

READING THE DECALOGUE IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

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The "Ten Commandments," so-called, are commonly read as a set of moral or legal principles that can be abstracted from the history of Israel while still retaining their moral force. I will suggest in this paper, however, that the isolation of the commandments from Israel's story of divine deliverance and liberation distorts the character and meaning of the text. The proper setting for the reading of the Decalogue, and indeed for the reading of Scripture as a whole, is the lived life of the community of faith. It is done best when it is guided by the liturgical life of the people of God. That liturgical life is itself a narration and enactment of Scripture's story. It is a story that is understood only to the extent that it is also lived. The decalogue in Exodus 20 will serve as a case study for this proposal.

I propose in this paper to demonstrate the necessity and the fruitfulness of reading Scripture within the life of the community of faith. The approach I will take belongs within the realm of "theological interpretation of Scripture." Theological interpretation of Scripture is undertaken under the conviction that whatever else we might have to say about the texts gathered together in the Christian Bible they are also and primarily an instrument of God's self-communication. Beginning in the nineteenth century and through much of the twentieth it was commonly supposed in the Western academy that the reading of biblical texts is best done without reliance on the commitments of religious faith, be they Jewish or Christian in character. In an approach sometimes referred to as methodological naturalism, the biblical texts were to be treated solely as the products of human culture and any



suggestion that God was involved in their production, transmission and reception was to be set aside. That God was involved in their formation and might be further involved in their reception within communities of faith as the Christian doctrine of inspiration proposes is a theological claim that was thought to have no place in the realm of objective, scholarly inquiry into the nature and meaning of the texts. Similarly, the collection of biblical texts into a canon of Scripture thought to be authoritative for Christian faith and life was thus considered to be of no hermeneutical significance.

Theological Hermeneutics

Advocates of the theological interpretation of Scripture have begun to push back against the assumptions briefly outlined here. They argue that whatever we may say about the historical and cultural circumstances that led to the text's production, the Bible is also a medium through which the voice of God may be heard. Theological hermeneutics accords with the view of Scripture espoused by Thomas Torrance. "Holy Scripture is assumed by Christ," Torrance writes, "to be his instrument in conveying revelation and reconciliation . . ." ¹ This conviction is commonly expressed through the claim that the Bible is the Word of God and is to be read, therefore, with an interest in what God might be saying to us. This interest, furthermore, is not secondary but primary. That means, first, that the fruits yielded by the range of critical methods developed within biblical studies are of value to the Jewish and Christian communities of faith from which the texts emerged only insofar as they help those communities to attend faithfully and obediently to the God whose Word Scripture is. It also means that methodological naturalism — the effort to read the texts as if God were not involved — is an approach that is alien to the texts themselves. Torrance describes the reading of Scripture thus: "true hearing of the Word of God coming to us through the human words of the Bible *which is faithful to those words* can take place effectively only within the sphere of reconciliation to God."²

¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 138.

² Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 142.

The claims I have made here belong of course within the realm of dogmatic confession. That is to say, they are statements of the church's faith, of what the church takes to be true. They find their epistemic ground not in some independently conducted inquiry but in the continuing tradition of divine encounter and witness that is the church's life. A defense of that claim lies beyond the scope of this paper³ but I hope that the argument that follows might demonstrate the fruitfulness of reading Scripture from within the framework of the church's faith. That framework of faith necessarily extends to the faith and continuing life of Israel, especially when reading what Christians call the Old Testament.

Theological hermeneutics is guided first and foremost by the liturgical life of the people of God. That liturgical life is itself a narration and enactment, we might say, of Scripture's story. It is a story that is understood only to the extent that it is also lived. It is important to note here that wherever the story Scripture tells is lived by the community called into being for that purpose, the Holy Spirit is at work. The living of that story, and so also our understanding of it, takes shape in virtue of the Spirit's guidance and enabling power. As hinted at above, the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture applies not only to the formation of the biblical texts but, wherever communities of faith are drawn to share in the story unfolded in those texts, it applies also to their reception.

