

Major Book Reviews

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS: THEN AND NOW

The Ten Commandments and Human Rights, by WALTER HARRELSON. OVERTURES 10 BIBLICAL THEOLOGY. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1980. 222 pp. \$9.95. Reviewed by RALPH W. KLEIN, professor of the Old Testament, Christ Seminary—Seminex.

WALTER HARRELSON, Distinguished Professor of Old Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, has written the kind of book on the Decalogue that would be expected of him. His writing is lucid and well-informed, and he builds on his own earlier studies, including *The City of Shechem: Its History and Importance* (1953) and his articles in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* on "Law, in the Old Testament," and "Ten Commandments" (1962). He is sensitive to ethical questions today, ecumenically concerned with Jewish-Christian relationships, and dialogical in style. While professional biblical scholars will read this book with great profit, especially in their own quest for contemporary meaning, pastors and college-educated lay people will also find it to be a stimulating and readily-understandable work.

Harrelson believes that the various "decalogues" in the Bible (Exod. 34:14-26; Lev. 18:6-18; 20:2-16; Ezek. 18:5-9; and Ps. 15) were modeled in one fashion or another after the Decalogue. Only the curse ritual of Deuteronomy 27:15-26 may be older. He reconstructs the original form of the commandments by eliminating the Prologue (Exod. 20:2), by casting the fourth and fifth commandments (Protestant numbering system) into negative commands, by eliminating the words "before me" from the first commandment, and by adding the words "thy neighbor" to the sixth commandment, "the wife of thy neighbor" to the seventh commandment, and "anything that is thy neighbor's" to the eighth commandment.

The largest segment of the book is devoted to an exposition of the words of the Decalogue (pp. 51-154). Commandments one to three are treated as "God's Exclusive Claims"; commandments four and five as "God's Basic Institutions"; commandments six and seven as "Basic Human Obligations"; and commandments eight to ten as "Basic Social Obligations." These detailed studies express both the meaning of the commandments for ancient Israel and suggest what their contemporary application might be. Thus, he discusses capital punishment and pacifism under the sixth commandment and issues like homosexuality and extra-marital sex under the seventh.

The final section of the book is hermeneutical. He calls for a Judaism that will witness against a faithless or triumphalist Christianity and a Christianity that will witness against a Judaism that should be able to discern the consummation God has brought near. The life of the believing community is seen in its polar opposites as bondage and freedom. Contemporary positive prescriptions need to be tested both by their congruence with the Ten Commandments and with love for God and neighbor. He sets forth two abiding tasks: to help ourselves and our contemporary secular society recover confidence in the positive value of summary lists of human conduct; and to produce a clean, pungent, lucid list of the kinds of corporate and individual misdeeds that bring

ruin upon society and its individuals. He produces such a tentative rewording of his own. Examples: "Do not have more than a single ultimate allegiance" (first commandment); "Do not violate the commitment of sexual love" (seventh commandment); "Do not damage others through misuse of human speech" (ninth commandment). Such a modern list may be supplemented by international compacts concerning human rights, such as, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, which is printed as an appendix and which is apparently the source of the book's title.

This summary cannot begin to recount all the fresh details of this book, which will surely become a standard monograph. However, in the spirit of dialogue, which Harrelson so openly invites, it is necessary to raise a few questions and concerns.

The stress placed on the Mosaic origin of the Decalogue is surprising (pp. 17, 42, 43, 54, 63, 71, 74, 83). Moses is credited with adding the Prologue at the time of the first oral declaration of the Decalogue. His discovery that Yahweh is incomparable is at the heart of the first commandment. Moses is the one who discovered that Yahweh would not permit the framing of any image of himself. Moses was probably the one who was responsible for the prohibition of the misuse of the divine name. The requirement not to labor on the seventh day may have come from the man Moses. It is often unclear to me why these conclusions are necessary either for historical or theological reasons. Harrelson "speculates" (his word) that Moses, at Sinai, shaped for Israel a form of organization and a set of requirements that would hold them together as a people. Did the Decalogue play such a cohesive role in Israel?

A second question concerns the need for, and the legitimacy of, a reconstruction of the "original" Decalogue. Harrelson's work here is as convincing as any, but should we not put more emphasis on the fact that the fourth and fifth commandments (God's Basic Institutions) are stated in both versions of the Decalogue in positive form? Israel *prohibited* killing and adultery but *enjoined* Sabbath-keeping and the honoring of parents. Is an original, negative version of these commandments really more likely, and by what criterion would such hypothetical commandments have any authority to-day? However those questions are answered, the book should have assessed somewhere the significance of the positive statements. The deletion of the Prologue raises a basic theological issue. Without it is the Decalogue an especially interesting or important document? Is not the bondage and freedom spelled out in the Prologue one of the most important factors in giving the Decalogue contemporary significance?

At times the author seems to presuppose an audience with a very "modern" theological disposition. Is it true that secularized citizens of the Western world cannot seriously entertain the idea that our lives are claimed by a God who is our deliverer and redeemer (p. 56)? Can Jews and Christians exchange the particularity of their faith for the notion that "deep within each human being is such a story of salvation, such a dimension of meeting the Holy One" (p. 58; cf. p. 122)? At times the critique of conservative Protestantism seems strident (pp. 67, 182).

All of us have cited the idea, at one time or another, that there may have been ten commandments because of the number of fingers on our two hands. I counted six allusions to this idea by Harrelson (pp. 48, 54, 72, 104, 158, 162). This speculative hypoth-

esis even becomes evidence: "The recollection of the Ten Commandments by reference to the ten fingers is itself a clear indication of how pervasive the presence of these prohibitions must have been in Israelite society" (p. 72).

Many of Harrelson's interpretations and applications are fresh and useful. The second commandment could well be paraphrased to mean that Israel is to make no image of Yahweh but is to be such an image of God in the world (p. 65). He moves beyond moralistic comments on cursing by seeing the third commandment as ruling out the ways human beings seek to control the power of the Holy and direct it toward their own desired ends (p. 72). He applies the eighth commandment more to the "haves" than to the "have-nots" and suggests that we need to recover an attachment to a small number of goods that do indeed extend our selfhood outward into other created things (p. 141). Less carefully stated is the observation that thousands have been driven into psychosis by the warnings of eternal damnation (p. 76). While most of his observations about sex struck me as worthwhile, the following does not correspond to my experience: "Acts of adultery do not destroy marriages, not always and perhaps not even very often" (p. 129).

Let me underscore my basic agreement with Harrelson that the Ten Commandments are a charter of human freedom. In my view, Israel noted in eight of these commands types of behavior that threatened a person's continuance within the community. On two issues, Sabbath-keeping and parent-honoring, they reported positive in-junctions. But in most areas of life, they, as freed slaves called to renewed "bondage," sought to maximize love of God and neighbor and so, if I have understood Von Rad correctly, sought to live righteously.

Within the parameters marked out by these commandments, are not we also invited to love God and do what we want?