David J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 205; Gender, Culture, Theory, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 26-45.

2

The Ten Commandments, Reading from Left to Right*

1. *Reading from Left to Right*

Almost any readings you will encounter of the Ten Commandments steadfastly read them from right to left—which is my metaphor for: adopting the ideology inscribed in the text. Literally reading from right to left means falling in with the convention that Hebrew texts are read in that direction; as a metaphor, reading from right to left also signifies an acceptance of a convention. It means adopting the world of the text, the world and worldview of the author, and the original intentions of the text.

Most of our criticism of the Hebrew Bible lives in this right to left world. Historical criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism always read from right to left, asking as they do about origins, intentions and effects but never, in principle, critiquing them. So too does rhetorical criticism, with its concern for the words on the page and their articulation but with a studied unconcern for meaning or value. There is of course nothing wrong with reading from right to left; but it is a quantum leap

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from these approaches to one that directly confronts questions of value and validity.

For myself, I think that the only way of taking a text seriously is to ask whether I accept it, whether I buy it, whether I believe it, whether I want to call it 'true', whatever that may mean. I don't have to decide in advance that it *is* true in order to be taking it seriously; but it is only if I think that its 'truth' is an important issue, that it is worth arguing with—worth confronting, that is, from my own standpoint—that I give it any honour. I call this project of reading the text by way of critique, 'reading from left to right'—which is to say, according to the canons of reading in our time, using the standards and moral values that come into play when we pick up the newspaper, a political tract or a new novel. Without making a fuss about it, and as naturally as our eyes scan the text from left to right, we find ourselves engaged as thinking, feeling, judging persons, asking, 'Is this true? Is it the case? Can I accept it? Will I have to change if I do accept it?'

2. *The Ten Commandments as Divine Law*

The first thing I observe when I try to take this text seriously, when I ask whether I believe it, when I consider whether I can buy its ideology, is its opening words, 'And God spoke all these words, saying' (Exod. 20.10), or, in its Deuteronomy version, its closing words, 'These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain...and he added no more' (Deut. 5.22). Taking these words seriously, and not brushing them aside as some strange Hebrew idiom, I find myself asking: Did God (if there is a God) actually speak audible words out of the sky over a mountain in the Arabian peninsula in the late second millennium BCE? That is certainly what the text seems to be saying, and I seriously want to take it seriously. Now it is not for me to say what is and is not impossible, and I readily admit that the world is no doubt a more strange and wonderful place than I have personally experienced. But it will not shock many readers of these pages if I say I do not believe that any such thing ever happened, and that I would be surprised if any scholarly reader

did either. But, as I say, strange and wonderful things happen.[1]

The point, indeed, may seem so obvious that some may wonder why or whether it needs to be made. I make it just because not a single commentator that I have found remarks on this datum of the text, not one confronts the claim of the text with their own personal refusal to accept its ideology, not one draws any conclusion about the status of the text once they have decided they do not believe some significant part of it.[2] Not one commentator remarks that, if God did not in fact say all these

[1]. Here, for example, is Moshe Weinfeld: 'At the dawn of Israelite history the Ten Commandments were received in their original short form as the basic constitution, so to speak, of the Community of Israel. The words were chiselled or written on two stone tablets…' ('The Uniqueness of the Decalogue', in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition* [ed. Ben-Zion Segal; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1990], pp. 1-44 [27-28]). Received from *whom*?, we are bound to ask. And chiselled by *whom*? Weinfeld does not say, but Bible readers think they know whom he means. Interestingly enough, in another version of his paper the sentence reads, 'the Decalogue was promulgated'—which sounds more human, does it not? See his 'The Decalogue: Its Significance, Uniqueness and Place in Israel's Tradition', in *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives* (ed. Edwin B. Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss and John W. Welch; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), pp. 3-47 (32).

