

## THE TWO TABLES OF THE COVENANT

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“AND he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone” (Deut. 4:13).

It has been commonly assumed that each of the stone tables contained but a part of the total revelation proclaimed by the voice of God out of the fiery theophany on Sinai. Only the subordinate question of the dividing point between the "first and second tables" has occasioned disagreement.<sup>1</sup> A re-examination of the biblical data, however, particularly in the light of extra-biblical parallels, suggests a radically new interpretation of the formal nature of the two stone tables, the importance of which will be found to lie primarily in the fresh perspective it lends to our understanding of the divine oracle engraved upon them.

Attention has been frequently directed in recent years to the remarkable resemblance between God's covenant with Israel and the suzerainty type of international treaty found in the ancient Near East.<sup>2</sup> Similarities have been discovered in the areas of the documents, the ceremonies of ratification, the modes of administration, and, most basically of course,

<sup>1</sup> The *perashiyoth* (pericopes marked in the Hebrew text) apparently reflect the opinion that the "second table" begins with the fourth commandment. (Here and elsewhere in this article the designation of specific commandments is based on the common Protestant enumeration.) The dominant opinion has been that the "second table" opens with the fifth commandment, but Jews usually count the fifth commandment as the last in the "first table", filial reverence being regarded as a religious duty.

<sup>2</sup> See G. E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition", *The Biblical Archaeologist*, XVII (1954) 3, pp. 50-76. D. J. Wiseman had previously read a paper on some of the parallels to the Society for Old Testament Studies (Jan. 1948). The most adequate documentation for the suzerainty treaty, particularly in its classic form, comes from the New Hittite Empire of the second millennium B.C., but there are references to such international treaties in the late third millennium B.C., and the suzerainty type continues to be attested in its essential form during the early first millennium B.C.

the suzerain-servant relationship itself. On the biblical side the resemblance is most apparent in the accounts of the theocratic covenant as instituted through the mediatorship of Moses at Sinai and as later renewed under both Moses and Joshua. Of most interest for the subject of this article is the fact that the pattern of the suzerainty treaty can be traced in miniature in the revelation written on the two tables by the finger of God.

"I am the Lord thy God", the opening words of the Sinaitic proclamation (Exod. 20:2a), correspond to the preamble of the suzerainty treaties, which identified the suzerain and that in terms calculated to inspire awe and fear. For example, the treaty of Mursilis with his vassal Duppi-Tessub of Amurru begins: "These are the words of the Sun Mursilis, the great king, the king of the Hatti land, the valiant, the favorite of the Storm-god, the son of Suppiluliumas, etc."<sup>3</sup> Such treaties continued in an "I-thou" style with an historical prologue, surveying the great king's previous relations with, and especially his benefactions to, the vassal king. In the treaty just referred to, Mursilis reminds Duppi-Tessub of the vassal status of his father and grandfather, of their loyalty and enjoyment of Mursilis' just oversight, and climactically there is narrated how Mursilis, true to his promise to Duppi-Tessub's father, secured the dynastic succession for Duppi-Tessub, sick and ailing though he was. In the Bible the historical prologue is found in the further words of the Lord: "which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2b). This element in the covenant document was clearly designed to inspire confidence and gratitude in the vassal and thereby to dispose him to attend to the covenant obligations, which constitute the third element in both Exodus 20 and the international treaties.

There are many interesting parallels to specific biblical requirements among the treaty stipulations; but to mention only the most prominent, the fundamental demand is always for thorough commitment to the suzerain to the exclusion of all alien alliances.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Mursilis insists: "But you, Duppi-

<sup>3</sup> Translation of A. Goetze in ed. James B. Pritchard: *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Princeton, 1950, p. 203. Cf. V. Korosec, *Hethitische Staatsvertraege*, Leipzig, 1931, pp. 36 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. further, Korosec, *op. cit.*, pp. 66 ff.; D. J. Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon*, London, 1958, pp. 23 ff.; Mendenhall, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

Tessub, remain loyal toward the king of the Hatti land, the Hatti land, my sons (and) my grandsons forever.... Do not turn your eyes to anyone else!"<sup>5</sup> And Yahweh commands his servant: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3; cf. 4, 5). Stylistically, the apodictic form of the decalogue apparently finds its only parallel in the treaties, which contain categorical imperatives and prohibitions and a conditional type of formulation equivalent to the apodictic curse (cf. Deut. 27:15-26), both being directly oriented to covenant oaths and sanctions. The legislation in the extant legal codes, on the other hand, is uniformly of the casuistic type.

