

# ***DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES***

Providing factual information about the Bibles, beliefs, movements, institutions, events and people of historical Christianity & Judaism.

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## **The Story of the Ten Commandments You Didn't Learn at Your Church or Synagogue**

*By Jim Myers*

This article was inspired by a book I just recently read ó *The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible* by Aviya Kushner. *It is a book I highly recommend.* You do not have to know anything about the Hebrew language to benefit from reading it. Aviya grew up in a Hebrew-speaking family, reading the Bible in Hebrew and debating its meaning over the dinner table with her family. Aviya read the Bible countless times in Hebrew and could easily quote long passages from memory. She had even read it aloud from beginning to end as a memorial to her grandfather.

But, when Aviya enrolled in a graduate course in which the English Bible was read, she discovered how different English translations were and how English readers approached their Bible. It was clear that regardless of whether one was reading a Hebrew or English Bible, it is NOT a book of tidy stories with logical A to Z progressions. *She described the Hebrew text as beautifully unruly, often ambiguous, multiple in meaning, and hard to pin down.* Therefore, readers must demand a second opinion, and a third, and a fourth ó *and they turn to commentaries that cross borders of time and language* -- in order to hear multiple voices interact across the barriers of time. The modern reader joins a conversation that has been going on for centuries. As the reader listens to those ancient voices, some things seem to repeat over and over, but at other times and places, they seem to contradict. Readers must be imaginative and willing to consider a variety of possibilities -- *every time they read their Bible.*

English readers crave a familiar shape to their stories -- *introduction of problem, heightening of problem, resolution of problem with a clear ending.* There is an arc to the way they read, and most translators make their translations that way. However, that's not the way the Hebrew text of their Old Testament was written to be read. English readers search for foreshadowing and parallels that are not in the Hebrew text.

With all of this in mind, let's consider a biblical story every Bible reader knows. If there is one thing in the Bible that Christians and Jews agree on, it is the story of the Ten Commandments and the words that were written on the two stone tablets. Many readers picture someone like Charlton Heston holding two stone tablets in a movie. In 1997 Rep. Robert Aderholt (R-Ala.) introduced House Concurrent Resolution 31, permitting the display of the **Ten Commandments** in government buildings.

*"The Ten Commandments represent the very cornerstone of the values this nation was built upon, and the basis of our legal system here in America."*

Let's begin by reading the only three verses in the Old Testament where the phrase Ten Commandments appears (usually the King James Version or related translations).

So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the **Ten Commandments**. (Exodus 34:28)

So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the **Ten Commandments**; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. (Deuteronomy 4:13)

And He wrote on the tablets according to the first writing, the **Ten Commandments**, which the Lord had spoken to you in the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly; and the Lord gave them to me. (Deuteronomy 10:4)

Obviously, for readers of those translations, the words Ten Commandments are clearly in their Bible. However, when Aviya reads her Hebrew Bible, she reads something like this.

So he was there with Yahweh forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the **Ten Sayings**. (Exodus 34:28)

So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to do, the **Ten Sayings**; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. (Deuteronomy 4:13)

And He wrote on the tablets according to the first writing, the **Ten Sayings**, which Yahweh had spoken to you in the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly; and gave them to me. (Deuteronomy 10:4)

The transliteration of Hebrew word she reads is **DeVARIYM** which may be translated as *words, things* or *sayings*. **DeVARIYM** is NOT the Hebrew word for *commandments*.

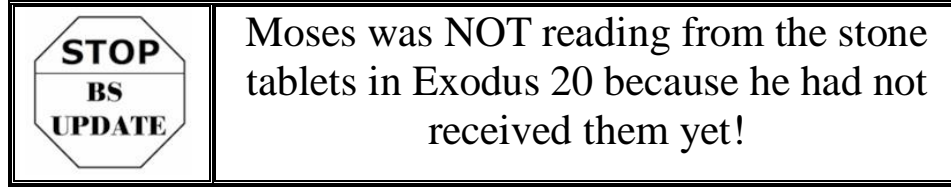


Now let's turn our attention to when Moses received the stone tablets and what was written on them. Most people believe the words found in Exodus 20:1-17 (KJV) are those words and the Exodus account is about the original event in which Moses received the tablets. The account in Deuteronomy 5:6-21, is viewed as simply a retelling of the story in Exodus by Moses forty-years later. In order to discover when Moses received the stone tablets, we must follow Moses up and down the mountain.

(1) The first trip is found in Exodus 19:3, 7. He does not come down with the stone tablets.

(2) The second trip is found in Exodus 19:20, 25. Again, Moses does not come down with them.

Exodus 19:25 is the verse that is immediately before Exodus 20:1, the first verse in the traditional account the Ten Commandments. Moses had not been given the stone tablets yet.



