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Do Not Covet: Is It a Feeling or an Action?

In English, to covet means to desire someone or something obsessively, wrongfully, and/or without due regard for the rights/feelings of others. It is a strong emotion, to be avoided. But does “covet” capture the meaning of the Hebrew verb חמד?

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Jealousy by Edvard Munch 1913. Photo credit: Städel Museum © Frankfurt am Main Germany

The Doubled Prohibition of Coveting

The writers of the Torah were dead set in their opposition to “coveting”; of this, at least, there can be no doubt. It is the only prohibition mentioned twice in the Decalogue and with an impressive list of interdicted items (MT):

שמות כ:יד {יז] לֹא תַחְמֹד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ

Exod 20:14 {17} You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.

לֹא תַחְמֹד אֵשֶׁת רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וַאֲמָתוֹ וְשׁוֹרוֹ וַחֲמֹרוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ.

You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his donkey,[1] or anything that is your neighbor’s.

In MT Deuteronomy, the verb “covet” (ח.מ.ד) appears only once,[2] and another (synonymous?) term, “crave” or “desire” (א.ו.ה) appears in the second prohibition (MT):[3]

דברים ה:יח {כא} וְלֹא תַחְמֹד אֵשֶׁת רֵעֶךָ

Deut 5:18 {21} You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.

וְלֹא תִתְאַוֶּה בֵּית רֵעֶךָ שָׂדֵהוּ וְעַבְדּוֹ וַאֲמָתוֹ שׁוֹרוֹ וַחֲמֹרוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ.

You shall not crave your neighbor’s house, or his field, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.[4]

This doubled prohibition of coveting is so important in the Roman Catholic tradition that it views the above as two separate commandments instead of one.

What Does “Covet” Mean?

For English-speakers, there is little if any doubt about what it means “to covet.” Based on considerations of etymology and widely accepted usage, I define it in this way: “to desire (someone or something) obsessively, wrongfully, and/or without due regard for the rights/feelings of others.” It is an emotion, a strong emotion, to be avoided or recanted. When a person experiences this emotion, he/she “covets.” But does “covet” capture the meaning of the Hebrew verb, from the root ח.מ.ד?

Coveting and Taking: A Biblical Pair

The root ח.מ.ד in the *qal* verbal form is often paired with an active verb, such as “taking”:

Precious metals used for idolatry

דברים ז:כה פְּסִילֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם תִּשְׂרְפוּן בָּאֵשׁ **לֹא תַחְמֹד** כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב עֲלֵיהֶם **וְלָקַחְתָּ לָךְ**…

Deut 7:25 You shall consign the images of their gods to the fire; **you shall not covet**the silver and gold on them **and keep it** for yourselves…

Achan takes from the *cherem* [proscribed items] in Jericho

יהושע ז:כא (ואראה) [וָאֵרֶא] בַשָּׁלָל אַדֶּרֶת שִׁנְעָר אַחַת טוֹבָה וּמָאתַיִם שְׁקָלִים כֶּסֶף וּלְשׁוֹן זָהָב אֶחָד חֲמִשִּׁים שְׁקָלִים מִשְׁקָלוֹ **וָאֶחְמְדֵם וָאֶקָּחֵם**…

Josh 7:21 I [Achan] saw among the spoil a fine Shinar mantle, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, **and I coveted them and took them**…

Even when root ח.מ.ד isn’t paired with the term “taking,” it often refers to circumstances where action follows the desire. For example, Proverbs 6:25, which warns about the dangers of adultery, notes:

משלי ו:כה אַל תַּחְמֹד יָפְיָהּ בִּלְבָבֶךָ וְאַל תִּקָּחֲךָ בְּעַפְעַפֶּיהָ.

Prov 6:25 Do not covet her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes.

The chapter ends with the warning that a husband never forgives a man who cuckolds him, so that adultery is a self-destructive act. The assumption is that if the man “covets her beauty” he will sleep with her.

Similarly, the pilgrimage law in Exodus states:

שמות לד:כד כִּי אוֹרִישׁ גּוֹיִם מִפָּנֶיךָ וְהִרְחַבְתִּי אֶת גְּבוּלֶךָ **וְלֹא יַחְמֹד** אִישׁ אֶת אַרְצְךָ בַּעֲלֹתְךָ לֵרָאוֹת אֶת פְּנֵי יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה.

