

Press release

When Jews and Christians changed the Ten Commandments

Bible scholar J. Cornelis de Vos presents the first full study of all ancient texts about the Decalogue – Jewish and Christian groups tightened or extended the prohibitions and commandments in order to strengthen their group identity – sexual ethical norms were added, but none of the Ten Commandments was ever rejected in the course of the centuries

Münster, 4 November 2016 (exc) During the first centuries after having been written down, the Bible's Ten Commandments were not nearly as set in stone as had been assumed, according to latest research. "Groups of Jews and Christians changed them from time to time. One group tightened the prohibition of killing, another extended the prohibition of adultery by sexual ethical norms, a third group added a new commandment for the construction of a sacred site", explains bible scholar adjunct professor Dr. J. Cornelis de Vos from Münster University's Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics". He recently presented the first study of all surviving Jewish and Christian texts from the early years of the Ten Commandments in ancient times that refer to the Decalogue's norms. "Although the people never doubted that God addressed them directly with the Ten Commandments, they did not shrink from transforming the Decalogue and tying their own norms to it. They created rules so tight that these could strengthen their group internally and define it externally. However, no commandment was ever explicitly rejected over the course of the centuries."

The monograph, "Rezeption und Wirkung des Dekalogs in jüdischen und christlichen Schriften bis 200 n. Chr." (Reception and Impact of the Decalogue in Jewish and Christian Writings until 200 AD) was published by Brill in Leiden and Boston. It shows a range of changes to the Ten Commandments, among them frequent extensions to the prohibition of adultery concerning sexual ethical norms. "Like many of their contemporaries, numerous ancient writers – be they Jewish, Christian or Gentile – believed that desire was the root of all evil and harboured a certain aversion to sexuality", according to the researcher. "The texts added a number of sexual practices that were considered reprehensible and should be prohibited: harlotry, the corruption of boys, homosexuality, abortion or the killing of newborns for lack of contraceptives." The early Didache church order, for instance, took up the Decalogue around 100 AD and added to the prohibition of adultery, "Thou shalt not corrupt boys." According to de Vos, this is one of many examples of how the Ten Commandments were updated and adapted to the values of one's own culture.

Samaritans changed the original Ten Commandments

In his fundamental study, the author analyses all Jewish and Christian sources from about 300 BC to 200 AD that have recourse to the Decalogue. Methodologically, he analyses them in their smallest linguistic details such as changed letters, syllables or repositioned text sections, and he elaborates variations from the two biblical versions of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21). He also classifies the sources historically and socio-religiously. The theologian first analyses the oldest translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, the Septuagint. He

then examines the Samaritan Pentateuch, Qumran writings and the Syrian translation as well as early Jewish writings, the New Testament and early Christian writings. “There were many changes”, according to the author, “but nobody explicitly rejected or replaced one of the Ten Commandments. Rather, the high normative standing was used to declare additional rules equally obligatory.”

The Samaritan Jews went to the lengths of making an insertion in the original itself. “Without further ado, the Samaritans concentrated the Ten Commandments of the Torah into nine, only to add a different tenth commandment probably towards the end of the 2nd century BC”, according to the author. “With it, in competing with the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, they legitimised the construction of a sacred site on Mount Gerizim in Samaria – a deliberate dissociation from the majority of Jews.” Woven into the Decalogue, a highly binding character was thus bestowed on this commandment. “The basic norms of a group were charged with religious normativity. This could also be practically achieved by norms, if not by being included among the Ten Commandments, but being textually shifted into their vicinity.”

Sermon on the Mount demands tighter commandments of Christians

Even the famous Sermon on the Mount from the New Testament was affected, as the biblical scholar shows: “Evangelist Matthew demands the tightening of some of the commandments. For example, Jesus says in the Gospel, which originated 80-90 AD, that not only killing is a serious offence but even already wrath or dispute, as these can lead to manslaughter. Dispute is thus for the first time included in the prohibition of killing”, says de Vos. The Sermon on the Mount extends the prohibition of adultery in a similar manner, according to him: it is adultery in heart to even desire the wife of another man. “The Ten Commandments of the Jewish Torah thus remain valid for Christians, but they are tightened in the Gospel according to Matthew.”

Another finding is that “the Ten Commandments were universally valid for all people – many Jews and Christians were positive about this”, according to de Vos. This was shown in the encounter with the politics, philosophy and ethics of the non-Jewish and non-Christian environment. “In order to convince non-Jews of the Decalogue’s universal connectivity, Jewish aspects such as the prohibition of visualising God were minimised.” The Jews Aristobulus and Philo of Alexandria, for example, portrayed the Decalogue as a universal and the very best philosophy. “According to Philo, the Decalogue was equivalent to the universal law of nature. Aristobulus even deduced from the Sabbath commandment that Jews were the best philosophers.”

What are the Ten Commandments?

The Ten Commandments are a series of commandments and prohibitions of the God of Israel in the Hebrew Bible. In it, they appear in two slightly different versions in two passages. For example, it is explained in a little more detail in the Book of Deuteronomy than in the Book of Exodus why everybody should observe the Sabbath as a day of rest. The Decalogue is introduced as a direct speech of God to his people, the Israelites, and outlines God’s will regarding their conduct towards him and their fellow human beings. The Decalogue’s commandments had presumably been passed on by word of mouth for several centuries until they found their place in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. – The monograph presents research results of the Cluster of Excellence’s project A9, “The Decalogue as a religious, ethical and political base text”, in which the author worked together with the Protestant theologian Prof. Dr. Hermut Löhr until 2012. In the second funding phase, they headed project A2-10, “The Jewish Nomos between normativity and identity using the example of Alexandria in the 1st-3rd centuries AD”. De Vos is

currently interim professor for the Old Testament and Ancient Judaism at the Institute of Protestant Theology of the University of Osnabrück. (ill/vvm)

Literature: Vos, J. Cornelis de: Rezeption und Wirkung des Dekalogs in jüdischen und christlichen Schriften bis 200 n. Chr. (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, Vol. 95), Leiden/Boston: Brill 2016, ISBN 978-90-04-32438-1, X + 510 pages, € 185.00.

Please note: For review copies please email the Dutch publisher Brill (reviews@brill.com). Please indicate the medium in which the review will be published.

Pictures: adjunct professor Dr. J. Cornelis de Vos (photo: Foto Reiss); book cover (2016, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, the Netherlands)

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