## UNIVERSITATEA "BABEŞ-BOLYAI" FACULTATEA DE TEOLOGIE ORTODOXĂ ŞCOALA DOCTORALĂ "ISIDOR TODORAN"

# THE DECALOGUE'S STATUS IN JUDAISM AND ITS VALUE TODAY

- DOCTORAL DISSERTATION -

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**Key-words:** Decalogue, Mosaic Law, Covenant, Commandment, Deliverance, Love, Respect, Promise, Loyalty

#### Introduction

The paper *The Decalogue's Status in Judaism and its Value Today* starts by approaching the main terminological elements, the biblical, Judaic, and patristic prerequisites of the subject, as well as the research level in the Romanian and international area. The paper then follows a two-fold structure: the commandments regarding our attitude towards God (the first four), and those regarding the ideal way of relating to others (the last six), adopting Calvin's division.

For its basis, the paper uses the statements found in the Scripture on the given subject. Hebrew resources represent another important source of information; as a result, we have rendered some opinions of Philo of Alexandria, Titus Flavius Josephus, assertions found in Talmud, as well as statements found in the Qumran Caves Scrolls. As far as the Church fathers are concerned, we have referred to the writings of Clement of Alexandria, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John Cassian, St. John Damascene, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Basil the Great.

Moses is credited with writing the Torah, while the book of *Exodus* presents the Law he received on the Mount of Sinai. Meanwhile, a great majority of researchers mention, "Moses was the one to consolidate the very first nation in the world, with its own, well-established legislation." He was the man God chose to fulfill one of the most important tasks in the history of mankind – conveying the moral laws which will eventually become the foundation of interpersonal relationships<sup>2</sup>.

Mount Sinai was also the place where the first roots of the faith in one God had formed – faith that was going to flood the earth with the Lord's knowledge (*Zach.* 14, 9)<sup>3</sup>. Moses becomes a fierce warrior who will veer God's people away from idolatry, always keeping the monotheist faith alive. He will become known as the greatest prophet, "who will universalize the one, true God through the Hebrew people."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Baruch TERCATIN, Din înțelepciunea Torei și a Hasidismului (București: Hasefer, 2003)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> TON, Oameni mari din Vechiul Testament (Oradea: Cartea Creștină, 2004), 117

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Werner KELLER, *Şi Biblia are totuşi drepate*, 1979, 137

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Max I. DIMONT, *apud* POPA, *Profeții oratori ai Vechiului Testament* (Oradea: Editura Universității din Oradea, 2011), 29

#### Part I

The commandments depicted on the first stone tablet refer to the relationship between man and God. God should be put first through our choice of serving Him. According to *Deuteronomy* 6, 4-9, *Shema Israel*, the Israelites were asked to bestow absolute love on the only true God.

Within the first commandment (*Existence in and of Himself*), we have primarily addressed the meaning behind the name God uses at the beginning of the Decalogue, YHWH. We have then discussed the main reason why the Lord demands the worship of the Jewish people, namely, their deliverance from under the Egyptian slavery. Then we have analyzed God's requirement of eliminating the idols and offering exclusive adoration to the True One. And lastly, we made observations regarding this commandment's applicability nowadays.

The first commandment is of particular importance and lays the foundation for all the others, given that it allows God to reveal His identity. He shows Himself through the name YHWH, a name that encompasses distinct meanings. Some of them have been revealed in the Scripture, while others continue to conceal great mysteries. When Moses, the leader of the people, faces the Pharaoh, he utters the Name of the One who sent him and tasked him with asking for the people's deliverance. In doing so, Moses was graced to disclose the Name of the One Who Can't Be Named. God proclaims Himself as the only One who truly exists, the One who creates independently by His own power. Unlike the other gods, He is the Definition of Life, the Person who brings everything into existence, the One who can decide regarding good and evil, and who can devise a flawless and infrangible moral code.

This commandment bears with it the essence of what God has done for the people, namely, the deliverance from slavery, so they can receive a whole new status: that of people free to act by the divine precepts passed on Mount Sinai. YHWH promised Israel something special, a better land, but He didn't stop there: God named Israel His firstborn, a people He created for His own glory.

