

“For Christ Is the End of the Law” (Rom 10:4).  
Topicality of Religious-Moral Principles  
of the Old Testament\*

One of the most important, but also the most challenging problems in modern theology is to determine to what extent the religious-moral principles of the Old Testament retain their binding character. As is well known, the Old Testament includes quite numerous less-than-perfect ethical principles—reflecting a specific historical-cultural background—which in the light of the New Testament we consider old-fashioned and non-binding. For example, one can evoke here the polygamy of patriarchs (Dt 17:17, 21:15), the law of retaliation (Lev 24:19-20), teachings on allowing a bill of divorce (Dt 24:1), and even entire sets of a moral character, such as the so-called family decalogue (Lev 18:7-17), which assumes the structure of a family from patriarchal times. A traditional, scholastic statement that of all the ritual, legal and moral principles of the Old Testament up to now only the moral principles are binding, does not stand up to scrutiny. Fr. Professor Stanislaw Olejnik, who enriched the theological sciences in Poland with a monumental textbook<sup>1</sup> and the most recent monographs on moral theology<sup>2</sup>, which are supposed to constitute a comprehensive study on the whole of Moral Theology, rightly points out that this traditional position cannot be accepted today. In the same place, Fr. Professor Olejnik also provides a proper key and criterion which allow for determining the extent of the topicality and validity of the religious-moral principles of the Old Testament, pointing out that, “All commandments, and in particular those which relate to fellow men must

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<sup>1</sup> S. Olejnik, *W odpowiedzi na dar i powołanie Boże*, Warsaw 1979.

<sup>2</sup> S. Olejnik, *Teologia moralna: Dar-Wezwanie-Odpowiedź*, vol. 1 *Wprowadzenie i idea wiodąca*, Warsaw 1980; vol. 2 *Człowiek i jego działanie*, Warsaw 1988; vol. 3, Warsaw 1988; vol. 4, Warsaw 1989.

be confronted” with the requirements and perspectives of the love assessing their value and usefulness in our times. Their point of reference must always be Christ. He, in turn, accumulates them all in His commandment of “loving thy neighbor.”<sup>3</sup>

This, by all measures a good point, invites a deeper biblical analysis and elaboration. Any partial treatment of the Old Testament does not correspond to current theological thought. “For whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). Hence, each generation must endeavor anew to learn and fulfill the divine plan expressed in the Holy Scriptures, which in their entirety—that is not only the Old and New Testaments taken together, but also every passage and every expression individually—are carriers of the redemptive message of God, and therefore also hope. Each scriptural passage constitutes an integral part of God’s redemptive plan, therefore it retains its binding force equally with redemption itself, to which it is assigned. As is well known, the Bible in its entirety, with all its parts, is inspired, therefore, as the Council insists—“all books of the Old and New Testaments, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable” (*valor perennis*) (DV 14).

The relevance of the Old Testament moral teaching is a subject of vivid interest among biblical scholars. It was studied extensively by P. Grelot, N. Lohfink, R. Schnackenburg, J. L. McKenzie and others<sup>4</sup>. In Poland the topic of the significance of the religious-moral forms for the Christian teaching on morality was researched by, among others, Fr. S. Łach, Fr. Cz. Jakubiec, Fr. J. Frankowski, bp Jan Szlaga, and in particular Fr. L. Stachowiak<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> S. Olejnik, *Teologia moralna 3: Wartościowanie moralne*, Warsaw 1988, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. P. Grelot, *Sens chrétien de l’Ancien Testament*, Paris 1992; N. Lohfink, *Pieśń chwały*, Warsaw 1982; J.L. McKenzie, *Wartości Starego Testamentu*, “Concillium” 1-10 (1966/67), 627-664; R. Schnackenburg, *Das Ethos des Alten Bundes und die sittliche Botschaft Jesu*, in: *Der Mensch und sein Auftrag*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1983, 9-39.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. S. Łach, *Religijno-moralne wartości Starego Testamentu*, in: *Pismo Święte w duszpasterstwie współczesnym*, Lublin 1950, 59-81; Cz. Jakubiec, *Stare i Nowe Przymierze – Biblia i Ewangelia*, Warsaw 1961; J. Frankowski, *Dlaczego chrześcijaństwo nie wyrzeknie się Starego Testamentu* “Znak” 212 (1972), 216-221; J. Szlaga, *Etos Ludu Bożego Starego Przymierza* in: *Studio lectionem facere*, Lublin 1980, 63-66; L. Stachowiak, *Biblijne ujęcie węzłowych zagadnień moralnych*, STV 6(1968), 11-28; *ibid.*, *W poszukiwaniu chrześcijańskiego sensu Starego Testamentu*, AK 72(1969), 417-426; *Id.*, *O ile prawdy i normy Starego Testamentu zachowały wartość dla kształtowania dzisiejszej doktryny moralnej*, AK 76(1971), 208-211; *Id.*, *W poszukiwaniu paranezy w Starym Testamencie*, CT 48(1978)2, 37-57; *Id.*, *Pouczenia etyczne w literaturze międzytestamentalnej*, CT 48(1978)3, 43-62.

