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## Presenting the Law: Text and Imagery on Dutch Ten Commandments Panels

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# Presenting the Law: Text and Imagery on Dutch Ten Commandments Panels

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**ABSTRACT** Many Dutch Calvinist churches house a Ten Commandments panel, installed in the late sixteenth or seventeenth century as part of the Reformed adaptation of the medieval Catholic church interior. In this article, the characteristic design of Ten Commandments panels is analyzed as a form of Calvinist visual culture. It suggests that these panels were primarily made to be viewed rather than thoroughly read. The remarkably figurative Moses imagery on panels points at a divergence between the rigid Reformed theological image prohibition and the practice of the adaptation of the church interior. The placement of Ten Commandments panels in the Reformed church interior highlights their symbolic value: It signified the need for self-examination of the participants in the Lord's Supper. The original spatial setting of Ten Commandments panels also shows how the newly Reformed furnishing and use of church space was rooted in its late medieval Catholic past.

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**KEY WORDS** Ten Commandments panels; Reformed visual culture; church interior

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## Introduction

Dutch Calvinist churches used to be known mostly as sober and serene, their interiors characterized by whitewashed walls. Iconic seventeenth-century paintings of church interiors, such as those by Saenredam, De Witte, and others, have provided a blueprint for this image. The Reformation indeed brought about drastic changes in the interiors of the Dutch medieval churches. Catholic art and furnishings were removed or destroyed in the process of the 'purification' of the churches in the late

sixteenth century, in which the iconoclastic fury of 1566 was a landmark event (Spicer 2017). Particularly after the recognition of the Calvinist church as the public church of the Dutch Republic in 1578, church interiors were adapted to accommodate Reformed worship. Following the removal of objects bearing a strong association with Catholic devotion, churches were redecorated in a manner fitting and appropriate for Reformed use, which was centered on the Word. Typical elements of the newly Reformed church interiors were the so-called 'tekstborden' or 'tekstschilderingen'. Texts were painted on panels, walls, and church furniture, displaying a variety of texts ranging from practical ordinances to passages from Scripture and other pious texts that were of crucial importance in Reformed theology. The most commonly found text panel installed in Dutch Calvinist churches is the panel displaying the Ten Commandments, a central tenet within Reformed thought and liturgy. This article discusses the characteristic design of a Ten Commandments panel to highlight its visual impact within the Reformed church space and its liturgical use.

This article presents the first results of a larger research project which aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of text decoration in Dutch Reformed churches by uniting approaches from various disciplines and including a broad range of material. To do justice to the complex nature of text panels, it aims to examine its material and visual aspects, the theological content of texts, as well as its embeddedness in the church space and its newly Reformed use. It covers text decoration preserved in the smaller village churches in the most peripheral areas of the Dutch Republic as well as in the larger and better-known city churches. The heyday of the installation of text panels and text paintings, as part of the Reformed adaptation of the formerly Catholic, medieval church interior, lies in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century, which is the main focus

of this project. Rarer eighteenth-century examples are also included, while the limit of its scope is marked by the French period.<sup>1</sup>

Recent decades have witnessed increasing scholarly attention to Reformed visual and material culture, debunking the ‘myth’ of the austere Calvinist church interior. This project builds on the existing literature on this topic. A pioneering study is Van Swigchem, which is still a reference work on the Dutch church interior (1984). It pays attention to (the arrangement of) the furnishing of the church space in connection with its Reformed use, and briefly points to the design and role of text panels within the church interior. In Steensma’s recent and posthumously published book *Protestantse Kerken. Hun Pracht en Kracht*, a chapter is devoted to texts as part of the Reformed church interior (2012). It gives a broad overview of the various kinds of text panels and text paintings, discussing their material aspects as well as theological and other themes present in texts.<sup>2</sup> Mochizuki has made a significant contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon of text decoration as an innovative form of Dutch Calvinist visual culture ‘in the wake of iconoclasm’ (2005; 2007; 2008). It is based mainly on the study of the panels in the Grote of St. Bavokerk in Haarlem, supplemented by examples from other churches.<sup>3</sup>

So far, this research project has resulted, among other things, in a catalogue of preserved Ten Commandments panels, some of which are embellished in a surprisingly lavish manner. Here, I will argue that the texts on these panels were not primarily meant to be read, but that the panels

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1 This is the PhD project ‘To Proclaim, to Instruct, and to Discipline, the Visuality of Texts in Dutch Calvinist Churches’, which I am carrying out at the University of Groningen.

2 Steensma repeatedly emphasizes that a broader and more systematic approach is needed for a better understanding of Protestant text decoration (2012, 164, 184).

