

**ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF EXODUS 20:13-18 AND THE INTEGRITY  
OF NIGERIAN CHURCH LEADERS**

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**Abstract**

Ethos is the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature and guiding beliefs of a person, group or Institution. The Torah projects ethos in the Decalogue which guided the social and spiritual lives of the Israelites, especially in the matters of interpersonal relationships and about the acquisition of assets or valuables. The problem this paper tends to address is the normalization of covetousness among the Church leaders and members by employing undue emphasis on wealth acquisition in their teachings and preaching. Through exegetical method used for the study to the passage under study (Exo. 20:13-18), the findings reveal that the ethical implications of covetousness can be grievous. It must not be renamed with contemporary Church parlance "breakthrough" but must be abhorred.

**Introduction**

This paper projects the contemporary issues that have bedevilled the church denominations as pertaining moral rectitude of church leaders or pastors. "Contemporary pastors are caught in frightening spiritual and social tornadoes which are now raging through home, church, community and culture. No one knows where the next twister might go down or what values the storms will destroy. As a result, pastors ask themselves, 'Does pastoral ministry make any difference in morally turbulent times?'"<sup>i</sup> This paper responds with a resounding YES! Society cannot flourish without godly church leaders. How alarming for the Christian cause when men and women of God feel forced to pre-empt the future of ministry as they watch their work gets harder and their world grow more corrupt. Ministry hazards are choking the hope out of church leaders' souls. They feel disenchanting, discouraged, and often even outraged. They question why they should be expected

to squander energy on trivial matters when evil threatens to wreck the human race. The Church faces a perilous time where some church leaders find it so tough to survive emotionally and economically. Many flounder for meaning and mission as traditional morality keeps buckling under brutal unrelenting assaults from secular society.

The purpose of this paper is to reiterate the fact that surely, God intends Church leaders to depict the Gospel through their life styles and show how the Gospel can be impactful in the kind of world they live in. Therefore, in a moral puzzle such as this, church leaders are left with the option of maintaining the status quo of observing the moral codes recommended in the Decalogue. These codes are foundational, generational, and effectual. In the process church leaders will be reawakened spiritually and challenged professionally. Effective Church leaders for the new century must be whole persons who deliberately balance being and doing, family and church, person and profession, worship and work. That means “wounded healers” must allow themselves to be healed through the same Gospel they use to bring recovery and wellness to others.

Furthermore, to present an exegetical reading in light of present risks Church leaders face in Ministry. The discourse therein, falls under these sub-heads; Exegesis of Exodus 20: 13-18; Exodus 20:13-18 in the Contemporary Proclamation of Christian life; Application of the Text to the Contemporary Church Leaders and the Nigerian Society; Recommendations and Conclusion.

### **Exegesis of Exodus 20: 13-18**

#### **The Hebrew Text**

**13**

לֹא תִרְצָח: ח: ס

**14**

לֹא תִנָּאֵף: ס

**15**

לֹא תִגְדֹּב: ס

**16**

לֹא-תַעֲנֶה בְּרֵעֶךָ עַד שֹׁקֶר: ס

**17**

לֹא תִחְמַד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ לֹא-תִחְמַד אִשְׁתּוֹ רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ וְשׁוֹרֹוֹ וְחֲמֹרֹוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ: פ

**18**

וְכָל-הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת-הַלַּפִּידִם וְאֵת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת-הַהָרָה עֹשֶׂה וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיִּגְעֻוּ וַיַּעֲמִדוּ מֵרָחֹק:

#### **Translation**

20:13 "You shall not murder.

20:14 "You shall not commit adultery.

20:15 "You shall not steal.