Reading the Decalogue

Enough for now of dogmatic foundations. Let me try to demonstrate how the reading of Scripture from within the community of faith might proceed, taking as a case study Exodus 20:1-17. This and the parallel text in Deuteronomy 5:6-21 is commonly, but somewhat misleadingly, referred to as the Ten Commandments. We do better, however, to speak of the "ten words," thus more accurately translating the Hebrew *`aseret ha-devarim* (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13, 10:4) or the Septuagint Greek, *deka logoi*. To speak of these ten words as the Ten Commandments sets them into a legal frame that distorts their character and

³ For a more substantial exploration of the point, see, for example, Robert W. Jenson, "Hermeneutics and the Life of the Church," in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 89-105.

obscures their fundamental purpose.⁴ The fault is made worse when, as is often done, they are presented as if they can stand alone as a set of moral principles without the first word, and so be abstracted from the story of God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It is that deliverance, that liberating action of God to which the first word testifies that is the hermeneutical key to the nine words that follow. In making this judgement, I am following the Jewish Talmud which presents as the first word: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery . . ." (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). The Christian churches, by unfortunate contrast, have mostly omitted that first word in their presentations of the "Ten Commandments." Luther provides a particularly egregious example in arguing that while,

Gentiles are just as duty-bound as the Jews to keep the first commandment, so that we have no other gods than the only God . . . we Gentiles have no use and can have no use for the phrase with which [Moses] modifies this commandment and which applies solely to the Jews, namely, "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." For if I were to approach God and say, "Oh Lord God, who brought me out of Egypt, out of the exile," etc., then I would be like a sow entering a synagogue for God never performed such a work for me. God would punish me as a liar.⁵

Luther is correct of course in claiming that he was never a slave in Egypt, but in shearing the commandments from their narrative setting he distorts the character of the commandments themselves. They become for him an instance of natural

⁴ The point is supported by George Knight who writes, "The word 'decatalogue' means 'Ten Words.' The word 'commandments' does not occur here. We have ten statements, ten fiats, from out of the mystery and awe of the storm on the mountain. We approach the 'Ten Commandments' wrongly if we separate them from this context, regard them as timeless utterances, and seek to apply them to the life of all mankind." George A. F. Knight, *Theology as Narration: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 134.

⁵ Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society IV*, trans. Martin H. Bertram in Luther's Works, vol. 47 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 90.

law,⁶ a set of moral principles, the validity of which, he argues, was recognized long before Moses and indeed before Abraham.⁷ Israel's particular circumstances are therefore deemed to be of no hermeneutical value in interpreting the commandments.⁸

We do better, I think, to follow the guidance of commentators like Terrence Fretheim who explains at length in his commentary on the book of Exodus that the narrative setting is crucial to the understanding of the law. "God's exodus redemption," Fretheim explains, "remains the constitutive event for Israel and continues to be actualized as such in Israel's worship." Fretheim thus concludes, "The law remains forever grounded in those constitutive events."⁹ Christopher Seitz likewise observes that "these laws are generated out of divine compassion, linked to the deliverance out of Egypt. Law is gift here, born out of God's saving and identifying purpose."¹⁰

The hermeneutical significance of Israel's deliverance from bondage is simply this: far from imposing a range of legal constraints upon Israel, who, let us recall, have just been liberated from bondage, the commandments delineate what free life

⁶ On which see, Philip Turner, "The Ten Commandments in the Church in a Postmodern World," in Carl E. Braaten and Christopher R. Seitz, eds. *I am the Lord Your God: Christian Reflections on the Ten Commandments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 3-17, especially 6-11. It might be argued that Romans 2:14-15 supports Luther's identification of the Ten Commandments as an instance of natural law. There is no doubt that Gentiles, in this case, can recognize and abide by at least those moral injunctions contained in the second table of the commandments. My point, however, is that the Decalogue taken as a whole cannot be understood in terms of natural law. The injunctions of the first table are surely beyond the understanding of those who do not know "the Lord your God."

