
THE PROBLEM OF METHODOLOGY FOR OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS

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In 1970 Brevard Childs asserted that there is “no clear-cut answer in respect to the use of the Bible” in doing ethics, and further blamed biblical scholars for not providing material which ethicists could use in the field.¹ A dozen years later the paucity of material gave Christopher Wright no compulsion to apologize for his first book on the topic since “the subject of Old Testament ethics has scarcely any literature to add to.”² At the same time Walter Kaiser expressed his “frustration at finding all too few guides who have blazed the trail before me,” when he wrote on the issue.³ In the years since, biblical scholars have produced an increasing volume of literature on both biblical and Old Testament ethics. Yet even with the increase of guides, one can still remain somewhat frustrated in approaching the subject as it remains true that there is no clear-cut answer about how the text of the Old Testament should be used as a source for ethics. It is even doubtful that an approach can be devised that would be acceptable to everyone. What Christopher Marshall says about Christian ethics in general can be applied specifically to Old Testament ethics: “there is a growing recognition that the quest for a single definitive method is misguided” since “no single method can cope with the pluriformity of Scripture” and since “there is no one method that can straddle the diversity of contemporary contexts readers find themselves in.”⁴

No attempt will be made here to examine all the issues involved in using the Old Testament in ethics, for the scope of a comprehensive study of the topic is much wider than the Bible. As Stanley Hauerwas has written, “The conceptual issues raised by the ethical use of scripture involve not only how we should understand scripture, but also how ethics should be understood.”⁵ The breadth makes pursuing a methodological approach to this subject somewhat like killing a hydra. Just when you think you have dispatched one issue another “head” pops up, presenting another Herculean labor that needs to be dealt with. Although not deadly, the questions raised can be vexing. What place does the Old Testament have in ethics? Is there a centre to Old Testament ethics? Should Old Testament ethics be approached synchronically or diachronically? What is the relationship between Old Testament ethics and the law? What place do other literary genres (such as prophetic, narrative, and wisdom literature) have in Old Testament ethics? Can Old Testament ethics be considered normative, and if so, in what sense

1Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 125. Robert Davidson preceded Childs by a decade in blaming Old Testament scholars for neglecting the study of Old Testament ethics. See Robert Davidson, “Some Aspects of the Old Testament Contribution to the Pattern of Christian Ethics,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 12 (December 1959): 374-375.

2Christopher J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 9.

3Walter C. Kaiser Jr. *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), xi.

4Christopher Marshall, “The Use of Scripture in Ethics,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18 (July 1994): 232.

5Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 56.

and for whom? What is the relationship between Old Testament ethics and Christian ethics? What is the relationship between Old Testament ethics and New Testament ethics? The list could go on.

There is no way a paper of this size can deal with all of these questions. The following pages will be devoted to a more modest attempt to focus on a limited number of issues that affect the use of the Old Testament for ethical reflection and action, comment on some of the methods used by recent scholars, and hopefully suggest some directions to using the Old Testament in ethics that many readers may find helpful.

The possibility of Old Testament ethics

As we begin we must ask the question whether the quest for Old Testament ethics is even possible? Surely we must agree with André Neher who says that “There is no abstract, comprehensive concept in the Bible that parallels the modern concept of ‘ethics’.”⁶ Whereas the Greek and Latin philosophers may have contemplated ethics as an abstract principle, the Hebrews did not. Neither did the biblical authors display interest in devising a systematized statement of ethics based upon general principle such as is found in Greek and Latin writings.⁷ Great care must therefore be taken by those who wish to discuss ethics and morality⁸ from an Old Testament perspective. This is because, as Goldingay rightly reminds us, “Ethics, like theology, is not really a biblical category.”⁹ Even so, like theology, it is possible to find ethical instruction in the Bible.