3 Very recently published is a study of the Reformed text painting that covers a medieval depiction of the mass of St. Gregory in the Utrecht Jacobikerk, see Bueren and Dijk 2017. On Calvinist visual culture, see also Finney 1999.

had the effect of an easily recognisable image or signal. That is what a closer look at the typical design of the texts as well as the various types of frame decoration suggests. Moreover, a significant number of panels is decorated with an image of Moses holding the two stone tablets. Whereas the anthropomorphic depiction of God was abandoned, the depiction of Moses stands out as a motif with a figurative character. This is remarkable, given the Reformed image discourse in which particularly images of human figures were deemed as potentially idolatrous. The iconography of the 'Moses panels' and their place and function in the Reformed church space therefore receive special attention. The wider range of material allows for a revised interpretation of the Moses imagery on Ten Commandments panels. Besides the undeniable changes brought about by the Reformation, the particular placement of these panels also points to some degree at continuity in Dutch church interiors and their use before and after the Reformation.

## **The Dutch Calvinist Handling of the Question of Images**

In Protestant theology, images belonged to the 'adiaphora': they were neither helpful for nor a real threat to true faith. With regard to religious imagery, Reformed tracts primarily focus on the Reformed objections to the role of imagery within the Catholic church and within Catholic devotion. Imagery was strongly associated with the invocation of saints, denounced by the Reformed as superstition and idolatry. The Reformed division of the commandments, starting the second commandment with "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that

is in heaven above or in the earth beneath” (Ex.20:4<sup>4</sup>), added weight to the prohibition of making images, compared to its Catholic phrasing. The Reformed view on imagery is clearly articulated in the Heidelberg Catechism from 1563, which was translated in that same year and became one of the most widespread polemical Reformed tracts in the Netherlands. In discussing the first and the second commandment, questions and answers 94–98 admonish the believer to “flee all idolatry, sorcery, enchantments, invocation of saints or of other creatures”. The same section states that God can and should not be portrayed, and should “not be worshipped” in any other way than he has commanded in his Word (Freedberg 1988, 32–38). Whereas Reformed ideology clearly states what is forbidden, namely depicting God and worshipping (through) images of man and other creatures, it does not prescribe what kind of imagery could or should be made (Jonckheere 2012, 31–42).

Decorated text panels are located in this void between the more theoretical image discourse and the practice of adapting church space for Reformed worship after the removal and destruction of Catholic art and furnishings. Synod reports provide insight into the more practical debate concerning the refurnishing and redecoration of church space in the early phase of the Dutch Reformed church. Remarks on the church interior in general and text decoration in particular are usually scarce; the practical implications of the new Reformed doctrine for and the order within the congregation were of primary concern for the authorities of the early Reformed church, rather than the furnishing of the ‘temple’. However, one of the rare comments on text panels illustrates the handling of the question

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4 For all English quotes from the Bible, the King James translation (KJV) is used, available on [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com).

of images within the Dutch Calvinist church. The following statement is found in the report of the synod of Rotterdam held in 1581:

Just as it is praiseworthy that churches are decorated with phrases from the Holy Bible, it is good that frames are made with prudent moderation, and most of all it is regarded as offensive for the weak, slanderous for the opposition and disturbing for the papists, to paint images of human beings next to those inscriptions, as can be seen now in Rotterdam. Therefore, let the ministers of Rotterdam now be admonished to do their duty in this, and let everyone make sure that these things do not occur in their own region.<sup>5</sup> (Reitsma and van Veen 1893, 210)

In this note, the practice of adorning the church building with texts from the Scriptures remains undisputed; in itself, it is worthy of praise. Besides that, it comments on two key elements in the decoration of text panels. First, the practice of making decorated frames is addressed. Just as it is praiseworthy to decorate a church with passages from the Scriptures, it is also praiseworthy when decorated frames are made—with a certain degree of moderation. This seems to have been more a matter of tolerance than frank enthusiasm: the importance of modesty and sobriety in the making of decorated frames is emphasized. Secondly, the depiction of human beings is mentioned. This was a crucial matter, as the depiction of human beings

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5 “Gelyck het pryselick is, dat men de kerkcken becleedet met heerlicke sententien uut der heyligen schrift, alsoe ist goet, dat men in de randen te maecken voirsichtige matigheyt houde, ende voornemelick acht men ergerlick voir de swacke, lasterlick voir de tegenparthye ende sorgelick voir de Papisten, dat men beeldnissen van menschen schildere by deselve schriften, als men nu gesien heeft in de kerkcke van Rotterdam Syn daeromme de dienaers van Rotterdam vermanet hierinne heur debvoir te doen ende sal een yegelick in synen classe waernemen, dat sulcx nyet en geschiede.” Translation by the author.

was particularly associated with the former Catholic image 'abuse' and idolatry. Therefore, a clear line is drawn at this point: human figures should not be depicted, as it would be 'offensive for the weak'.

