From the Decalogue to the Ten Commandments: A Reflection on the Sacred Text as a Source of Questions (Rather Than Answers)

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to reflect on a particular form of violence, that caused by the short circuit between faith and religious ethics, between the liberating dimension of the experience of God's love and the need to derive from it a practical ethic that promotes human coexistence and is an expression of that love. In the Christian experience—but also in Judaism and Islam—it is possible for a reversal to take place whereby ethics ends up preceding and judging faith. This is a form of moralism, very similar to religious fundamentalism, made possible by the reversal between the purpose of faith (to live the experience of God's love to the full) and the ways and expressions that should express and realize it in practical life. This reversal occurs when moral action is an end in itself and has lost the criteria of judgment through which moral discernment is achieved. Through the interpretative story of the Decalogue (Ex 20:1-17), the thesis argued in this essay is that moralistic rigor enacts a true form of violence both against the religious tradition it claims to protect and against the believing community, preventing or limiting its dialogue with the challenges of the present that would allow it to keep the experience of faith alive.

Keywords: Decalogue, Ten Commandments, Exodus, freedom, moral responsibility, *debarîm*

1. Introduction

In recent years, I have been studying the dynamics between religion and violence, from divine violence to decolonial theology to the political role of biblical hermeneutics. The aim of this essay is to reflect on a particular form of violence, that caused by the short circuit between faith and religious ethics, between the liberating dimension of the experience of God's love and the need to derive a practical ethic from it, one that promotes human coexistence and is an

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expression of that love. In the Christian experience—but also in Judaism and Islam—it is possible for a reversal to take place whereby ethics ends up preceding and judging faith. This can happen when religions are institutionalized and based on a canonized scripture. This can produce a form of moralism, very similar to religious fundamentalism, made possible by the reversal between the purpose of faith (to live the experience of God's love to the full) and the ways and expressions that should express and realize it in practical life (Lyman, 1910, 1915). This reversal occurs when moral action becomes an end in itself and loses the criteria of judgment through which moral discernment is achieved: compliance with the rule thus becomes more important than reflection on the specific situations that should prompt the individual to engage with people and critical issues, enabling them to take a conscious, considered, and responsible position.

Through the interpretative story of the Decalogue (Ex 20:1-17), the thesis argued in this essay is that moralistic rigor implements a true form of violence both against the religious tradition it claims to protect and against the believing community, preventing or limiting its dialogue with the challenges of the present that would allow it to keep the experience of faith alive. The tacit assumption of the following reflections is that faith is an experience of relationship with God and with others, the effective realization of which can be experienced if we are predisposed not to receive preordained answers, but to allow ourselves to be questioned by challenges and to develop answers that make sense in relation to the criteria of judgment and

values we have chosen. I will not deal here with the ambiguous difference between the history of reception and that of interpretation.

In Christian circles, the Decalogue is generally thought of as a series of commandments that, within Christian culture, must be learned by heart. They are considered irrefutable and immutable, and this perspective allows them to be taken out of context. Over the centuries, in fact, it has become a paradigm of ethical and political formalism: it does not matter how and why it was formulated, the only important thing is that it is respected (Kuntz, 2004; Levi, 1990; Greeman-Larsen, 2012). However, this seems to contradict the exercise of morality: limiting one's actions to obedience means giving up the conscious rediscovery of the value and importance of principles that are as ancient as they are timeless. If acting in accordance with morality simply means conforming to what is preordained, in what terms can we speak of responsibility and individual freedom? What role do responsibility and freedom play in the relationship between the individual and the community? What distinguishes faith from ideology?

Better known as the “Ten Commandments,” understanding of this passage has often been thwarted by underlying prejudices regarding its exclusive religious dimension and its interpretation, which, in Kantian terms, could be described as deontological. Over the centuries, it has become a bastion of moralism, partly because of its inclusion in catechisms, through which it has been handed down from generation to generation, completely decontextualized from the literary history of Israel. The Decalogue has thus been deprived of its historical and cultural dimension and, as the word of God, separated from the world. Although it appears within a corpus of texts considered sacred, I am deeply convinced that the Decalogue is an eminently political text: as we shall see, it is proclaimed at the end of a process of political liberation and is the first manifesto of political independence (Tonelli, 2010). It is no coincidence that, over the centuries, the Decalogue and the Exodus of Israel have inspired crucial moments in Western history (Walzer, 1984).

