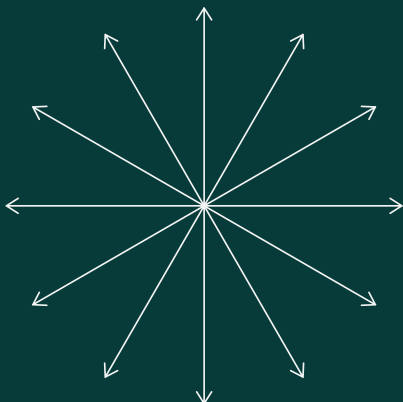

TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION IN CHRISTIANITY: AN EXAMINATION OF ANCIENT INSTRUCTION MANUALS



— THE BOOK OF —
EXODUS



TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

When asked what technical communication is and what technical communicators do, it is very easy to explain and view technical communication as a more modern concept. Technical communicators can connect their profession to the world of UX (user-design), AI, and machine-learning. Technical communication, however, is not exactly new and, “in truth[,] technical communication has been around as long as humans have used technology to expand their abilities (2022). If the aforementioned is the case, could examples of technical communication extend even towards ancient biblical texts? Are they simply written or do we consider oratorical practices as a part of technical communication? This case study seeks to dive deep into the Book of Exodus from the Holy Bible in order to decide if it can be considered a form of technical communication. For the sake of this study, the version of the Holy Bible under scrutinization will be the King James version.

What is Technical Communication?

In order to fully examine the Book of Exodus and decide whether or not there are examples of technical communication within its pages, it is important to decide upon the definition of technical communication. By doing this, this case study will have concrete criteria from which our subject in question can be judged. The Society for Technical Communication (STC) defines technical communication as any form of communication that essentially:

- Communicating about technical or specialized topics, such as computer applications, medical procedures, or environmental regulations.
- Communicating by using technology, such as web pages, help files, or social media sites.
- Providing instructions about how to do something, regardless of how technical the task is or even if technology is used to create or distribute that communication (2021).

In addition, the STC further puts forth the idea that technical communication and its practitioners should provide a user experience such that the information provided is highly accessible and easy to understand. While there might be jargon specific to a technological process or product, the language

surrounding the communication that reaches the users should be easily identified to a much wider audience. In essence, as the STC concludes, “What all technical communicators have in common is a user-centered approach to providing the right information, in the right way, at the right time to make someone’s life easier and more productive” (2021). For the purpose of this paper, the definition of technical communication that will be most important is that it provides instructions on how to do something. In order to do so, it is important to understand the context of the Book of Exodus and where in particular within the text instructions are provided.

The Book of Exodus

For those reading this paper and unfamiliar with the Book of Exodus, these pages within the Old Testament of the Holy Bible chronicle the journey of the Israelites as they are delivered from slavery in Egypt, their near starvation in the wilderness, how they eventually question and resent God for taking them out of what they’d learned to contend with even if it had been slavery, and eventually the promises from God for the future generations to come who will reach and experience what He calls “the promised land” (Online) Throughout the chapters of this book, while God eventually provides a stone tablet which will hold His Commandments, a lot of what is communicated to the Israelites is oratorical. Moses, their deliverer and an Israelite raised by the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter until adulthood, is typically the one who speaks to the people after God speaks to him.

For the purpose of this study, the focus will begin in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Book of Exodus. By this point - for context - God has already provided the stone tablet upon which the ten commandments were written, an example of which can be seen in the figure below alongside them translated into English. According to the Smithsonian magazine, the image on the left is of what is “[k]nown as the ‘Samaritan Decalogues’” and “was likely carved in the late Roman or Byzantine era sometime between 300 and 500 A.D. and may have graced the entryway to a long-crumbled synagogue” (Lewis, 2016). Verbally, to Moses, He has even outlined the consequences for not adhering to his commandments, providing context for various scenarios and what a true follower of God would in order to remain righteous in His eyes.