This can be understood as a reference to a passage from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. In 1 Cor. 8:7-13, Paul explains how the freedom of a Christian should not become a stumbling block for the weak. He uses the example of eating food that had been offered to idols. Those strong in faith would not believe in the power of idols and could, therefore, eat the sacrificial food with a clean conscience. One might, however, consider not eating the food, to the benefit of a weaker brother or sister in faith who could be confused by this act. Similar to Paul in his day and age, the seventeenth-century Calvinists dealt with former 'idolatrous' habits. Paul's principle could easily be transferred to the religious imagery and the accompanying practices; although images, belonging to the 'adiaphora', were irrelevant for those strong in faith, because they did not believe in the power of idols and did not engage in idolatrous practices, they could be confusing and disturbing for those weaker in faith.

The exact panel discussed by the Rotterdam synod in 1581 is, in all probability, lost.<sup>6</sup> However, there are numerous other examples that highlight the way in which the image prohibition was dealt with in the Reformed furnishing of church interiors with text panels.

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6 The Laurenskerk in Rotterdam was heavily damaged in the bombardment of 1940. Although many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings and prints of the interior of the Laurenskerk depict text panels, they do not show any text panels clearly decorated with human figures. See also A. de Lorme 'Gezicht in de Laurenskerk te Rotterdam' 1669, Museum Boymans van Beuningen, Rotterdam. This painting is reproduced in Van Swigchem 1984, 62-63.

## The ‘Visuality’ of Text

The Ten Commandments were among the central texts in Reformed doctrine and Reformed liturgy. The churchgoers were familiar with this text as well as with the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed. These texts were recited during church services, they were an important part of catechism teaching, and were even used to teach children how to read (Spaans 2004, 456n173).



**FIGURE 1** Ten Commandments panel, Bovenkerk Kampen, 1634, photo by author.

A Ten Commandments panel is often part of an ensemble consisting of these three texts, known as the typical set of ‘geloof, gebod, gebed’ (Steensma 2012, 164-174).

Panels displaying the main text of the Ten Commandments were likely not primarily intended to be carefully read—there was little need to *inform* the churchgoer of these well-known words—but the panels rather served a decorative and symbolic purpose.<sup>7</sup> Depicting Scripture was a fitting and “praiseworthy” way of decorating a Reformed church, in which the Word played such a dominant role. The

calligraphy and the arrangement of the texts on Ten Commandments panels point to such a visual function. A characteristic design is observable on nearly all Ten Commandments panels, of which the panel in Kampen (1634) is an illustrative example (Fig. 1). The text of the Ten Commandments is

7 Gray argues similarly with regard to texts as part of medieval murals in English churches, stating that texts added weight to murals, rather than helping the viewer to identify the painted scenes. She advocates an understanding of the act of reading that differs from the present-day practice (2011).

divided into two columns, shaped by a red contour resembling the arched shape of the two stone tablets of the law. This division recurs on almost all Ten Commandments panels. The calligraphy itself serves here as an embellishment of the panel: the white and gilded gothic lettering contrasts with a black background and is decorated with subtle scrollwork in a similar pallet of colors. The Roman numerals, the decorated initials, and the first line of each commandment are inscribed with golden characters, emphasizing the structure of the text. Although the text itself was often legible from a close distance, such characteristics ensured that a Ten Commandments panel could easily be recognized without a close look at the content of the text.

The nature of a Ten Commandments panel as an object to be looked at could be further enhanced by means of an embellished frame. Frames consisted mainly of non-religious and mostly non-figurative painted or wood-carved ornamentation, which did not bear the risk of idolatry. Modesty was at stake here, as the Rotterdam synod pointed out. Precisely because of its non-idolatrous nature, decorating the frame was a suitable way in which to adorn a panel within a Calvinist church. It could underline the visual nature of a panel by creating an illusion of rich materiality to heighten its beauty and prestige.<sup>8</sup>

Frames were adorned in the Northern Renaissance style that was in vogue at the time. Stylistically, roughly two branches can be distinguished in the design of text panels.<sup>9</sup> Among the most commonly found forms of decoration are the classical architectural elements, such as cannelured pilasters, friezes, and tympanums. The Ten Commandments panel of Beusichem (1627) is a prototype of a panel with classicist features (Fig. 2).

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8 On the pictorial use of text and on frames, see also Mochizuki 2007, 78-83.

9 Various forms of frame decoration were already noted by Van Swigchem (1984, 273-275).



**FIGURE 2** Ten Commandments panel, Beusichem, 1627, photo archive Regnerus Steensma.



**FIGURE 3** Panel with the Creed, Geervliet, 1599, photo archive Regnerus Steensma.

It is, similarly to many other panels, shaped as an ‘aedicula’, resembling temple architecture. This aedicule, or temple shape, was ubiquitous in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in a variety of different media. Within the church space, it was a familiar way of framing other categories of panels, such as epitaphs. In print, it often recurs on title pages of Bibles, most notably on the title page of the seventeenth-century Dutch ‘Statenvertaling’ (1637).<sup>10</sup> Its appearance in this authoritative Bible translation may illustrate the weight or status this design could add to a panel.