Even though the Hebrew language has no direct parallel to the modern term and the Bible was not written primarily as a source-book for moral behaviour, it should not be inferred that the ancient Israelites or the writers of their Scriptures were not interested in right behavior or that they did not believe people should live according to a set of moral guidelines. The authors of the Old Testament clearly enunciated what they believed to be proper ethical action by praising right behaviour while proscribing that which they considered to be immoral.¹⁰ Some of the moral positions they supported were written down as laws (both apodictic and casuistic) and admonitions which they were convinced had been given to them by God. At times they showed

6André Neher, “Ethics: In the Bible,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 6 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), 932.

7Cf. John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 14-16; I. Howard Marshall, “Using the Bible in Ethics,” in *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics*, ed. David F. Wright (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1979), 41; James Muilenburg, *The Way of Israel* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 15.

8Although the terms entered the language from different sources, they tend to be used as synonyms in modern English, and will be used so in this paper. Grenz reminds us that although some “people differentiate between ethics and morality ... to set up too strict a distinction between the two is probably arbitrary” particularly since most “people tend to use the words somewhat interchangeably.” Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 23. For explanations that treats ethics and morality as distinct concepts, see Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 4-5 and Shubert Spero, *Morality, Halakha and the Jewish Tradition*, The Library of Jewish Law and Ethics, Vol. 9 (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1983), xiii-xiv.

9John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 64.

10Ze'ev Falk points out that the Old Testament did not limit ethical behavior to humans. Since “God was ascribed the attribute of justice, his behaviour, like that of every human being, became subject to ethical tests and evaluations.” Ze'ev W. Falk, “Law and Ethics in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and their Influence*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 89. Thus biblical characters could query whether what God did was just or good, and state their objection if they thought his actions violated accepted norms.

their approval or disapproval of actions by the way they framed their narrative stories and by adding comments to the text which made their position clear. Furthermore, sages preserved their instruction in order to steer people into the paths of righteousness, giving them the tools necessary to live moral lives. Similarly the prophets instructed their listeners about the proper way to live. It is therefore possible to speak of Old Testament ethics in terms of the manner of life which is approved by the writers of the Old Testament. This is a lifestyle which is presented in a number of different ways and through various emphases, but which can be identified in its simplest form as a life lived out in the presence of God in accordance with his will.¹¹

Systematic approaches to Old Testament ethics

How then do we discern how life should be lived out in the presence of God? For some, this can be accomplished by developing Old Testament ethics around a central theme.¹² The desire to locate a center is understandable, as a center provides a means of organizing Old Testament thought systematically. Nevertheless, it is basically a lost cause, as the Old Testament is neither as systematic nor as monolithic as we might wish. Furthermore, as with the search for a center for Old Testament theology, the fact that a number of centers have been proposed should give us reason to pause and consider its feasibility; a truly organizing center should be recognizable by all. What Birch says about Eichrodt's and Kaiser's attempts to find a central organizing feature for Old Testament ethics can be extended to all other such attempts. What they put forward is certainly of importance; nevertheless, their proposals are not "capable of encompassing the diverse range of moral witness in the Old Testament" since the "end product systematizes the Old Testament materials in an artificial manner alien to the Old Testament itself."¹³

Others try to systematize the study of ethics developmentally, that is, they attempt to describe how the ethics of Israel developed diachronically along historical and/or sociological lines. Thus Johannes Hempel declared that Old Testament ethical traditions are "not uniform or homogeneous" as they "derive from different sources according to the manifold national and social groups forming the 'Israelite' people".¹⁴ Israel, he says, was made up of semi-nomadic cattle breeders, peasants, and city dwellers, each of whom had their own ethical traditions. As these different groups interacted with each other, with "pre-Israelite traditions and extra-Israelite influences," and with their belief in Yahweh, their ethics developed from a more primitive to a

¹¹Barton correctly distinguishes between the ethics of ancient Israel which varied a great deal from person to person and from time to time, and the ethics of the Old Testament which, generally speaking, make it possible to discern what its writers understood to be acceptable behavior and what they rejected. "Understanding Old Testament Ethics," 46-49; "Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament," 115-130. For similar positions, see Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1991), 35-37 and Henry McKeating, "Sanctions against Adultery in Ancient Israelite Society, with Some Reflections on Methodology in the Study of Old Testament Ethics," *JSOT* 11 (1979): 70-71.

