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“You Shall not Kill” or “You Shall not Murder”? The Meaning of Ratsakh in the Sixth Commandment

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**THEOLOGICAL
FOCUS**

“You Shall not Kill” or “You Shall not Murder”? The Meaning of Ratsakh in the Sixth Commandment

by Jiří Moskala

The Decalogue is a precious gift endowed to humanity by God Himself (Exod 31:18), uttered (Exod 20:1; Deut 5:4–5, 24) and written (Exod 24:12; 31:18; Deut 5:22) by Him. It presents the foundational principles to preserve life and defines how one maintains the vertical (first four commandments) and horizontal (last six commandments) relationships that are the most valuable properties in life. The Decalogue presupposes salvation and forms the heart of God’s revelation and biblical ethics. It is the Magna Carta of biblical teaching and its summation, the pattern for the rest of biblical legislation. It forms the substance and foundation of divine standards for all humanity; its principles are eternal.

In the book of Exodus, the Decalogue is called “the Testimony” (Heb. ‘edut; Exod 31:18); and in the book of Deuteronomy, it is named “the words of the covenant” (Heb. dibre habberit; Exod 34:28). Neither book uses the term “the Ten Commandments” (Heb. mitswah; however, see Exod 20:6), but rather, three times call it “the Ten Words” (Heb. ‘aseret haddebarim, definite plural form of the term dabar meaning “word, sentence, matter, thing, speech, story, promise, utterance”; see Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4). In both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the Decalogue lies at the beginning of the law collections and their interpretation.¹

Crucial Question

The sixth commandment is a very short statement and was originally expressed in Hebrew with just two words: “lo’ tirtsakh” [negative particle lo’ plus verb in qal, imperfect second person singular of the root ratsakh]. God’s command is identical in both versions of the Decalogue (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17).² This brief commandment is clearly translated in the KJV as “You shall not kill” (that is, to take or terminate the life of a person) and this rendering is followed, for example, by the following versions: RSV, NAB, ASV, CEB, JB, and NJB. On the other hand, Bible versions like NIV, TNIV, ESV, NKJV, NRSV, NASB, NET, and NLT render this phrase as “You shall not murder.” “Murder” is defined as unlawful killing, or killing without a legal justification, or the premeditated and deliberate killing of another human being. This would be distinct from other forms of killing that are then presumably legal or acceptable, such as execution in cases of criminal activities (capital punishment), killing in times of war, or in self-defense.

Which translation is correct: “You shall not kill” or “You shall not murder”? The answer has tremendous implications for decisions in real life. Diligent students of the Bible know that each translation of the biblical text is an interpretation, so one needs to be sure to follow the right one. This question has to be decided only on biblical grounds, which means using the

Hebrew word ratsakh in its particular context and by discerning the intended purpose of this fundamental legislation.

Some scholars and writers claim the commandment “You shall not kill” points to a specific prohibition—that is, murder. Appeal is made to the original Hebrew by arguing that the word ratsakh does not mean killing in general but refers specifically to intended killing, namely murder, or to unauthorized killing. For example, Dozeman observes, “The command forbidding murder is broad.”³ Hyatt comments, “The purpose of the sixth commandment was to prohibit any kind of illegal killing that was contrary to the will and the best interests of the community. Thus its real import was to prohibit murder, in spite of the fact that this meaning is not specifically derived from the verb employed.”⁴ Ryken states, “What the commandment forbids is not killing, but unlawful killing of a human being.”⁵ Gane in his exposé on the Old Testament Law for Christians comments, “The familiar KJV rendering ‘Thou shall not kill’ is misleading because the sixth commandment does not forbid all killing.”⁶ and he argues that this commandment only “prohibits the illegal, unjustifiable taking of life.”⁷ North, in his article on the sixth commandment, concludes, “So, in reading Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17 we must differ with the translation ‘Thou shall not kill’ on the grounds that it is too broad, and thus inaccurate and inconsistent with all the contexts in which rskh is used and not used in Scripture.”⁸ This type of interpretation is reflected in some modern translations as seen above. However, the crucial question remains: Is this argument supported by the biblical data? To the claim that the verb ratsakh is translated as “murder,” Victor Hamilton states, “I do not think it is that simple.”⁹ I agree. What does the biblical data reveal? John Durham rightly argues that “the precise meaning of the sixth commandment depends on the definition of רצח.”¹⁰