20:16 "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

20:17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

20:18 And all the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance

## Textual Background

The text in Biblical context is found only in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21. While generally quite similar, these two versions differ significantly in their motivation for Sabbath-keeping (20:8-11). A partial listing of more than two transgressions recalling the Decalogue, although not in the form of commandments, is found in Jeremiah 7:9 (in this order: stealing, murder, adultery, swearing falsely, worshiping other gods) and in Hosea 4:2 (in this order: swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery). The listing of the murderer, the adulterer, and the thief (in that order) in Job 24:13-17 may also presuppose the Decalogue. Miller affirms that, “Whether Psalm 50:18-20 and Ezekiel 22:1-12 reflect Decalogue commandments is hard to say.”<sup>1</sup> Two other texts are especially close to the Decalogue. Leviticus 19 is a list of laws characterizing a life of holiness. Many of these laws overlap with the Ten Commandments, although the chapter adds others. Deuteronomy 27: 15-16 is a list of twelve curses directed against different forms of covenant breaking, at least four of which overlap in content with Decalogue commandments.<sup>2</sup> Also, the Old Testament refers continually to keeping God’s commandments but it is impossible to know when reference is made to the Decalogue.

“The New Testament repeatedly refers to the Decalogue as a special and central body of laws. Jesus tells an inquirer, “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He questions further, “Which ones?” Jesus draws illustrations from the Decalogue (in this order: murder, adultery, stealing, false witnessing, honoring parents), then adds (from Lev. 19:18) “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” Matt. 19: 16-19; 22:39; Mark 10:17-20; 12:28-31; Luke 10: 25-27; 18: 18-21).<sup>3</sup>

In Matthew 5, however, Jesus interprets several commandments by drawing both on Decalogue commandments (murder, adultery, swearing falsely) and others (divorce, an eye for an eye, loving neighbor and hating enemy- Matt. 5:17-48). This gives the impression that the Decalogue, even in Jesus’ time, was not singled out from the other Old Testament laws as much as Christians tend to single it out. The New Testament letters contain several references to Decalogue series of commandments: Romans 13:9 (adultery, murder, stealing; coveting and other any other commandment); Ephesians 6:2 (honoring parents is the first commandment with a promise, a statement that must refer to the whole Decalogue); James 2:11 (adultery, murder, for other possible allusions and discussion. On the whole the New Testament references suggest that the Decalogue was known as a body of law with special status. Yet, it was not set apart as sharply from other laws or even contrasted with other supposedly now superseded laws, as Christians have often done later.

Reginald H. Fuller sees a more defined and central role for the Decalogue: “For the Old Testament and Judaism, the law embraces the whole of the Torah, but for the New Testament writers the central part of it is the second table [Decalogue commandments five to ten] plus the love commandment.”<sup>4</sup> He argues further, that, many of Paul’s references to the law refer to the Decalogue.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H.B. London, Jr. and Neil B. Wiseman. *Pastors at Risk: Help for Pastors, Hope for the Church*. (Illinois: Victor Books, 2003), p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Miller Patrick D. *The Place of the Old Testament and Its Law: Interpretation*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> Reginald H. Fuller. *The Decalogue in New Testament: Interpretation*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> Reginald H. Fuller. *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Childs Brevard S. *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2014), p. 103.

## The Exegesis

Exod. 20:13 is the sixth commandment, it aims to help preserve society and because people are made in God's image, the Israelites were commanded not to take another person's life by murder, לֹא תִרְצַח: "to slay". The root of the verb also connotes "to be crushed."<sup>6</sup> Its grammatical usage here is Qal imperfect 2<sup>nd</sup> person masculine singular. The grammatical classification of person here, clearly shows that the act is active done by a subject (second person) on a victim. The particle לֹא is a negative "no" or "not". It is used together with the verb to assert order which forbids any gruesome act of murder. It is imperative, hence the use of 2<sup>nd</sup> person masculine singular, because commands are given in the second person reference i.e., do not kill or you shall not kill.

