

THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE BIBLE IN ETHICS



The Bible and ethics

For two millennia the Bible has given a tremendous impulse to moral thinking and action. In recent times it has inspired Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela in their struggle for justice and civil rights, as well as the compassion of Mother Theresa for the poor and dying in Calcutta and these are but a few examples. Nor is this surprising. Within the great diversity of literature that the Bible encompasses there is an equal diversity of ways in which moral concern and moral action are promoted.

We offer comment here on three features: -

1. Many ethical statements in the Bible are grounded in belief in God. Indeed, *the moral requirement springs from the nature of God as the Bible understands him*. God's nature is justice, mercy and love; He moves his people to act accordingly. Consider the setting of the Ten Commandments (Ex.20.1-2); the nature of prophetic ethics (Micah 6-6.8); the ground of wisdom (Prov.1.7); the Great Commandment (Mark 12.28-31). On this view, religion and ethics go hand in hand. If we 'walk humbly with our God' (Micah 6.8), we are in fact acting in a truly humble way. If we truly love God,

we express that love towards our neighbour and, Jesus adds, towards our enemy (Matt.5.43-8)! The strength of this kind of approach is that it forces us to think about what is a fundamental importance in the world. Moral obligation is not just a matter of doing what other people do. It is not just what society thinks is right, or what governments lay down. It is to see moral obligation as rooted in the nature of things.

2. Does this mean that if you don't believe in God, the Bible has nothing to say? Might it even undermine moral understanding by linking it so closely with belief in God? One response to that is that the idea of God, like the Bible and morality, represents great depths of understanding much greater than our feeble opinions! Besides, some biblical material, though grounded in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, has a wider moral appeal. For example, the Good Samaritan, the hymn of love, and the ethic of non-violence and non-retaliation in the Sermon on the Mount embody classic moral concerns for all humanity. Indeed, the Golden Rule operates across cultural boundaries and thus has a particular relevance to a multicultural society such as ours.

3. The variety of moral statements in the Bible relates to their purpose. Some are more prescriptive than others: that is, they take the form of commands. Biblical commands require careful thought; they are not slogans. Think, for example of the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'. Originally this was written in Hebrew, and the meaning or application was widely understood as 'You shall do no murder'. Killing was in fact permitted in Israel in carefully defined conditions: killing enemies in war; killing animals for sacrifice, or for food. Today, some quote this commandment in a wide range of contexts from war and capital punishment to abortion and fox hunting. They assume that it has a self-evident meaning and application. The Hebrew wording does not prohibit such applications, but it does not explicitly support them. The commandment indicates a moral boundary, relating to the taking of human life. The question of its further application opens up issues that require careful examination and discussion and decision about action. That is the very nature of ethics. The Bible commands us to love, but how can this be understood literally as a command? One can love only if one has experienced love, or love has become effective in one's life. This goes some way towards explaining why moral obligation in the Bible is so closely linked with God. The OT speaks of God's love for his people through the covenant he made with them. The NT tells that God so loved the world that he gave his Son for its salvation (John 3.16). Biblical ethics thus center on a vision of life in which love is the driving force.

Recap: There can be little doubt that the Bible's contribution to ethics is immense. It is wrong to regard it as simply prescriptive. It is not simply a matter of 'Thou shalt' or 'Thou shalt not'. Commands are guidelines and mark limits. The Bible shows deep concern for every aspect of ethics. It is concerned with motive, with what drives people to act in a particular way. It is particularly concerned to orient people to the vision of the good and to build up personal awareness and moral sensitivity for these are essential to right action. It is through such a process that we grow as persons.