Usage of the Word ratsakh

There are four main words in the Hebrew Scripture used for killing: harag (e.g., see Gen 4:8, 14–15, 25; 12:12; 20:11; 27:41; 37:20, 26; Exod 2:14), mut (in the Hiphil; e.g., see Gen 18:25; 37:18; Exod 1:16), qatal (only in the following four Hebrew texts: Job 13:15; 24:14; Ps 139:19; Obad 1:9; and used in Aramaic in Dan 2:13–14; 3:22; 5:19, 30; 7:11), and ratsakh (see also the more descriptive expression shofek dam, “shedding a blood,” as in Gen 9:5–6; and tabach or shachat for slaughtering animals). It is significant to observe that three of these verbs (harag, mut, qatal) include killing humans and animals, while the verb ratsakh (used in the sixth commandment) applies only to killing humans.¹¹ This discovery is crucial, because then the difference in usage is not primarily regarding “various circumstances of killing”¹² (premeditated/deliberate or accidental/unintentional killing), but who or what is killed. The difference lies “between the

object that is killed—humans and animals.”¹³ The term ratsakh refers uniquely to taking the life of humans.

The Hebrew verb ratsakh occurs forty-seven times in the Old Testament, and its meaning must be determined from the context (study carefully the following nineteen biblical passages):

Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17—employed twice in the sixth commandment.

Numbers 35:6, 11, 12, 16 [twice], 17 [twice], 18 [twice], 19, 21 [twice], 25, 26, 27 [twice], 28, 30 [twice], 31—used altogether twenty times. The motive of killing must be investigated for implementation of the punishment: the intentional killing is punished by death after a court hearing (capital punishment), in contrast to the accidental killing when the killer is required to stay in the city of refuge (the institution of asylum) until the death of the High Priest.¹⁴

Deuteronomy 4:42 [twice]; 19:3, 4, 6; 22:26—appears six times.

Joshua 20:3, 5–6; 21:13, 21, 27, 32, 38—occurs eight times.

The rest of the Old Testament—used eleven times in the following texts: Judges 20:4; 1 Kings 21:17; 2 Kings 6:32; Job 24:14; Psalms 62:3; 94:6; Proverbs 22:13; Isaiah 1:21; Jeremiah 7:9; Hosea 4:2; 6:9.

A cognate noun ratsakh (killing, murder) occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible: In Psalm 42:10 (in Heb 42:11) it means “shattering,” “crushing,” “mortal wound,” or “mortal agony,” while the same noun in Ezekiel 21:22 refers to the slaughter by King Nebuchadnezzar in battles when he was conquering Israel. Thus, the Hebrew root ratsakh is also used for killing in war.

Summary of Findings in Context

God is the creator, He is life, and the source of life; this is why only He gives life and only He can take it away. He is the ruler over life and death (Job 1:21; Deut 32:39; Isa 45:7) and as the creator of life He has all rights over life and death and the authority to command: “Do not take life.” However, we need to underline that it is a strange and alien work for God to kill (Isa 28:21); it is done only out of the necessity to protect life, as in the case of the biblical flood (Gen 6:11–13). The Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:23, 32).

The thematic background of the sixth commandment is in the story of Cain and Abel with two brothers worshipping God (Gen 4:3–11). The first murder occurs during their first worship, signifying that the one who kills, kills his brother. The sanctity of human life is underlined.

