will choose and where his name dwells, and works out the practicalities of the problem of bringing things all that way if you live some distance away. It also relates the theme to its characteristic encouragement to rejoice and to being concerned for the Levites who have no land of their own. Leviticus relates the instructions about tithing to its characteristic stress on holiness.

Deuteronomy 15:1-11

Deuteronomy’s rule about cancelling debts does not appear in Exodus or Leviticus. Maybe it hints at greater poverty in the social context from which it comes, perhaps because of increased taxation.

Deuteronomy 15:12-18; Exodus 21:2-11; Leviticus 25:39-46

Whereas Exodus and Deuteronomy free bondservants after six years, Leviticus prescribes this only in the fiftieth year. Given that Israelites did not obey the instructions in Exodus and Deuteronomy (see Jer 34), maybe Leviticus is trying to be more realistic. But it also underlines the requirement to free Israelites by allowing that foreigners may have no right for freedom, which also suggests that its concern is with keeping the integrity of Israel with its extended family and clan structure (people must be allowed to go back to their extended families). Deuteronomy characteristically makes explicit that the rule applies to women as well as men, urges masters to be generous is setting up their freed servants in a way that makes it more likely that they will be able to reestablish themselves, and reminds them that they ought to remember the way Yahweh freed them from serfdom.

Deuteronomy 15:19-23; Exodus 22:30; 34:19

Deuteronomy gives more detail about how to implement the instruction, characteristically relating it to its focus on the place Yahweh will choose.

Deuteronomy 16:1-17; Exodus 23:14-17; 34:18-26a; Leviticus 23

Deuteronomy and Leviticus again are much more expansive than Exodus, though in different ways. Deuteronomy again emphasizes the place Yahweh chooses as a dwelling for his name and encourages rejoicing and the involvement of women as well as men and of Levites, foreigners, orphans, and widows. Leviticus is explicit on points of detail about the observance and it sets the three festivals in the context of an account of the entire calendar for worship, including the Expiation Day, which appears only here.

Deuteronomy 16:18-20; Exodus 23:6-9; Leviticus 19:15

Conversely, when it comes to matters of community relations and the resolving of issues in the community, Exodus is at least as detailed as Deuteronomy and Leviticus—or to put it the other way, they have little they feel the need to add to the generally ethical exhortations in Exodus.

Deuteronomy 16:21-22; Leviticus 26:1

Leviticus simply adds the characteristic backing “I am Yahweh your God.” These practices were accepted in Genesis and not banned in Exodus; maybe the need to ban them issued from experience of the way they had come to be the means of improper worship under the influence of their also being Canaanite practices.

# Deuteronomy in the New Testament

The wide-ranging nature of Deuteronomy’s perspective and its influence on modern Old Testament theology is foreshadowed in its importance in the New Testament, where it is the third most-often-quoted book (after Psalms and Isaiah, which are much longer). The range of its influence can be illustrated from Matthew.

## Matthew 4:1-11: it’s God’s word and it’s life-giving

When Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tested, the devil makes various suggestions to him. To each suggestion Jesus replies with a quotation from Deuteronomy 6 and 8. In other words, all his replies come from the section of Deuteronomy that outlines basic attitudes to God, of submission, trust, and worship.

## Matthew 5:17-48: it needs taking in its radical sense

Jesus has come to fulfill or fill up or fill out or fill the Torah. He does so in a variety of ways. Deuteronomy is concerned to get people in the village to relate to one another as family (it emphasizes that the community is a body of brothers and sisters); Jesus extends that principle (vv. 21-26). The Ten Words end with a prohibition on coveting one’s neighbor’s wife; Jesus underlines the implications of that (vv. 27-32). Deuteronomy bids people keep their vows; Jesus points out that they should be truthful even when no vow is involved (vv. 33-37). Deuteronomy requires punishment for perjury but places limits on it, and requires generosity in lending; Jesus pushes these requirements further (vv. 38-42). Deuteronomy gives no countenance to the idea that one might give up loving one’s neighbor when he becomes one’s enemy – though Leviticus the book that makes this explicit; Jesus underlines this point (vv. 43-47). Deuteronomy requires complete faithfulness; so does Jesus (v. 48).