10 Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap “Titelpagina Statenvertaling 1637.” Accessed 6 October, 2017. <http://www.bijbeldigitaal.nl/view/?bible=sv1637>.

The frames of the panels in Geervliet (1588 and 1599) are typical examples of illusory scrollwork painted on wooden frames in a way that is reminiscent of the prints of Hans Vredeman de Vries (Fig. 3). The frames are lavishly decorated with painted flowers in baskets and shimmering stones attached to the frame. The colorful scrollwork is painted in such a way that an illusion of depth and substance is created, aided by tangible relief of the added stones. This type of scrollwork can often be found as frame decoration, ranging from more sober and simple to exuberant forms, aimed at catching the eye of the churchgoer.

## **Suggesting God**

God the Father is one of the main characters in the Biblical narrative about the Ten Commandments, together with Moses. It is described in the Old Testament how God inscribed the commandments on two tablets with his own finger before handing them down to Moses (Ex. 31:18, Deut. 9:10). God is represented on Ten Commandments panels as the lawgiver from above, in either a textual or symbolic way. The anthropomorphic image of God, depicted as an elderly man even on the most prestigious medieval altarpieces, had been mostly condoned in the late medieval church, but the notion that God should not and could not be adequately depicted gained much importance with the Reformation.<sup>11</sup> Joachim van den Heuvel's seventeenth-century 'Interior of a village church' contains—conspicuously,

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11 One of the best known and illustrative examples is the history of the 'Last Judgement' altarpiece by Lucas van Leyden (1526–1527). The altarpiece was removed from the church in 1566 to protect it from rioters. In that same year, the figure of God the Father as an elderly man was overpainted, as was ordained by the city government (Filedt Kok, Leeftang, Veldman 2011, 322n7).



**FIGURE 4** Joachim van den Heuvel, Interior of a village church, c.1640-1650, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, RMCC s28.

in the form of a depicted text panel—the Reformed explanation of the problem of depicting God (Fig. 4). As part of this intimate church interior, a text panel is depicted which says: “GODT IS GEEN / VLEESCH GOD / IS EEN GEEST / SOO GELDT DER / SIELEN DIENST / OOCK MEEST”. This inscription is based on John 4:24: “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit

and in truth.” It highlights the core problem in depicting God: He is a transcendental being and should be worshipped as an immaterial spirit. It is simply impossible to truly depict God, the argument runs, and his—by definition—deficient image could wrongly suggest his immanent presence and lead to unjust worship.

The emphasis on his spiritual nature recurs in the way God is represented on Ten Commandments panels. God is never depicted as a human figure, but his presence is suggested through a text or by means of the symbol of the Tetragrammaton. In Exodus 20, the verse preceding and announcing the Ten Commandments mentions how “God spake all these words”. Precisely this verse, saying “Godt sprack alle dese woorden” is inscribed on many of the Ten Commandments panels (Ex. 20:1). This phrase can be found in the upper area of a panel, typically in between the space left by the arches of the two tablets, as well as in the upper beam, or the tympanum, of the panel. In the same location, we also find the

Tetragrammaton, which was widely used as the symbolic representation of God in this period. It came to replace the physical depiction of God as an elderly man (Wilkinson 2015, 365–381). The Tetragrammaton consists of Hebrew characters, which were used to spell the name of God. In the Jewish tradition, the Name remains unspoken. The fact that the Name of God, as indicated by the characters forming the Tetragrammaton, traditionally remained unvocalised and unsaid as a matter of principle may have made it even more suitable as a symbolic representation of God on a Reformed Ten Commandments panel. Just as it was impossible for Calvinists to grasp God as a spirit in an image, it was impossible and unjust for Jews to put into earthly words the very holy nature of the heavenly God.

The design of the Tetragrammaton follows the description of the appearance of God in the Old Testament. The book of Exodus describes how God appeared as a cloud during the day and as a pillar of fire during the night to lead Moses and his people through the desert. Ex. 40:38 says, “For the cloud of the Lord was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys”.<sup>12</sup> When Moses ascends Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, God appears in a thick cloud, and as a fire on top of the mountain; his presence was accompanied by thunder and lightning (Ex. 19, Ex. 24). This cloud of fire recurs in the depiction of the Tetragrammaton on Ten Commandments panels, which is often surrounded by a radiant cloud. The Tetragrammaton on a panel in Sneek (1632) is an illustrative example (Fig. 10, see below).<sup>13</sup> A slightly different, alternative representation of God

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12 This description recurs in Deut.1: 33: “Who went in the way before you, to search you out a place to pitch your tents in, in fire by night, to shew you by what way ye should go, and in a cloud by day.”

