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WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE NASH PAPYRUS?

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I

Quite a lot actually! The Nash Papyrus contains a version of the Ten Commandments from the Jewish community of ancient Egypt that has many affinities with the two versions of the commandments found in the Masoretic Hebrew Text (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5), the Greek Septuagint, and some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Nevertheless, it is a unique version of the Ten Commandments that demands attention in its own right.

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, the Nash Papyrus was the oldest known manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. The text dates to the second or first century B.C.E. In addition to the Ten Commandments, the Nash Papyrus contains some additional text drawn from Deut 4:45 and the first lines of the *Shema* from Deut 6:4-5.

Indeed, when John Trever saw the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Jerusalem in 1947, the similarities in Hebrew text of the Nash Papyrus with the scrolls prompted him to date the scrolls to the second or first century B.C.E.

Some interpreters maintain that the Nash Papyrus represents one of the earliest versions of the Ten Commandments, but this does not mean that we need to rewrite our Bibles. Most interpreters also recognize that it is a liturgical text. A close reading of the text of the Nash Papyrus indicates that it is a product of ancient Jewish interpretation

of the Ten Commandments, that combined elements from the various versions of the Ten Commandments to provide a standardized and easily understood text for use in the Jewish prayer service. Because the Nash Papyrus was written in Egypt, we will focus on a comparative reading of the Masoretic Hebrew Text, which emerged as the standard text of the Bible in Rabbinic Judaism, and the Greek Septuagint, which originated in ancient Egypt.

II

We may begin with a brief description of the manuscript and its assessment by early scholars. The Nash Papyrus was originally a single papyrus sheet that was never part of a larger scroll or document.¹ There are twenty-five lines of text, written in a square Hebrew script. Most of the text is intact, although there is damage along the margins. The original papyrus sheet is now split into four fragments that fit easily together. The papyrus was purchased from an Egyptian dealer in 1902 by Mr. W. L. Nash, Secretary of the Society of Biblical Archaeology in England, together with some Greek fragments of Homer's *Odyssey* (12:279-304). Both texts are believed to have originated in the Fayyum, an Egyptian city and district located about 80 miles southwest of Cairo with a history dating back at least to the Greco-Roman period. Because the Greek fragments of the *Odyssey* were dated to the second century C.E., Stanley A. Cook, the original publisher of the Nash Papyrus, dated the papyrus to the second century C.E. as well.² Subsequent paleographical and epigraphic work by W. F. Albright, however, established the Hasmonean period during the second or first century B.C.E. as the date for the Nash Papyrus.³

III

We may now turn to a line-by-line translation of the text. Gaps in the original Hebrew text are indicated by brackets.

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- 1) [. . . I am Y]HWH, your G-d, who b[rough]t you out from the land of E[gypt.]
- 2) You [shall not have] other gods [before M]e. You shall not make [for yourselves an image]
- 3) [or any form] which is in the heavens above, or which is in the earth [below,]
- 4) [or which is in the waters below the earth. You shall not worship them, [and you shall not]
- 5) [serve them, because] I am YHWH, your G-d, a jealous G-d, visi[ting the iniquity of]
- 6) [the fathers upon son]s to the third and fourth generations of the those who of hate Me, [showing]
- 7) [fidelity to the thousands of [those who love Me and to those who observe My commandments. You shall not [take up the]
- 8) [name of YHWH] your G-]d in vain, because YHWH will not hold innocent [anyone who]
- 9) [takes up] His na[me] in vain. Remember the Sabbath day [to sanctify it.]
- 10) [Six day]s you shall labor, and you shall do all your work, but on [the seventh] day
- 11) [is a Sabbath for YHWH,] your G-d. You shall not do any work on it, [you,]
- 12) [and your son, and your daughter,] your male servant, your female servant, your ox, your ass, or any of [your animals,]
- 13) [or your foreigner who is] in your gates, for in six days, Y[HWH] made
- 14) [the heav]ens and the earth, the sea and all t[hat is in them,]
- 15) and He rested [on] the seventh [day.] Therefore, YHWH blessed the seventh
- 16) [day,] and He sanctified it. Honor your father and [your] mother [so that]
- 17) it will go well for you, and so that your days will be lengthened on the land [that]
- 18) YHWH, your G-d, is giving to you. Do not commit adultery. Do not murder. [Do] not
- 19) [ste]al. Do not tes[ti]fy against your neighbor as a false witness. Do not covet [the]
- 20) [wife of your neighbor. Do n]ot desire the

house the h[ou]se of your neighbor, [his] field, [his male servant,]

21) [or his female servant, or] his o[x], or his ass, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. [N.b., the rest of this line is intentionally left blank in the manuscript]

22) [And these are the sta]tutes and the laws which Moses commanded the [sons of]

23) [Israel] in the wilderness when they went out from the land of Egypt. Hea[r,]

24) [O Israe]l, YHWH, our G-d, YHWH, He is one. And [you shall love]

25) [YHWH, your] G[-d with al]l [your hea]rt[. . .]

