

THE EPISTLE

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This Month's Cover

In honor of the Feast of Saint Nicholas (December 6) our cover is a detail from *Saint Nicholas of Myra* by Jaroslav Čermák (1830-1878). It is oil on canvas and was completed in 1862. It is on display in the National Gallery of Art in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The full painting is large, measuring 7'x6'6", and depicts Saint Nicholas at an important event in his life, when he saved three boys' lives.

St. Nicholas (c.270-c.343) was the Bishop of Myra in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). He was noted for the strong defense of the Faith, his kindness and generosity, and his protection of children. In different countries he is honored as the patron saint of sailors, merchants, archers, repentant thieves, children, brewers, pawnbrokers, toymakers, unmarried people, and students. In most of the Mediterranean regions he is the patron saint of schoolboys and is paired with Saint Lucy of Sicily (Dec.13), the patron¹ of schoolgirls. Because of this and his legendary generosity, especially on behalf of children, he became closely associated with Christmas and gift-giving. His image ultimately morphed into that of Santa Claus (that name being a corruption of "Saint Nicholas"). He was a staunch defender of the orthodox Christian faith when the Arian heresy was at its peak. Arianism, which originated with a Libyan/Byzantine priest named Arius, denies the Trinity and teaches that Jesus is a divine being created by God, higher than the angels, but not equal to God.² At the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, Nicholas and Arius were both present. Legend has it

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¹ Some argue that this should be "matron," but in this context "patron" is generally accepted for both genders.

² Arianism should not be confused with Aryanism, the Nazi theory of the superiority of the Aryan race. In Nicholas' time, more than half of Christianity was Arian, but the heresy was eventually suppressed, and orthodox Christianity became the teaching of almost all the Church. Arianism survives today in only a few places around the world. Its strongest voice is in the Jehovah's Witnesses, who honor Arius as a hero of early Christianity.

that Nicholas punched Arius in the face in an argument during the council (not exactly what one would expect from Santa Claus).

Jaroslav Čermák was a Czech painter known primarily for his historical paintings. He is one of the most highly regarded native Czech painters, and many of his works are displayed in the National Gallery in Prague. When he was a child, he had a serious hip injury and had to spend a couple of years in bed, relatively immobile. During that time, he developed an interest in both history and drawing. He was of a wealthy titled family who were patrons of the arts, supporting both writers and painters, so they enthusiastically encouraged his interests. In 1847-48 he studied at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts under the German painter Christian Rubens. He went from Prague to Antwerp where he studied for about four more years, and then he moved to Paris in 1852. During the next few years he traveled extensively throughout Europe, spending a great deal of time in Montenegro. While he was there, he fought in the Herzegovina Rebellion and was awarded a medal for bravery by King Nicholas I. Čermák's style was strongly influenced by the work of Peter Paul Rubens.¹ Although he did a few religious paintings, most of Čermák's works were historic subjects and portraits. He died in Paris in 1878. His remains were transferred to Prague, where he is buried in the Olšany Cemetery.

Richard R. Losch+

A Word from the Editor

“Help me and I’ll help you, hurt me and I’ll hurt you” is called the Law of Reciprocity, and it is basic to human nature. Equally basic is blood vengeance—if you hurt me, I will hurt you back more than you can ever imagine. A great step forward in the enlightenment of human law was made by King Hammurabi of Babylon (1810-1750 BC). The Code of Hammurabi specified that if someone hurt you, you may hurt him back only to the degree that he hurt you—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—but no more than that. The Old Testament law was very careful about being fair and just in retribution for an offense, and it relied heavily on the principles set forth by Hammurabi 500 years earlier. The standard set forth by Jesus, however, took a huge stride

¹ Even though they share the same surname, there is no evidence of any family relationship between Čermák's first art teacher, the German Christian Rubens (1805-1875), and the Flemish Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), who influenced Čermák's later work.

forward from that. Instead of do unto others as they do unto you, he taught us to do unto others *as we would have them* do unto us. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also” (Matt. 5:38f). Mohandas Gandhi, who was a Hindu but a great admirer of Jesus, carried this out to the fullest. As the British were shooting down his people, they refused to shoot back. The result was total victory, and India expelled the British and became a free nation. Praying for an enemy often carries much greater power than striking back at him. He may still have physical power over you, but he will have no spiritual power, and as a result, usually will eventually lose his physical power as well. Ultimately, that is far more important. Sad to say, our society seems to be reverting rapidly toward the more primitive concept of “do unto others before they do unto you.” The so-called social media are a classic example of this as they become increasingly antisocial. The rudeness, vituperation, rage, and sometimes outright hatred that are exhibited in the social media are chilling. People often do not realize that while the person they are insulting may be to them just an unknown name on a digital screen, cruel words can leave permanent scars. I am convinced that there is a strong correlation between the rise of harshness in today’s world and the decrease of religious faith.