13 The Grote of Martinikerk in Sneek possesses a set of two panels, dating from 1632. One is inscribed with the Ten Commandments and is adorned with Moses scenery, while its

can be seen in the upper area of a panel in Bourtange (1611, Fig. 5), where an illuminated cloud contains the phrase “Hoort Isarel de Heer onsen Godt is een eenig Heere” (Deut. 6:4).<sup>14</sup>



**FIGURE 5** Detail of text triptych in Bourtange, 1611, photo by author.

## Depicting Moses

Moses is portrayed in the Old Testament stories about the Ten Commandments as a messenger between God and the Israelite people. The books of Exodus and Deuteronomy describe how Moses ascended Mount Sinai, to which God descended from heaven to hand over to Moses the two

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pendant, bearing the Tetragrammaton, is inscribed with additional texts from the New Testament.

- 14 'Isarel' must be a misspelling of 'Israël'. Deut. 6:4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord". On the Bourtange panel, see also Steensma 2000. "Twee protestantse drieluiken" in *Jaarboek voor Liturgie-onderzoek* 16: 219-233.

tablets inscribed with the Law. Moses then brought the tablets down to his people, who had been commanded to stay at the foot of the mountain. The verses directly preceding the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5 relate the voice of Moses himself: “The Lord talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire (I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to shew you the word of the Lord: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount)” (Deut.5:4-5). Other passages narrate how Moses’ brother Aron gave in to the complaints of the Israelites when Moses stayed on Mount Sinai for a long period of time. Aron melted their gold into a golden calf, an icon to replace the invisible God and their absent leader Moses (Ex. 32).

Following this Biblical narrative, the figure of Moses is portrayed on a number of Ten Commandments panels. Some panels depict only the bust of Moses, in some cases accompanied by his brother Aron. Others are adorned with more elaborate Moses scenes filling the background on both sides of the bust of Moses. These typically include a depiction of Moses receiving the tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai and the worship of the golden calf. Despite the controversy around depicting human figures within the church, as was underlined by the Rotterdam synod cited above, panels with figurative Moses imagery were apparently installed and tolerated on a considerable scale in the Reformed church interior. Mochizuki has suggested that the depiction of Moses with the Ten Commandments should be seen primarily as a pre-iconoclastic phenomenon, which was gradually supplanted after the Reformation by the depiction of the text of the Ten Commandments (2005, 193; 2009, 235). The continuous appearance of Moses on panels in the late sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth

century—on rare occasions, even in full length<sup>15</sup>—casts doubt on this hypothesis.<sup>16</sup>

An explanation of the appearance of Moses on Ten Commandments panels can nevertheless be sought in the pre-Reformation iconographical tradition. Moses depicted as an Old Testament prophet was not so much associated with the condemned saintly figures with an intercessory role in Catholic devotion, but highlighted his status as an exemplary figure, as is demonstrated by Veldman (1995). Veldman gives an overview of the late medieval iconographical tradition of depicted scenes from the Old Testament accompanying the Ten Commandments as moral exempla, mainly in illustrated Bibles and other prints. The depictions of Old Testament scenes served as prefigurations, i.e. foreshadowings of stories from the New Testament or as moral exempla with the Ten Commandments, showing either the desired or the unwanted behaviour. While the earliest examples date from the fourteenth century, the popularity of scenes from the Old Testament as moral exempla of the Ten Commandments increased with the rise of the Reformation. This included images of Moses with the Ten Commandments, appearing first in German prints and reaching the Netherlands in the course of the sixteenth century.

The rare pre-Reformation (and preserved) depictions of Moses in Dutch church interiors must also be included among examples of typological and exemplary pictures, similarly to prints. The Zuiderkerk in the Dutch town of Enkhuizen contains a series of typological paintings on its wooden vault,

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15 The Ten Commandments on a panel in Rhenen are flanked by the full-length depiction of Moses and Aron, with Old Testament scenes painted in the background (c.1575-1650).

16 A characteristic Moses figure can also be found in some eighteenth-century examples. A typical eighteenth-century Ten Commandments panel with marbled columns and depicting a Moses figure can be found in Wadenoyen (1711). Later examples include a panel in Bruchem (1749) and Spannum (c.1750-1775).

one of them depicting Moses receiving the tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai (1485). The composition of this scene is clearly indebted to the depiction of Moses on Mount Sinai in the *Biblia pauperum* (Henry 1987, 116).<sup>17</sup> Filedt Kok describes a depiction of Moses on Mount Sinai and the worship of the golden calf painted on the wooden vault of the church in Warmenhuizen as one of four scenes from the Old Testament which are combined with the depiction of the Last Judgement (c. 1530) (2008, 13-15). The depiction of the worship of the golden calf functions here as a moral exemplum; eternal judgment is the consequence of such misconduct.