IV

We may now turn to a line-by-line assessment of this text in relation to the two known versions of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 as well as in relation to the Greek versions of these texts in the Septuagint.

1) The initial statement of the Nash text corresponds to both Exod 20:2 and Deut 5:6, except that it omits the phrase, “from the house of bondage,” following “Egypt.” Interpreters agree that the reason for the omission of this phrase is due to the Egyptian provenance of this text. Jews were generally granted relatively high status in Egypt during the Hellenistic period of Ptolemaic rule, although restrictions were later placed on the Jewish community during the Roman period.

2-8) No differences from Exod 20:3-7 or Deut 5:7-13.

9) The Nash text reads “Remember the Sabbath day” with Exod 20:8 rather than “Observe the Sabbath day” with Deut 5:12. There is no attempt to reconcile the two readings. The LXX text of Deut 5:12 adds the phrase, “just as the L-rd you G-d commanded you.”

10) The Nash text reads, “but on the seventh day is,” whereas both Exod 20:10 and Deut 5:14 read, “and the seventh day is.” The Nash reading corresponds to both of the LXX texts of Exod 20:10 and Deut 5:14.

11) The Nash text reads “on it,” which does not appear in either Exod 20:10 or Deut 5:14. The Nash reading corresponds to the LXX versions of both Exod 20:10 and Deut 5:14.

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12) The Nash text reads, “your ox and your ass,” with Deut 5:14 (“and your ox and your ass”), but the phrase does not appear in Exod 20:10. The Nash phrase corresponds to the LXX text of Exod 20:10.

13-16) The Nash text follows Exod 20:11 in justifying the remembrance of the Sabbath day in relation to YHWH’s creation of the world. The text reads “YHWH blessed the seventh day” in ll. 15-16 whereas Exod 20:11 reads, “YHWH blessed the Sabbath day.” Deuteronomy 5:14b-15 justifies the observance of the Sabbath as a time rest to commemorate YHWH’s redemption of the Israelite slaves from Egypt. Again, there is no attempt to reconcile the two versions.

16-17) The Nash text adds the phrase “in order that it will go well with you” to justify the command to honor the parents. This phrase does not appear in Exod 20:12, but it appears after the reference to lengthening days in Deut 5:16. The Nash phrase appears prior to the reference to lengthening days in the LXX version of both Exod 20:12 and Deut 5:16. Deuteronomy 5:16 also includes the phrase, “just as YHWH has commanded you,” immediately following the command to honor the parents.

18-19) The Nash text presents a different order of prohibitions, i.e., against adultery, murder, theft, and bearing vain witness, whereas Exod 20:13 and Deut 5:17-20 employ the order, murder, adultery, theft, and false witness. With regard to the matter of vain or false witness, the Nash text follows Deut 5:20 and not Exod 20:13. The LXX text of Exod 20:13 employs the order, adultery, theft, and murder.

19-21) The Nash text follows Deut 5:21 in the prohibition of coveting rather than the shorter text of Exod 20:14. The LXX text of Exod 20:14 corresponds to the Hebrew text of Deut 5:21, but the LXX text of Deut 5:21 adds the phrase, “nor any beast of his,” after the reference to the ass.

22-23) The Nash summation of statutes and laws commanded by Moses in the wilderness has no exact counterpart in either Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5, although it may be derived from Deut 4:45, “These are the testimonies, the statutes and the laws which Moses spoke to the sons of Israel when they went out from Egypt.”

23-25) The Nash statement of the *Shema* generally follows Deut 6:4-5, although it varies from the Masoretic Text by inserting the Hebrew word, *hû*,

“He,” so that the *Shema* reads, “Hear, O Israel, YHWH, our G-d, YHWH, He is one,” instead of “Hear, O Israel, YHWH, our G-d, is one, as in Deut 6:4. The Nash reading may correspond to the LXX reading of Deut 6:4, although the Greek (*’eis ’estin*, “[he] is one”) is ambiguous on this point as the Greek verb, *’estin*, would take “the L-rd,” as the subject.