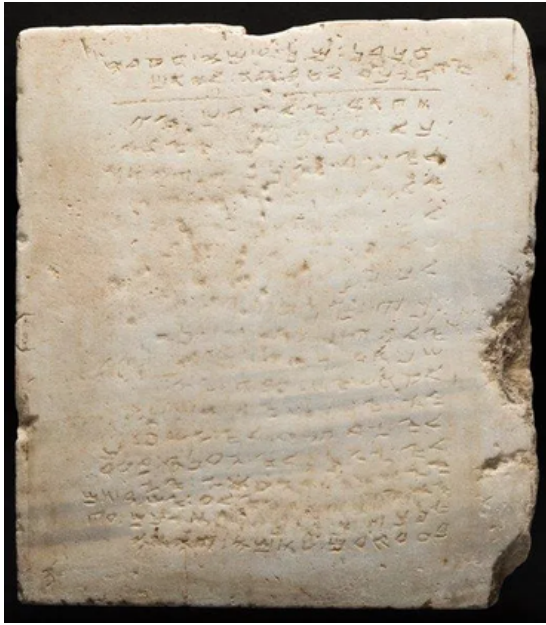


Figure 1A. Oldest known carving of 10-commandments

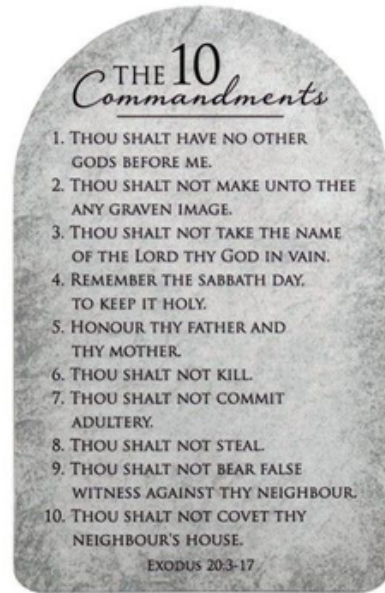


Figure 1B. Modern stone carving of 10-commandments for sale

It can even be argued that the ten commandments themselves - moral codes - can be considered a form of technical communication. They follow the same criteria by which chapter twenty-five will be measured when defining technical communication: *providing instructions on how to do something*. In this instance, the instructions are on how to truly live in a manner that is pleasing to their God. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, moral is defined as “relating to the standards of good or bad behaviour, fairness, honesty, etc. that each person believes in” and code is “a system of words, letters, or signs used to represent a message in secret form, or a system of numbers, letters, or signals used to represent something” (Online). A moral code then can be a system of words, or instructions, by which the standards of good and bad behavior are outlined. The Ten Commandments are instructions, if this argument is to be maintained. But is this technical communication?

One of the examples the STC uses when defining technical communication as instructions and the value of technical communication is for the instructions - or, as provided on the page, the “technical illustrations” - to “clarify steps or identify the parts of a product, letting users focus on getting their task done quickly or more accurately” (2021.) Clarifying the steps would include said steps happening in some sort of sequential order, which isn’t necessarily the case for the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments aren’t steps, perse, but conditions the Israelites of God need to meet in order to live godly lives and potentially get into heaven. They can even be considered traits or virtues their God is

asking for them to possess such as being fair, honest, loyal, and respectful to one another and one another's properties, etc. So, for the sake of this argument, the Ten Commandments will not be considered a form of technical communication - which is why the attention needs to shift to chapters twenty-five through twenty-seven where the real meat of this paper lies.

Exodus 25 - 27: An Ancient Instruction Manual

This chapter begins with God instructing Moses to guide the Israelites on the sort of offering that He wanted them to give to him. From verse 8 onwards, He begins instructing through Moses on how to, "make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall thee make of it" (Online). When the Israelites left Egypt to journey into the wilderness for their freedom, they had all that they could carry amongst themselves. Yet and still, in order to make the offerings, the altar God would request, and the very sanctuary in question - they already had and would have all the materials needed to get the tasks completed. Fitting in line with what is needed for technical communication, in order for the communication - or instructions - to be true technical communication, the instructions need to be clear and understandable, the language used at the time needed to be understood by all, and the materials and constructs He was asking for weren't things the people of the time wouldn't have been able to identify or be familiar with.

For example, as we get into the instructions starting in Verse 9, God tells Moses how exactly to build the sanctuary for Him to "dwell" among the Israelites with clear specifications for how the sanctuary should be with measurements the Israelites should know with terms the Israelites would understand for their time period:

10 And they shall make an ark of shittim wood: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof, and a cubit and a half the height thereof.

11 And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, within and without shalt thou over-

lay it, and shalt make upon it a crown of gold round about.

12 And thou shalt cast four rings of gold for it, and put them in the four corners thereof; and two rings shall be in the one side of it, and two rings in the other side of it.

13 And thou shalt make staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold.

14 And thou shalt put the staves into the rings by the sides of the ark, that the ark may be borne with them.

15 The staves shall be in the rings of the ark: they shall not be taken from it.

16 And thou shalt put into the ark the testimony which I shall give thee.

17 And thou shalt make a mercy seat of pure gold: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof.

18 And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat (Online).

According to the Jewish Virtual Library, there are five small units of length are mentioned in the Bible. Their exact length is not explicit but their interrelations are generally established: kaneh (qaneh), "reed"; 'ammah, "cubit"; zeret, "span"; tefah/tofah, "handbreadth"; and 'ezba', "fingerbreadth" (Jewish Virtual Library) .In fact, a lot of the original measurements when it comes to lengths were measured against the extremities such as digits as can be seen in the table below:

	reed	cubit	handbreadth	fingerbreadth
According to the short cubit				
reed	1			
cubit	6	1		
handbreadth	36	6	1	
fingerbreadth	144	24	4	1
According to the long cubit				
reed	1			
cubit	6	1		
handbreadth	42	7	1	
fingerbreadth	168	28	4	1