To understand what happened in Exodus 20, we must begin with the last verse in chapter 19:

And Moses went down (the mountain) to the people and said to them.

And **ELOHIYM** spoke all these **Sayings**, saying: ðI am Yahweh your **ELOHIYM**, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.ö

Moses repeats what he heard on the mountain. Notice that he said nothing about ð**Ten Sayings**ö to the people. After Moses finished delivering the ðSayingsö this is what happened next:

And the people stood at a distance, but Moses approached the thick darkness where the ELOHIYM was. Yahweh said to Moses. . . (Exodus 20:21b-22a).

The text doesn't say Moses went back up the mountain, but that appears to be what he did. What happened on that trip is recorded in Exodus 22:b-24:2. And then Moses returned to the people again.

And Moses came and told the people all the Sayings of Yahweh, and all the judgments; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, ðAll the Sayings which Yahweh has said will we do.ö And Moses wrote all the Sayings of Yahweh. (Exodus 24:3-4a)

Once again he did NOT bring the stone tablets with him. However, be sure to note that Moses wrote the section of Sayings called the MISHPATIM (Judgments) down on something, probably a parchment scroll or on cuneiform tablets.

Moses, Aharon, Nadav, Avihu and seventy of the leaders went up; and they saw the ELOHIYM of Israel. (Exodus 24:9)

Once again Moses climbs back up the mountain, but this time he took the tribal leaders with him. Something very interesting took place at a level beneath the top of the mountain.

And they saw the ELOHIYM of Israel; and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand; also they saw the ELOHIYM, and they ate and drank. (Exodus 24:10-11)

After they ate Yahweh called to Moses.

ðCome up to Me on the mountain, and stay there. I will give you **tablets of stone** and the **Instructions** (TORAH) and the **Commandments** (MITZVAH) I have written on them,

that you may teach themö . . . Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain; he was on the mountain forty days and nights. (Exodus 24:9-18)

This is the first time the tablets of stone are mentioned. While Moses is with Yahweh, he is given instructions for building and operating the tabernacle (Exodus 25-31). When Yahweh finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave him the **Two Tablets of the Testimony**, tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of ELOHIYM. Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets in his hand, tablets inscribed on both sides, on the front and on the back. The tablets were the work of ELOHIYM; and the writing was the writing of ELOHIYM, engraved on the tablets (Exodus 31:18; 32:15-16). But, when he saw the golden calve idol and the Israelites worshiping it he lost it!

His anger blazed up. He threw down the tablets he had been holding and shattered them at the base of the mountain. (Exodus 32:19)

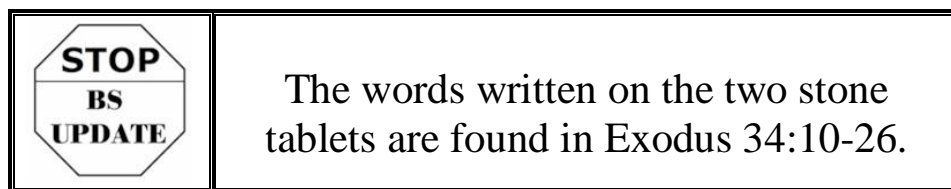
Picture Moses standing at the base of the mountain with the broken pieces of the tablets lying on the ground. Moses then went back to up the mountain to Yahweh, and He said this to Moses:

öLeave, you and the people you brought up from the land of Egypt; and move on from here toward the land of which I swore to Avraham, Yitzøchak and Ya-akov, -I will give it to your descendants.ø(Exodus 32:31-33:1)

Once again the text doesn't say he went back down the mountain, but we find him back with the people at the base of the mountain in chapter 33, where Moses once again delivers Yahweh's message to the Israelites.