The Torah contains two versions of this passage: Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-2. I will refer to the first, in which the Decalogue is proclaimed immediately after the flight from Egypt and the reader follows the unfolding of events. The simultaneity of the flight and the proclamation helps to place a certain emphasis on the content of the Decalogue. On the contrary, the version contained in Deuteronomy is inserted into the memory of those events and offers a retrospective view of what has already been narrated.

In the following pages, I will consider three aspects: the first is the narrative context of the Decalogue, in order to place it within the story of the Exodus, which is its raison d'être. The second will deal with some aspects relating to the structure, vocabulary, and grammar of the pericope. The third aspect concerns the rediscovery and use of this text at the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. It is from this point onwards, in fact, that a new use of the Decalogue in the context of a new legal and moral sensibility matures into its transformation into the "Ten Commandments." A concluding reflection will highlight the main points and the thesis argued.

2. The narrative context

In the two versions contained in the Torah, the Decalogue always appears in relation to the story of the Exodus, which inspired the revolutionary action of some peoples (Walzer, 1984). The version of the Decalogue contained in the second book of the Torah takes the reader almost by surprise, since Ex 19:24 and Ex 20:18 are in clear continuity. This consideration, combined with the difference in style between the Decalogue and its context, suggests that it was inserted at a later date—probably during the transition from oral to written tradition—even though it fits well into the context of those two chapters (Perlitt, 1969; Auzou, 1961; Dohmen, 2004). In its final redaction, the Decalogue is situated between the stipulation of the covenant and the ancient code of the alliance and retains clear links with the entire book of Exodus, in particular the book of the covenant and chapter 32. We must not forget that the Bible is composed of narrative plots and does not contain isolated texts. Therefore, separating a group of verses from the narrative deprives it of an important part of its meaning, the reasons for which it was transmitted, and the use that was made of it by the believing communities.

In the Book of Exodus, Israel is called a "nation" for the first time (Ex 19:6). A progressive reading of the Pentateuch shows us that, while the Book of Genesis narrates the events of individual characters, it is only with Exodus that the Old Testament begins to narrate the history of the people of Israel. The individual dimension is replaced by the collective one: the religiosity of the Fathers is shifted to the public sphere and becomes an important aspect of Israel's political history. I would even say that religion and politics become one, because the fulfillment of the promises (the land and the multiplication of descendants) takes place precisely in the political sphere, understood not only as the infra of the people, but also as the relationship between Israel and other nations.

In the chapter preceding the proclamation of the Decalogue, the freed slaves accept God's proposal, saying, "All that the Lord has said we will do" (Ex 19:8). At this point, Moses' role as mediator seems to come to an end, because it is not he who responds, but the entire people. Moses does not have the task of deciding for them, but only of maintaining their relationship

with their God (Cazelles, 1989), so the covenant is not between God and Moses, as would have been the case in Mesopotamia, nor does Moses identify himself with God, as the Egyptian Pharaoh did. The covenant is between God and the entire people. It can be said that Israel is born when it becomes an active and responsible interlocutor of YHWH and accepts the covenant: from this perspective, the covenant represents the fulfillment of the history of liberation and, at the same time, marks the birth of Israel as a nation.

Its stipulation is public: everyone must decide whether they want to participate or not. Since illiteracy was widespread in the ancient world and few people were able to understand written laws, the public proclamation of the covenant and the debarîm suggests that God wants to involve the whole people: YHWH freed an indistinct rabble from slavery and made them a people through the gift of the law (Spinoza, 1670). It is given not as a condition for liberation, but only after it has already been achieved. For this reason, the free acceptance of the law implies a responsibility on the part of the members of Israel. Everyone, without distinction, takes part in this transformation: since all had experienced slavery, they can now experience holiness. Every Israelite—both those in the narrative and those who read the text of the covenant in the future—becomes here a protagonist in the birth of Israel, as a people and as a nation, and on the basis of this bond, all doubt is overcome: the first debarîm reaffirm this relationship and the link with the Exodus. An ancient Midrash clearly explains what happened: "Why were the commandments not stated at the beginning of the Torah? The answer to this question can be given with a parable: One day a man arrived in a province and said to its inhabitants, 'I want to be your king. Then the inhabitants replied, ‘Have you done anything good that gives you the right to be our king?’ What did he do? He built a wall for them. He erected an aqueduct for them. He also led them in war. Then he said again, ‘I want to be your king.’ And now the inhabitants replied, ‘Yes, yes!’—So did the Omnipresent. He led Israel out of Egypt, divided the Sea of Reeds for them, caused manna to fall from heaven for them, had the well built in the desert, brought them quails, and fought for them against Amalek. Then he said to them again, ‘I want to be your king,’ and this time they replied, ‘Yes, yes!’" (Crüsemann, 1983, pp. 11-12).