[2]. It is not entirely surprising that the great majority of commentaries do not make even a single comment on the verse 'And God spoke all these words, saying' (Exod. 20.1). Not even the 659-page commentary of Brevard S. Childs on Exodus (*Exodus: A Commentary* [Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press], 1974) finds room for a single remark, though on p. 397 he does observe that the first-person formula 'points to direct, unmediated communication of Yahweh himself' (presumably, that is, to a literary fiction of direct communication by Yahweh). The article by E.W. Nicholson, 'The Decalogue as the Direct Address of God', *Vetus Testamentum* 27 (1977), pp. 422-33, thinks that there is a theological reason (and not just an editorial reason) for the first-person speech, but it does not consider whether the ascription of these sentences to God is *true*. Apparently all theological reasons are good ones. Others who refer to the first-person address seem to be interested only in formal analogies (e.g. Anthony Phillips, *Ancient Israel's Criminal Law: A New Approach to the Decalogue* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970], p. 4) or in its redactional history (e.g. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, *Der Dekalog: Sein späten Fassungen, die originale Komposition und seine Vorstufen* [Orbis biblicus et orientalis, 45; Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982], pp. 164-68).

words and the text says that he did, the text is telling us lies and trying to deceive us, and that is a strange state of affairs in a text that is in the business of laying down ethical principles.

Commentators have their own ways of avoiding the issue, of course—which is to say, of not taking their text seriously.

Method One is to tell us that someone else spoke the ten commandments, *without telling us that in so saying they are denying that God did.* J. Philip Hyatt, for example, tells us that the commandments probably 'originated in the customs and regulations of the families and clans of pre-Mosaic times, as handed down by heads of families and clans, elders, and wise men'.[3] But he makes no remark whatsoever on v. 1, which says that these are the words of God. A stunning example of this procedure is provided by a little book entitled, *The Decalogue—Words of God?* [4] Although the implied answer is of course Yes, the author invariably speaks of the Decalogue as the product of humans, locating its origin in clan wisdom, paternal instruction, and the like. Not surprisingly, Exod. 20.1 does not appear in the index.

Method Two is to change the subject, and to make the issue whether the Ten Commandments were spoken by *Moses* or not. R.H. Charles, for instance, writes: 'The two codes we are considering are ascribed both in Exodus and Deuteronomy to Moses'.[5] This is of course not true; they are ascribed to *God*.

Method Three is to tell you how foolish you are if you think that 'God spoke all these words' was ever intended to mean that God actually spoke these words. Says James Barr, in a foreword to Eduard Nielsen's book on the Ten Commandments, 'Israelite law was not, as a superficial reading of the Old Testament might suggest, dropped complete from heaven, but grew and developed through various phases of the life of the Hebrew people'.[6] So it is not that the Old Testament claims one thing and modern

3. J. Philip Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus* (New Century Bible; London: Oliphants, 1971), p. 210.

4. Helen Schüngel-Straumann, *Der Dekalog—Gottes Gebote?* (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, 67; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1973).

5. R.H. Charles, *The Decalogue* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973), p. 28.

6. Eduard Nielsen, *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective: A Traditio-Historical Approach* (Studies in Biblical Theology, 2/7; London: SCM Press, 1968), p. vii.

scholars think another. Let us have no criticism of the Hebrew Bible here. Let us rather put the blame on its readers, those superficial ones who cannot see that 'written with the finger of God' means what it has always meant to readers of any intelligence: 'developed through various phases of the life of the Hebrew people'.

Method Four is to pretend (or, talk as if) God did actually speak all these words, while at the same time making quite clear that you do not believe he did. Dale Patrick, for example, apropos of the second commandment, says, 'It is intriguing to ask why Yahweh rejected images of himself'.[7] What the commentator really believes, I am sure, is that it was some human being who *said* that Yahweh 'rejected images of himself'. Whatever Yahweh thought about the matter, we have no first-hand knowledge about it. *We have only some human's word for it.* But the commentator makes it sound as if here in the Ten Commandments we have the *ipsissima verba* of Yahweh, as if here some question in the mind of Yahweh personally is being presumed and alluded to. The commentator simply does not confront the problem of the text's claim.

Perhaps it would not matter so much if the ten commandments were a less significant part of the Old Testament. The trouble is, the very commentators who refuse to take the text seriously—by buying its ideology uncritically—generally make a lot of noise about the importance of the text. Here is James Barr again:

> The Ten Commandments constitute beyond doubt the best known and most influential single passage in the whole Old Testament.[8]

And Eduard Nielsen takes up the strain:

> Of all the passages in the Old Testament the decalogue, 'the ten commandments', is presumably the best known to western civilization.[9]

[7]. Dale Patrick, *Old Testament Law* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 45.

[8]. James Barr, preface to Nielsen, *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective*, p. vii.

