

The First Commandment: A Theological Reflection¹

Gordon J. Hamilton

It is easy to forget priorities, particularly our priorities about Scripture. The novel or obscure often dominate our scholarly publishing about the Bible because academics give priority to new interpretations and to solving problems. In this article I would like to reflect on two of our foundational texts: the commandment to love God in Deuteronomy 6: 4–5 and Mark 12: 28–34.

Deut 6: 4–5

In Deut 6, we encounter the most famous statement of Israelite faith, v.4, joined to the most fundamental commandment of the Old Testament, v.5: '(4)Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; (5)and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might'.

A balance between the collective belief of the ancient Israelite community and the obligation of each individual is immediately struck by the simple use of pronouns: in v.4 the Lord is identified as *our* God; in v.5 he is called *your* (ms. sg.) God. Moreover, the latter has a double reference both to the collective Israel evoked in the preceding verse and to each individual Israelite. To reflect this balance between the individual and community perspectives I shall employ both 'you' and 'we'.

Each of us is then commanded to love God in three ways, but ways that are usually masked in English translations. By returning to the language in which the author wrote, in this case, Hebrew, we can gain a fuller sense of God's Word to us.

First, you are commanded to love your God with all your heart. The Hebrew word used here is *levav* (to give a phonetic rather than a scholarly transcription). *Levav* carries a much wider sense than just 'heart', which would suggest that only an emotional kind of love is being commanded in this phrase. *Levav* denotes the inner part of a person, both the heart i.e. the emotions, and the mind i.e. the intellect. To the ancient Israelites these aspects of the inner person, heart and mind, were combined in this single term. Separating the emotions and mind would come only later in history, as we shall see when examining Mark's account of Jesus' selection of this commandment. In the first phrase in Deut 6:5 we are ordered to love the Lord with our entire, integrated, inner person.

Secondly, you are commanded to love God with all your *nefesh*. Again, the Hebrew word *nefesh* has a much broader range of meanings than is usually communicated by the single English word 'soul'. Concretely a *nefesh* is that which breathes. Both human beings and animals have a *nefesh*. A *nefesh* is also a life itself, that which departs at death. Perhaps 'self' or 'life-force' would comprise the closest English equivalents of *nefesh*. In this verse, you are commanded to love God with your whole life-force, your soul, with your entire self, the very essence of what makes you a living, breathing individual.

The third way of loving God is with all of our *me'od*. *Me'od* is the hardest of the three Hebrew terms to grasp. *Me'od* is usually employed in Biblical Hebrew as an adverb meaning 'a lot' or 'much'. It is only used as a noun here and in a derivative verse in 2 Kings (23:25). *Me'od* seems to be employed in an original sense of 'muchness' or 'excess' here. The ancient Greek and Latin translations of the Hebrew of Deut 6:5 specify a generally physical kind of 'muchness': 'strength' or 'might'. *Me'od* thus provides a call to action that usually manifests itself in a physical, outward way of loving.

It is important to try to envision the relationship between these three ways in which we are commanded to love God. Each overlaps with a part of another quality. *Me'od* as 'muchness', 'strength', or 'might' generally conveys an external action. But it surely includes instances of inner strength as well. *Me'od* thus dovetails with some of the qualities of the inner person, *levav*, 'heart' in that word's more inclusive Hebrew sense as both emotions and intellect. And *nefesh*, the breath which joins the external and internal spheres, overlaps with both the usually outwardly-directed might, *me'od*, and the exclusively inwardly-defined person, *levav*. I visualize the relationship among these three aspects of a person as that of a ring made up of three components that interlock.

Each of us is commanded to love God with all of these three interconnected parts. Each part is specified, yet we are not allowed to fragment ourselves by responding with only part of our being. Moreover, no allowance is made for partial love—using only part of our emotions and minds, only a fraction of our life-force or selves, or only some of our 'muchness' or might. Each of these ways is stated categorically: 'with all of your' envisions no half-measure responses. Yet these all-encompassing injunctions are not idealistic; they order each of us, without any hint of idealisation, to love our God by using all of what we now are. God demands, indeed commands, an inclusive integration of ourselves in loving him and his Word. The primary theological message of Deut 6:5 is the command to love the Lord our God in a completely integrated and holistic manner.