## Matthew 15:1-20: its thrust is easy to avoid

Deuteronomy requires people to honor their parents, which among other things means seeing they get looked after. But some of Jesus’ contemporaries have devised legal procedures whereby their resources seek to count in this connection. That’s the kind of thing that makes you really taboo, Jesus says.

## Matthew 19:1-12: it’s not God’s first word

Jesus takes up one of the issues raised in the Sermon on the Mount, the propriety of divorce. On the basis of Genesis 1 and 2, Jesus affirms the lifelong nature of marriage. Some Pharisees ask him about Deuteronomy 24:1-4; he declares that this regulation is given only because of (male?) stubbornness – because marriages will break down and/or men will refuse to clarify the status of a wife they throw out. The second word (about divorce) must not be allowed to make the first word (in Genesis) lose its status. It had priority. Jesus here provides one key hermeneutical clue for interpreting the significance of the instructions in Deuteronomy.

## Matthew 19:16-22: it needs applying personally

There is a wealthy young man who can claim to have kept a list of commandments. The list Jesus asks him about excludes the tenth, perhaps pointedly. When he asks what else he needs to do, Jesus tells him to sell all he has and give it to the needy. One can see that this requirement is a radical version of the expectation implicit in the tenth commandment and elsewhere in Deuteronomy. It is not an expectation that applies to everyone (to judge from things Jesus says elsewhere) but it is the way the commands come home to this man.

## Matthew 22:23-32: it’s capable of being misused

Some theologians want to use Deuteronomy 25:5-10 as the basis for an argument concerning something wholly different, in what one might call a proof-texting way. Jesus ignores their use of Deuteronomy and instead takes what he sees as the real issues head on.

## Matthew 22:37: it says the most important thing

If one asks what are the two most important commands in the Torah, then Deuteronomy 6:5 comes first. Jesus adds that the entire teaching of the Torah depends on it and on Leviticus 19:18, thereby providing a second hermeneutical clue for interpreting the significance of the instructions in Deuteronomy. It is always worth asking whether a particular instruction is an exposition of the first or of the second of these two commands.

## Outside Matthew:

## I Corinthians 9:9 suggests how Deuteronomy may relate to us even when it doesn’t look like it

When Paul asks whether Deuteronomy 25:4 is at all concerned about animals, it is tempting to say “Yes,” and it has some implications for the way we treat the animals we eventually eat, but Paul sees it as relating to another important question.

## In John 1:21, the religious authorities ask John the Baptizer whether he is “the Prophet”

The prophet is a figure Acts 7:37 also refers to. In the latter passage it is explicit that Stephen refers to Deuteronomy 18:15, 18, understood to denote a quasi-messianic figure. Understood thus, Jesus fulfills the promise of Deuteronomy.

# Responses to Questions I Have Been Asked About Deuteronomy

There is more info in my *Numbers and Deuteronomy for Everyone* (Louisville: WJK/London: SPCK, 2010).

*Do we apply these principles to our country, or should the focus be on the church?  Is the church responsible for the poor in their midst or is it the government?*

\*\*I don’t see why this shouldn’t be both-and.  The principles apply to the church because with the Jewish people it is the people of God.  But Israel was to be a model for the world, and the OT seems to have the same expectations of the world as of Israel, so they suggest expectations of the government, too.  
   
*Does God still use human beings as means of judgment?*

Romans 13 implies so.

