

THE OLD  
TESTAMENT  
*and* ETHICS

A BOOK-BY-BOOK SURVEY

EDITED BY  
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AND JACQUELINE E. LAPSLEY

  
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# ABBREVIATIONS

## General

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ca.	circa
chap(s).	chapter(s)
Gk.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
Lat.	Latin
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NET	New English Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
RSV	Revised Standard Version
v(v).	verse(s)

## Old Testament

---

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel
1–2 Kgs.	1–2 Kings
1–2 Chr.	1–2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra

Neh.	Nehemiah
Esth.	Esther
Job	Job
Ps./Pss.	Psalms
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccl.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hos.	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jon.	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

## New Testament

---

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John

Acts	Acts
Rom.	Romans
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians
1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Phlm.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
Jas.	James
1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
1–3 John	1–3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

### Apocrypha and Septuagint

Add. Esth.	Additions to Esther
Bar.	Baruch
Jdt.	Judith
1–2 Esd.	1–2 Esdras
1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees
Sg. Three	Song of the Three Young Men
Sir.	Sirach
Sus.	Susanna

### Secondary Sources

AB	Anchor Bible
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
BibSem	Biblical Seminar
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CC	Continental Commentaries
CEJL	Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature
CSHJ	Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism
EUS	European University Studies
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExAud</i>	<i>Ex Auditū</i>

Tob.	Tobit
Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon

### Dead Sea Scrolls

CD-A	<i>Damascus Document<sup>a</sup></i>
1QS	<i>Rule of the Community</i>

### Other Rabbinic Works

<i>Rab.</i>	<i>Rabbah</i> (+ biblical book)
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### Greek and Latin Works

#### *Aristotle*

<i>Eth. nic.</i>	<i>Ethica nichomachea</i> ( <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> )
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#### *Augustine*

<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i> ( <i>Letters</i> )
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### Other Authors

#### *Thomas Aquinas*

<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa theologiae</i>
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FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of Old Testament Literature
GAP	Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
IRSC	Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JLR</i>	<i>Journal of Law and Religion</i>
JPSTC	JPS Torah Commentary
<i>JPsyC</i>	<i>Journal of Psychology and Christianity</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
LBS	Library of Biblical Studies
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LTE	Library of Theological Ethics
NAC	New American Commentary
NCamBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NIBC	New International Bible Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTG	Old Testament Guides
OTL	Old Testament Library
OThM	Oxford Theological Monographs
OTR	Old Testament Readings
OTS	Old Testament Studies
PBM	Paternoster Biblical Monographs
<i>PSB</i>	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>
SBL	Studies in Biblical Literature
SBLAB	Society of Biblical Literature Academia Biblica
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLEJL	Society of Biblical Literature Early Judaism and Its Literature
SBSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SHBC	Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary
SHS	Scripture and Hermeneutics Series
STR	Studies in Theology and Religion
TCrS	Text-Critical Studies
<i>ThTo</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>TW</i>	<i>Theologische Wissenschaft</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WestBC	Westminster Bible Companion



# INTRODUCTION

JOEL B. GREEN

For a long time, study of the Bible and study of Christian ethics (or moral theology) were regarded as separate enterprises. This is true to such a degree that those of us who want to study the two together, Scripture *and* Christian ethics, face a series of important questions. These questions cannot forestall our work, though, because of the importance of the Old and New Testaments for Christian ethics. The church that turns to the Bible as Christian Scripture does so on account of its belief that the Bible is authoritative for faith and life, for what we believe and what we do. Working out the shape of faithful life before God, then, necessarily involves interacting with, learning from, and sometimes struggling with the church's Scriptures.

Affirming the nonnegotiable relationship of the Bible to faithful life is only the beginning, however. A cascade of issues immediately follows as we seek to flesh out how the Bible might function authoritatively in theology and ethics. Indeed, the church's history serves as a warning in this regard. This is because the Bible has been used to support immorality and injustices of many kinds—for example, the marginalization and abuse of women, the institution of slavery, a constellation of racist practices, and the persecution of the Jewish people. The Bible has been badly used and misappropriated—sometimes scandalously through its being commandeered to serve the aims of those in power and sometimes simply through unskilled reading. In such cases as these, it seems that we need protection from the Bible, or at least from its interpreters. It is easy enough, then, to recognize the importance of raising and addressing some methodological issues.

What questions require our attention? Some are obvious, others more subtle. Among the more pressing would be the following:

- What of the historical rootedness of the biblical materials? These texts come from another time and place, and work with some commonly held assumptions and social realities that we no longer share. Jesus directs his followers to wash each other's feet, for example. Here we find as straightforward a command as Jesus' directive at the Last Supper that his followers eat the bread and drink the cup in his remembrance. Yet most Christian traditions ignore it, or they transform it into an abstract principle, like "serve each other." But why should we convert the practice of foot-washing into an abstraction while making the Lord's Supper central to Christian worship? Expanding our horizons, other questions arise. What of concubinage, household duty codes, or inheritance laws, for example, and other such matters firmly rooted in the ancient soil in which the biblical books were written?
- What of the many, sometimes competing, voices we hear in the Bible? Written over hundreds of years and in response to evolving situations, the biblical materials do not always speak with a common voice on the questions they address. When, if at all, is divorce an allowable option, and for whom? Should we, or should we not, eat meat sacrificed to idols?
- What of the fact that the biblical materials have their ethical concerns, we have ours, and these two do not always coincide? For most of us in the West, eating meat sacrificed to idols is not a pressing concern, but it attracted its share of attention from Paul and the writers of Acts and Revelation. Nor do many of us think much about gleaning rights or other forms of economic sharing, even if Old Testament instruction on such practices begs for renewed attention. (Few preachers talk as much about poverty and the poor as the Bible does!) Conversely, the biblical writers could hardly have anticipated the swirl of ethical worries arising from technological advances that today allow us to contemplate and, at least in initial ways, to foster transhumanism. And many of us find ourselves far more concerned than the biblical materials, at least at an explicit level, with environmental ethics.
- What of those biblical texts that seem morally repugnant to us? What are we to make of biblical texts that authorize in God's name the decimation of a people or the stoning of wrongdoers?

To these questions we can add a few others that identify more specifically some methodological conundrums.

- How do we work with and between the Old and New Testaments? Do we give each its own discrete voice? Do we understand the ethics of the New Testament in continuity with or as a disruption of the moral witness of the Old Testament?
- Do we want to know what the biblical writers *taught* their first readers about faithful life, or do we want to know what the biblical books *teach* us about faithful life? That is, is our task a *descriptive* one, or are we interested in how Scripture might *prescribe* morality?
- Do we learn from the biblical writers the *content* of Christian ethics, or do we learn from them *how to engage in reflection* on Christian ethics? Another way to ask this is to distinguish between what the Old and New Testaments teach about morality and how the Old and New Testament writers go about their ethical reflection. Those whose concern is with the former approach are often interested in setting out the boundaries of appropriate ethical comportment. Those interested in the latter often think that we need to learn from the Bible an approach to ethical reflection that may take us beyond what the biblical materials teach.
- Are we concerned with describing what biblical books teach about right living, or are we concerned with how engagement with the books of the Bible might have the effect of sculpting our character, our dispositions, our commitments, for ethical lives? When we turn to Scripture with a concern for ethics, are we focused first and foremost on “ethics” as moral *decision-making* or as moral *formation*? Do we come to the Scriptures asking, “What should we do?” or do we come asking, “What kind of people ought we to be?”

Undoubtedly, many will want to respond at least to some of the questions with a resounding “both-and” rather than “either-or.” Sketching the terms of the conversation like this can help to identify the poles of the discussion, but does not prohibit a range of responses along a continuum.

Even on this sampling of questions, the state of today’s discussion about Scripture and ethics supports very little by way of consensus. Naming these issues serves rather to map the terrain, so to speak, or to identify the fault lines in the conversation. Readers of the essays collected here will find that contributors have not been asked to adopt a certain perspective or approach. They have been given the more general task of focusing on the ethics of each of the books of the Old Testament, major Old Testament traditions, and the Apocrypha, and on the possible significance of each for contemporary Christian ethics. They sketch some of the moral issues explicitly addressed in the book and some of the patterns of moral reasoning displayed in the book. As

such, they supplement and extend the conversation begun in the introductory essays on “Ethics in Scripture” and “Old Testament Ethics.”

Students will find here a needed introduction to the larger conversation concerned with the Bible and ethics, not its final word. Students of the Bible, whether in introductory classes or in more advanced courses concerned with the theology of Scripture, will find a reminder that more is going on with these documents than questions of history or theological debate. Students in Christian ethics will find here an introduction to the ethical witness of the Scriptures, including a reminder of the ways in which moral formation and instruction are always theologically and contextually grounded. A central question for God’s people in every time and place was and remains what it means to be faithful to God in the midst of these challenges, these historical exigencies, these options for faith and life. Whether cast as reflecting the divine image, as loyalty to the covenant, as faithful response to God’s liberating initiative, or as imitating Jesus, these texts broadcast as their central concern the identity and ethics of a faithful people. The call to faithful life is not only for people within the biblical stories, or only for the people to whom the biblical materials were first addressed. It remains our call too, and these reflections on the ethical witness of Scripture help to shape the itinerary of the journey ahead.

The essays that follow are selected from the *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, published in 2011 by Baker Academic, and are made available here in order to make them more readily available for use in classroom and personal study. The *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* is a major reference tool with over five hundred articles treating not only the biblical books, but a wide array of topics concerned with issues in Christian ethics (like gambling, bioethics, the seven deadly sins, terrorism, and animals) and different approaches to ethics and Scripture (like cross-cultural ethics, Reformed ethics, narrative ethics, Latino/Latina ethics, and virtue ethics). In other words, the conversation begun in the present volume is continued, and expanded, in the dictionary itself.

# 1



## OVERVIEW

### ◆ Ethics in Scripture ◆

*Allen Verhey*

Ethics may be defined as disciplined reflection concerning moral conduct and character. In Scripture, such reflection is always disciplined by convictions about God's will and way and by commitments to be faithful to God. Biblical ethics is inalienably theological. To sunder biblical ethics from the convictions about God that surround it and sustain it is to distort it. The fundamental unity of biblical ethics is simply this: there is one God in Scripture, and it is that one God who calls forth the creative reflection and faithful response of those who would be God's people.

