We have good reason to state¹ that contemporaneous sources reveal a certain knowledge of the concept and contents of the Ten Words (= Decalogue; Hebr.: הדרים שמות; Gr.: οἱ δέκα λόγοι²) in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity.³ Therefore the question has to be raised if and in which way Jesus of Nazareth made use of this core text of the biblical tradition during his earthly ministry. The inquiry is part of the more general and much discussed problem of Jesus’ attitude towards the (Jewish) Law.⁴ What did Jesus in fact know of the Law? Did he make distinctions between different parts of the Law? Did he


² Cf. Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4. The (feminine) noun δεκάλογος was used for the first time in the second-century Christian letter of Ptolemy to Flora 5.3. Whether this neologism shows a marked awareness of the Ten Words as a separate textual unit cannot be determined with certainty.

³ It is beyond the scope of this article to provide once more a list of the citations and allusions to the Ten Words in the literature and archaeological remnants of the time. This has been done recently and quite exhaustively by Kellermann, “Dekalog” 147–226. Also worth studying is D. Sänger, “Tora für die Völker—Weisungen der Liebe: Zur Rezeption des Dekalogs im frühen Judentum und Neuen Testament,” Weisheit, ed. Reventlow, 97–146. Shorter: G. Stemberger, “Der Dekalog im frühen Judentum,” JBTh 4 (1989): 91–103.

⁴ A clear epistemological distinction has to be made between Jesus’ attitude to the Law and Jesus’ attitude to the Law (or νόμος) as the early Christian sources conceived it. For the latter approach cf. my “Jesus und der Nomos aus der Sicht des entstehenden Christentums,” in Der historische Jesus, ed. J. Schröter and R. Brucker, BZNW 114 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 337–354. Cf. also the detailed analysis by W. R. G. Loader, Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels, WUNT 2.97 (Tübingen: Mohr/ Paul Siebeck, 1997).
distinguish between more theological and more ethical commandments or prohibitions? Did he make different uses (cf. the different usus legis in the Christian theological tradition) of the Law? Answers to all these questions could help us to locate Jesus more precisely in the history of thought of Second Temple Judaism.

There is no direct way to answer their question and no eyewitness-account has come down to us (so far) of the earthly life of Jesus. The extant sources which inform us of him, i.e. of some aspects of his life—the canonical and extra-canonical gospels and gospel-fragments, some sparse notices in other parts of early Christian and Jewish literature—do this in retrospect. To reach solid historical ground in this situation necessitates: (a) to examine the relevant material with the instruments of historical criticism and (b) to reconstruct the general background of the time which is the context of Jesus’ relation to the Ten Words.

2. Learning the Ten Words

To start with the latter point demands that we first ask in which way a first-century Jew from a small village or town in Galilee like Jesus could have gained knowledge of the Decalogue.

The first, most obvious and least speculative answer to this question would be: by reading and studying the Torah. The Decalogue recurs twice in the Pentateuch. So every public or private lecture of the Torah could come across this text which, simply by virtue of its position, signals its outstanding importance to the attentive reader or listener. However, it remains doubtful whether a piece of text, which could have been only a smaller part of a sabbatical lecture, could be learned by

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5 In my opinion this means that we cannot trust our sources without further critical (not sceptical) examination; pace R. Swinburne, “Evidence for the Resurrection,” in The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus, ed. S. T. Davis et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 191–212, who stipulates (192): “that memory as such, all memory, is to be trusted in the absence of positive counter-evidence that is untrustworthy.” The task of the historian is to separate authentic memory from intentional constructions for some ideological or other aim. And even if such intentional shaping of the historical account cannot be argued for, there remains the task of testing the reliability of the author’s memory, by internal and external comparison and by reflections on the general historical probability of the narration.

6 In both the Sinai and the Horeb pericope the Decalogue precedes other collections of laws—explicitly (Exod 20:19; Deut 5:23–33) and implicitly (Exod 20: the Bundesbuch Exod 20:22–23:19; the Privilegrecht Exod 34; Deut 5: the deuteronomic laws); and it is uttered as God’s direct speech (Exod 20:1; Deut 5:4, 22).