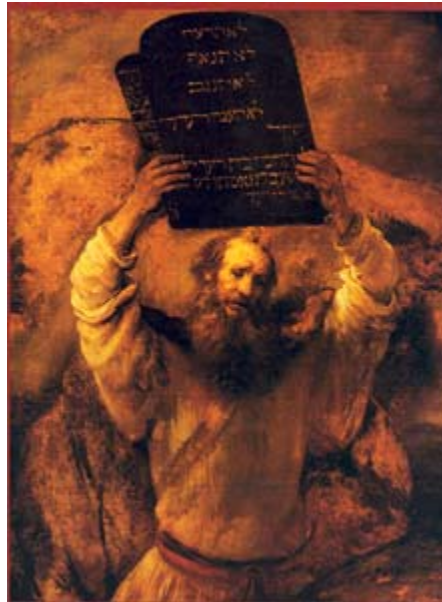


Re-creating the Tablets of the Law

By Alan R. Millard



“Inscribed with the finger of God,” the two stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments have created a dramatic focus for many images of Moses descending Mount Sinai, including Rembrandt van Rijn’s 17th-century rendition of “Moses Breaking the Tables of the Law.” Here Moses holds above his head two large black slabs, one partly hiding the other. The front slab is inscribed with the last five commandments, in square Hebrew letters, according to the traditional biblical text.

These slabs are reminiscent of engraved stone tablets, with the commandments in Hebrew, that hung in Dutch churches after the Reformation. Similar tablets were attached to the walls of British churches, but the texts were often in English. Although Rembrandt and other artists have created easily readable images, archaeological evidence suggests the tablets envisioned in the biblical text would have had a strikingly different appearance.

How should we imagine the Tablets of the Law that Moses twice brought down from the mountain?

Whether the story is legend or history is irrelevant to this question. However we, are to appreciate the story, we should try to understand these tablets in the context of their time.

In Cecil B. de Mille’s film “The Ten Commandments,” an arrow of fire circles and then strikes the rock beside Moses, searing ancient Hebrew letters into the stone. Then the fire gouges out the rock and cuts it into two slabs. Moses marches down the mountain, carrying the slabs in his hands, to relay God’s laws to the Israelites.

Even allowing for the fact that Moses remained fit and healthy until his death at 120 (see Deuteronomy 34:7), the image of him striding down a rough, steep mountainside with two slabs the size of paving-stones is rather ridiculous!

But de Mille was simply drawing on a long tradition of Christian art that shows Moses carrying large stones in his hands. These painters probably made the stones so large to provide enough space to write the Hebrew words legibly.



Giraudon/Art Resource

“Listen Israel,” cry the tablets of Moses, as depicted by the French artist Philippe de Champaigne in his 1663 painting of “Moses Presenting the Tables of the Law.” Fortunately the people of Israel—or at least those of France—will have no trouble “hearing” this message, conveniently translated into French and written in large type on large slabs.

Curiously, Bible scholars have intensively studied the Ten Commandments, but few have paid any attention to the nature of the tablets on which they were written. Those who have, realize that they could not have been big and heavy, because Moses would not have been able to carry them. The eminent modern Italian Jewish scholar, Umberto Cassuto, estimated their size based on the size of the acacia-wood ark or chest in which the second set of tablets was placed (Exodus 25:10–16 and 40:20). (The first set was of course broken when Moses, aghast at seeing his people worshiping the golden calf, threw the tablets down, smashing them to pieces.) According to Cassuto, they were about 12 inches high.¹

Recently, another eminent Italian scholar, Giovanni Garbini, has concluded, wrongly I believe, that the Tablets of the Law envisaged in the text were small clay tablets similar to numerous cuneiform tablets discovered in excavations at many ancient Near Eastern sites. Garbini takes his cue from the fact that the Tablets of the Law were written on both sides and were apparently easily broken (Exodus 32:15–19): “I was struck,” he writes, “by the detail that the tables of the law were written on two surfaces...and were broken so easily by Moses. Although it is said that they were of stone, these tablets seem to have been the small terracotta [i.e., baked-clay] tablets on which the Babylonians wrote.”²

Later, Garbini considers the possibility that they were made of stone, but he rejects this:

