

THE QUESTION OF FAITH

*What this library shares with religion, and what it does not claim
For adults 18 and over, of any faith or none*

I. WHY THIS PAGE EXISTS

The question comes from both directions and deserves a straight answer rather than a diplomatic one. From believers: is this Christian, and if not, what is it? From everyone else: this reads like a rule of life, so whose rule is it?

The answer is the same to both, and it is unusual enough to be worth stating carefully. This library was not written out of any religion. It borrows no authority from one, quotes no scripture as a warrant, and asks nobody to believe anything. And yet a great deal of it will feel familiar to anyone raised inside a serious moral tradition, because it was built out of the same materials — not the doctrine, but the ethics underneath, which are considerably older and more widely held than any single faith that carries them.

The backbone is shared. The authority is not borrowed.

II. WHAT THIS IS NOT

Stated plainly, so that nobody has to guess.

- It is not a Christian document, nor Jewish, Muslim, nor anything else. No page here rests on revelation, and nothing in it is offered as commanded by God.
- It does not tell anyone what to believe, and it takes no position whatever on whether any of it is true.
- It takes no position on headship — on whether God ordered marriage with a particular person at its head, or in which direction. That is a genuine question and this library is simply not the place it gets answered.
- It does not claim to be a religion, a church, or a substitute for either. There is no membership, no ordination, no congregation, and no one here is anybody's pastor.
- And it was not written backwards from a conviction. Nothing here began with a verse and worked toward a practice. It began with two people, an ordinary marriage, and the observation that most marriages fail from fog rather than from wickedness.

That last point is the one most likely to be misread, and it cuts both ways. A believer looking for scriptural warrant will not find it here and should not pretend to. A sceptic looking for smuggled religion will not find that either. The library is exactly what it appears to be: an argument about marriage, made on its own terms, that a person of any faith or none can accept or reject without touching what they believe about anything larger.

III. WHAT IT SHARES ANYWAY

Now the honest other half. It would be false to claim this was built in a vacuum, because it was not — and the ethical instincts running through every page are ones the religious traditions have carried longest and stated best.

- That a promise made is a thing owed, and that its cost is not a reason to break it.
- That truth-telling between two people is the foundation and everything else is built on top of it.
- That a person is answerable — that conduct has consequence, and that a life with no accountability in it decays.
- That what is broken can be repaired rather than discarded, and that the repairing is the more serious work.
- That forgiveness must be complete when it is given: a matter settled is a matter closed, and raising it again is its own offence.
- That the strong owe something to whoever is in their hands, and that authority which does not serve the person under it has become something else.
- That a marriage is meant to last, and that lasting is worth arranging your life around.

None of these is the property of any one faith, and none of them requires belief to be true. But it would be graceless to pretend they arrived from nowhere. They are the ethical inheritance of everyone raised in a tradition that took marriage seriously, and this library is unembarrassed about standing on it.

IV. THE TEN, AS THEY STAND IN EXODUS

They are set down here because they will be asked about, because they are the plainest statement of that inheritance in the language, and because a document that gestures at ethics without ever naming any is doing something evasive. They are given in the order and division of Exodus, as Jewish and Protestant traditions count them — other traditions merge the first two and split the last, which produces the same text under different numbers.

As they stand, in the traditional English:

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.
3. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.
4. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honour thy father and thy mother.

6. Thou shalt not murder.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

A note on the sixth

The sixth is given as murder because that is what the Hebrew says. The verb is *ratsach*, which carries the specific sense of unlawful killing, and the language holds separate words entirely for killing in war, in judicial execution, and in the slaughter of animals — none of which appears in this commandment. The older English “kill” is a seventeenth-century looseness, and most modern translations have since corrected it. The difference is not pedantry: the broader reading sets the commandment against the very book it stands in, which goes on to describe lawful killing at length, while the narrower one is perfectly consistent with it. Rendering it as murder is not an edit to the text. It is the text, read as it was written.

This library records them and does not preach them. Where a reader holds them as commanded, they are commanded and this page changes nothing. Where a reader holds them as accumulated human wisdom about how people must treat one another to live together at all, they are that, and this page changes nothing either. Either way they are older than any of us, they have outlasted every argument against them, and no page in this library contradicts a single one.

V. WHERE THE TWO MEET

Set the library beside that inheritance and the overlaps are not coincidental.

Adultery is the one offence this library treats as breach rather than infraction — answered by the Reckoning rather than by the ordinary ledger, because it is an attack on the covenant itself rather than a failure within it. False witness is the thing the entire architecture is built to prevent: the nightly questions exist so that nothing is hidden, and concealment is treated more seriously than the thing concealed. Stealing has its own quiet application here, in a house where two people have agreed that neither takes privately what belongs to the other. Coveting is answered structurally rather than by exhortation, since a man whose whole appetite is pointed at his own wife is not much troubled by anyone else's. And honouring father and mother appears in every page about children, though from the other side — that honour is earned by parents worth honouring, and that children give it to households where it makes sense to.

The convergence is not because the library was written from that text. It is because two serious attempts to answer the same question tend to arrive at similar places.

VI. THE THIRD PRESENCE

Many couples who read this will hold that a marriage has three parties rather than two — themselves and God — and that the covenant they make is witnessed by someone beyond the room. This library says nothing about whether that is so, and it does not need to, because nothing in these pages is disturbed by it.

A house that holds it will read the vow as made before someone, the ledger as a small nightly examination of conscience, the correction as chastening in the older sense, and the wiping of the slate as something nearer to absolution than to bookkeeping. All of that fits without a word being changed, and a couple who want to pray at the close of an evening should pray at the close of an evening. It is their house.

