

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

The publication of this treatise in an accessible form and by so competent a hand may prove to be of considerable importance politically. For the occupation of Palestine by Jewish communities has been going on for years and the introduction of constitutional government into the Ottoman Empire seems to favour the extension of that occupation. Will the resettled Jews adopt towards their neighbours the attitude of extreme intolerance which this treatise prescribes? When the writer was last in Palestine the statements made to him were rather in favour of an affirmative answer to this question: where the territory was occupied by Jews, there was no place for members of other communities. Mr. Elmslie's work should be studied by all whom the Zionist movement interests; and it will be all the more valuable as a contribution to Eastern politics because it is evident that his mind is absolutely free from Antisemitism.

D. S. MARGOLIOUTH.

#### ON A NEGLECTED ASPECT OF THE THIRD COMMANDMENT.

I HAVE long been surprised to find how much stress is laid by most commentators upon a secondary application of this commandment, while they almost leave out of sight its plain and primary meaning. For they put *profane speaking*, not *lying*, as the thing chiefly forbidden. Here is an instance of what I mean. In Mant's Bible (1817) stands (as from *Oxford Catechism* . . .): "In this third Commandment are forbidden: 1. Irreverent thoughts of God. 2. Blasphemy, or dishonourable mention of His name. 3. False swearing in avouching an untruth. 4. Perjury, or breaking a lawful oath. 5. Causing the name of God, and our holy profession, to be blasphemed by others."

Now the commandment actually forbids, not 1, 2, 5, but

3 and 4. It forbids plainly *lying confirmed by an oath*. It says, Do not swear falsely, do not swear to do, and then, by not doing, make your words a lie.

This appears clearly enough, when we examine the words of the third commandment in the Hebrew and the LXX; and also our Lord's own explanation of it in St. Matthew v. 33-37. The commandment is given thrice in the Old Testament.

1. Exodus xx. 7.

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹן

[ 2. Deuteronomy v. 11, identical.

3. Leviticus xix. 12.

לֹא תִשָּׁבְעוּ בְשֵׁמִי לְשָׁקֵר

In English 1, 2 appear :

1. "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God *in vain*" (A.V., R.V.) . . . "for falsehood" R.V. marg.

"Utter not the name of Jehovah upon a falsehood" : "do not swear falsely," Gesenius.

The Hebrew word *Shav* means "evil, wickedness, iniquity, folly : esp. falsehood, a lie." Gesen. lexicon.

So that the adverbial phrase "in vain" is here weak : not but what "vain" in our Bible English often means false and wicked. And the Hebrew word *Shav* often means falsehood. See Exodus xxiii. 1; Psalm xxiv. 4.

3. "Ye shall not swear by my name *falsely*." A.V. and R.V.

The LXX of 1, 2 has *ἐπὶ ματαίῳ*; and this Greek may have helped to our "in vain" : but it often translates Hebrew words which mean something stronger, "lie, falsehood."

The LXX of Leviticus is *οὐκ ὀμείσθε πρὸς ὄνοματί μου ἐπ' ἀδίκῳ*. And this "for wrong" = "to make wrong appear right," which is falsehood. And there is added, "Ye shall

not profane the name of the Lord your God"; meaning that a false oath is such profanation.

There are indeed many Scriptural passages enforcing truthfulness and the keeping of vows and promises: the man who shall dwell in God's holy hill is he who speaketh the truth in his heart, who "swaereth and changeth not" (Ps. xv.). "The Lord is the God of truth" (Jeremiah) "A swift witness against false swearers" (Malachi). So that it would be surprising if among the Ten Commandments there were not one plainly forbidding falsehood. But no such omission can be charged upon the Decalogue. Falsehood is twice forbidden, in commandment 3, and in commandment 9.

Turn we now to our Lord's enforcement of the third commandment in St. Matthew v. 33. Christ takes several of the commandments, three unmistakeably (in *vv.* 21, 27, 33). He begins with the words, "Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time"; then adds something to each, prefacing it with, "But I say unto you." There can be no reasonable doubt that Christ is quoting the third commandment as *οὐκ ἐπιορκήσεις, ἀποδώσεις δὲ τῷ Κυρίῳ τοὺς ὄρκους*. For, though *ἐπιορκεῖν* is not in the LXX of this commandment, yet it occurs elsewhere; it is the plain and common word in Greek for "for swear, swear falsely." And St. Paul says (1 Tim. i. 10), "The law is against liars, perjurers" (*ψεύσταις, ἐπιόρκοις*). So that our Lord certainly quotes the commandment as "Thou shalt not swear falsely." But then He adds, "Thou shalt not speak falsely." Even without an oath you, my disciples, are not to lie. Swear not at all in common interchange of talk: *ἔστω ὁ λόγος ὑμῶν ναὶ ναί*: yea yea (yes yes) for affirmation; *οὐ, οὐ*, no, no, for denial. Those strong adjurations, which men add, come of evil, originate from the evil in man. Men are so often untrustworthy that

their fellowmen will not believe them without oaths, nor will speakers hold themselves bound without oaths. And all oaths imply God in some way, and call on Him to punish falsehood.