The symbolism of the Exodus lies not in its happy ending, however encouraging and evocative, but in the way it was achieved: the educational process that transformed a motley crew of slaves into a chosen people, tools of labor into individuals, exiles into citizens. The transformation is twofold, religious and political, made possible by the new consciousness that the Israelites laboriously acquired thanks to God's saving action, that is, the care and recognition He offers His people, but also the trust that the latter places in Him. It is only at the end of this process that the Decalogue is proclaimed.

If, taken out of context, the Decalogue might seem like a simple religious creed, placed at the end of the Exodus experience, it is in fact the result of a history of liberation and the beginning of a new life based on what that history has taught. The flight from Egypt is first and foremost a political act, a rejection of slavery and submission to a foreign and earthly ruler. (Brueggemann, 2018).

Starting from this context, in the following paragraph I will present a translation of the Decalogue, followed by a brief analysis of its structure and some lexical elements.

3. The text: Structure and Lexicon

From reading the Decalogue in its narrative context, we can highlight five points: 1) like most biblical texts, Exodus 20:1-17 also had a long historical and literary genesis: this makes the hypothesis of the existence of an original text credible; 2) it is likely that the original text had a cultic use and was handed down from generation to generation; 3) similarly, it seems possible that it was later expanded and inserted into the Pentateuch; 4) the final text shows strong links with the book of Exodus, even if the original redaction seems to be that contained in Deuteronomy 5; 5) On a theological level, even if the Decalogue was only inserted at a later date into the framework in which it is found today, the link with the theophany of Sinai is irrefutable. Probably, the two texts originally had separate origins. In fact, neither Jeremiah 7 nor Hosea 4, which contain a list of precepts similar to those of the Decalogue, mention theophany, even though it could strengthen their argument. It is therefore likely that the Decalogue was intentionally inserted into the theophanic framework when both texts were already well structured. The final text can be translated as follows:

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Yhwh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery: you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol nor any image of anything in heaven above, or on earth beneath, or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, the Yhwh your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. You shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor the stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male or female servant, nor his ox or donkey, nor anything that belongs to your neighbor (Ex 20:1–17).

The translation presented here (Tonelli, 2010) aims to highlight the grammar and vocabulary used in the pericope. The importance of the individual elements is linked to their relationship with all the others, but also to the possibility of saying the same things in different ways. The first question to be answered is therefore to understand why those who wrote this text decided to express themselves in this way and what nuances the form adds to the content of the pericope.

A preliminary observation is necessary regarding the verbs: verse 2, in which God affirms his sovereignty over Israel, is conjugated in the indicative mood, meaning that it does not express a command but is a simple statement of fact regarding his relationship with Israel (García Lopez, 1992). In the following verses, the verbs are conjugated in the imperfect tense, which in Hebrew expresses an “imperfect” action, i.e., one that is not yet completed, and is

translated as the future tense. In the second group of verses, the imperfect tense is preceded by a negation (lō followed by a yiktol) which gives rise to a "vetitive." The fact that God's interlocutor is Israel can be deduced from what happens in the previous chapter and from the adjective "your" with which God relates to Israel, since it is not specified here.21 Furthermore, nothing in Exodus 20:18 suggests that God had just delivered such an important speech. These brief considerations urge the reader not to read the pericope in isolation, but to place it in a broader narrative context concerning the stipulation of the covenant. The appropriateness of this choice becomes clearer when we consider the language of the text, which is not strictly legal but rather resembles an account of what has gone before.

Since I cannot dwell on a detailed analysis of the text (Tonelli, 2010), I will focus here on just a few elements: the first is the Name of God, both for reasons of narrative structure, since it already appears in verse 1, and for the importance it has had in the political and religious history of Israel. In fact, over time, the religious traditions of the various tribes coalesced around the cult of YHWH, thus transforming them into a single people. From a theological point of view, the meaning of the Name expresses a special relationship between God and his people, substantially defining their political identity as well. The use of the tetragrammaton is one of the elements that allows us to understand that the Decalogue plays on several levels simultaneously, which were not distinct from each other in the culture of the time. My discussion will not be about the Name, but about its function in this verse, so I do not claim to give a complete explanation of it. The second element I will discuss is the use of the word debarîm, "words," together with some grammatical elements.

