CHAPTER 1

The Ten Commandments in the Medieval Schools: Conformity or Diversity?

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1 The Context of the Medieval Schools

This essay aims to sketch, in a short space, the academic context of the Decalogue in the schools of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and to show how and where the commandments began to develop their importance for the Middle Ages. To do this, I shall attempt to lay out the framework in which the commandments were discussed in the schools; to consider how this framework constrained schoolmen in their treatment of the commandments; and to ask whether, and how, interpreters could move beyond the limitations of the schools’ curriculum. We might think that the commandments would always have had a prominent place in the history of biblical interpretation, but that seems not to have been the case. Augustine devoted a pair of sermons to the commandments, and he talks about various aspects of the precepts in other writings, but his treatment is not very systematic; yet until the twelfth-century Paris schools there is very little further discussion of any interest. Should we be surprised at this? The commandments were the most important of the 613 mitzvot, the commands of the Jewish Law (the Old Law, as Christians termed it), and the place of the Law was a central issue for the Early Church. But I suspect that to be surprised at the lack of discussion is to fall into the trap of mistaking the later-medieval and Reformation interest in the commandments as representative of a continuous Christian role for the Decalogue. This is not borne out by evidence of Christian exegetical interest in the commandments until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when an upsurge of activity is related

to the so-called twelfth-century renaissance, and to the desire of lay Christians
to learn more about their religion. In response, churchmen and theologians
began to look for ways of involving the laity in the practice of their faith, ideas
that were cemented in the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.2

There are also what we might call technical reasons for the relative lack of
interest in the commandments in the earlier Middle Ages. In the monaster-
ies and in the early cathedral schools the study of the Bible began with the
Psalms and the Epistles of Paul. Paul's preceptual theology was difficult, and
he seemed, if anything, to minimise the place of the Old Law in Christian be-
lief. His saying that ‘the letter kills but the spirit gives life’ (2 Cor. 3:6) seemed
to imply that the words of Jesus in the Gospels had made anything the Old
Testament had to offer redundant: Christianity was the age of the life-giving
spirit, and it had done away with the deadening letter of the Law. The Psalms,
on the other hand, were the ubiquitous Old Testament text, especially for mo-
nastic life; and here the difficulty was to explain how they might be important
in a Christian context. The solution to this problem was to interpret them not
literally, but according to the various spiritual senses of Scripture—so that ty-
pology or allegory could be used to show that the Hebrew Bible pre-figured
or supported the Christian message, even before the coming of Christ. Before
the twelfth century, the prevalent fashion in biblical interpretation was to em-
phasise such spiritual interpretations; and for this sort of reading, the com-
mandments make a very poor text. For whereas some apparently literal Old
Testament narrative—the Song of Songs is the prime example—was suscep-
tible to a spiritual interpretation, it was really not clear that the command-
ments could be better understood using these spiritual tools. On the whole,
they were simply too practical: firmly rooted as they are in the literal world, the
commandments were just not attractive to sophisticated exegetes, and they
were neglected in comparison to other biblical passages.

But in the twelfth-century schools, the literal and historical meanings of the
Bible came into greater prominence—a development at least partly fuelled
by the interests of Master Hugh and the school he directed at the abbey of
St. Victor in Paris. Hugh taught that it was important not to rush straight to
the spiritual senses of the text before you had first thoroughly understood the
literal meaning, because the literal sense provided the foundation on which

2 For an overview and bibliography, see: Swanson R.N., The Twelfth-Century Renaissance
(Manchester – New York: 1999); and Benson R.L. – Constable G. (eds.), Renaissance and
(c. 1140–1233): The Schools and the Literature of Pastoral Care, Studies and Texts 108
(Toronto: 1992).