[9]. Nielsen, *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective*, p. 1. Here are some more testimonials to the significance of the Ten Commandments,

Maybe this is true, maybe not. Maybe it seems more true if you are a Presbyterian like Barr or a Lutheran like Nielsen. Never mind. The point is that so-called critical scholars have been reading this unquestionably important text as if it contained divine words when what it really contains (and they know it) are human words, social and religious laws that their authors want to ascribe to God because they want other people to obey them. Let us not beat around the bush: reading from left to right, stepping outside the conventions and beliefs that the text wants to impose on us, which is to say, reading this text as a humanly produced text and not privileging it because we want to agree with it or want to affirm its divine origin, we have to say (do we not?) that it stands written in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 because it was in the interests of its framers to promulgate its contents.

All of us have interests. We have interests whether or not we know of them, even whether or not we are interested in them. Interests devolve from our personal, social, economic, ethnic, sexual (and so on) location. We do not have a lot of choice about what our interests are, for they are implicates of our identity. If I am rich, or if I am heterosexual, it is not in my interest to promote an egalitarian social order or to seek to outlaw heterosexual acts between consenting adults. I can of course act against my interests, whether recklessly or highmindedly; but they are my interests, and it cannot be in my interest to act against them. My interests are mine whether I like them or not; they are interests determined for me by where I fit into the web

which we would do well to have in the back of our minds if we plan to study them critically: (1) '…the fundamental place of the Ten Commandments in human civilization as a revelation of eternal truths' (Ephraim E. Urbach, 'Preface', in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, p. xi). (2) 'In their role as the fundamental demands made by the God of Israel on the Community of Israel, the Ten Commandments were familiar to every Israelite loyal to his heritage. They became the crowning point of his religious and ethical tradition… [I]t was only the Ten Commandments that Israel was privileged to hear directly spoken by the Deity' (Weinfeld, 'The Uniqueness of the Decalogue', in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, p. 21). The reader is invited to decide whether Weinfeld is simply reporting the stance taken by the biblical texts, or whether he is speaking in his own voice, as a believer, and uncritically.

of social networks.

So when it comes to reconstructing the pattern of interests of people in societies long defunct (as I am trying to do in this essay), though we may be in the area of the contingent, we are not necessarily in the area of the speculative. Such an enquiry is, indeed, at the mercy of our historical knowledge or lack of it. But because it deals with social locations and social relations, and thus with typicalities, it is on rather firmer ground than we tread when we enquire after discrete historical 'facts'. And, being concerned with public and observable realities rather than private mental processes, it is on very much firmer ground than the common enquiry in biblical criticism after authors' intentions. All in all, I want to argue, the reconstruction of the interests that lie behind our biblical texts, though far from being an exact science, might well be more secure and foundational than much that has passed for biblical criticism in recent centuries.

3. *In Whose Interest Are the Ten Commandments?*

In whose interest?—that becomes the question for this essay. The Ten Commandments exist because it is in someone's interest for them to exist. In *whose* interest, then, are they? Since societies, like ancient Israelite society, for example, are not homogeneous, I shall be asking, In which *group's* interest are these commandments? And since groups are usually in some kind of conflict with other groups, I shall be asking, What kind of *social conflict* is alluded to, or repressed, by this text? And since it is usually the victors in any social conflict whose texts get preserved, I shall be looking narrowly at *elites and powerholders* in Israelite society for the matrix of these laws.[10]

So saying, I am already being controversial. For it is part of the

[10]. Most previous studies that profess to investigate the *social* setting of the Decalogue are not interested in *class* but in social constructs like 'clan' or 'wisdom circles' (so, for example, Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Wesen und Herkunft des 'apodiktischen Rechts'* [Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament, 20; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965]); Hossfeld, *Der Dekalog*; Christoph Levin, 'Der Dekalog am Sinai', *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985), pp. 165-91.

accepted wisdom that the Ten Commandments do *not* serve a sectional interest, that they apply equally to everyone and promote the greater good of the community as a whole. Thus, for example, Claus Westermann takes for granted that the commandment of monolatry applies 'to everyone and for all time',[11] and Walther Zimmerli that 'the law of Yahweh is addressed first and foremost to Israel as a nation'.[12] So too Brevard Childs: 'The Decalogue is not addressed to a specific segment of the population, to the priestly class, or a prophetic office within Israel, but to every man'.[13] Perhaps, indeed, the framers of the commandments did think, as innocently as Brevard Childs did when he spoke of every *man*, that they *were* addressing the whole community; we however can only gasp at the audacity of authors who manage with a word to suppress vast constituencies, whether the powerless in general or women in particular.

