

The Biblical account of Moses receiving the Tables of the Law and a pictorial interpretation of the event by Jacopo Tintoretto

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According to the Hebrew Bible, Moses, who led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, received the Tables of the Law directly from the Lord, God Yahweh, on Mount Sinai. During Moses's absence on the mountain his brother, Aaron, fashioned a golden calf for the people to worship. When Moses descended from the mountain and witnessed the people's idolatrous debauch, he smashed the Tables of the Law in anger. This scene has been depicted by various artists, from among which the version by Jacopo Tintoretto, *Moses Receiving the Tables of the Law*, is chosen for discussion. Tintoretto's painting not only depicts the narrative, but also contrasts the transcendence of the written law and the visual symbol system of the idolaters, respectively in the upper and lower zones of the painting.

Key words: Moses, Tables of the Law, Tintoretto's *Moses Receiving the Tables of the Law*

Die Bybelse weergawe van Moses wat die Tafels van die Wet ontvang en die visuele voorstelling daarvan in 'n skildery deur Jacopo Tintoretto

Volgens die Ou Testament het Moses, wat die Jode uit Egipte gelei het, die Tafels van die Wet direk van die Here, die God Yahweh, op die Berg Sinaï ontvang. Gedurende Moses se afwesigheid op die berg het sy broer, Aaron, 'n goue kalf geskep vir die mense om te dien. Toe Moses van die berg afgekomen en die volk se afgodsfees aanskou, het hy die Tafels van die Wet in woede stukkend gegooi. Hierdie toneel is deur verskeie kunstenaars uitgebeeld, onder wie die weergawe van Tintoretto, *Moses ontvang die Tafels van die Wet*, vir bespreking gekies is. Tintoretto se skildery stel nie net die verhaal voor nie, maar verbeeld ook die transendensie van die geskrewe wet teenoor die visuele simboolstelsel van die afgodedienaars, respektiewelik in die boonste en onderste gedeelte van die skildery.

Sleutelwoorde: Moses, Tafels van die Wet, Tintoretto se *Moses ontvang die Tafels van die Wet*

According to the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) Moses (assumed to have lived 1391-1271 BCE), who led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, received the stone tables inscribed with the Law [*Torah*], generally referred to as the Ten Commandments,¹ directly from the Lord, God Yahweh, on Mount Sinai (Exodus 31:18). This happened at a time during the exodus when the people wandering in the desert were informed about what Yahweh expected of them.²

Laws engraved on stone predated the time of Moses. The most memorable are the laws codified by Hammurabi, King of Babylonia (1792-50 BCE), carved on a stele, which was found in 1852 by French archaeologists at Sushan.³ This city, situated some 300 km east of Babylon, was the capital of ancient Elam, in which events that took place in the time of Daniel, Nehemiah, Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) are recorded in the Bible. It is indeed possible that the Hebrew people had knowledge of Hammurabi's Code. Though their culture and religion were unique, they were not completely isolated from influences in the Eastern Mediterranean. Not surprisingly, there are similarities between the Mosaic law and the Code of Hammurabi; however, there are also marked differences between the two sets of law.⁴

The Mosaic laws, or Ten Commandments, are formulated in two books of the Bible: Exodus 20: 2-17 and Deuteronomy 5: 6-21. Historically the Bible version of how they originated involve supernatural events. According to Exodus 24: 12 Moses was first summoned by Yahweh to ascend Mount Sinai to receive "tables of stone, and a law, and commandments". These were "the work of God" (Exodus 32: 16), in the form of "two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God" (Exodus 31: 18) "on both their sides" (Exodus 32: 15).⁵

According to Hebrew belief Yahweh initially inscribed the Ten Commandments on two stone tables, which Moses received on behalf of the wandering people who had left Egypt (Exodus 20: 2-17).

The Biblical description relates that on the mountain, before returning to the people, Yahweh had told Moses of his followers' pagan debauch. Yahweh wanted to turn his wrath against them, but Moses pleaded with Him not to do so. Descending after a period of time from the mountain with these two tables, Moses, beheld the transgression of the people celebrating a golden calf⁶ – an idol that was created by Aaron,⁷ his brother, in his absence. This sight caused Moses to cast the tables “out of his hands and break them” (Exodus 32: 19) in anger.