Exod 34:24 I will drive out nations from your path and enlarge your territory; **no one will covet** your land when you go up to appear before YHWH your God three times a year.

The point is that travelling to appear before YHWH leaves the land vulnerable, giving an outsider the opportunity to covet *and take* the land while the owner is away. Thus, God promises that the land will be safe during the owner’s pilgrimage.

A particularly telling source is the passage in Micah, which describes how those who covet other people’s property go about robbing them of it:

מיכה ב:א הוֹי **חֹשְׁבֵי אָוֶן וּפֹעֲלֵי רָע**עַל מִשְׁכְּבוֹתָם בְּאוֹר הַבֹּקֶר יַעֲשׂוּהָ כִּי יֶשׁ לְאֵל יָדָם. ב:ב **וְחָמְדוּ** שָׂדוֹת **וְגָזָלוּ**וּבָתִּים **וְנָשָׂאוּ**וְעָשְׁקוּ גֶּבֶר וּבֵיתוֹ וְאִישׁ וְנַחֲלָתוֹ.

Micah 2:1 Ah, those who **contemplate iniquity and design evil** on their beds; when morning dawns, they do it, for they have the power. 2:2 They **covet** fields, and **seize** them; houses, and **take** them away. They defraud men of their homes, and people of their land.

Here contemplating evil and designing stratagems go together the same way that coveting and theft do. It seems likely, therefore, that the passages cited above that do not explicitly mention taking, point to an assumption in the biblical text that coveting entails acting on this emotion. In this reading, biblical coveting does not refer to a person just desiring something in the abstract, but to planning or taking concrete steps with which to acquire that object.[5]

The LXX Translation: Desire

The LXX translators of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 used the verb *epithumeo* (ἐπιθυμέω), which the *Greek English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (*LEH*) translates as “to set one’s heart upon, to long for, to desire*.*” The Greek verb *epithumeo* is different than the English verb “covet” since it can be used for positive as well as negative desires. For example, before he is taken by the authorities, Jesus tells his disciples that he greatly desires (ἐπιθυμίᾳ ἐπεθύμησα) to have the Passover feast with them (Luke 22:15).

The LXX translators used the term *epithumeo* for all “coveting prohibitions” in both versions of the Decalogue, i.e., as a translation of both the Hebrew root ח.מ.ד as well as the root א.ו.ה, perhaps because it understood these Hebrew roots as synonyms.[6] For this reason, readers interpreting the Greek Bible (as opposed to the Hebrew Bible) were likely to miss the specific connection between ח.מ.ד and “taking.”

Philo: A Self Destructive and Dangerous Feeling

The most important Jewish exegete of the LXX version of the Torah was the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher, Philo (ca. 25 B.C.E. – 50 C.E.). He expounds upon this prohibition at length in his *On the Ten Commandments* (*De Decalogo* XXVIII; 1:142; Yonge trans.):

Last of all, the divine legislator prohibits covetousness (ἐπιθυμεῖν), knowing that desire is a thing fond of revolution and of plotting against others;

Unsurprisingly, Philo places the sin squarely in the realm of thought, though at the same time noting that craving what others have can lead to dangerous actions such as plotting and strife. He continues by explaining why this sin is worse than other emotional sins:

For all the passions of the soul are formidable, exciting and agitating it contrary to nature, and not permitting it to remain in a healthy state, but of all such passions the worst is desire. On which account each of the other passions, coming in from without and attacking the soul from external points, appears to be involuntary; but this desire alone derives its origin from ourselves, and is wholly voluntary.

Philo here argues that whereas most passions are involuntary, covetousness is under human control since it is based on an idea, namely, that something that is not yours should be yours. Such base desires have two types of negative consequences.

First, Philo argues, a covetous person may waste his life fruitlessly obsessing over the object of his or her desire. Like the mythic Tantalus, whose eternal punishment is to spend his afterlife in a place with abundant fruit and water that forever eludes his grasp, a covetous person lives a life of eternal frustration, never succeeding in attaining what he or she covets (149):

For Tantalus, whenever he seemed about to lay his hands on any of the objects which he desired, was invariably disappointed, and the man who is overcome by desire, being always thirsting for what is not present, is never satisfied, wallowing about among vain appetites.