That unity, however, is joined to an astonishing diversity. The Bible contains many books and more traditions, each addressed first to a particular community of God's people facing concrete questions of conduct in specific cultural and social contexts. Its reflections on the moral life, moreover, come in diverse modes of discourse. They come sometimes in statute, sometimes in story. They come sometimes in proverb, sometimes in prophetic promises (or threats). They come sometimes in remembering the past, sometimes in envisioning the future. The one God of Scripture assures the unity of biblical ethics, but there is no simple unitive understanding even of that one God or

of that one God's will. To force biblical ethics into a timeless and systematic unity is to impoverish it. Still, there is but one God, to whom loyalty is due and to whom God's people respond in all of their responses to changing moral contexts.

## Ethics in the Old Testament

### *Ethics in Torah*

The one God formed a people by deliverance and covenant. The story was told in countless recitals of Israel's faith. The God of Abraham heard their cries when they were slaves, rescued them from Pharaoh's oppression, and made them a people with a covenant (e.g., Deut. 6:20–25; 26:5–9; Josh. 24:2–13). The covenant, like an ancient suzerainty treaty, acknowledged and confirmed that God was the great king of Israel and that Israel was God's people. (George E. Mendenhall provided the classic description of ancient treaties in relation to Torah.) And like those ancient treaties, Israel's covenant began by identifying God as the great king and by reciting God's kindness to Israel (e.g., Exod. 20:2). It continued with stipulations forbidding loyalty to any other god as sovereign and requiring justice and peace in the land (e.g., Exod. 20:3–17). And it ended with provisions for the periodic renewal of covenant and with assurances of God's blessing on faithfulness to covenant and the threat of punishment for violation of the covenant (e.g., Exod. 23:22–33).

The remembered story and the covenant formed a community and its common life. And if Gerhard von Rad is right, they also provided a framework for the gathering of stories and stipulations into larger narrative and legal traditions (J, E, D, and P; various codes), and finally, for the gathering of those traditions into the Torah.

Much of the Torah (usually translated "law") is legal material. Various collections (e.g., the Decalogue [Exod. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:6–21]; the Covenant Code [Exod. 20:22–23:19]; the Holiness Code [Lev. 17–26]; the Deuteronomic Code [Deut. 4:44–28:46]) can be identified and correlated with particular periods of Israel's history. The later collections sometimes revised earlier legislation. It was evidently not the case that the whole law was given at once as a timeless code. Rather, the lawmakers displayed both fidelity to the earlier legal traditions and creativity with them as they responded both to new situations and to God.

Although the Torah contains no tidy distinction between ceremonial, civil, and moral laws, the traditional rubrics do identify significant functions of the legal material. As "ceremonial," the legal materials in Torah struggled against temptations offered by foreign cults to covenant infidelity and nurtured a

communal memory and commitment to covenant. As “civil,” the Torah had a fundamentally theocratic vision. In this theocratic vision, the rulers were ruled too; they were subjects, not creators, of the law. Such a conviction, by its warnings against royal despotism, had a democratizing effect. As “moral,” the statutes protected the family and its economic participation in God’s gift of the land. They protected persons and their property. They required fairness in disputes and economic transactions. And they provided for the care and protection of vulnerable members of the society, such as widows, orphans, resident aliens, and the poor.

The legal materials never escaped the story or the covenant. Set in the context of narrative and covenant, the legal traditions were construed as grateful response to God’s works and ways. Moreover, the story formed and informed the statutes. The story of the one God who heard the cries of slaves in Egypt stood behind the legal protections for the vulnerable (e.g., Exod. 22:21–23; Lev. 19:33–34).

The narratives of the Torah were morally significant in their own right. Artfully told, they rendered the work and the will of the God to whom loyalty was due. They put on display something of God’s cause and character, the cause and character to be shared by the faithful people of God. Noteworthy among such narratives were the stories of creation. They affirmed that the one God of covenant is the God of creation too. This is no tribal deity; this is the one God of the universe. In the beginning there is a narrative prohibition of idolatry as compelling as any statute; nothing that God made is god. In the beginning there is a celebration of the material world and a narrative prohibition of anything like Platonic or gnostic dualism; all that God made is good. It was, in the beginning, an orderly and peaceable world. There is a narrative invitation to a common life of gratitude for the blessings of God. When the curse fell heavy on God’s good creation, the one God would not let human sin or the curse have the last word in God’s world. God came again to covenant and to bless, blessing Abraham with the promise that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:1–3). The Yahwist’s stories of the patriarchs not only trace the blessing of David’s empire to that promise but also form political dispositions to use the technical and administrative skills of empire to bless the subject nations (Gen. 18–19; 26; 30:27–28; 39–41) (see Wolff).

### *Ethics in the Prophets*

The one God who created the world, who rescued slaves from Pharaoh and made covenant with a people, spoke to those people through the prophets. The

prophets came as messengers of the great king. They came with a particular word for a particular time, but they always reminded the people of the story and the covenant and called the people to respond faithfully.