¹²Thus human obedience to the will of God as revealed in the scriptures is identified as the central theme of Old Testament ethics by Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1967); Walter Kornfeld, "Old Testament Ethics," in *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. 4, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Herder and Herder; London: Burns & Oates, 1969), 280-282; and James Muilenberg, "Old Testament Ethics," in *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. John Macquarrie (London: SCM 1967), 235-237. Other attempts to identify a central theme include the holiness of God and relationship with God. The first is supported by Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, the latter by David Allan Hubbard, "OT Ethics," in *ISBE*, Vol. 2: 165-169.

¹³Bruce Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox, 1991), 37.

¹⁴Johannes Hempel, "Ethics in the Old Testament," in *IBD*, Vol. 2: 154.

more advanced state.¹⁵ That the ethics of the ancient Israelites was not homogeneous is quite certain. That their ethics developed to some state so that everyone agreed on what was proper moral behavior is not.

Systematizing Old Testament ethics, whether around a central theme or diachronically, is fraught with pitfalls. In part this is because, as John Barton has shown, it presents Old Testament ethics as “a rather artificial construct, which purchases coherence and system at the price of historical objectivity and verifiability.”¹⁶ It also fails when it neglects to distinguish between the ethics of ancient Israel as a people and the ethics of the canonical text.¹⁷ Since the lack of concrete historical evidence makes it virtually impossible to produce an ethics of the people of ancient Israel, the texts of the Hebrew Bible are our only viable guide to help us discover the ethics of the writers of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament as canonical Scripture

This brings us to the issue of whether it is necessary to accept the Old Testament as canonical Scripture in order to use it as a source for ethics. A strong argument against this necessity has been raised by John Barton who, following Martha Nussbaum,¹⁸ entreats us to focus on the characters in the text as they can influence our moral thought the same way characters from Greek tragedy and modern novels can. By centering on the characters within the biblical narrative we can see how the “mixture of their own mistakes, the malice of others, and the impersonal forces of chance,” combine to affect their moral life.¹⁹ And since we share the same *humanity* with these characters — the same needs, emotions, frailties, and possibilities — we can relate to them in a way that we could never relate to universal ethical injunctions. By approaching the text in this way, Barton encourages us, we can begin to appreciate the effect sin and suffering has upon our own lives and thereby come to the realization that our actions are not neutral and that we should choose to live the good life.

Whereas I want to applaud this approach as it aims to open up the Old Testament for use by anyone (regardless of creed) who wants to know how to live morally, I find it somewhat troubling. Despite his lofty goal, it seems to me that Barton’s attempt to make the Old Testament useful to anyone by placing it in the same league as the Greek playwrights and philosophers, may actually diminish the number of readers who would use it as a source for models of the moral life. As it is primarily professional ethicists and philosophers who turn to the Greek classics for ethical concepts, this approach may result in Scripture be relegated to the same fate so that precious few will exert the effort needed to extract examples of the good life from its pages.

Keeping open the possibility that one does not have to “believe” in the Old Testament in order to use it as a source for ethical thought and action, I expect that those who accept it as in some sense authoritative Scripture will be far more likely to come to the text expecting that it has something to say about the life God wants them to live. Those who regard it as their Scriptures will also be much more sympathetic to what the biblical authors have to say, and thus more willing to model

15Hempel, “Ethics in the Old Testament,” 157.

16John Barton, “Understanding Old Testament Ethics,” *JSOT* 9 (1978): 44

17Barton, “Understanding Old Testament Ethics,” 45-46; “Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament,” 120-121.

18See Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

19Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 24.

their lives upon what is recorded there. This is particularly true for those who see it as God's word to our world, revealing who he is, what he has done in history, and what he required of his people in the past and present. As the Bible presents God as a holy and righteous God who requires his followers to reflect his righteousness, its readers recognize that it is deeply concerned with ethical behavior, and that its vision of morality is higher than ours. As an outcome, they allow its message to influence both their thinking and actions.