God's commandment is also associated with the first explicit prohibition of killing (Gen 9:5–6), in spite of the fact this text is misused to justify capital punishment as a divinely ordered act. Humans were created in the image of God; thus, theologically speaking, the one who kills destroys the image of God, and no one has the right to kill this image. This is why killing humans is absolutely prohibited: it is a sin. Hamilton rightly proclaims, "To kill another human being is to destroy one who is a bearer of the divine image."¹⁵ Doukhan observes, "This implies that killing humans impacts God Himself."¹⁶ By respecting life, one shows a deep respect for the Holy Creator. In Genesis 9, the restriction not to kill humans is given in sharp contrast to God's permission to kill animals (for food and sacrificial reasons, not for sport-hunting purposes); yet, while killing animals, humans have to pour their blood out to demonstrate respect for life because life is in the blood (Gen 9:4–5), while shedding the blood of humans is banned. Wenham aptly comments, "No sin shows greater contempt for life than homicide. Whereas an animal's blood may be shed but not consumed, human blood cannot even be shed."¹⁷ Life is sacred and people cannot take the life of another person on their own. Human life must be highly respected and preserved. Even negligence in protecting life was punishable (Deut 22:8).

The sixth commandment is an apodictic law. Apodictic laws are unconditional and make categorical assertions, whereas casuistic laws explain different conditions and how they need to be executed/applied. In principle, killing is killing and cannot be excused. It is an absolute command regarding the respect of life. Thus, one might argue that any taking of human life violates the sixth commandment. It is significant that no casuistic law is part of the Decalogue (in contrast to the other collections of biblical law). However, when killing occurs then comes into place casuistic legislation (see Deut 19:1–22:8). Gane compares several collections of biblical laws and rightly concludes, "Casuistic laws appear in all of the major biblical law collections . . . except for the Decalogue."¹⁸ Patrick explains that a casuistic law "defines a specific case, distinguishes it carefully from other similar cases, and stipulates the legal consequences."¹⁹

The sixth commandment is brief and the word "kill" is not qualified by motives (e.g., "do not kill illegally—that is, do not murder), alluding to the fact that it should be taken as a general principle. It has a very broad meaning. Dozeman rightly observes, "The law is stated categorically and does not spell out the consequences for disobedience."²⁰

The Hebrew word *ratsakh* is used only for killing humans, and is not employed even for killing sacrificial animals.

No provision is made in the Old Testament sacrificial system for killing people. This crime was too serious and could not be atoned for and forgiven by rituals—by killing a sacrificial animal. The legislation was established to investigate acts of killing in the six cities of refuge where the killer could run and be tried to discover if he committed an involuntary slaughter or a murder (Exod 21:12–14; Num 35:9–34; Deut 4:41–43; 19:1–13; Josh 20).

A close examination of the term *ratsakh* raises questions about translating the phrase *lo' tirtsakh* as "do not murder" and using the word alone as a rationale to distinguish between various kinds of killing such as murder, manslaughter, or justifiable homicide, because the term *ratsakh* does not necessarily mean to intentionally kill someone. Also, the "avenger of blood" may lawfully kill the one guilty of manslaughter should the latter leave a city of refuge (Num 35:27, 30). In addition, there are several places in Deuteronomy (Deut 4:41–42, 19:3–6) and passages scattered throughout Numbers and Joshua (Num 35:6–31; Josh 20:3–5) that use the word to refer to unintentional killing or causing accidental death, namely manslaughter. Premeditation had to be determined by a judicial process, yet both those found guilty of premeditation and those considered innocent of premeditation were described by the same Hebrew term *harotseakh*, "the one who kills," "the one who commits *ratsakh*." Thus, the person responsible for accidental killing/manslaughter is called *harotseakh* in the city of refuge (Num 35:12). Of course, the term *ratsakh* also has the connotation of "murder" or "assassination" (Judg 20:4, 1 Kgs 21:19, 2 Kgs 6:32). The term *ratsakh* is used for premeditated (Num 35:16–21, 30) as well as accidental or involuntary killing (Num 35:7, 11; Deut 4:42). The contextual markers usually indicate if *ratsakh* means "killing" or "murder."

In the context of the cities of refuge, the term *ratsakh* is used for executing capital punishment (Num 35:30).

The word *ratsakh* used in Proverbs 22:13 refers to a lion killing a person, so motivation for killing is not in place. So not only humans, but also animals can kill (*ratsakh*), which means that motivation for the action is not always included.

The verb *ratsakh* is not used directly in situations of war, but a noun *retsakh* is referred to in Ezekiel 21:22. This cognate noun (meaning "killing, murder") refers to the slaughter in a battle.

