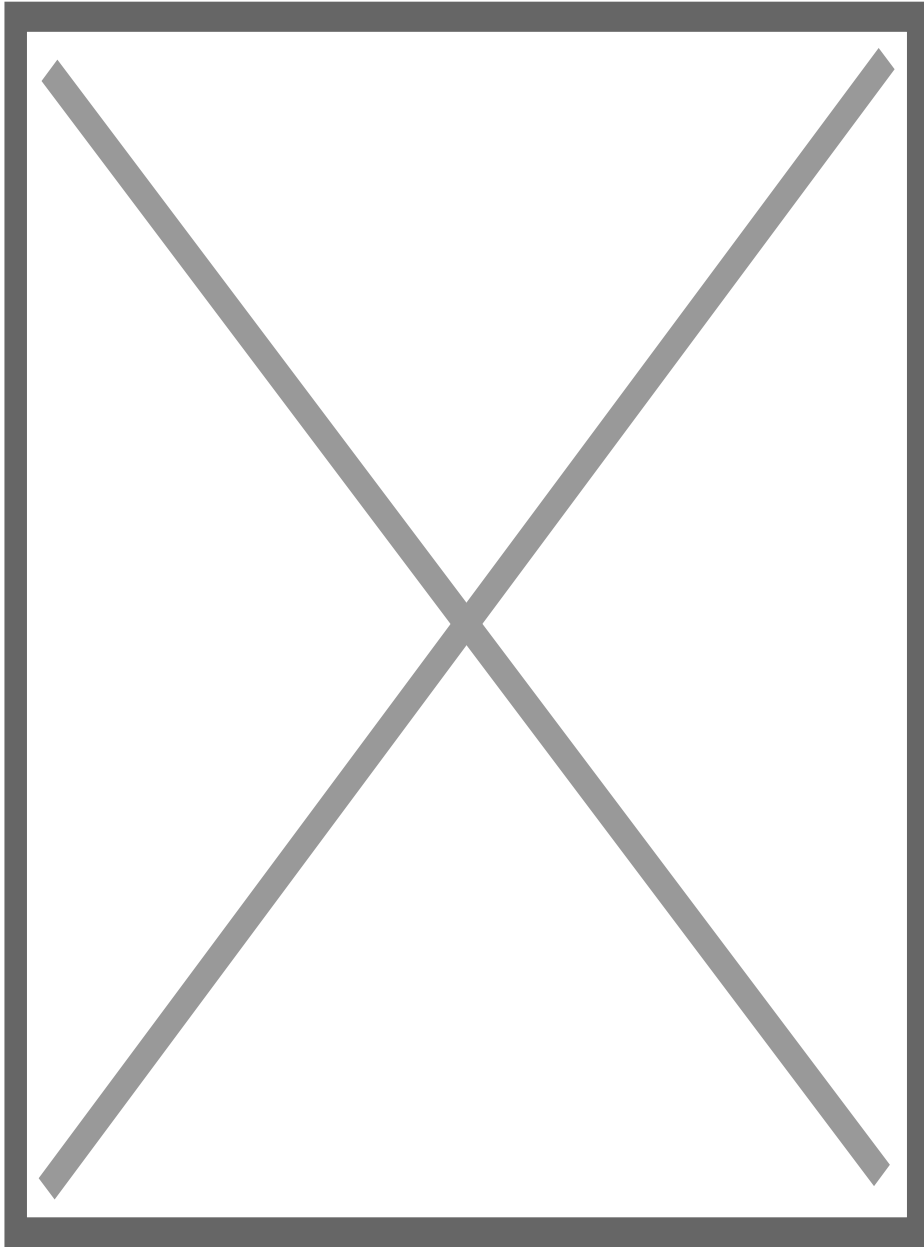


The Louisiana Standard Version

There are many problems with the Ten Commandments laws states are passing. One is the specific text they require schools to post.

by [Matt Thomas](#) in the [June 2026](#) issue
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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

In 2024, Louisiana enacted a law requiring all public schools to post a copy of the Ten Commandments in every classroom. Last year, Texas and Arkansas did the same, and legislators in other states are working on similar bills. The three existing laws have each been challenged in court; so far two of them, in Louisiana and Texas, have been allowed to take effect.

The laws differ as to whether they require an explanatory text to be included with the Ten Commandments—Louisiana does, while Texas and Arkansas do not—but they agree on one crucial detail: the specific version of the Ten Commandments that should be posted. All three laws draw their text from a monument erected on the grounds of the Texas State Capitol by the Fraternal Order of Eagles in 1961.

