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***THE LIVING GOD IN THE PENTATEUCH.***

**EXEGESIS OF A CONCEPT**

– PHD. THESIS –

**ABSTRACT**

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# ***THE LIVING GOD IN THE PENTATEUCH. EXEGESIS OF A CONCEPT***

**KEYWORDS:** *The Living God, life, oath, word, commandment, law, covenant, name of God*

In the Old Testament we do not find a dogmatic or philosophical, abstract apprehension of God, but the manner in which God revealed Himself in history. The God of the Old Testament is not an abstract being, strict, immobile, but He is the one Who transcends all the human beings, the God of heaven and earth, Who reveals Himself in many ways and in many places. But this element of the activity in itself does not constitute the complete or central content of His Being, instead it is only a manner in which He reveals Himself, God being more than this. He is the fullness of life, the entire life originates from Him, He gives man “breath of life” (Genesis 2:7)<sup>1</sup>.

The Old Testament speaks about the activity and Self-revelation, His work within the universe and in history, it speaks about His pedagogy, merci and miracles. This remarkable speech about the intervention of God in history in the most diverse forms indicate the fact that God is alive, which is a fundamental idea of the Hebrew apprehension of God<sup>2</sup>. The God of the Old Testament is alive, He is active and personal, He reveals Himself to Israel and continues to manifest Himself uninterruptedly in new acts of revelation in the history of His people. God was perceived by the Israelites as a personal being, accessible to man, Who manifests Himself within His creation during the entire history<sup>3</sup>. Probably there is no other word capable to express better the biblical conception of Yahweh than the word “living”, for His life includes His personal reality, His activity and will, His immanence united with His transcendence over man, over creation and over all the other beings<sup>4</sup>.

This emphasis on the living existence of God is remarkable, and it is stressed especially in the antithetic parallelism between Yahwism and Baalism, between the living God and idols. In time the people chose and formalized its faith and, although it does not have a well-developed

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<sup>1</sup> THEODORUS CHRISTIAAN VRIEZEN, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 317–18.

<sup>2</sup> VRIEZEN, 317.

<sup>3</sup> PAUL VAN IMSCHOOT, *Theologie de l’Ancien Testament. Tome I*, Bibliothèque de théologie. Série III. Théologie biblique, vol. 2 (Tournai: Desclée et Cie, 1954), 29.

<sup>4</sup> JOHN L. MCKENZIE S. J., *Dictionary Of The Bible* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1965), 317.

dogmatic thinking, in the process of crystallization of faith it elaborated, starting from the Ten Commandments, Shema Israel, the confession according to which God is Unique. But this confessed uniqueness must also be supported by the elements of revelation that show concretely the fact that God is Unique. Of all these elements, I chose the theme of the living God, for I considered it relevant to emphasize the precarious character of all the polytheistic systems.

In the projection of my thesis I emphasized the concrete understandings of the expression *living God* starting from the origin of the words that form the expression, since there has been a tendency in time to understand that the term “one” from Shema Israel refers to the manner of existence of God through Himself, as a Unique Person, and this generated the Jewish monopersonal monotheism. But the expression does not refer exclusively to the level that I have already mentioned above, but, in the same time it affirms the fact that there is no other god except for the God of Israel, and in His case we can speak of a second level, of the level of God’s relationship with the creation, a relationship in which He performs concrete acts, based on which we may acknowledge the living God. By understanding the expression *living God* we accede to the peak of “the manifestation of God as love in history”<sup>5</sup>.

I chose this theme for the belief that by developing it I will bring my contribution to the Romanian biblical theology of the Old Testament, taking into account the importance of the theme and the reduced number of studies dedicated to it. On the other hand, our research wishes to sketch a possible answer for those who observe only one reality of the existence, eliminating completely the possibility of a second existence. By emphasizing and understanding the manner in which the *living God* worked in the lives of people, existing the possibility of rediscovering a theocentric perspective for the modern man, presenting elements of reference to and anchoring in transcendent, through the reorientation of the perspective of the strictly material life towards a spiritual one; becoming aware of and living the eternal “life”; the confession of the living God within our communion with Him<sup>6</sup>.