That the Bible as Scripture can greatly influence the people of the book, reminds us that these people are not isolated souls but members of communities of faith who come to the Old Testament believing that it has something to say that can be learned from no other source. The importance of coming to the text as communities seeking ethical instruction is highlighted when we remember that ethical behavior is both learned and practiced in the social arena. Thus, as the sages were well aware, the community is the ideal setting for learning moral truth.

Communities of faith, however, will not find the Bible adequate as the only source for ethical thought. Indeed, even in the communities where it is accepted as the primary source for ethics, other sources — both ancient and modern — will also be consulted for moral guidance. In part this is because we face many moral problems today that were unforeseen by the biblical writers. To deal with these issues we either need to consult other sources of moral thought or devise a way to consider them in the light of biblical ethics.²⁰ Using the Bible as our primary means of ethical input recognizes that it cannot be considered a systematically arranged textbook of ethical propositions or a Hebrew form of *Aesop's Fables* that was written to instruct its first readers (or all readers) how to face any potential ethical problem. Although extensive, its help will be limited to issues that were pertinent to the original readers. Its moral teaching becomes applicable to us as we share in the human struggle with the first readers.

Coming to the Old Testament as canonical Scripture should reinforce to the reading community the need to examine it in its totality. Clearly no one type of literature can encompass the entire biblical testimony about ethical behavior. Even so, studies of ethics are frequently grounded in solitary genres. Law, for instance, has been frequently cited as the center of biblical ethics. Others have claimed that the ethical high point in the history of Israel came with the prophets. In recent years narrative texts have been regularly mined for veins of moral ore. The ethical statements found in wisdom literature are also made the focus of some studies. Taken individually, each genre has its own methodological problems with regard to its use as a source for ethics. They are furthermore insufficient on their own to provide us with a full picture of the breadth and depth of the ethics of the Old Testament. And for this reason we need to learn how to read each biblical genre in which ethical material is recorded and to read them in relation to the other literary forms so as to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Old Testament's ethical teaching.

Old Testament ethics and critical approaches

It has been asserted that most people who use the Old Testament as a source for ethics also accept it as authoritative Scripture. That this is so does not entitle such readers to approach the text uncritically. Both allegorical interpretation and the all too common expectation that Bible

²⁰Although space prohibits an examination of how biblical ethics can provide insight into modern day problems that were unknown to biblical writers, it is a topic of some importance. Using Scripture in this way will require some kind of paradigmatic approach that makes use of biblical categories that are in some way related to the modern day problems. For example, a discussion of ecological ethics could be greatly enhanced through an examination of the Bible's teaching on the relationships between God, humankind, and the rest of creation.

characters are intended to serve as models of God pleasing behavior are to be rejected. Instead we should read the stories in the context of the whole work in which they are found, taking into account the historical, rhetorical, and theological purpose of the texts.

A study of Old Testament ethics must approach the text in a historical manner. This should not however open the door to an examination of a diachronic development of the ethics of Israel. Source and form critical views are rejected, not as a denial that sources (whether written or oral) lie behind the text, but as an assertion that the moral view of the final text is key, as it reveals the mind of the authors who gave it its final shaping. It is these authors who are the source of the ethics of the Old Testament. The final shape of the Old Testament comes in a historical form because its writers clearly wanted their readers to accept it as historical, and the original readers, along with many later readers, read it that way.²¹ As readers naturally attach more authority to historical texts than to fiction, readers of the Old Testament have almost always accepted it as authoritative, not because it was accepted as such by the community of the faith, but because it testifies that the events described within actually happened, and that the characters mentioned really lived. This is not to say that every story in the Old Testament is historical in the modern sense of the word. Neither should it be inferred that a story must be historical in order to have ethical significance. It is simply that “There is a normative claim in historical narrative that fiction for all its interest rarely makes,”²² and that both Israel and the church have always taken these texts to be normative.