Two other standard features of the classic suzerainty treaty were the invocation of the gods of the suzerain and (in the Hittite sphere) of the vassal as witnesses of the oath and the pronouncing of imprecations and benedictions, which the oath deities were to execute according to the vassal's deserts.

Obviously in the case of God's covenant with Israel there could be no thought of a realistic invocation of a third party as divine witness.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it is implicit in the third word of the decalogue that all Israel's oaths must be sworn by the name of Yahweh (Exod. 20:7). The immediate contextual application of this commandment is that the Israelite must remain true to the oath he was about to take at Sinai in accordance with the standard procedure in ceremonies of covenant ratification (cf. Exod. 24). Mendenhall<sup>7</sup> finds no reference to an oath as the foundation of the Sinaitic covenant; he does, however, allow that the oath may have taken the form of a symbolic act rather than a verbal formula. But surely a solemn affirmation of consecration to God made in the presence of God to his mediator-representative and in response to divine demand, sanctioned by divine threats against the rebellious, is tantamount to an oath. Moreover,

<sup>5</sup> *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 204.

<sup>6</sup> There is a formal literary approximation to the invocation of the oath witnesses in Deut. 4:26; 30:19; and 31:28 where by the rhetorical device of apostrophe God calls heaven and earth to be witnesses of his covenant with Israel. Heaven and earth are also invoked along with the mountains and rivers, *etc.*, at the close of this section in the treaties. Cf. Matt. 5:34, 35; 23:16.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 66.

Israel's eating and drinking in the persons of her representatives on the mount of God (Exod. 24:11) was a recognized symbolic method by which people swore treaties.<sup>8</sup>

The curses and blessings are present in Exodus 20, though not as a separate section. They are rather interspersed among the stipulations (cf. verses 5, 6, 7, 11, and 12). Moreover, an adaptation of the customary form of the curses and blessings to the divine nature of the suzerain who here pronounced them was necessary. Thus, the usual invocative form has yielded to the declarative, and that in the style of the motive clause, which is characteristic of Old Testament legislation and which is illustrative of what may be called the reasonableness of Israel's Lord.<sup>9</sup>

There is one final point of material correspondence. It provides the key to the nature of the two tables of stone and to this we shall presently return. The parallelism already noted, however, is sufficient to demonstrate that the revelation committed to the two tables was rather a suzerainty treaty or covenant than a legal code. The customary exclusive use of "decalogue" to designate this revelation, biblical terminology though it is (cf. "the ten words",<sup>10</sup> Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), has unfortunately served to obscure the whole truth of the matter. That this designation is intended as only *pars pro toto* is confirmed by the fact that "covenant" (w|uE>Deut. 4:13) and "the words of the covenant" (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 28:69; 29:8; etc.) are alternate biblical terminology. So too is "testimony" (wXg i ħExod. 25:16, 21; 40:20; cf. II Kg. 17:15), which characterizes the stipulations as oath-bound obligations or as a covenant order of life.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the two tables are called "the tables of the

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Wiseman, *op. cit.*, p. 84 and lines 154-156 of the Ramataia text.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. B. Gemser, "The importance of the motive clause in Old Testament law", *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, I (1953) pp. 50-66. It must be borne in mind that the decalogue does not stand alone as the total revelation of the covenant at Sinai. For curses and blessings see also the conclusion of the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 23:20-33) and especially Deut. 27-30.

<sup>10</sup> The contents of the treaties are also called the "words" of the suzerain.