In the search for the interests represented by the Ten Commandments, however, it is a different question we find ourselves asking. It is not the question of the intention of the authors, not the question of whom they thought they were addressing, but rather a question about the text. It is, What does the text assume, and how does it function? With this question we deflect our attention from authors—who were real people once but are now unfortunately entirely inaccessible—and fall to discussing narrators and narratees—who, while they are nothing but mental constructs, are fortunately perpetually accessible, for they are embedded in the text, they are a function of the text.

Who *is* envisaged in the Ten Commandments, then? Who is the narratee supposed by the narrator? It is not at all difficult to

11. Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (trans. Douglas W. Scott; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 21 (he presumably means all Israelites).

12. Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (trans. David E. Green; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), p. 138.

13. Childs, *Exodus*, pp. 399-400. Cf. also Weinfeld: 'By contrast with many laws and commands…the commands in the Decalogue obligate *everyone*. Every single individual, regardless of his condition or the circumstances in which he finds himself, is required to observe them' ('The Uniqueness of the Decalogue', in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, p. 4). Weinfeld subsequently makes clear that by everyone he means every *Jew*, but he does not make clear whether he means every *male* Jew.

profile that figure. Put together all the data we have in the commandments about who is envisaged, and what we find is: it is an individual, a male, an Israelite, employed, a house-owner, married, old enough to have working children but young enough to have living parents, living in a 'city', wealthy enough to possess an ox and an ass and slaves, important enough to be called to give evidence in a lawsuit. It is a man who is capable of committing, and probably tempted to commit, everything forbidden here—and likely to ignore everything enjoined here, if not commanded to observe it. It is, in short, one might say, a balding Israelite urban male with a mid-life crisis and a weight problem, in danger of losing his faith.[14]

Everyone else is not so much ignored—for several other categories of persons are mentioned—as sidelined. Women, for example, are present, but they are not addressed. Apparently the work they do does not count as work, since they have nothing to rest from on the sabbath; presumably the daughters are out in the fields, Ruth-like, so they need a weekly rest like their brothers. Women's sexuality likewise passes without notice: they can be coveted by their husband's neighbour, but they themselves cannot covet their husband's neighbour—or even, for that matter, their neighbour's husband. Resident aliens are referred to; they are even required to observe the sabbath law. But they are not *addressed* as narratees. They are in the same position as cattle, obliged to obedience, but not the persons addressed. Likewise

[14]. I find that my analysis of the narratee has been anticipated by Frank Crüsemann, in his *Bewahrung der Freiheit: Das Thema des Dekalogs in sozialgeschichtlicher Perspektive* (Kaiser Traktate, 78; München: Kaiser, 1983), who describes him as a middle-aged male householder, a member of the *'am ha'arets* (esp. pp. 28-35). Where I differ from Crüsemann is that while he acknowledges that there are many members of Israelite society who are excluded from consideration in the Decalogue, he too excludes them from his consideration when he esteems the Decalogue to promote an ethic of freedom. Even if it is that (and I think it is something of a *tour de force* to argue it), it is freedom only to those who share that social standing. In my view, that very fact makes the Decalogue ethically problematic. William Johnstone has helpfully summarized and commented on Crüsemann's work in 'The "Ten Commandments": Some Recent Interpretations', *Expository Times* 100 (1988–89), pp. 453-61. I am grateful to Emma Clines for drawing these references to my attention.

slaves, children, the unmarried, elderly parents, the disabled, beggars, the landless, the dispossessed, day-labourers and the urban poor are not the narratees.

The text screens these people out: they are not 'neighbours'. The text is busily pretending that the whole society is made up entirely of a group of 'neighbours' (Exod. 20.16-17; Deut. 5.20-21), who are men of a certain income and social standing, men more or less equal to one another. It does not recognize the existence of those who are not the narratees, who are not 'neighbours'. Now we all know who it is who pretends that everyone in a society is equal, that everyone has the same chances: it is always the haves, for it is in their interest to maintain the fiction. It makes them more comfortable not to have to worry that their privilege may be the cause of other people's poverty; and, if the underprivileged can be made to believe in this equality, it lessens the chances of social friction. The poor, however, are not under the illusion that they are the brothers or neighbours or equals of the rich.