Taking into account the fact that the Holy Scripture comprises, either in a typological form, or in an explicit one “the fundamental patterns of the spiritual life, the stages and transformations

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<sup>5</sup> IOAN CHIRILĂ, *Cartea profetului Osea. Breviarum al gnoseologiei Vechiului Testament* (Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 1999), 237.

<sup>6</sup> IOAN CHIRILĂ, „Viul – ființa și legile seculare ale vieții”, in *Medicii și Biserica. Familia, nașterea, tehnologii medicale de reproducere asistată (poziții teologice, medicale, juridice, filosofice)*, ed. Mircea Gelu Buta, vol. IV (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2006), 35.

that it goes through in its ascension”<sup>7</sup>, the analysis of the fragments from the Scripture related to this theme may constitute the basis of the self-search of each person that wishes to achieve the real knowledge of the living God, offering guiding marks for the understanding and living of life in its fullest sense: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).

Through the analysis of the expression “living God” in the texts of the Pentateuch we discover the biblical support of the dogmatic teaching referring to the living existence of God, for He is the Spring of the whole life which continues to work and communicate Himself to the world, taking care of His whole creation. God watches over man since the very moment of his creation (Jeremiah 1:5), until the moment of death, thus man living his entire existence with the divine promise to “be with”<sup>8</sup>.

The theme of the living God has a special relevance for the environment of biblical research, and it is often mentioned in treatises of biblical theology. However the approach of this subject from the perspective of the biblical exegesis is rather poor both in Romanian and in the international environment (there is only one PhD thesis that approaches this subject from a biblical perspective, but it focuses on the analysis of all the occurrences of the expression within the whole Scripture, which does not allow a thorough analysis of each expression: Edward E. Everding, *The Living God: A Study in the Function and Meaning of Biblical Terminology*, Harvard, unpublished PhD thesis, 1968). My thesis comes to fill in this void and to join the other specialized studies, offering the perspectives necessary to anchor the theological discourse in the biblical rescript. However, our endeavor focused on an exegetical-theological analysis in close relationship with the original meaning from the biblical text, unseparated from the historical, social, cultural, religious context in which they have been uttered. The analysis of these thematic areas clarifies the meanings of the expression *living God* and underlines both the manners in which it has been used/perceived in the context of the Old Testament, allowing, in the same time, an updating of the lost meanings. Through my study I offer premises for the biblical fundament of the theological discourse referring to the theme of life, offering ideas for the applicability of the theme in fields other than that of biblical theology, especially for the interreligious dialogue. In the same time, the

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<sup>7</sup> IOSIF HAZZAYA, *Scrieri duhovnicești*, trans. Agapie Corbu (Arad: Sfântul Nectarie, 2019), LXVI.

<sup>8</sup> CRISTIAN PRILIPCEANU, *Teologia numelor divine din Vechiul Testament* (Iași: Doxologia, 2014), 71.

thesis offers a biblical system of reference in the dialogue regarding the ethical problems of the relation to life, which receive more and more attention lately.

### **1. The structure of the thesis**

In this thesis I intended to organize an exegetical-theological study through which I emphasize the theological meanings of the name of *living God*. Our approach started from the terminological and semantic delimitation of the key terms of the expression, continuing with the exegetical thoroughness of the places in which the expression *living God* occurs as well as the oath formula “as I live”, and in the end I offered a few biblical perspectives referring to the theology of life.

The thesis is structured in four chapters, preceded by an *Introduction* (pp. 9-20) and followed by several *Conclusions* (pp. 189-191). The introductory section comprises general elements on the theme, objectives of the thesis, methodology and current stage of research, both nationally and internationally.

The thesis starts with a chapter of terminological delimitations, which have the purpose of defining and explaining thoroughly the important terms for the understanding of the theme (Chapter I. Terminological and semantic delimitations of the expression living God, pp. 21-39). The definition and terminological delimitation sketches the general frame of the thesis and underlines the perspective developed in the chapters of exegetical analysis.