Exod. 20:14 has the seventh commandment which is directed toward protecting the sanctity of the home, the fundamental building block of society. The marital vow is a holy commitment that should not be violated by sexual unfaithfulness under any circumstances. לֹא תִנָּאֵף: adultery refers to infidelity on the part of either men or women. As observed in verse 13, the negative particle asserts imperativeness and forbids the act conveyed by the act. The verb is Piel, qal imperfect 2<sup>nd</sup> person masculine singular. Piel shows intensity meaning that its use in this context, reveals the detestable degree such act in the sight of God.

Exod. 20:15 the eighth commandment was given to encourage the respect of others' property, לֹא תִגְנוֹב: "you shall not steal". This too is an important element in a stable society. It is closely related to the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment.<sup>7</sup> The verb connotes the idea of stealing away used in the qal imperfect 2<sup>nd</sup> person masculine singular.

Exod. 20:16 the ninth commandment concerns bearing false testimony-לֹא-תַעֲנֶה בְרֵעֶךָ עַד שֶׁקֶר: against someone that would cause him unjustified injury. Keeping this law helps maintain stability in society by protecting individuals' reputations. In as much as there is nothing wrong in bearing witness or being a witness to a purpose or to somebody, it is wrong to do it in deception. Hebrew expressions literally mean to answer wrongly, deception, disappointment and falsehood. All the Hebrew rendering; שֶׁקֶר: "false," עַד "witness" and בְרֵעֶךָ "against your neighbour" are described in their noun forms, noun common masculine singular absolute and noun common masculine singular construct. The means that the witness and what he bears are the same. Because he appears in false hood his witness is also false.

Exod. 20:17 the tenth commandment is a general safeguard against many other sins, particularly commandments six through nine. Israelites were not to desire earnestly, or lust after-לֹא תַחְמֹד: what legitimately belonged to others. The root meaning of לֹא תַחְמֹד is to desire, to be desirable, to delight greatly on something. You may do all those in the right motives but not with criminal tendencies. It is used in the qal imperfect 2<sup>nd</sup> masculine singular here to depict its outright rejection.

Exod. 20:18-21 is the response of the people gathered before the mountain who were overwhelmed with fear and awe, recognizing the mighty power and majesty of God. They wanted to hear of Him through Moses not directly lest God destroy them. Moses assured them that the purpose of this display of God's power and holiness was to test their reaction to Him. Fear of Him would help curb disobedience and the law is for all who gathered, however, the pronoun כָּל "all" goes beyond the Israelite community it had a futuristic implication or had all the people of the earth in mind. Its grammatical function is common masculine singular absolute and הָעָם "the people" is verb qal participle masculine plural absolute.

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<sup>6</sup> Craigie Peter C. and David L. Jeffrey. *Ten Commandments*. (In DBTEL, 2012), p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> Yusufu Turaki. *Tainted Legacy: Islam, Colonialism and Slavery in Northern Nigeria*. (Kaduna: Real Eagles Print., 2010), p. 116.

### **Exodus 20:13-18 in the Contemporary Proclamation of Christian Life.**

The citation of the Decalogue in the New Testament held a special place in the moral guidance of the apostolic churches. By the second century, it had assumed a special place in catechetical instruction, evidenced by its inclusion in works like the *Didache*, an early Christian catechism. “Very early also, the Decalogue was associated with the concept of natural law, with the notion that it contained universal truths self-evident to all people<sup>8</sup>. The Decalogue’s validity and the central role is giving moral guidance, not only to the Church, but also to society as a whole, became a common assumption in Western and African Christendom. Thus, on the one hand, “the English King Alfred (9<sup>th</sup> Century) prefixed the Decalogue to his legal code<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, “The African Penal Code contains the interpretations of the Decalogue<sup>10</sup>. Calvin and the Puritans considered it basic to the law of their respective societies. Walter Harrelson, looks to it as “a guide to human rights in our time. Only the applicability of the Sabbath Commandments was at times disputed.<sup>11</sup>