If, then, in the world of the text it is these urban middle-aged males who are the narratees, and it is (of course) Yahweh who is the narrator, the question for the real world of social relations now becomes: In whose interest is it to have a text telling these pillars of society what they should and shouldn't do, in the name of Yahweh? It will not be slaves or women or resident aliens; though they do indeed stand to benefit from some of the commandments—some of them finding it agreeable to live in a society where work is forbidden on the sabbath and others preferring the laws against theft or murder—most of the commandments leave them cold. The only group in the society that stands to benefit from observance of the commandments as a whole are those who have spent their lives in the enforcement of such commandments and who are consequently the only ones who have the authority to tell the addressees of the commandments that they must obey them, upon pain of...whatever. It is, in a word, the fathers of those addressed, that is, the old men of the society, who speak in the name of God and whose interests are represented in every one of the commandments. No word is breathed, naturally, of the inevitable tension between those who want these laws to be kept and those who do not, between those

whose interests they serve and those whose interests they damage. But the moment we allow that the laws do not serve all the members of the community equally, at that moment we recognize a social conflict repressed by the text. The fathers are always *against* someone, some group, whenever they assert their own group's interests.

Now the interests of the fathers are of course principally represented by the fifth commandment, 'Honour your father and mother' (Exod. 20.12; Deut. 5.16). On this commandment, we might say, hang all the law and the prophets—to coin a phrase. Not only is the physical survival of the old men dependent on the observance of the law, but their self-esteem also will be measured by their ability to ensure that their sons maintain the family and national traditions. It is entirely in their interests to say that God demands you 'honour' your father, for that means you must make sure he doesn't die of hunger even though he has stopped being a productive member of the family, and it also means that you must uphold all the values he has lived for. For it would be equally a dishonour to an old man to be left to rot by his son *and* to hear that his son is kicking over the traces. Now keeping the old folk alive may be a drain on the pocket, but it hardly does any harm to the younger generation. Or does it? Does it or does it not do harm to the younger generation if there is a pressure upon them, sanctioned with the name of God, to conform to the ideals of their elders, to be taught to regard their time- and culture-conditioned morals as divinely authorized?

If all goes well, from the fathers' point of view, the old men can hope that their sons will do exactly what they have done, and be exactly the kind of people they have been. To their mind, the commandments will have served their purpose well if no one can be quite sure whether 'you shall not' is a command or a prediction,[15] whether that turn of phrase commands the younger generation how they should behave or whether it prophesies how in fact they will behave. The Hebrew, of course, allows

[15]. Henning Graf Reventlow is the only person I know who has suggested that any of the 'commandments' has a force other than an imperative: he argues that 'you have no other gods beside me' is an assertion of the current state of affairs (*Gebot und Predigt im Dekalog* [Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1962], pp. 25-27).

either possibility. In reality, indeed, once the young have internalized the values of the old, what they are supposed to do will be the same as what they actually do—and the imperative will have been transmuted into a future indicative. The fate of the younger generation is always to become the older generation, and the addressees of the Ten Commandments are, in the nature of things, destined to become one day their speakers—to the next generation.

So we ourselves do not need for the most part to distinguish between the older generation that is speaking and the younger generation that is being addressed. The fictive narratees of the Ten Commandments that I have profiled above are very much the same as the real-life interest group whose benefit is being served by the commandments. But in the fifth commandment the exact group who author the commandments in their own interests step forward in their true colours. Honour thy father and thy mother, say the fathers—not because father and mother are on an equal footing where honour is concerned, but because a dishonour to the mother is a dishonour to the father. Honour thy father and thy mother, say the fathers, that thy life may be long in the land—which is when obedience to the commandment comes home to roost. If we have ever wondered why this should be the first commandment with a promise, as Eph. 6.2 has it (to be exact, it is the *only* one with a promise), we know now that it is because it is the commandment with the highest chance of benefiting both its authors and its addressees. If the younger generation will honour their elderly parents and ensure that their society supports this value, it is only a matter of time before they will be on the receiving end of the honour. It is just because they undertake to keep their aged parents alive that they have a chance of their own days being long.

4. *The Sabbath Commandment*

Let us take next the sabbath commandment (Exod. 20.8-11; Deut. 5.12-15). In whose interest is *this* commandment?

At first sight it is an easy question. The people who stand to benefit from the commandment to sabbath rest are obviously those who are going to be desisting from work on the sabbath,

paterfamiliases, their children, slaves and resident aliens. This is assuming of course that these people like working less than they like not working. Perhaps even in ancient Israel there were workaholics, who found the institution of the sabbath disagreeable and not in their own interest; but let us assume that in the ancient world as in the modern most workers preferred (strangely enough, say I) not to work. Is not the sabbath commandment in their interest, then?