The problem of the misuse of the Bible in ethics

The above discussion highlights the importance of biblical interpretation. We need to read the Bible with great care. In discussing abuses that often arise we should bear in mind two guiding principles:

1. **We must relate each passage to the Bible as a whole.** The examples we have discussed were

carefully selected. If you chose verses at random from the Bible, you might well get a very odd result. The Bible is the classic of Christendom, shared in part with Judaism. It is 'scripture', a written authority long accepted by Christian churches as containing the rule of faith and life. It is called 'the Word of God'. This is a claim that, through reverent and attentive reading of the book, one might 'hear' what God is saying to us. Some people have thought that this term imparts authority to every syllable, as if God wrote the Bible on a huge tablet of stone and gave in one great mass to his people. It is more helpful to reflect that God works through human agency. The Bible is not uniform in content. It comes from different periods of history (spanning a least a thousand years), and contains a variety of types of literature. It arose from the people of God in various ages and it is their faithful witness to God's will and purpose for his people. It thus reflects religious practices as different as animal sacrifice on the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the house-church worship of early Christian communities. It enshrines what the Jews call the Torah or Teaching (what God requires of his covenanted people), and the gospel of Jesus confessed as Christ (Messiah). Hence, when a text or passage is selected as 'what the Bible says' or 'the Word of God', it must not be pulled out from the mass of words in some kind of lucky dip. It must be carefully related to the whole so that it is seen clearly to speak for the sum of biblical wisdom or the 'fullness' of God's purpose. This can be called a 'holistic view' of the Bible, where the part is related to the whole, the periphery

to the centre, and the Old to the New. St. Paul does precisely this when he states that all the commandments are summed up in this sentence, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Rom. 13.9).

This important principle is well illustrated by Jesus himself. He was asked whether it was lawful (i.e., right in the eyes of God) for a man to divorce his wife (cf. Mark 10.2-12). As his audience well knew, there was a provision for divorce in the Torah (Deut. 24.1-4; cf. Mark 10.4). Rabbis and others argue about how it should be implemented. Perhaps the crowd wanted to know whether Jesus would take a strict or liberal view. In fact Jesus applied what we have called a holistic view of the Bible. He viewed the provision in Deuteronomy in the light of the purpose of God as set out in the Torah or 'Books of Moses': 'Moses' permitted divorce 'because of your hardness of heart' or 'stubbornness' (Mark 10.5) that is, because of human failure or willfulness. Jesus emphasizes the purpose of marriage in the sight of God. Marriage was intended by the creator to be a life-long partnership (Mark 10.6-9). It is this goal that he sets before his children. The question is not what God teaches about divorce. It is about the creator's purpose for his creation.



2. We must read biblical passages in the setting of their times. The Bible came into being over a long period of time. *Every passage therefore has its own context.* This fact is very important for interpretation. We ourselves live at the beginning of the 21st century. The place and time in which we live shape our lives. It has often been pointed out that the world has changed more rapidly in the 19th and certainly the 20th centuries than in previous millennia. The worlds in which the biblical authors lived were very different from ours. [Please note that in some respects the world that has shaped us is not any more moral than theirs. The 20th century produced terrible wars and outrages against humanity.] If we are to understand ancient writings, we must try to appreciate the world that shaped their writers and their message. In other words, we must understand their context. St. Paul, for example, lived in a world that took for granted that slavery was essential to civilised society. It is likely that Paul did not like the institution of slavery, but he had to accept it as a fact of life and try to mitigate its effects by receiving slaves as full members of the church and even valued co-workers. We must try to form a picture of his world and how he tried to express moral excellence within it (cf. Phil.4.8). We must not attribute our own thoughts and attitudes to the biblical authors.

Recap: So far we have established that the Bible has a great concern for ethics. Some of its teachings are readily accessible; others are not as straightforward as they seem and raise important questions of interpretation. We have adduced two principles that must be kept in mind; the holistic principle, which insists that we view the individual text in the light of the whole; and the contextual principle, that insists that we view every statement in the cultural setting that has shaped it. We have also thought about how easy it is to be unaware of such influences on our lives. We are now ready to move on to the next stage of our exploration.

