

- **Ethical Decisions in the Old Testament**
- ***Les Choix Ethiques dans l'Ancien Testament***
- ***Ethische Entscheidungen im Alten Testament***

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#### SUMMARY

I. *Responding to the God of created order.* This includes: a monotheistic stance which both combats the moral degeneracy of polytheism and also simplifies ethics to a fundamentally single choice – to love and obey Yahweh, or not to; basic confidence in the world as a place created and ordered by God in such a way that moral choices matter and have predictable moral consequences that can be known and anticipated; a high degree of 'secular' freedom in how we live in the earth, unfettered by the bondage of occultism, sacral taboos and the fear or manipulation of magic; a primary regard for the value of human life as made in the image of God, which both sets the shedding of innocent blood near the top of the list of ethical negatives and sets the equality of all human beings near the top of the list of ethical positives. Furthermore, the ethical values that flow from these sources are to be preserved and lived out, even in the midst of a cursed earth and a fallen humanity which constantly undermine, deny or reverse them.

II. *Responding to the God of covenant purpose.* God's promise to Abraham was that all nations would be blessed through him. There is therefore a future and a hope in human history, based on God's covenant purpose, which makes ethics worthwhile. The people of God, chosen in Abraham, have a mission in the midst of fallen human society, which is

ethical (Gen. 18:19). Old Testament ethics thus has both a missionary and an eschatological dimension. It is fundamental to God's redemptive purpose, not just a by-product.

III. *Responding to the God of redemptive action.* Through the redemptive event of the exodus and the making of the covenant at Sinai, God called Israel to be priestly and holy (Ex. 19:4–6). The demand of obedience to the law is thus set in a wider context, as a moral exemplar to the nations. While the law has a strongly deontological dimension, based on the authority of Yahweh, it is also has motivational clauses which include gratitude, imitation of God, and a valid consequentialism based on God's knowledge of what is best for human life and society. The foundation of ethical awareness in Israel was the combined didactic roles of the family and the priesthood. There is evidence in the narratives and in the ethical typologies (e.g. Ps. 15, Job 31, Ezek. 18) of a relatively sophisticated level of ethical consciousness in Israel alongside the acknowledged fact of endemic ethical failure.

In conclusion, some thoughts are offered on how the ethical relevance of the OT is to be applied today, to the church or secular society. The author's paradigmatic approach, developed elsewhere, is briefly explained and advocated.

#### RÉSUMÉ

L'éthique de l'Ancien Testament est essentiellement théiste et, par conséquent, se caractérise par la réponse faite à Dieu. Cette réponse se développe dans trois directions principales.

I. *Répondre au Dieu de l'ordre créationnel.* Ceci comprend: une position monothéiste qui, à la fois, combat la dégénérescence morale du polythéisme et simplifie l'éthique, la ramenant à un unique choix fondamental, rendre ou non à Yahweh amour et obéissance; la confiance dans le monde comme lieu créé et ordonné par Dieu de telle sorte que les choix moraux comptent, et entraînent des conséquences morales

prévisibles; un haut degré de liberté 'séculière' dans la façon de vivre sur terre, par libération de l'asservissement de l'occultisme, des tabous sacrés, de la peur et de la manipulation magique; le respect, avant tout, de la valeur de la vie humaine créée en image de Dieu, ce qui place l'effusion du sang innocent en tête de la liste des interdits éthiques et loge au premier rang des affirmations positives l'égalité de tous les êtres humains. De plus, les valeurs éthiques qui découlent de ces sources doivent être préservées et traduites dans la vie, même sur une terre maudite et au milieu d'une humanité déchue qui les sape constamment, les nie ou les inverse.



II. *Répondre au Dieu du dessein d'alliance.* Dieu a promis à Abraham que toutes les nations seraient bénies en lui. Il y a donc un avenir et une espérance dans l'histoire d l'humanité, fondée sur le dessein de l'alliance de Dieu qui donne à l'éthique sa valeur. Le peuple de Dieu, choisi en Abraham, a une mission au sein de la société humaine déchue, qui est une mission morale (Gn 19.19). L'éthique de l'Ancien Testament a ainsi une dimension à la fois missionnaire et eschatologique. C'est là un aspect fondamental du dessein rédempteur de Dieu, et non pas uniquement un aspect dérivé.