Verse 2 begins the direct discourse in which God presents himself with his Names and his deeds. Understanding the Names with which he presents himself means understanding the type of divinity Israel trusts in. The interpretation of verse 2 is important because it influences the interpretation of the following verses: if it is interpreted as God's self-affirmation of sovereignty, the Decalogue should be interpreted in the same way as other codes of the ancient Middle East, that is, as the exaltation of an absolute sovereign who imposes himself on a people without them having a choice (Kratz, 1994). If, on the other hand, it is interpreted in relation to the narrative context, the text becomes the mouthpiece of a theological and political vision that is new to the culture of the time: in light of the story of the Exodus, God gives an account of his relationship with Israel, a relationship that becomes the foundation of the following verses (Crüsemann, 1983).

To understand how verse 2 should be interpreted, two aspects must be considered: the first concerns the culture of the time, i.e., what kind of beliefs were associated with proper names and what functions were attributed to them; the second concerns the meaning of the Tetragrammaton. As regards the first aspect, a person's true name contained their essence. This explains why, since ancient times, it was forbidden to pronounce (*nāśā' 'et šēm*, lit. 'to raise the name') the name of the deity (Liverani, 2003, p. 249; Lopez, 1992, pp. 36-37). It is therefore not surprising that even in the Decalogue we find the prohibition of the misuse of the Name without any explanation being given. If being able to "call by name" indicated the supremacy of the one who pronounced it (cf. Gen 2:19-20), in the case of the Name of God, the attempt to prevail over Him by invoking His Name (i.e., His power) becomes abuse (*lašāw* "for nothing, for falsehood, in vain"). In the Bible, God is called by many names - El, 'Elohim; Šaddaj, El Olam, El Eljion - but Yhwh (Cazellese, 1989; Lemaire, 2003), the name of revelation (cf. Ex

3:6, 13-15), is His proper name, the one that expresses His essence, and in v. 2 it appears alongside that of the tradition of the Fathers.

From a grammatical point of view, in this verse the verbs are conjugated in the indicative mood (hôze ʾtîkā, "I brought you out") and precede the exhortative verbs in the following verses: the verb jāsā, "to go out" in the causative form, also means "to free," and therefore "who freed you." Two aspects of this self-presentation should be emphasized: the first is that God affirms that the exodus from Egypt marks the birth of Israel as a people/nation; the second is that he reawakens the memory of his people, since he makes himself known as the God of the Patriarchs, the God of promise, and at the same time identifies himself with the God of the Exodus. To have memory is to have awareness. The God of liberation is the same as the God of patriarchal tradition, but before being obeyed, he wants to be (re)cognized: the entire Decalogue, in fact, revolves around the memory of liberation (Crüsemann, 1983). Lopez (1992) interprets the second part of the verse in analogy with Ex 20:5, as a causal proposition, translating the particle 'ašer, which introduces the relative clause, with "because": "I am the Lord your God, because I brought you out of the land of Egypt ...". From this perspective, it can be said that YHWH reigns over Israel not because he has accompanied it since the time of the Patriarchs, but because he has liberated it, and in the face of liberation from slavery, other traditions fade into the background. The fundamental idea expressed in this self-presentation is to identify the foundation of the law in the memory of the experience of the Exodus. Without this memorial, Israel could not recognize YHWH as its God, nor accept the words that follow as legitimate. The link between YHWH's self-presentation and the memory of liberation is not, however, only external and formal, but is essential to God himself, and it is for this reason that it conditions the interpretation of the entire pericope.

In the worship of its God, Israel unifies itself into a single people-nation and distinguishes itself from other peoples: with the revelation of the Name, it receives and configures its own religious and political identity. The verbs in the indicative mood attest to a state of fact, recalling the history of Israel, while those conjugated in the imperfect tense (the future tense in Hebrew) project the action into the future: the change in tense indicates both a temporal difference (past-future) and the consequentiality of the action ("because I have delivered you, I will be your God"; "because I have delivered you, you shall have no other gods," and so on). Their tone is exhortative rather than imperative, since the binding force and content of the words are motivated by the experience of the Exodus, which made YHWH the only God of Israel and the center of its identity. It can be said that it is within this relationship that the social commandments found in the second part of the pericope acquire a new raison d'être.