I would suggest that there is a second theological message in this short section of Deuteronomy: to love his Word in an equally integrated and

holistic way. We could easily undermine the power of this great commandment by treating the love of God as something totally abstract, ethereal, or idealistic. I think that this commandment contains a concrete call to love God's Word, to actualize our love in very specific ways by responding with all of our inner parts, all of our lives, and all of our might to Scripture itself. How do I arrive at this conclusion? I interpret this commandment in its close context. The statement of faith and command to love in Deut 6:4—5 are enclosed by calls to action concerning what subsequently became parts of Scripture—the commandments, statutes, and ordinances. The preceding paragraph in Deuteronomy begins the envelope: 'Now this is the commandment, the statutes, and the ordinances which the Lord your God commanded me to teach you...' (6:1). The puzzling singular 'commandment' of 6:1—where one would expect a plural 'commandments' to match the plurals 'statutes and commandments'—quite likely refers to *the* commandment to love the Lord in 6:5. Immediately following our focal verses we read the end of the envelope: 'These words which I command you this day shall be on your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children; you shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the way, when you lie down and when you arise' (Deut 6:6—7). Though literally directed at members of the children of Israel as they were about to enter the land of Canaan, these words are no less applicable to us as members of the 'Israel of God' (Gal 6:16) millennia later. In this larger deuteronomical context, we are called to respond to God's Word with three concrete acts of love: (1) to integrate the Divine Word into our inner parts—both emotions and mind—'These words which I command you this day shall be on your *heart*'; (2) to pass them to the next generation—'you shall teach them diligently to your children'; and (3) to fill our lives with God's Word—'you shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you arise'. To be honest, this sounds a little more difficult to implement than the ten minutes of Scripture reading so hesitantly advocated by our parish priests and Catholic school religion teachers.

Now that we have ascertained some of the basic theological messages of this passage by seeking out the literal sense with the aid of the original language, let us look at a major problem which investigations into a form of ancient literature may help to resolve. The problem I see can be summed up in two words: command and love. How can the Lord *command* each of us to *love* him? Part of the solution to this problem—the clash of an ancient Near Eastern and a modern western conception of love—can come from looking again at the wider scriptural context. Although the commandment to love is necessarily directed at the individual, this verse is equally clearly situated in a community context. Recall that the Lord is called our God in the preceding verse, Deut 6:4. An earlier verse also

indicates that the commandment to love God totally is part of his on-going relationship with his people: in Deut 4:37 why is the Lord said to act?—‘because he loved your ancestors’. The larger pentateuchal context is that of the covenants established with Abraham and his family as well as with Moses and the children of Israel. A small detail uncovered by scholars in ancient political treaties—covenants—discovered in archaeological digs provides an additional help in understanding the kind of love being ordered in Deuteronomy. W. Moran has argued persuasively that ‘love’ and ‘hate’ were technical terms in ancient Near Eastern political covenants which were taken up in Deuteronomy.² In these treaties ‘love’ indicates the kind of obedience required by a vassal for the overlord; for a vassal to break the conditions of such a covenant would be to ‘hate’ the overlord. To love God in this ancient treaty sense is to recognise him as Lord, as Overlord if you will. That is how he can command each of us to love him. ‘Love’ in this ancient Near Eastern and biblical covenantal sense is not left in the abstract. In Deut 5:10, the Lord promises to act loyally ‘to the thousandth generation of those who love me and obey my commandments’; in the New Testament, see especially John 14:15 ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’.

Mark 12:28—34

Mark’s narrative of the greater commandments occurs in a series of disputes which are set in the Temple. Three disputational stories precede: Jesus is first confronted by the chief priests, some scribes and elders who question the authority by which he acted (11:27—33), then by some Herodians and Pharisees over giving tribute to Caesar (12:13—17), and next by some Sadducees who concoct a trick case concerning marriage in the resurrection (12:18—27). Then our focal point occurs: an interchange between Jesus and a scribe regarding the first commandment (12:28—34). Several narrative blasts at the professional class of scribes follow (12:35—40). Mark’s setting is one of dispute and debate between Jesus and members of various Jewish sectarian movements and professional classes in the Jerusalem Temple.

Given this literary context one would expect the interchange between Jesus and the scribe to be highly confrontational (so it is recounted in Matthew 22:34—40). Instead Mark 12:28—34 portrays a meeting full of admiration and concord.