**FIGURE 6** Ten Commandments painting, c.1600-1625, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, RMCC s13.

A painting found in Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, is one of the most skilfully painted examples of a Reformed depiction of the Ten Commandments with the typical and more elaborate Moses imagery (Fig. 6).<sup>18</sup> A bust of a bearded Moses is depicted above the tablets of the Law, with both of his hands on top of the tablets and his rod in his right hand. He holds his other hand open and looks at the beholder as if he is presenting the Ten Commandments to the viewer. The background scenery covers other elements of the Biblical stories: the top right corner shows how Moses received

the stone panels inscribed by God on Mount Sinai. The gathering of the

17 Zuiderkerk "De gewelfschilderingen." Accessed October 6, 2017. <http://www.zuiderkerkenhuizen.nl/?p=gewelfschilderingen>.

18 This concerns not a wooden panel, but a painting on canvas.

people is depicted at the foot of a mountain, above which light appears behind clouds. A closer look reveals a tiny Moses figure in the middle of the fiery cloud, in which God himself is present, holding the two stone tablets. In front of the encampment, indicated with a few tents on the left side, a golden calf is visible with people gathered around it. This depiction of the worship of the golden calf can be understood as a warning against the risk of idolatry: although God himself cannot be seen with the physical eye, one should not worship any graven image, or, in other words, make the mistake of replacing the invisible God by a visible idol. Here, the golden calf is placed on an altar-shaped base, whereas a classical column is usually depicted in this scene on other panels, as well as in print; this may therefore be understood as an implicit reference to the Catholic church altar.<sup>19</sup>

An Antwerp print by Johan Sadeler (I), based on a design by Crispijn van den Broeck (1571) and depicting Moses with the tablets of the Law, demonstrates the close iconographical relationship of Moses scenery in print and on panels (Fig. 7). Its subject matter and composition is very similar to the Utrecht example.



**FIGURE 7** Johann Sadeler (I), after Crispijn van den Broeck, Moses with the Tablets of the Law, 1575, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Moses is depicted as the central figure above the two stone tablets of

19 So far, I have not encountered any other examples of this altar-shaped base, neither on prints nor on church panels with the Ten Commandments.

the Law. On the left, Moses receives the tablet of the Law on Mount Sinai, while the kneeling people pray at the foot of the mountain. A thick cloud hovers over the mountain, on which a tiny Moses figure with the tablets of the Law is visible. The Biblical passage also mentions the loud voice of a trumpet: several horns appear in the godly cloud (Ex. 19:16). On the right side of the central Moses figure, the Israelites' encampment is depicted with the worship of the golden calf in front of it. The tents bear a striking similarity to those on the Utrecht canvas. The golden calf on the Antwerp print is placed on a more customary, antique-looking column. A noteworthy difference to Ten Commandments panels is that the text on the Antwerp print is inscribed in Latin, whereas on church panels, the text is always in



**FIGURE 8** Ten Commandments panel, Lunteren, c.1575-1615, photo by author.



**FIGURE 9** Ten Commandments panel, Joure, 1648, photo by author.

the vernacular, in accordance with the Reformed conviction that Scripture

should not only be accessible for the learned but also for the common people.

Other contemporary Ten Commandments panels with Moses imagery show a strong similarity to the discussed Utrecht Ten Commandments painting. A similar composition, the same subject matter and design for the background scenery, and even similar colours, recur repeatedly. Very similar to the Utrecht canvas is, for instance, the Ten Commandments panel currently located in a church at Lunteren (c.1575–1650, Fig. 8).<sup>20</sup>



**FIGURE 10** Panel with texts from the New Testament, Sneek, 1632, photo archive Regnerus Steensma.



**FIGURE 11** Ten Commandments panel, Sneek, 1632, photo archive Regnerus Steensma.

Its imagery and composition is (although inverted) almost exactly the same as on the Utrecht painting: the bust of Moses, bearded and dressed in red cloth, is centrally depicted above the two tablets, while he holds his rod in his right hand and lets his left forearm rest on the other panel. Several Frisian panels are adorned with very similar imagery. A panel in

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to drs. Tanja Kootte for drawing my attention to this piece. There is no documentation known concerning its provenance and dating, but it probably dates from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century (c.1575–1650), given its scenery, composition, and style. This panel is currently located in a twentieth-century church building.

