

# Old Testament Ethics

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IN DISCUSSING Old Testament ethics, we are not faced with the usual problem of trying to pick out a consensus from a welter of diverging viewpoints and methods. If only there were such an abundance of careful studies on biblical ethics, we would find ourselves in the luxurious position of highlighting the helpful approaches, discarding those which are problematic, and generally drawing together the “assured results” of scholarship.

When one considers how often people invoke biblical teachings in matters of morality, it seems that biblical ethics would be an inviting terrain for scholars to explore. Yet there is a perplexing scarcity of comprehensive, systematic studies of the material. Several general treatments of Old Testament ethics appeared around the beginning of this century — W. S. Bruce's in 1895, Archibald Duff's in 1902, Hinckley G. Mitchell's in 1912, and J. M. Powis Smith's in 1923. But to my knowledge the *only* study devoted to Old Testament ethics since 1923 is a German monograph of less than 200 pages, written in 1967 by Hendrik van Oyen as part of a series on the general history of ethics in the West. The situation is only slightly better in the field of New Testament studies, although there also the several systematic overviews are all rather too concise.

When biblical scholars have interested themselves in ethical studies, they have tended to focus on rather specific, narrow topics: social justice, the status of women, war, vengeance, property rights, ecological concern for nature and the like. Many also address problems tangential to ethics: social structures, political organization and control, economic systems, the ethos and the world view of the people, theological interpretations of moral issues and much more. What is missing is the effort to bring these aspects together and to examine the ways in which they interrelate in a general system of ethics.

Perhaps we can find part of the reason for this lack in a statement made by ethicist James Gustafson: biblical ethics, he observed, is in itself “a complex task for which few are well prepared; those who are specialists in ethics generally lack the intensive and proper training in biblical studies, and those who are specialists in biblical studies often lack sophistication in ethical thought” (“The Place of Scripture

in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study,” *Interpretation* 24 [1970], p. 430). A person venturesome enough to engage in interdisciplinary work runs the risk of being tagged a dilettante by colleagues in each discipline. But the root problem is how to conceive and conduct the work. Biblical studies and ethics do not mate easily; each has a quite different purpose, method, set of presuppositions and subject matter.

ONE WAY to demonstrate both the dilemma and the possibilities of biblical ethics is to retrace my own efforts to acquire an understanding of the field. From my first exposure to the critical study of the Old Testament in seminary, I found certain of its moral teachings and its general view of humanity and community attractive, indeed compelling. Yet like most seminary students I had little more than the standard introductory courses in ethics, and nothing at all in biblical ethics specifically. My graduate training focused almost entirely on the Old Testament itself, again with no attention to its ethics but with much work on its theology. It was not until a few years into my teaching career that I was able to indulge my fancy by teaching a trial course at the seminary and graduate levels. That I survived that first stumbling attempt to put together an overall approach to biblical ethics — indeed to experiment with whether there could be said to *exist* such a discipline — I owe to the goodwill of those first students.

What I needed was a second graduate education in ethics. I decided instead to devote a sabbatical in 1976 to as much reading in the field as I could manage. With the advice of some colleagues I tackled a mass of materials ranging from Aristotelian ethics to contemporary analytical philosophy and phenomenological thought. The readings included key contributions in both philosophical and theological ethics. I sought to familiarize myself with these intellectual traditions, to ascertain what were the recurrent issues in the study of ethics and to identify categories and methods which could be helpful in conducting a study of biblical ethics.

This reading had a rather sobering effect on me, and I was tempted to abandon the whole project. What I discovered was that there is no generally accepted definition of the field of ethics, nor any widely practiced method for “doing” ethics. To my knowledge, there is no other field in which graduate students, often at the point of their doctoral examinations, are expected to define their discipline — both its subject matter and the viable ways to approach it.

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Actually, this is not an inherent weakness; more disciplines could benefit from the kind of self-criticism that ethics applies to its presuppositions, purposes and analytical means.

An obvious change in the study of religious ethics during the past couple of decades is its drift from its traditional moorings in the study of theology. This change is reflected in the curricula of many seminaries and divinity schools today: ethics has achieved an independent existence as a department or area of study. To be sure, many theologians and other non-ethicists cannot understand this shift and are still reluctant to grant ethics separate status. Does not ethics serve as the practical application of theological truths?

Most ethicists seem unwilling to view the matter this simplistically. They must often make use of several nontheological disciplines in their work, such as sociology, anthropology, economics, jurisprudence, political science, philosophy and phenomenology. They may frequently engage moral questions in institutional contexts where the theological warrants for a specific ethical issue may not be honored — as when they advise on matters of medical ethics, public policy and ecological practice. In addition, an apparent shift in the self-understanding of the field of ethics has occurred.

Ethicists today consider their area not just the normative task of what people ought to do and why but also the analytic and descriptive enterprise of how and why people in fact do act. Ethics entails

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### *Third in a series*

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critical reflection on the social dimensions of moral behavior, the constitution of meaning by both the individual and the group, the identification of values underlying moral action, the use of warrants in grounding these values, the operation of norms and principles in a changing and diversified world and similar issues. By no means are all ethical studies devoted to such theoretical matters, yet even the many books and articles that deal with some specific moral problem will typically address these general matters in the course of their discussions. The aim is to understand moral action in the total context of human existence, that is, in light of all the individual, social and environmental factors affecting it. For Christian ethics, the effort is to determine how certain moral behavior is consistent with, or even perhaps required by, the tenets of Christian faith.

**A**T THE OUTSET we must recognize that the Bible is neither an ethical treatise nor a handbook of morals. For that matter, it can scarcely be considered a theological work — that is, a critical, systematic study of the deity and of the relationship between the divine sphere and all other spheres of

existence. Rather, the Bible is a gathering of traditional materials that gradually emerged among the people of ancient Israel and early Christianity and eventually became their authoritative statements about their God, the nature of their believing community and their terms for living. Morality and ethics, like religion and theology, are observable in this literature, but they can be recovered only with a method capable of identifying moral values in what began as folk or community literature before it was made normative as religious canon. How this task should be approached is at present a completely open question, and one that unfortunately is scarcely being addressed.

One can gain a helpful starting point from the influential article on “Contemporary Biblical Theology” by Krister Stendahl in the first volume of the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon, 1962). Dealing with theology, Stendahl argues that the modern student of the Bible must distinguish clearly between the descriptive task and the hermeneutic task: between “What *did* the text mean?” and “What *does* it mean?” In ethics we would express this distinction in terms of the descriptive enterprise and the normative enterprise. It should be obvious enough — but seems not to be to some — that one should first take pains to describe and understand the ethics of the ancient document and the people who produced it, *before* trying to appropriate moral norms and directives of the Bible for today.

Because there has been so little comprehensive work on the ethics of the Old Testament, it would be premature to indicate any trends in understanding it. We can, however, itemize several elements that converge to make up the descriptive task, taking our examples from Old Testament materials.

1. Most important are the *moral norms and teachings* in biblical literature. As central as they are, however, they are not theoretical absolutes. They are attached to explicit moral problems such as adultery, war, punishment, parent-child relations, the oppressed or defenseless in society and the use of property. The prophets often make sweeping statements about social justice, but there are always specific injustices they are trying to combat — sometimes through rhetorical overstatement. In other words, the prophets seem to have certain general ethical principles or values in mind, yet they speak mainly in terms of concrete moral norms about specific conduct. It remains an open question whether it is the general values *or* the specific norms that are the universals — if either is. By focusing on the moral dilemmas that the biblical generations faced, we can take a first step toward determining how principles and norms function in the moral life.

2. The *sociohistorical context* for both these moral problems and moral norms is crucial if we are to understand what the Bible is advocating ethically. After nearly a century of form criticism, all students

of the Bible are aware how much the ancient social situation affected the meaning of the literature that grew up in its midst. Ethicists must look not only at the Israelite context but also at the moral values of the surrounding culture or cultures on any given moral point, for often the biblical position is taken in direct response to some contrary moral behavior.

For example, the Old Testament retains a largely disparaging ethic concerning the status and rights of women. Women were under all the obligations of the law but shared in few of the social and religious prerogatives. Yet while no excuse can be offered for the biblical ethic at this point, at least the historical and social reasons for it can be understood. Ancient Israel and its neighbors constituted a patriarchal world; at some points Egypt and Babylonia granted slightly more rights to women than did Israel. But by understanding the moral norms in Israel and early Christianity as natural products of their times, we are able to look beyond them for indications of a higher, liberating view of women. Such a critical analysis has been done by several scholars, notably Phyllis Trible in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress, 1978).

3. Because we cannot directly observe the behavior of biblical people or interview them about their moral values and principles, it is all the more important to study the biblical *forms of moral discourse* — the many ways in which these values and judgments are expressed. Some of these principles will be stated quite explicitly, from the sentence “Such a thing is not done in Israel” (II Sam. 13:12), to the descriptions of the prudent and virtuous life according to the wisdom tradition, to the unequivocal criticisms of the prophets. In other cases moral action will be promoted through persuasion, as in the way clauses are frequently added to laws and injunctions in order to motivate the people to conduct themselves in a certain manner (as in “Honor your father and your mother, *that your days may be long in the land,*” Exod. 20:12). More subtle is the use of narratives (e.g., the stories about Abraham, David or the wilderness generation) to serve as paradigms of moral or immoral behavior.

4. The ancient people, like many today, would not be prone to distinguish sharply between morality and religion. What is morally right to do is so because God wills it or because it is consistent with the divinely ordained structure of the world. Consequently, it is especially important in biblical ethics to determine the *theological warrants* for morality. This includes the specific appeals made to God’s will as well as the general theological beliefs which serve to validate the content of the moral teachings. For example, even though the laws in the Pentateuch probably emerged gradually over the course of centuries as people sought ways to live in community, what does it mean that these laws became viewed as stemming directly from God at one point in the life of

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Moses? Or again, note that God is normally pictured as the supreme practitioner of the morality which humans must follow — but that, in an interesting twist, Abraham (in Gen. 18:25), Job and others can step forward and remind God to do what is right. Such matters as revelation, divine activity, theodicy and eschatology will all be pertinent in understanding how the Old Testament theologizes its ethic.

5. An essential part of ethics is the particular view taken of *moral agency*. What is the nature of humanity according to the biblical tradition? Is it possible for us to know and do the good, and therefore should each person be held fully responsible for all actions and choices? Or does the human have certain inherent characteristics and external influences which call for a more cautious estimation of each person’s responsibility for moral behavior? Furthermore, to what extent is it even appropriate for us to single the individual out? Does not the Old Testament frequently view the whole community as a “moral agent”?

There will likely be quite different answers to these questions in different sections of the Bible. Within the Old Testament, for example, it appears that humans are in a position to know and do the good because of what they have experienced in their past history, but that they too often choose the wrong course nonetheless. Yet this is not because they are evil or because there is some malevolent force loose in the world that subverts people’s best intentions. According to the opening chapters of Genesis, humanity and all the world are created good — but humans repeatedly choose, as they are free to do, a course which yields disruption, alienation and chaos. Yet there is no end to God’s attempts to reform them, both as individuals and as a community. This divine/human drama lies at the center of the Bible.

6. Inevitably, ethics involves the problem of *authority*. How is it that ancient Israel and early Christianity tried to secure conformity to certain moral practices and avoidance of others? Of course, the above-mentioned issue of theological warrants will loom large at this point, as will the forms of moral discourse employed in engendering and interpreting

moral behavior. But one must also consider the roles played by institutions (the cult, the school, the court of law, the state), family and kinship groups and key leaders (including the prophets and the sages). Furthermore, it is very important to consider tradition in this regard; that is, the way in which the heritage from the past functions for each new generation — sometimes being appropriated rather fully, sometimes being rejected or ignored and other times being creatively reinterpreted in the new situation. Values, attitudes and lifestyles can often be instilled in the succeeding generation by subtle means of inculcation and regimentation. The subtle as well as the more obvious techniques of persuasion, coercion and legal controls are part of the functioning of morality.

7. Finally, at the very heart of biblical ethics lie the *fundamental values* that infuse moral conduct and principles. These are not the first but rather among the last things that the ethicist will be able to determine. Such moral values involve an essential preference given to a particular way of existing in the world. Values are not the same thing as religious

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beliefs or practices, although they will be related to them. Values are also not mere ideas. They are oriented toward the concrete conditions of life and lie behind our choosing, acting and finding meaning in our situation.

Among such fundamental values observable in Old Testament morality are the following: affirmation of the goodness of life in this world (thus the Old Testament offers us more of a this-worldly than an other-worldly or eschatological ethic); the importance of viability for all members of society (thus a decisive stand against oppression or exploitation which restricts human fulfillment); the priority of good relationships (thus the importance of life in community and, consequently, of social ethics); and the preference for prudence and moderation (thus an ethic which seeks happiness and fulfillment not in excesses but in a deliberative, responsible lifestyle). Such values, while not all present at every point of Old Testament morality, do in fact underlie the bulk of the moral norms and principles we find there. Walter Harrelson’s recent book on *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (Fortress, 1980) provides a perceptive discussion of how important such basic values are.

The above-mentioned seven subjects together give us access to biblical ethics. Fortunately, there had al-

ready been substantial work done separately in nearly all of these areas. We have made real gains in understanding the historical context of ancient Israel, the literary forms of the Bible, the nature of tradition and the theological beliefs of the people. What now needs to be done is to examine these various areas together explicitly in terms of ethics.

I HAVE already said that biblical ethics is primarily a descriptive discipline. The question of how biblical ethics can or should be used in facing today’s moral problems is a second stage which Christian and Jewish ethicists address. This problem of appropriation is a vital one. Unfortunately, the Bible has too often been exploited to support slavery and the denigration of women in society; to advance simplistic solutions to such issues as homosexuality, abortion and capital punishment; to deprive citizens of free choice, as in governing the consumption of alcoholic beverages; to do battle against science and the theory of evolution; to legitimate war, economic exploitation and rape of the land.

Partly because of such misuse and the potential for more healthy appropriation, ethicists recently have been giving more attention to the question of how the Bible can be used in moral decision-making. It may be sufficient simply to mention the names of some who have published on this matter: H. Richard Niebuhr, James Gustafson, Edward Leroy Long, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, H. Edward Everding and Dana Wilbanks. The task of biblical application is one of the more immediate and sensitive problems which clergy and laity face daily.

On the basis of my own work in descriptive biblical ethics I can tentatively suggest a different avenue for this normative question than has been taken so far. The accent in appropriation should perhaps fall much more on the fundamental values in biblical ethics than on the specific moral norms and directives that we meet on the surface level of the text. Not only will this approach allow us to overcome the manipulation which can occur when one arbitrarily chooses one text over another on a given moral problem, but it also respects the very real cultural differences that exist between our age and antiquity. When those fundamental values are translated into concrete moral choice, the resulting norm may in fact differ from one historical situation to another — from the premonarchic agricultural setting in Israel to the affluence of the eighth century to the period of Hellenistic or Roman domination to today’s secularized society. Affirmation of life, of human fulfillment, of good relationships, of prudent living — all such basic values can find new, creative application in each generation. Thus the particular historical exigencies and social possibilities in our own age will necessarily affect the ways in which these values are translated into norms on such issues as women’s rights, sexual

ethics, social justice, property rights, energy policy or ecological concerns. The "biblical ethic for today," therefore, will not be readily apparent until one examines the *present* situation in order to see which course of action the biblical values seem to encourage now.