A house that holds nothing of the kind loses none of the machinery. The vow is made before each other, which has always been the part that binds in practice; the reckoning is honest self-examination without the theology; the slate is wiped because both of them agreed it would be. Everything works. It simply works with two people in the room instead of three.

What this library will not do is claim the third presence in order to borrow its weight. Writing “God requires this” would make every page heavier and every page less honest, and it would put a claim beyond argument at the centre of a document whose entire method is that everything must be arguable. If any of this is right, it has to be right on the evidence of what it produces in the two people who live it. That is a harder standard, and it is the only one this library is entitled to.

VII. RENEWED, NOT ABOLISHED

Here is the one place where this library genuinely parts company with a common religious instinct, and it is worth being clear about it rather than blurring it over.

A great deal of moral teaching approaches human weakness by attempting to remove it. Appetite is to be mortified. Desire is to be subdued. The self is to be denied until the troublesome part of it is gone. That instinct is ancient and sincere and it comes from a real observation — that unmanaged appetite wrecks lives — but as a method it has a poor record. Almost nobody abolishes their own nature. What generally happens is that the appetite goes underground, acquires shame, and reappears years later in a worse form, having learned in the meantime to hide.

This library takes the other route entirely. Nothing here asks anyone to stop wanting. It asks that the wanting be pointed — declared rather than concealed, given to one person rather than dissipated, held rather than spent, and made into fuel for the thing being built. The steel does not remove his desire; it prevents its discharge, so that it stays available and stays aimed. The ledger does not make him a man without faults; it makes his faults visible early, while they are still small enough to answer. The whole apparatus

is one long argument that a man is not improved by having less of himself, but by having all of himself under direction.

Weakness is not abolished here. It is renewed — turned around, put to work, and made the engine of the thing rather than its enemy. A couple who have tried the other method for years, and found themselves at forty with the same appetites and a great deal more shame, may find this the more useful proposition. It is certainly the more honest one about what people are actually like.

VIII. THE VIRTUES BY THEIR NAMES

Section III named the ethical instincts this library shares. This section names the virtues it actually trades in, because a serious moral tradition is a vague enough phrase to mean very little, and the objection this page will meet deserves a plainer answer than that.

The objection is that all of this is appetite dressed in ceremony — that a house which writes at length about steel and correction has found an elaborate justification for doing what it wanted to do anyway.

The answer is in the architecture, and it is not subtle. Every instrument in this library is a brake. The steel exists to refuse. The ledger exists to account. The interval between strokes exists to make him wait. The halt word exists to stop. There is not one device on any page here whose function is to permit more of anything; each of them exists to govern something that was already present and was previously governed by nothing at all.

The virtues, then, by their proper names.

- Temperance. Not the absence of appetite but its government. A man with no desire has nothing to be temperate about; the virtue exists only in someone who wants a great deal and is under command about it.
- Chastity, in the older and more accurate sense. Not abstinence — chastity inside a marriage never meant abstinence. It meant appetite rightly used and rightly aimed: given to one person, withheld from all others, and not spent on substitutes. A locked week is not chaste because nothing happens in it. It is chaste because everything that happens in it is pointed at one person.
- Fortitude. Strength held rather than discharged. This library asks a man to carry things — the ache, the interval, the evening he does not get, the correction he has earned — and to carry them without collapsing and without going hard about it. Aggression is not removed. It is put under command and given somewhere to go.
- Fidelity. The whole arrangement is a machine for making infidelity uninteresting rather than merely forbidden. A man whose entire appetite is aimed at his wife, daily and deliberately, is not heroically resisting temptation. He has simply run out of attention for it.

- Humility. He is answerable nightly, in writing, to someone who will tell him the truth. So is she: the Rite of Her Reckoning exists precisely so that the person who holds the book can be held to it, in the same room, in her own handwriting.
- Prudence. Nothing is decided in the heat of it. The Schedule is written sober, the limits are set in advance, the questions are asked on ordinary mornings with the lights on, and nothing is signed on the night it is discussed.

And the transformation all of them serve, stated once and plainly. Lust is appetite with no object and no discipline: it takes whatever is nearest, it is never satisfied by what it takes, and it leaves a person smaller than it found them. Desire is the same energy given an object, a discipline, and a purpose. This library does not ask anyone to have less of it. It asks that it be pointed at one person, held until it is worth something, accounted for honestly, and spent on building two people into something that stands.

That is the whole claim of this page. The virtues are old, they are not ours, and they are not the property of believers. What this library contributes is not the virtues. It is a method for practising them inside a marriage, on an ordinary Tuesday, in writing.

IX. WHAT THIS IS INSTEAD

So if it is not a faith, what is it? It is a doctrine in the plain sense of the word — a body of teaching, set down deliberately, coherent across its parts, and answerable to argument. Not revealed and not commanded: proposed, and standing or falling on whether it does what it claims.

It exists because nothing quite like it did. The people writing seriously about marriage were not writing about structure; the people writing about structure were not doing it carefully; and the traditions that took both seriously mostly required a set of prior beliefs before they would say anything at all. There was a gap where a plain, careful, argued account should have been, and this library is an attempt to fill it.

It asks for no faith and grants no absolution. It offers one thing only: a way forward for two people who want their marriage to be more than what it drifts into, and who are prepared to write things down and be honest at eight o'clock in the evening for the rest of their lives. Whatever else a reader believes, and whoever else they believe is watching, that offer stands unchanged.

Take the ethics; they were never ours. Take the method; that part we built. Believe whatever you already believed.

A guide only. For consenting adults, 18 and over, of any faith or none. This library claims no religious authority and asks no one to hold any belief. Nothing in it is offered as commanded.