Even worse is when the person does take the object of desire, causing strife, bloodshed, and even the collapse of social order (152-153):

Is it not owing to this passion that relationships are broken asunder, and change the good will which originates in nature into an irreconcilable enmity? And are not great countries and populous kingdoms made desolate by domestic seditions, through such causes? And are not earth and sea continually filled with novel and terrible calamities by naval battles and military expeditions for the same reason? For, both among the Greeks and barbarians, the wars between one another, and between their own different tribes, which have been so celebrated by tragedians, have all flowed from one source, namely, desire of money, or glory, or pleasure; for it is on such subjects as these that the race of mankind goes mad.

Philo suggests that although desire for other people’s possessions does not always lead to wrong action, it is always destructive, either to the self or to others. If people do not take what they desire, they are forever tortured, and if they do, they violate a core social prohibition and risk throwing society into chaos and violence.

The Root of All Sins

In line with this thinking about covetousness, Philo explains the place of this prohibition at the end of the social laws, which form the second list of the Decalogue (XXXII, 1.173-174):

The fifth [in the second list, which equals the tenth in the full listing] is that which cuts off desire, **the fountain of all iniquity**, from which flow all the most unlawful actions, whether of individuals or of states, whether important or trivial, whether sacred or profane, whether they relate to one’s life and soul, or to what are called external things; for, as I have said before, **nothing ever escapes desire**, but, like a fire in a wood, it proceeds onward, **consuming and destroying everything**.

For Philo, craving what is not one’s own is the root of all social evil. Why else does one murder, commit adultery, steal, or bear false witness?

Equal to All Other Commandments

Philo’s thinking here is reminiscent of the statement of R. Yakum (date unknown), quoted in the 9th century C.E. midrashic work *Pesikta Rabbati (21):*

רבי יקום אומר העובר לא תחמוד כאילו עובר על עשרת הדברות, לא תחמוד אנכי.

Rabbi Yakum says: “To violate ‘do not covet’ is tantamount to violating all ten commandments: ‘do not covet…’ ‘I am…’”

Following a rabbinic tradition in which a commandment from the second list is paired with a commandment from the first,[7] Rabbi Yakum reads the tenth and the first together as if they state in a sentence “do not covet Me.” In other words, not only are social sins such as adultery and theft committed because the person desires what a fellow human possesses, but “religious sins” between humans and God, are committed because a person covets being God or having divine power/authority. If God is the master of the world, how can a person desire to have that which God did not give, or act in a way God does not permit?

This point was teased out by R. Yaakov Culi (d. 1732), in his Ladino commentary on the Torah, *Me-Am Lo’ez:*

A person should contemplate somberly and reason with himself: “God is the master of my fate, not I. If I deserve to own something, surely God will not withhold it from me. But if something is not destined to be mine, then all of my pains and efforts to acquire it will come to naught. So it is futile to pursue it.”[8]

Coveting is Avoidable (Ibn Ezra)

If coveting/craving is merely a feeling, how can the Torah prohibit it? How is a person supposed to avoid a feeling? This question was tackled explicitly by Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1167) in his long commentary on Exodus (*ad loc*.):

לא תחמוד – אנשים רבים יתמהו על זאת המצוה: איך יהיה אדם שלא יחמוד דבר יפה בלבו כל מה שהוא נחמד למראה עיניו.

“Do not covet” – many people are surprised by this commandment: How is it possible for a person not to desire in his heart something beautiful, once the thing is attractive in his eyes?

To explain how such a prohibition is possible, ibn Ezra begins with a parable:

ועתה אתן לך משל. דע: כי איש כפרי שיש לו דעת נכונה, והוא רואה בת מלך שהיא יפה, לא יחמוד אותה בלבו שישכב עמה, כי ידע כי זה לא יתכן. ואל תחשוב זה הכפרי שהוא כאחד המשוגעים, שיתאוה שיהיו לו כנפים לעוף בהם בשמים, כי יתכן להיות זה

Now let me offer you a parable: A village man who has a normal social sense, when he sees the beautiful daughter of the king, will not covet in his heart the opportunity to sleep with her, for he knows that this is not possible. Do not imagine that this village person is like a crazy person who desires to have wings like a bird to fly in the sky, as if such a thing were possible.