The process of appropriation is anything but a facile operation. It requires critical insight concerning our contemporary situation as well as a sensitive understanding of what was ethically at stake in the biblical world. Biblical scholars in the coming years can contribute to carrying out this task. ■

## Helping Omega Make Its Point

### The Pitfalls and Promise of Understanding Catholics

JAMES T. BAKER

I AM NOW learning what I suppose ecumenical pioneers have known for decades — that religious integration is both the simplest and the most complicated of human endeavors: simple in design, complicated in detail. This is true of all kinds of integration — racial, social, sexual, but most of all religious.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whatever history's judgment of his intellectual contributions may be, certainly left religious thinkers a healthy morsel for leisurely munching when he dropped the broad metaphysical hint that all things move constantly toward a point of complete union, which he called the Omega Point. As the God-man, Teilhard's vision would instruct us, Christ was both the symbol and visible evidence of the process of integration-toward-unification; and as Christians, we must surely see, it is our task to help Omega make its Point in whatever ways we can. Those who have tried know how exciting but also how difficult this task can be.

I found myself playing a small part in Omega's pageant last Easter season as I stood in a dressing room of my college's Newman Center, tossed aside my Baylor (Baptist) sweat shirt, and was fitted with rabbinical robes so that I could act as "father" for a Passover Seder meal. I fully relished my part, as did the elderly black cook who played my wife, as did the young Catholic and Methodist students who played our sons and daughters. It was all very ecumenical: eating our chicken legs (we

hadn't a lamb's shank), drinking our grape juice (there were Baptists present), singing and praying and having a laugh or two together. Omega seemed to be making its point with clarity.

It was especially nice that after the final prayer the Wesley Foundation chaplain's wife, as pretty and freshly pink as Meryl Streep playing a Wesley Foundation chaplain's wife, thanked me profusely for coming to share my faith with her and her fellow Christians. It was a completely appropriate thing to say to a bearded, "Jewish-looking" man who happens to be founder and sole member of a football boosters club called "Southern Baptists for Notre Dame." But even before the Seder candles had flickered and died, before the brief ecumenical glow dimmed, I was all too aware of just how superficial our acting really was. We had played our parts, and played them well, but Omega had not made its point. The walls that separate religious groups are not so easily scaled or razed.

My caution was perhaps the product of the hard lessons I have learned during the three years that I, a confirmed Protestant, have taught church history at a Roman Catholic seminary located within the confines of a Benedictine priory — a seminary for the education of men with belated vocations. I must say that I have been well treated, if a bit underpaid, and I have made many close friends. I have been made a kind of honorary Catholic, and my students feel that my soul is about as safe as a Protestant's can hope to be.

I had relatively little trouble surviving the initial Inquisition, a nervous hour when the seminary's board of directors asked me how I planned to

handle the supremacy of Peter and I answered, "Gingerly." There was never any real trouble from the dean of students, a former Protestant, who reportedly listened to my lectures through the wall of his room with a stethoscope. And we were all able to share a healthy laugh when one of the more conservative students, reacting with some heat to Luther's *Table Talk*, blurted, "Thank God I'm not a Protestant," and all I could manage was a lame, "Yes, thank God."

IT HAS ALL BEEN instructive and rewarding, and I plan to continue offering my services to Omega; but it has also taught me how rocky the ecumenical landscape can be. We have a long way to go, over a rough and still uncharted terrain, before we reach the Point of a universal Christian church — and even farther before Christianity and other religions find that Point.

The rocky obstacles we face are, of course, of our own making. Robert Frost, in his famous poem "Mending Wall," describes in earthy New England symbols the humanity-old dedication to erecting barriers between ourselves and others, the very kinds of barriers that separate religious groups. Frost and his neighbor are reconstructing the wall that separates their land, because stones have fallen during the winter, when it occurs to him how very foolish this annual ritual has become. Neither man any longer has cows. Every year sees the wall broken. But his neighbor continues to override his every objection with the traditional formula: Good fences make good neighbors. Never mind that "something there is that doesn't love a wall"; this man and his

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