We are approaching the Christmas season, and one of the happy things about this time of year, despite its secularism and commercialism, is that there is an annual increase of joy, kindness, and thoughtfulness. This is very encouraging because it shows that there is still hope for a restoration of these virtues to our society. The sad thing is that it often seems to fade away soon after Christmas. The real message of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* is not that a miserly old grouch can find joy in the festival, but that once he has found it, it is possible for him to retain it. This is what we need to work on as Christians and as human beings. For most people, being nice does not come naturally. It’s something we have to work on and learn. For Christians, this is not just an opportunity, it is an obligation. We need to work on it by prayer and practice, focusing on the joy of our salvation. There is nothing wrong with enjoying the secular aspects of Christmas, as long as we never forget what the celebration is really all about. That alone is enough to bring about a resurgence of human decency.

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Be Wordly Wise

Apology

The word “apology” is one of those words that is misused more often than it is used correctly. An apology is not saying that you are sorry for something. It is an explanation or defense of something, particularly of something you said or did. The word comes to us from the Latin *apologia*, which in turn comes from the Greek *apologeisthai* (ἀπολογεῖσθαι), “to speak in one’s defense.” That comes from the Greek *apo* (ἀπο), “from,” and *logos* (λογος), “basic reason or spiritual principle.” Some of the great theologians in history have been known as Christian Apologists. They did not write to say that they were sorry for Christianity, but rather to explain it to unbelievers and the uneducated. Cardinal John Henry Newman’s biographic explanation of why he converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism is entitled *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (Justification of His Life). The next time someone demands an apology for something you said or did, don’t say you’re sorry (especially if you’re not), give an explanation.

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A Touch of Trivia

In 1987, Forbes published its first list of billionaires. In those days, there were only about 100 billionaires in the world. Today, because of inflation, there are over 900 just in the United States alone. Pablo Escobar, the head of the Medellin drug cartel, was included in Forbes’ list of the 100 richest men in the world. He was worth so much money that in 1984 he offered to pay off the Colombian national debt in exchange for immunity from prosecution. There is no evidence that the offer was officially accepted, and the Colombian government flatly denied that they even considered it. Notwithstanding, Colombia never bothered Escobar or his people. By 1989, Escobar was the seventh richest man in the world. To avoid any government freezing his accounts, he kept his money in cash in a series of local warehouses. At the height of his operation, he brought in over \$70 million per day. The cartel spent \$2,500 per month on rubber bands to wrap up the stacks of cash piled up in the warehouses. He lost about 10% of his cash every year to what he called “spoilage.” This spoilage came primarily from rats chewing up the piles of bills to make their nests.

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The Meaning of the Word “Hebrew”

The word Hebrew applies to a segment of the Semitic people, and it is the name of the historic language of a portion of those people. The Semites include a large population of non-Jewish peoples, among them the Arabs and Samaritans. There are several languages in the Semitic language family, including Hebrew and Arabic. An important one is Aramaic, the language of the ancient region of Aram (which includes modern Syria). Aramaic, not Hebrew, was the common language spoken in Judea in Jesus’ time.¹ It is similar to Hebrew in many ways and uses the same alphabet, but it is not the same language.

The word Hebrew can also be used as an adjective, as in “the Hebrew people.” It should not be used to apply to an individual, however. Saying “a Hebrew person,” like “a Jewish person,” is an offensive euphemism to avoid saying “a Jew.” Because of hateful anti-Semitism, some people think the word Jew is pejorative. It is not. Jews are justifiably proud of being Jews, and call themselves Jews.

The Hebrew for “Hebrew” is *I’vrit* (עִבְרִית), meaning “crossers.” It refers to Abraham and his family, the ancestors of the Hebrews, who first crossed over the River Euphrates from Mesopotamia into the land of Canaan. The largest of the tribes of the Israelites was that of Jacob’s son Judah, who was the leader of the Israelites.² At the time that the first books of the Bible were composed, the language of the people was not called Hebrew, but *Yehudit* (יהודית), “Judahite.” This comes from the name of Judah, *Yehudah* (יהודה) whence come “Jew” and “Judaism.” The Hebrews may have been few, but because of the Bible, their language and their faith have affected the entire world.