Ibn Ezra’s first point is that coveting is not about one’s sensory reactions. The village man may find the king’s daughter attractive, but he doesn’t take such a desire seriously and think about it as an option. In like manner, he might find the idea of flying in the air to be an entertaining thought, but not something he thinks about seriously. Next, ibn Ezra touches on another point, that dividing between attractive things one desires and attractive things one does not desire is a matter of training:

כאשר אין אדם מתאוה לשכב עם אמו, אע״פ שהיא יפה, כי הרגילוהו מנעוריו לאמר לו שהיא אסורה לו.

This is akin to how a man does not desire to sleep with his mother, even if she is beautiful, since he was trained from his youth to know that she is forbidden to him.

Noting that active desire can be trained out of a person, ibn Ezra applies this thinking to the prohibition of coveting:

ככה כל משכיל שידע כי אשה יפה או ממון, לא ימצאנו אדם בעבור חכמתו ודעתו, רק כאשר חלק לו השם…. ובעבור זה המשכיל לא יקנא ויחמוד. ואחר שידע שאשת רעו אסרה לו השם, יותר היא נשגבה בעיניו מבת מלך בלב הכפרי. על כן הוא שמח בחלקו, ולא ישים אל לבו לחמוד ולהתאוות דבר שאינו שלו, כי ידע מה שהשם לא רצה לתת לו, לא יוכל לקחתו בכחו ובמחשבותו ותחבלותיו. על כן יבטח בבוראו שיכלכלנו ויעשה הטוב בעיניו.

Similarly, every intelligent person knows that a beautiful woman or money is not something an individual can obtain through wisdom or personality, it is all up to the portion doled out [to an individual] by God… For this reason, a wise person will not be jealous and will not covet. Since he knows that God has forbidden his neighbor’s wife to him, thus she is more elevated in his eyes than the princess in the eyes of the peasant. And so he is satisfied with his portion and does not allow his heart to crave and desire something that is not his. For he knows that that which God does not wish to give to him, he cannot take by force or by his thoughts or schemes. He has faith in his Creator, that He will provide for him and do what is good in His eyes.

Thus, according to Ibn Ezra, the feeling of craving, which is a concrete desire, as opposed to merely an attraction, can be suppressed through philosophical training, which accustoms a person to be content with what God has allotted to each person.

Coveting as an Active Plotting: Rabbinic Texts

Ibn Ezra’s understanding of the tenth commandment as a feeling is unusual for rabbinic interpreters of the Hebrew Bible since, as noted above, the Hebrew text associates the verb חמד with the action of taking and rabbinic interpreters tend to follow suit. For example, the third century C.E. halakhic midrash from the R. Yishmael school, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, inextricably links action and thought under the category of “coveting” (BeChodesh 8, Lauterbach trans. with adjustments):

או אפילו חומד בדיבור, ת”ל לא תחמוד כסף וזהב עליהם ולקחת לך, מה להלן עד שעושה מעשה, אף כאן עד שעושה מעשה.

Perhaps even the mere expressing of one’s desire [for the neighbor’s things] in words is also meant? But it says: “you shall not covet the silver and gold on them and keep it for yourselves” (Deut 7:25). Just as there, only the carrying out of one’s desire into practice is forbidden, so also here, it is forbidden only to carry out the desire into practice.

Gersonides (Levi ben Gershom, Ralbag, 1288-1344) also explains the tenth commandment as active planning (Exod 20:14):

וענין החמדה הוא שישתדל שיהיו לו, כאילו תאמר שיתן ממון לרעהו, שיגרש אשתו כדי שישאנה, או שימכור לו עבדו ואמתו ושורו וחמורו או אחד משאר קניניו, כי זאת היא תכונה רעה מאד להשתדל שיֵצאו קניני רעהו מתחת ידו אם לא יתרצה מעצמו למוכרם ולהוציאם מתחת ידו.

The meaning of “covet” is to attempt to attain something from one’s neighbor, for example, to offer him money to divorce his wife so that he can marry her, or to sell him his slave or his ox or his donkey or any other piece of his property. This is a very evil characteristic, to attempt to take away one’s neighbor’s possessions when he himself does not wish to sell them and part with them.