Figure 2. Units of Length-Bible

Cubit would be the most commonly used, particularly in the books of Ezekiel and Chronicles. This means that although Exodus would be the first time the measurement is mentioned, it is most certainly not the only time the measurement is ever mentioned, thus normalizing the terminology even more. For example, The Jewish Virtual Library also provides historical context for the measurement of the cubit, stating:

“In the description of the future sanctuary in Ezekiel 40:5 (see also 48:13), the second or long cubit is mentioned: ‘and the length of the measuring reed in the man's hand was six long cubits, each being a cubit and a handbreadth in length.’ The cubit in this description exceeds the normal cubit by one handbreadth and thus contains seven handbreadths and not six like the short cubit. Ezekiel uses the long Persian cubit, which was in use also in Mesopotamia, and which may have come into use in Palestine during the time of the Return” (Jewish Virtual Library).

So, while this wouldn't necessarily translate into immediate understanding for the modern audience, for the Israelites - and arguably any culture living nearby outside of them - these terminologies and measurements are not strange or foreign concepts. To put it plainly, the instructions God orated were pretty understandable and easy to follow at the period of time in which they were given, making these instructions an example of technical communication during this point in history that the everyday person would have been able to understand and accomplish with little to no difficulty.

Moreover, even the materials used would not have been hard to obtain or understand what they were for the Israelites would have either already had them in their possessions or could have easily retrieved them from their current landscape. For doubting God and not following in his commandments, the Israelites who had been delivered from Egypt would not make it to the Promised Land, but would wander for the next forty years in the harsh wilderness of Sinai. The most common trees they would encounter on this journey were shittah trees. It is from this they would be able to erect the shittim wood God calls for in order to create the very sanctuary he requested, which can be seen in the image below:



Figure 3. *Shittim Acacia Wood Blocks*

Counterargument

Nevertheless, can an argument be made that these instructions are - in fact - not technical communication at all? What would make these instructions not align with the definition of technical communication? While the instructions provided in the Book of Exodus follow along with the criteria highlighted at the beginning of this study, which were to provide instructions on how to do something, it is also important to note that there are needs for instructions - or how-to guides - that the modern world requires of technical communicators and those who provide these aforementioned instructions.

In a blog post on Hubspot, Principal Marketing Manager Caroline Forsey defines a how-to guide as “step-by-step instructions on a process from start to finish. How-to guides can also offer best practices, examples of ideal outcomes, or trends and insights on guide topics” (Forsey, 2023). She also goes on to outline what a good how-to guide does for the customers as well as for the business, and even provides the following steps (a how-to guide) to create a how-to guide:

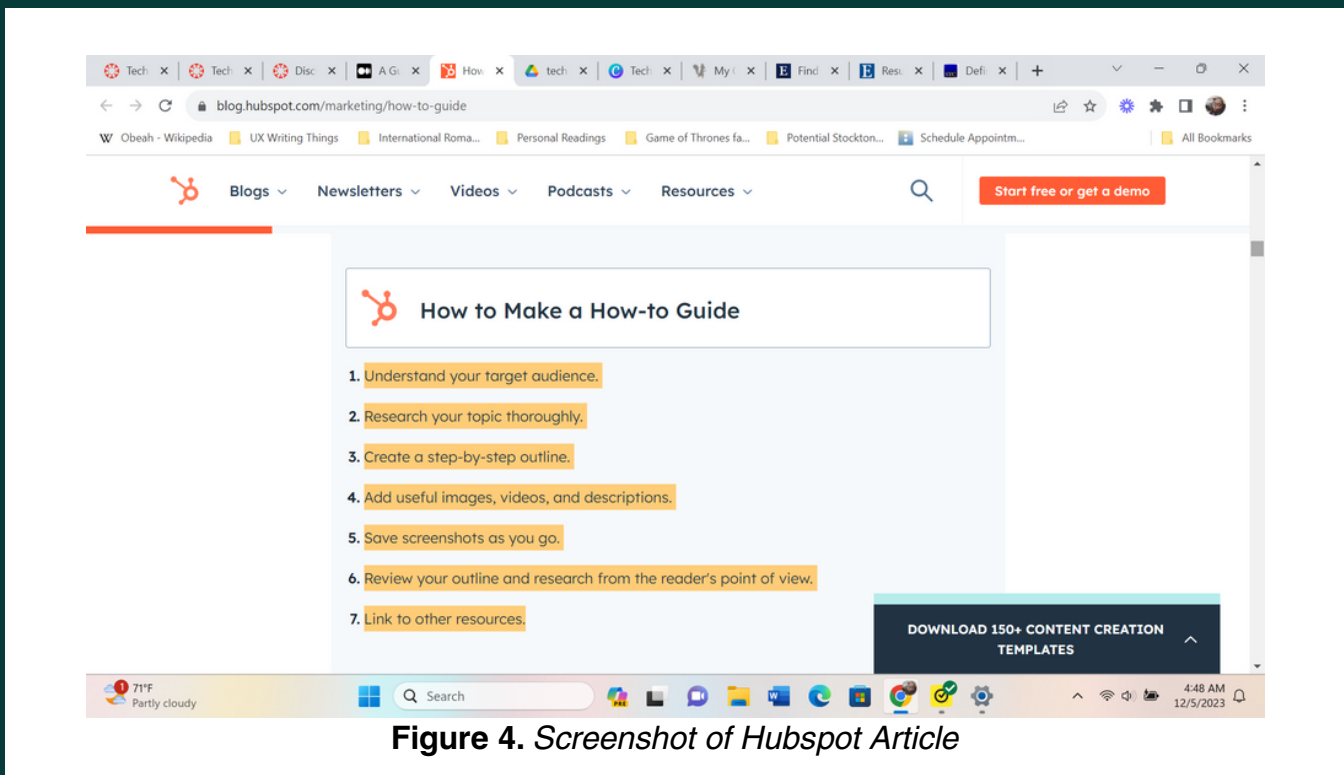


Figure 4. Screenshot of Hubspot Article

One of the most important steps to creating a how-to guide - or, to better connect it to the Book of Exodus, an instruction manual - is to understand the target audience. This requires viewing the act of providing instructions from the user’s point of view and therefore, assuming that they are a beginner. In this instance, given the materials needed in order to build the sanctuary for their God and the lengths of measurement needed in order to use the materials they would have possessed correctly, the instructions provided were not meant for a beginner building a sanctuary for the first time. They might have used the materials and known how to measure in order to build what was needed, but not every Israelite who made the journey helped build the pyramids and other structures of Egypt. This makes the beginning of the argument that perhaps the instructions on how to build a sanctuary for God doesn’t exactly fall in the criteria of what would make it technical communication.

In addition, a good how-to guide, according to the article by Caroline Dorsey, is backed by visuals and heavy descriptions. There is no denying the descriptiveness of the text such as when God says that, “And thou shalt cast four rings of gold for it, and put them in the four corners thereof; and two rings shall be in the one side of it, and two rings in the other side of it” as well as “And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be” (Online). In these verses, God uses

excellent verbal representations of his specifications. However, returning to the previous point, there is an assumption in these instructions that every single Israelite who would help in building the sanctuary would know - without a shadow of a doubt - what a cherubim would look like after years of being subjugated by the Egyptians and forced to assimilate to their culture. There also are no visuals that can be ascertained from the reading; the majority of the instructions from God, save for the Ten Commandments, are delivered oratorically. There are no examples of the Israelites being shown imagery of what was expected of them. They were simply to know what God wanted of them and they were to accomplish the task, making it even easier to question whether or not this is an example of technical communication.

Conclusion

Are the instructions provided within the Book of Exodus an example of technical communication for the time period from which they would come? There can be arguments made against and for them. On one hand, the definition that the STC provides allows the wiggle room needed to explain the instructions away as the following characteristics:

- Communicating about technical or specialized topics, such as computer applications, medical procedures, or environmental regulations.
- Providing instructions about how to do something, regardless of how technical the task is or even if technology is used to create or distribute that communication.

The sanctuary for their God could easily be considered a specialized topic for the Israelites at the time because this was a procedure in which there were specifications orated from God and there were instructions on how to do so using the technologies (and materials) they would have access to at the time. It can even be argued that the steps to build the sanctuary and accent it were given in a equential order, thus making them step-by-step instructions that the common Israelite could have followed without too much direction needed. Moreover, technical communication - as mentioned before - has to be easily accessible. This means that the instructions themselves have to be easily accessible, usable for the targeted audience, and be able to make the Israelites' lives easier - not harder.

What makes these instructions technical communication is that while God could have easily just told the Israelites to build a sanctuary, He was very clear on the specifications for what was needed to build it as well as the materials and tools needed in order to make it - thus doing what technical communicators do when they let “users focus on getting their task done quickly or more accurately” (2021). In the future, more research can be done to examine the Holy Bible in its entirety to ascertain whether there are other potential examples of technical communication in these ancient texts and what that might mean for the origins of technical communication as a field.

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