

# The Ten Commandments: Was That An Echo?\*

Confession time: My sisters and I did not always hear what Mom said. Occasionally, this resulted in unintentionally repeating things she had just told us. That is why we sometimes heard phrases like “There’s an echo in here” in protest against our inattentiveness. Echoes are fascinating. They repeat the content of a sound, but never identically.

In Scripture, we can identify textual echoes where one biblical writer reworked an earlier passage. Often, this results in a similar message, but tweaked to speak to a new context. Most people devote minimal attention to such echoes, even when they appear in important passages. Consider the Ten Commandments. We think of them monolithically. In North America, they present themselves to our communal psyche as a brute fact; whether society likes them or not, they loom in the background, adorning courthouses and government buildings throughout the United States.

Devoted as many Christians are to memorizing and preserving the presence of the Ten Commandments in the public sphere, we seldom realize that the Old Testament provides different versions of them. We are most familiar with Exodus 20:1-17, but Deuteronomy 5 relays the information in a very similar, but intentionally different way. When read back-to-back, one might ask, “Is there an echo in here?”

## The Prologue

At the beginning of Israel’s time at Mount Sinai, the people stood before the mountain as God introduced the Ten Commandments, saying, “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery”<sup>†</sup> (Exodus 20:1). Israel’s experience of the Lord’s miraculous deliverance grounded its obedience to the commands God uttered next.

Deuteronomy’s version of the Ten Commandments also begins with a prologue, but it only makes sense in light of Deuteronomy’s placement within the story of Israel. By this point, Israel had completed 40 years in the wilderness, and the Exodus generation had died off. Poised to enter the promised land, the people received Moses’s final instructions. He began with a history lesson and told the new generation to consider God’s covenant as one made with them, not one God made with their parents.

In order to make this point, Deuteronomy introduces the commandments by placing Moses’s—new generation—audience at the foot of the mountain: “Hear, Israel, the statutes and judgments that I am speaking in your ears today so that you learn them and guard them in order to perform them. The LORD our God made a covenant

with us at Horeb. Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us”<sup>††</sup> (5:1-3).

Most readers skip on to the commandments and fail to see Moses’s point: God’s covenant is not a remnant from a bygone generation; it endures, and its commands are just as binding on the generation of “today” as it was on the first generation.

## The Sabbath

Deuteronomy records the first three commandments from Exodus nearly verbatim, but there is significant variation on the fourth command. In Exodus 20:8-11, the command reads, “Remember the Sabbath day, to sanctify it. Six days you shall work and do all your business but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. You shall not do any business; you and your son and your daughter, your slave and your maidservant and your cattle and your immigrant who is in your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them and he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it.”<sup>†</sup>

In this version, the reason for resting on the seventh day derived from the creation story in which God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2-3). Israel was to follow God’s example. Consequently, no business transactions were permitted, and children, servants, animals, and foreigners within Israel were obliged to rest on the seventh day. God commanded Israel to rest as He rested when He blessed and sanctified of the Sabbath.

In Deuteronomy 5:12-15, the commandment is significantly different. Verse 12 specifies that Israel must guard the Sabbath “just as the LORD your God commanded you.”<sup>†</sup> This additional phrase recalled the command given in Exodus and simultaneously reminded the new generation that the command was for them, not only for their parents.

The substance of the command in Deuteronomy 5:13-14 echoes Exodus 20:9-10, with deviations that supply clarity regarding how to apply the law. First, Deuteronomy teaches that Sabbath applies not only to cattle, but also to oxen and donkeys. Exodus mentioned neither of the latter two animals. In effect, Deuteronomy closed a loophole by extending Sabbath to these animals.

Secondly, Deuteronomy also specified that slaves and maidservants were to rest in the same manner as their masters. Exodus forbade them to transact business, but Deuteronomy 5:14 specifically commands the masters, “You shall not do any business . . . so that your slave and maid servant may rest like you do.”<sup>†</sup> Entry into God’s rest—which extends beyond simply avoiding business—was to be possible for all people.

Deuteronomy also departs from Exodus in its rationale for the Sabbath. Whereas Exodus based Sabbath in the creation story, Deuteronomy taught, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a strong hand and outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day”<sup>i</sup> (5:15). Rather than appealing to Genesis, Deuteronomy grounded the command to rest in Israel’s history of salvation. As slaves in Egypt, they were deprived of rest, but God brought them out. Based on that salvation, God commanded them to rest and to allow others to do likewise.