<sup>11</sup> wXg i ħ is related to the Akkadian *ade*, which is used as a general appellation for the contents of suzerainty treaties. Wiseman (*op. cit.*, p. 81), defines *adu* (sing.) as "a law or commandment solemnly imposed in the presence of divine witnesses by a suzerain upon an individual or people

covenant" (Deut. 9:9, 11, 15) and "the tables of the testimony" (Exod. 31:18; 32:15; 34:29); the ark, as the depository of the tables, "the ark of the covenant" or "of the testimony"; and the tabernacle, where the ark was located, "the tabernacle of the testimony".

The two stone tables are not, therefore, to be likened to a stele containing one of the half-dozen or so known legal codes earlier than or roughly contemporary with Moses as though God had engraved on these tables a corpus of law.<sup>12</sup> The revelation they contain is nothing less than an epitome of the covenant granted by Yahweh, the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, to his elect and redeemed servant, Israel. Not law, but covenant. That must be affirmed when we are seeking a category comprehensive enough to do justice to this revelation in its totality. At the same time, the prominence of the stipulations, reflected in the fact that "the ten words" are the element used as *pars pro toto*, signalizes the centrality of law in this type of covenant. There is probably no clearer direction afforded the biblical theologian for defining with biblical emphasis the type of covenant God adopted to formalize his relationship to his people than that given in the covenant he gave Israel to perform, even "the ten commandments". Such a covenant is a declaration of God's lordship, consecrating a people to himself in a sovereignly dictated order of life.

who have no option but acceptance of the terms. It implies a 'solemn charge or undertaking an oath' (according to the view of the suzerain or vassal)."

<sup>22</sup> There does appear to be some literary relationship between the legal codes and the suzerainty treaties. J. Muilenburg ("The form and structure of the covenantal formulations", *Vetus Testamentum*, IX (Oct. 1959) 4, Pp. 347 ff.) classifies both under "the royal message". Hammurapi in his code, which is still the most complete of the extant ancient Oriental codes, introduces himself in the prologue with a recital of his incomparable qualifications for the promulgation of laws, then presents the laws, and in the epilogue pronounces curses and blessings on future kings as they ignore or honor his code. The identity of the decalogue with the suzerainty treaties over against such law codes is evidenced by features like the covenant terminology, the *ade* character of the stipulations, the "I-thou" formulation and the purpose of the whole as manifested both in the contents and the historical occasion, *i. e.*, the establishment of a covenant relationship between two parties.

But what now is the significance of the fact that the covenant was recorded not on one but on two stone tables? Apart from the dubious symbolic propriety of bisecting a treaty for distribution over two separate documents, all the traditional suggestions as to how the division should be made are liable to the objection that they do violence to the formal and logical structure of this treaty. The results of the traditional type of cleavage are not two reasonably balanced sets of laws but one table containing almost all of three of the four treaty elements plus a part of the fourth, *i. e.*, the stipulations, and a second table with only a fraction of the stipulations and possibly a blessing formula. The preamble and historical prologue must not be minimized nor ignored because of their brevity for this is a covenant in miniature. In comparison with the full scale version, the stipulations are proportionately as greatly reduced as are the preamble and the historical prologue. That would be even clearer if the additional strand of the curses and blessings were not interwoven with the commandments. Certainly, too, there was no physical necessity for distributing the material over two stones. One table of such a size that Moses could carry, and the ark contain, a pair of them would offer no problem of spatial limitations to prevent engraving the entire text upon it, especially since the writing covered both obverse and reverse (Exod. 32:15). In fact, it seems unreasonable, judging from the appearance of comparable stone inscriptions from antiquity, to suppose that all the area on both sides of two tables would be devoted to so few words.

There is, moreover, the comparative evidence of the extra-biblical treaties. Covenants, such as Exodus 20:2-17 has been shown to be, are found written in their entirety on one table and indeed, like the Sinaitic tables, on both its sides.<sup>13</sup> As a further detail in the parallelism of external appearance it is tempting to see in the sabbath sign presented in the midst of the ten words the equivalent of the suzerain's dynastic seal found in the midst of the obverse of the international treaty documents.<sup>14</sup> Since in the case of the decalogue, the suzerain

<sup>13</sup> Cf., e. g., Wiseman, *op. cit.*, plates I and IX.