The second part of the thesis (Chapter II: The expression *living God* in the Pentateuch – exegetical approach, pp. 40-89) proposes an exegetical-theological analysis of the places where the expression “living God” occurs in the Pentateuch, namely: “Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live?” (Deuteronomy 4:33) and “For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?” (Deuteronomy 5:26). This thorough analysis allowed the emphasizing of the theological meanings of the expression, the *living God* being the one Who chose the people of Israel from all the other nations, sealed a covenant with it and gave it a law which guaranteed the fullness of life if observed. Nonetheless, the exegesis emphasizes the fact that the people of Israel is the only people that hears the voice of the living God and remains alive, while its future life is conditioned by obedience to Him. The presence of God is expressed and can

be lived through His word, the righteous commandments and their observance being the manner in which God is acknowledged and found in the middle of the community.

The following part of the thesis (Chapter III: The oath in the name of Yahweh, pp. 90-146) is dedicated to the exegetical analysis of the oath formula (“As I live”), in the three places where it occurs in the Pentateuch: “but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord” (Numbers 14:21); “Say to them, ‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will do to you’” (Numbers 14:28); “For I raise My hand to heaven, and say, As I live forever” (Deuteronomy 32:40). If the second part of the thesis shows what can be understood through the name that man gives to God, following the experience he has lived in his close proximity (revelation on Sinai), this part goes deeper into the understanding of God’s Self-revelation: “As I live” (Numbers 14:21; 14:28; Deuteronomy 32:40). The phraseology of the declaration characterizes God as being alive, the origin of life to Whom the whole creation belongs. The tension between the divine sovereignty on life and death and the human access to life through the word of Moses is recreated in his last parenetic discourse (32:45-47). Thus, the observation the commandments is more than a legal request, it is a manner of living close to God. Observing the Torah is a manner of actualization of the presence of Yahweh, and the fulfillment of the commandments allows the experimentation of His presence.

The last part of the thesis comprises a systematization regarding the theology of life (Chapter IV: *The living God* and the theology of life in the Old Testament, pp. 147-188), which outlines the area of actualization of the theme. In the first part of this chapter I underline the special care that God shows for the life of man, by instituting a commandment in order to protect man from every act of trespassing of his own dignity of image of God. Then, I present systematically the main actions through which the living existence of God is underlined and the main meanings of life from the perspective of the Old Testament, and in the end the main features of the living God and of life from the perspective of the Deuteronomy are re-emphasized, where the theme of life is one of the key messages of the book.

The conclusions (pp. 188-190) synthesize the main results of the research, the *living God* being the origin and foundation of the entire human life, origin and foundation that reveals the profound meaning of life, which comes from the living God and finds Its full meaning in the relationship with Him.



## **2. Objectives of the research**

The general objective of the thesis is to achieve an exegetical and theological study of the theme of the *living God* as reflected in the Pentateuch, taking into account the fact that there is no such thesis in the space of the Romanian or international biblical theology.

The specific objectives of the thesis:

- The terminological and semantic delimitation of the expression *living God* which can offer the premises for the present research and contribute to a thorough perspective of the meanings of the expression;
- Achieving an exegetical analysis of the places where the expression *living God* occurs in Pentateuch, an objective which requires an endeavor of understanding the theme of the *living God* as presented in the Pentateuch. This approach will be based on the lexical-semantic analysis and on the ideational-theological systematization of the biblical texts relevant for the theme, by this aiming to define as precise and as complex as possible the theological theme of the *living God*. Starting from the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch, I identified the places where the expression *living God* occurs, and then I interpreted the texts with the help of the biblical commentaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias, articles and recent studies etc.
- Developing an exegetical analysis of the places in which the oath formula “As I live” occurs, an objective which can be achieved by following the same steps as presented in the previous point.
- Systematization of the main theological ideas referring to the theology of life through an emphasis on the biblical perspective on this theme.

## **3. Methodology of the research**

As methods of research our approach uses the diachronic exegesis or the historical-critical one, using its scientific features. Firstly, benefiting from the historical dimension of this method we will interpret the biblical text in its historical dimension, taking into account the context and social, political, religious, cultural and linguistic conditions in which the text we analyzed was written. In the same time, using the historical-critical exegesis, we interpret the text critically, trying to analyze as objective as possible the phrases and expressions considered. It is important to mention the fact that “the critical study of the biblical text is called, as a matter of fact, to say

what are the additions of the original text and to indicate which one of the variants of text are authentic”<sup>9</sup>, and these elements do not prejudice the dogmatic integrity of the text.