Well, yes, it *is* in their interest. But I cannot accept that that is the *reason* for the commandment; I want to say it is only the side effect. This on two accounts. One is that that I am not disposed to believe that some of these commandments are in the interest of one group and others of other groups. At least, I will take some persuading about that, for that would mean that the Ten Commandments do not form a unity—from the interest point of view—and I think it is reasonable to suppose that they do. The second reason, though, has more weight. It is that children, slaves and resident aliens do not usually manage to have legislation effected that benefits them. Since they are never in a position of power in a society, they have no say in the rules the society makes. If they are benefited by a law, it will be coincidentally and accidentally, not through any design of theirs. No doubt it benefits the powerless to have a law forbidding murder, but it is not on account of the powerless that the law comes into being.

What, are there never any humanitarian or egalitarian impulses in a hierarchical society, which enact legislation on behalf of the needy? Are there never any demands for social justice that even the most self-interested rulers feel in sympathy with? Is it never possible for a powerful group to act selflessly against its own interests on behalf of a less privileged group?[16] My response is that such questions arise only when we are working with a restricted definition of 'interest', such as a group's economic interest or its interest in maintaining its power. Ruling elites can also have an interest in their image as benevolent or as representative of all those they rule. The natural (not the cynical) assumption is that powerful groups do nothing

[16]. I am grateful to Martin Buss for his insistence that I address such questions.

against their interests; if they do, they threaten their own power. And it is in the interest of the dominant (hegemonic) class to secure the assent of the greatest number of people not of their class; that makes for social stability and thus the continuance of their own power.

In whose interest is it then to have a law forbidding work on the sabbath? Perhaps it will be easier to say in whose interest it is *not* to have such a law. I would imagine that those on the poverty line, who need to work all day every day to make a living, will be disadvantaged by this law. And those who have animals to look after will also find this law contrary to their natural advantage. Cows have to be milked every day, sheep have to be pastured, hens have to be fed. Presumably camels can be left to get on with it every Saturday, but even the most sabbatarian farmers of my acquaintance find themselves constrained to hold a (shall we say?) flexible interpretation of this commandment.

There is a better way still of answering this question, *Against* whose interest is the sabbath law? It is to ask, What evidence is there of what people actually wanted to do or tried to do on the sabbath but were prevented by the law? Amos 8.5 has grain merchants wishing there were no sabbath; if they want to sell on the sabbath, we conclude, presumably their customers also want to buy. So the sabbath law is not in the interests of merchants or of cheatable little people[17] who need to buy their food daily and cannot afford weekly visits to supermarkets. Jer. 17.21-22 has the prophet insisting that people do not 'bear a burden' on the sabbath or 'carry a burden out of your houses'. People are unlikely to be carrying loads around Jerusalem for the fun of it, so we have to imagine what kinds of people, what kinds of loads, and for what purposes. Since they are carrying loads out of their houses and in by the gates of Jerusalem, we might well suppose that these are goods manufactured at home for sale in city markets. But the text is too unspecific for us to be sure. Neh. 13.15-16 is much more helpful. Here Nehemiah says he saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the sabbath, loading grain, wine,

17. The merchants are clearly envisaging doing business with poor people whom they can cheat, sell low quality produce to, and get into debt slavery (8.1-4).

grapes and figs on asses and bringing them into Jerusalem. And Tyrian merchants resident in Jerusalem ran markets in fish and 'all kinds of wares' on the sabbath. So we can conclude that merchants, and perhaps home-based manufacturers, want to work on the sabbath, and are disadvantaged by the commandment. Perhaps, ironically, the only reason why they specially want to trade on the sabbath is precisely because there is a sabbath, on which many other people are free enough from work to go to the market. Nevertheless, the point is that traders would not be wanting to trade on the sabbath if it were not in their interest to do so; so being forbidden to do so must be against their interest.

If these are the people *against* whose interest the sabbath law is, *in* whose interest, then, is the sabbath law? It can only be those who stand to lose nothing by it, those who can afford it, those who can make the income of six days last for seven, those whose income, that is to say, has a surplus of at least 17% to daily requirements. So they are not little people, they are not the widows or the poor. They are probably not farmers or craftworkers, and, to judge by the evidence, they are not merchants. They are certainly not priests, since they *have* to work on the sabbath, perhaps harder than on other days, if the sacrificial list of Numbers 28 (note 28.9) is anything to go by. There are not many groups left in ancient Israelite society but the urban elite, administrators, officials and the wealthiest of traders.