⁷ To the claim that the commandments, particularly the first four, may be characterized as natural law, Christopher Seitz offers a forceful rebuttal: "If we think these are natural laws, we have probably not just misheard them but domesticated them as well." Christopher R. Seitz, "The Ten Commandments: Positive and Natural Law and the Covenants Old and New – Christian Use of the Decalogue and Moral Law," in Carl E. Braaten and Christopher R. Seitz, eds. *I am the Lord Your God: Christian Reflections on the Ten Commandments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 18-37, 21.

⁸ See Luther, *The Christian in Society*, 89.

⁹ Terrence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 204.

¹⁰ Seitz, "The Ten Commandments," 29.

looks like.¹¹ Rightly understood, they are “not repressive but emancipatory.”¹² The logic is straightforward: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Why? It is because other gods will enslave you once again. Whether it be the idols fashioned with gold or stone as sometimes tempted Israel, or, in our own time, the gods of fashion, wealth, celebrity and status, homage paid to these gods plunges people back into bondage.

“You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not covet” The same logic continues to be applied. I have set you free, says the Lord. Such actions as these will enslave you once more. It is thus for the sake of Israel’s freedom that the commandments are given. As George Knight again observes, the commandments “are addressed to a nation that has just been rescued from slavery. Thus *they are to be seen as constituent elements in the life of a free people* whom God has willed into being.”¹³ Terrence Fretheim echoes the point:

The activity of God in redeeming Israel *from bondage* means that the law and the service to God and world it entails is not understood to be another form of bondage. The law is a gift of a redeeming God, and a particular redemptive act is seen as undergirding and informing the law, not the other way around. Those who are given the law are already God’s people. Hence the law is not understood as a means of salvation but as instruction regarding the shape such a redeemed life is to take in one’s everyday affairs.¹⁴

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann thus advises that, “It is important not to stress the command structure of Sinai without appreciating the emancipatory impulse of Yahweh. Conversely, it is impossible to appreciate the emancipatory impulse of Yahweh, operative in the Exodus narrative, without paying close attention to the command structure of Sinai.” Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 183.

¹² Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 200.

¹³ Knight, *Theology as Narration*, 134. My emphasis.

¹⁴ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 224. See also, Abraham Heschel, “Religion and Law,” in Fritz A. Rothschild, ed. *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism. From the Writings of Abraham J. Heschel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 155-61, 155.

Attentiveness to the narrative context of the Decalogue, as advocated here by Knight and Fretheim, is not the preserve of theological interpreters of Scripture alone, but reading the text theologically, from within the liturgical life of the community of faith makes a substantial difference. The contrasting approach of Calum Carmichael, Professor of Comparative Literature at Cornell University and contributor to the *Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, illustrates the point. Carmichael observes that “until recently scholars examined the legal material in the Pentateuch separate from the narrative histories in which it is embedded.” That view, Carmichael continues, “has undergone a radical change and much recent research focuses especially on how each genre might relate to the other.”¹⁵ Carmichael’s own efforts to attend to the narrative setting, however, maintain the “scholarly” commitment to methodological naturalism and so yield a reading of the Decalogue very different from the one I am offering here. Despite there being no reference in Exodus 19-20 to the biblical story of Cain and Abel or to their parents Adam and Eve, Carmichael proposes that it is this primeval story that constitutes the narrative setting of the Decalogue. The story of God’s deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt is mentioned only in passing in Carmichael’s exposition while God is generally referred to in impersonal terms simply as “the deity.” This “scholarly” distance from the working out of Israel’s faith and covenant relationship with YHWH leads Carmichael to propose that, “the supernatural aura surrounding the giving of the Decalogue is patently an attempt to lend authority to its contents.” He continues: “we have the typical reaching out to higher forces by those with power in order to sanction control over those they rule.”¹⁶ The Decalogue is thus interpreted in terms of a political power play while the possibility of God’s real involvement in the story as deliverer of Israel from bondage and giver of the law warrants no consideration whatsoever.

