

The Ten Commandments

The question this month came from a man who is a member of our Spokane mission. He asks: *How do you explain the difference between the two versions of the Ten Commandments recorded in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21.*

The actual differences are:

(1) The Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5 do not begin with the words, “God spake all these words saying....”

(2) The Fourth Commandment in Exodus begins with the words: “Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy,” but in Deuteronomy it begins with the words: “Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it.”

(3) In Deuteronomy 5 there is a long addition to the Fourth Commandment which reads: “And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.”

(4) In Deuteronomy the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Commandments begin with the words “Neither shalt thou...” instead of “Thou shalt not...” as in Exodus.

(5) In the version of the Ten Commandments recorded in Deuteronomy the words, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife....” are switched around, so that the neighbor’s wife is mentioned first and his house second.

Besides these there are only some very minor differences of wording, and we would consider the difference between the opening words of commandments 6-10 also an unimportant difference.

Difference #5 is of some importance in our polemic against Roman Catholicism. In defense of its practice of image worship Rome combines the first two commandments (it finds no difference between idolatry and image worship), but in order to have ten commandments takes the words, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house,” as the Ninth Commandment and the words, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife,” as the beginning of the Tenth Commandment. The fact that these phrases are switched around in Deuteronomy shows that they belong to the same commandment and are not two separate commandments as Rome teaches.

Difference #1 is the result of the fact that in Exodus God himself is reciting the Ten Commandments from the top of Mount Sinai out of the smoke and fire that accompanied His coming to the Mount, one of the very few times that God spoke directly to His people. In Deuteronomy God is not speaking directly, but Moses is retelling the story of the giving of the law.

The other differences concern the Fourth Commandment and the Sabbath. They are the most important of all. The additions and changes in Deuteronomy’s version of the Ten Commandments reflect the fact that the nation of Israel was then at the borders of the land of Canaan and ready to enter the land in fulfilment of God’s promise. That land was for them the Sabbath land, the land of rest (Sabbath means “rest”), a picture of the rest which still remains for the people of God” (Heb. 4:9), a land in which their whole life would be controlled by the weekly and yearly sabbaths.

In preparation for their entry into that land God speaks through Moses more fully of the Sabbath in Deuteronomy than He does in Exodus, a reminder to them of the important place that the Sabbath would have in all their life, and therefore of the important place that He would have

in their lives. It is no different for us. The Sabbath, now celebrated on the Lord's Day, reminds us both of the rest that still remains for us in heaven and of the place that God has in our lives as the one in whom we find rest for our souls.

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