By implication, this commandment cannot be used to support not carrying guns (for protection from snakes or wild animals), unless guns are used only for the purpose of killing people.

God speaks to the nation that consists of people who are members of the covenantal community. It means

these laws are highly personal and no one can take his or her own life or the life of the other person. God speaks to Israel, His covenantal people, but these principles are for all His people at all times and are the laws for the whole of humankind to keep.

Sarna appropriately states, “Unlike other verbs for taking of life, . . . [r-ts-kh] is never employed when the subject of the action is God or an angel.”²¹

When Paul summarizes the law as being love, he quotes from the Decalogue, including the sixth commandment (Rom 13:8–10). Love is indeed the sum of God’s law because He is the God of love (1 John 4:16). Thus, true love is shown in practical actions springing from faith (Gal 6:5).

In light of the above observations, the wrong question is often asked in regard to the sixth commandment: When is killing not murder? There is no exception to it because it is stated as the principle. This perspective is for each individual to take it as a given fact. One does not ask similar questions such as, when is stealing not wrong? Or when is adultery permissible?

Israelite Casuistic Laws

In contrast to the apodictic law of the sixth commandment, the biblical text explains what to do in case someone violates it and kills. This is an immense problem, so the casuistic law needs to be implemented (see, for example, the legislation for the cities of refuge).

The legal section of the book of Deuteronomy is structured according to the Decalogue in such a way that each commandment of the Decalogue is further explained or applied in this legal part of the second speech of Moses (Deut 12:1–25:16).²² In this way the book of Deuteronomy explains, among other things, the application and relationship to the sixth commandment (Deut 19:1–22:8). These three chapters deal with homicide, holy war, and criminal justice, which now justify legitimate killing because the principle law of respecting and preserving life was not upheld, or when a nation had to engage in a holy war under God’s command. How should capital punishment and killing as a result of military actions during a holy war be understood? This excellent question does not and should not negate, disprove, or contradict our exegetical, conceptual, and theological interpretation of the sixth commandment. We recognize that capital punishment and holy war legislation represent a huge tension with the understanding of the Decalogue’s prohibition of killing. However, these issues must be answered on their own grounds and not by alteration of the meaning and intention of the divine prohibition, “You will not kill.”

In dealing with strong tensions in the biblical text—on the one hand, God’s prescription not to kill, and on

the other hand, His own orders to kill and punish by taking life in specific cases, like murder, rape, kidnapping, defiant transgression of the Sabbath, and holy war—one must have in mind the following facts, on the basis of which they should be understood:

The Ten Commandments are expressed in a personal way; they address individuals (stated in the second person singular). It means that no one can kill a person. When killing occurred, Israel as a society had a legal obligation to deal with the crime or accident, but no person had the right to avenge the killing or murder personally. Proper judicial procedure needed to take place. No Israelite was permitted to take justice into his own hands. Only the authorized ending of life as an expression of the administration of justice upon God’s command was permissible in a specific situation, in which case a judge and at least two witnesses had to be involved. Thus, a theocratic community was delegated with such tasks and capital punishment was rarely executed in Israel’s society.²³

The gravity of killing is demonstrated by the severity of the punishment. There was no sacrificial compensation for killing; only life pays for life in case of murder, or asylum in situations of accidental killing. Ryken writes, “Some [I would say: all] accidental death, although unintentional, are nevertheless culpable, which is why God’s law includes legal sanctions for a person who ‘unintentionally killed his neighbor without malice aforethought’ (Deut. 4:42).”²⁴ The protection of one’s life, family, or nation, as well as God’s honor, cannot be supported by appealing to the meaning of the Hebrew word *ratsakh* alone. Such a move requires a much wider interpretive reading. The satisfaction for the crime of murder has to be performed because life has infinite value (Gen 9:6),²⁵ and it is not within human power to ultimately forgive a murderer (Num 35:31) because the giver of life is God Himself and only upon His command can it be taken away. Ellen G. White wisely comments, “The safety and purity of the nation demanded that the sin of murder be severely punished. Human life, which God alone could give, must be sacredly guarded.”²⁶ Ryken rightly underlines that the various casuistic legislations have one purpose in mind: “The goal is always not the destruction of life but its preservation. . . . Sometimes it is necessary to take a life in order to save a life.”²⁷

