SEVEN MITSVOT OF BENE NOAH (#1): What constitutes idolatry?

According to Jewish tradition, God commanded Adam haRishon (the first human being) six laws. These laws consist of 5 prohibitions and 1 positive commandment: 1. The prohibition of idolatry. 2. Blasphemy (cursing the divine name). 3. Murder. 4. Theft and 5. Unlawful sexual relations. God also ordered Adam and his descendants to 6. Establish courts of justice to enforce these laws.

In the times of Noah these laws were ratified in a covenant and a sixth prohibition was added: 7. Not eating the flesh of an animal, when the animal has not yet been slaughtered ("mutilation", Maimonides, Mishne Tora, Hilkhot Melakhim, chapter 9).

These precepts are known as the "Seven Commandments of the descendants of Noah."

In his book "Israel and Humanity" Rabbi Benamozegh explains the origin of each of these commandments in the early days of humanity, and their extension. As we will see below, in some cases these commandments are stricter than their parallels for the Jewish people, and in other cases, more lenient.

1. ABODA ZARA (Idolatry)

The prohibition of idolatry is the first of these Seven Commandments. A non-Jew who wants to observe the Seven precepts of Bene Noah must recognize the existence of only one God.

Following the opinion of some Rabbis, Rabbi Benamozegh explains that in Judaism the prohibition of idolatry is stricter than for non-Jews. That is, for Jews, for example, there should not be any attribution of metaphysical power to any entity other than God, for example, angels or saints, especially in regard to worship (prayer). An example, in my own words: we Jews do not believe in the power of an angel or a saint. Nor can we pray to "the imaginary independent powers" of an angel, to help us, to perform a miracle, or even to pray to God on our behalf. This is strictly forbidden, even if one

declares that only believes in God, and that He alone is Almighty. The same applies if a Jew would pray to the spirit of a deceased individual, even a rabbi, as if it were “a saint”. We must serve, and pray EXCLUSIVELY to God.
Let’s clarify that Jews are allowed to pray to God in merit (zekhut) of the good deeds performed by a deceased person. In fact every day we ask HaShem to help us and protect us in merit to our patriarchs Abraham, Yitzhaq and Ya’aqob. It is also permissible to ask another person, especially someone who leads an irreproachable moral life, (such as the case of Abba Hilquiya in the Gemara) to pray for us. Once again, what is strictly forbidden is to pray to an angel, a dead person or his spirit, regardless of how “holy” this individual may have been. In the notes and comments to the text of Rabbi Benamozegh the case of Moshe Rabbenu (Moses) is brought, explaining that the location of his grave was not revealed by the Tora to prevent the Jews who, out of ignorance, might approach the grave of Moses to pray to his spirit, as other religions do with their saints.
According to Rabbi Benamozegh, the cult of an angel or a saint, might not be included for the non-Jew in the prohibition of idolatry (or would not be condemned with capital punishment, according to other interpretations) if he or she serves God and what recognize Him as unique and supreme.
On the basis of this differentiation between the less strict position of the Tora regarding what qualifies as idolatry for the non-Jewish society, several rabbis throughout history, opined, for example, that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity constitutes a case of idolatry (Maimonides, Benamozegh, etc.) or does not qualify as such (Tosafot, Rabbi Moshe Isserlis, etc.). This subject is known as shituf (lit. association), that is, the non-Jewish belief that there are other entities associated with God, that have divine powers.