וכבר למדנו שהחמדה אינה בלב לבד, אבל יש עמה מעשה, ממה שאמרה התורה: ׳לא תחמֹד כסף וזהב עליהם ולקחת לך׳. ואמר עוד: ׳ולא יחמֹד איש את ארצך בעלֹתך לראות׳ — רוצה לומר שלא ישתדל איש לקחת אותה בעלותך לרגל; וכן אמר: ׳וחמדו שדות וגזלו׳.

We already know that coveting is not just in one’s heart, but that it entails some action from what is said in the Torah “you shall not covet the silver and gold on them and keep it for yourselves” (Deut 7:25). Similarly, [the Torah] says: “no one will covet your land when you go up to appear” (Exod 34:24), meaning to say, that no man will try to take it when you go up for pilgrimage. And [the Bible] says: “They covet fields, and seize them” (Micah 2:2).

ולזה לא יהיה עובר על לאו זה אם לא עשה מעשה באופן שיהיה לו הדבר שיחמוד.

Hence, we infer that one does not violate the prohibition if one does not actually do something in order to obtain the coveted object.

Thus, for Gersonides, the Rabbinic interpretation is the simple meaning of the text. In the Bible, coveting refers to the first step in the process of taking something from one’s fellow that is his/hers and not yours. Thus, it is not the flickering thought of coveting that is forbidden here, but rather when one seriously begins to plan how to actualize the sinful thought.

Coveting versus Desiring

Identifying coveting as an action helped the rabbis solve the MT’s switch in language between Exodus, which twice uses the word covet (ח.מ.ד) and Deuteronomy, which uses covet (ח.מ.ד) one and crave (א.ו.ה) once. The point is made clearly in the 3rd century halakhic midrash from the R. Akiva school, *Mekhilta de-Rashbi* (Exod 20:14):

[לא תחמד] ולהלן הוא או’ לא תתאוה בית רעך (דב’ ה יח) לחייב ע[ל תאוה בפני עצמה ועל] חמדה בפני עצמה

[“Do not covet”] – but later it says, “do not crave the house of your fellow” (Deut 5:18). This means that a person violates [the prohibition of craving for one thing and the prohibition] of coveting for another.

איזו היא תאוה האומר לו[יי ש…] חמדה הכובש כבושין ליטלן

What is the prohibited craving? One who says: “I wish…”[9]Coveting is one who acts concretely to take [the objects].

מנ’ התאוה אד[ם סופו לחמוד שנ’] לא תתאוה ולא תחמוד מנ’ חמד אדם סופו [לגזול שנ’ וחמדו] שדות וגזלו

How do we know that a person who craves will [ultimately come to covet? For it says:] “Do not crave…” and “do not covet” (Deut 5:18). How do we know that one who covets will end up [robbing? For it says: “They coveted] fields and took them” (Micah 2:2).

In this exegesis, the Rabbis identify a three-step process:

1. Craving (א.ו.ה) something that someone else has, prohibited by Deuteronomy’s version of the tenth commandment, “do not crave your neighbor’s household” (לא תתאוה בית רעך)
2. Coveting (ח.מ.ד), which includes planning and scheming to acquire an object that someone does not want to give you, prohibited in Exodus’ version of the tenth commandment, “do not covet your neighbor’s household” (לא תחמד בית רעך), which is a possible consequence of craving.
3. Robbing (ג.ז.ל), which a person who fails to acquire the object he covets might resort to.

Codifying the Multi-Step Prohibition: Maimonides

In his legal code *Mishneh Torah*, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) follows the *Mekhilta de-Rashbi* midrash, and codifies this prohibition accordingly. He begins with coveting (*Hilkhot Gezeila Va-aveida*1:9):

כל החומד עבדו או אמתו או ביתו וכליו של חבירו או כל דבר שאפשר לו שיקנהו ממנו **והכביד עליו ברעים והפציר בו עד שלקחו ממנו** אף על פי שנתן לו דמים רבים הרי זה עובר בלא תעשה שנ’ לא תחמד,

Anyone who covets a servant, a maidservant, a house or utensils that belong to a colleague, or any other article that he can purchase from him **and pressures him with friends and requests until he acquires it from him**, violates a negative commandment, even though he pays much money for it, the Torah states, “Do not covet” (Exod. 20:14).