<sup>14</sup> The closing paragraph of the Egyptian text of the parity treaty of Hattusilis III and Ramses II is a description of the seal, called "What is

is Yahweh, there will be no representation of him on his seal. But the sabbath is declared his "sign of the covenant" (Exod. 31:13-17). By means of the sabbath, God's image-bearer, as a pledge of covenant consecration, images the pattern of the divine act of creation which proclaims God's absolute sovereignty over man. God has stamped on world history the sign of the sabbath as his seal of ownership and authority. That is precisely what the pictures on the dynastic seals symbolize and their captions claim in behalf of the treaty gods and their representative, the suzerain.

These considerations point to the conclusion that each table was complete in itself. The two tables were duplicate copies of the covenant. And the correctness of this interpretation is decisively confirmed by the fact that it was normal procedure in establishing suzerainty covenants to prepare duplicate copies of the treaty text.

Five of the six standard sections of the classic suzerainty treaty were mentioned above. The sixth section contained directions for the deposit of one copy of the treaty document in a sanctuary of the vassal and another in a sanctuary of the suzerain.<sup>15</sup> For example, the treaty made by Suppiluliumas with Mattiwaza states: "A duplicate of this tablet has been deposited before the Sun-goddess of Arinna.... In the Mitanni land (a duplicate) has been deposited before Tes-sub.... At regular intervals shall they read it in the presence of the king of the Mitanni land and in the presence of the sons of the Hurri country."<sup>16</sup> Deposit of the treaty before the gods was expressive of their role as witnesses and avengers of the oath. Even the vassal's gods were thereby enlisted in the foreign service of the suzerain.<sup>17</sup>

in the middle of the tablet of silver" (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p.201). For the Mitannian practice of placing the seal on the reverse, cf. D. J. Wiseman, *The Alalakh Tablets*, London, 1953, plates VII and VIII, texts 13 and 14.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Koroseg, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101. On a stele from Ras Shamra an oath-taking ceremony is depicted with the two parties raising their hands over two copies of the treaty (*Ugaritica* III, plate VI).

<sup>16</sup> Translation of A. Goetze, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 205. In various treaties the public reading requirement specifies from once to thrice annually.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. II Kg. 18:25 and observations of M. Tsevat, "The Neo-Assyrian

Similar instructions were given Moses at Sinai concerning the two tables. They were to be deposited in the ark, which in turn was to be placed in the tabernacle (Exod. 25:16, 21; 40:20; Deut. 10:2). Because Yahweh was at once Israel's covenant suzerain and God of Israel and Israel's oath, there was but one sanctuary for the deposit of both treaty duplicates. The specified location of the documents as given in Hittite treaties can be rendered "under (the feet of)" the god, which would then correspond strikingly to the arrangements in the Israelite holy of holies.<sup>18</sup> The two tables do not themselves contain instructions concerning their disposition, for the legislation regarding the ark and sanctuary had not yet been given. The same is true of the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22-23:33). But it is significant that when such legislation was given after the ceremony of covenant ratification (Exod. 24), the ark was the first object described in detail and directions for the deposit of the two tables in it were included (Exod. 25:10-22).

As for the further custom of periodic public reading of treaty documents, the contents of the two tables were of course declared in the hearing of all Israel and the Book of the Covenant was read to the people as part of the ratification ceremony (Exod. 24:7); but the practice of periodic proclamation was first formulated some forty years later in the Book of Deuteronomy when God was renewing the covenant unto the second generation. When suzerainty covenants, were renewed, new documents were prepared in which the stipulations were brought up to date. Deuteronomy is such a covenant renewal document; hence its repetition with modernizing modifications of the earlier legislation, as found, for example, in its treatment of the decalogue (5:6-21) or of the passover (16:5 ff.; cf. Exod. 12:7, 46).<sup>19</sup> Another case in point

and Neo-Babylonian Vassal Oaths and the Prophet Ezekiel", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXVIII (Sept. 1959) III, p. 199.