### Other Differences

A couple of other commandments merit attention. In the fifth commandment, Deuteronomy augments the directive to honor one’s parents with the statement, “Just as the LORD your God commanded you” (5:16). It also adds, “So that it may go well with you,” in addition to the reward of long life.

In the tenth commandment, Deuteronomy adds that one should not covet another’s field. Similar to the addition of the ox and donkey in verse 14, this clarified the law from Exodus. Even more significant is Deuteronomy’s rearrangement of things not to covet. In Exodus, the prohibition of coveting a neighbor’s wife placed her after the prohibition of coveting that neighbor’s household, thereby relegating the woman to part of that household. By contrast, Deuteronomy moves the woman to the first place in the sequence of things not to covet.

The change is intentional. Many have suggested that Exodus reduced women to the status of chattel within Israelite society. While that point is debatable, Deuteronomy removes the ambiguity. By placing the wife first, she is no longer part of a household that is owned by the man; she is distinct from it as his wife. The manuscript tradition of the Hebrew text supports this point by placing an untranslatable structural divider in Deuteronomy 5:21 between “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” and “You shall not desire your neighbor’s household.” No longer is the woman subordinated within her husband’s household.

### Explanation 1: Historical Development

Having observed differences between the two versions of the Ten Commandments, we now turn to explaining how those differences arose. There are two approaches to this subject: historical development and literary analysis.

Historically, most scholars believe Deuteronomy was written during the reign of King Josiah (641–609 BC). No theory is perfect, but if this one is even partially correct, Deuteronomy addressed a society that settled in Canaan centuries beforehand. Some of its variations from Exodus could reflect that new historical setting. The expanded timeline might also account for Deuteronomy closing loopholes. After centuries of seeing people break the rules, Deuteronomy

interpreted the intent of Exodus to include animals like oxen and donkeys in the Sabbath regulation.

Although this explanation enjoys much support, it suffers from certain difficulties: (1) theories about the development of Old Testament books are extremely difficult to substantiate, (2) this theory is contested by some scholars, and (3) it offers a historical narrative that in places contradicts the only textual witness we have to Israel’s development as a people.

### Explanation 2: Literary Analysis

The second way to explain the differences between Exodus and Deuteronomy is literary analysis. This approach recognizes that as theoretical as historical reconstructions may be, what is not theoretical is the text that we have in hand. Put differently, regardless of when Deuteronomy (or Exodus) received its final form, the form we have is what is inspired for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Two literary observations help explain the differences between the Ten Commandments as recorded in Exodus and Deuteronomy. First, within the larger storyline of Genesis—Kings, Deuteronomy occupies an important place: It records Moses’s final words before Israel entered Canaan. Moses knew his end was near and Deuteronomy was a fitting place to record his final teachings. Further, it was natural that this teaching extended beyond mere repetition such that Moses would interpret and apply what had already been said in Exodus. That is why we see the additions of oxen and donkeys in the fourth commandment and a rearrangement of things in the tenth. The point was not to rehash laws the people already knew, but to interpret and give guidelines for applying them.

The second literary observation recognizes the unique flavor of Deuteronomy in its prologue to the Ten Commandments. Although Deuteronomy is part of the larger story of Genesis—Kings, it does have its own emphases. For instance, the words *shamar* (guard/keep) and *‘asah* (perform/observe) are two key words for Deuteronomy, and they both appear in 5:1, introducing the Ten Commandments. These words highlight the importance of Israel obeying God’s covenant continually, which is a chord Deuteronomy hits home over and over.

Significantly, after giving the Ten Commandments, Deuteronomy 5 concludes by repeating these key words and enjoining Israel to guard the commandments and to do them (vv. 29–33). The point made by framing the Ten Commandments between the key words in verses 1 and 29–33 is similar to what James would one day teach: “Do not merely listen to the word. . . . Do what it says” (James 1:22).

**BEN BOECKEL** is senior pastor of Grangeville Church of the Nazarene in Grangeville, Idaho, and adjunct professor of biblical languages at Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City.

<sup>i</sup>This is the extended version of the article which is located in this quarter’s *Illustrated Bible Life*.