In this article, I refer to the passage in question using the term Decalogue, from the Greek decálogos, first used by Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. It originates from the Septuagint translation of Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13, and 10:4, in which the expression ʿaśeret haddebarîm ʾ'ten words' appears. Later Christian tradition took up this expression to designate the Decalogue in the two versions of Ex 20:1-17 and Dt 5:6-21. The pericope begins with the narrator's voice: 'The Lord spoke all these words (*debarîm*) to say', followed by God's direct speech. Here it is not important to reveal the identity of the narrator (Moses? The editor? An eyewitness?), but to understand the use of the term *dabar*, here in the Pi'el form (a form that realizes the basic Qal meaning – even if some verbs exist only in Pi'el), translatable as "to speak, to say, to pronounce," and whose noun simply means "word."

In the first verse, *dabar* appears both as a verb and as a noun, thus emphasizing, repeating, and confirming the fact that these are simply "words." Jackson (2000, pp. 197-202), in his interesting study of semiotics in biblical jurisprudence, translates *dabar* as "word" and cites the Decalogue as an example. Unlike *ʾāmar* "to say," which requires an object complement, in *dabar* it can be implicit, or it can summarize a presupposed or already uttered speech, which contains a finite verb form of *ʾāmar* or the infinitive *leʾmōr*. Furthermore, *ʾāmar* can have a wide variety of subjects (people, things, animals, etc.), while *dabar* has as its subject either people or the instruments with which speech is designated (mouth, lips, voice, etc.). When *dabar* is to be understood as "word of God," it expresses a broader concept than "commandment" and "precept" (Barr, 1961). The Greek translation of the Septuagint was made in analogy with the Hebrew text: *dabar* is rendered by *logos* (Ex 20:1, while in Dt 5:5 *dabar* is rendered by *tà rēmata*), which is repeated in the form of the noun and the verb. The meanings of *logos/legein* are manifold: 1) word, speech (cf. Aristotle, *Topics*, 146a4) and, in theology, "revealed word"; 2) reasoning (cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 28a; Aristotle, *Physics*, 189a4), in the sense of "grasping with the mind" (Plato, *Republic* 529d and *Parmenides* 135e); 3) motive, reason, foundation (cf. Plato, *Republic* 366b; *Gorgias* 465a; *Phaedrus* 62b); 4) reasoning, argumentation (cf. Plato, *Crito*, 46b; *Laws* 696c; *Timaeus* 30b). In all its meanings, *logos* expresses the concept of "language/reason," of rational articulation and not simply of "word."

The Greek term emphasizes the rationality of linguistic expression and its content. The term *dabar*, on the other hand, emphasizes the will that characterizes its content rather than reason: what is communicated is the will of God. Both, however, tend to prefer reference to the religious sphere rather than the strictly legal one, and in the case of *dabar*, it is even more difficult to make a clear distinction.

On closer inspection, throughout the pericope, the only term that can be translated as command is mizwotaj (v. 6"my commandments") from mizwah "precept" and from the verb zwh (Brown & Driver, 1979) "to command, to order," but also "to give responsibility," which therefore requires an active role on the part of those who accept God's requests. This term appears in place of *dabar* only after Yhwh has proclaimed his uniqueness for Israel: the word becomes a command if the interlocutor accepts the special relationship to which God calls him.

When reading the passage, one gets the impression that the words (*debarîm*) spoken have a considerable normative force, even if they do not directly belong to the legal sphere: this, in fact, comes from the context surrounding the proclamation—from the covenant mentioned earlier—and from the active role that Israel, as a free people, plays in the story. On this occasion, the binding force of the law does not come so much from the fact that it is God who is speaking, nor from an explicit reference to the commandments, but from what precedes all this: from the consent, from the relationship of complicity with YHWH, matured in the common experience – albeit with different roles – of the exodus, from the commitment that Israel freely decides to take on in accepting the covenant, and from the responsibility that derives from all this. This is also what makes it different from other legal codes of the ancient Middle East. We are not faced with a deus ex machina guiding history, but with two interlocutors capable of making their own decisions autonomously: ultimately, everything that happened was what Israel wanted: first, it invoked the Lord, who listened to it and freed it, and now, after the proposal of alliance, Israel freely agreed to "do whatever the Lord says" (19:8).

The words of YHWH recount what had happened up to that point: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the house of slavery." Verse 2 is the first commandment insofar as it expresses the history experienced up to that point and constitutes the foundation for what is subsequently established. YHWH does not command his supremacy over Israel, but evokes the reasons that legitimize it, and this is why the debarîm become mizwotaj.