In the Eastern theology the biblical research does not have an exclusively scientific purpose, the eastern exegetical exposition being based on the consensus of the patristic tradition impregnated with the spiritual dimension<sup>10</sup>. Hence, in the exegetical analysis we will take on the rigors of interpretation used by the Christian East. After the historical-critical exegetic interpretation, we tried to identify the spiritual perspective that occurs in the texts analyzed, a dimension that can be found especially in the patristic writings. Apart from the eastern exegetical rigors, we also resorted to the Judaic interpretations referring to the texts approached, since one must take into account the fact that the Hebrews were the first recipients of the biblical texts in general, and of the Pentateuch especially, and therefore we cannot neglect the contribution they brought to improve the understanding of the biblical text through the interpretations and explanations offered from the perspective of the Judaic tradition.

#### **4. Limits, perspectives and future openings**

Following the research I was able to observe that the biblical text of the Old Testament offers us important starting points for the development of the theology of life, through the correlations that can be made by showing that God and the obedience to His Word/word are the source of the entire life: in the parallelism between the words of God and the human being that “lives” (Deut 8:3); in offering life through commandments (Deut 6:24) and at the end of Moses’ Chant (Deut 32:39); at the end of Moses’ discourse “for He is your life” (30:20). Thus a dramatic tension is created between the intense experience of Israel who hears the voice of the living God (Deut 4:33 and 5:26), after which the people is astonished that a man can survive such an encounter (Deut 4:33; 5:24.26) and the understanding of the fact that the words coming out from God’s mouth are life-giving (Deut 8:3). Another tension occurs between the emphasis put by Moses on Israel’s decision between life and death (Deut 30:15-20) and God’s the sovereign power over life and death, according to the Chant (Deut 32:39). At the end of the Deuteronomy God is hidden, but He is hidden with the purpose of giving birth to a new search, after the “word” that is “life” (Deut

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<sup>9</sup> IOAN CHIRILĂ, *Introducere în Vechiul Testament – manual pentru Facultățile de Teologie Ortodoxă* – (București: Basilica, 2018), 133.

<sup>10</sup> CONSTANTIN COMAN, *Erminia Duhului. Texte fundamentale pentru o ermeneutică duhovnicească* (București: Editura Bizantină, 2002), 124.

32:47). All these parallelisms open new perspectives for the possibility to identify the Word/word with the life, the divine Law having the role of leading towards life, and the commandments being law in the service of life.

The Old Testament expresses an obvious realism, for God is not presented as an abstract, metaphysical idea. Both in the biblical text and in the Judaic literature, the living existence of God is an axiom. There are no rational arguments to convince someone of this truth, for God's existence is implicit.

Through the expression the *living God* it is revealed, firstly, the fact that God is a Person, and each one of His actions reveal a personal existence. He is not a force or a power, but a personal Being, an active, communicational reality. He is living because He moves (in His providential work) and reveals Himself (as opposed to the idolatrous cults where the idols were brought and presented), but He also moves creation through His life-giving power and through the pouring of His love upon creation. The *living God* works, speaks, communicates Himself, cares for and leads destinies.

The *living God* is the very foundation of the human life. To this respect, life reveals its most profound meaning, for it is not adored in itself, but because it comes from God and it belongs to Him. Wherever there is life, there is His gift, for He is the one Who gives all the goods of nature. Hence, life with Him means for Israel prosperity and abundance of material goods as well.

Going deeper into this theme, besides its importance for the biblical theology, also offers us the profound meanings of life. Creation as a whole is full of life through its participation to the divine existential cycle, the nomosic forms being nothing else but the natural representation of this divine existential cycle. Living the life with the meanings that the theme of the *living God* reveals, involves an introversion of His Word/word, a retrieval of the self in its Creator, a settlement in the real Life/life. The *living God* is an area of balance between the knowledge of God and the personal knowledge.

Considering that in this thesis, in order to achieve a thorough analysis of the theme, we focused on the texts of the Pentateuch, in the future researches one may continue to analyze the manner in which this theme is reflected in the other corpus of the Old Testament, especially in *Psalms*, in the sapiential literature or in prophets. Also, one might study the meanings of the expression and of the theology of life in the texts of the New Testament, especially in the *Gospel according to John*, where the theology of life is granted a special attention.

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