Frequently, in resistance to unfaithfulness, they brought a word of judgment. The sum of their indictment was always the same: the people have violated the covenant (e.g., 1 Kgs. 19:10, 14; Hos. 8:1). Concretely—and the message of the prophet was always concrete—some specific idolatry or injustice was condemned as infidelity to the covenant. The infidelity of idolatry was never merely a cultic matter. The claims of Baal, for example, involved the fertility of wombs and land and an account of ownership. The prophetic announcement of God's greater power freed the people to farm a land stripped of claims to divinity but acknowledged as God's gift, and it required them to share the produce of that land with the poor. The infidelity of injustice was never merely a moral matter, for the one God of covenant demanded justice, and the welfare of the poor and powerless was the best index of covenant fidelity. So the prophets denounced unjust rulers, greedy merchants, corrupt judges, and the complacent rich. Their harshest criticisms, however, were aimed at those who celebrated covenant in ritual and ceremony but violated it by failing to protect the poor and powerless (e.g., Amos 5:21–24).

On the other side of God's judgment the prophets saw and announced the good future of God. God will reign and establish both peace and justice, not only in Israel but also among the nations, and not only among the nations but also in the whole creation. That future was not contingent on human striving, but it already made claims on the present, affecting human vision and dispositions and actions. The prophets and the faithful were to be ready to suffer for the sake of God's cause in the world.

### *Ethics in Wisdom*

The will and way of the one God could be known not only in the great events of liberation and covenant, not only in the oracles of the prophets, but also in the regularities of nature and experience. When the sages of Israel gave moral counsel, they seldom appealed directly to Torah or to covenant. Their advice concerning moral character and conduct was, rather, disciplined and tested by experience.

Carefully attending to nature and experience, the wise comprehended the basic principles operative in the world. To conform to these principles was at once a matter of piety, prudence, and morality. The one God who created the world has established and secured the order and stability of ordinary life. So the sage could give advice about eating and drinking, about sleeping and

working, about the way to handle money and anger, about relating to friends and enemies and women and fools, about when to speak and when to be silent—in short, about almost anything that is a part of human experience.

The ethics of the sage tended to be conservative, for the experience of the community over time provided a fund of wisdom, but the immediacy of experience kept the tradition open to challenge and revision. The ethics of the sage tended to be prudential, but experience sometimes could teach that the righteous may suffer, and that there is no tidy fit between piety, prudence, and morality (Job). The ethics of the sage tended to delight both in the simple things of life, such as the love between a man and a woman (Song of Songs), and in the quest for wisdom itself. Experience itself, however, could teach that wisdom has its limits in the inscrutable (Job 28), and that the way things seem to work in the world cannot simply be identified with the ways of God (Ecclesiastes).

Wisdom reflected about conduct and character quite differently than did the Torah and the prophets, but, like “the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 1:7; 9:10), “the end of the matter” was a reminder of covenant: “Fear God and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of every one” (Eccl. 12:13). The beginning and end of wisdom kept wisdom in touch with Torah, struggling to keep Torah in touch with experience, and covenant in touch with creation.

## Ethics in the New Testament

The one God of creation and covenant, of Abraham and Israel, of Moses and David, of prophet and sage raised the crucified Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. That good news was celebrated among his followers as the vindication of Jesus and his message, as the disclosure of God’s power and purpose, and as the guarantee of God’s good future. The resurrection was a cause for great joy; it was also the basis for NT ethics and its exhortations to live in memory and in hope, to see moral conduct and character in the light of Jesus’ story, and to discern a life and a common life “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27).

### *Jesus and the Gospels*

The resurrection was the vindication of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. He had come announcing that “the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15), that the coming cosmic sovereignty of God, the good future of God, was at hand. And he had made that future present; he had made its power felt already in his words of blessing and in his works of healing. He called the people to repent, to form their conduct and character in response to the good

news of that coming future. He called his followers to “watch” for it and to pray for it, to welcome its presence, and to form community and character in ways that anticipated that future and responded to the ways that future was already making its power felt in him.

Such was the eschatological shape of Jesus’ ethic. He announced the future in axioms such as “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Mark 10:31; Matt. 19:30; Luke 13:30). He made that future present by his presence among the disciples “as one who serves” (Luke 22:27; cf. Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 13:2–17). And he called the people to welcome such a future and to follow him in commands such as “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35; cf. 10:44). To delight already in a coming kingdom in which the poor are blessed was even now to be carefree about wealth (Matt. 6:25, 31, 34; Luke 12:22) and to give generously to help the poor (Mark 10:21; Luke 12:33). To welcome even now a kingdom that belongs to children (Mark 10:14) was to welcome and to bless them (Mark 9:37). To respond faithfully to a future that was signaled by Jesus’ open conversation with women (e.g., Mark 7:24–30; John 4:1–26) was already to treat women as equals. To celebrate God’s forgiveness that made its power felt in Jesus’ fellowship with sinners (e.g., Mark 2:5; Luke 7:48) was to welcome sinners and to forgive one’s enemies.