The correspondence between the two terms, which in the Bible is never accidental, completes the overall meaning: the words express commandments because they recall the truth of a historical experience that allowed Israel to conquer freedom. It is not my intention to limit the meaning of the pericope to the use of *dabar-mizwotaj*: rather, the aim is to evoke the breadth and depth of its political, moral, and theological vision, which goes far beyond a prescriptive and ideological vision. After all, the Hebrew language already had a legal lexicon that could have replaced *dabar* (*torah* and *mišpat*), but also a well-structured legal system with its own lexicon (*halakah-haggadah*, *mishpat-ryb*). In the next paragraph, I will briefly focus on some historical moments that saw the transformation of the Decalogue into 'the Ten Commandments'

4. From the Decalogue to the Ten Commandments

The difficulty in translating Hebrew terms into modern language reflects a different way of conceiving the law: for the biblical world, it is not enclosed in a definition or a commandment, but is a tendency, a propensity to live in a community, which originates precisely in the maturation of shared experiences within it. What matters is not strict observance of the rule, but respect for and sharing of the meaning it expresses: respect for the law does not derive from external imposition, but from its ability to engage the individual internally. Thus, although sacred, the law is at the service of man and adapts to the changes that mark community life: the law can change if the situation requires it. In this passage, the emphasis is not on the norm as such, but on the relationships (between men and between man and God) that it must regulate, or on the social order that it helps to maintain.

The Decalogue was interpreted as a legislative text in the strict sense only many centuries after it was written, specifically at the time of the Mishnah, about a century after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. In the beginning, it was simply a collection of general criteria that served to guide the individual's relationship with Yahweh and with the community to which he belonged. Precisely because they were criteria, the debarîm have always come "before" the law and constitute its foundation. Their function was orientative, not in the sense of allowing for other possibilities, but in determining the direction of action. The context in which the pericope was inserted and the language used in it betray, in fact, a broader function than the strictly legal-normative one, yet this did not prevent it from being flattened to the latter aspect in the following centuries. To understand how and when this happened, it is necessary to bear in mind the influence of the Old Testament on canon law and the birth of modern legal science (Berman, 1983).

With regard to the influence of AT on canon law, we must bear in mind the analogy between the organization of the Pentateuch as an archive and the first legislative collections compiled in the Middle Ages (*decreta*, *canones*, *constitutiones*). As for the second aspect, the birth of modern legal science and catechisms marks the turning point at which law ceased to

derive from experience and became a principle of action. Both aspects tend to emphasize that, for a long time, the norm was conceived in a radically different way from today and that its identification with a principle that precedes action is a recent achievement. The transition did not happen quickly, nor was it painless, as it was the result of a radical rethinking of the conceptual categories with which legal reality had to be conceived. It was the consequence of very complex socio-political, religious, economic, and cultural dynamics, which I cannot dwell on here, but which are important to take into account.

In the formation of law and the formulation of moral and legal norms, Western tradition, perpetuating the customs of the ancients, has maintained a certain continuity between the ancient, the original, and the new. Until the early centuries of Christianity, the coexistence of legal codes from different eras within the same collection did not cause any problems; on the contrary, the antiquity of a law guaranteed its authority, especially if it was taken directly from the biblical text. Some authors compared Mosaic law with Roman law, and others even sought to demonstrate the biblical origin of the latter, a sign of the importance given to the former.99 For example, Alfred the Great (849-899), king of the West Saxons, placed the Decalogue in the preamble to the laws he had proclaimed, reaffirming the value of the laws of Moses and continuing with a summary of the Acts of the Apostles (Mielke, 1992; Worldmald, 2000; Pratt, 2007).

During the 11th and 12th centuries, important social and economic changes made the life of political communities more complex, which consequently perceived the practice of custom, too closely tied to local life, as insufficient. To survive, these communities did not need strong political power, as each link in the chain could only survive thanks to economic interdependence with the others. The law, therefore, expressed the natural order of things, and the norm was the result of a broad universe of mores. Scientia iuris was essentially interpretatio, that is, a legal order that lives and slowly develops throughout history. The Latin term *iurisdictio*, which referred to the field of law, consisted, in fact, of 'speaking the law': it was the highest manifestation of the order of things in nature. In this social and cultural context, the law did not address individuals taken in their singularity, but rather the network of relationships mentioned above. Later, as it became more complex, the social structure began to need order, a legal order. It was in this context that the process of forming modern law began, in which Gregory VII's (1073-1085) Dictatus Papae (1074-1075) was of enormous importance: through it, the idea of a political system that no longer claimed to be an objective interpretation of reality and in which public life was based on proclaimed and recognized principles gained ground. Through a long process of systematization and hierarchy of sources of law, modern legal science was born (Bermann, 1983).

