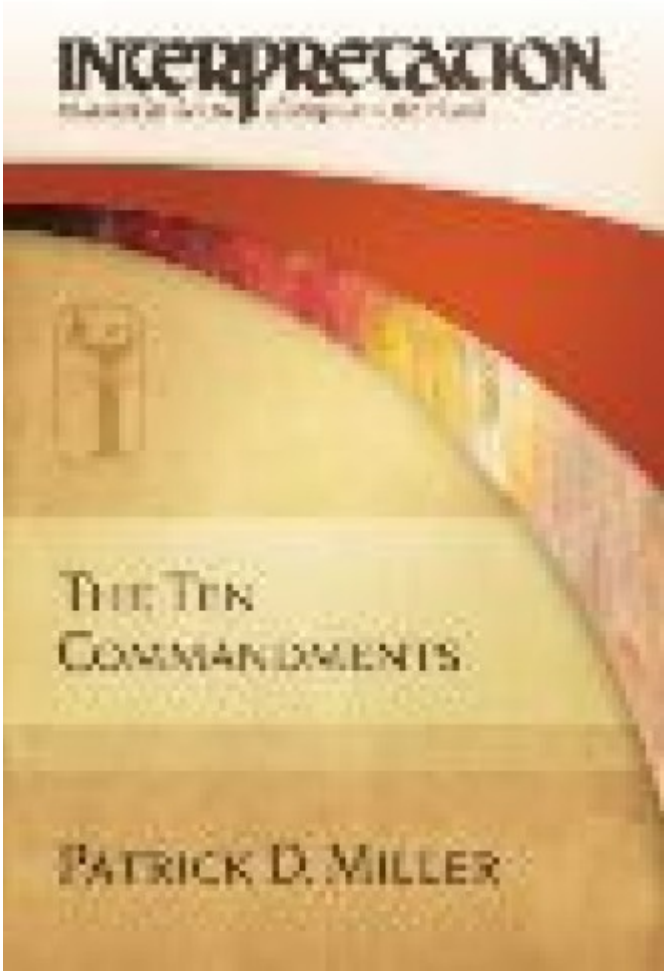
Command performance

by Walter Brueggemann in the February 23, 2010 issue

In Review



The Ten Commandments (Interpretation series)

Patrick D. Miller
Westminster John Knox

When people get around to prioritizing Old Testament scholars of this generation who have made significant contributions to textual interpretation for the guild and for the church, it is likely that Patrick Miller's name, like that of Abu ben Adam, will

lead all the rest. Miller offers a rare combination of historical critical acumen of the sharpest kind and an acute hermeneutical capacity. Beyond that, even rarer, he works with an anchor of theological sensibility that keeps his focus on the main issues.

All of these capacities are on exhibit in *The Ten Commandments*, as they are in his earlier scholarship-defining book, *They Cried to the Lord* (Fortress, 1994). The present volume, Miller's crowning achievement as he nears the end of his research career, is sure to be the state-of-the-art book on the Decalogue for a very long time to come. Miller's wise and patient exposition of the commandments will be enormously important as society and the church are pressed back to basics about ethical thought and ethical conduct.

The book is organized in a straightforward way, with nine chapters on the Ten Commandments—nine instead of ten chapters because Miller combines his discussion of the first two commandments. These extended expositions are framed by an introduction and an illuminating appendix. In the introduction, Miller explains how he will treat each commandment in the largest imaginable scope. He sees that the commandments cannot be understood as isolated absolutes but instead are divine utterances that open out into wide and thick dynamic trajectories that provide an ongoing, processive act of interpretation. In the appendix Miller gathers the richness of his study for some guiding principles:

> This is not any text; it is not pulled out of the hat; it is not an obscure text. Rather, by context, tradition, and content the Ten Commandments are a *foundational* text, if there are such things. . . . Divine commands—or at least *these* divine commands—are a more foundational and normative way of connecting between the human and the divine vis-à-vis the moral life.