This assessment of the text of the Nash Papyrus leads us to several conclusions.

1) The Nash text is clearly an eclectic that combines readings known from several distinct versions of the Ten Commandments, including the Hebrew texts of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 as well as the Hebrew text that would presumably stand behind the Septuagint Greek versions of these texts.

2) It appears that the base text is Exodus 20, insofar as it reads “Remember the Sabbath day” with Exod 20:8, and it justifies the observance of the Sabbath with a notice of YHWH’s acts of creation as in Exod 20:11. The use of Exodus 20 as the base text makes sense, insofar as Exodus 20 is the first version of the Ten Commandments to appear in the Bible.

3) The Nash Papyrus incorporates readings known Deuteronomy 5, such as the addition of “your ox and your ass” to Exod 20:10 based on the reading of Deut 5:14; the addition of “in order that it will go well with you” in Exod 20:12, based on Deut 5:16, albeit in a different order; and the introduction of the larger text concerning coveting from Deut 5:21 rather than the shorter text of Exod 20:14. In each case, the Nash reading provides a more comprehensive reading of the text that accounts for elements of Deuteronomy 5.

4) The Nash Papyrus also incorporates readings that appear to be represented in the LXX text of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, including the additions, “but on the seventh day is,” and, “on it,” in Exod 20:10 from the Septuagint texts of both Exod 20:10 and Deut 5:14 as well as the placement of the phrase “in order that it will go well with you” in keeping with the order of the Greek text of both Exod 20:12 and Deut 5:16. In each case, the additional material provides a more cogent and complete reading of the text.

5) Despite its affinities with the Septuagint texts of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, the Nash Papyrus text maintains its independence. It eliminates

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Publications and Upcoming Events



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Publications:

“Synchronic and Diachronic Considerations in the DtrH Portrayal of the Demise of Solomon’s Kingdom,” in Chaim Cohen et al, editors, *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom Paul on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (2 vols.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 1:175-189.

“The Book of Isaiah in Recent Research,” in Alan Hauser, editor, *Recent Research on The Major Prophets* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 78-92 (reprint of an Article originally published in *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 1 [1993] 141-162).

“Reevaluating Isaiah 1-39 in Recent Critical Research,” in Alan Hauser, editor, *Recent Research on The Major Prophets* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 93-117 (reprint of an article originally published in *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 4 [1996] 79-113).

“Reading Prophetic Books,” in *Iggud: Selected Essays in Jewish Studies. Volume 1: The Bible and its World, Rabbinic Literature and Jewish Law, and Jewish Thought* (ed., Baruch Schwartz et al; Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2008), English Section, pp. 57*-68*.

“Post-Shoah Theology and Jewish Biblical Interpretation in America,” in B. Zuckerman and Z. Garber editors, *The Impact of the Holocaust in America: The Jewish Role In American Jewish Life*, Volume 6 (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Casden Institute and Purdue University Presss, 2008), 159-189.

“Targum Jonathan’s Reading of Zechariah 3: A Gateway for the Palace,” *Tradition in Transition: Haggai and Zechariah 1-8 in the Trajectory of Hebrew Theology*. (Mark Boda and Michael H. Floyd, eds.; LHBOTS 475. London and New York: T and T Clark, 2008), 271-290.

“Jewish Biblical Theology and Christian Biblical Theology,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 134 (2009) 397-410.

Editor, *Hebrew Studies: A Journal Devoted to Hebrew Language and Literature* 49 (2008), 409 pp. Published by the National Association of Professors of Hebrew.

Events:

“Song of Songs,” 3 part mini-course, Congregation Har El, Palm Desert, CA, January 2009.

“Reclaiming the Sacred in Judaism: A Model from Lurianic Kabbalah,” Claremont School of Theology Conference on Theological Education in a Secular Age, March 4-6, 2009.

“Form Criticism and the Question of the Endangered Matriarchs in Genesis,” Plenary Address, Society of Biblical Literature Pacific Coast Regional Meeting, Santa Clara University, March 23, 2009.

“Samuel’s Institutional Identity in the Deuteronomistic History,” World Congress for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel, August 3-6, 2009.

“The Elijah Narratives,” Taus Lecture Series.
Temple Beth El, San Pedro, CA, September 14,
2009.

Panel Review: Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (Oxford and New York; Oxford University Press, 2001), Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, LA, November 20-24, 2009.