The wayward people's transgression of the relevant commandments (Exodus 4-5) that Moses was bringing to them (after the idolatrous event)⁸ reads as follows in a modern translation:

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The reason for the wandering people's request to Aaron, for an idol was that they were not sure of what had become of their leader on Mount Sinai. Upon his return, standing at the camp gate, Moses saw that the people were dancing around a golden calf, disgracing themselves in the practice of idolatry. This sight caused him to smash the tables in anger because Aaron had caused the people to degrade themselves to the level of their pagan enemies.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tables of the testimony in his hands he did not know that the skin of his face shone because Jahweh had communicated with him. When Aaron and all the people of Israel saw him thus transformed they were afraid to approach him. But Moses called to them and Aaron and the leaders of the congregation returned to him. Aaron explained to Moses that the people brought their golden jewellery to him to be melted down in order to cast the calf. He then erected an altar before the calf, declaring the next day to be a feast of the Lord. When the people saw the precious golden artefact they rejoiced and praised it as the god that brought them out of Egypt.

It is told that Moses proceeded to ground the calf fine, mix the powder with water and forced the people to drink the poisonous mix. He then asked those men who were on the Lord Yahweh's side to gather about him, and instructed them to go through the camp, putting to the sword all the unrepentant transgressors. About three thousand men were killed. After the slaughter Moses called upon his loyal followers to consecrate themselves to the Lord, that He might bestow His blessing upon them.

Deuteronomy 5: 6-20 states that after the revelation at Sinai the Ten Commandments were re-issued for the sake of the generation born wandering in the desert, prior to their entry to the promised land of Canaan. Moses was ordered by Yahweh to engrave two tables of stone resembling the first that he had smashed. On these he wrote the laws, identical to what had been written on the original tables (Deut. 34: 1-4). The new tables were designated “the two tables of the testimony” (Deut. 34: 29). According to I Kings 8: 9, Moses put them into the Ark at Horeb, but when the Solomonic Temple was dedicated they were placed in the Ark of the Covenant.⁹

The *Aggadah*, a primary component of Rabbinic tradition, attests that there is not a misfortune that Israel had suffered which is not attributed to the calf. Consequently: “The High

Priest would not enter the Holy of Holies wearing any item of gold, lest it recall the Golden Calf.”¹⁰

A depiction of the Biblical narrative by Jacopo Robusti, called Il Tintoretto (1518-94)

There are many depictions of Moses with the tables of the law. The most famous is Michelangelo's (1475-1564) larger than lifesize sculpture of *Moses* (1513-16),¹¹ showing the seated figure with the Tables of the Law held under his right arm, but glaring in the opposite direction (*a sinistra*) where the viewer supposedly knows that the golden calf is being celebrated. Also famous is the portrayal of *Moses Smashing the Tables of the Law* (1659)¹² by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-69) that shows the lawgiver holding the tables written by God above his head, ready to hurl them down in anger when he witnessed the idolatry of his followers. Other portrayals, among which that of Marc Chagall (1887-1985), entitled *Moses and the Tables of the Law* (1966),¹³ reveal only one incident of the Biblical narrative. A survey of well-known representations from early times to the present, including those by Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455),¹⁴ and Raphael Sanzio (1483-1520),¹⁵ confirm the judgment of the present author that the composition by Tintoretto (1561) is the supreme example of an integrated visualization of the Bible narrative (figure 1).

Tintoretto's representation is not merely an episodic illustration of Moses receiving the tables of the law from Yahweh on Mount Sinai while the Jews below prepare to elevate the sculpted idol in the form of a calf for festive veneration, but is a complicated and meaningful work of art on various levels. It includes, in a total vertical composition, reference to both Moses and the golden calf according to the Biblical description. While waiting for Moses to return from the mountain where he went to receive guidance from Yahweh, the people became anxious and pleaded with Aaron to make them a god to go before them and lead them. Forgetful of the commandment forbidding the worship of a sculpted idol, the Hebrew people engaged in the preparation of a heathen rite are represented in stark contrast to Moses on the mountain, surrounded by angels, his body transfigured by divine light into an exalted figure.¹⁶

First of all, it is important to note that Tintoretto contextualized the above mentioned painting in the Gothic church of the Madonna dell Orto in Venice. Its brick facade is transitional from Romanesque to Gothic and from Gothic to Renaissance. The interior, consisting of a nave with two aisles, contains numerous works of art, also other paintings by Tintoretto, who lived nearby (number 3399 on Fondamenta dei Mori) and was buried there, in an apsidal chapel.