Because Jesus announced and already unveiled the coming reign of God, he spoke “as one having authority” (Mark 1:22), not simply on the basis of the law or the tradition or the regularities of experience. And because the coming reign of God demanded a response of the whole person and not merely external observance of the law, Jesus consistently made radical demands. So Jesus’ radical demand for truthfulness replaced (and fulfilled) legal casuistry about oaths. The radical demand to forgive and to be reconciled set aside (and fulfilled) legal limitations on revenge. The demand to love even enemies put aside legal debates about the meaning of “neighbor.” His moral instructions were based neither on the precepts of law nor on the regularities of experience, but he did not discard them either; law and wisdom were qualified and fulfilled in this ethic of response to the future reign of the one God of Scripture.

This Jesus was put to death on a Roman cross, but the resurrection vindicated both Jesus and God’s own faithfulness. This one who died in solidarity with the least, with sinners and the oppressed, and with all who suffer was delivered by God. This Jesus, humble in his life, humiliated by religious and political authorities in his death, was exalted by God. When the powers of death and doom had done their damndest, God raised up this Jesus and established forever the good future he had announced.

The Gospels used the church's memories of Jesus' words and deeds to tell his story faithfully and creatively. So they shaped the character and conduct of the communities that they addressed. Each Gospel provided a distinctive account both of Jesus and of the meaning of discipleship. In Mark, Jesus was the Christ as the one who suffered, and he called for a heroic discipleship. Mark's account of the ministry of Jesus opened with the call to discipleship (1:16–20). The central section of Mark's Gospel, with its three predictions of the passion, made it clear how heroic and dangerous an adventure discipleship could be. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34 [and note the allusions to martyrdom in 8:35; 10:38–39]).

Hard on the heels of that saying Mark set the story of the transfiguration (9:2–8), in which a voice from heaven declared, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" It is striking that the voice did not say, "Look at him, all dazzling white." The voice said, "Listen to him." Silent during the transfiguration, Jesus ordered the disciples to say nothing of what they had seen until the resurrection, and then he told them once again that he, the Son of Man, "is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt" (9:12). Mark proceeded to tell the story of the passion, the story of a Christ who was rejected, betrayed, denied, deserted, condemned, handed over, mocked, and crucified, but still was the Son of God, the Beloved, and finally vindicated by God. The implications are as clear as they are shocking: Jesus is the Christ not by displaying some tyrannical power, not by lording it over others, but rather by his readiness to suffer for the sake of God's cause in the world and by his readiness to serve others humbly in self-giving love (cf. 10:42–44). And to be his disciple in this world is to share that readiness to suffer for the sake of God's cause and that readiness to serve others humbly in self-giving love.

The call to heroic discipleship was sustained by the call to watchfulness to which it was joined (13:33–37), by the expectation that, in spite of the apparent power of religious leaders and Roman rulers, God's good future was sure to be.

Mark's call to watchful and heroic discipleship touched topics besides the readiness to suffer for the sake of God's cause, and it illumined even the most mundane of them with the same freedom and daring. Discipleship was not to be reduced to obedience to any law or code. Rules about fasting (2:18–22), Sabbath observance (2:23–3:6), and the distinction between "clean" and "unclean" (7:1–23) belonged to the past, not to the community marked by freedom and watchfulness. The final norm was no longer the precepts of Moses, but rather the Lord and his words (8:38). In chapter 10 Mark gathered the words of Jesus concerning marriage and divorce, children, possessions, and political power. The issues were dealt with not on the basis of the law or conventional

righteousness, but rather on the basis of the Lord's words, which appealed in turn to God's intention at creation (10:6), the coming kingdom of God (10:14–15), the cost of discipleship (10:21), and identification with Christ (10:39, 43–45). Mark's Gospel provided no moral code, but it did nurture a moral posture at once less rigid and more demanding than any code.

Matthew's Gospel utilized most of Mark, but by subtle changes and significant additions Matthew provided an account of Jesus as the one who fulfills the law, as the one in whom God's covenant promises are fulfilled. And the call to discipleship became a call to a surpassing righteousness.

Matthew, in contrast to Mark, insisted that the law of Moses remained normative. Jesus came not to "abolish" the law but to "fulfill" it (Matt. 5:17). The least commandment ought still to be taught and still to be obeyed (5:18–19; 23:23). Matthew warned against "false prophets" who dismissed the law and sponsored lawlessness (7:15–27). To the controversies about Sabbath observance Matthew added legal arguments to show that Jesus did what was "lawful" (12:1–14; cf. Mark 2:23–3:6). From the controversy about ritual cleanliness Matthew omitted Mark's interpretation that Jesus "declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19; cf. Matt. 15:17); evidently, even kosher regulations remained normative. In Matthew's Gospel the law held, and Jesus was its best interpreter (see also 9:9–13; 19:3–12; 22:34–40).

The law, however, was not sufficient. Matthew accused the teachers of the law of being "blind guides" (23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26). They were blind to the real will of God in the law, and their pettifogging legalism hid it. Jesus, however, made God's will known, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. There, he called for a righteousness that "exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (5:20). The Beatitudes (5:3–11) described the character traits that belong to such righteousness. The "antitheses" (5:21–47) contrasted such righteousness to mere external observance of laws that left dispositions of anger, lust, deceit, revenge, and selfishness unchanged. This was no calculating "works-righteousness"; rather, it was a self-forgetting response to Jesus' announcement of the kingdom (4:12–25).