All the same, in what sense could it be *in their interest*, or is it that it is no more than *not against their interest*? That is a question I need to defer for the moment, until I have looked at the commandments about worship.

5. *The Commandments about Worship*

Let us ask next in whose interest are the commandments enjoining monolatry and forbidding images and preventing certain uses of the divine name (Exod. 20.3-7; Deut. 5.7-11). It is not cynical to suggest that these commandments about the deity are not simply the result of religious experience or theological thinking. Religious people do have influence on how communities think, but the moment we have *laws* about religious beliefs, enforceable upon pain of sanctions, we are out of the realm of pure ideas

and into the realm of social control. The moment someone tells me I must not make an image of my god and that I will be punished if I do, at that moment I know that that person has power over me or assumes power over me. (I also know that that person has something to lose if I do not obey, so I too have a kind of power of my own; but that is not quite the point here.) Laws are a representation of a conflict of wills in a society, so I am asking here: Whose conflicting wills are in evidence here?

Childs sets out the options in terms of a conflict between Israel and other nations. Either one can follow Eissfeldt, he says, arguing that the commandment is and always was an essential part of the Mosaic religion, or one can follow Knierim and derive the commandment from the covenant ritual at Shechem and the threat of rival Canaanite deities.[18] But the commandment, addressed as it is to Israelites, witnesses rather to a conflict *within* Israel; it is not Canaanites who are being warned off Canaanite deities, but Israelites—*other* Israelites, Israelites who are not in the position of being able to tell their neighbours whom they are permitted to worship.

What these commandments, about monolatry, against images and improper use of the divine name—and enjoining sabbath observance as well—want to do is to make Israel different from other nations. They are markers of identity, they are distinctives, they are self-definitions of Israel, they are boundaries around someone's view of what is legitimately Israel. Who then are the people who care about Israel's identity, who are anxious that without laws, with sanctions, the identity they envisage for Israel may not exist? They are not the subsistence farmer trying to jog along peacefully with Philistines in the valley of Sorek, nor the itinerant potter who has always found a Canaanite shekel to be worth as much as an Israelite one; they are not the man and the woman in the street or in the suk. They are the wealthy at the apex of power in their society, whose position becomes precarious if social change is allowed to happen, if traditional forms of national identity are undermined. They are conservatives, and they are running scared.

These are the people who want to keep insisting that they are

[18]. Childs, *Exodus*, p. 404.

not autochthonous Canaanites, that they have been 'brought... out of the land of Egypt' (20.2). Why do they particularly want the god whose words they invent for these commandments to define himself as the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt? Because they need to define themselves as incomers, settlers,[19] who do not have long-standing title to the land they occupy but are conscious of a different, more nervous, relationship to the land than their non-Israelite neighbours have. They want to keep alive a memory of arrival and settlement—even if it was, in historical actuality, from over the next hill rather than from Egypt—and they want nothing to change. Their own significance lies in the past when they were different from their neighbours because of their origins; they need to keep difference alive to preserve their identity and self-worth. In whose interest are these laws about monolatry, images, the sabbath? My answer is: these conservative old men who see themselves as inheritors of traditional ways of life.

6. *The Social Commandments*

Whose interests are being served by the other commandments, then?

Thou shalt not steal (Exod. 20.15; Deut. 5.19). Who needs laws against theft except those who have property to be stolen? Who wants to forbid coveting except those who have something worth coveting (whatever that means[20])? Those who want to forbid coveting, and stealing also, presumably, are not the average Israelites in the street: they are, by their own admission, owners of male and female slaves, of oxen and asses, of houses. They are the grandees; they form the wealthiest stratum of the

19. Or, to use Israel Finkelstein's formulation, 'groups of sedentarizing nomads, withdrawing urban elements, northern people, groups from the southern steppe, etc.' ('The Emergence of Israel in Canaan: Consensus, Mainstream and Dispute', *Scandinavian Journal for the Old Testament* [1991/2], pp. 47-59 [56]).