Further contextual problems

1. Eschatology. A Strange feature of the Graeco-Roman world in which the books of the NT were written is that few people believed that the world would last for long. Stoic philosophers believed that it would soon end in a great cosmic conflagration the 'big bang' theory of the end of the world. Other popular philosophers called Cynics mocked this view, saying the world would end 'not with a bang but a whimper'. The religious interpretation of some parts of Judaism and the NT tended to relate this urgent expectation to the judgement of God on an evil world and to the completion of God's work of salvation in

Christ. Prophets saw visions of a 'new heaven and a new earth' (cf. Rev.21.1). Christian believers looked for the imminent return of Christ to complete his work. All this was important for ethics. Although it was too negative towards the world, it concentrated the mind on human mortality and set human life in the context of eternity.⁴

2. Modern Dilemmas. As we have seen, the cultural context of the interpreter today is very different from that of the ancient world. This is important when attempting to apply biblical insights to modern problems. For example, biblical societies were patriarchal, and the possibilities open to women in them were severely circumscribed. The role of women in modern society and the possibilities open to them are vastly different. Again, modern understandings of sexuality are in marked contrast to those of the ancient world. No simple correlation can therefore be established between biblical and modern statements on such subjects. Furthermore, many modern issues have no counterpart in biblical discourse. Advances in human fertilization and embryology, not to speak of animal cloning and its possible applications, precipitate a completely new range of ethical dilemmas. If the biblical writers had never heard of such possibilities, of what possible use can the Bible be to moral decision-making in these areas today? Even more alarming is the question, what possible misuse of it may arise?



The dynamics of biblical ethics

1 The fundamental misuse of the Bible may be described as 'non-contextual literalism': that is, attempting a simple correlation of biblical statements and modern situations without any reference to considerations of context. Thus, if the Bible has a taboo about blood, blood transfusions may not be administered today. If, for whatever reason, Paul refused to allow (married?) women to speak in church worship at Corinth, women must not be allowed a leading role in ministry today. If Paul agreed that homosexual practice in the ancient world was such as to place it among the vices of the unregenerate, similar attitudes must be adopted to homosexuals today without further question. Such errors spring from making inappropriate correlations between the biblical situation and the modern world. A careful study of the ancient situation including what the biblical writer was trying to say to it, and why he was trying to say it is essential for valid interpretation. One must also be willing to explore all relevant feature of modern ethical dilemmas before deciding how the Bible may lead us to a perception of what is right in the situation.

2 The Informed use of the Bible leads us to a truer perception of the moral situation, both in the ancient text and today. The whole Bible testifies not only to the idea of God as creator but to the world as his gift to us, to be used responsibly. Today, the misuse of the world's resources and the abuse of the earth itself are major problems. Powerful self-interest make solutions difficult to find and harder to implement. Biblical perspectives open up an alternative scenario a wide canvas on which fundamental questions about the human situation and human responsibility for the resources of the planet are set out unequivocally and demand unequivocal action.