*Moses addresses the Israelites present as the ones who experienced the covenant at Sinai/Horeb.  How is this so if the rebellious generation has died in the wilderness?*

\*\*It’s like asking “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

*If Yahweh allocated the stars to other peoples to worship, is that worship therefore legitimate? Is it illegitimate only for Israel? Are the stars Yhwh’s underlings—and are underlings to be worshiped? Are they the same as “gods”, “sons of God”, “angels”, and “counselors”? How are these distinguished from false gods? Does Satan belong to them? How do we know that Yahweh alone is the real God?*

\*\*I’m not sure what “legitimate” means for other peoples; the focus in Deuteronomy 4 lies on its being illegitimate for Israel. Yes, the stars are Yahweh’s underlings and they are another way of talking about those other entities, so they become “false gods” when people repudiate Yahweh in order to treat them as the ultimate authority and power or when these entities themselves repudiate Yahweh’s authority over them (which is presumably what Satan did). Deuteronomy 4 doesn’t discuss how we know Yahweh is the real God; it declares only that the fact that Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt is the reason why Israel must acknowledge Yahweh. But the implicit argument in Exodus and the explicit argument in Isaiah 41—48 is that we know that Yahweh is the real God because he says he is going to do things (like the exodus) and then does them, and that he can show how events fit into the purpose that he announces, whereas other gods don’t and can’t.

*In the Sabbath commandment, why does Deuteronomy stress the exodus rather than creation?*

\*\*Because this link makes it possible to underscore the motivation for letting people such as servants observe the Sabbath.

*What does the Sabbath day look like for Dr. Goldingay?*

\*\*On Saturday I sometimes lie in bed an extra half-hour and/or go out for breakfast or lunch and/or go to Malibu for lunch and look at the ocean. On Sunday I get up slightly earlier than usual in order to take services and preach at our church, which occupies me until about 1.00 p.m. On both days I try to avoid teaching or preaching elsewhere (partly because that seems like work), but I do write (partly because that doesn’t seem like work). But in some ways my Sabbath (in the sense of time given to God) is the first part of the other days when I sit with God, read the Bible, and pray. I do find the question of the Sabbath difficult and perhaps at the resurrection God will declare that I have not kept the Sabbath and that he would now like ten years worth of Sabbaths (see 2 Chron 36:21) before I join in whatever we will do after the resurrection, though that will presumably also be like some more Sabbaths.

*Why is there so much on sex (but nothing on homosexuality)?*

*\*\**Because the issues to do with sex were ones they had to deal with and homosexuality wasn’t an issue?

*Does Deuteronomy 7:12-16; 30:1-20 support the prosperity/health and wealth gospel?*

\*\*Well to some extent, the same as Jesus and Paul (Matt 6:33; 2 Cor 9), but it’s not promising Cadillacs or private planes but good provision of the regular things that make for a rich human life. The further problem is when you take such promises out of the context of the Torah’s recognition that the promises don’t always work and that sometimes the people of God suffer persecution.

*Do the women get to the festivals? Is the Torah good news for women? Is it good news for men?*

*\*\**There is considerable stress in Deuteronomy on women having the same responsibilities and rights as men—it is a characteristic of the differences between the Deuteronomic version of the regulations and the Exodus version. Maybe Deuteronomy is making explicit something that was implicit, or maybe it is introducing a novel expectation. Of course it continues to work with the fact of human hardness of heart (Mark 10), so some of its rules work with patriarchy and seek to constrain its effects rather than simply condemning it. So in these ways it’s good news for women, and for men.

*Deut 15:4 “there will be none in need”; 15:11 “the poor will always be with you”:  which is it?*

*\*\**One is God’s promise about how it could be, the other the realistic allowance for how it will be because of human selfishness?

*We’ve discussed slavery as practiced among the Israelites, but they did experience chattel slavery in Egypt. Is it possible that so many slave laws exist because some Israelites were treating slaves as they had been treated in Egypt?*

\*\*Actually it wasn’t chattel slavery in Egypt. They were state serfs, and they were ill-treated. But the answer to your question is yes, no doubt some people were treating servants as chattel slaves.