With the increasing secularization of the West, the prominence of the Decalogue in public discussion decreased. “In literary works, it frequently became the symbol of restrictive legalism, to be disparaged, twisted and parodied e. g. by the poet Lord Byron<sup>12</sup> Despite this, however, it remains one of the most widely known and quoted portions of Scripture, even in our secular society. The central importance of the Decalogue as a guide for Christian Church ethics has been variously understood. The task for theologians has always been to show how this Old Testament law code can retain validity for Christians because of the Church’s general tendency to consider Old Testament law to have been superseded by Christ, as the end of the law, Rom. 10:4. “Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Calvin to name only some of the prominent theologians, each developed his distinctive theological way of investing the Decalogue with a new significance in the Christendom context.<sup>13</sup> Luther, for example, held that the Decalogue is authoritative for Christians only so far as it agrees with natural law knowable by all people. “He exempted some aspects from this agreement, notably the prohibition of images, which he considered time-bound.<sup>14</sup>

How much emphasis should be accorded to the Decalogue within the Church? Both the Bible [Old Testament and New Testament] and Christian tradition have given it a prominence that we cannot and should not ignore. This special prominence is not without its problems, a fact recognized in Jewish interpretation says, “There, a tension has prevailed between giving the Decalogue a unique position, similar to its position in the Church; and on the other hand, a hesitation to elevate it at the expense of the other laws.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, “I have argued that the

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Harrelson. *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2018), p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> Craigie Peter C. and David L. Jeffrey. *Ten Commandments*. (In DBTEL, 20120, p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Childs Brevard S. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2019), p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Steinmetz David C. “The Reformation and the Ten Commandments”: Interpretation, Sugirtharajah, R.S. ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Childs Brevard S. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2019), p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Janzen Waldermar. *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> Elmer L. Towns. *Fasting for Spiritual Break Through: A Guide to Nine Biblical Fasts*. (Benin: Joint Heirs, 1996), p. 102.

<sup>14</sup> Elmer L. Towns. 1996, p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> Elmer L. Towns. 1996, p. 101.

Decalogue, though special in its Exodus context, does not cover the wide field of biblical ethics in an umbrella fashion.”<sup>16</sup>

This paper recommends for use, the rich ethical resources of the Old Testament, found in its laws and other genres, such as stories, proverbs, prophetic preaching etc., and by a one-sided emphasis on the Decalogue, it applies. However, the paper in this exegetical discourse warns against the exclusive emphasis traditionally given to the Decalogue, which has tended to detach it from its Exodus context, God’s story of Israel salvation that precedes it and forms its basis. If that happens, the Decalogue no longer addresses a covenant people [Old and New] that has experienced God’s grace and is invited to respond with the new life [sampled in the laws]. Instead, the Decalogue appears to speak to all without narrative context, based on natural law or of its inherent authority. Once we realize and avoid these two dangers, however, the Decalogue still speaks centrally and profoundly to the problems of our time. It forms one of our richest resources for our Church leaders for preaching and teaching.

### **Application of Exodus 20:13-18 to the Contemporary Church Leaders and the Nigerian Society.**

The issues of integrity touch all facets of human existence, because without integrity the purpose of man on earth becomes an aberration. Man being the peak of God’s creation is obligated to live a life that portrays God’s communicable attributes of embedded in the Decalogue. This obligation is more binding on the teachers and preachers of the Word. No man should live in variance with God’s laws. The unfortunate phenomenon as it concerns a variant covetousness, as exhibited by Church leaders needs to be discarded in obedience to the Decalogue. Undue emphasis on wealth acquisition in the teaching and preaching will only deviate society far away from the Decalogue than bringing the society closer to it.