In marked contrast to Carmichael’s approach, I suggested in my introductory remarks, that theological interpretation of Scripture is guided first and foremost by the liturgical life of the people of God. That liturgical life is itself a narration and

¹⁵ Calum Carmichael, “Law and Narrative in the Pentateuch,” in *Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Leo G. Perdue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 321-34, 321.

¹⁶ Carmichael, “Law and Narrative in the Pentateuch,” 330.

enactment of Scripture's story. It is a story that is understood only to the extent that it is also lived. So it turns out to be for Israel, for the people to whom the commandments were given. The liturgical narration and enactment of Israel's deliverance from bondage takes place, above all, in the annual celebration of the Passover. As told in Exodus 12, the Passover ordinance was established by the Lord's directive. Following detailed instructions of the preparations to be made for the escape from Egypt, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance" (Ex 12:14). The divine injunction to remember this day is crucial because the Exodus establishes a new identity for Israel. They are a people whom God has delivered from bondage. Through the Exodus, Israel learns who the Lord is – the one who delivers them from bondage – but they also learn who they are, a people set free to live in covenant relationship with Yahweh.

The Passover liturgy, the Haggadah, does not function for Jews simply as an inspiring story from the past. It is their story now, the story in which they belong and which continues in the present day. It is the story of divine deliverance and liberation, of God's love and mercy and faithfulness, not only to their ancestors, but also to them. It is the story of Jewish identity; it defines who they are! Thus an old rabbinic saying from the Haggadah reads, "In every generation every person should feel as though they themselves had gone forth from Egypt." The point is reiterated later in the Haggadah: "Not only our ancestors alone did the Holy One redeem, but us as well along with them, as it is written, 'And he freed us from Egypt so as to take us and give us the land which he swore to our ancestors.'" (Deuteronomy 6:23).

Throughout the liturgy, from the questions asked by the children about the various foods to be eaten in the Passover meal, and through the *maggid* in which the events of the Exodus are narrated and commentary is made upon their meaning, the guiding theme is the words of Exodus 13:8, "You shall tell your child on that day 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.'"

In response to the questions asked by the children: "Why does this night differ from all other nights?; why on this night only unleavened bread?; why on this

night only bitter herbs?; why on this night do we dip [the herbs] twice?, why on this night do we all recline?," the master of the seder and all the celebrants respond:

We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us forth from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. And if the Holy One, blessed be he, had not brought our forefathers forth from Egypt, then we, our children and our children's children would still be Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt.¹⁷

Note the identification of the present generation with Israel's forebears: "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought *us* forth from there." Jewish children are learning and adults are being reminded of who they are. They are a people whom Yahweh has delivered from bondage. That must never be forgotten.

This is the narrative context in which the "Ten Commandments," or the ten words are set. In liturgical confirmation of the point, the sequence of readings in the synagogue for the seven days of Passover begins with Exodus 12, the story of the Passover itself, and is followed by Exodus 20 the giving of the commandments to Moses. The narrative context is crucial to the interpretation of the commandments because, as I have argued, the ten words set forth what freedom entails.

Christian Participation in Israel's Story

We must consider now what significance this has for Christians? Does this Passover tradition, and its hermeneutical significance for the reading of the Decalogue, not give some credence to the point made by Luther? "We Gentiles," said Luther, "have no use . . . for the phrase with which [Moses] modifies [the first] commandment and which applies solely to the Jews, namely, 'who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.'" The Decalogue is set within a story that is unique to Israel. What has that to do with non-Jews? Well, it would have very little

¹⁷ *The Passover Haggadah*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1953), 25, 27.

to do with non-Jews were it not for the fact that shortly before his death and resurrection, on the day of unleavened bread, Jesus sent the disciples to prepare the Passover meal.