Even in Jesus’ time, Hebrew was for all practical purposes a dead language. A dead language is not one that is lost and forgotten, but rather one that is used only for very specialized purposes and is not used by the common people. For over 2,000 years, Hebrew was used

¹ There are a few small pockets of people in the Middle East who still speak Aramaic. Most of them were massacred by ISIS, who planned a genocide of all the Aramaic-speaking people. Fortunately, many survived and still speak that language as their primary tongue.

² Judah was Jacob’s fourth son, but he was his heir and the leader of the Israelites. Levi and Simeon were denied their birthrights because in a fit of rage-filled vengeance they slaughtered all the men of the city of Haran, and Reuben was denied his because he violated his father’s concubine Bilhah. This left the fourth son, Judah, with all the rights of the firstborn.

for religious purposes in Jewish worship and by scholars of the Bible and of antiquity. It was not a language of daily life. Jesus taught the people in Aramaic, not in Hebrew.¹ Even so, the language has had a great influence around the world, in that Hebrew words have become common words in many languages. For example, Amen (אמן), “Truly”), Hallelujah (הללויה, “Our Praise to God”), and Sabbath (שבת), *Shabat*, “Seventh”) are among the many Hebrew words known throughout the world. A language that was very common among eastern European Jews for centuries and is still used today in many parts of the world is Yiddish. It is a mixture primarily of Hebrew, German, and some Slavic languages, and is written in the Hebrew alphabet. The name comes from the German *Jüdisch*, “Jewish.” It has also contributed many words to other languages, such as *kvetch* (complain), *nudnik* (jerk), *tchotchke* (knickknack), *meshugah* (foolish), and *shmuck* (used sarcastically, decoration or treasure).

At the end of the 19th century, the migration of thousands of persecuted Jews to Palestine² sparked what is known as the Zionist movement, which sought to establish a legal Jewish state. One of the leaders of that movement, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858-1922), revived the Hebrew language, updated it with modern vocabulary words. He encouraged it to become the language of the new nation. That dream was realized, and with the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948, Hebrew became its official language. Once a dead language, it is now very much alive and is the daily language of millions of Jews in Israel and elsewhere around the world.

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¹ Jesus spoke Aramaic, but he almost certainly knew both Greek and Hebrew, and perhaps some Latin. When he read from Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk. 4:17ff), it would have been either in Hebrew (the original) or in Greek (the Septuagint). Greek was commonly spoken by many Jews in his time (the so-called Hellenized Jews), and it is very likely that as a child he learned Hebrew in the synagogue schools. Also, any bright child in Roman-occupied Judea and Galilee would have picked up some Latin.

² Palestine at that time was not a political entity. It was the name by which that region was known, much as we use the expression, “Middle West.” Until 1918 it was part of the Ottoman Empire, who had had pretty much abandoned it. In Roman times, it was part of the Province of Syria. The region that had once been Israel and Judea was called Syria-Palestina (Philistine Syria) by the Emperor Hadrian as an intentional insult to the Jews.

No Graven Image

The Ten Commandments were the first commandments given to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, and for all practical purposes they summarize the spirit of all 613 Commandments of the Torah.¹ They therefore carry great weight in any theological discussion. One of the most controversial of these among different religions is the law against the making of any graven image. It would seem rather simple and straightforward, but if we analyze the text carefully it opens a wide arena of debate. The fact that the Bible was not put into verses until the 13th century adds confusion to the issue, because the original texts give little indication of where breaks should be considered. For example, what we identify as the first six verses of the Ten Commandments contain four sentences as follows:

[A] Then God spoke all these words:

[B] I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

[C] You shall have no other gods before me.

[D] You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments (Ex. 20:1-6, RSV).