Matthew called the community to play a role in moral discernment and discipline. The church was charged with the task of interpreting the law, vested with the authority to "bind" and "loose" (18:18), to make legal rulings and judgments. These responsibilities for mutual admonition and communal discernment were set in the context of concern for the "little ones" (18:1–14) and forgiveness (18:21–35), and they were to be undertaken with prayer (18:19). Jesus was still among them (18:20), still calling for a surpassing righteousness.

In Luke's Gospel, the emphasis fell on Jesus as the one "anointed . . . to bring good news to the poor" (4:18). Mary's song, the Magnificat (1:46–55), sounded

the theme early on as she celebrated God's action on behalf of the humiliated and hungry and poor. In Luke, the infant Jesus was visited by shepherds in a manger, not by magi in a house (2:8–16; cf. Matt. 2:11–12). Again and again—in the Beatitudes and woes (6:20–26), for example, and in numerous parables (e.g., 12:13–21; 14:12–24; 16:19–31)—Jesus proclaimed good news to the poor and announced judgment on the anxious and ungenerous rich. Luke did not legislate in any of this; he gave no social program, but he insisted that a faithful response to this Jesus as the Christ, as the “anointed,” included care for the poor and powerless. The story of Zacchaeus (19:1–10), for example, made it clear that to welcome Jesus “gladly” was to do justice and to practice kindness. Luke's story of the early church in Acts celebrated the friendship and the covenant fidelity that were displayed when “everything they owned was held in common” so that “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:32–34; cf. 2:44–45; cf. also Deut. 15). Character and community were, and were to be, fitting to “good news to the poor.”

The “poor” included not just those in poverty, but all those who did not count for much by the world's way of counting. The gospel was good news, for example, also for women. By additional stories and sayings (e.g., 1:28–30; 2:36–38; 4:25–27; 7:11–17; 10:38–42; 11:27–28; 13:10–17; 15:8–10; 18:1–8), Luke displayed a Jesus remarkably free from the chauvinism of patriarchal culture. He rejected the reduction of women to their reproductive and domestic roles. Women such as Mary of Bethany, who would learn from Jesus and follow him, were welcomed as equals in the circle of his disciples (10:38–42).

And the gospel was good news to “sinners” too, to those judged unworthy of God's blessing. It was a gospel, after all, of “repentance and the forgiveness of sins” (24:47), and in a series of parables Jesus insisted that there is “joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” (15:7; cf. 15:10, 23–24). That gospel of the forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed “to all nations” (24:47); it was to be proclaimed even to the gentiles, who surely were counted among the “sinners.” That story was told, of course, in Acts, but already early in Luke's Gospel the devout old Simeon recognized in the infant Jesus God's salvation “of all peoples” (2:31; cf., e.g., 3:6). The story of the gentile mission may await Acts, but already in the Gospel it was clear that to welcome this Jesus, this universal savior, was to welcome “sinners.” And already in the Gospel it was clear that a faithful response to Jesus meant relations of mutual respect and love between Jew and gentile. In the remarkable story of Jesus' healing of the centurion's servant (7:1–10), the centurion provided a paradigm for gentiles, not despising but loving the Jews, acknowledging that his access to God's salvation was through the Jews; and the Jewish elders provided a model for Jews, not condemning this gentile but instead interceding on his behalf. In

Acts 15, the Christian community included the gentiles without requiring that they become Jews; the church was to be an inclusive community, a welcoming community, a community of peaceable difference.

John's Gospel told the story in ways quite different from the Synoptic Gospels, and its account of the moral life was also quite distinctive. It was written that the readers might have "life in [Jesus'] name" (20:31), and that life was inalienably a life formed and informed by love. Christ was the great revelation of God's love for the world (3:16). As the Father loves the Son (e.g., 3:35; 5:20), so the Son loves his own (13:1). As the Son "abides" in the Father's love and does his commandments, so the disciples are to abide in Christ's love (15:9–10) and keep his commandments. And his commandment was simply that they should love one another as he had loved them (15:12; cf. 15:17). This "new commandment" (13:34) was, of course, hardly novel, but it rested now on a new reality: the love of God in Christ and the love of Christ in his own.

That reality was on display in the cross, uniquely and stunningly rendered by John as Christ's "glory." The Son of Man was "lifted up" on the cross (3:14; 12:32–34). His glory did not come after that humiliating death; it was revealed precisely in the self-giving love of the cross. And that glory, the glory of humble service and love, was the glory that Jesus shared with the disciples (17:22). They too were "lifted up" to be servants, exalted in self-giving love.

The commandment in John was to love "one another" (e.g., 15:12) rather than the "neighbor" or the "enemy." John's emphasis surely fell on mutual love, on relations within the community. But an emphasis was not a restriction, and the horizon of God's love was the whole world (3:16). And as God so loved the world that he sent his Son, so Jesus sent his followers "into the world" (17:18; cf. 20:21). The mission of the Father's love seeks a response, an answering love; it seeks mutual love, and where it finds it, there is "life in Christ's name."