The question which arises first is, why the traditional, clear and rather convenient division into obsolete legal and ritual principles and the still binding moral-ethical code does not stand up to scrutiny any longer?

Furthermore, how in the moral message of the Old Testament can we distinguish what is an expression and reflection of changing—and as such subject to expiration—temporal and cultural conditions from that which in the ethical scope retains the *valor perennis*?

Finally, what, for moral valuing, are the practical consequences of the principle stressed by Fr. Professor Stanislaw Olejnik, namely, that the usefulness of the ethical principles shall be assessed in the perspective of the supreme commandment of love and the very person of Jesus Christ as a living embodiment of the love revealed and fulfilled in human?

The major goal of this paper is to attempt to answer this question. The starting point of a proper assessment of the normative character of the Old Testament is the fact that all principles—ritual, legal and religious-moral alike—draw their binding force from the faith in the inspired nature of the word of God. Phrases such as, "Thus says the Lord," or "God said to Abraham," "Moses," or "David": "say to the Israelites" and similar constitute the ultimate justification of the theonomic character of all principles, norms and institutions of Israel, governing the entire life of the people of God. Therefore, any division, even if sometimes necessary, will be of a rather artificial nature. Whereas we used to distinguish in the Old Testament some ritual-liturgical compilations, such as Ex 34:14-26, Is 33:14-15; religious-moral ones (Decalogue: Ex 20:1-17, Dt 5:6-21) or legal ones (Lev 20:9-21), this distinction only means that in all aforementioned compilations it is the ethical, ritual or legal principles that predominate. All of them, however, are of a strictly religious character, understood as an indication of the will of God, which encompasses the entirety of life of the people of God; in the biblical language: "conduct before God" in justice and sanctity, as well as "service," that is the ritual sphere.

All the principles, with no exceptions, not only in the normative sphere, but also in their motivation, point to and already are a response to the action of God. A telling example of that is the so-called Code of the Sanctity of Family: Lev 20:9-22. All provisions are hedged by legal sanctions, more often than not capital punishment; whereas insofar as its theological grounds it points to fulfilling the promise granted to Abraham in the form of the land given to Israel as, "its legacy" and to the community with God Yahweh, who is the actual agent of sanctification.

Human acts in the Bible are of an interlocutory structure, that is, they are always a response to a particular action of God. Their root and source is faith

in the presence and action of God: “Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, the Lord alone!” (cf. Dt 6:4, Mk 12:29). A direct consequence of this confession is an obligation to love God and one’s neighbor (cf. Mk 12:30-31). Thus, Israel’s monotheism is rightly described as ethical monotheism. The revelation of the only God corresponds to an obligation to, “display God’s glory among the nations, be to them the light” (Ez 39: 21; Eph 5:13). This obligation applies unconditionally to all spheres and actions, in particular to everything that concerns ritual, family and social life, as well as encompasses a wide scope of individual duties.

The Decalogue as a set of obligations following from the Covenant is preceded by a historical prologue: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex 20:1, Dt 5:6). The Decalogue, as can be easily noticed, consists of an entirety of ethical norms in the ritual and social scope, if tightening the society mainly to a widely understood family. Both in the Elohist (Ex 20:9-17), as well as in the Deuteronomistic version (Dt 5:6-20), the Decalogue, in its content, is intimately linked with the Covenant made on Sinai. God, entering the community of life and love with His people, bound him – by the Decalogue – with particular principles which were supposed to guarantee the most intimate communion of Israel with their God, based on mutual dedication, a telling expression of which is the formulae of the covenant: “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (Ex 6:7). This time not any specified goods but God alone gives Himself to Israel and obliges them to follow His sanctity and faithfulness.