While all Judeo-Christian faiths and denominations revere the Ten Commandments, there are variations in the way they are counted. For example, most Protestants consider [A] to be just an introductory statement, [B] and [C] to make up the First Commandment, and [D] to be the Second, combining all coveting into one commandment, the Tenth. Catholics, Orthodox, and a few Protestant sects consider [A]

¹ Scholars debate over exactly how many commandments there are in the Torah, but the traditional count is 613. To my knowledge, no one has ever satisfactorily enumerated them. This is true even of the Ten Commandments. Different faiths disagree, for example, over whether there are two commandments against coveting (one for wife and one for property) or both are covered in one commandment. The text of the Bible was not delineated into chapters and verses until the 13th century AD, and to this day there is no universal agreement on the delineation.

to be introductory, *[B]*, *[C]* and *[D]* all to be the First Commandment, and they divide coveting into two: the Ninth about wives and the Tenth about property. In the Rabbinic tradition, on the other hand, *[A]* and *[B]* are the First Commandment,¹ and *[C]* and *[D]* the second; they also divide coveting into two.

The differences in the way these opening verses are grouped have a significant effect on their interpretation. It is commonly but wrongly believed that the Ten Commandments forbid the making of any statutory or the likeness of anything in nature. This is an incorrect interpretation. If we were to take this literally, there is almost nothing that we could manufacture in this world. If a carpenter builds a porch it must be different from any other porch in the world, and he could never again build another porch like it, because that would be the likeness of something that is “in the heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth.” A potter could never make a second vase like one he has already made, because it would be a likeness of something that already exists. That sounds silly when we think about it, but it is what a literal interpretation of that Commandment would mean. It all hangs on the emphasis and the original intent of the Commandment. If we look at it as Judaism does, combining *[C]* and *[D]* into a single Commandment, we can see that the intent is not to forbid the making of images, but to forbid worshipping any images that we have made. We must recognize, of course, the danger of becoming so attached to our images that we become tempted to worship them. This is why many Protestant churches avoid or openly forbid any religious images in their churches other than a simple cross. The downside of that is that it also deprives them of a wealth of beautiful art that can inspire them to a closer relationship with God. The ancient rabbis understood this. We have the impression that they forbade any form of art that depicted anything from nature, but that is not true. Archaeologists have found many ancient synagogues that had beautiful mosaics containing images from nature. It is also clear, however, that these

¹ Rabbinic tradition calls them the Ten Statements rather than the Ten Commandments. They are statements of the basic principles of God's moral code. The First Statement emphasizes their release from Egypt, a culture obsessed with death and a place that was enslaved to idolatry. They also emphasize that the opening statement, “God spoke all these words,” is an integral part of the Ten Statements, because it clearly states that this came from God himself, and was not a product of human intellect.

were strictly for beauty and decoration, and were not objects of worship. The one restriction that they were adamant about was not depicting God, and usually not depicting any human being. For example, Renaissance paintings of God on his throne surrounded by the saints (as in last month's *Epistle*) would have been shocking to the ancient Jews, who would have denounced them as blasphemous.¹

In AD 726, the Byzantine Emperor Leo III Isauros openly opposed all images in Christian churches other than geometric designs, because of the commandment against graven images. He ordered that all paintings, statuary, and icons be removed from every church in his empire. This sparked what came to be known as the Iconoclastic Controversy, which spread throughout the entire Christian Church. After decades of debate and feuding, a final settlement was reached in which statuary and all other art forms were permitted in the Western (Roman Catholic) Church, but in the Eastern Church only two-dimensional art was permitted. This was because the word "graven" implies carving. The Hebrew word that we translate, "graven image" is *pesel* (פסל) "carved image," and what we translate as "likeness" is *tamunah* (תמונה), "similarity." Many on the anti-iconic side were still unhappy with this compromise, because the commandment also forbids the "likeness" of any natural creature, and icons are likenesses of the saints. The result of this compromise in the East was the use of only stylized two-dimensional icons and mosaics, both of which became finely developed art forms. This practice survives to this day in almost all Eastern Orthodox churches.

The history of the interpretation of the Ten Commandments is a striking lesson of why scriptural interpretation cannot hang just on a surface reading, and especially not a reading from a translation. Every passage requires an understanding of the context, the language, and the culture of the times. Even then, interpretation can be influenced by the tastes and interests of the interpreter. The Swedish theologian Krister Stendahl expressed it well when he said, "We are not so much blinded by what we don't know as by what we think we know."

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¹ Today, only the most conservative Jews feel strongly about this, since they understand that these images are not objects of worship but simply depictions to inspire. Islam, on the other hand, strictly forbids any image of any living thing. In many branches of Islam, making an image of God or of Mohammed (whom they do not believe to be divine) is a capital offense.