The format of the painting shows the composition divided into two interlinking parts. The upper or heavenly zone is fitted into a Gothic arch format that echoes the Gothic arched windows of the church building. It directs the viewer's attention upwards to the clouds and moving figures representing angels (without wings), where the figure of Moses is placed in a central position, looking heavenward with his arms outstretched above his head in a gesture that resembles the ancient posture of praying. The tables of the law are placed on a cloud opposite Moses. It is held in place by the left hand of a bearded figure facing exactly into the centre of a blaze of light, and who, with his right hand touches the horseshoe, parabola-like shape into which the burst of light fits as a small circle, surrounded by a larger circle that contains the light. With his left hand he places the stone tablet in the form of an arched artifact on a cloud where it is kept in position by the angel opposite the Moses figure.



Figure 1
Jacopo Robusti, called Il Tintoretto (1518-95), Moses Receiving the Tables of the Law,
1561, oil on canvas, 135 x 59 cm, Madonna dell Orto, Venice (free internet).

The lower or earthly zone is fitted into a square format containing a rocky background landscape and human figures. The foreground activity on the earthly or human level is concerned with preparation for the casting of the precious golden calf. The women are helping each other to remove their earrings and gold jewellery that are collected in baskets, while four muscular men carry a life-sized clay model of the calf through the camp to the altar. Aaron, who oversees the fashioning of the idol, is seated in the right foreground, giving instructions to the craftsman Belzaleel, with the compasses, and his assistant Oholiab.

The tables of the law are compositionally placed vertically above the golden calf to emphasize the dissimilarity of worship. The written law is contrasted with the sensuous idol of a pre-literate people, represented by Tintoretto in contemporary Venetian dress and opulence. The correspondences are meaningful: that between the tables of the law and the head of the calf on the vertical middle line of the painting as well as the fact that the work is placed in the choir of the church of the Madonna dell'Orto. Both the setting in the picture and in the church is meaningful to emphasise the wisdom of the written law in contrast to the folly of adoring the artefact in the form of an inanimate, senseless beast.

What is represented in the upper zone of Tintoretto's painting is transcendental and invisible to the earthly group who are surrounding the visible, but lifeless image of a calf. In the upper and lower zones the main contrast is between the presence of the unseen, transcendental God who manifests his presence by reflecting divine light onto Moses, and the sculpted calf as an inanimate, tangible artifact that has no life of its own, only the deceptive brilliance of gold. In the upper zone the tablet is covered with engraved letters that represent the Ten Commandments, the sacred and eternal laws, or Torah, that Moses is receiving directly from Jahweh. Moses transcends pagan idolatry because the written word is an advanced invention of the human mind.¹⁷ In the lower zone Aaron's followers indulge in a visual culture manifested in the glitter of a golden object that represents an emulation of pagan culture. Moses's figure is exalted by divine light while the figures of Aaron's followers are clad in rich garments, representing a sensuous and materialistic culture. Moses has advanced to the presence of the living God where his body is dematerialized by sacred light. In contrast, the earth-bound Israelites that surround the calf are unenlightened and have not been taught to read the abstract signs that comprise writing, carved into stone, the meaning of which is not only totally different but also more meaningfully lasting than a golden sculpture resembling a calf.

Conclusion: the contrast between word and image

The Biblical narrative of Moses receiving the written tables of the law while Aaron and his followers fashion a glittering image of a calf provides a stark contrast between the "fundamental incommensurability between image and word".¹⁸ Moses transcends pagan idolatry because the written law is an advanced invention of the human mind intended to change the natural inclination of a pre-literate people whose religion requires material manifestations of divinities. While the written word is visual, its meaning is abstract, in contrast to the purely sensual and emotional impact of the image which requires no abstract cognition.

In a sense, "word versus image" is the very essence of the difference between hominid and homo sapiens, that is the difference between primitive and complex thinking. These are two distinct stages in the evolution of intelligence. Image or visual thinking is the least abstract mode of thinking because one creates images only with regard to perceptual or imaginary entities of first order of abstraction. This was the case for hundreds of millions of years since the formation

of fish and before, until about a million years or so, when humans have developed language, the only species who do have done so. All the other animals have different kinds codes based on vision, smell etc, but not languages, which is a symbol system.