Therefore, the reading of the entire moral Law which refers to the Divine Revelation as the response to the gift and calling from God—as Fr. Professor Stanisław Olejnik does—captures the interlocutory and normative character of the Divine Law accurately, and the entire sphere of ethical actions of man—as his response. At the same time, such a perspective, especially in reference to detailed principles, creates severe difficulties, as it requires entirely new considerations which will replace casuistic thinking with truly theological categories.

Thus, the purpose of particular ethical norms—as Fr. Professor L. Stachowiak accurately points out—is “to create within the Covenant an atmosphere of a dialogue,” which by fulfilling the Decalogue as the “Covenant Chart” makes Israel a rightful partner in the indissoluble Covenant relationship<sup>6</sup>.

The only grounds of all these religious-moral principles of the entire order is the revealed will of Yahweh, expressed in a laconic: “I Am the Lord”

<sup>6</sup> L. Stachowiak, *Rozwój norm moralnych w historii zbawienia Starego Testamentu*, AK 81(1973), 45.

(cf. Ex 31:13; Lev 21:15; Ez 5:13). The Bible does not know any other motivation. This theonomic character of the entire Divine Law of the Old and New Testament constitutes one of the crucial marks of the biblical ethos.

In the face of numerous misunderstandings in this regard one shall stress that both Old and New Testaments alike unequivocally show the stability of both the Sinaitic Covenant, as well as its Law (that is the Torah), related to Moses. First it is done by the Deuteronomistic Tradition, which constitutes a new interpretation of the meaning of the old Law in the changed context of the Babylonian slavery, and then by Christ Himself. The Law, according to the Deuteronomist, is primarily an unmerited gift from God Himself (Dt 4:2), a symbol of redemptive endurance of God’s will (Dt 4:3), a peculiar symbol of His closeness (Dt 4:7), or even of intimacy with the living God (Dt 4:4), an expression of Israel’s wisdom in relation to other nations (Dt 4:6), as well as the only path to life (Dt 4:1-4). For its inimitable function, the laws given by God at Sinai are unchangeable, like God Himself is (Dt 4:2). The only correct conclusion following from understanding the Law in such a way is expressed in the words, “Now therefore, Israel, hear the statutes and ordinances I am teaching you to observe, that you may live (...) Observe them carefully, for this is your wisdom and discernment in the sight of the peoples (...)” (Dt 4:1-6).

Also Christ Himself clearly states His attitude towards Old Testament Law. His fundamental declaration, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (Mt 5:17) shows that Christ confirms and fulfills the Old Testament in its entirety. As elaborated in the following explanation, Christ does not change even the smallest letter (that the iota was), or even add the proverbial ‘dot over *i*’. Everything retains its binding force, and so it shall remain until the end of times, when the Law will prove unnecessary, as everyone will be able to see and experience its fulfillment in God.

The word “plērōō,” used by Christ to describe the fulfillment, expresses both the fact that Christ perfected Old Testament Law, as well as that in Him all promises announced thereof were fulfilled and actualized. To illustrate this, one can think of a container filled to the brink. The contents of the instructions which Christ brings fill the “container” of God’s Law so fully that from now on Jesus Christ is not to be understood without Old Testament Law, and conversely the Law cannot be understood without Jesus Christ. The fullness that Jesus is in relation to Old Testament Law is a kind of an indissoluble integrity of Jesus with the Law, and said Law with Jesus. Therefore, a strong effort must be made to read the aforementioned quote, like Martion did, in the exact opposite way to what Christ meant: “Do you think that I have come to fulfill the law or the prophets? I have come not to fulfill but to abolish.”

St. Paul, stressing that “Christ is the end of the Law” (Rom 10:4), wants to point out that Jesus is the purpose and fulfillment of the Order, and not its abolishment. The expression used here by St. Paul “telos gar nomou—Christos” shows a distinctive purposefulness of Old Testament Law, which from the beginning God oriented towards Christ as its climax. Only He, and not the Law, can rule over man and determine his relationship to God. By His obedience to the Father in grace and power of the Holy Spirit, He becomes the Agent of Justice arising from faith, and not works. In Him the Law reached its boundary and He created a new order of grace in which we have access to the Father and justification<sup>7</sup>. The entire Law and Prophets were embodied in the living person of Jesus Christ. From now on, no commandment, not even the commandment of love, but love present and fulfilled in Jesus Christ becomes the ultimate and highest ethical principle of Christianity. In Christ the entire Law and Order is present, hence Christians do not need to adopt the Mosaic Law first in order to reach Christ. All that is needed is to believe in Christ as the Lord and Savior, adopt Him with one’s heart and declare it aloud to become a participant of exoneration.