*Did the Israelites ever actually practice this seventh year freeing of slaves?*

\*\*Not as far as we know.

*What is the significance of the rite in Deut 15:17?*

\*\*Maybe it symbolizes his openness to the master’s orders. Maybe it is a public mark of his servant status. Maybe it holds an earring that marks that. Over against Exodus 21:6 the extra element is the fixing to the door – suggesting his permanent attachment to this household.

*Deut eronomy26:  the Levites and widows and poor only get fed every three years?*

\*\*Maybe this reflects the possibility that not everyone was observing the seven-year cycle at the same time. Or maybe it again shows that the “law” is more a vision than a “law” for literalistic implementation.

*What is the reason for the particular curses in Deuteronomy 27, and why are there only curses involved in the ceremony?  If part of the leaders were sent to represent blessing it would seem that there should be a part of the ceremony that mimics the curses but deals with blessing.  There are a number of blessings given in the next chapter but they are simply read instead of part of a responsive liturgy like the curses.*

\*\*The word “secretly” comes twice, so maybe that’s a clue about the curses as a whole—they are curses on people who do things for which they don’t get found out. Maybe it’s only curses not blessings in the same way as you get no reward for keeping U.S. law but get in trouble for not keeping it.  Actually the “cursing” elders don’t do the cursing, as the “blessing” elders don’t do the blessing – the Levites do it.  So as you say, Deuteronomy 28 links more closely with the presence of the two sets of elders.

*Isn’t there a tension between telling Israel to wipe out whole groups and cities, and telling them to be kind to aliens? Is wiping out nations the best way to attract them? There are occasional passages about how aliens are included in the grace of God and others where foreigners are excluded.  Israelites are not to eat road-kill but they can sell it to foreigners. What is the difference between aliens and foreigners, and why is a distinction made?*

\*\*There is more than one difference here. Aliens are needy foreigners who come to be more-or-less part of the community. Foreigners are people such as merchants who are in Israel only temporarily. Aliens are bound by similar rules as Israelites but foreigners aren’t (so foreigners can eat what is unclean for an Israelite). But then there is a difference between relationships with individual foreigners and occasions when God commissions Israel to act as his means of judging a foreign nation such as Amalek.

If sometimes non-genocidal war is okay, how does that impact us today?

\*\*Maybe the question is whether not going to war would be worse than going to war. It’s not clear that there has been an example in the last fifty years or so.

*I do not understand how to handle a tension between retribution theology and the theology that says that things are meaningless and disconnected. Although God promises that it will go well for us if we do good in the Pentateuch he also seems to understand in other places that even in obedience to him we will face hard times.*

\*\*As you say, while the Torah makes promises about how things will work out, it also recognizes that they do not always work out as you would expect, and it sometimes it hints as to why that is (e.g., God is testing you). Things are the same elsewhere in the OT and in the NT. We have to hold onto both truths (the general promise and the fact that it doesn’t always work). It is when we fail to do that kind of thing that we end up in heresy!

*There seems to be a constant tension about being saved by grace through faith, along with the fact that we will be judged according to our obedience to God. Knowing we will all stand before the judgment seat of God, how important is it to keep the OT laws? How would you word this to a new believer who has many sinful behaviors to adjust to meet the intent of the law? Is God’s covenant with Israel conditional or unconditional?*

\*\*Neither. God is committed to Israel forever, like a husband to a wife or a wife to a husband. Yahweh forgoes any right to divorce. But Yahweh expects that Israel will respond in faithfulness, like a wife to a husband or a husband to a wife. But talk in terms of conditions doesn’t help to understand marriage and it doesn’t help to understand God’s relationship with us. And the way Paul discusses this issue in Romans 6 shows that it’s not best relates to judgment on the basis of works, though that will happen. It’s that the point of Jesus’ dying for us is that we may serve God not ourselves, so that if we carry on living for ourselves we miss the point.