“The Bible says that they [the tablets] were made of stone [Exodus 31:18, 34:1–4]; but it also says that they were inscribed on both sides (and were therefore flat) and that Moses had been holding them in his hands [Exodus 32:15], so they were not too big. There were no tablets of this kind in the ancient Near East; there were no fairly small stone tablets, written on both sides and containing a fairly long text like that which Moses was preparing to present, namely the Decalogue. However, if Moses’ tablets had been made of terracotta instead of stone, they would have been two perfect examples of Babylonian tablets: manageable, flat, inscribed on both sides, covered with very fine writing and therefore capable of containing a fairly long text, easy to break if they were thrown to the ground. It is precisely this feature which shows how the biblical author, though speaking of stone tablets, had in mind the terracotta tablets used for cuneiform writing. But that means the whole story was thought up in Babylon, the land of exile...”³

Garbini introduced this matter as a starting point for his attempt to prove that the history of Israel was written late—after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., when the Jews were in exile in Babylonia, or even later, as a theological creation. According to Garbini, “cuneiform tablets had disappeared from Egypt and Palestine by the end of the 13th century B.C. (they were only reintroduced by the Assyrian administration [in the eighth century]), [so] the story of the golden calf, written by someone who was familiar with such tablets, must have been composed by an author who was or had been in Babylon.”⁴

Garbini is wrong, however, on several counts. First, cuneiform tablets were known in Israel under Assyrian rule (about 720–640 B.C.), as Garbini acknowledges. Two were excavated at Gezer and were actually written there, so, logically, the narrative could go back to that time.⁵ More importantly, cuneiform tablets were a major means of communication throughout the Levant in the Late Bronze Age (about 1500–1200

B.C.), and all the evidence points to their use continuing right up to the years of disruption and destruction soon after 1200 B.C., at the very time that Israel was emerging in Canaan. Excavations at Tel Aphek, which controlled the road from Egypt to Syria behind the marshy land around modern Tel Aviv, yielded fragments of a few cuneiform tablets from a scribal school, as well as one complete tablet. This tablet is a letter sent late in the 13th century B.C. from a governor of Ugarit, far to the north of Canaan, to an Egyptian official.⁶ Why it lay in Aphek we cannot tell. Perhaps the Egyptian resided there for a time, or perhaps the messenger was waylaid there. But that discovery, with a few others, is enough to prove that cuneiform writing on clay tablets was a writing system known in Canaan throughout the 13th century B.C. We also have a few examples of texts written in the cuneiform alphabet of Ugarit, or a close relative of it, from the same period from other sites in Canaan—Tell Taanach, Beth Shemesh and Mount Tabor.



Moshe Kochavi

Ancient purchase order. This 13th-century B.C. tablet found at Tel Aphek, east of Tel Aviv, is inscribed with a cuneiform letter from Takuhlina, a governor of Ugarit, to the Egyptian governor in Canaan. The letter includes a request to buy wheat.

Some scholars have suggested that Moses would have carried similar tablets down Mount Sinai. The small clay tablets clearly fit the biblical description of small, hand-held slabs, and they were common at the time of Moses. But the production of cuneiform tablets is highly involved: First, it requires a source of good quality, soft clay that can be shaped into tablets. Then the characters are pressed into the clay. The biblical text makes no mention of a source of clay, and, more importantly, the Bible tells us the tablets were made of stone, not clay (Exodus 31:18, 34:1–4).

No date calculated for Moses' career and related events is later than 1200 B.C., so even if the tablets Moses carried down Mount Sinai were clay tablets with cuneiform writing, that would not lead us to conclude that the story was written during or after the Babylonian Exile. Whatever one may think about the reality of Moses, or the antiquity of the narrative of the law-giving, there are no grounds here for asserting that "the whole story was thought up in Babylon, the land of exile."

More important for our purposes, however, the suggestion that the Tablets of the Law were written in cuneiform script on clay tablets is implausible. On the most practical level, that would require a source of suitable clay on the mountain top or would require that Moses took a supply with him. Linguistically it is awkward, too, for the texts repeatedly specify "tablets of stone"; indeed, Moses was told to cut the second set from the rock (Exodus 34:1). It seems a bit farfetched to suppose that clay tablets were baked on Mount Sinai to turn them into the stone-like terra-cotta of which Garbini writes! (Terra-cotta specifically means baked earth.)