Joure, dating from 1648, strongly reminds us of the Utrecht and Lunteren pieces (Fig. 9). The Martinikerk in Sneek possesses a Ten Commandments panel with similar Moses imagery (Fig. 11) that has a counterpart with texts from the New Testament, adorned with the Tetragrammaton (1632, Fig. 10). The same imagery and composition also recurs on the earlier panel in



**FIGURE 12** Ten Commandments panel, Bolsward, 1580-1592, photo archive Regnerus Steensma.

Bolsward (1580-1592), although in a more simplified version (Fig. 12). Besides Ten Commandments panels characterised by figurative and narrative Moses imagery, a number of other Ten Commandments panels exist that bear a typical bust of Moses but lack the elaborate background scenery. Examples can be found in Tricht (c.1575-1650, Fig. 14) and in the church of Herveld (1697, Fig. 13).<sup>21</sup> The Moses scenery on Ten Commandments panels stands out because of its distinct religious, figurative, and, in several cases, narrative character. The archetypal image of Moses must have been familiar to churchgoers,

as it had long since appeared in prints and paintings with a typological or exemplary character. The same scenery repeatedly recurs on Ten Commandments panels, which enhanced its symbolic function: Moses and the two tablets of the law could easily be recognised. Moses' figurative depiction might have been tolerated in the Reformed church interior because he was known and portrayed according to his Biblical description

21 This panel was originally part of the village church in Slijk-Ewijk. This dating is provided on Reliwiki "Monumentomschrijving Rijksdienst." Accessed October 6, 2017. [http://reliwiki.nl/index.php/Slijk-Ewijk,\\_Dorpsstraat\\_70\\_-\\_Hervormde\\_Kerk](http://reliwiki.nl/index.php/Slijk-Ewijk,_Dorpsstraat_70_-_Hervormde_Kerk).



**FIGURE 13** Ten Commandments panel, Herveld, 1697. Collectie Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, object no. 43.342.



**FIGURE 14** Ten Commandments panel, Tricht, c.1575-1650, photo archive Regnerus Steensma.

and as an exemplary, rather than a saintly, figure. However, Moses appears in a mediating role on Ten Commandments panels, presenting the tablets of the Law to the beholder, following the biblical narrative in which he fulfils a role of an intermediary between God and people. This role pleads for a further analysis of the possible place and function of ‘Moses panels’ within the Reformed church interior and its liturgical use, compared to the former medieval Catholic use of the church.

## Church Space

The original placement of Ten Commandments panels that bear elaborate Moses scenery is, in many instances, difficult to reconstruct. The provenance

of the panel in the possession of Museum Catharijneconvent can be traced back no further than to a twentieth-century private collection.<sup>22</sup> The Lunteren panel can currently be found in a small church that is much younger than the panel itself; it must have been part of another church in the late sixteenth or seventeenth century. Although the panels in Sneek and Joure are preserved in the church, the ways in which they are now attached to the wall most likely differ from their original placement.

There are several other examples of Ten Commandments panels, albeit without an image of Moses, of which the original placement within the church is known. Placed on top of or as an integral part of the choir screen, these panels often marked the border between choir and nave. A Ten Commandments panel, in many cases accompanied by the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, either on the same or on separate panels, was used to replace a medieval crucifix or a complete medieval Calvary group (Steensma 2012, 166; Van Swigchem 1984, 279). An eloquent example can be found in the Pieterskerk in Leiden (c.1572-1625, Fig. 15).<sup>23</sup> Its Ten Commandments panel is inscribed on both sides, which indicates that it was meant to have a freestanding position. It is situated on top of a retained medieval choir screen, where a Calvary group must have stood prior to the Reformation (Kroesen 2011, 238). Ten Commandments panels in similar settings can be found in village churches as well as in larger city

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22 Private collection of S.B. Slijper, Blaricum; 1975 (12 mei) auction Mak van Waay, Amsterdam, cat. 242, nr. 123; 1975 Aartsbisschoppelijk Museum Utrecht; 1976 Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent. Digital collection database Museum Catharijneconvent. Accessed on 6 October, 2017. <https://www.catharijneconvent.nl/adlib/31231/?q=Tien+geboden&page=2&f>

23 The exact date of the Leiden panel is unknown. The consecration crosses on the frame of the panel indicate that a pre-Reformation panel was used as the carrier for this text panel. This points to an early date, soon after the occupation of the Pieterskerk by the Calvinists in 1572.

churches. In the village church in Noordwijk, a Ten Commandments panel is placed on the choir screen, flanked by two panels with the Creed and the Lord's Supper, all of them inscribed on both sides (1624; Fig. 16). A choir screen with a Ten Commandments panel is part of the Reformed interior of the church in the Frisian village of Kimsward (1695; Fig. 17).



