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**Exegetical study on the value of human life in the “homicide stories” and in the legal texts of the Pentateuchal traditions**

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## **Introduction to the Research and to the Theme of the Value of Human life**

My interest in the Old Testament has been developing since the beginning of my theological studies, but the question of death and homicide has been with me for even longer. I first encountered the two phenomena in my Master to Ministry thesis in which I examined the narratives of death and murder in the Davidic narrative, and in the process it became clear to me that I wanted to pay deeper and more comprehensive attention to the Old Testament passages in which one person takes the life of another. These narratives are often disturbing to the contemporary reader and raise many moral, theological and faith issues. In my thesis, I call the narratives of Num 25 and Ex 32 “homicide stories” because the central organizing force of the stories, the climax of the events, is the act of homicide which, by being irreversible, releases the tension in the community but also imposes a burden on both the perpetrator and his community.

The value of human life and the violent end of human life are complex issues, especially given the many different and sometimes conflicting traditions and stories in the Hebrew Bible. A disturbing but at the same time extremely fascinating topic is that what motivated the characters in these stories, the people who shaped them and the communities that passed them on. What the stories are about in their own time and context, what they say in the texts they record, and what message they might have for contemporary readers. To what extent are they to be seen as an infallible paradigm and to what extent is it necessary to “peel off” the *human* from them in order to reveal what God has to say in life-giving and affirming terms. In addition to their relevance to theology, the Old Testament “homicide stories” reveal the worlds of different times, the motivations and intentions of communities in different historical and social situations. They also reveal the developmental stages of a religious dimension that not only determines individual destinies but also permeates the entire understanding of Israel's history.

In my study, I review Torah passages that enter into dialogue with each other on the value of human life. On this issue, the religious and social aspects are difficult to separate. The Hebrew Bible (in some of its texts) is convinced that human life can only come from God, and therefore its taking, its extinction, is taboo for another human being. The absolute value of human life is called into question when different traditions make its protection dependent on different motivations or life situations (e.g. war, cult).

According to many stories and traditions, the human life seems to lose its universal and eternal value among certain times and difficult situations. People become dispensable in these stories for some greater good, such as religious purity or territorial security. All of this, hidden behind a divine command, appears as part of the divine purpose and salvation history. Certain Old Testament

“homicide stories” also raise the question of what is more important, to perpetuate and affirm the power status of a particular community or to preserve human life.

Maintaining the order of the community envisioned during the Exile requires members to keep their distance from the surrounding "others", even at the cost of their lives. The narrative of Num 25 becomes unsettling at the point where it condemns to death not only the "others" deemed dangerous, but also everyone within the community who comes into contact with the forbidden "others". In my analysis, I will take into account the supposed date of origin of the texts under study and the theological orientations and motivations behind them, while also considering their place in the canonical arc of the Hebrew Bible. The core of my dissertation is the exegesis of the narrative of Num 25 in chapter 3. My basic assumption is that for the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible, especially in texts attributed to the Priestly source, the formation and perpetuation of Israelite identity (of which priesthood, religious and ethnic purity are the pillars) is more important than the value of individual life and its preservation. Considering the P-texts of the Pentateuch, a canonical inconsistency can be observed in the way human life is judged and in the way manslaughter is treated. These texts cannot be excused for the modern reader by attributing the violent designation to the “marker” of the Old Testament because, on the one hand, this would not be the truth and on the other hand, biblical passages concerning the value of human life have been and are still being relied upon on numerous occasions in the Christian churches. However, they serve as a point of reference outside the church, as well. It is also an integral part of the relevance of the subject. It is important, however, to take into account and clarify that different times have different understandings of the aspects of violence, including homicide. These different understandings interact with the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, in which the taking of human life is not only problematic but also rewarded.

I am concerned with the question of whether the value of human life can be absolutized, whether the objective concept of the “sanctity of human” life can be described. My point of departure is that from an external, abstract point of view, no life can be taken away, sacrificed for any greater good, for atonement for one's own or another's transgressions; no human being can extinguish another human life. At certain points in the Hebrew Bible, a framework of accountability is outlined (e.g. the Ten Commandments or Gen 9:5-6) but in certain narratives this framework fades or is not visible at all. Not only do we find narratives where human life is presented as valueless and killing is left without any theological/divine evaluation but also texts where killing certain people is rewarded with blessings and other divine benefits.