Furthermore, the phrase “tablets of stone” accurately describes a writing material current in the Late Bronze Age, despite Garbini’s pronouncement that “there were no tablets of this kind in the ancient Near East.” In fact, the land of Egypt has yielded hundreds of inscribed stone flakes.

It is true that Egyptian scribes usually wrote on papyrus, the paper made from stems of a reed that grows in the Nile. White and supple when fresh, its fairly smooth surface easily takes black or red ink. Like good writing paper today, however, papyrus was costly, so people scribbled short notes and matters of no lasting value on broken pottery (ostraca, singular ostrakon). Most ancient pots were made mostly of unglazed earthenware—truly tetra-cotta—that was cheap, easily broken and easily replaced. Broken pieces of pottery littered ancient towns and villages, so that they served as readily available scrap paper.

If there were no suitable potsherds, scribes working near the cliffs at the edge of the Nile valley could use flakes of stone. Stone ostraca come from many periods in Egyptian history. Accidents of survival and discovery have given us especially large numbers from the Late Bronze Age. One particularly interesting collection comes from the village of the workmen who created the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings, a place now called Deir el-Medina. These stone ostraca give a lively picture of human society and behavior in the 14th, 13th and 12th centuries B.C.⁷ In addition to notes and messages of all sorts, the ostraca include many scribal exercises. Why spend money on papyrus sheets when pupils can practice writing on discarded potsherds or stone flakes? Modern scholars are grateful for that economical attitude, because ostraca survived longer than papyrus manuscripts, which rotted in damp soil.

School exercises often required students to copy works of literature. Their copies are now a valuable source of Egyptian literary texts. Sometime between 1300 and 1150 B.C., a student copied the story of Sinuhe onto a stone flake. Sinuhe was an Egyptian courtier who fled after a change of ruler and lived in Canaan for many years, adopting local habits. His story is set in about 1950 B.C., the so-called “Patriarchal Age” of Genesis.⁸ The Sinuhe Ostrakon, now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, is a giant.⁹ It is nearly three feet (88.5 centimeters) high and over a foot (31.5 centimeters) wide, with 70 lines on the front and 60 on the back.



The Ashmolean Museum

Antique scrap paper. Broken pieces of pottery and flakes of limestone were often used for notes, sketches and inconsequential writings in ancient Egypt, where sheets of papyrus were too valuable to waste. Sometimes students used larger flakes as copy books. On this one now in the Ashmolean Museum, a diligent pupil copied the story of Sinuhe, an Egyptian official who accidentally hears of the probable assassination of his king and, fearful because he knows this secret, flees to Asia. The account of his travels is a major source of information about the 20th century B.C.

Most ostraca made from stone flakes are much smaller, however, convenient to hold with one hand while writing on them with the other. An ostrakon of that size could carry twenty or more lines of writing on its two sides, so two could easily hold the text of the Ten Commandments.

Scribes and their pupils in Egypt wrote on these ostraca with reed pens and ink when working in their usual surroundings. Egyptian clerks who traveled with military campaigns or other expeditions, however, often scratched their names and other information on cliffs and rocks along their routes. At special points, formal monuments were chiselled in the rocks to mark the reach of Egyptian power. These monuments usually display the pharaoh with his titles and deeds in hieroglyphs, or they simply bear an inscription.