The fact that the prohibition is of active plotting and not just emotional craving brings Maimonides to a complicated formulation of how *halakha* determines whether a person has violated the sin of coveting or not:

ואין לוקין על לאו זה מפני שאין בו מעשה, **ואינו עובר בלאו זה** **עד שיקח החפץ שחמד**, כענין שנ’ לא תחמד כסף וזהב עליהם ולקחת לך **חימוד שיש בו מעשה**.

This is not the kind of commandment that would be subject to corporeal punishment, for the thought of coveting does not involve a deed. However, **a person does not violate this prohibition until he takes possession of the article he covets**, “Do not covet the gold and silver on these statues and take it for yourself” (Deut. 7:25), **coveting must involve a deed**.

On one hand, plotting is in the mind, and thus a person cannot be punished for violating it. On the other hand, it only counts as plotting if the person actually acquires the object. In other words, a person retroactively knows whether he or she has violated the prohibition of coveting if one succeeds in acquiring the desired object through lawful means. This acquiring in and of itself is not forbidden, however, since it is not theft. It is merely the proof that the person did more than just desire the object but coveted it.

Maimonides clarifies this distinction between the prohibition of craving and the prohibition of coveting in the next paragraph (*Hilkhot Gezeila Va-aveida*1:10):

כל המתאוה ביתו או אשתו וכליו של חבירו וכל כיוצא בהן משאר דברים שאפשר לו לקנותן ממנו כיון שחשב בלבו היאך יקנה דבר זה ונפתה לבו בדבר עבר בלא תעשה שנ’ לא תתאוה ואין תאוה אלא בלב בלבד.

Anyone craving a home, a wife, utensils, or anything belonging to another that he can acquire from him–-from the time he thinks in his heart, “How is it possible to acquire this from him?” and his heart is aroused by this matter—he has violated a prohibition, as the Torah states “Do not crave” (Deut 5:18) – “craving” is only within the human heart.[10]

Notably, even though Maimonides distinguishes between craving and coveting, and argues that former does not involve any active pursuit, he still interprets the prohibition as a realistic wanting. Perhaps he is dealing here with the same problem ibn Ezra addressed, namely the impossibility of prohibiting someone to be attracted to something or someone.

Responding to the Sermon on the Mount?

The rabbinic emphasis on coveting as action may also reflect a response to one of Jesus’ “antitheses” in the Sermon on the Mount found in the Gospel of Matthew.[11] In this section of the Sermon, Jesus argues that it is important for his disciples to be even more righteous than the Pharisees (Matt 5:20; NRSV):

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus goes on to list ways in which his interpretation of the law is stricter than that of the Pharisees. For example, he argues that not only is murder a punishable sin, but even feeling anger toward someone or insulting them is a punishable sin (Matt 5:21-23). The important passage for our purposes is Jesus’ discussion of adultery (Matt 5:27-28):

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with craving (ἐπιθυμῆσαι)[12] has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

For Jesus, sins of the heart are equivalent to sins of action, and in this way, he argues, his interpretation of Torah is stricter and more righteous than that of the Pharisees. Whether they were bothered by criticism implicit in the Sermon on the Mount, whether they merely wanted to distance themselves from an interpretation appropriated by Christianity, or whether they took no notice of this passage at all, the rabbis’ position is the exact opposite of that taken by Jesus.

In the Rabbis’ view, it is unrealistic to prohibit feelings of attraction. For a feeling to be prohibited, it must be something the person thinks about realistically. Such a “craving” leads to active planning, in which a person works to take the desired object away from his fellow. It is this plotting that the Torah forbids in the tenth commandment of “do not covet your neighbor’s house,” as such behavior is destructive to society, the concern of the latter half of the Decalogue.