## Methods

In my research I basically rely on the historical-critical exegesis. The focus is on the exegesis of the relevant parts of Numbers 25 and Ex 32, in addition to the interpretation of Gen 9:5-6 and Ex 20:14 (and Deut 5:17), and tangentially on the herem passages. The dissertation adopts a diachronic approach as its basic approach, however, the exegesis of the chosen texts also incorporates aspects of literary and social science approaches in the analysis of synchronic methods.

In the study of the traditions and layers of the Torah, I start from the basic principles of the source theory associated with the name of Julius Wellhausen, which has been superseded in some respects (the distinction between Yahwist + Elohist; Deuteronomic; Priestly traditions), since historical-critical research still uses the designations of the sources, while also taking into account the different (P/non-P) distinctions. Within the Deuteronomic tradition, Deut refers to Deuteronomy 5, “DTM” refers to the Deuteronomic History including Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings, and “KTM” refers to the Books of Chronicles.

Source-critical analysis is important for understanding the theological thought of the Priestly tradition and its position on the value of human life and the extinction of life. The exegesis of Num 25 and related texts seeks to clarify the motivation of P, which seems so important to the text that it renders the controversies surrounding the topic secondary. This necessarily involves some degree of canon criticism. I also consider it important to reflect anthropologically on the value of human life in the selected texts and the theology of P. This is particularly important in our postmodern present, where there is a constant *exodus* of people and thousands of human lives are lost in humanitarian crises and disasters.

I use the Hungarian Revised New Translation for the citation of the biblical texts and the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia for the Hebrew text, and footnotes where I deviate from these (e.g. by using my own translation). In the actual process of work, the value of life is examined by juxtaposing and reading together selected and closely related texts, in which knowledge of the contemporary historical background and context also plays a major role.

## Theses

The study thematised by the value of life outlines the following crucial theological points:

In the Hebrew Bible, Gen 9:5-6, belonging to the Priestly tradition, articulates the "sanctity of life" that since God created humanity in his own image, it is taboo for man to take the life of another. The commandment "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex 20:23; Deut 5:17) supports this basic ethical consideration.

Based on Gen 9:5-6, it can be stated that for the Priestly tradition, taking human life is taboo because human life is sacred (belongs to God).

The inviolability of life is often ignored by the different traditions depending on their motivations.

The Priestly tradition rewards killing in order to consolidate the position of the priesthood in the post-captivity period, within the covenant between God and God's people.

The Deuteronomic tradition (including the concept of herem) 'commands' killing in order to gain and keep the promised land and to preserve religious purity.

An examination of the textual traditions of the Hebrew Bible reveals that the prohibition of homicide, except in qualified cases of blood vengeance that applies only within the Israelite community. The part of the Num 25 narrative from the Priestly tradition is inconsistent with and ignorant of this.

Num 25 is contradictory on the issue of praise and reward because these are given as the consequences not only of the murder of the Midianite woman but also of the murder of an Israelite man.

Num 25 places the Aaronite line of the priesthood in a legitimate leadership role with the rewarded murder by the Phinehas, thus ending the rivalry of the post-exilic priestly groups.

In Israelite worship, devotion and commitment to God demands an ordination conceived in blood and murder ("the covenant of the everlasting priesthood" and "consecration of oneself to the service of the Lord"), in both P (Num 25) and non-P (Ex 32) traditions.

## Summary of the Research

Homicide is an act of violence - in every age and society. But the issue is more complex when we consider when, for whom and to what extent fatal interpersonal violence is problematic; what are the criteria that draw the line between what is *problematic*, *acceptable* and *praiseworthy* in human interactions. Taking life is an invasive act contrary to the will to live which not only violates but also erases the boundaries of life (of the other), making the basic conditions of existence impossible. And by this transgression of competence, it violates the boundary between the *divine* and the *human*. It is the task of communities and societies of all times to define and regulate violence, both from a legal point of view and from the point of view of anthropological reflection as well.