God did not intend for the people of Israel to kill other people on the way to the Promised Land. He wanted to fight for His people as He did during the ten plagues (see Exod 7–12) and the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 13–15). Unfortunately, His plan for fighting for His people so that they would not need to fight and kill in war failed because of Israel’s lack of trust in God and their disobedience (see Gen 15:13–16; Exod 14:13–14, 19, 24–25; 23:23, 27–28; Deut 7:20; Josh 24:12; cf. 2 Chr 20:20–24).

In interpreting biblical laws regarding capital pun-

ishment and engaging in war, one needs to take into account the “theocracy principle.” These biblical laws can be applied only in a situation where God’s people live under God’s direct leadership and rules, which is no longer the case because the theocracy of Israel as a holy nation ended. So this legislation was only valid during the ancient Israelite society.

The Meaning of the Sixth Commandment

The meaning is apparent: respect for life, which is a precious gift from God. Life is extremely fragile and must be carefully preserved; even negligence is punishable (see Deut 22:8). This commandment lacks specificity, as no person or object is directly defined, and the prohibition is consequently more inclusive:

1. Respect for the life of other people (against killing or murder).
2. Respect for one’s own life (against suicide).
3. Respect for the unborn life (against abortion).

Durham states:

Its basic prohibition was against killing, for whatever cause, under whatever circumstances, and by whatever method, a fellow-member of the community. . . . The primary reference of the commandment is religious, not social. . . . רצח as a verb describing killing that occurs primarily within the covenant community. . . . What is certain is that רצח describes a killing of human beings forbidden by Yahweh to those who are in covenant with him.²⁸

It is true that the Decalogue was given to the faith community. However, this legislation goes beyond borders, beyond Israel’s community of faith. All human beings are included, as all were created in God’s image. Thus, the prohibition of killing not only applies to killing a fellow believer, but also has universal implications.

Commandments as God’s Promises

One needs to keep in mind that God’s commandments are actually God’s promises. They are given to His people to obey out of love and gratitude. As Seventh-day Adventists, this is our special contribution to understanding the meaning of the Decalogue.²⁹ This is why God gives these permanent commandments as His promises. White offers this insight into the function of the Decalogue: “The Ten Commandments . . . are ten promises.”³⁰ She stresses that “the voice of God from heaven” speaks “to the soul in promise, ‘This do, and you will not come under the dominion and control of Satan,’”³¹ which is why in Seventh-day Adventists’

thought the Decalogue is perceived as God’s beatitudes. The Ten Commandments are a special gift from God to guide believers to know what He can do for and in them when they let Him. “In the Ten Commandments God has laid down the laws of His kingdom. . . . The Lord has given His holy commandments to be a wall of protection around His created beings.”³² White declares that “all His biddings are enablings.”³³

In the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ made it clear that the intention of the sixth commandment is purity of heart, grounded in deep respect for the life of other human beings. He eloquently speaks about right attitudes toward others, and even against verbal abuse:

You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, “You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, “Raqa,” will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, “You fool,” will be liable to fiery Gehenna. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny. (Matt 5:21–26, NAB)

It is evident that Jesus goes beyond physical killing. Hamilton aptly comments, “Jesus has the story of Cain’s act of fratricide against Abel in mind when he speaks of ‘anyone who is angry with his brother’ as a kind of killing, or something that, if not controlled, could lead to killing” and he further connects Jesus’ statement with Genesis 4 “by the emphasis on a ‘gift’ in both units.”³⁴

One needs to pray earnestly and sincerely to not be in a situation in which we will be tempted to kill another human being. Jesus teaches in the case of Sabbath observance that it is a matter of prayer and trusting God (Matt 24:20).