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:14-20)

Through this enactment and reinterpretation of Israel's story of divine deliverance, Jesus draws those who would be his disciples into Israel's story, now brought to fulfillment so Christians believe, in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The God who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt is at work again in the person of Jesus, undertaking for Gentiles too now the work of liberation, establishing a new identity for them, and introducing a new life of freedom for those who choose to follow him.¹⁸

In confirmation of the point, Luke's version of the Passover meal which I have quoted above is followed immediately by the dispute among the disciples about which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." (Luke 22: 25-26) We have seen this pattern before. The divine declaration of deliverance from

¹⁸ Thomas Torrance rightly observes, therefore, that "there cannot be a Christian Church independent of Israel, for Gentiles may belong to the one people of God only by incorporation into the commonwealth of Israel through the Mediatorship of Christ Jesus . . ." See Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: The Catholic Book Club, 1976), 26.

bondage, and the enactment of that story in the Passover meal, is followed by instructions about what the new life looks like. In Exodus 20, "You shall have no other gods before me," and so on; in Luke, you shall have no one in authority over you, nor shall you lord it over others, rather "the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." This is what freedom looks like. This is what the new life looks like that follows upon the divine work of liberation.

Servant leadership and the worship of no gods other than the God made known through Israel are "laws" that may be approved of in principle outside the Jewish and Christian communities of faith, but unless one knows oneself to have been delivered from bondage, unless one remembers that the Lord your God has set *you* free, the imperative to participate in the new pattern of life described in the Decalogue and in Jesus' teaching has little force. It is the narrative context recalled and celebrated liturgically week by week by the community of faith that is the *Sitz im Leben* within which the divine command is best understood, and within which obedience to that command makes sense.

Jesus and the Law

That the law given to Israel is to be understood first and foremost as a specification of the conditions of freedom is apparent in Jesus' application of the law. We can take the fourth commandment as exemplary here:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.
(Exodus 20:8-11)

It is notable here that the sabbath commandment as rendered in Exodus 20 finds its basis in God's creative work but since redemption and deliverance from bondage involves re-creation, the reestablishment of the life that God intended from the

beginning, there is consistency in the narrative of God's dealings with Israel. The Deuteronomic version of the sabbath command, therefore, appropriately invokes the Exodus as the basis for the command: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:15). The sabbath is essentially about freedom, of course. You will not be shackled to your work, says the Lord. You shall have rest from your labour. The commandment applies, not only to Israel, but equally to slaves, to alien residents in your town, and even to livestock. Just as the blessing promised to Abraham is to extend eventually to all the families of the earth, so the sabbath rest that God provides is not confined to Israel alone.

The sabbath command provides an especially poignant instance of how the interpretation of Scripture can go awry. When the first word of the Decalogue is forgotten, the word of grace and liberation, a deadening legalism can set in which undermines the very purpose for which the law is given. The example of Jesus is especially salutary here. Several incidents in the gospels reveal Jesus taking an attitude to the sabbath that some found objectionable. According to Mark 2:23-28, Jesus was unperturbed by his disciples picking grain on the sabbath, presumably because they were hungry. "The sabbath," he explains, "was made for humankind not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). In further justification of his relaxed attitude Jesus reminds the Pharisees of the time when David and his companions were hungry, entered the house of God, and ate the bread of the presence. Feeding the hungry apparently accords more closely with the intent of the law than the legalistic scruples of the protesting Pharisees.

The gospels record two incidents in which Jesus healed on the sabbath and in which he was again chastised by those who were concerned to uphold the law as they (mis)understood it. In Luke 13, and parallel passages, Jesus heals a woman bent over in pain, and in Luke 6, again with parallels in Matthew and Mark, Jesus heals on the sabbath a man with a withered arm. The healing of those wracked with pain and disease is a clear instance of the release from bondage and the life of freedom that the law is intended to secure. That a woman bent over in pain for eighteen years, for example, should be released from her bondage is appropriately

understood as a fulfillment of the sabbath command rather than as a violation of the law. As Jesus himself explains when questioning those who objected, “ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” (Luke 13:16). In the healing of the man with a withered arm, Jesus again engages the Pharisees on how best to interpret the law. “Jesus said to them, ‘I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?’” (Luke 6:9). The point is clear; the sabbath command is directed towards salvation and freedom from bondage. So too do all the commandments specify the conditions of freedom and new life. It is deeply ironic therefore that the commandments have so often been perceived as a constraint upon freedom and an impediment to the realization of the self as a liberated and autonomous individual. Like the commandments themselves, freedom and the realization of true selfhood look very different from within the story Scripture tells.