### *Paul and His Gospel*

Before the Gospels were written, Paul had addressed pastoral letters to the churches. He always wrote as an apostle (e.g., Rom. 1:1) rather than as a philosopher or a code-maker. And he always wrote to particular communities facing specific problems. In his letters he proclaimed the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ and called for the response of faith and faithfulness.

The proclamation of the gospel was always the announcement that God had acted in Christ's cross and resurrection to end the reign of sin and death and to establish the coming age of God's own cosmic sovereignty. That proclamation was sometimes in the indicative mood and sometimes in the imperative

mood. In the indicative mood, Paul described the power of God to provide the eschatological salvation of which the Spirit was the “first fruits” (Rom. 8:23) and the “guarantee” (2 Cor. 5:5). But the present evil age continued; the powers of sin and death still asserted their doomed reign. The imperative mood acknowledged that Christians were still under threat from these powers and called them to hold fast to the salvation given them in Christ. “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25).

Reflection about the moral life was disciplined by the gospel. Paul called the Romans, for example, to exercise a new discernment, not conformed to this present evil age but instead “transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom. 12:2). There is no Pauline recipe for such discernment, no checklist or wooden scheme, but certain features of it are clear enough. It involved a new self-understanding, formed by the Spirit and conformed to Christ (e.g., Rom. 6:11; Gal. 2:20). It involved a new perspective on the moral situation, an eschatological perspective, attentive both to the ways in which the power of God was already effective in the world and to the continuing assertiveness of sin and death. It invoked some fundamental values, gifts of the gospel and of the Spirit, notably freedom (e.g., 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:1) and love (e.g., 1 Cor. 13; Phil. 1:9). And it involved participation in a community of mutual instruction (e.g., Rom. 15:14). Discernment was not simply a spontaneous intuition granted by the Spirit, nor did it create rules and guidelines *ex nihilo*. Existing moral traditions, whether Jewish or Greek, could be utilized, but they were always to be tested and qualified by the gospel.

This new discernment was brought to bear on a wide range of concrete issues faced by the churches: the relations of Jew and gentile in the churches, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor. Paul’s advice was provided not as timeless moral truths but rather as timely applications of the gospel to specific problems in particular contexts.

### *The Later New Testament*

The diversity of ethics in Scripture is only confirmed by other NT writings. The Pastoral Epistles encouraged a “quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim. 2:2). It was an ethic of moderation and sober good sense, avoiding the enthusiastic foolishness of others who might claim the Pauline tradition, whether ascetic or libertine.

The subtle theological arguments of the book of Hebrews did not exist for their own sake; they supported and sustained this “word of exhortation” (13:22). The theological basis was the covenant that was “new” (8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24) and “better” (7:22; 8:6), and the fitting response to that covenant was to

“give thanks” and to “offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe” (12:28). Such worship, however, was not a matter of cultic observances. It involved “sacrifice,” to be sure, and that “continually,” but the sacrifice that is pleasing to God is “to do good and to share what you have” (13:15–16). Hebrews 13 collected a variety of moral instructions, including, for example, exhortations to mutual love, hospitality to strangers, consideration for the imprisoned and oppressed, respect for marriage, and freedom from the love of money.

The Letter of James too was a collection of moral instructions, and a somewhat eclectic collection at that. There was no single theme in James, but there was an unmistakable solidarity with the poor (1:9–11; 2:1–7, 15–16; 4:13–5:6) and a consistent concern about the use of that recalcitrant little piece of flesh, the tongue (1:19, 26; 3:1–12; 4:11; 5:9, 12). James contains, of course, the famous polemic against a “faith without works” (2:14–26), and it seems likely that he had in mind a perverted form of Paulinism, but James and Paul perhaps are not so far apart. When James called for an active faith (2:22), readers of Paul might be reminded of Paul’s call for a “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

The ethic of 1 Peter was fundamentally a call to live with integrity the identity and community formed in baptism. The “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3; cf. 1:23) was a cause for great joy (1:6, 8), but it was also reason to “prepare your minds for action” and to “discipline yourselves” (1:13). In 1 Peter the author made extensive use of what seem to have been moral traditions associated with instructions for baptism (and which are also echoed in other NT texts [see Selwyn]). The mundane duties of this world in which Christians are “aliens and exiles” (2:11) were not disowned, but they were subtly and constantly reformed by being brought into association with the Christian’s new moral identity and community.

The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude defended sound doctrine and morality against the heretics who “promise them freedom” (2 Pet. 2:19). In 2 Peter is a carefully wrought catalog of virtues, beginning with “faith,” ending with “love,” and including in the middle a number of traditional Hellenistic virtues (1:5–8).

The Johannine Epistles, like the Pastoral Epistles and 2 Peter, defended sound doctrine and morality, but these epistles made their defense in ways clearly oriented to the Johannine perspective. To believe in Jesus—in the embodied, crucified Jesus—is to stand under the obligation to love. In Jesus’ death on the cross we know what love is (1 John 3:16). And to know that love is to be called to mutual love within the community (e.g., 1 John 2:9–11; 3:11, 14–18, 23; 4:7–12, 16–21; 2 John 5–6).