In the hierarchy of legislative principles, the basic idea was to distinguish between what is eternal and untouchable, even by the Pope, and what is transitory and adaptable. Later, during the Protestant Reformation, in order to curb papal power, Protestants insisted on the importance of biblical sources in the legal sphere: divine law had to be considered superior to other sources of law. In this context, the Decalogue enjoyed a certain degree of success when Calvin (1509-1564), in his attempt to build the perfect city, asked the people of Geneva to swear to observe its contents (Benedict, 2002; Biéler, 1961; McGrath, 1990).

On the Catholic side, biblical sources could not be renounced, but they were filtered through the decrees promulgated by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which were also adopted

by the Republic of Venice, the Duke of Savoy, and Philip II of Spain (Cherry, 1971). The Decalogue was an important reference point for Christian ethics during these years, both for Catholics and Protestants, and gradually replaced the logic of the Seven Deadly Sins that had been typical of the Middle Ages (Bossy, 1988). While the doctrine of the Seven Deadly Sins dominated the practice of the sacrament of penance between the 13th and 14th centuries, the Decalogue subsequently became the only means of knowing what God wanted or forbade: ethics was a matter of faith, not reason. It was in the years immediately preceding the Reformation and then, more decisively, in those of the Counter-Reformation, that the Decalogue was transformed into a rigid regulatory system and was adopted for the education of children, both by Lutherans and Catholics through the Tridentine catechism. The process that gave greater importance to the Decalogue reached its peak in the years immediately preceding the Reformation, thanks to the figure of Jean Gerson, a pupil of Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly, who had accepted Ockham's doctrine in the faculty of theology in Paris. Ockham's doctrine made the Decalogue the only moral code that expressed the will of God (and no longer natural law), and Gerson, in turn, made it the core of Christian ethics, writing commentaries on it even in the vernacular. The emphasis was placed on the worship that believers owe to God through respect for his commandments (Gerson, 1960-1973).

During the years of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the Decalogue was accepted by Catholics and Protestants as an educational tool, particularly in catechetical practice (Braido, 1991). Luther's first catechism, the Small Catechism, dates back to 1529 and was structured as a dialogue between father and son (Fraas, 1971). This was followed by those of the Geneva tradition: Calvin's Formulaire d'instruire les enfants en la Chrétienté (1541) (Calvin, 2008) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563). The word “catechism” originally referred to an exorcism that preceded baptism, but later became a series of teachings that followed it. From the beginning, it was linked to the parish and family environment as an educational practice that consisted essentially of memorizing the obligations assumed at baptism. For this reason, great importance was given to obedience to parents, as educators who passed on the word of God. The combination of catechism and education fostered the rediscovery of childhood, the basic idea of which consisted of a rhetorical question: how can we honor God, whom we cannot see, if we are not able to honor our parents, whom we see every day? (Ariès, 1960). Catechism, both in the Reformed and Catholic Churches, included prayers, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, but the emphasis differed: the Reformed placed it on the Commandments, the Catholics on the Creed, both with the aim of instilling obedience to God in the faithful.

During the same period, the Decalogue also had a political interpretation: Jean Bodin, who was educated in the Gersonian tradition of the commandments, developed his *république* based on the model of a morally imperative law, governed by a single, unchallenged sovereign. The change of era was decisive in modifying both the role of the Decalogue in pastoral care and its meaning. It ceased to be the result of a journey of liberation and, at the same time, a new beginning for Israel, and became a list of rules to be followed. The decontextualization of the pericope from its narrative context contributed to the extreme simplification of its content and, consequently, to denying its ability to stimulate ethical and religious reflection in its readers. “I am the YHWH your God” is not a command, but a statement that summarizes the previous

history, and it is from this history that believers must learn to elaborate ethical and faith questions in order to make responsible choices.