The narrative begins: ‘And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing (or debating) with one another, and seeing that he (Jesus) answered them well, asked him: “Which commandment is first of all?”’ (vv.28—29). This is a completely appropriate question coming from the mouth of a first-century Jewish scribe, whose professional membership is underlined by the words ‘one of the scribes’. ‘The Jewish scribe in NT times is the scholar and intellectual of Judaism... His scholarship was the

knowledge of the law, which he regarded as the sum of wisdom and the only true learning.³ We have good reason to suppose that questions about the central issue of the Law were current in first-century Judea.⁴ Even after the Scribe's positive evaluation of Jesus' response in the preceding sectarian debates, it is surprising, however, that this expert interpreter would seek out a non-professional to select the single most important commandment. This interchange reverses the expected social roles. Set against this ancient social backdrop, the issue would appear to be Jesus' ability and authority to interpret Scripture. This passage thus continues the central concern of the debate between Jesus and the Sadducees, the interpretation of Scripture, which immediately precedes (see especially 12:24,26).⁵

Jesus' is no less surprising than the scribe's question to him. Asked for the first commandment, Jesus gives the fundamental Israelite statement of faith, one commandment, and then another: 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.' (vv. 29—31) These verses demonstrate Jesus' authority to interpret the received Scriptures in three ways. First, he controls the interpretation by giving more than was asked. This is especially apparent in the inclusion of Deut 6:4, the statement of collective belief in the one God, which is not technically even a commandment. He also selects not one but two commandments. This leads us to the second way in which he manifests his authority: he ranks and joins two commandments, one from Deuteronomy and the other from Leviticus (19:18).⁶ The first commandment centres on the vertical dimension, the divine-human relationship. The second command covers the horizontal dimension, the Old Testament commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. The ethical implications of this combination of the vertical and horizontal dimensions have received much attention. But the third way in which Jesus is seen to be the ultimate interpreter has not. Jesus misquotes Deut 6:5. He is said to have added 'with all your mind' to the written commandment. One could explain this change either as an explication of the full range of nuances contained in the Hebrew word *nefesh*—spelling out the intellectual component of that word—or as a bow to the intellectually-oriented Hellenistic world. I would prefer to understand this short addition as a primary example of how Jesus is portrayed by Mark as the ultimate interpreter of Sacred Scripture. Jesus possesses the authority to modify even the premier divine commandment as he sees fit.

The scribe then goes beyond concurring with Jesus' selection, ranking, and modification of the greatest commandments: 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he;

178

and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices' (vv 32—33). The scribe recognises Jesus' authority by addressing him with the honorific title 'teacher' and by twice lauding his selection from the Law: 'you are right' and 'you have truly said'. Then something odd occurs. Whereas Jesus, the wandering preacher, teacher, and healer had quoted Scripture with but one modification, the professional interpreter only paraphrases the commandments he has just heard. As with any paraphrase, as much is learned of the reader's point of view as that of the original text. The scribe's perspective becomes apparent in several significant ways. He changes the commandments of love by depersonalizing them. In place of 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one', with an emphasis on 'our God' in this supremely Jewish setting on the Temple Mount, the scribe abstracts to the universal theological statement 'he is one, and there is no other but he'. Instead of the individual demands communicated by the repeated use of the pronouns 'you' and 'yours' in 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength', the professional interpreter gives an abstraction in which not a solitary second-person reference remains: 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength'. What are essentially commandments about relationships are worded in this scribe's paraphrase to exclude any direct reference to the human lovers. A set of modifications are also included in his version of the first commandment: Jesus' categorical term 'mind' is altered to a considerably less demanding 'understanding' and reference to loving God 'with all your soul' is dropped altogether. I am tempted to view the latter as a subtle indication that the professional interpreter has abandoned any understanding of the role of the soul in the relationship between an individual and God. The personal imperative communicated in the second commandment 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' is also avoided through the use of the scribe's abstract formulation of an infinitive plus impersonal pronouns 'to love one's neighbour as oneself'.

Perhaps the most startling aspect of this paraphrase is that the scribe redirects Jesus' selection and ranking of the greatest commandments for use in a sectarian context. The debate is situated in the Temple with elders, Herodians, Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests, and scribes surrounding Jesus and his disciples. Whereas confrontation between Jesus and members of these groups marks what precedes and follows, Jesus communicates nothing in Mark 12:29—31 that would arouse sectarian ire. The scribe, in contrast, goes out of his way to make sure that the chief priests and the Sadducees, the potent priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem, are aware that in selecting the love commandments their livelihood of offering animal sacrifices, if not threatened, had, at any rate, been relegated to a

secondary status. Instead of Jesus' eirenic and authoritative pronouncement 'There is no commandment greater than these', the scribe turns the double commandment to love into a partisan statement: '(this) is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices' (v33).

