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THESES OF THE DISSERTATION

***Rationalising the irrational: Israel's transformation into God's people in the light of the Exodus narrative (Ex 12-40) and Rudolf Otto's theory of numinous***

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## **Research Background and Objectives**

I have been concerned for a while how to fill empty worship practices and sermons with biblical based contents, which fully engage the whole person. I believe that the first step toward this is a better understanding of Israel's religious experiences. During my studies, I have become acquainted with Rudolf Otto's phenomenology of the numinous, and I realized that it could provide valuable assistance in this endeavour.

Otto named the mystical, irrational aspect of the Holy as the "numinous," recognizing that what we commonly understand by the term "Holy" in everyday use no longer expresses its original meaning. It has become saturated with rational, moral elements. In my opinion, Otto plays a crucial role in making this rational-irrational Holy a reality for us. I believe that his approach not only clarifies the theological message and structure of a biblical text, but also enhances our understanding of psychological experiences when adapted exegetically. I expect that Otto's perspective will lead to valuable insights for our communities as well. It will illuminate those attitudes that can "bring back" that enduring sense of wonder (which is characteristic of Israel), even in this secularized, burnt-out world. Otto's theory is largely based on the texts of the Hebrew Bible (HB), whose narratives not only guide us in experiencing encounters with the transcendent in depth and complexity, but the biblical traditions hold up a mirror to us. In the failures of the chosen people, we can recognize that it was not only Israel that struggled to allow the divine to come close, but we also continue to wrestle with rationalisation today. However, just as Israel had to learn to live with the sacred, so must we. The texts examined in Exodus chapters 12-40 still have the power to bring us closer to the true experience of the sacred, to our own emotions, and to the essence of our lives.

## **Method**

In exploring the various aspects of the numinous, Otto's methodology will guide us in the analysis of Exodus 12–40. In *Das Heilige* (DH), Otto undertook the challenge of expressing the inexpressible in words. His goal was not to rationalize the irrational but rather to delineate and identify its elements. Since the numinous is irrational, it cannot be fully articulated through concepts; it can only be grasped through a specific emotional reaction that it evokes in the soul of the experiencer (DH, 134). The first step in uncovering the experience of the numinous is to somehow indicate the emotional factors involved. Otto attempts to understand and describe the elements of the numinous primarily through analogies, ideograms, and emotional symbols (DH, 99). He does this by

identifying similarities and contrasts with related sensations, as well as using symbolic expressions, all while primarily seeking the emotional determination related to the object of the numinous. This is followed, secondarily, by the sense of creatureliness within self-awareness, from which the irrational nature of the experience can be inferred. Ultimately, Otto strives to capture the irrational elements as accurately as possible using ideogrammatic designations that are as close as possible to the original sensations, thereby fixing the fleeting phenomena of mere feelings with lasting "signs." The outcome of his comparative methodology is a profound series of observations, bordering on the field of religious psychology, where the individual's relationship with the Sacred—particularly as it manifests—plays a central role.

The challenge Otto faces is that while he attempts to articulate something, he often realizes that he ends up saying nothing, and frequently he only asserts something by negating something else. His use of terminology is neither classical nor clear, and it can be inconsistent and vague. Despite this, his effort to express the inexpressible is significant.

Following Otto's method during exegesis, on the primary level of the numinous experience, I will first attempt to identify the emotional factors and mood manifestations evoked by the numinous in the text under study. I will examine their nature to infer the presence of the numinous itself. It is on this level that reactions typical of the natural human being also become perceptible in the text. On the levels of recollection and rationalization, I will also attempt to uncover indirect experiences of the numinous. However, the secondary level will be primarily important to us because it conveys the reality of the numinous object within the narrative, against which we can infer the formation or absence of a sense of reality.

In analyzing the levels and experiences, the three elements of phenomenology will be most helpful: the numinous (irrational), the rationalization associated with the numinous, and the profane (natural) thinking and reactions.

## **T h e s e s**

### **Hypothesis:**

1. Certain elements of Otto's numinous theory, handled with due caution, can be inspiring in our exegetical work. His sensitive approach to the immediate, unique experiences can lead to a deeper insight into the broader processes, turning points or breaking points. By understanding the internal struggles of the people, the specific dynamics of their manifestations fit better into the flow of the Exodus narrative. One of the limitations of applying Otto's approach is that in his book *Das Heilige*, his analysis does not extend to experiences beyond the numinous feeling, nor does it discuss

negative emotions. The other is that Otto analyzes experiences and feelings only, so his approach is not suitable for capturing other psychological aspects of the narrative, such as scandal or hope.

2. In the exegesis of the selected passage, three layers can be identified within the narrative's plot by the application of the numinous analysis. The primary layer includes passages depicting the people's experiences as direct encounters, which are narrated and interpreted by the secondary layer of traditions. This latter could be identified as the layer of indirect experiences. On the narrative level, the primary and secondary experiences merge into a more distant experience to form a refined theological message. Therefore, while Otto's concepts offer a novel perspective that can reveal deeper dimensions of these levels, we must consider the three layers together. This integrated view forms the overall picture that the narrator aims to use for teaching, encouraging, and warning the people in exile and upon their return.

