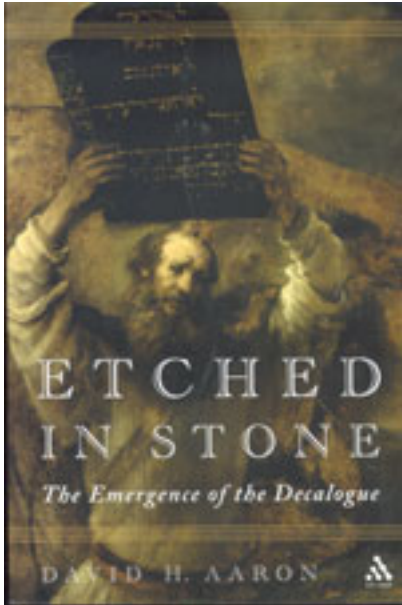


RBL 10/2006



Aaron, David H.

Etched in Stone: The Emergence of the Decalogue

London: T&T Clark, 2006. Pp. xv + 352. Paper. \$39.95.
ISBN 0567029719.

Reinhard Achenbach
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität
Munich, Germany

In this volume the author confronts a broad religious movement in the United States that seeks to display monuments containing an English version of the Decalogue (from Exod 20) throughout the country on public grounds as well as on school and church lawns, stating it to be a modern creed of ethics and an image of moral stability. His intention is to shed light on the historical and literary evolution of the original text. His conclusion as summarized on page 1 is: “The Decalogue is a late literary creation, written by a group of postexilic authors (i.e., writers working not before the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. and perhaps as late as the fifth century B.C.E.). The Decalogue passages are based upon earlier attempts to create a covenant scene that would serve to unite the Israelite people at a time of political and social discord.”

Thus for all noncritical readers of the Bible it becomes clear from the beginning of the book: the Decalogue was not written by God, nor was it written by Moses, nor by a single identifiable author, but there existed pre-versions before 587 B.C.E., during the exile (587–539 B.C.E.), and after the exile, with the last version perhaps formulated in the fifth century, between 500 and 450 B.C.E. The “biblical text itself, taken by many contemporary religionists to be a univocal document, is the result of many competing ideologies” (323).

Methodologically, Aaron relies on the theories of composition of Van Seters, Rendtorff, Mullen and P.R. Davies, but for the sequencing of materials relative to one another he uses more ideological criteria, following Fishbane's and others' concepts of intertextuality and of "cultural repertoire" consisting of elements of common memories within the ancient Israelite society and permanently floating motifs ("memes"), as considered by Wolfgang Iser (*Der Akt des Lesens*, 1976; ET, 1978). The author reaffirms the notion already made by J. Wellhausen (*Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*) that the concept of the "Mosaic Torah" and the uniqueness of the Torah's prophet was developed by the late authors and redactors of the Pentateuch and was still unknown to the prophets of Israel. It replaces older covenant traditions (ch. 2). According to Aaron, the absence of explicit references to the Decalogue and the Sinai covenant story in nonpentateuchal historical retrospectives as Pss 105; 106; 135; 136; Josh 24; and even Neh 9–10 indicates a lack of concern or even a lack of knowledge at a time as late as the time of Nehemiah (ch. 3)! Outside the Pentateuch the rare and late occurrence of textual witnesses for the Sinai tradition, in contrast to the broad range of important texts referring to Mount Zion, shows that the legendary and fictional Sinai story is an heir of the Zion tradition from monarchical times and replaces it in the postmonarchic, postexilic eras (ch. 4). In contrast to the traditional covenant concepts, there is no king receiving the documents of a covenant. "The Decalogue traditions were devised as allegiance documents framed to depict God and the Israelite people as having entered directly into a covenantal relationship. Neither priest nor king was relevant.... The Decalogue was about a personal promise that took on corporate significance, rather than a king's promise to create a livable society through the imposition of law and order" (325).