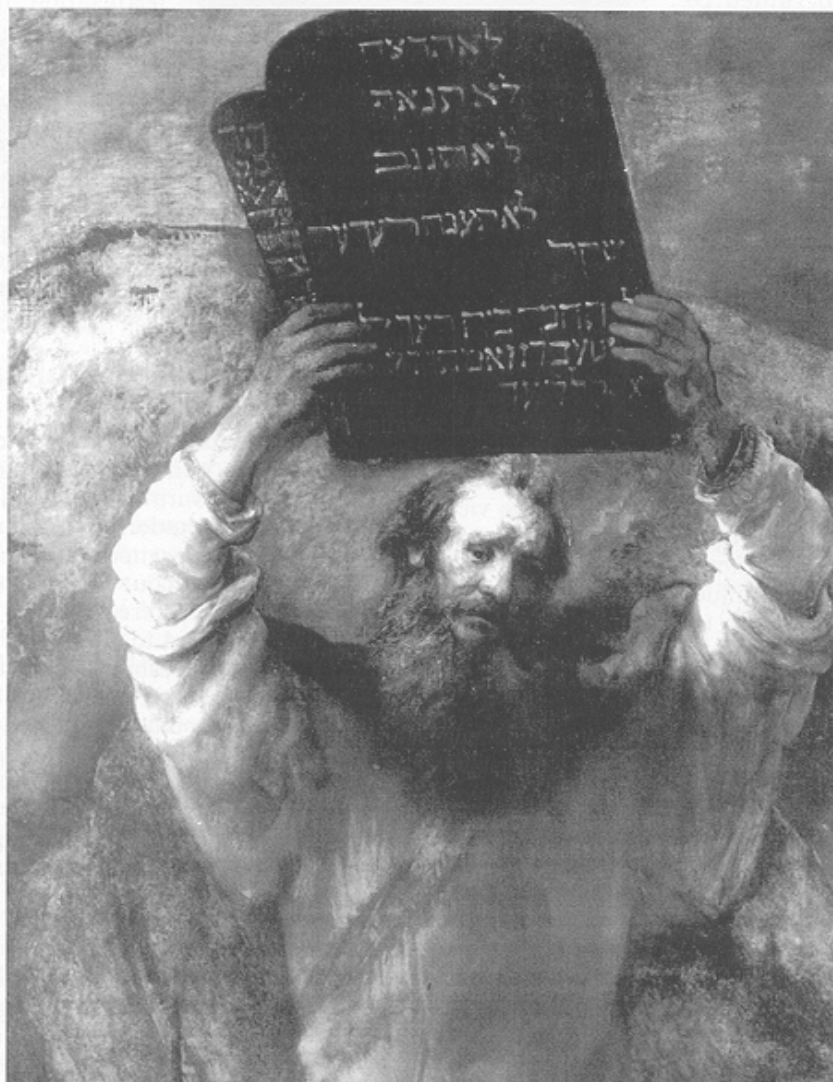
While biblical ethics are expressed in a particular cultural setting they also have a counter-cultural function. That is to say, they question the culture in which they are set. The Graeco-Roman world, the heroes were powerful people-warriors like the fabled Achilles or Alexander the Great. People gloried in competition, wealth victory and success. All these were a matter of honour. There was little place for the weak, the ill or the handicapped. Biblical ethics represented alternative values – the love that inspires co-operation and creates community; the compassion that cares for the weak; the non-violent

response that absorbs aggression; the openness to others that breaks down barriers. Here is a new deal, an alternative programme for a new era.

The temptation to reduce Christian ethics to a collection of commands or prohibitions is a grave misrepresentation of the Christian ethic. True values are 'the fruit of the Spirit' the outcome or product of the working of God's Spirit in our very being (Gal.5.22-3). It is not 'doing what comes naturally', or an ethic of self-gratification: that leads in a very different direction (cf. Gal.5. 19-21). We can test our embodiment of virtue against the story of the Bible as a whole and the ministry of Christ in particular. In this way we can come to a better understanding of ourselves and the roots of our actions. It can also help us to see a particular dynamic at work in and through the Bible: a power that upholds the right and the good, and that overcomes barriers and makes for reconciliation and wholeness. It is liberating enabling people to flourish, and to do so not in the isolation of individualism but in the fellowship of community with others. It has therefore a critical function, for the world as we know it does not correspond with such a picture.

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FOR USE IN THE CLASSROOM

- (a) Some biblical passages with a moral purpose:
 (a modern translation is preferable)
 The Ten Commandments (Ex.20.3-17)
 Prophetic ethics (Micah 6.8)
 Wise sayings (Proverbs 2)
 the Great Commandment (Mark 12.31)
 the Golden Rule (Matt. 7.12)
 the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7)
 the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.29-37)
 the hymn of love (1 Cor.13).

Which of these passages map out what is not acceptable?

Which passages sound like commands? What is the basis of such 'commands'?

Which passages offer wise advice?
 Which passages set our major principles?
 Which passages have a narrative or poetic quality?
 Which passages are concerned with motive?
 What other features do you see in these passages?

