Exodus 20:13 is a short, four word, commandment that has caused a great deal of discussion, confusion and in some cases heated debate. The problem is the Hebrew word, רָסָּה (ra·sah). The King James Version of the Bible translates the word as kill. Most, if not all, other English language Bibles translate the word as murder. This means the KJV verse reads, “Thou shalt not kill.” The English Standard Version, the New International Version, the New American Standard Bible and even the New King James Version translates the verse as “You shall not murder.”

One source feels the problem arose because the KJV translation was inaccurate from the beginning. The source feels the translation was not challenged because the culture in those times used other words for nonmurderous killings. On the other hand, one can find sources that call this concept into question. One source specifically says, “It does not always imply intentional or premeditated ‘murder,’ for the same word is used in Deut. 4:41–42 for unintentional killing.”

The result is that in modern times some Christians and Christian critics use kill and murder interchangeably. This confusion or difference of opinion creates a problem when killing in self-defense, the defense of a third party, capital punishment, or war are the topic of debate. All of these issues are important and worthy of debate, but this paper will focus on two of the issues.

Self-defense and defense of a third party are the focus of this paper. They were chosen for several reasons. First, they are part of a larger debate concerning the use of deadly force in general. There are those in this country, and the world, working to stop legally sanctioned use of

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1In the interest of clarity, this writer is a retired police officer and is currently an armed member of a church security team.


deadly force to protect one’s person, property, neighbor or society. Second, law enforcement in the United States is currently under attack for its use of deadly force, and many police officers are Christians.\(^5\) Third, today’s society has placed Christians in the position of making decisions about the need to protect themselves, places of worship, congregants and others from becoming the victims of violent acts. Fourth, it would seem Christians have a responsibility to be as certain as possible they are following God’s Word in all things, and it would seem anything involving the use of deadly force against another would be of extreme importance.

The final reason for reviewing this issue may take some by surprise. It is however something one should consider. An important belief in Christianity, at least Evangelical Christianity, is the unchanging nature of God. God the Creator in the Old Testament is the same omnipotent, omniscient and loving God worshiped by Bible believing Christians today. With that said, other things have changed over time. God has amended, clarified or allowed changes over the millennia. He did not change, but what He expected and accepted from man did change at times.

Consider the subject of slavery. God has been attacked by nonbelievers and questioned by believers over the matter of slavery. They have claimed God cannot be a moral, loving God if He allowed slavery. In his defense of God against such charges Dr. Paul Copan laid out an argument for why God tolerated and regulated slavery in the Old and New Testament. To some it seems inexplicable that God allowed slavery to continue after freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Dr. Copan points out God was sensitive to the world in which the Israelites lived and the need to make changes incrementally.\(^6\)

The foregoing notwithstanding, there is another problem one should consider. Much of the writing, or even research, in the area of self-defense and defense of others in recent times

\(^5\)As police officers, Christians find themselves in a particular quandary. A police officer may be called upon to use force, including deadly force, against a person who does not pose a direct threat to the police officer, but does pose an ongoing substantial threat to others. For example, a criminal who has used deadly force in a crime, but is fleeing from the officer. The officer, depending on the law of the jurisdiction in which the officer serves, may be authorized, even required, to use deadly force to prevent the person from becoming a threat to others.

seems to be the product of those with a vested interest in swaying any argument toward the side of justifying the use of deadly force. To be clear, these writers are not necessarily uninformed or biased with their writing on this matter. The problem is their reasoning and arguments were often not supported by anything other than their assertions. In many cases, the writers or speakers quote scripture and provide their understanding of the verses in question. What they did not provide was any support for their beliefs. Essentially, they were saying this is what I believe the verses say, based on my understanding of those verses.

Christians should do their best to obey God in the way they live their lives. This is true when one is making small decisions and even more true when making life changing decisions. Deciding to become a police officer, armed security officer or to use justified deadly force against another are life changing decisions. Unfortunately, humans are good at self-deception. Someone longing to be a police officer and serve his or her community might easily convince himself that taking the life of another in the line of duty is okay, even if Holy Spirit is telling him it is not okay. The same is true of someone striving to protect his flock from the dangers of the modern world. He can easily deceive himself into thinking it is the right thing to do, without considering God’s will or the consequences.

Beyond self-deception, human memory can be selective. One can remember a verse or passage in the Bible as one wishes. For these reasons, Christians need to stay in the Word. It is much easier to distort the meaning of those four words in Exodus 20:13 if it has been years since one thought seriously about them.

**Killing or Murder**

The written word is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing part relates to the way it is used to record or communicate information without speaking, signing or reading each other’s minds. The curse part is that the written word must be interpreted by the reader with no input from the other senses. With modern means of communication such as email and social media, people are learning about the problems that can arise because one’s written word is misunderstood. It is easy to misunderstand because the receiver of the information cannot hear the tone of voice, see the facial expression or observe the body language of the sender. When
considerations such as cultural and societal differences are concerned, even words in the same language can be misunderstood.

