

Third Sunday in Lent
Cycle B RCL
Revised

Exodus 20:1-17

The Ten Commandments (Hebrew: “ten words”) appear in a slightly different form in Deuteronomy 5:6-21. In the present setting, they come from the northern, Elohist writer (E), who composed a narrative about Israel’s origins around the 8th century BCE; and an editor has connected them with the “Covenant Code,” a long legal section in Exodus 21-23. Since these ten rules mandate no punishment for infraction, they may have served as a kind of constitution to govern the administration of law throughout ancient Israel. The prohibition of having other gods “before my face” (20:3) refers to setting up shrines to gods in the precincts of God’s house, as did wicked King Manasseh (2 Kings 21:4).

Psalm 19

This psalm consists of portions of two different psalms. Psalm 19:1-6 is a fragment of a *hymn of praise* that probably comes from the temple rituals of Jerusalem before the Exile in 586 BCE. Psalm 19:7-14, is from a *wisdom psalm*. Wisdom psalms were not for use in the worship of the Temple but for the instruction of students in the court schools. The “law of the Lord” (*torat adonay*) is not law as we might think of it but “instruction” such as a teacher might deliver to a student.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Paul’s introduction to problems in the Corinthian church comes from “Chloe’s people,” who, evidently, made a trip from Corinth to Ephesus to inform Paul about divisions in the Corinthian church, divisions that in 1:12-17 seem to be divisions into baptismal parties but parties that also represented very different understandings of the gospel from Paul’s. In verses 18-25 Paul writes an argument against religious esotericism or “wisdom.” For his part, the apostle writes, he is content to proclaim the “foolishness” of Christ crucified over against the pretended spiritual and philosophical sophistication of those who are dividing the church.

John 2:13-22

The Mishnah (an early compendium of Jewish law) describes in some detail the way the Temple’s sacrificial system functioned in the time of Jesus. In stalls right outside the great retaining wall of Herod’s Temple, pilgrims to the Temple would purchase tokens representing the sacrifices they wished to offer. The priests themselves had raised the sacrificial animals; and after the sacrifice, they sold the roasted meat to merchants in the city. Other stalls were for changing foreign currency into Jewish shekels for payment of the half-shekel Temple tax required by the governing authorities in return for not making Jews participate in official Roman religious rites. The entire system was rife with corruption, as Jewish sources tell us. John alone among the four gospels puts this story at the very first of Jesus’ ministry.