20. Is it simply a mental act? Perhaps so. See Bernard S. Jackson, 'Liability for Mere Intention in Early Jewish Law', in his *Essays in Jewish and Comparative Legal History* (Studies in Judaism and Late Antiquity, 10; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), pp. 202-34.

society.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour (Exod. 20.16; Deut. 5.20). Neighbours who have something to lose from false witness against them are the obvious originators of this law—because they are most benefited by it, it is in their interest. The kind of occasion envisaged may be that pictured in 1 Kgs 21.10-13, where two 'base fellows' (בני בליעל) are 'set' (שׁוּם hi.) by the elders of the city on Jezebel's instructions to testify falsely against Naboth. How do you 'set' false witnesses against someone, and how do you persuade 'base fellows' to waste their afternoon in a law court? Presumably money changes hands, and members of the lower orders find it worthwhile to lay false charges against a so-called 'neighbour', a member of the Volvo-driving, property-owning classes. Most references to witnesses in the Hebrew Bible are very generalized and do not evince this class differential, but when it gets down to a concrete example, isn't it interesting that *class* enters into it, that false witness is something men of property have to fear? It is noteworthy too that in Exod. 23.2 the injunction is 'not to bear witness in a suit, *turning aside after a multitude*, so as to pervert justice'. Is the law against false witness specially designed then to protect the interest of the elite against the plebs? It was never a law against lying, of course, and so it did not apply to the rank and file members of Israelite society. It was a law about a specific form of lying, lying in a law-court when property was at stake, apparently.

Thou shalt not commit adultery (Exod. 20.14; Deut. 5.18). Who is so worried about other men committing adultery with their wives as to want a divine commandment about it? It is a well-known fear of polygamous men that while they are occupying themselves with one wife, their other wives can be doing anything they like. And polygamy, we know, is largely a function of wealth. Again, it is likely to be the property-owning classes who are most anxious about property going out of the family as a result of illicit liaisons. They are the ones who stand to lose the most from adultery. No doubt every Israelite male thinks himself robbed by another who manages to sleep with his wife, but those who have landed property that goes with the offspring are the ones who want to have a law about it.

Thou shalt not kill (Exod. 20.13; Deut. 5.17). This is a difficult

commandment, on any view. The verb (רצח) is most commonly used, in the legal material at any rate, of unintentional killing, manslaughter. So the commentators solemnly note, but they never remark that it is somewhat absurd to have a law forbidding unintentional acts.[21] In the only concrete example we have in the Hebrew Bible of an act of רצח, we find a man cutting wood in the forest with a neighbour where the axe-head flies off the handle and strikes the neighbour dead (Deut. 19.4-5). This cannot be the sort of thing forbidden here, for no commandment, human or divine, is going to stop axeheads flying off. Perhaps the clue lies rather in the practice of blood revenge, as Reventlow has argued.[22] We would need to ask, Who is doing this killing that is forbidden in the commandment, and why are they doing it? It is not unintentional killing, for which there is no reason, and which anyone might do by accident, but the associated, subsequent killing by the avenger. רצח in fact refers both to the act of the manslayer *and* to the act of the avenger (in Num. 35.27 the לאג is said to רצח the one who has רצח'd, and in 35.30 the רצח is to be רצה'd on the evidence of witnesses). So the commandment seems to be directed against the practice of blood revenge. What precise group is practising this custom I do not know, but I can assume it is some *group* since blood revenge is, by definition, a socially condoned killing, not an act of private vengeance; and here in these commandments it is being outlawed by another social group with more power. And I assume that the ones outlawing it are the conservative fathers; for blood revenge makes for social instability, and the fathers stand for social cohesiveness and order; and they are the ones with power.

7. *Conclusion*

How goes the programme of reading from left to right, then? Ask any question that steps outside the framework of the text and you relativize the Ten Commandments. Somehow the stan-

21. So, for example, in the well-known article of J.J. Stamm, 'Sprachliche Erwägungen zum Gebot "Du sollst nicht töten"', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 1 (1945), pp. 81-90, where רצח is defined as 'illegal killing inimical to the community'.

22. Reventlow, *Gebot und Predigt im Dekalog*, pp. 71-73.

dard questions, Are the Ten Commandments Mosaic?, What did they originally mean?, How were they reinterpreted in later Israelite literature?, have evaded the question of their value or 'truth'—or, enduring quality, or, continuing applicability. And the most sophisticated of historical scholars and redaction critics have gone on entertaining the most appallingly uncritical views about the ideological and ethical status of the ten commandments. Is there a chance that an analysis like the present one, that focuses on the sectional interests they support, will demythologize them—without at the same time bringing western civilization tumbling?[23]

[23]. It is a pleasure to record Heather McKay's stimulating contributions to the ideas of this essay.