- (b) Read again the parable of the Good Samaritan. Do you agree that the aim of the parable is 'to tease the mind into active thought' and to prompt right action. In what ways is this parable particularly relevant today? Can you think of hostile relations today between 'us' and 'them'. How would you recast the parable in a modern context?

Read again the hymn of love in 1 Cor.13. What kind of love does the poet describe? What are its essential characteristics? How does his description of love differ from popular notions of love?

(c) Social Ethics

Is Jesus' view a counsel of perfection? While Mark held steadfastly to the indissolubility of marriage, others in the early church appeared to hold that Jesus did not deny that a marriage may be dissolved if a grave fault should arise. See Matt. 5.32, noting the exception Matthew allows. In the real world, how far must allowance be made for the 'hardness' of the human heart? Must not social ethics – ethics relating to society at large – reckon with 'human hardness of heart'?

- (d) Are we always aware of the extent of which we are shaped by the culture in which we live? What about fashion in clothes, possessions, language? How does culture (the media, our peer group) shape our thinking? How far is our thinking influenced by our own presuppositions and prejudices even when we think we are being objective and logical? How difficult is it to be really self-aware, and to fully appreciate people who are different from us?

(e) Consider these words of St. Paul's:

What I mean, my friends, is this: the time we are living in will not last long. While it lasts, married men should be as if they had no wives; mourners should be as if they had nothing to grieve them, the joyful as if they did not rejoice; those who buy should be as if they possessed nothing, and those who use the world's wealth

as if they did not have full use of it. For the world as we know it is passing away. (1 Cor.7.29-31. The Revised English Bible)

Look at Cor.7. In what ways do you think Paul's attitude to marriage was limited or distorted by his belief that 'the time is short'? Why was marriage not his preferred option?

'Live each day as if it were your last.'

Do you see any value in this kind of advice?

- (f) Consider the following statement in a contribution to the contemporary debate on the repeal of Section 28 and the degree of acceptance accorded to homosexuals in society:

'One strictly religious argument is that the Hebrew Bible explicitly denounces homosexual practice, that this is nowhere contradicted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, and that it is repeated in the letters of St. Paul. Someone who now wishes to defend the legitimacy of homosexual activity will have to say that what Jews and Christians regard as the inspired Word of God is false on a matter of unquestionable importance. Non-Christians may greet this opportunity with enthusiasm, but scriptural consensus is not something that believers can treat lightly as they might strict dietary and sabbatarian regulations which evidently do not enjoy cross-testamental support.' [John Haldane in *The Herald* newspaper, January 2000]

We are not going to discuss the moral issue of homosexuality here. That would require a much more extensive study. Can one justify a claim for such 'scriptural consensus'? Does the Hebrew Bible consistently denounce homosexual practice? The evidence suggests that it contains more views than one (cf.2 Sam.1.26; Ruth 1.16-17). Where denunciation occurs in the scriptures of Israel, it is closely linked to a priestly view of ritual purity bound up with Temple practice (cf. Deut.23.17-18).

Within the prophetic tradition one can find a remarkably inclusive ethic (Is.56.3-5). As there is no recorded saying of Jesus on the subject, it is hazardous to make use of the 'argument from silence'. St. Paul touches on the subject in a sweeping reference to the sins of the Gentile world, but he does not present any considered account of the issue (Rom.1.26-7; 1Cor.6.9-10). Indeed, his reference may be primarily to male prostitution.

In the light of our study, would you defend the argument in the quotation as a valid interpretation of the Bible for today?

NOTES

1. 'Covenant' denotes their special relationship with God, based on his grace: cf.Exodus 19.1-6.2.
2. 'Messiah' means 'Christ' or 'Anointed One'.
3. 'The first five 'books of Moses' formed the main part of the Jewish Bible.
4. St. Paul probably modified the eschatological tone of his writings as time went on. In Ephesians(which may not come directly from Paul), it has been almost totally replaced by his concern for church, including the values and life-style of the Christian communities and the ethics of stable family life in households.