In my thesis, the value of life is the theme of the exegetical analysis and interpretation of various selected texts. The results “were born” from juxtaposition and reading these texts together. My point of departure is the affirmation of the "sanctity of life" according to Gen 9:5-6, from which it follows that killing a human being is taboo for man. These verses are part of a large-arched post-exilic retrospective constructed by the Priestly source, which links the identity formation of his own time with the post-flood period. For them, the necessity of the Flood is captured in the fact that man, by breaking the sanctity of life and disregarding its integrity, has fundamentally sinned against the divine order of creation. The verses of Gen 9:5-6 refer back to the imperative of Gen 1:28 and state the basic rule of mutual protection of life and the responsibility for each other's lives. This means that life can only be taken by those who can give it, who can create it, so the taboo of taking human life for P is based on that human being was created to the image of God. Furthermore, shedding of the life-giving blood cannot remain without consequences, the principle of *an eye for an eye* here is expressed as poetic truth. Every culture regulates somehow or prohibits violence between people living in one community. The taboo, the prohibition in primitive societies was to keep out or disable anything that was dangerous to the community. The relevant rule of the Ten Commandments "Thou shalt not kill" can be interpreted in this way: Thou shalt not kill, lest you endanger your community, meaning do no harm to it. The “sanctity of life” cannot be abstractly deduced from this commandment; life is not sacrosanct in and for itself but because it belongs to God.

Life belongs to God, however not all life belongs to God's chosen people. The *herem* texts of the Hebrew Bible, which command the extermination of certain foreign peoples, are the source of considerable tension, even more so considering the failure of obedience resulting in punishment. There is a strong argument that these genocides are not historically authentic descriptions and therefore never took place in reality, however the rhetorical violence in the text is not without its problems. The legitimization of killing by divine command has been the basis for numerous abuses and misuses

throughout history. The problem of legitimacy, understood in extreme cases as prescriptive, that enables the practice to be carried out, lies mainly in the identification of groups of modern interpreters with the biblical addressees of divine revelation. If this identification is of a literal nature, it arbitrarily substitutes the enemy to be destroyed into the biblical narrative. The possibility of these misuses are among the motivating components of this research on the "value of life".

The post-exilic returnees, who make efforts to form the identity of God's people, see their future in the rebuilding of the community. Protecting and purifying (and keeping pure) the community is more important than anything else, even more important than protecting the life of the individual. That provides a background for the disregard of the inviolability of life by the various traditions, according to their further motivations. The selected texts of Num 25 and Ex 32 come from two different traditions but both narratives include the reward, the blessing that comes with killing human beings. The prohibition of manslaughter, except in qualified cases of blood feud, applies to the community of the chosen people, however both narratives are ignorant to this. The inconsistency of the narrative of Phinehas (Num 25:6-18), belonging to the P-source, is that Phinehas, who receives the reward for his zeal, kills not only the Midianite Cozbi but also the Israelite Zimri. The explanation of this contradiction is to be found in the origin of Zimri, a Simeonite. The violence of the chieftain, Simeon, is also reflected in Gen 34 and in the blessings given to the sons of Jacob (Gen 49). On the other hand, the appearance of the murdered Midianite woman, Cozbi, in the Israelite camp condenses the fears of idolatry and mixing with foreign peoples and also the polemic against intermarriages that is articulated most prominently in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, in the post-exilic period of the Restoration. The actions of Phinehas and the mission of Ezra are linked in the genealogy of the Aaronite Ezra and in the prominent role of the priesthood. Num 25 seals this with the "covenant of the eternal priesthood" and at the same time marks the leading status of the Aaronite priestly line.

In relation to the development of the Israelite priesthood, the present study departs from the model of J. Wellhausen, where a partial conclusion is that the priesthood did not play a significant role in pre-monarchic times. In the Torah's narrative, however, the birth of the priesthood takes place in the period of the wilderness where the tension between the different priestly groups is illustrated by the so-called *conflict stories* (including the story of the golden calf and Phinehas). The clear separation of the priestly groups can be dated to the post-exilic period, as well as the end of the rivalry between the different traditions. The violence of the Levites, originating in the violence of Levi, appears with Simeon in Gen 49, as well as in the narrative of Dinah (Gen 34) and the story of the golden calf (Ex 32). In relation to the Aaronites, a whole sequence of violence runs through the book of Numbers (chapters 5; 11; 16 and 21) in which the final element is the case of Cozbi and Zimri, executed by Phinehas. The devotion and dedication of the Levites and Aaronites to God is sealed in various

traditions by bloodshed, indicating that these groups have not flinched from going to the very end in the crucial liminal situations of Israelite history.