III. *Répondre au Dieu de l'action rédemptrice.* Par l'événement rédempteur de l'exode et par l'alliance conclue au Sinaï, Dieu a appelé Israël à être un peuple sacerdotal et saint (Ex 19.4-6). L'obéissance à la loi est ainsi placée dans un contexte plus large, en tant qu'exemple moral pour les nations. Tandis que la loi a une dimen-

sion fortement *déontologique*, fondée sur l'autorité de Yahweh, certaines clauses se rapportent aussi aux *motivations*, comme la gratitude et l'imitation de Dieu, et d'autres préceptes se réfèrent (de façon valide) aux *conséquences* des conduites – Dieu sait quel est le meilleur pour la vie humaine, individuelle et sociale. A la base de la conscience moral en Israël, on trouve conjoints les rôles didactiques de la famille et de la prêtrise. Dans les récits et les typologies éthiques (par exemple, Ps 15, Jb 31, Ez 18) se manifeste un niveau relativement raffiné de conscience morale en Israël, à côté de l'échec moral endémique avoué comme un fait.

**En conclusion:** on lira quelques réflexions sur la façon dont la pertinence morale de l'Ancien Testament devrait s'appliquer aujourd'hui à l'Eglise et à la société séculière. L'approche paradigmatique de l'auteur, développée ailleurs, est brièvement expliquée et préconisée.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die alttestamentliche Ethik ist im wesentlichen eine theistische Ethik und demzufolge als Antwort auf das Handeln Gottes zu verstehen. Diese Antwort wird auf drei Ebenen entfaltet:

### I. Antwort auf Gottes Handeln in der Schöpfung

Dies umfasst folgendes: eine monotheistische Haltung, die die moralische Verdorbenheit des Polytheismus bekämpft und die Ethik auf die Ebene einer einzigen grundsätzlichen Entscheidung reduziert: Jahwe zu lieben und ihm gehorsam zu sein – oder dies nicht zu tun; grundsätzliches Vertrauen in die Welt als von Gott so geschaffen und geordnet, daß moralische Entscheidungen von Bedeutung sind und erkennbare und vorhersehbare Konsequenzen haben; ein hohes Maß an 'säkularer' Freiheit in unserer Lebensgestaltung, unbelastet von der Gebundenheit des Okkultismus, sakralen Tabus und der Furcht vor Magie; eine primäre Achtung des Wertes menschlichen Lebens als Ebenbild Gottes, die dazu führt, daß das Vergießen unschuldigen Blutes eines der wichtigsten ethischen Verbote, und die Gleichheit aller Menschen, eines der wichtigsten Gebote darstellen. Weiterhin sollen die aus diesen Quellen stammenden ethischen Werte erhalten und ausgelebt werden, selbst mitten in einer verfluchten Welt und einer gefallenen Menschheit, die diese Werte ständig untergraben, verleugnen oder umkehren.

### II. Antwort auf Gottes Handeln im Bund

Gottes Verheißung an Abraham bestand darin, daß durch ihn alle Völker gesegnet werden sollen. Die Geschichte der Menschheit hat durch Gottes Bundesgedanken Zukunft und Hoffnung, die alle Ethik lohnenswert macht. Das Volk Gottes, erwähnt in Abraham, hat einen ethischen Auftrag mitten in einer gefallenen menschlichen Gesellschaft (1.Mose 18,19). Die Ethik des AT beinhaltet daher sowohl eine missionarische als auch eine eschatologische Dimension. Sie bildet ein wesentliches Element in Gottes Erlösungsabsicht und ist nicht nur Nebenprodukt.

### III. Antwort auf Gottes Handeln in der Erlösung

Durch das erlösende Ereignis des Exodus und den Bundesschluß am Sinai berief Gott Israel zur Priesterschaft und Heiligkeit (2.Mose 19,4-6). Der Aufruf zum Gehorsam gegenüber dem Gesetz wird daher in einen breiteren Zusammenhang gestellt, d.h. als moralisches Vorbild für die Völker. Während das Gesetz eine starke, auf der Autorität Jahwes gegründete und verpflichtende Dimension hat, hat es auch motivierende Teile, die sich z.B. auf Dankbarkeit und Nachfolge gründen. Dazu kommt, daß das Übertreten des Gesetzes Konsequenzen nach sich zieht, die darauf gründen, daß Gott das Beste für das menschliche Leben und die Gesellschaft kennt. Die Grundlage für das ethische Bewußtsein in Israel bildete die Verbindung der erzieherischen Funktion der Familie und der Priesterschaft. Die Erzählungen und die ethischen Typologien, z.B. Ps.15, Hiob 31



und Hes.18, beweisen ein relativ hohes ethisches Bewußtsein in Israel, begleitet von der anerkannten Tatsache des allgemein verbreiteten ethischen Versagens.