The written law and idea of monotheism as Moses presented it was much too abstract for the Hebrew people of thousands of years ago. His followers in the desert needed some concrete and nature-based deity such as the golden calf that they could understand. They did not worship it as such. Rather, the golden calf as object, was a substitute or surrogate for the deity. It was an not solely an object, but an intermediate being: between god and object.¹⁹ However, by introducing a set of written laws Moses initiated a transcendental approach to monotheistic worship, independent from visual earthly gods and the sensuality of artefacts representing them.

The theme of Tintoretto's *Moses Receiving the Table of the Law* is the existence of opposites that do not blend in reality: the metaphysical and the sensory experience of the world; the world of ideas and the literal interpretation of events; the abstract and the concrete; the spiritual and the earthly. In his representation, however, he demonstrated his compositional mastery by blending these unresolved opposites.

Notes

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| 1 | For the text and a discussion of the Ten Commandments, see Bowker (1997: 962) and Unger (1966: 256-7). | 8 | The guilt of the Israelites who worshipped the golden calf during the exodus was certainly not a case of retrospective guilt, because the worship of Yahweh excluded idolatry. In actual fact, in their oral culture the commandment against idolatry was know to the Israelites, since the Ten Commandments actually preceded Moses. The Bible gives examples of various of the commandments being kept before the time of Moses. For example, in Genesis 35: 2-3 Jacob warned the people: "Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean...". Jacob obviously knew that Yahweh forbade idolatry. |
| 2 | All the Biblical quotations are from the <i>New English Translation of the Bible</i> . | 9 | See: http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=8&letter=T#ixzz1J9WZ3XTg . |
| 3 | The stele inscribed with the Code of Hammurabu was discovered at Susa in 1901 and is now in the Louvre Museum, Paris. It is in the form of a round-top stele more than two metres high and contains 282 laws. On the upper part Hammurabi is depicted in relief standing before the seated sun-god Shamash, the god of justice. | 10 | Bowker (1997: 382). |
| 4 | For a comparison between the Code of Hammurabi and the Ten Commandments, see http://www.specialityinterests.net/codexhammurabi.htm . | 11 | Rembrandt van Rijn, <i>Moses Smashing the Tables of the Law</i> (1659), Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. |
| 5 | According to Wecker (2010: 1), "Biblical and rabbinic texts seem to have avoided the question of the shape of the tablets for the most part". | 12 | Michelangelo, <i>Moses</i> (1513-16), Tomb of Julius II, San Pietro in Vincoli. Rome. |
| 6 | The golden calf fashioned by Aaron as an idol was presumably a male or bull calf. The bull as a male deity was certainly familiar to the Israelites since many of their neighbours worshiped gods in this form. In addition to the Egyptian bull god, the Israelites would have recognised the Canaanite Baal who was worshiped in the form of a bull. | 13 | Marc Chagall, <i>Moses with the Table of the Law</i> (1956), Marc Chagall Inauguration Catalogue, 1973, Musee National Biblioteque. |
| 7 | For information about Aaron's career, see Browning (1997). | 14 | Lorenzo Ghiberti, Baptistery door (1425-52), Florence. |
| | | 15 | Raphael, <i>Moses Receiving the Tables of the Law</i> (1518-19), Palazzi Pontifici, Vatican, Rome. |

- 16 “Exalted figure” is a phrase used by the author to describe the transformation of a human body into a schematic figure that is not detailed anatomically, but is represented as transformed by divine intervention. See Maré (2010) and also Maré (2011).
- 17 According to David Abram (1996: 41) the ancient Hebrews eventually forsook their former corporeal religiosity and its responsiveness to the natural environment by shifting to a purely phonetic set of alphabetic signs that allowed an epistemological independence from earthly sensuality: “To actively participate with the visible forms of nature came to be considered *idolatry* by the ancient Hebrews; *it was not the land but the written letters that now carried ancestral wisdom*”(italics in the original).
- 18 This phrase is borrowed from Holly (1990: 372).
- 19 Ideas based on an e-mail communication from Prof. Tsion Avital.

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