Jesus’ undivided YES towards Old Testament Law in its entirety does not mean a full approval of the interpretation of the Law as used by the Pharisees and Scribes in Jesus’ times, but rather adopting all instructions from the Old Testament as hints and principles of behavior, as well as a vital part of the proclamation of salvation, which was completely subject to, and as such oriented at, redeeming the people of God. Everything that was written—as St. Paul teaches—“was written for our instruction” and therefore for our salvation (Rom 15:4). Hence, it is not enough to ask what redemptive meaning the particular passages used to have for old Israel, but also it is necessary to learn what meaning they have for us today and what God wants to tell us with them in such an extremely different historical and topical situation of us living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A foot-bridge here can be an analogy of the existential situation of the people of the first and ultimate covenant, a situation of danger, fear, anxiety, but also the need and yearning for salvation. A key to proper understanding is an existential interpretation of the entire Bible in the light of the fullness that Christ is and brings. Naturally, the proclamation of salvation included in the Bible cannot be understood statically, as if a sentence uttered once had always the same value and an identical meaning to all generations that adopt the Bible as the word of God. Uttered in a specific historical situation by Moses, prophets and authors, or

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A. Schlatter, *Der Brief an die Römer*, (Erläuterung zum N. T. 5), Stuttgart 1962, 185.

even editors of Holy Scriptures, it included the entire redeeming truth that God wanted to pass to his people. The same utterance seen in the context of a unity and wholeness of the plan of salvation oriented, from the beginning of time, towards Christ, only in Him receives its full theological meaning.

From amongst the religious-moral principles the best example is that of the commandment of love. Both commandment of love of God (Dt 6:5) and of one's neighbor (Lev 19:18), formerly known as two commandments, not only become bonded by Christ in an inseparable unity (cf. Mt 22:37-40), but also Christ clearly points to Himself as an example, a motif for their keeping: "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you" (J 15:12; cf. also 15:17).

From now on it is not the commandment but following the living example of Jesus Christ which becomes the center and fullness of the moral teaching of the New Testament: "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you" (J 15:12). In Christ a new measure and a new, full scope of love is revealed (Mt 5:43). Revealing this fullness is affected in Jesus Christ. From the very beginning this commandment remains, however, a foundation on which, "the whole law and the prophets depend" (Mt 22:40). The Old Covenant from the very beginning has been oriented to Christ as its fullness and at the same time He is its end, climax and fulfillment. Love, as a mark characteristic to Christ's disciples (J 13:35), receives its necessary complement in following Jesus and taking up one's cross daily (Lk 9:23), in which conformity and obedience to the will of the Father and love towards others are both expressed.

The fullness revealed in Jesus Christ is further expressed in the fact that not only the entire sphere of ethics, but also that of ritual became subject to it. Taking up the teaching of the Old Testament prophets (Os 6:6), Christ points out that mercy takes precedence over sacrifice (Mt 9:13), and in case of a conflict between these two spheres, Christ orders: "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:23-24).

Such an interpretation arises from faith in the unity of the divine plan and continuous work of one and the same God the Redeemer. The hermeneutical key to a full theological interpretation is the principle given by Christ himself, "You search the scriptures, because you think you have eternal life through them; even they testify on my behalf" (J 5:39).

The words of God's proclamation and in consequence also of "the Scriptures" on each stage of the history of salvation were a path to life, although how both "the Scriptures" and life itself were understood has been changing and deepening. A practical example of applying such a Christocentric interpretation

as early as in the Apostle Church is Lk 24:24-25. Christ Himself opens to His disciples a theological depth present in the scriptures of prophets, but cognizable only in the light of faith in Risen Christ, who alone, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them what referred to Him in all the Scriptures.”

The word of the Scriptures always arises from specific experience and must also be interpreted in an unchangeable manner in light of the experience of faith of all of God’s people—first of the Old Covenant, then that of the New Covenant. For its historical background this experience may be quite diverse, however insofar conveying the contents, read in the light of human existence, it will always be very similar, or even identical. On all pages of the Bible, regardless of different eras and different names, we encounter a human being who amongst numerous dangers is fighting or gives in to evil, who trusts, believes, struggles for saving his hope or leaves and curses God. Man, who goes astray and sins, but no less intensely also yearns for salvation. Man who prays, awaits redemption or is silent in the face of evil, full of resignation and pain. Man who loves and hates, rejoices and mourns, is born and dies and yearns to comprehend the meaning of his suffering, sorrow and joy.