Zum Schluß wird darüber reflektiert, wie die

ethische Relevanz des AT heute zur Anwendung in der Gemeinde oder in der Welt kommt. Der paradigmatische Ansatz des Verfassers, der in anderen Werken vertieft ist, wird kurz erläutert und empfohlen.

## INTRODUCTION

The original full title which I was given for this paper, 'How were ethical decisions made in the Old Testament?' reminded me of examination questions where you had to spend most of your answer interpreting and defining the question. It could be approached in at least two ways. A *canonical* approach would be to look at the ethical teaching of the major sections of the Old Testament to enquire what they have to offer us as usable material that we can theologically synthesize into our own Christian ethical agenda. An *empirical* approach would be to ask how Mr and Mrs Average Israelite came to make ethical decisions in daily life, assuming that the Hebrew Bible affords the kind of evidence we need to answer that. After trying several possible ways of juggling the material I have finally opted to organize it on a canonical basis, and illustrate each main section with whatever empirical evidence seems appropriate to that dimension of the subject.

It is something of a truism to say that biblical ethics is theistic. That is to say, it assumes the existence of one living personal God and sets the whole of human life in response to him. Ethics is not an agenda, a means to an end, an inflexible law, self-fulfilment or any of the other terms that may secondarily describe various human formulations of it. It is primarily response to God, who he is and what he has done. In the Hebrew Bible that response is first set in the context of God as creator, so that is where we begin. Secondly, we meet the revelation of the God of covenant purpose whose commitment to bless the human race leads him to initiate a special relationship with Israel within which their ethical response is a central feature. Thirdly, we find that purpose given concrete historical form as we meet

the God of redemptive action who delivers his people and then gives them land to live in and law to live by.

## I. RESPONDING TO THE GOD OF CREATED ORDER

### 'The fear of the Lord ...'

The assumption of monotheism in the opening chapters of the Bible is so obvious that we easily miss its ethically revolutionary character. The creation narratives almost effortlessly exclude polytheism and dualism, and the pervasive ethico-cultural edifices that go with them. Only one God created the heavens and the earth. Human beings are answerable only to that one God. Whether walking and talking with him in the garden in Eden, or fleeing from him in the restless land of Nod, east of Eden, it is one and the same God with whom we have to do. This immediately introduces a fundamental simplicity into biblical ethics. Commitment to love and obey the one living God rescues one from the fear of offending one god by trying to please another, from the confusion of moral requirements, or from the moral cynicism that arises when people feel that it doesn't really matter in the end how you live because you can't win. The gods will get you in the end.

For Israel, the fear of Yahweh alone was the first principle not only of wisdom, but of ethics. 'Fear him, you saints and you will then have nothing else to fear' (from Tate and Brady's hymn, 'Through all the changing scenes of life') is not quite the words of the Psalmist (34:9) but he would doubtless have agreed heartily. Certainly, in Psalm 33 the thought moves directly from the sole creative word of Yahweh to the universal challenge to all human beings to fear him (6-8), since



he is the moral adjudicator of all human behaviour (13–15). The same universal ethical thrust is found in some of the Psalms celebrating the kingship of Yahweh (e.g. 96:4f., 10–13).

To say that ethics in the Old Testament was simple is not to say obedience was easy or that ethical decision-making was a matter of black and white choices. It is to say that the task of living in this world is not complicated by divided allegiances to competing gods, or obscure philosophies which demand religious or 'expert' elites to interpret them for us. Sometimes this essential simplicity is referred to by way of encouragement to act in accordance with God's will. 'Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach', says Moses, '... No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it' (Deut. 30:11–14). 'He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Mic. 6:8). Although these texts were spoken to Israel, they can be relevant to humanity at large inasmuch as Paul generalizes the requirements of the law as something written on the hearts even of those who never heard it (Rom. 2:14f.).

### 'The earth is fixed ...'

Another unmistakeable feature of Genesis 1 is its presentation of the creation as a place of order, system and structure. We live in a cosmos, not a chaos, and we do so because of the creative word and action of God. This is not only affirmed in Genesis 1 but celebrated in Israel's worship and used by prophets to exalt the power of Yahweh as over against the gods of the nations (Isa. 45:18ff.). This created order has two effects on biblical ethics.

#### *i) As a bulwark against relativism*

The most important effect of this truth as regards ethics is that it provides the objective basis and authority for the exercise of moral freedom, while exposing the wrongheadedness of moral relativism. Oliver O'Donovan has reinstated the importance of the creation

basis for evangelical ethics in his programmatic study *Resurrection and Moral Order*.