Panel Review: Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), Annual Meeting of The Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, LA, November 20-24, 2009.



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Biblical Theology Bulletin 39/2 (May 2009)
60-70.

Activities:

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Lectures every Sunday at the Adult Forum, Christ Church Episcopal, Ontario, CA. Theme: The Monotheizing Process in Biblical Literature. Current Focus: The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.



the phrase “from the house of bondage” in Exod 20:2, whereas all versions of the text include this phrase; it does not add “just as the L-rd G-d commanded you” to Exod 20:8 or to Exod 20:11 although the phrase appears in the Greek text of Deut 5:12 and Deut 15:16; it employs an entirely independent order of the prohibitions against adultery, murder, and theft; and it does not add the phrase, “nor any beast of his,” to Exod 20:14 from the Greek text of Deut 5:21.

6) Although the Nash Papyrus employs a version of Deut 4:45, it does not correspond to any known version of this text. Nevertheless, the Nash Papyrus provides a more cogent reading insofar as it specifies that Moses spoke these words to Israel in the wilderness, i.e., *after* the people had gone out from Egypt.

7) The Nash Papyrus includes the first lines of the *Shema* from Deut 6:4-5, although it adds the term, “He,” which may or may not correspond to the Greek text of this passage. Such an addition aids in clarifying the reading of this text, viz., Masoretic Hebrew, “Hear, Israel, YHWH our G-d, YHWH one,” leaves the interrelationships of the terms in the text open to interpretation, but the Nash version, “Hear, Israel, YHWH (is) our G-d, YHWH is one,” renders a much clearer reading.

V

So what do we learn from our reading of the Nash Papyrus? Interpreters have long-noted that the inclusion of the *Shema*, the fundamental statement of adherence to G-d in the Jewish prayer book, together with the Ten Commandments points to the character of the Nash Papyrus as an early Jewish liturgical text. The Mishnah (Tamid 5:1), the earliest known document of Rabbinic Judaism written ca. 200 C.E., indicates that the Ten Commandments were read immediately prior to the *Shema* in the Jewish prayer service during the Greco-Roman period. But the Babylonian Talmud (Berakot 12a), compiled ca. 600 C.E., indicates that the practice of reading the Ten Commandments as part of the Jewish worship service was discontinued due to claims made by early Christians that such practice demonstrated that the Ten Commandments were the only valid portion of the Torah.

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The Nash Papyrus reflects the practice of reading the Ten Commandments prior to the *Shema* as part of the Jewish prayer service during the Greco-Roman period. Of course, the practice of reading the Ten Commandments as part of the Jewish worship service raises a question, viz., which version of the Ten Commandments should be read, especially since so many versions were available both in the Hebrew Bible and the various other versions of the Bible extant at the time? Rabbinic Judaism maintains that the problem of multiple versions of the Ten Commandments constituted no real problem as both versions were spoken by G-d simultaneously at Mt. Sinai, "something which transcends the capacity of the human mouth to utter and the human ear to hear" (b. Shevuot 20b; b. Rosh HaShanah 27a).⁴ Indeed, our text represents an attempt to combine the various texts of the Ten Commandments available to Egyptian Jews during the Greco-Roman period, viz., the Hebrew versions of both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 as well as the Hebrew presumably underlying the Greek versions of both texts.⁵ The result was a Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments that would provide its reader with a text that was designed to account for the various versions of the text extant in Egypt at the time and to resolve some of the problems in reading the Ten Commandments.

Endnotes:

¹ Tyler Mayfield, "Manuscripts 101: Nash Papyrus," *The Folio: The Newsletter of the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center for Preservation and Research* 25/2 (Fall, 2008) 4; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001) 118; Moshe Greenberg, "Nash Papyrus," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 12:833-4.

² Stanley A. Cook, "A Pre-Massoretic Biblical Papyrus," *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 25 (1903) 34-56; see also, F. C. Burkitt, "The Hebrew Papyrus of the Ten Commandments," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 15 (1903) 392-408.

³ William Foxwell Albright, "A Biblical Fragment from the Maccabean Age," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 56 (1937) 145-176.

⁴ David Kadosh, "Decalogue," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 5:1446.

⁵ The practice of combining diverse texts of the Torah to provide a complete reading of a given point of Jewish law or practice is known from the Temple Scroll from Qumran, which attempts to present a version of G-d's own statement of the Torah to Moses and Israel at Sinai.

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