The contents of the Old Testament, read through the prism of the experience of living people, and in particular by the power of the redemptive work of God, have not become obsolete. At the same time, as follows from Heb 11, this is not only about a positive example of just men of the Old Order, such as Abel, Abraham, Jacob or Moses, but also fratricidal Kane, insidious Ezau, the harlot Rahab or sinful David—weak in his sin but also grand in his repentance.

Thank God the Bible is not an exemplary Book showing only shining examples but a Book of Redemption, a place of meeting all those who believed in the redemptive power of the word. That faith, from Abraham to Paul and all those who, “summon the name of the Lord as their Savior” in an unchangeable way gives them access to salvation (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3, 5:9, 22; Ga 3:6).

By becoming fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the redemptive meaning of the Old Testament events have not been crossed out. Partial and theologically incomplete meaning of the events does not erase then the actual, literal sense of all particular texts of the Old Testament. Quite the contrary, a proper reading of the complete theological meaning, to which we gain access in Jesus Christ, assumes a faithful reading in the literal sense first. In the specific historical situation it also expressed the fullness of the redemptive meaning, and therefore also the salvation needed as per the capabilities as well as the needs of the people for whom the Mosaic Covenant is still the ultimate one, and as such, the complete Covenant.



The New Law, announced by Jesus Christ in the Sermon of the Mount and Risen Christ Himself as the limit and fullness of the Law constitute the only criterion of a complete theological interpretation of all norms, principles, commandments, as well as ritual institutions of the new “God’s Israel” (Ga 6:16). It is noteworthy to point out, though, that according to St. John the revealed divine will from the very beginning was expressed in the words, “For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another” (1J 3:11). In this light, Christ restores all institutions to their original perfection and fullness intended by God (cf. Mt 5:33-37.39-42: the law of retaliation, swearing oaths), enriches them and gives them spirit (Mt 5:27-30, 21-26: desire as the source of adultery, wrath as the root of a murder), but also changes some of them and makes them obsolete, as is the case with the divorce letter (Mt 5:31-32) or the provisions of forbidden practices. Christ Himself—as Mk 7:19 puts it—“Thus he declared all foods clean.” Christ as a “Fullness” of the revelation constitutes a unified evaluation criterion for all provisions, laws and institutions of the Old Testament, regardless of their literal or content classification.

The one-time-ness and exclusiveness of the sacrifice of the Cross (Heb 8:27, 9:28) as the only and perfect sacrifice of the new and eternal covenant (Mt 26:28) reveals a temporary and preparatory character of the Old Testament sacrifices, and by the same token to a large extent relativizes the unchangeable nature of the ritual legislation of the Old Testament.

The only and eternal sacrifice of Jesus Christ therefore means the end of the numerous sacrifices of the Old Testament, however, it certainly does not erase the historical-redemptive meaning of said sacrifices which they had for ages, until that very time, as without them the absolute and entire meaning of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ would not be understandable either. One and the same word has been carrying out its redemptive mission simply by unchangeably being the carrier of the proclamation of salvation, and at the same time, an irreplaceable means of salvation, although actualized in a different way as by the measure of the revelation of God the Redeemer. The sacrifices of the Old Testament remain in such a close unity with the sacrifice of the cross and the bloodless sacrifice of the Last Supper that without them the entire theological meaning of that sacrifice would be actually impossible to comprehend. In this light, the end of the ritual law, as well as its climax is expressed in its fulfillment, and not in revealing its secondary meaning. Similarly to the ancient ritual of Pesach, it is merely subject to the judgment in the light of the new Law of the Spirit, the fullness of which is the common ritual made “in Spirit and truth” (J 4:23).

The mission and proclamation of the Old Testament Books was then a widespread proclamation, from the very beginning aiming at Christ as its end and fulfillment.

The entire theological meaning revealed in Christ also entails a greater obligation, "Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more" (Lk 12:48). Therefore, it is not the feeling of superiority, but perfect love as realized in Christ that becomes the only criterion characteristic of true disciples of Christ (cf. Mt 16:24, 1J 3:11).