But the last part of Christ's words is rather an addition to the commandment—a counsel of perfection—than a statement of what is actually in that commandment. The old law was, Swear not falsely : the new is, Speak not falsely.

It astonished me long ago to find that many (nay most) explanations of the third commandment give hardly any hint that this commandment forbids lying. More than forty years ago it came to be my part to prepare boys for Confirmation at Rugby. A little book much used was *Vaughan on Confirmation*. No doubt it is a good manual in much. But I was greatly surprised when, in more than a page of notes on commandment 3, I found *not one word or hint that it forbids falsehood*.

Here are Dr. Vaughan's very words :

“ Notice here prohibitions : of profaneness in general : (1) an irreverent use of the name of God in conversation : (2) needless appeals to Him : (3) jesting quotations of Scripture : (4) the introduction of names or terms having a solemn or awful import.

“ Of profaneness in *worship*. Whose thoughts do not sometimes wander ? ” etc., etc.

But this great Headmaster says absolutely nothing about truthfulness to his boys ; whereas false speaking on oath is just what *is* forbidden. Not but what mere loose profanity was a fault then, and is still one, I believe, among Eastern peoples. And our Lord's further remarks about the third commandment forbid this : but He distinctly gives them as an addition of his own to what had been said of old time. We must not let this put out of sight the primary meaning of the commandment, a prohibition

of deliberate falsehood. Which is a sin against God, who has given to man the gift of speech, that he might utter truth.

It is a pity that many in their zeal against coarseness and profanity have obscured the plain meaning of the third commandment. The 9th again forbids falsehood, falsehood to the hurt of our neighbour: but this is but a part of truthfulness; and this offence generally brings its own punishment, while on our own character probably the other transgression of truth has a more corrupting influence.

There is also an important thought deserving attention. If the law given by God through Moses to His people, on which so much of Christian morality is based, had said nothing distinct about truthfulness, Christian morality would compare unfavourably with the best heathen morality. We know that in very old times Homer's hero Achilles says: "Hateful to me, yea hateful as the gates of hell, is he who hides one thing in his heart and utters another." We are told that in the education of Persian children one chief thing taught them was "to speak the truth." So that it is inconceivable that this duty could have been omitted from the Decalogue. But, as I urge, it has not been omitted; deliberate falsehood is plainly forbidden, and of course the positive duty of truthfulness is implied.

It may be that the words of St. James (Ep. v. 12) have partly led to this exaggerated stress being laid by so many on what is not actually in the third commandment. Owing to the fact that swearing was a prevailing vice at the time, this Apostle puts very prominently forward his counsel "not to swear any kind of oath at all." Yet in the following words, *ἦτω δὲ ὑμῶν τὸ ναὶ ναὶ καὶ τὸ οὐ οὐ*, "let your yes be yes, etc.," he is even more distinct for truthfulness than is the Greek of St. Matthew v. 36. And in the passage

about the tongue's abuses in chapter iii. *μὴ ψεύδεσθε* stands out plain.

And the rather weak "in vain" has misled unlearned English folk. Possibly, too, some have thought that to forbid careless, insulting, and blasphemous words about God was a more specially religious command than to forbid lying, a prohibition common to heathens.

With regard to the total omission of falsehood in Dr. Vaughan's notes on the third commandment : as Dr. Vaughan was (whatever his knowledge of Hebrew might be) a good Greek scholar, he certainly knew the Greek of St. Matthew : so I suppose him to have been led by his zeal against profanity in schoolboys to forget for a time, in dealing with the third commandment, the at least equal importance of truthfulness. But surely it is misleading and dangerous to put out of sight the plainest meaning of a divine command, in order to lay stress upon a minor point that strongly appeals to you.

Are not preachers, when a text is interpretable in several ways, sometimes tempted to sink and obscure the surest and truest meaning, in order that they may enforce a lesson important possibly, but not reasonably or certainly deducible from the words before them ? Such appears to me what has been done in the case of the third commandment. I have always to confirmands taught what I have here urged, that this commandment forbids lying as a sin against God. Nor has it been an unnecessary teaching. For when I have put the question, "What does the third commandment forbid ?" the almost invariable answer has been "Swearing and bad language." Much instruction given by school teachers is, I am sure, to this effect. Misbehaviour and inattention in church or at worship are severely rebuked in children as breaches of the third commandment, while no mention is made of falsehood as belonging to it. Even

since writing most of this paper, I find in a small book meant for teachers put down, as the main point enforced in commandment 3, *reverence*, in commandment 9, *truth*. A misleading perversion! As if untruth in the way of slander were the only offence against truth.

But I am also encouraged by finding that Bishop Gore (to whose writing on St. Matthew my attention has been called) is in exact agreement with me about this commandment. At what time I myself came to see how erroneous was the prevalent "Sunday school" interpretation of the commandment (as one may call it), I can hardly say. No doubt a knowledge of the Greek text of St. Matthew came to me very early, thanks to good home and school teaching (yes, school-teaching at Eton in the forties, when some detractors say we had no religious teaching at all); and, when thus I had learned the right view of the New Testament giving of the commandment, a more careful study of the Old Testament text showed me that "in vain" meant in the original "for falsehood."

Whence I conclude—not as new, but true—that the third commandment forbids deliberate lying.

W. C. GREEN.