Jesus’ declaration that the sabbath is made for humankind, for the sake of liberation and new life, reveals an attitude that appears also in his teaching, notably in the sermon on the mount where several times Jesus says, you have heard that it was said, but I say to you: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement . . .” (Matthew 5:21-22). This is not an abrogation but an intensification of the law, and a widening of its scope. Jesus recognizes that not just murder but also anger against a brother or sister will plunge as back into the kind of constrained and fearful existence from which God sets his people free.

Both the words and the deeds of Jesus reveal that he is about the same work as his Father (John 5:19-21), delivering into newness of life those who are variously enslaved by disease, social isolation, constricting legalism, sin, and so on. Walter Brueggemann thus observes that “the narratives of Jesus’ powerful transformative acts (miracles) are in effect enactments of exodus . . .”¹⁹ It is in this way, through the realization of the conditions of freedom set out in the Decalogue, that Jesus truly fulfills the law (Matthew 5:17).

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 179.

Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate here a hermeneutic situated in the life of the people of God, situated, that is, within the life of that community of people who gather week by week to hear afresh the narrative of Scripture and who find themselves, precisely on account of God's liberating work among them, to be participants in the story that Scripture tells. Their reading of Scripture takes place within a pattern of liturgical life through which Israel remembers that the Lord their God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, out of the house of bondage, and through which Christians remember that Jesus sat once at a Passover meal, took bread and broke it and said, "this is my body, which is given for you." He did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:19-20). By this means Jesus draws those who would be his disciples into Israel's story and makes them to be participants in the divine economy through which God is at work bringing to fulfillment his promise that the creature shall have life and have it in abundance. The ten words specify for both communities what free life looks like and are aptly summed up in the two commandments to "love God the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-9). Anything else is not freedom but bondage.

That the law can be summed up in the commands to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself reveals that the law is not well understood in terms of legal constraint but rather as encouragement to freedom and creativity. Abraham Heschel explains that,

The law, stiff with formality, is *a cry for creativity*; a call for nobility concealed in the form of commandments. It is not designed to be a yoke, a curb, a strait jacket for human action. Above all, the Torah asks for *love: thou shalt love thy God; thou shalt love thy neighbour*. All observance is training in the art of love The end of our readiness to obey is the ability to love. The law is given to be cherished, not merely to be complied with.²⁰

²⁰ Heschel, "Law and Life," 162. Italics original.

It is not a fool-proof method, this hermeneutic that I have outlined. Participation in the liturgy and in the life of faith does not guarantee that our reading of Scripture will always issue in reliable apprehension of the Word of the Lord. The distortion of our hearing that is produced by sin, or simply by the fact that we are as yet apprentices in faith, requires that we must return week after week, to confess our inattention, to seek forgiveness, and to be reminded once more of the story Scripture tells.²¹ The central message of that story is that God is at work in the world through Word and Spirit, precisely in order to set us free from the things that have enslaved us and to realize in full his promise of blessing for all the families of the earth.

²¹ Again at this point I find myself in agreement with Thomas Torrance who writes, "The Word of God summons us to listen to it not as though we know already what it has to say, not as though it only confirms what we have already said to ourselves, but to listen in such a way that we are lifted outside of ourselves and hear what only God can say to us. How can we do that except in repentance? To listen and deny ourselves, to listen and to repent of what we want to make the Bible say, to listen in such a way as to let the Bible speak against ourselves, that is to listen indeed to the Word of God." Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 142.