Therefore, we conclude that this commandment given to the Jewish people thousands of years ago is still true for Christians today. The moral code has remained the same, seeing that God has remained the same through the passing of time. The Jewish deliverance from the Egyptian slavery is a symbol for the deliverance of all people through the faith in Christ's sacrifice. Therefore, we are called to serve this one God and Deliverer, leading a Christ-like life,

each day experiencing the exodus from the slavery of our old, sinful life, and walking in the deeds He has laid before us since the beginning of time.

Within the second commandment (Forbidding idolatry. Serving the one, true God) we find notes regarding the meaning of idolatry, as well as times when the Israelites have broken this exhortation. Furthermore, there are additional explanations relating to divine jealousy, and the consequences of worshiping false gods. Finally, there is an emphasis on the commandment's validity in the present day.

In the second commandment, we see God revealing His will in an even more apparent way. The first commandment is now complete and clarified: He forbids the people from building any kind of idols or any image of the one, true God. Also, we find a list of elements that could become objects of worship, may they be of cosmic nature, on earth, or in the water. In other words, we are talking about manufactured instances, which cannot exist in and of themselves. Unlike these, the One who designed and created them through *Logos*, is the God who transcends matter yet also supports it.

It is no wonder He demands exclusive worship and will not accept sharing His glory with anything that exists merely through His sovereignty, and only for as long as He allows it. In the Scripture, the idols are depicted in an ironic manner, sarcastic even: blind, deaf, and infirm (*Ps.* 115). All of this is meant to emphasize the futility of worshipping them, as well as the seriousness of turning one's heart toward them.

Through His teaching, Christ showed mankind that idols can be more than mere objects carved for the sole purpose of worship. On many occasions, He addressed the problem of improperly-channeled attitudes, such as focusing on irrelevant aspects, which can turn into idolatrous behavior. Where Christians are concerned, idolatry can be clearly visible through the lack of God's supereminence in their lives. Therefore, the aforementioned objects of worship can become either material elements, events, one's self, or other people.

The main reason why both the ancient Israel and we, contemporary Christians, are motivated to keep the second commandment lies right within the deliverance God offers. For them – deliverance from the Pharaoh's slavery, and for us – deliverance from the slavery of sin and death, which was made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, Son of God.

The third commandment (*Honoring the divine Name*) includes references to the merit given to the Name in ancient times, as well as references to the meanings of the main names God

has revealed Himself through in the Scriptures. We have then addressed the definite aspects pointed out by the commandment, namely the ways in which God's Name can be dishonored. We have also mentioned the consequences that come with breaking this clause, as well as a few observations regarding the honor given to the divine Name in postmodernism.

If the first commandment allows God to reveal His identity, the third commandment puts a clear emphasis on the value of the divine Name, which requires utmost reverence in uttering it. The reason why the commandment forbids taking the Name of the Lord in vain is clear: the divine Name is holy, consequently anyone wishing to proclaim it or invoke it must consider the Name's unblemished character. Meanwhile, anyone wishing to come close to Him must become holy. It is not by chance that in the scene with "The Burning Bush," YHWH commandments Moses to remove his sandals, for the ground was holy. This was an instance in which God revealed His Name in a very particular way (*Ex.* 3, 1-10).

Most researchers tend to equate this commandment's defiance with blasphemy, perjury, uttering falsehoods about Him, and with any trivial usage of the holy Name. Within the Decalogue, Israel is actually forbidden to make a false oath or to use YHWH's Name to bear false witness.

Today, just like in the old times, the third commandment is broken in various ways: people make promises of great deeds, but few of them keep their word, even though the promises often take the shape of an oath, be it in the holy Name or on the Bible. The problem of broken promises begins in the narrowest sphere – the family – where the spouses promise each other mutual faithfulness; in many homes, however, this oath does not last. We can also mention the plethora of insults addressed to God, seeing that some use the holy Name with no boundaries.

We can conclude the commandment requires using the divine Name with utmost respect, that uttering the Name should always be accompanied by praise, gratitude, and an authentic attitude.

