If irony suffuses the relation of U.S. politics to the religion from which it claims Constitutional autonomy, that irony intensifies a hundredfold when the focus of that relation falls on the status of the Bible. While the Bible itself bespeaks a monarchial theocracy where civil and cultic laws interweave comfortably, the U.S. Constitution draws a bright line of separation between the secular republic and the kingdom of heaven. Nonetheless, the Bible retains talismanic significance in U.S. political culture; much as politicians must nowadays sport a flag badge on every public occasion, they must also quote from, appeal to, and swear on the Bible (the Bible in which Jesus himself forbids oath-taking, whether either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem).

The multidimensional irony of the Bible’s status in U.S. politics comes to the fore particularly in connection with the Ten Commandments, the talismanic centre for the talismanic book. As a précis of the Torah, the Commandments provide a convenient foundation-stone for Christian ethics without inconveniently-detailed Levitical precepts for worship and purity; most of the Commandments are relatively easy to keep, at least on a simple reading. Churches that eschew any possibly-distracting decorative iconography in their worship space frequently display the Commandments prominently as an edifying alternative to stained glass or plaster saints. And Jesus seems to have regarded them as a satisfactory synecdoche for the whole Torah in his dialogue with the rich young man (Matt 19:16–30 and parallels). For this and numerous other reasons, the Ten Commandments occupy a prominent place in the imagination of the U.S. public.

1 I present this essay, an exercise in biblical political theology, in honour of my friend and colleague Yvonne Sherwood.

The apparent simplicity of the Commandments obscures a great many controverted aspects of their history and significance. For example, the Commandments appear in slightly different forms in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and different interpretive traditions divide the commandments differently. The simplicity of the Ten Commandments evaporates as one considers them more closely—but their ideological value as a simple, foundational, and universal basis for national life overrides any intricacies of enumeration, of interpretation, or of particularity.

However complex the tradition history of the Ten Commandments may be, their appeal to the popular imagination lies in their lucid clarity. So to begin a reflection on the how the Commandments—and more narrowly, the first three Commandments—inhabit and interrogate the distinctively American investment in their transcendent status, the focus should fall first on the Commandments in question.

*The Unique, Invisible, Useless Lord*

First, in the narrative context of the Book of Exodus, these commandments are addressed not to a nation-state, but to a caravan of people wandering in the Sinaitic wilderness. At least in the imagination of the scribal tradents who compiled the Pentateuch, the relevance of these Commandments doesn’t depend on an established civil government enacting their precepts into public policy, nor on each individual adopting them as a personal code. The Commandments are addressed to a people, a particular community, and this community holds together as a people in relation to the words Moses dictates to them.

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” God begins by announcing the Divine Name; where careful English translations say “the LORD,” the Hebrew specifies God’s own name—at which, according to tradition, all the world stands still, all sound is hushed, the praise of God in heaven and the mysterious wheels of the chariot cease spinning, as God pronounces the unspeakable Name. God announces the Name, and explains that God’s identity is made known in saving this

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3  “Said R. Abbahu in the name of R. Johanan: When God gave the Torah no bird twittered, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, none of the Ophanim [the wheels of the divine chariot] stirred a wing, the Seraphim did not say ‘Holy, Holy’, the sea did not roar, the creatures spoke not, the whole world was hushed into breathless silence and the voice went forth: I AM THE LORD THY GOD”; *Midrash Rabbah* vol. III, Exodus xxix 9; S. M. Lehrman trans., H. Freedman and M. Simon, ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1939), 345.