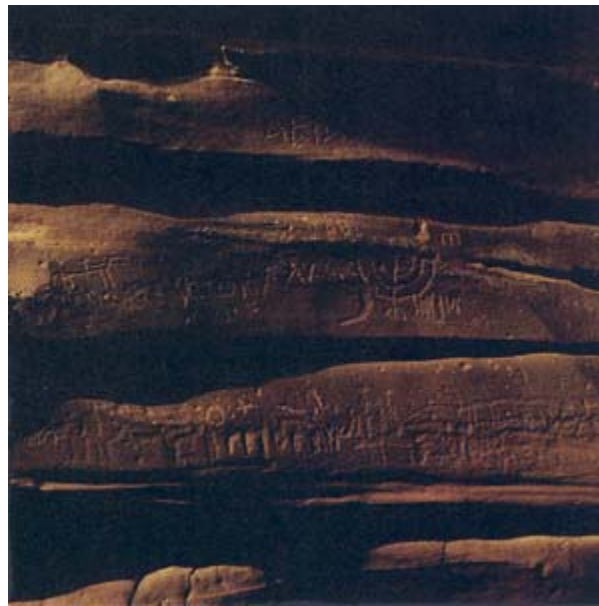


The Oriental Institute/University of Chicago

Antique scrap paper. This small stone flake was inscribed by ancients working in the royal tombs at Deir el-Medina in Egypt.

The common, smaller stone flakes, easily inscribed on both sides and comfortably held in one hand, match the biblical description of the Tablets of the Law.

Writings scratched on rocks, as well as on movable stone objects, have also been found in Sinai. Examples dated to about 1600 B.C. were discovered in turquoise mines at a site called Serabit el-Khadem.⁹ While Egyptian officials wrote on the stones in the Egyptian language, Semitic, perhaps Canaanite, workmen here carved their famous inscriptions in so-called Proto-Sinaitic script, an early form of the alphabet.¹⁰



Werner Braun

The canyon of inscriptions at Wadi Umm Sideira in the Sinai displays a concentration of inscriptions carved into stone by Nabatean, Jewish and other travelers who crossed through the valley in antiquity.

Inscriptions on rock have a long history in this region, extending back to the 16th century B.C., when Semitic workmen at the turquoise mines of Serabit el-Khadem wrote inscriptions in Proto-Sinaitic, the earliest form of the alphabet, on the mine walls.

With this knowledge, we can imagine Moses going up the mountain a second time: He had to cut a pair of stone tablets from the rock, the next tells us (Exodus 34:1), perhaps detaching two suitable flakes. While on the mountain, he had to write the Law. Since the first tablets were explicitly “engraved” with commandments (Exodus 32:16), we may assume Moses engraved the second set too, although the text simply speaks of writing. Unless he carried a scribe’s kit of pens and ink, his writing implements would be nothing but sharp stones to scratch the words on the tablets. In short, inscribed stone flakes fit the description of the Tablets of the Law very well, certainly better than clay tablets of Babylonian style and far better than the large slabs of European paintings.

Stone flakes with the commandments scratched on them in archaic Hebrew or some Canaanite language, in an early alphabetic script, appear to be what we should imagine Moses carrying. At whatever date the narratives of Exodus and Deuteronomy came into existence, their contents may well reflect actual circumstances and activities of the Late Bronze Age.

Footnotes:

a. See “Mining the History of the Alphabet at Serabit el-Khadem,” sidebar to “Frank Moore Cross—An Interview: Part III: How the Alphabet Democratized Civilization,” **BR** 08:06.

Endnotes:

1. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), p. 418.
2. Giovanni Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1988), p. xiii.
3. Garbini, *History and Ideology*, pp. 104, 105.
4. Garbini, *History and Ideology*, p. xiii.
5. See Bob Becking, *The Fall of Samaria: An Historical and Archaeological Study* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 114–118.
6. David I. Owen, “An Akkadian Letter from Ugarit at Tel Aphek,” *Tel Aviv* 8 (1981), pp. 1–17; letter in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, January/February 1984, pp. 81, 84 (Queries & Comments, *BAR* 10:01).
7. Jaroslav Cerny, “Egypt: From the Death of Ramesses III to the End of the Twenty-first Dynasty,” in *Cambridge Ancient History* 3rd ed., vol. 2, part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 606–657, especially section III, “Workmen of the King’s Tomb,” pp. 620–626; Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant: The Life and Times of Ramesses II* (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 1982), pp. 185–205.
8. Trans. by John A. Wilson in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 18–22.
9. John W.B. Barns, *The Ashmolean Ostrakon of Sinuhe* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952).
10. Benjamin Sass, *The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millennium B.C.* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1988).

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Millard, Alan R.. “Re-creating the Tablets of the Law.” *Bible Review*, Feb 1994.
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