Conclusion

The Hebrew word *ratsakh* has a wide range of meanings. It is used in both versions of the Ten Commandments, and is not used only for specific unauthorized killing because such a narrow view cannot be substantiated by the biblical data. Thus, the word “murder” is not an appropriate translation of the sixth commandment, even though it includes murder. Our study leads to the recognition that all killing or taking of human life is prohibited in principle. This commandment is about respect for life, about life’s sacredness, and thus about respect for the Creator God who created humans in His image. So the translation of the sixth commandment should be in broad terms, “You shall not kill,” because it is obvious that the meaning of the word *ratsakh* is not limited to murder.³⁵ When explaining the sixth commandment, the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary states: “Any rightful understanding of our relation to our neighbor indicates that we must respect and honor his life, for all life is sacred (Gen 9:5–6).”³⁶

Doukhan supports our conclusion:

The sixth commandment should not be translated ‘you shall not murder,’ implying only the specific case of a criminal act, but ‘you shall not kill humans’ in a general sense. The prohibition as ‘murder’ would not make sense for an activity in which most common people would rarely think of engaging.³⁷

Frank Hasel comes to a similar conclusion in his study: “The military pledge of allegiance conflicts with allegiance to God’s Word and His unchanging law that commands, among other things, not to kill another person (cf. Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17).”³⁸ The sixth commandment is an absolute command and has a preventive character to preserve the gift of life, because life is sacred. It has a universal sense.³⁹

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1 There are seven main collections of legal material prescribed in the Pentateuch, and the first and principal one is the Decalogue. The seven codes are: 1) the Decalogue (Exod 20:1–17), 2) the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22–23:33), 3) the Ritual Code (Exod 34:10–26), 4) the Sacrificial Code (Lev 1–7), 5) the Purity Code (Lev 11–15), 6) the Holiness Code (Lev 17–27), and 7) the Deuteronomical Code (Deut 12–26).
2 There are two versions of the Decalogue with very slight differences; the first is recorded in Exodus 20:1–17, and the

second in Deuteronomy 5:6–21. The second version presented orally by Moses to Israel occurred almost forty years later, just before entering the Promised Land (Deut 1:3–4; 4:44–47). These circumstances explain the slight difference that exists between these two versions of the Decalogue. See Ekkehardt Mueller, “Why is the Reason Given for Sabbath Keeping in Deuteronomy 5 Different from that Given in Exodus 20?” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gerhard Pfandl (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 169–173.

3 Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 494.

4 J. Philip Hyatt, *Exodus*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 214. See also Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 344.

5 Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 616.

6 Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 261.

7 Ibid.

8 James J. North, “When Killing Isn’t Murder,” *For God & Country: A Journal for Seventh-day Adventists in Military and Public Service* 1 (2019): 21.

9 Hamilton, *Exodus*, 343.

10 John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 292.

11 Jacques B. Doukhan, *Genesis*, Seventh-day Adventist International Commentary (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2016), 161. “The verb used refers to the killing of persons; it is never used of animals” (John L. Mackay, *Exodus*, A Mentor Commentary [Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2001], 352). Durham also concurs: “The verb refers only to the killing of persons, never to animals” (293).

12 Doukhan, *Genesis*, 162.

13 Ibid.

14 There are several biblical passages that legislate life in the cities of refuge (Exod 21:12–14; Num 35:9–34; Deut 4:41–43; 19:1–13; Josh 20). Six cities were chosen for this purpose—namely, Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan in pre-Jordan, and Kedesh, Shechem and Hebron (Kiriath-arba) in the land of Israel. The provision was made to establish six cities of refuge where the killer could flee and was judged to determine if the killing was intentional or accidental.

15 Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 315.

16 Doukhan, *Genesis*, 161.

17 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 193.

18 Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 89.

19 Dale Patrick, *Old Testament Law* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1985), 21.

20 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 494.

21 Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 113.

22 Stephen A. Kaufman, “The Structure of the Deuteronomical Law,” *MAARAV* 1, no. 2 (1978–1979): 105–158; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 127–137.