<sup>18</sup> See Exod. 25:22. Cf. Korosec, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>19</sup> Taking Pentateuchal history at its face value, we discover that the Book of Deuteronomy exhibits precisely the legal form which contemporary second millennium B.C. evidence indicates a suzerain would employ in his rule of a vassal nation like Israel at such an historical juncture. It will no longer suffice for negative critics to grant only that certain individual



is Deuteronomy's addition of this requirement for the regular public reading of the covenant law at the feast of tabernacles in the seventh year of release (31:9-13), a requirement that became relevant and applicable here on the threshold of Israel's inheritance of Canaan. The document which was to be brought forth and read was not one of the stone tables but the "book of the law" which Moses wrote and had placed by the side of the ark (31:9, 26). However, even if "this book of the law" is identified with Deuteronomy alone, reading it would have included a re-proclamation of the contents of the tables.

The relevance of the foregoing for higher critical conclusions concerning the decalogue may be noted in passing. Along with a decreasing reluctance in negative critical studies to accept the Mosaic origin of the decalogue<sup>20</sup> the judgment continues that the present form of the Sinaitic decalogue is an expansion of the original, which is then reduced to an abridged version of the ten words, without preamble, historical prologue, or curses and blessings, and often without even an abridged form of the second and fourth words. Similarly, even where there is no bias against the Bible's representations concerning its own origins, the supposition has gained currency that it was an abbreviated version of the decalogue which was engraved on the stone tables. Such estimates of the contents of the Mosaic tables are clearly unsatisfactory, since the supposed abbreviated forms lack those very features which distinguish the tables as that which comparative study indicates was called for by the historical occasion, and biblical

ancient laws and cultic patterns are preserved in Deuteronomy; for the fact is that its total structure conforms to the classic structure of suzerainty treaties, all six standard sections being represented. The implications of this for the unity and authenticity of Deuteronomy are clear. While the suzerainty pattern has been widely recognized in the Decalogue and in Joshua 24, there has been a strange lack of acknowledgment of all the obvious facts in the case of Deuteronomy. It is to be hoped that the traditionalistic higher criticism will not long indulge in obscurantism out of regard for the unfortunate circumstance that its seventh century date for Deuteronomy is the pivot of the massive volume of modern historical studies of Israelite literature and religion.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. H. H. Rowley, "Moses and the Decalogue", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xxxiv, 1951-52, pp. 81 ff.

exegesis indicates the tables to be—not a brief ethical catechism but copies of the Sinaitic covenant.

The purpose of Israel's copy of the covenant was that of a documentary witness (Deut. 31:26).<sup>21</sup> It was witness to and against Israel, reminding of obligations sworn to and rebuking for obligations violated; declaring the hope of covenant beatitude and pronouncing the doom of the covenant curses. The public proclamation of it was designed to teach the fear of the Lord to all Israel, especially to the children.<sup>22</sup>

Both copies of the covenant were laid before Yahweh as God of the oath. But what was the purpose of Yahweh's own copy in his capacity as covenant surzerain? In the case of the international treaties, the suzerain would naturally want to possess, preserve, and protect a sealed legal witness to the treaty. It would remind him of the vassal's ade for the purpose of enforcement and punishment; for he would be the actual avenger of the oath, the instrument of the oath deities according to the religious theory which was the legal fiction lending sacred sanction to the treaty. It would also remind him of his suzerain's role as protector of the vassal and of the various specific promises of assistance often contained in the treaties. He had not, however, like the vassal taken a covenant oath and human lords being what they are he would have considerably less interest in the benefits he might bestow than in the amount of annual tribute he was entitled to exact from the vassal.

<sup>21</sup> Various types of covenant witnesses other than the divine witness are mentioned. Cf. the song of Moses, which he had Israel memorize (Deut. 31:19, 22; 32); the stones with the law written upon them erected on Ebal (Deut. 27; Josh. 8:30-35); and the stone witness of covenant renewal at Shechem (Josh. 24:26, 27).