Within the fourth commandment (*God's rest and rehabilitating the creation in the cult*), we firstly addressed the history of the Sabbath day, and then we made observations regarding the types of rest suggested in the commandment, and its motivations. We have also referred to the Sabbath as a symbol of the covenant between YHWH and Israel, to the connection between Sabbath and the Day of the Lord, and also to the ways in which the commandment applies to us today.

According to the Decalogue, the forth commandment refers primarily to Israel, having been given as the symbol of the covenant between the Creator and His people. Israel was the only people in ancient times that observed a special rest day each week. Observing this day was not only mandatory, but it also brought blessings upon those who kept it. The source of the commandment goes all the way back to Creation, but once the Decalogue was issued, the commandment assumed a whole new meaning, representing the relationship between God and His people.

The commandment describes two types of rest – physical and spiritual – which become intertwined. Through physical rest, the Israelites would forever remember the Deliverer offered them a day of weekly leisure following their hard work. Alternatively, the spiritual rest would offer them the opportunity to show their gratitude toward what God has done for them, expressing it through worship, praise, and thankfulness. The commandment begins with the phrase "Remember the Sabbath day..." In other words, the Israelites had to look back on their former status of slaves with no freedom – and then look in perspective at their new status, that of free people. In the light of these meditations, each one should think, act, and rejoice in each Sabbath, in honor of the One who saved them.

Starting with the first years of the early Church, up until now, the Sabbath is observed on Sunday, in remembrance of Christ's resurrection. His death and His return to life represent the means of saving mankind from sin and from Satan's dominion. Therefore, Christians celebrate this deliverance by holding meetings with the community. Furthermore, Sundays should be observed by ceasing any mundane activities, by diving deeper into knowing God, and by becoming more aware of the rest received through Christ.

However, nowadays, there is a great discrepancy between work and rest. People get involved in increasingly more activities which – in spite of not being ungraceful in and of themselves – deter their attention from the One who requires our celebration in the rest day, namely Jesus, our Savior.

The commandments we find on the first stone tablet address the relationship between man and his Maker. The man, created after His own image, is due to give Him honor and love the One who gave him life; not just formally, but to the full extent of his abilities.

#### Part II

The second set of commandments essentially address the subject of loving your neighbor. Honoring the first four laws, in regard to God, is proved by showing respect to those around you. The next six commandments can be summarized by Christ's exhortation: In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you.

To analyze the fifth commandment (*Family*. *Honoring parents*), we have commented upon Old and New Testament elements, but also upon the commandment's applicability these days. Meanwhile, we have made observations regarding the parents' responsibilities, various ways of honoring them and leaders in general, as well the promise which accompanies the divine imperative.

The fifth commandment is often regarded as the connection point between the two stone tablets, making the transition between the divine precepts regarding the relationship with God and those regarding the relationship with the neighbor. In Judaism, the commandment had a rather particular meaning, that of bestowing value and honor upon authority. Therefore, when we think about honoring our parents, we think about the fact that they need to be cherished and respected by their children.

In the OT and in modern Judaism, as well as in Christianity, the fifth commandment receives its due respect, seeing that it addresses a family matter, and the family remains the bottom pillar of society. This commandment must be applied in our homes, if society wants to survive. The OT and the NT repeatedly emphasize the merit of keeping this commandment. Let us make notice of the fact that in the Scripture from *Ex.* 21, 12-17, we see that breaking this commandment appears among the three capital sins: murder, theft and dishonoring parents. God had established the punishment for all of these sins was death.

The commandment remains valid throughout all generations and across all cultures; meanwhile, the approach method regarding this exhortation comes with repercussions on the descendants, in the sense that parents offer their children an example through the way they honor those who have given life to them. In fact, God mentions that cherishing one's parents is one of the factors contributing to man's happiness and to leading a blessed life on earth.

Within the sixth commandment (*Cherishing life*), we have addressed – in addition to the terms' significance – some controversial problems related to the commandment. Furthermore,

we have made observations regarding the way in which this clause is presented in the Old Testament, in the Savior's statements, as well as specifications regarding its actuality.