23 Sarna, *Exodus*, 113.

24 Ryken, *Exodus*, 616.

25 Students of the Bible may find three competing interpretations of Genesis 9:6. 1) God is the giver of life, so He Himself will punish those who transgress this foundational respect for life and kill another person. 2) Humans need to

perform the punishment (biblical *locus classicus* for capital punishment), but not on the basis of personal revenge; each case has to be taken into court, and the guilty person has to die (it is a legal legislation against a personal feud or hostility). 3) The text only asserts that the guilty person has to die—the *lex talionis* (life for life)—but it does not specify how or by whom. For details, see Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 315.

26 Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1958), 516.

27 Ryken, *Exodus*, 617. The biblical flood is the primary example of this principle when God destroys to ultimately preserve life.

28 Durham, *Exodus*, 293.

29 See Jiří Moskala, “The Decalogue in Luther and Adventism,” in *Here We Stand: Luther, the Reformation, and Adventism*, eds. Michael W. Campbell and Nikolaus Satelmajer (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2017), 101–116.

30 Ellen G. White, Manuscript 41, 1896, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953), 1:1105.

31 Ellen G. White, Letter 89, 1898, in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953), 1:1105.

32 Ellen G. White, Manuscript 153, 1899, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953), 1:1105.

33 Ellen G. White, *Christ Object Lessons* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1900), 333.

34 Hamilton, *Exodus*, 344.

35 See Wilma A. Bailey, “*You Shall Not Kill*” or “*You Shall Not Murder*”? *The Assault on a Biblical Text* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005); idem, “*You Shall not Kill*: The Meaning of RTSH in Exodus 20:13,” *Encounter* 65, no. 1 (2004): 39–54.

There is an important implication in our study: Seventh-day Adventists’ official position on non-combatancy status is in direct harmony with the proposed exegetical, conceptual, and theological understanding of the sixth commandment. The attitude of non-combatancy is rooted in the biblical data and its interpretation.

36 *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Washington DC: Review and Herald, revised 1976), 606.

37 Doukhan, *Genesis*, 162. See also Ekkehardt Mueller who argues that the change from “killing” to “murder” is often done for political agenda (The Power of Culture, <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Power%20of%20Culture.pdf> [accessed 08-22-2019]).

38 Frank M. Hasel, “Ethical Challenges in Military Service,” *Adventists and Military Service: Biblical, Historical, and Ethical Perspectives*, eds. Frank M. Hasel, Barna Magyarosi, and Stefan Höschele (Madrid: Safeliz, 2019), 162.

39 No wonder that when rabbis reflected on this prohibition, they posed a serious question: “Why was only one man created by God?—to teach that whoever takes a single life destroys thereby a whole world [of human beings]” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, as quoted in Sarna, *Exodus*, 114).

The Power of Choice and Life: A Short Theological Reflection

by Frank M. Hasel

It has been said that “man has been endowed by God with the greatest and most awesome of freedoms: the freedom of choice.”¹ Indeed, the ability of human beings to make meaningful choices is one of the most significant aspects of what it means to be human. Our freedom to choose is crucial for any theory of ethics, since moral action has to do with choosing what is right. Our ability and privilege to choose grows in the soil of freedom, which is also the seedbed of true love. Divine love never forces us against our will. To be able to choose freely² is one of the highest human goods. It is at the foundation of many human rights statements and declarations.³ One cannot deny human freedom without rejecting what makes us personal beings rather than animals. The priceless freedom to choose gives dignity to our life. At the same time, it makes us responsible for our decisions and the actions that result from them.

Biblically speaking, human beings are created by God with the ability to choose.⁴ Time and again we find core biblical passages that put before us the option to choose⁵ and we are admonished to choose wisely because the fear of the Lord⁶ is the beginning of wisdom.

As with any freedom, there is a certain risk. Human beings are capable of choosing poorly and sometimes make wrong choices that are more self-centered than obedient to God’s will. Making right choices leads to blessings, but choosing wrongly leads to negative results. The Bible uses the terminology of blessings and curses for this experience (cf. Deut 28).

According to the Bible, our capacity to choose is an essential part of being created in the image of God. It coheres well with the biblical religious experience and the nature of God. In the Bible, God is the one who freely chose to create us, and God freely chooses to save us in the only way He designed for our salvation. Our freedom to choose reflects this important aspect of God’s nature and makes us powerful agents. In the words of Ellen G. White:

What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice