

# Understanding Israel's 10 Commandments

## Are the 10 Commandments really a moral code?

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Everyone knows that God gave the Israelites [the 10 Commandments](#). Some of you may even be able to list them from memory. But do a search for the phrase “10 commandments” in your Bible and you might be surprised to find that it actually never appears anywhere. (Your translation may supply a subheading at the beginning of these sections that says “The 10 Commandments,” but there is no such subheading in the original Hebrew.) And, for those who have memorized them, which list—of a possible three—is it that you’re reciting? Further, even if we agree on the list, how do you count them to arrive at 10?

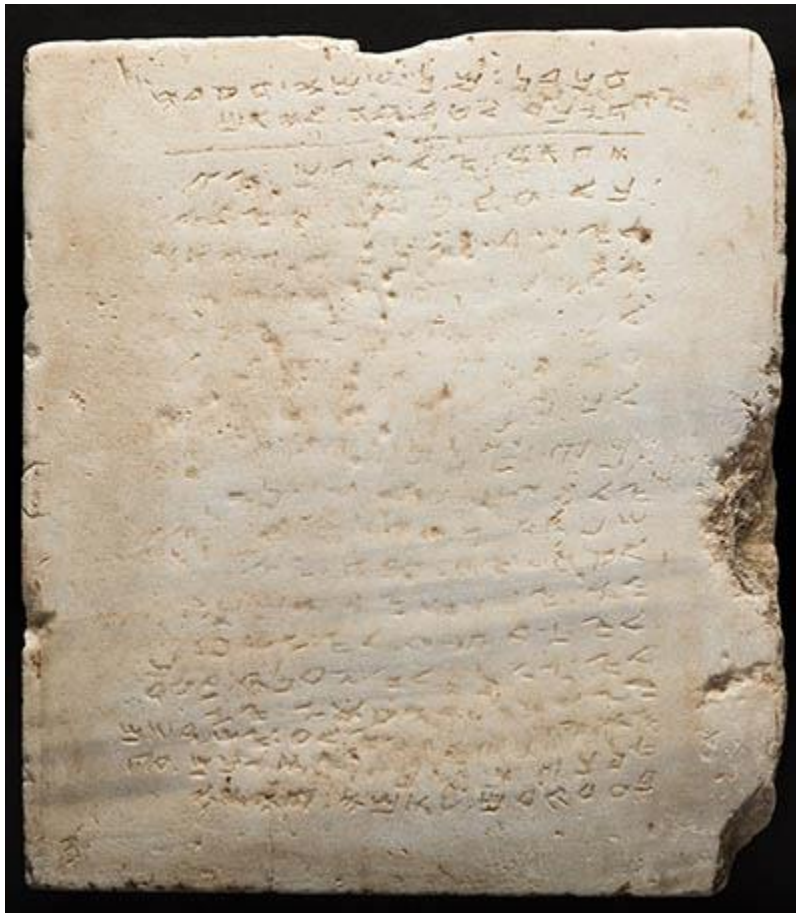


“Thou shalt not kill!” The voice of God thunders across the mountain as Charlton Heston’s Moses watches the fiery finger of God etch the words onto the stone tablets of Israel’s foundational moral code. This iconic moment in cinema captures the awe and reverence given the 10 Commandments over the last 2,500 years. *Photo: World History Archive / Alamy Stock Photo.*

The “10 Commandments” are listed in Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5 and Exodus 34. The first two lists (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5) are virtually identical, with a few differences in wording and order. Exodus 34, however, seems to be a completely different (and less familiar) set of commandments.

The list in Exodus 20 is the one to which most people are referring when they cite the 10 Commandments, and it's introduced in the text as follows: "And God spoke all these words, saying..."

While in Exodus 20 we're not told how many of "these words" there are, Deuteronomy 4:13, 10:5 and Exodus 34:28 will tell us that there are 10 (in the Greek translation, "deka logous," meaning "10 words," and giving us the English "decalog"); but nowhere in the Hebrew will they be referred to as the "10 Commandments."



A 10 Commandments stone tablet—believed by some to be the oldest stone copy of the 10 Commandments—was sold at an auction in November 2016 for \$850,000. *Photo: Courtesy Heritage Auctions/HA.com.*

But if we can agree that Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 give us a decalog, 10 "words"—and they are clearly more than suggestions, so "commandments" is an appropriate descriptor, even if one that the text doesn't use specifically to refer to these "words" here—we next need to note that they are not actually enumerated in either place. How should we count them?

Although in agreement that there are indeed 10, Jews, Catholics and Protestants all count them differently. For example, while Jews consider the substance of both verses 2 and 3 as the first commandment, Christians take verse 2 as a preface to the actual first commandment in verse 3; but some Christians see this commandment as continuing through verse 6, while others agree with the Jewish tradition that the second commandment begins in verse 4. I've noted the differences in the chart below.

<b>Commandment</b>	<b>Jewish (Rabbinic)</b>	<b>Christian: Orthodox, Reformed</b>	<b>Christian: Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran</b>
I am YHWH your God	1	preface	preface
There shall not be for you any other gods before my face	1	1	1
You will not make for yourself a statue or any other image	2	2	1
You will not raise the name YHWH for worthlessness	3	3	2
Remember the Sabbath day, to sanctify it	4	4	3
Honor your father and your mother	5	5	4
You will not murder	6	6	5
You will not commit adultery	7	7	6
You will not steal	8	8	7

You will not testify against your fellow as a lying witness	9	9	8
You will not covet your fellow's household	10	10	9
You will not covet your fellow's wife	10	10	10

You might also notice in my chart that my wording differs from the more familiar "I am the LORD thy God ... thou shalt have no other gods before me," etc. While the [King James Version](#) dominates in modern Biblical quotations, its usage of English is 400 years out of date with ours; if we want to understand the Bible's Hebrew in a way that makes sense to us today, we need to update our translation based on information we now have about [Biblical Hebrew](#) that wasn't available in King James's day.

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