The book of Revelation, like most other apocalyptic literature, was motivated by a group's experience of alienation and oppression. In the case of Revelation, the churches of Asia Minor suffered the vicious injustice and petty persecution of the Roman emperor. Revelation encouraged and exhorted those churches by constructing a symbolic universe that made intelligible both their faith that Jesus is Lord and their daily experience of injustice and suffering. The rock on which that universe was built was the risen and exalted Christ. He is "the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5). He is the Lamb that was slain and is worthy "to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might" (5:12). The victory had been won, but there were still sovereignties in conflict. On the one side were God, his Christ, and those who worship them; on the other side were Satan, his regents, the beasts, and "the kings of the earth," and all those who think to find security with them. The bestiality of empire was on display, and it called for "patient endurance" (1:9; 2:2–3, 10, 13, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12).

The conflict is not a cosmic drama that one may watch as if it were some spectator sport; it is an eschatological battle for which one must enlist. Revelation called for courage, not calculation, for watchfulness, not computation. And "patient endurance" was not passivity. To be sure, Christians in this resistance movement against the bestiality of empire did not take arms to achieve a power like the emperor's. But they resisted. And in their resistance, even in the style of it, they gave testimony to the victory of the Lamb that was slain. They were to live courageously and faithfully, resisting the pollution of empire, its cult surely and its lie that Caesar is Lord, but also its murder, fornication, sorcery, and idolatry (cf. the vice lists in 21:8; 22:15; see also 9:20–21). They were to be the voice of all creation, until "those who destroy the earth" would be destroyed (11:18), until the Lord makes "all things new" (21:5).

Ethics in Scripture are diverse, not monolithic. Yet, the one God of Scripture still calls in it and through it for a faithful response, still forms and reforms conduct and character and community until they are something "new," something "worthy of the gospel of Christ."

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## ◆ Scripture in Ethics: Methodological Issues ◆

*Bruce C. Birch*

All traditions that regard the text of the Bible as Scripture would agree that these texts should be important resources for Christian ethics. Yet there is little agreement on, and often little attention paid to, how Scripture and ethics relate. Although the literature on this relationship has grown significantly in the last two decades, the tendency in practice in the Christian life is to leave this relationship unexamined. Texts are only casually or haphazardly brought into conversation with formative or normative concerns for Christian ethics. This essay seeks to raise some issues of perspective, foundational understandings, and methodological practice that might be helpful in constructing a more self-conscious relating of Scripture to the moral life in Christian practice. The views reflected here in brief draw on and are consistent with longer treatments of this subject in previous publications (Birch and Rasmussen; Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*).

### Perspectives on Biblical Ethics

It is helpful to think of different arenas within which questions of the relationship between the Bible and ethics can be raised. Each of these arenas poses different challenges and offers differing insights, but it is important not to confuse them or assume only one to be significant.

#### *The World behind the Text*

Some treatments of biblical ethics have focused on recovering, understanding, and critically assessing the morality of the biblical communities out of

which the biblical texts were produced. Since these texts represent the witness of Israel and the early church stretching over more than fifteen centuries, the ethical systems of differing times, places, and groups reflected in the biblical text are diverse and complex.

Naturally, there has been considerable interest in recovering the morality of Jesus as the central figure in Christian faith, understood by most Christian traditions as God incarnate in human history. How Jesus lived, who he understood himself to be, and how his death and resurrection became the confessional foundation for the formation of the church make Jesus' own understanding of ethics crucially important. The popular slogan "What would Jesus do?" reflects this concern to use the ethics of Jesus as a model for moral conduct.

By the same token, entire denominational traditions have placed a high value on discovering and emulating the pattern of moral life practiced in the earliest church, especially as reflected in the book of Acts and the writings of Paul and other early church leaders in the NT Epistles. These NT writings often are treated as manuals of conduct for contemporary Christian life.

Efforts to discern and understand the ethics of Jesus or the early church may help to deepen our knowledge of the biblical communities that produced the witnesses of the biblical text. However, these communities were diverse and complex, and their testimonies in the biblical texts do not produce a single, unified ethic that can be emulated. There are four canonical Gospels, and each has a unique portrait of Jesus. There have been many notable efforts to recover the actual words and teachings of Jesus in a historical sense, and these have produced no uniform result. The writings of Paul and other NT authors reflect the unique circumstances of early congregations in differing time periods, and although all contribute to the resources for Christian ethics, there is once again no singular unified Christian ethic to be recovered and emulated.

With respect to the OT, the witness of Israel to its life lived in covenant with God is even more diverse and stretched over a longer period of time and historical circumstances. Efforts to find unifying themes throughout the OT texts or developmental patterns of moral conduct have been notably unsuccessful. We cannot produce a typical or complete history of ancient Israelite ethics. Different texts reflect different social strata and historical settings. Many recent studies have helped us to understand these glimpses of ancient Israel more fully in their own contexts, but there is no singular code of moral conduct to be emulated here. Instead, there is a richness of testimony of life lived in relation to God, both in obedience and disobedience. We may learn from these and be informed from them in our own moral efforts, and this methodology is addressed later in this essay.