According to the new legal science, in order to have binding force, the law was transformed into a coherent organism in itself, deprived of any internal contradiction. Legal collections no longer served as reference tools and were transformed into regulatory systems. From a medieval perspective, with the modern age, the political scene became “artificial”: there was no longer any analogy between the cosmic order and the political order, and the latter was essentially transformed into a “convention.” On the contrary, from a modern perspective, medieval law, with its claim to adherence to reality, was an impediment to social, political, and economic evolution. These changes, together with the wars of religion, stimulated the search for sources of law other than religious tradition. The legal norm is thus interpreted starting from its detachment from metaphysical, natural, and historical foundations, in the sense of a community's set of experiences, in favor of greater rationality. For the Decalogue, this meant being understood unilaterally in terms of deontological ethics: it became a list of rules and imperatives, to the detriment of its original dynamism. To the extent that it was considered a guiding criterion, a blueprint for human action, it was characterized by a certain dynamism, namely the fact that man could use it as a criterion for evaluating his actions and developing rules appropriate to the needs of the case. When Exodus 20:1-17 is interpreted simply as a list of rules, it is no longer an instrument of freedom but of constraint. It becomes a limitation.

5. Final remarks

The aim of this article was to show the violence exerted by a moralistic interpretation of the biblical text. This violence is twofold: against the tradition to which biblical literature belongs and against the community of believers who, through the sacred text, are urged both in their experience of faith and in their moral reflection. The premise of my thesis is that faith on the one hand and moral reflection (even that which is not bound to faith) on the other are experiences of inner liberation and awareness and that, as such, they imply individual responsibility. This is denied, however, if we draw on the sacred text as a source of ready-made answers and solutions, without placing it in the context of our question and without taking into account the distance that separates us from it. To reflect on this question, I have dealt with a specific textual example, the Decalogue contained in Exodus 20:1-17. This is, in fact, an emblematic case of how the purpose of the text has been transformed into its opposite, that is, from the result of a process of liberation and new beginning to a manifesto of catechetical moralism.

My argument took into account three aspects: the need to place Ex 20:1-17 in its narrative context in order to understand it within the experience of Israel's liberation as its fundamental stage; some characteristics of the body of the text—structure, semantics, grammar; and some fundamental stages in its interpretative history in order to understand when, how, and why the meaning of this text was transformed.

Obviously, the purpose of this journey is not to be a nostalgic return to the past but to encourage reflection on the importance of using such an ancient text as a resource that prompts moral reflection rather than providing answers and rules that we must obey literally and blindly.

Although the overview provided is brief and the historical moments considered are few, the interpretative history of the Decalogue shows the gradual detachment of the text from its context and the transformation of its reception, depending on the moral and religious challenges that had to be faced.

The transformation of the Decalogue into “the Ten Commandments”is one of the responses to the complex historical, cultural, social, economic, and political dynamics that required a new conception of jurisprudence, a new model of pastoral care, and new ways of using the sacred text. In this delicate and complex change, the list of principles contained in the pericope easily lent itself to becoming a list of rules that were to enclose the perimeter of legitimate moral action.

Like all responses to the challenges of an era, the rediscovery of the profound meaning of the text and its role in the narrative context is also a response to the need to reactivate an interactive relationship with the sacred text, rather than one of blind obedience: the collection of texts that make up the Bible, the variety of testimonies of faith contained therein, and the impossibility of identifying a text or verse that is a concise representation of the biblical message require an active relationship with the sacred text. To renounce this interactive dynamic means both to exercise violence against a rich tradition, whose value and role are thus denied, and to deny moral reflection, especially in relation to the challenges of our time.

Placed at the end of a journey of liberation as the keystone of Israel's process of religious and, above all, political self-awareness, it would be an internal contradiction to want to read the Decalogue as a new form of constraint, of slavery. The established law is, yes, a commandment, but its raison d'être is given by the history that precedes it: it is the result of the growth of a relationship between God and his people and of liberation from slavery. Ethics arises from the gift of liberation and not the other way around, just as the law is given after the experience of the Exodus, not before, and that is why it is truly a gift: Israel must respect the law not in order to be saved, but because it has been saved. The ten words, far from being a heavy burden, are the sign and expression of a new life, the way that keeps man free: the rules are not reduced to the mere imposition of prohibitions, but delimit and guarantee the space of freedom. It is not the absence of rules, but their wise coordination, together with the memory of the experience of liberation, that make freedom possible and enjoyable. Freedom and the rules that guarantee its preservation are only possible within a shared space, that is, in a space of relationships and reflection, within which the individual cannot give up questioning himself or escape his responsibilities.

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