Word and Truth

You shall not Speak False Witness Against your Neighbour

We have considered the commandments which arise from the obligation due to your neighbour in deed and thought. A single commandment is sufficient to encompass the obligation to your neighbour which arises from speech. Nonetheless, this lone commandment, prohibiting false witness (falsum testimonium), is arguably the most interesting, and certainly the most discussed, of all the commandments of the second tablet. In some commentaries, analysis of this eighth commandment takes as much space as all the other precepts put together. Commentators use it to analyse questions which arise from lying, swearing oaths, taking vows, and committing perjury – all important in a daily life revolving more around oral than written reliability. It is notable how many of the points the theologians raise are also discussed in Gratian and other legal texts, giving a sense of their everyday significance. This Christian interpretation was at odds with the Jewish reading of this commandment which, as Nicholas of Lyra noted, was understood to prohibit only false testimony given in court.\(^1\) Appearing in court, which involved swearing an oath to tell the truth, had been a matter of debate in the early Church, since oath-taking appeared to be prohibited in the Gospel. The Bible provided a variety of problematic texts and examples of key figures who appeared to lie with impunity or even profit. The most conspicuous of these was Jacob, one of the twin sons of Isaac the son of Abraham (Gen 27). Jacob and his mother, Rebecca, hatched a plan to divert blind Isaac’s paternal blessing from the elder twin Esau – hearty, open, and trusting – to the more complex, thoughtful Jacob. To his father’s question, “who are you, my son?,” a disguised Jacob answered, “I am Esau, your firstborn.” Deceived, Isaac bestowed the elder son’s blessing on Jacob, leaving nothing for Esau. To the uncommitted reader this is a clear lie – and worse, a lie both to benefit Jacob himself and harm his brother. But Jacob, with his new name, Israel, was to become the father of the twelve sons whose families were the living fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham that he would raise a great nation. For medieval commentators, it was simply not possible that the twelve tribes of Israel could have been founded on a lie; the story had to be interpreted another way. Exposition was needed even when the Bible recounted lies

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1 Nicholas of Lyra, Postilla, on Ex. 20: Non loqueris.
spoken for the benefit of others. The two most common examples of this sort were the story of Rahab the harlot, who hid Joshua's spies in Jericho and helped them escape (Josh 2), and the tale of the midwives who lied to the Egyptians rather than expose the Hebrew baby boys (Ex 1:15–21): neither was lying for her own advantage, but they lied nonetheless, and as a result, “the people multiplied.” How could stories based on untruths be understood as part of the founding narrative of the people of God? In addition to the biblical case studies, and to the practical importance of truth-telling in daily life, lies and oaths were also the subject of two treatises and a sermon by Augustine, all of which provided our theologians with a challenging set of issues to resolve.²

Commentators began by asking whether this commandment rightly belonged on the second stone tablet. This was a common starting point for discussing any of the precepts concerning your neighbour, but in this case the question had particular force because the first-tablet corollary to false witness was the commandment which forbade taking the Lord's name in vain. Some scholars, such as William of Auxerre and Simon of Hinton, interpreted the second commandment as banning the swearing of oaths, and consequently discussed oath-taking in their discussions of that precept.³ Simon's rationale for his discussion rests in part on the distinction he makes between oaths per se and oath-taking: the substance of the oath he judged to be part of the commandment against false witness, but the process of swearing an oath was part of taking the Lord's name in vain. John of La Rochelle splits the discussion in two, dealing with oaths in the second commandment and lies in the eighth, having first established that “false witness” does indeed include lying.

John approached the question of where the commandment belonged through an abstract discussion of the debt owed by humanity to truth.⁴ John distinguishes two types of truth: “uncreated Truth” is, in essence, Christ, since Christ is the Word of God; “created truth” is its shadow, microcosmic form, made to be comprehensible to humans and other created beings. In John's system of obligation, rational creation has a debt to pay with respect to each sort of truth, owing a debt of reverence to uncreated Truth, but only a debt of observance or obedience to created truth. It is these two different sorts of debt that lead to two different commandments. The precept against taking the Lord's name in vain was a reminder to honour the debt of reverence. According to John, Creation in