The sixth commandment reminds us life is a gift from God, given that man is created in His image. Therefore, taking someone's life affronts God's image.

We have mentioned some of the most controversial issues regarding this interdiction, including abortion, euthanasia, suicide, and war. Researchers have different opinions in relation to these practices, but we consider all of them to be against the teachings of the Holy Scripture, especially if we study them in the light of the New Testament. Although in the OT, under certain circumstances, wars and murders were encouraged, in the New Testament era, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, we see the Savior giving us a new understanding of these practices. He addresses the root of all murder – anger and hatred. If these were disposed of, the act itself would surely be annihilated. The Apostles were in agreement with the Savior, especially Apostle Paul, who deals with the problem of anger at length, advising his contemporaries to avoid it and replace it with love. Furthermore, the Church fathers also address the seriousness of breaking this commandment, offering practical solutions for avoiding this sin.

Today, we are called to learn from history and avoid repeating the same unjust acts. This, in turn, implies educating our children and guiding them towards healthy morals. If we consider ourselves Christians, and we say we know the principles of the Holy Scripture, we have the duty of conveying God's truth and will to the next generations. Then, instead of war and hatred, we will reap peace, unity, and Christ-like love.

In addressing the seventh commandment (*Faithfulness and honor*), we have mentioned the meaning of the terms used in the paper, while also specifying the commandment's purpose, as well as the consequences of breaking it. Furthermore, we have referred to the Old and New Testament's view, including the way the modern civilization is called to obey this exhortation.

Although many people are of the opinion that the seventh commandment is controversial and antiquated, it remains actual and worthy of honoring it. Just like the first commandment shows us God required absolute faithfulness from Israel, this clause requires mutual faithfulness between partners.

Ever since the beginning, the Creator has planned for each man to marry one wife, thus emphasizing the sacred character of marriage. No doubt, humankind – through the centuries – has diverged from this precept, following the slippery slope of infidelity.

The commandment's purpose is based on God's concern toward the sexual health of His people, and toward the stability of the Jewish homes. Given that the family was considered the fundamental cell of society, any divergence from the divine standards compromised the home's balance. The list of capital sins includes adultery, and in the OT, God decided death was going to be the punishment for it.

In the NT, both the Savior and Apostle Paul emphasize in their teachings the seriousness of this sin. Within the Mount on the Sermon, Lord Christ – just like in the sixth commandment – addresses the root of adultery, underlining the fact that both the exterior act and the interior attitude are blameworthy.

When we referred to the eighth commandment (*Perpetuity of property*), we analyzed theft in the context of the Jewish culture, the various forms theft can take, the consequences and the antidote for it, as well as the commandment's applicability in today's culture.

In the Jewish culture, primarily in the Mosaic Law, the principle of equality was highly encouraged, as well as the principle of reciprocity. In other words, the property of your neighbor was considered holy, regardless of whether your neighbor was rich, poor, or a slave. This commandment intended to protect the people's possessions and personal freedom.

Generosity is one way to thwart theft. It was not arbitrary that the Creator commanded people to work for six days, and then have a day of rest. The Torah highly encourages hard work, specifying that philanthropy is a virtue that set the Israelites apart from the other nations. In the NT, Apostle Paul taught those in his generation that honest work will keep them away from theft.

The principle of respecting property is still valid today, although it is increasingly broken. It is necessary for people to assimilate this value of honor and honesty early on, through civic and Bible-based education, acquiring a correct understanding of the reasons behind the divine commandment. Thus, they will keep the commandment when others see them, but also in secret.

For the ninth commandment (*Living in truth*), we pointed out terminological aspects, the way it was accepted in a Jewish context, its difficultness, and its actuality today. In the Jewish culture, the ninth commandment referred in particular to official false testimonies. Back then, the rumors regarding someone would be verified through witness statements. However, the Israelites have often broken this divine exhortation, bearing the consequences.