Commitment to YHWH and God's covenant relegates the "sanctity of life" to a secondary issue. For the modern reader, the contrast between the narrative of Num 25, which lauds manslaughter, and Gen 9:5-6, which establishes the taboo of the "sanctity of life" and its taking, becomes clear, at the same time this contradiction is not problematic for the Priestly tradition. The tension caused by manslaughter in the text of Num 25 is completely obscured by the emphasis made on atonement and rewards. The double reward given to Phinehas, the "covenant of peace" and the "covenant of the everlasting priesthood", is the consequence of a violent and fatal act which the narrative portrays as „jealous zeal" (or zealous spirit). This attitude, being in harmony with the that of the divine, serves as a positive example for later traditions in their commitment to certain causes. The concept that taking of human life is not punished but rewarded is a divine legitimation of "jealous zeal" for homicide which exonerates the perpetrator but is completely indifferent to the victims.

In the Ancient Near East, the interests of the community were superior to those of the individual, from which the individualism of the modern age has moved far away. The problem of violence in ancient texts can in some ways be linked to this. However, the question of whether Phinehas is really acting in the interest of the community when he ends the lives of a foreign but presumably innocent woman and an Israelite compatriot with a sudden gesture, or whether these are merely means of expressing the power-political motivations driving the narrative, remains an open question. From a theological perspective, however, the tension between homicide and blessing cannot be resolved.

The central organising force of "homicide stories", the culmination of events are the acts of homicide. In these narratives, in some ways, the 'scapegoating' of the victim releases the tension in the community, catalyses or prevents the escalation of blood feuds between members, and stops the cycle of violence. There may be situations in which killing may be considered necessary, even legitimate, but the taking of human life is a violation of the order of creation, always means harm to the individual and to his community, as well. Jesus is radical on the issue when he speaks of the idea that even the thought of harming is like murder (Matthew 5:21-22).

The traditions of the Hebrew Bible do not promote manslaughter but set a definite framework for the taking of human life. They do not, however, reflect the overriding concern to protect the community and the tension between the means and the lives required. According to Num 25, defending God's people with a zeal in accordance with God's zeal is, although not commanded but, an exemplary and rewarding act, carried out by Phinehas, a descendant of the high priest Aaron. The Aaronite priesthood is given a strong prominence by the "covenant of the eternal priesthood". The privilege of



the priesthood is to have a relationship with YHWH and this privilege gives them control and authority over the community that is dependent on them for this. And it is this aspect that is most important, since the basic foundation of identity formation is the covenant, the covenant in which YHWH is the God of Israel who brought his people out of the house of slavery and promised them land and a future through their descendants. The legitimation of "jealous zeal" and covenant loyalty are closely linked in the "homicide stories".

The concept of the value of life, and the antecedents and consequences of homicide, as defined in the starting point of this paper, presents a more complex picture by the end of the analysis. The moment when human life is taken, the "sanctity of life" is violated. The value of life is shaped in the complex system of the elements of prohibition and commandment that prevents homicide, and the blessing and curse that follow. In this study, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" on the side of antecedents and Num 25, which narrates the double covenant-rewards to Phinehas, on the consequent side have been given a greater emphasis. The tension between the two poles became more pronounced, too. It is the eternal task of the men of all times, who seek God, who long to be connected to God, between these tensions to search for the value of life and the presence of the One from whom life comes.

The images of God painted by the violent texts of the Hebrew Bible, which presumably always legitimate human motivations and functioning forms, are one of the many representations and visions that we encounter when examining biblical texts. The distinction between God and these images of God; the distinction between jealous zeal (ready to kill) and jealous love, is of paramount importance for interpretation. It is certainly possible to construct arguments that consider killing people in the name of God as the only legitimate kind of murder, however, taking human life can never be an ethical or theological good.

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