Jesus evaluates the scribe's paraphrase positively: 'And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God"' (v34). The operative word is 'wisely'. Despite the scribe's impersonal and polemical paraphrase he has acknowledged Jesus's authority to choose the premier belief and first two commandments. The professional biblical interpreter recognises Jesus as the ultimate interpreter of the divine law. In turn, Jesus commends this scribe. He is not far from the kingdom of God which was believed to be at hand in Mark's gospel. This is the highest compliment Jesus could have given the scribe. It is clear, however, that in Mark the commendation is directed solely at this particular scribe (cf. 12:35—40). The interchange between the professional and ultimate interpreters of the sacred writings concludes in silence: 'And after that no one dared to ask him any question' (v34).

This passage can say much to modern Christians about the role of the intellect in the interpretation of Scripture. Jesus's interchange with the scribe is primarily intellectual and is so signalled by this text. We possess in this passage a model of how to use all of our intellectual resources to interpret Sacred Scripture. Not only do Catholics have warrant to do so from Pius XII's *Divino afflante Spiritu*; we have a clear instance of such in Mark's account of the Greatest Commandments. This passage also speaks to the sublime balance commanded in a Christian's intellectual love of God. Jesus' modified version of Deut 6:5 commands: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'. Quite apart from any modern philological insights into the two-fold meaning of the Hebrew word *nefesh*, Jesus makes explicit that each of us must love God with all of our *mind*. There is no room for anti-intellectualism.

Finally, each of us as individual Christians and our Church as the collective people of God need to ask: 'Have Catholics continued to treat the first commandment as the greatest one?' Some two millennia after Jesus made this commandment foremost, does it retain that place of priority in our individual and communal lives? It would be highly unusual for a twentieth-century Catholic to include a review of possible disobedience to the first commandment in an examination of conscience before seeking the sacrament of reconciliation. Catholics have often been taught to equate the Ten Commandments and the great commandment. Does this equation mean that the Ten have replaced the first commandment in our hearts and minds? Or have some of the specificities of the new *Code of Canon Law* taken priority in some of our lives? Or have any of the spiritual commandments concerning sexual activity in

effect taken the first place?⁷ Lastly, have we as a community succumbed to a—perhaps the—pervasive ethic of modern western society by transposing the order of Jesus’ greatest commandments thereby changing the whole dynamic of Christian relationships? Has the commandment to love our neighbour surpassed Christ’s premier order to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, and all of our strength? What are our Catholic priorities?

- 1 This paper was written during a University postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Religious Studies at The University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. I would like to dedicate it to Mr. K.A. Waites.
- 2 William L. Moran, ‘The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963), pp. 77–87.
- 3 John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*. (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce, 1965), p. 780.
- 4 See Hillel the Elder’s famous dictum ‘What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Law, and all else is commentary’ (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a).
- 5 For a very full discussion of the early Jewish techniques of biblical interpretation witnessed in this and the parallel passages of Matthew 22:34–40 and Luke 10:25–28 see E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1978), pp. 247–51). I am grateful to Professor W. McCready of The University of Calgary for this reference.
- 6 It is surprising how few modern Christians realize that the commandment to love your neighbour originates in the book of the Law to which many of them have the most difficulty in relating, Leviticus.
- 7 See Hugo Meynell’s poignant dialogue, ‘Quaestio Disputata—Sex and Catholicism, *New Blackfriars* 67 (Nov. 1986), pp. 485–93.

The Nearness of God

Charles Taliaferro

‘God is closer to me than I am to myself’

Meister Eckhart¹

Can God be closer to you than you yourself are? I believe that the answer to this question is ‘yes’. Indeed, God is such that it is impossible for you to be closer to yourself than God. Surely this is a paradoxical claim. It would be paradoxical to maintain that something could be closer to, say, a stone than a stone. Not even God could get closer to the stone than the stone itself. How then could God be closer to you than yourself? In part, I believe that the answer lies in appreciating the nature of what it is to be