Whereas the covenant scene at Shechem (Josh 24), according to Aaron, appears as a pre-Deuteronomistic sage's composition, Deuteronomy's presentation of the Decalogue as a covenantal document is the earliest formulation preserved in the Pentateuch (ch. 5). Deuteronomy seems to be a document of "survival in exile [and] in Diaspora" (182), transferring traditional cultural contents to a generation where traditional authorities no longer functioned (ch. 6). Among all the wilderness stories, the narrative of the golden calf seems to be the "first 'apostasy' story" (221; ch.7). Its scope is not as traditionally stated the case of idolatry as the great sin but, as the function of the "golden icon motif" shows, an example of the people's demand for a replacement leader who is neither king nor priest (ch. 8). Exodus 32, according to Aaron, was not originally connected with the Decalogue story but, in connection with an independent tablet-tradition, was originally adapted to a story that supports the ascendancy of the Levites in opposition to another tradition supporting the figure of Aaron. Later this story was combined with the Deuteronomistic Decalogue scene, and at a later stage Priestly redactors harmonized the story with a more positive depiction of the character of Aaron the high priest. According

to Aaron, since the first version of the Decalogue was destroyed (Exod 32:19*), the Priestly author of the second version, found in Exod 34, wanted this to be considered the authoritative document of the new covenant (ch. 9).

Finally, Aaron presents an interpretation of the three different versions of the Decalogue within the Pentateuch (Exod 34; 20; Deut 5). All the authors depart from traditional paradigms of covenant ceremonies, but at the same time they seem to be “ideological combatants” (320). It remains the task of the “redactors of the Pentateuch” to establish “through writing, a cultural stability that would otherwise have been elusive” (285). While the harmonizing redactional revision stressing (contrary to Exod 34:4, 28b) that even the renewed tablets contained the “original” version of the Decalogue (cf. Deut 10:4; 4:13), it seems obvious to Aaron that “the writers of the various documents would have stood aghast at seeing the destiny of their compositions, merged into a single narrative with little regard for their unique contributions of obvious disparities” (323).

The concern of this stimulating and provocative analysis remains mainly in the field of U.S. discussions, for which the study obviously is of great importance. Many scholars will agree with the main thesis that the Deuteronomistic version of the Decalogue emerged from exilic times and that the introduction of the Decalogue in Exod 20 and the final formation of Exod 32 and 34 is post-Deuteronomistic. However, many exegetes will hesitate to accept a good number of the author’s arguments in detail, especially because he does not offer a detailed exegetical analysis of the texts themselves but argues on a tradition-historical level in an often speculative way. He simply ignores European scholarly discussion and literature concerning the formation of Deuteronomy, the Sinai pericope, and the history of composition of the book of Joshua, including the question of post-Priestly and post-Deuteronomistic redactional work in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua and of Priestly material in Josh 24. Many arguments, especially the reconstruction of the tradition history of the golden calf story, merely rely on insecure constructs, as for example the idea that in a lost version it was not the ashes of the destroyed idol but the broken tablets that Moses ground into powder and threw upon the water and before making the Israelites to drink it (cf. 248–49).

In addition, the terms used are often vague, so it is not always clear if Aaron is speaking about “Deuteronomic” or “Deuteronomistic” authors or if a text emerges from one or more authors, redactors, or editors. The silence concerning the Sinai pericope in relatively late compositions as Ps 105 or 106 or Neh 9 cannot be accepted as an argument for the existence or nonexistence of the Decalogue within the Sinai pericope. Even the late redactional references to God’s revelation of the Torah in the prophetic books as in the book of Jeremiah must not necessarily be interpreted as if “the prophet” did not know the pentateuchal concept. On the contrary, the redactors of the Jeremiah material may have

stood in critical opposition to the Priestly scribes of the Pentateuch (Jer 8:8). At the end Aaron states that, after the demolition of monarchic Israel “through the invention of this literature we call Tanakh, Israelites transcended the expected destiny” of total assimilation into the larger conquering nations (284). From a historical point of view, this statement overestimates the impact of literary inventiveness and underestimates the social, institutional, and theological background and function of that literature. Nevertheless, part of the historical truth is that the authors of the Pentateuch were still aware of the fact that the Decalogue helped Israel to defend ideal rights of freedom and prevail in its struggle to retain its cultural and religious independence and identity against the cultural pressure of foreign claims of political and religious hegemony. Christian belief shares in this tradition. Finally, the author rightly stresses that the motif of the disappearance of the stone tablets may indeed be read as a warning against any attempt of expropriation of the Jewish heritage from the side of present political authorities in the form of monumental representations: “the ephemeral word outlasts the stones” (326).