For instance, consider the now politically incorrect word in American English, bum. On this writer’s first and only trip to England many years ago, the point was made that bum in United States and in England had very different meanings. In the U. S. it was often used to describe someone’s status in life. In the U. K. it was used to describe a part of one’s anatomy, the one upon which one sits. Is it any wonder when words that were written centuries ago are translated into other languages by people with different societal and educational influences problems will occur? When the meaning of those words include matters of serious concerns, this can become a problem, as in the translation of רָסָה.

It is clear there is a disagreement with the meaning of the word as it was originally used. As noted earlier, over the centuries, most biblical scholars or translators have decided it means murder. Yet, some believe it could mean additional forms of killing including accidental, negligent and intentional. To makes this even more clear consider the following comments or definitions of the word רָסָה from various sources:

1. The word is, “…specific to putting to death improperly, for selfish reasons rather than with authorization (as killing in the administration of justice or killing in divinely ordained holy war would be).” 7
2. Used here the word “refers to unlawful killing, not the kind of killing demanded by other laws that the Israelites understood to be Yahweh’s laws.” 8
3. The word can “…refer to an accident, manslaughter, premeditation, or governmental execution.” 9
4. “The NIV translation “murder” for Hebrew rāsah in the sixth commandment may be somewhat too narrow…” 10

7 Stuart, 462.
8 Osborn, 479.
9 Swanson.
This should make it apparent the meaning of the word translated as kill and murder is not completely clear in the minds of some experts. Luckily, that is not the situation in modern English. The definition of the word “kill” incorporates many other more specific words related to the taking of a life. Murder on the other hand is understood to be the intentional and illegal taking of a life.\textsuperscript{11}

It would be nice if this discussion of killing versus murder could stop at this point. As with many difficult, moral, ethical and legal questions, that is not the case. Under the law, there are some instances when one might intentionally take the life of another without committing murder. Self-defense and defense of a third party are two such exceptions. The problem with those exceptions is different states or entities have laws that define them differently or handle them differently. For example, some state laws say a person has an absolute right to defend himself with force, up to and including deadly force, if the individual legitimately feels his life is threatened. Other entities may limit that right to specific circumstances and situations.

\textbf{Is Killing Immoral?}

Hopefully, the foregoing information is clear enough to discuss the ethics or morality of a Christian, or anyone really, intentionally killing another person. The Bible does include a number of passages dealing with one person killing another. Based on these passages many believers, ministers, pastors, theologians and others have come to conclusions about the ethics and morals of the situation. In fact, when one reads these texts with an open mind, it is fairly clear some of these concepts mirror or may have laid the foundations for modern laws. This could easily lead one to believe God’s Word is completely compatible with the laws in the modern world.

The Sixth Commandment makes it clear God is opposed to one person taking the life of another. The question with which we are struggling is, does that mean in any fashion or only \textsuperscript{11}The word murder can have other uses, as can the word kill. For example, one can murder, or kill, an opponent at handball, but that does not mean a life was taken. Also, murder in the criminal sense is defined by the state or federal law using the term. However, as far as this writer knows, murder does not include death by accident or negligence, unless there are some other factors that cause a state or political entity s to use the term murder for some form of homicide caused by egregious misconduct not intended to cause the death of someone.
with malice and forethought? Some will argue killing another is never justified and quote everything from turning the other cheek to Jesus rebuking Simon Peter for slicing off the ear of Malchus. (John18: 10) While one can see why some Christians would feel that way, there is reason to believe killing is justified, even righteous in certain circumstances.

Certainly, one must be careful when saying killing might be righteous under certain circumstances. Still, this Christian believes that killing is justified and righteous if ordered by God. That should be clear to any student of the Bible who is familiar with the Old Testament. God destroyed or had. His people destroy many people in the Old Testament for reasons that have been clearly laid out in many commentaries, books and sermons. To feel they were not righteous requires one to believe God is not righteous, or the Bible is not truly His Word.

The first biblically recorded incident of one person killing another was in Genesis 4 when Cain killed his brother Abel. This was obviously not a righteous killing, as God punished Cain for the act. God judged Cain and said to him, “And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” (ESV) Yes, Cain was punished, but others who killed were not.

Exodus 2:11-15 tells the story of Moses killing an Egyptian. In modern terms, the killing might have been justified, but it was clearly not justified under Egyptian law. If it had been, Moses would not have had to flee Egypt. Also, it is clear from the passage that Moses knew what he was doing was wrong. Verse 12 reads, “He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.”(ESV) Not only was Moses not punished, he was chosen to lead the Israelites out of captivity. Does that mean the killing of the Egyptian was a righteous act?

One could contrast other incidents of killings or murders in the Bible in an attempt to answer the question posed by the title of this section. However, that should not be necessary. These incidents illustrate that circumstances other than the actual act seem to have a bearing on how God sees acts of this nature. Cain clearly murdered his brother, and was punished by God.12

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Moses clearly made a decision to violate Pharaoh’s law and kill the Egyptian. In this case, there were earthly consequences for his actions, but God later chose him for a great honor.

It should be safe to say at this point that killing appears to be immoral in some circumstances. In others, it may not be, or it may not be an act of immorality for which God holds one directly and immediately accountable.\(^\text{13}\)

**Justifiable Homicide?**

This section will briefly discuss the passages and verses in the Bible some have used to make the claim that there is such a thing as justifiable homicide. One of the earliest passages called upon to support the use of deadly force against another is Exodus 22:2-3. This passage states, “If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft.” (ESV)

This passage closely parallels some state laws allowing the use of deadly force for theft or burglary. One is allowed to protect property and people under this law with force, up to and including deadly force. Scholars and others explain the reasons for this exception in various ways. One believes the homeowner is justified in using force against someone who breaks into the home at night, without regard to whether the force kills the intruder.\(^\text{14}\) Another goes into more detail about why the homeowner, or other, is excused at night, and explains that during the day deadly force is not justified because the burglar could be identified or scared away with less than lethal force.\(^\text{15}\)

Other writers in this area have used other verses to justify using deadly force in personal defense and in defense of a third party. These would include Genesis 14:14-16 in which Abram takes a party of men to rescue captive members of his family. This same source used the story of

\(^\text{13}\)Certainly one can argue Moses did the right thing, but then one has to answer the question of why he ran.

\(^\text{14}\)Osborn, 479,

\(^\text{15}\)Stuart, 462.
Moses killing the Egyptian as support for using deadly force to protect a third party.\textsuperscript{16} Another uses Nehemiah 4:14 as justification or authority to use deadly force to protect a third party.\textsuperscript{17} Others have moved into the New Testament to find support for the idea of Christian self-defense, finding self-defense as a possible reason for Jesus telling disciples to take a sword with them in Luke 36.\textsuperscript{18}

It would be possible to close this section at this time. There is however one more matter that deserves comment. This is a very current debate in many ways, but this is not the first time this sort of debate has taken place. Over the centuries, the idea of something called a just war has been debated and discussed at many levels. One of the foundational works on the idea of a just war was \textit{Summa Theologicae} by Saint Thomas Aquinas.\textsuperscript{19} Originally, the focus of the so-called just war theory was conflict between nations. Eventually, this debate expanded until it encompassed the private use of deadly or armed force by both Christians and non-Christians.\textsuperscript{20}

This section could go on for some time if there was sufficient space. That does not mean it is necessary to continue. These paragraphs state the cases many use to support the position that the use of deadly force for self-defense or to protect others is moral. If the individuals holding these positions are correct in their understanding, a Christian can engage in the legal use of deadly force in self-defense or defenses of a third party, if such action is legal within the civil and criminal laws in force at the time.


\textsuperscript{17}David French, "The Biblical and Natural Right of Self-Defense." \textit{National Review},


Summary and Conclusion

Based on the research done for this paper, there is a significant amount of support for the idea that a Christian can serve as a police officer, armed security officer at church and, if the law allows, personally intervene to stop someone from killing or injuring a third party. That does not mean one should simply put the possibility this is an ethical or moral problem completely out of his mind. There is a rich history within Christianity of people refusing to use force against another human being, or refusing to resist force used against them.

Dr. David Renwick of the National Presbyterian Church spoke on this matter during a 2016 sermon series. Dr. Renwick spoke of the refusal of a group of missionaries to defend their lives in the 1950s in Ecuador. They allowed the tribe with which they were working to kill them, though they had the ability to resist. They saw their submission to the tribe’s actions as a testimony to their faith. Dr. Renwick also spoke of others such as John Piper who oppose the current practice. Dr. Renwick appears to believe it is inappropriate for Christians to arm themselves or defend themselves with deadly force.21

For the record, this writer comes down on the side of self-defense and the protection of others. Still, my seminary studies have made me question that position on more than one occasion. Many believers have died for their faith over the centuries. St. Ignatius of Antioch begged his fellow believers in Rome to forego their plans to interfere with his execution, because his faith was so strong.22 Others made similar choices in more recent times, such as Balthasar Hubmaier23 and Felix Manz24 who died for their beliefs in the sixteenth-century.

In closing I will quote the words of Dr. Rodney Decker from the conclusion of his study


of the issue, “At the level of self-defense this use of violence may be necessary to preserve life: one’s own or that of others. The failure to act violently to stop violent aggression will, in some cases, perpetrate greater violence as the aggressor is allowed to continue a violent killing spree.”25

The decision to defend oneself is personal. It should be based on the individual’s understanding of God’s Word and the laws governing such action at the time. Regardless of one’s decision, there will be consequences. One considering this matter should do his or her own research into the personal, legal and biblical ramifications of the final decision.

25Decker, 63
Bibliography