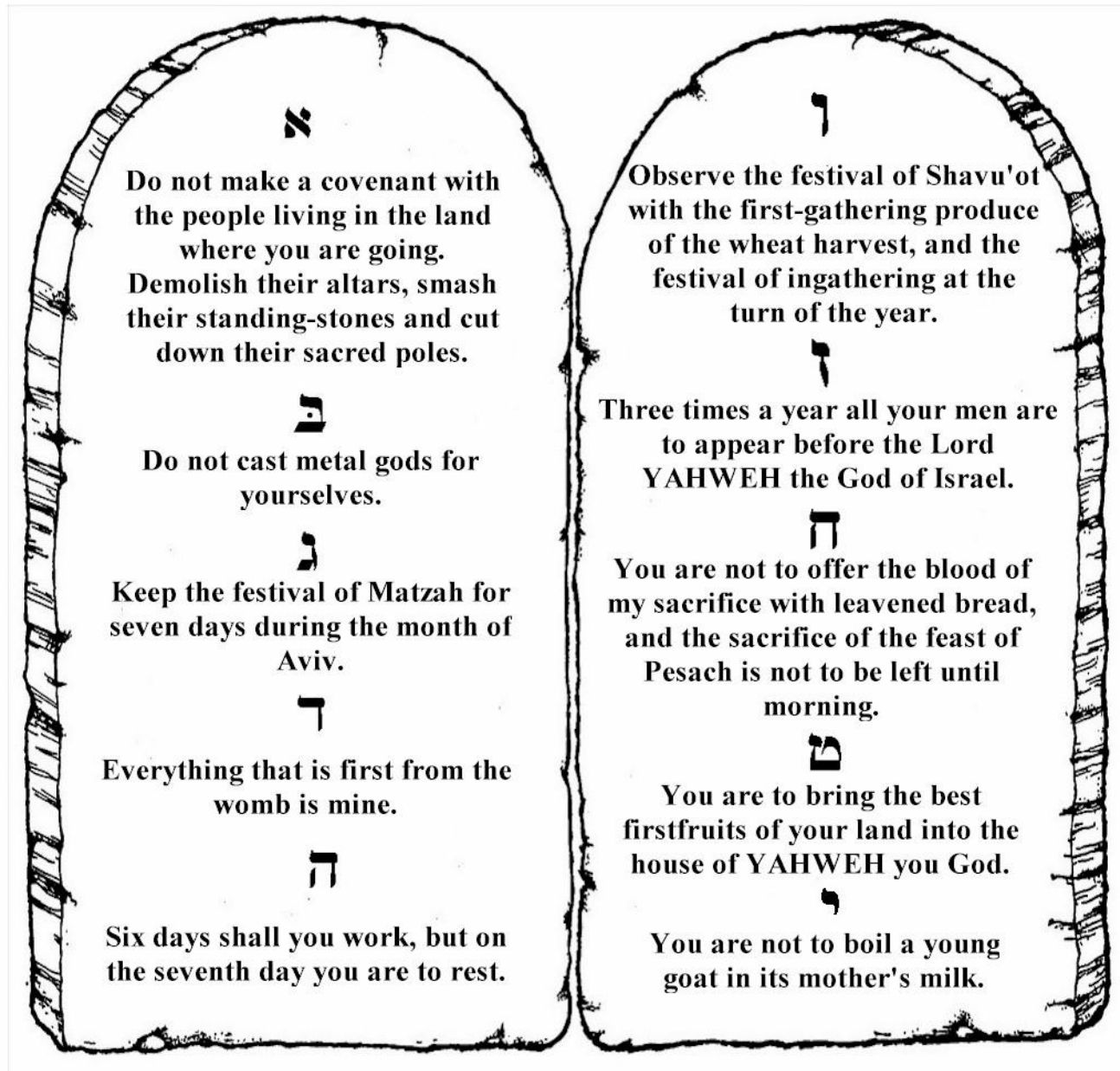
Yahweh said to Moses, öYou cut two tablets of stone like the first ones; and I will inscribe on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready by morning; in the morning you are to ascend Mount Sinai and present yourself to me on the top of the mountain . . . Moses cut two stone tablets like the first. Then he got up early in the morning and, with the two stone tablets in his hands, ascended Mount Sinai, as YAHWEH had ordered him to do. (Exodus 34:1-2, 4)


Notice that Moses had to take two blank stone tablets up the mountain to Yahweh this time. Now we are finally told what **Ten Sayings** were that were written on the two stone tablets. We have read thirteen chapters of information since we read what has been traditionally called the Ten Commandments.



Yahweh wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Sayings. And Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand. (Exodus 34:27, 28b-29a)

This is what was recorded on the two stone tablets.



	<p>Understand that things which have been universally õbelieved by the masses,ö can simply be completely wrong!</p>
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*As long as we live, they too will live;  
for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.*

## October Memorials

*In Loving Memory*

**JEWELL G.  
PATTERSON**

March 14, 1907  
October 1, 1995

*May you dwell under His  
wings in complete  
SHALOM forever!*



**In Their Remembrance**

*May their memories inspire us to  
seek those qualities of mind and  
heart which they shared when we  
walked life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to  
fulfillment their highest ideals and  
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our  
loyalty to those things which we  
valued and shared --  
faith, love, peace and devotion  
and our biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will  
live; for they are now a part of us,  
as we remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor  
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The Prayer  
Book Press)

*In Loving Memory*

**Calvin P.**  
*A SPECIAL FRIEND  
OF BHC*

1914  
October 17, 2003

*May you dwell under His  
wings in complete  
SHALOM forever!*

שלום

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