If the historical aspect of the text is important, so is the rhetorical purpose of the author. In order to grasp the Old Testament’s position on ethical issues, the reader needs to apprehend and be sympathetic to the position of the implied author since his ethics are its ethics.²³ Only by coming to grips with the rhetorical aim of the whole book will the reader know how to interpret each part, and thus be able to discern the moral force of the parts. By identifying his purpose we are better able to discern whether an author intended to make ethical comments, or whether his description is purely historical or incidental with no intended ethical emphasis. In the same way, if we know the author’s rhetorical purpose we can more easily judge whether his ethical perspective applauds or condemns the actions of a character.

This brings us to a consideration of whether ethics focuses on the storyteller or on his characters. As I see it, both must be taken into account, but the storyteller is of greater importance. This is because the character, even if a historical person, finds his or her way into the story because the author chose to include him or her as it fit his purpose for writing. By keeping this order straight we can overcome the uncritical habit of treating biblical characters as though they were all intended to serve as models of proper behavior. It can also help us more easily determine whether an author uses a character as a positive or negative example of right living. Since it is highly unlikely that an author would approve of actions in one scene that counter the ethical thrust of the rest of his writing, we must grasp his overall vision before we comment on the moral teaching of individual accounts or the actions of individual characters.

Once we have understood an author’s purpose for writing, we can profitably turn to the characters of the story to see how they acted and how the author responds to them. In some cases

²¹Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 13.

²²Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 12-13.

²³By working out many of the details of how this can be done, Gordon Wenham has made a tremendous contribution to formulating a tenable approach for using the Old Testament in ethics. See Wenham’s methodology and application to the books of Genesis and Judges in *Story as Torah*.

the author will candidly state his approval or disapproval of an action or indicate God's pleasure or displeasure. In other cases we will have to read a passage in the light of the author's overall aim, and in some cases guess at the moral implications of his words. Whether informed directly or indirectly about the author's estimation of a character, our focus will turn to them since they are fellow human beings to whom we can relate, particularly since they faced situations that are similar to the ones we face.

Characters are particularly important because it is through our interaction with them that the biblical narratives begin to intersect our story and impact our lives. As we see how they related to God, to people around them, and to the world in which they were placed, the characters come alive for us and show us how we can live — either positively or negatively — in the world. By giving us a panoramic view of life lived before God, the Old Testament works upon us to mold our character and form our corporate identity as the people of God. The stories we find in Scripture act as chisels to shape our moral world and create in us a God designed model of the good life. As members of communities of faith we must allow these stories to provide us with an ideal. If we do not, we will find it elsewhere as other stories take their place. And since these stories introduce us to the God who created us in his image and who desires that we live our lives in imitation of him, we will never find a better text to influence our personal and corporate narratives.

The rhetorical purpose of an author will influence the theological themes that he develops in his work. Similarly, his desire to commend certain moral actions and denunciate others will in all likelihood be related to the development of these major themes. For instance, the focus on the holiness of God in Leviticus is reflected in the many laws that are intended to teach Israel how to live as holy people in God's presence. This does not mean that all ethical teaching in a given book will cohere with the major themes. Just as minor themes are dealt with in many books, an author may choose to bring up an ethical matter that is not directly related to his major theme. We should expect however that his major ethical statements will be related to the major theological themes that concern him.

Conclusion

More can and should be said about the use of the Old Testament in ethics. This limited study is intended to add to the literature that will help ethicists and biblical scholars make better use of the Old Testament in their study of moral issues. We have examined a number of issues that cause problems for those who attempt to use the Old Testament in ethical discourse and suggested a few ways forward. Will all be convinced that following this approach to Old Testament ethics will answer all of our questions? By all means no. As intimated earlier, this paper examines but a few of the methodological questions that vex Old Testament ethics. It may also give rise to other questions that need to be addressed by those who wish to glean ethical teaching from Old Testament texts. But even if this study joins the other proposed methods that have not proven acceptable to everyone, it is hoped that it will both serve as a guide to some as they begin to study the moral teachings of the Old Testament and a challenge for others to take a closer look at the problems in methodology for Old Testament ethics.