A Translator’s Postscript

As a translator, the above analysis leaves me at a loss for what English word to use. Is there an English word that implies an active desire with the likelihood, but not the necessity, of taking action? I have been unable to come up with one. In the past, I have proposed transliteration for certain terms whose nuances cannot be captured in English (e.g., the offerings described in Leviticus 1-3), but it hardly seems appropriate here. Hopefully, some future translator will succeed in finding an appropriate English equivalent for חמד, and I promise to admire and praise this work, without coveting (in any sense) the translator’s talent.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/do-not-covet-is-it-a-feeling-or-an-action)

1. The LXX also includes after ox and donkey “or any of his cattle.”
2. The SP uses תחמד in both cases; the LXX uses the same verb both times, ἐπιθυμήσεις, which means “crave, desire, long for.” This is the same verb it uses in Exodus.
3. From one perspective, the most significant difference in MT between Deuteronomy and Exodus is that the prohibition regarding coveting your neighbor’s wife appears separately, i.e., not as a subcategory of “household,” but as its own prohibition, with the list of household items that one is forbidden to “crave” coming afterwards. The matter is different in the LXX and the SP, however, which elide the differences between Deuteronomy and Exodus, but in opposite ways. LXX follows Deuteronomy, and has desiring your neighbor’s wife as a separate prohibition in both versions. In contrast, SP follows Exodus, and lists the wife as a subcategory of “household items” in both versions.
4. In addition to the change in order and the change in verb, the list is slightly expanded in Deuteronomy, as it includes a reference to “his field” that is absent in Exodus. Again, the LXX includes “or any of his cattle” after “ox and donkey.”
5. See discussion in, Alexander Rofé, “The Tenth Commandment in the Light of Four Deuteronomic Laws,” in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition* (eds. Ben-Tsiyon Segal and Gershon Levi; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 45-65.
6. See, e.g., Num 11:4 where ויתאוו תאוה “craved a craving” is again translated with the Greek *epithumeo*. It is also possible that the LXX translation of Deuteronomy is harmonizing with Exodus, which would also explain why he adjusts the word order in Exodus, to harmonize with Deuteronomy. Alternatively, it is possible that he had a different *Vorlage*, and that the harmonizing occurred at an earlier stage.
7. This is a popular midrashic theme that goes back to the earliest midrashic compilations, such as the 3rd century *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* (Yitro, *BeChodesh* 8), though which commandment from the second set should be paired with which commandment from the first set differs between sources.
8. Counterintuitively, some traditional sources leave room for “positive coveting”; specifically, the *Tz’enah Ur’enah,*the medieval Yiddish paraphrase of portions of the Hebrew Bible written in the late 16th century by R. Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi (1550-1625), and especially popular among women*.* It offers this example (*Yitro*):

Do not envy your friend’s prosperity. This is a sin of the heart, and a very grave one…. [But] if you see your friend learning Torah, doing good deeds, and causing others to study Torah, it is permissible to envy him his accomplishments in order to be spurred on to similar deeds. It is also permitted to covet a friend’s daughter as a wife for one’s son.

1. The genizah fragment is broken here and this line has no parallel in *Midrash HaGadol*.
2. Maimonides continues in the same vein as *Mekhilta de-Rashbi*, arguing that failed coveting leads to robbery (1:11):

התאוה מביאה לידי חימוד והחימוד מביא לידי גזל, שאם לא רצו הבעלים למכור אף על פי שהרבה להם בדמים והפציר ברעים יבא לידי גזל שנ’ וחמדו בתים וגזלו, ואם עמדו הבעלים בפניו להציל ממונם או מנעוהו לגזול יבא לידי שפיכות דמים, צא ולמד ממעשה אחאב ונבות.

Craving leads to coveting, and coveting leads to robbery, for if the owners do not wish to sell, even if one offers more and more money and has pressured his friends, he will come to rob him, for it says, “they coveted fields and took them.” And if the owners push back and try to keep their property or stop him from robbing them, it will end up in bloodshed, as we see in the story of Ahab and Naboth (1 Kings 21).

1. Luke 6 has a shorter version of this speech, called the Sermon on the Plain, but as Luke’s version has no parallel to the verses we will discuss here, I will stick to Matthew’s terminology. For an accessible introduction to this sermon and its aims, see Dale C. Allison, Jr. [“Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7),”](https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/main-articles/sermon-on-the-mount) *Bible Odyssey* [cited 26 Jan 2018].
2. The Gospel’s term for craving is standard Greek term used in the LXX for the prohibitions of coveting and craving.