The tenor of Miller's argument is to show that these commands are not simply imposed on Israel, but are offered with divine persuasiveness and invite Israel's assent. That assent is given at Sinai and in the ongoing liturgical framing of the commandments over the generations. The commandments are situated in a shaping narrative and are community-based, and therefore are aimed at the common good.

In our anxious society, it is tempting to situate the commandments in an absolute moralism that misrepresents the tone and character of biblical faith and the relationship between the One who commands and the ones who are commanded.

Miller is at his best in modeling another mode of reflection wherein the receiving community takes on responsibility that requires engaged interpretation. In my judgment, there is an enormous need to make sense of this ethical tradition apart from loud, one-dimensional renderings, and Miller serves that end well.

The heart of the book is Miller's exposition of each of the commandments. He takes the trouble to trace out all of the possible uses of and allusions to the commandments in the biblical text, thus demonstrating the process of an interpretive trajectory. In a very broad sense, his approach is canonical, though he has no need, as do some Christian canon critics, to bring it all to Christ. His exposition follows where the text itself leads, so that his is a model of thoughtful, generative interpretation.

We may take the third commandment in some detail as an exemplar of how Miller proceeds with each one. I focus on the third commandment both because it has not been front and center in contemporary attention and because Miller finds so many remarkable implications in the commandment that it evokes from him nearly 50 pages of text.

Miller articulates the third commandment—"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name"—in relation to the first two, concerning the exclusiveness of YHWH; to the fourth, concerning in turn the use of the divine name and the use of the Sabbath day; and to the ninth, on truth telling. He offers a riff on the term for "wrongful use," showing that the Hebrew word has a range of possible meanings: "useless, to no effect, deceitful, unreal." This analysis is matched by an exhaustive exploration of "the name of the Lord," which signifies the power and presence of YHWH in worship that is sharply limited to this one God. Miller finds this worship practice exhibited in the familiar Aaronic blessing that reiterates the name and its capacity for blessing (Num. 6:22–26).

From that basis he considers the way in which oaths in God's name concern reliable truth telling and promise keeping, making particular reference to Rahab's oath (Josh. 2:12–21) and to the agreement between David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:12–17). Miller thus sees how the commandments operate in concrete narrative cases; he makes narrative connections that would not occur to someone who lacks his patient discernment. Eventually Miller concludes that these oaths in the name of the Lord are characteristically concerned with the neighbor and the neighbor's well-being.

The negative counterpoint to that divine intention for the neighbor is exhibited when the name of the Lord is harnessed to political power and purpose:

> Political use of the name of God is thus an important sphere of its use and misuse. The name of God marks off the one who claims the congregation's ultimate loyalty. It is not Caesar but the Lord whom this community serves. The one name relativizes all other names.

Before he finishes with this commandment, Miller observes that Christian invocation of the name of Jesus is completely parallel to this usage.

It is evident from this quick scan of his exposition that the force of this commandment pervades the entire text, even as it permeates every sphere and aspect of the life of Israel. This single exposition is a remarkable offer of biblical theology that is urgent in our society, where "truthiness" has largely expelled truth telling in public practice. Israel has known since Sinai that "without God everything is possible." But Israel has also known that when the divine name is at the center of lived reality, with focus at the center and limit at the edge, the neighborly dimension of utterance becomes inescapable. What a gift to see Miller replicate this wise, patient discernment with each of the commandments.

This remarkable book situates Miller in the weighty company of Luther and Calvin, both of whom placed the exposition of the commandments at the center of their theological project. Taken in sum as Miller takes them, the commandments clearly invite us to another way in the world for which there is a great hunger among us.

Miller's book merits many readings. One should read it first to get a glimpse of the large vista of interpretation that Miller offers. After that, one will return to it many times as a reference work of a most practical and concrete kind. Miller dares to suggest that obedience is a workable category even in a society of autonomy. On his final page, he returns to the ultimate center of the commandments given by the God of the Exodus—namely, divine forgiveness. "Forgiveness," he writes, "is always a divine act."