The origins of the monument’s Ten Commandments text are complex. Just five years earlier, Cecil B. DeMille’s film *The Ten Commandments* had burst onto the scene as the highest-grossing movie that year and, adjusted for inflation, one of the biggest hits of all time. To promote the film, DeMille teamed up with Minnesota judge E. J. Ruegemer to erect monuments of the Ten Commandments around the country. Ruegemer had been promoting the posting of the Ten Commandments since the 1940s as a means of combating juvenile delinquency, and DeMille saw a commonality of purpose, if not of motivation.

Ruegemer was a member of the FOE, and he enlisted the organization to assist with the project. The FOE took on the task—to such an extent that monuments were still going up ten years after the film opened. The monument on the capitol grounds in Texas was erected as part of this promotional effort.

As for the specific text of the Ten Commandments replicated on the monument—and now in Louisiana and Texas law—the origins are a bit more mysterious. The text is quite similar to language from the King James Version of Exodus 20, and many people assume that the monument uses the KJV verbatim. However, having reviewed dozens of published English Bible translations spanning centuries, I was unable to find one that matched the text exactly. The KJV comes closest, but even it differs at a few points.

Translation is an act of interpretation. Given that this particular translation has been mandated to be displayed in public spaces, we should interrogate it to determine how, intentionally or otherwise, it interprets the biblical passage. I see two main subjects of inquiry into what I’m calling the Louisiana Standard Version of the Ten Commandments: its archaic language and the things it leaves out.

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The LSV’s language is archaic because it closely follows the KJV. The KJV was first released in 1611, but due to spelling and punctuation variations within the text—along with misprints introduced by various printers—the need arose for standardization. This came about in the form of the Oxford edition, which was released in 1769 and is essentially the KJV we know today. So the LSV reflects the English language as it was spoken 250 to 400 years ago.

Languages transform over time due to a whole host of influences: other languages, new technologies, slang, dialects, and more. If the Ten Commandments posters are meant to communicate to students in classrooms, this LSV text is an odd pedagogical choice. Why use a translation that is so distant from its intended audience?

The LSV is also a laconic translation, meaning that it omits portions of the commandments as they appear in the Hebrew Bible. This can be seen by reading the LSV text alongside the unabridged text from Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

It’s striking just how much text the LSV omits. I’m reminded of the warning in Revelation: “If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and

in the holy city, which are described in this book” (22:19). Particularly with the commands regarding graven images and the sabbath, long stretches of the biblical text are omitted—mainly explanations of the reasoning behind the commandments and details as to what the commandments mean.

The new laws in Louisiana and elsewhere are purportedly secular in purpose, and the first several commandments are specifically about one’s relationship with God, so we could argue that these omissions are understandable. However, we could also argue that they remove the specific religious context from which these commandments arose, thus robbing the passage of much of its meaning.

In Exodus, the sabbath is grounded in the six days of creation followed by a day of rest. This sabbath rest is extended to children, enslaved people, and immigrants. Deuteronomy pushes further, grounding the sabbath not in creation but in the exodus from Egypt—God’s core liberationist move in the Hebrew Bible. To drive the point home, Deuteronomy adds the phrase “that your male or female enslaved person may rest as you do.” The implication here is that even the most oppressed person should benefit from the weekly rest of the sabbath.

To take this further: Who is being addressed throughout the commandments? Beginning with the last commandment, we see that you are not to covet your neighbor’s wife. If we assume heteronormativity in ancient Israel, the envisioned “you” must be male. This you also appears to be a person of means, given that he is identified as potentially having a house, donkeys, and oxen. The sabbath and coveting commandments both specify a person who enslaves others, indicating a level of wealth beyond that of the average Israelite.

Turning again to the sabbath commandment, the you is not a son or daughter, a male or female enslaved person, an immigrant, or an animal. The you is a wealthy, landowning, adult male with status in the society, and he is being held responsible for making sure that those less privileged are able to participate in the sabbath rest.

In short, there is a strong element of justice woven into the sabbath commandment, in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. By omitting this material, the LSV misses out on one of the most profound elements of the Ten Commandments.

In 2018, a group of evangelicals gathered in Dallas to produce the Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel, or the Dallas Statement. It speaks directly against many elements of social justice that it views as “dangerous and false teachings.” Now, lawmakers in that same state are attempting to codify a text of the Ten Commandments that explicitly omits elements of social justice.

There are many good reasons not to post the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms, reasons legal, religious, and democratic. I see these all as valid criticisms. But as a pastor and biblical scholar, I find the exclusion of the justice embedded in these commandments to be the most egregious. Rather than posting a watered-down version of the Ten Commandments in public spaces, we could aim to enact the underlying imperatives contained in those words. As Christ announced his ministry, he identified his purpose “to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recover of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). As we read and teach the Ten Commandments, we should go and do likewise.

The *Century's* community engagement editor Jon Mathieu speaks with Matt Thomas about a Bible translation mystery affecting classrooms in several US states.

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