<sup>22</sup> Deut. 31:13, Ps. 78:5ff. The treaties and the biblical covenant share a perspective of family solidarity reflected in numerous references to the sons and grandsons of the vassal. In the treaties, sworn commitment is in the terms: "we, our sons, and our grandsons" and agreeably both curses and blessings are pronounced unto children's children. "Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me" (Exod. 20:5b) is the biblical counterpart, defining the bounds of corporate responsibility in guilt under this covenant administration by the utmost limits of contemporaneity (here described by means of numerical climax, a popular device of Hebrew and Canaanite literature).

Such *mutatis mutandis* was the purpose of Yahweh's own stone table of covenant witness. However, even from the formal point of view there is here a remarkable shift in emphasis arising from the fact that God's suzerainty covenant with Israel is an administration of salvation. The form of the blessing suggests the unique emphasis: "showing mercy", and that not merely to the third and fourth generation of them that love him but, contrary to the balance observed in this respect in the curse and blessing formulae of the international treaties, "to a thousand generations" (Cf. Deut. 7:9). This much more abounding of grace is evidenced even in connection with the function of the stone tables as witnesses against Israel; for since the divine throne under which the tables are located is the place of atonement, the witness of the tables against Israel never ascends to Yahweh apart from the witness of the blood advocating mercy.

The divine suzerain's condescension in the Covenant of Grace at the time of its Abrahamic administration extended to the humiliation of swearing himself to covenant fidelity as lord of the covenant and fulfiller of the promises (cf. Gen. 15). Mendenhall<sup>23</sup> mistakenly regards the Abrahamic covenant as completely different in kind from the Sinaitic, partly because of God's oath and partly because of an alleged absence of obligations imposed on Abraham. Actually, the total allegiance to his Lord demanded of Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:1; 17:1) was precisely that fealty which the treaty stipulations were designed to secure. Moreover, it is demonstrable that an oath on the part of the suzerain is not incompatible with the genius of the relationship governed by a suzerainty treaty. There are, for example, a treaty and a related deed from Alalakh,<sup>24</sup> both concerned with one Abban, the vizier of Hattusa, and his bestowment of certain cities upon his political "servant" Iarimilim. The treaty states that Abban confirmed the gift in perpetuity by a self-maledictory oath accompanied by the symbolism of slaughtering a sheep. It also stipulates that the territorial gift is forfeit if Iarimilim

<sup>23</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>24</sup> Published by D. J. Wiseman in the *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* XII (Dec. 1958) 4, pp. 124-29 and in *The Alalakh Tablets* (London, 1953), pp. 25, 26, plate I, respectively.

is disloyal to Abban. The text deeding Alalakh (part of Abban's gift) pronounces curses upon any who would alter Abban's purpose by hostilities against Iarimlim. All this corresponds perfectly to God's dealings with Abraham. The Lord covenanted territory to his servant Abraham as an everlasting possession (Gen. 12:1, 2; 13:14-17; 15:16, 18) and did so by a self maledictory oath symbolized by the slaying of animals (Gen. 15:9 ff.). Moreover, it is clear that by rebellion against Yahweh's word Abraham would forfeit the promise (Gen. 22:16, 17a; *cf.* Deut. 28, especially verses 63ff.); and finally, the Egyptians and Canaanites who oppose this territorial grant are cursed (Gen. 12:36; 15:14, 16, 19-21).

God's oath is, therefore, in keeping with the suzerain-vassal relationship and simply enhances the condescension and graciousness of God's covenant reign. Considered in relation to the divine oath and promise, Yahweh's duplicate table of the covenant served a purpose analogous to that of the rainbow in his covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:13-16). This divine condescension anticipated the humiliation of the Incarnation, and this divine oath contemplated the ultimate humiliation of the accursed death of him who should be "found in fashion as a man".