3. The image pictured by the Exodus narrative is dynamic: the relationship between the people and God is ever-changing, sometimes with extreme ups and downs, yet continuously shaping through these struggles. This dynamic image reflects not only the reality and rationality of the Babylonian exiles but also of any human community's relationship with the transcendent. Nevertheless, in Exodus 34:6-7, we find an image of God that offers irrational hope and a steady anchor amidst this fluctuation.

## **Theses:**

**Thesis 1:** Following Otto's methodology, it is primarily by the application of irrational-rational categories that the numinous experience becomes more recognizable. Understanding the role of rationalization also helps to track the phases of the people's formation. This focus illuminates not only the (religious) experiences of the people, but also the dynamics of the Exodus narrative (Ex 12–40). The most important insight is that in chapters 19-24 the people presumably did not have a full numinous experience, but rather only an ancient, lower-level experience of the tremendum. The occasional presence of a "natural" human mindset along with the absence of the element of the fascinans make it understandable why the people could so easily and quickly revert to the familiar idol worship. A more complete, primary numinous experience could be identified from chapter 34 onwards. The shift is caused by a psychological element that falls outside the category of the numinous.

**Thesis 2:** It has been confirmed that one difficulty in applying Otto's analysis is that it does not extend to experiences outside the numinous feeling. It only mentions, but does not detail negative emotions. Additionally, since Otto's phenomenology analyzes immediate religious experiences

only, it is not suitable for capturing other psychological processes within the narrative. Consequently, it does not cast enough light on the important nonrational turn and hope that led to the increasing emphasis on the fascincans rather than the predominance of the tremendum. These limitations indicate that alternative approaches are needed during the exegesis to appropriately present the transformation of the people into God's people.

**Thesis 3:** Examining the "secondary" and "primary" layers within the narrative, it has been proved that the spontaneous experiences of the primary layer are not only narrated but also interpreted by the traditional sources of the secondary level. These experiences, especially the negative ones, are rationalized by the authors and redactors of the various traditions. For instance, while the people experience terror on the primary level, this fear is "tamed" into a sense of divine awe on the secondary level (20:20), and God becomes an ally of the people (Ex 19–24). Thus, a form of tremendum experience emerges indirectly by the tension within the layers. Although the elements creating the impression of a tremendum experience become more distant in space and time this way, the narrative's power, as well as the author's or redactor's personal numinous experiences, bridge this gap. These two layers synchronize in the section following the golden calf episode (Ex 33–40), where there is no longer need to reinterpret primary experiences. This section presents a state of equilibrium that also reflects the people's deeper numinous experience.

**Thesis 4:** By the end of the analysis, it has become clear that there is no strong correlation between the people's religious experience and the events. The miracles in the desert did not provoke the people's numinous wonder, and the punishments did not result in any angry rejections. On the contrary, according to the narrative's depiction, they actually elicited a numinous feeling.

**Thesis 5:** The various approaches of the layers recognized within the narrative's plot illustrate a dynamic image of God. God is not only inscrutable and irrational but also a steadfast presence (34:6-7) who adapts and speaks through more and more familiar, "home-like" way by Moses and the cult – as the narrative progresses. In the struggle caused by the extreme situations (Ex 15-34), a sense of security and stability is established by way of practices that also regulated the sacral practices of the people returning from Babylon. The God and man relationship can become more balanced through rituals, festivals, and regulations, also providing a dynamic framework of the relationship between God and every human community.

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## Publication List Related to the Dissertation

1. *Egészen máshol: A numinózus szociális tere az Exodus szövegében*

LELKIPÁSZTOR 98: 4 pp. 129-134., 6 p. (2023)

2. *Izrael „konfirmációja” a Sínai-hegynél*

In: Bácskai, Károly; Pángyánszky, Ágnes; Szűcs, Kinga; Varga, Gyöngyi (szerk.):

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3. *MÁSKÉPpMÁS - A numinózus helye az aranyborjú történetében*

In: Kajos, L F; Bali, Cintia; Puskás, T; Szabó, R (szerk.):

XI. Interdiszciplináris Doktorandusz Konferencia 2022 Tanulmánykötet, Pécs

Pécsi Tudományegyetem Doktorandusz Önkormányzat, 692 p. pp. 395-402., 8 p. (2023)

4. *Among us*

In: Kajos, Luca Fanni; Bali, Cintia; Preisz, Zsolt; Szabó, Rebeka (szerk.)

X. JUBILEUMI Interdiszciplináris Doktorandusz Konferencia 2021 Tanulmánykötet, Pécs, Pécsi

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6. *A Sacramentum jelentőségének újrafelfedezése a protestáns istentiszteleten*

In: Kiss, Gábor (szerk.): Fiatal Kutatók és Doktoranduszok X. Nemzetközi Jubileumi Teológuskonferenciájának Tanulmánykötete. Budapest, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége (DOSZ) 651 p. pp. 91-105., 15 p. (2020)

### Other publications

*A hiteles keresztény közéleti cselekvés kérdései*

LELKIPÁSZTOR 93: 6 pp. 202-207., 5 p. (2018)

Közlemény:33152823 Nyilvános Forrás Idéző Folyóiratcikk