Through the centuries, lying has appeared in multiple shapes and forms; unfortunately, lying is present in every sector of life today. We see it in politics, education, and culture. The

truth is professed less and less often, and those courageous enough to stand by the truth are often laughed at. We live in a cultural context celebrating relativism, and denying the existence of some incontestable truths. It is widely considered that each man can create his own truth, and be in his right to do so. However, Jesus Christ has clearly stated that only He is the Truth. Therefore, Christians are called to stand by their faith in an absolute Being, the Source of ethics and the One whose Word is insurmountable.

Finally, within the tenth commandment (*Controlling desires*), we have explored the following aspects: the meaning of the terms, the objects forbidden to desires, the Judaic and Islamic approach to this commandment, the boundary between desire and greed, and the commandment's applicability today.

Unlike the others, this commandment relates primarily to the intentions found in a man's mind. The other nine referred mainly to exterior acts. Therefore, we can consider this specification as being more demanding. Its seriousness bears a close resemblance to the Sermon on the Mount, where the Savior addresses the roots, the intentions on which sin is based. This norm closes the commandment list on the second stone tablet, and it also encapsulates the Decalogue in a high note.

Nowadays, greed and desires, in general, are flaunted and encouraged by the media, starting with food, clothes, and cars; even celebrities seek to instigate sin through their language and attitude. In a context that is increasingly filthy, we consider the possibility of confronting desires that contradict the will of the Holy Spirit, through His power, and through the fact that He offers us the freedom of choosing the good.

The importance of the commandments on the second stone table consists of the fact that, when God delivered His people from the Egyptian slavery, He wanted the people to keep their freedom by exhibiting an appropriate attitude toward their neighbors: God had given them freedom, so they could offer freedom to their neighbors. This could be accomplished by honoring their parents and showing respect to others. Today's believers should live according to the same exhortations and principles. If we show respect to those around us, we will not hate them, deceive them, steal from them, and will not covet what is not ours.

#### **Conclusions**

The researchers' opinions regarding the Decalogue's applicability are diverse, as it can be seen from this paper. Some think these norms are antiquated, and that they have been given strictly to the chosen people. Others, however, strongly believe in their applicability today. We have considered and advocated for the idea of the commandments' applicability for each generation. Nevertheless, in our culture, a great majority of governments neglect these exhortations, considering them obsolete. This here paper presents an attempt to update them – evidently, the updates are based on the Holy Scripture and on the arguments offered by the greatest researchers, who have shown their support throughout the centuries. We have considered it to be useful to approach these norms through the views of the three monotheist religions, seeing that each of them begins from this moral basis upon which family and society are built.

Although there were peoples with their own moral legislation before the issuance of the Decalogue, it was determined that the Decalogue's commandments are clearly superior. Furthermore, the Mosaic Code brings forth radical changes and a certain balance in the relationships contained within the Hebrew family. We can discover the reasons behind these differences only when we all admit that the Author of these decrees is YHWH Himself, the Maker of heaven and earth.

The reason YHWH gave Israel the Ten Commandments was to bless the people; the blessings would continue to pour over the Israelites for as long as they would choose to respect them (*Deut.* 7, 6; 26, 17-19).

The Decalogue can be summarized with two main ideas: the love toward God – which appears clear in the commandments on the first stone tablet – and the love toward one's neighbor – shown on the second stone tablet. In the Sermon on the Mount, our Savior, alluding to the Mosaic Law, abbreviates it in these two directions. We have used the same approach in the paper, deeming it the most appropriate. Throughout the paper, it is clear that the commandments correlate one with another; we cannot speak about honoring some and neglecting the others. They form a perfect whole, intertwining among themselves.

In conclusion, in the OT era, the Decalogue is the law comprising the highest moral standard until the coming of the Savior. The true value of the Ten Commandments can be grasped only when they are looked at through the perspective of the NT, particularly through the teachings summed up in the Sermon on the Mount. In this context, Christ updates them, offering

them a new moral dimension. The ultimate purpose is to encourage human beings to imitate their Creator in character and behavior. Therefore, our Savior does not annihilate the Mosaic Law, but He adorns it with a new connotation, which culminates in excellence.

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