Church leaders and members alike may be caught up in bondage called besetting sins. Neo-religious teachings (gayism, lesbianism, breakthrough, get rich–quick, hustle, killing humans for money rituals, embezzlement, marriage of convenience etc.) stare at the Christian Church and dare her for a battle

First, we need to remind ourselves that the command to kill is an insufficient basis for addressing all questions of killing, such as killing in war, capital punishment, murder, manslaughter, abortion, euthanasia, etc. A much wider selection of biblical texts should be drawn on when considering these areas. However, the murder commandment can speak properly only within such a wider biblical context, and not in isolation. In its terse formulation, however, it can help to set a basis for such discussion, a direction toward preserving life. By forbidding the most heinous for of life-taking, murder, it puts under judgement all emotions and actions leading up to it (Matt.5:21-26; James 4:1-2).

Adultery commandment was to guard against the most direct assault on marriage in ancient Israel. In our time, adultery strictly speaking, sexual intercourse with or by a married person across marriage lines, is more rampant than ever. Even with this happening, the word adultery is so seldom applied to the practice that sounds quaint and old-fashioned. It might help for church leaders to name the practice, when it occurs in Christian ranks, by this ambiguous and time-honoured name, to expose it for what it is. Beyond the main assault on marriage today, the act of adultery appears to be the consequence of a marriage-under mining mentality. “Church leaders and members commit societal adultery whenever they express, advocate, condone, or excuse views and practices that undermine lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage as the only set of sexual

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<sup>16</sup> Elmer L. Towns. 1996, p. 103.

intercourse legitimate for Christians.<sup>17</sup> This paper asserts, society and the Church alike must learn to resist adultery.

The theft commandment focuses on theft. Theft is rampant in our society, whether it means, break-ins, car thefts, pick-pocketing, shoplifting, embezzling, computer fraud, wrong acquisition of public and church properties, plagiarizing on exams, copyright violations or other forms of acquiring someone else's property unlawfully. Here, as in the other commandments early attitude formation is essential. The example of Church leaders and other adults is crucial. It is important also to name various forms of wrongful acquisition of others' property as theft, since there is a tendency not to regard some forms of theft.

The witness commandment's original setting was intended to safeguard just and legal proceedings. The coveting commandment, if our interpretation is right, this commandment directs itself against the rich stealing often informal legal ways for the poor. It addresses the stronger ones competing or manoeuvring over the weaker ones. It indicts countless scenarios in our world.

### **Recommendation**

1. The Church leadership should be proactive in averting violence, conflicts and killing both physically and virtually.
2. The Church leadership should provide basic security and protection of women and girls. The Church must promote traditional family values to enhance the status of women.
3. The new nomenclature for theft and covetousness is corruption should be eschewed. Corruption, match-fixing, examination fraud, kickbacks, vote-rigging, the purchase and sale of votes and falsification of election results should be eschewed.
4. The way forward is to radically reject corrupt practices and adopt the position of transparency and accountability before God and our fellow citizens. They should follow the example set by those Christian leaders who have stood up and fought against theft and covetousness, extortion, bribery, exam fraud etc. "The Rev. William Okoye, the former Chaplain to the President of Nigeria, rejected a bribe of millions of Naira."<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The paper strongly asserts that God intends Church leaders to be righteous and become change agents in a confused world. It is the conviction of this paper that a robust commitment to Christ thrives inside church leaders and that many are fatigued by long-term faithfulness. The researchers advocate that every church leader in Nigeria, regardless of Church denomination or size of a congregation, has the potential to be a Gospel revolutionary at this present moment in time. The thesis of this short research paper is that (1) Church leaders' personal growth must be accelerated and (2) their families must be strengthened so they can meet the spiritual needs of the masses in a changed and changing world. The researchers bid church leaders everywhere to regain a wholehearted adventure in ministry as they draw closer to the Source, implement Scripture more dynamically in countless expressions of ministry, serve downcast people, and more passionately care for the world around them.

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<sup>17</sup> Samuel WajeKunhiyop. *African Christian Ethics*. (Jos: ACTS, 2008), p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Steinmetz David C. "The Reformation and the Ten Commandments": Interpretation, Sugirtharajah, R.S. ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 46.