There remains the question of the relevance of our interpretation of the duplicate tables of the covenant for the understanding of their law content. The increased emphasis on the covenantal context of the law underscores the essential continuity in the function of law in the Old and New Testaments. The decalogue is not offered fallen man as a genuine soteric option but is presented as a guide to citizenship within the covenant by the Saviour-Lord, who of his mercy delivers out of the house of bondage into communion in the life of the covenant--a communion which eventuates in perfect conformity of life to the law of the covenant. To stress the covenantal "I-thou" nature of this law is also to reaffirm the personal-religious character of biblical ethics at the same time that it recognizes that covenantal religion and its ethic are susceptible to communication in the form of structured truth. Yahweh describes the beneficiaries of his mercy as "them that love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 20:6; *cf.* John 14:15).

Recognition of the completeness of each of the tables provides a corrective to the traditional view's obscuration of the covenantal-religious nature of the laws in "the second table". An hegemony of religion over ethics has, indeed, always been predicated on the basis of the priority in order and verbal quantity of the laws of "the first table", analyzed as duty or love to God, over the laws of "the second table", analyzed as duty or love to man. Nevertheless, this very division of the ten words into "two tables" with the category "love of God" used as a means of separating one "table" from the other suggests that the fulfillment of the demands of "the second table" is to some degree, if not wholly, independent of the principle of love for God.

Our Lord's familiar teaching concerning a "first and great commandment" and a "second like unto it" (Matt. 22:37-40; Mk. 12:29-31) has figured prominently in the speculation about the contents of "the two tables".<sup>25</sup> It is, however, gratuitous to suppose that Jesus was epitomizing in turn a "first table" and "second table" as traditionally conceived.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, it must be seriously questioned whether Jesus' commandment to love God's image-bearer, ourselves and our neighbors alike, can properly be restricted after the dominant fashion to the fifth through the tenth laws. The nearest parallel in the decalogue to the specific language of Jesus is found in the fourth law as formulated in Deuteronomy (5:14): The sabbath is to be kept "that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou". And does man not best serve the eternal interests of himself and his neighbor when he promotes obedience to the first three commandments? Is that not the ethical justification of the great commission?

But beyond all doubt Jesus' "great commandment" must be the heart motive of man in the whole compass of his life. Restricting the principle of love of God to the sphere of

<sup>25</sup> In the Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, it is the only proof text cited 'for distinguishing between the "tables" in terms of duty towards God and duty to man (chap. XIX, sect. II).

<sup>26</sup> There is no explicit reference to the two stone tables in the context, which is broadly concerned with the generality of scriptural legislation. Jesus relates his two commandments to the totality of Old Testament revelation (Matt. 22:40).

worship prejudices the comprehensiveness of God's absolute lordship which is the foundation of the covenant order.

That the love of God with heart, soul, mind, and strength is as relevant to the tenth commandment as it is to the first is evident from the fact that to violate the tenth is to worship Mammon, and ye cannot love and serve God and Mammon. Or consider the tenth word from the viewpoint of the principle of stewardship, the corollary of the principle of God's covenant lordship. Property in the Israelite theocracy was held only in fief under the Lord who declared: "For the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev. 25:23b). Therefore to covet the inheritance of one's neighbor was to covet what was God's<sup>27</sup> and so betray want of love for him. The application of this is universal because not just Canaan but "the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1).

The comprehensiveness of Jesus' "first and great commandment" is evident from the preamble and historical prologue of the covenant document. Being introductory to the whole body of stipulations which follow, they are manifestly intended to inculcate the proper motivation for obedience not to three or four or five of the stipulations but to them all; and the motivation they inspire is that of love to the divine Redeemer. Why are we to love our neighbors? Because we love the God who loves them and, according to the principle articulated in the sabbath commandment (Exod. 20:11), the imperative to love God is also a demand to be like him.

The two commandments of Jesus do not distinguish two separable areas of human life but two complementary aspects of human responsibility. Our Lord's perspective is one with that of the duplicate tables of the covenant which comprehend the whole duty of man within the unity of his consecration to his covenant Lord.

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<sup>27</sup> Considered in this light, there is an exact equivalent to the tenth commandment in a Hittite treaty where the suzerain charges the vassal: "Thou shalt not desire any territory of the land of Hatti". (Cited by Mendenhall, "Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law," *The Biblical Archaeologist* XVII (May, 1954) 2, p. 30).

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