**FIGURE 15** Ten Commandments panel, Leiden, c.1572-1625, photo archive Regnerus Steensma.



**FIGURE 16** Text panels on top of the choir screen, Noordwijk, 1624, photo archive Regnerus Steensma.



**FIGURE 17** Ten Commandments panel, Kimsward, 1695, photo archive Regnerus Steensma.

The emphasis placed on the border between nave and chancel by means of a Ten Commandments panel in some ways mirrors the pre-Reformation structure of the church space. The chancel was the liturgical centre of the

church, where the main Mass was celebrated before the Reformation. It was a sacred area in the medieval church, where the consecration and the transformation (or transubstantiation) of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ took place. It was a place set apart from the rest of the church. The rood screen, closing off the choir space, accentuated this structure. On top of or above the rood screen, a crucifix might have been installed. This tangible presence of the suffering body of Christ on the cross filled the vertical space between the arch and the choir screen. Without exception, these crucifixes were removed from churches in Dutch Calvinist territory during the Reformation. A Ten Commandments panel could substitute a crucifix after the Reformation, as is illustrated by the Leiden example (Steensma 2012, 66; Van Swigchem 1984, 279).

It was not unusual for the choir space to remain the location for the celebration of the Lord's Supper after the Reformation (Pollmann 2002, 184-185). The text panels that are inscribed with texts on both sides indicate that this might remain a customary practice. Inscriptions on the back of a Ten Commandments panel often contain the Words of Institution, the phrase from the New Testament whereby Christ is believed to have laid the foundation for the sacrament of Communion (1 Cor.11:23-27). This is the case both in Noordwijk and in Leiden.

As we have seen, a Ten Commandments panel was designed in such a way that it was easily identifiable by a passing churchgoer. Placed on top of the choir screen, it could function as a warning sign. The churchgoer saw the panel on his or her way to Communion, walking from the nave of the church to the chancel, where the Lord's Supper was celebrated. It was essential for the faithful to be aware of one's sinfulness first. The Apostle Paul points to this importance of self-examination before participating in the Lord's Supper: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth

and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (1 Cor. 11:28-29). Depicting the Ten Commandments, the panel pointed at the sins of the beholder and signified that every believer needed to be redeemed. Subsequently, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper itself, taking place in the chancel space, pointed to the meaning of Christ's suffering, as was emphasized by the Words of Institution on the back of the panel. Before the Reformation, the crucifix referred to the transformation of the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Christ: his suffering body was depicted as a clear reference to the sacrament of the Eucharist. The replacement of the crucifix by a text panel demonstrates a shift from the immanent bodily presence of Christ in the Catholic Eucharist to an emphasis on the more transcendental meaning of the Reformed Lord's Supper for the churchgoer.

The role of Moses, depicted as the presenter of the Ten Commandments to the churchgoer and as a mediator between God and people, becomes more apparent when we take into account the position of the panels within the church interior. Such panels were usually installed not at eye level but higher up; people literally had to look up to them. Although the exact original location of the discussed Moses panels is unknown, it is possible that we have to imagine these, too, atop a choir screen, replacing a crucifix. This brings to light a similar parallel between the medieval Catholic church interior and the Reformed situation. The Catholic crucifix was an image of Christ as a mediator between God and the faithful. The role of the image of Christ on the cross as "hanging" in between heaven and earth was underlined by its elevated position in the church, above the rood screen. Moses, presenting the Ten Commandments to the churchgoer, seems to take up the intermediary role of the pre-Reformation crucifix within the church space, in an elevated position between the choir screen and the vaulted ceiling; this could be interpreted as being between heaven and earth, between God and the people, and between God and the churchgoer.

Before the Reformation, Moses was present in this mediating position in prints, following the Biblical narrative. On Reformed Ten Commandments panels, he remains present in this position as some sort of Reformed equivalent of the medieval Catholic depiction of the suffering Christ.

## **Conclusion**

The late sixteenth and the early seventeenth century were marked by an ongoing process of ‘purification’ of the interiors of Dutch medieval churches from the vestiges of Catholic worship. The drastic demolition and removal of church art and furnishings could lead one to believe that the Reformation put a definite end to religious visual culture within the church space, and that the Word completely eradicated the image. In fact, innovative forms of religious imagery were found, displaying the Word, presenting Scripture as an image. While text was the key element, Ten Commandments panels have a markedly visual character. Fashionable and colorful modes of decoration were chosen to frame texts, adding weight and prestige to the installed panels. This enhanced their visual impact in a way that was not necessarily sober or modest. Particularly the panels with the more elaborate Moses imagery may have diverged from what would have been seen as acceptable imagery within a Reformed church space. In this way, the panels discussed show how the theologically limited—albeit undefined—space for religious imagery was exploited and perhaps stretched in the more concrete process of the adaptation of the church space. Shifting the focus from the panels themselves to their position and function within the church interior also elucidates the ways in which the furnishing and structure of church interior, tailored to Reformed thought and to Reformed worship, still echoed some of its medieval Catholic past.

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