While it is clear that Biblical ethics is very securely tied to the action of God in history (which we consider below), it is important that we give adequate attention to the Hebrew Bible's creation doctrine with all its implications for our world-view. An emphasis on history alone, without the safeguards of the biblical creation faith, could deliver us into the kind of historical relativism which puts all things, morality included, at the mercy of the historical process. This is a danger which O'Donovan also warns us of, insisting that the only proper protection from it is the biblical affirmation of a given order of creation which, though disturbed by the fall, is still the order within which we live, and which will finally be restored to its perfection and glory through God's redemptive action, which has already been achieved in the resurrection of Christ and will be complete at his return.

That which most distinguishes the concept of creation is that it is complete. Creation is the given totality of order which forms the presupposition of historical existence. 'Created order' is that which is not negotiable within the course of history, that which neither the terrors of chance nor the ingenuity of art can overthrow. It defines the scope of our freedom and the limits of our fears. The affirmation of the psalm, sung on the sabbath which celebrates the completion of creation, affords a ground for human activity and human hope: 'The world is established, it shall never be moved'. Within such a world, in which 'The Lord reigns', we are free to act and can have confidence that God will act. Because created order is given, because it is secure, we dare to be certain that God will vindicate it in history. 'He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth' (Ps. 96:10,13).<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the culture or whatever the juncture of history, we all have to live in God's created world as his human creatures. There is a basic shape to that world which we did not invent, and therefore a corresponding shape to the moral response required



of us if we are to live within it with the kind of freedom which, by God's so ordering, it authorizes. Morality, in biblical terms, therefore, is preconditioned by the given shape of creation, which underlies the relativity of cultural responses to it within history.

The biblical authority, then, for our ethics in a world of moral relativism, is based on its twin affirmation of creation and history: creation as the fundamental order that shapes our existence in history, and which is destined for restoration in the new creation of the kingdom of God; and history as the stage on which we observe the acts of the God whom we are commanded to imitate by 'walking in his ways'.

*ii) As a basis for legitimate consequentialism*

In Christian evaluation of different ethical stances, 'consequentialism' usually gets a bad press. It is the view that moral choices should be evaluated in terms of their likely consequences, not in terms of *a priori* moral principles which are regarded as absolute and necessary (the latter view being termed 'deontological'). The most influential secular brand of consequentialism is Utilitarianism, which at its simplest argues that the correct ethical choice in any matter is that which is likely to achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. This is not the place to enter into a critique of it.<sup>2</sup> What I would like to show is that among the effects of the biblical teaching on the established order of creation is a degree of confidence in the reliability and predictability of life in this world. This is not, of course, to suggest that nothing untoward ever happens unexpectedly (see the discussion of Ecclesiastes below), still less to endorse an unbiblical fatalism. It is simply to note that the Hebrew Bible does move from the observation of regularity, consistency and permanence in creation itself (e.g. in Jer. 31:35ff.), to affirmations of the same characteristics in God, and thence to the assumption that certain consequences will always follow from certain actions. There are causes and effects in the moral realm, as in the physical, and it is part of wise living in this world to take note of them and behave accordingly.

It is interesting that a consequentialist

view of ethical decisions is found precisely in the Wisdom literature, which tends to be grounded in a creation rather than a redemption theology. Much of the advice and guidance given in Proverbs is prudential. 'Think what will happen if ...' Behavioural cause and effect are repeatedly linked. Hard work produces wealth. Lending and borrowing will lose you friends. Careless words cost lives. And so it goes on.

Possibly the most interesting example concerns the Wisdom tradition's sexual ethic. It is in full accordance with the law, of course, but it is not explicitly sanctioned by law. Whereas the law simply says 'Do not commit adultery, on penalty of death', the Wisdom teacher says, 'Do not commit adultery because of the appalling consequences that you will expose yourself and your whole family and property to.' It isn't worth the risk. Common sense itself warns against what the law prohibits. Moral rules and moral consequences actually reinforce one another in this way of thinking (e.g. Prov. 5, 6:24–35, 7). We need to remember however, that the Wisdom tradition's consequentialism is thoroughly personal and theistic. It is not impersonal fate, or *karma*. Behind all the prudential advice of the sages stands their own foundational axiom, 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. Whatever results follow from our actions are not mechanical cause and effect, but the outworking of God's own order in his world. The consequentialism of Wisdom is thus based on what we would theologically call God's sovereign providence and justice.

In the narratives we come across a kind of empirical consequentialism when appeals to conscience are made on the grounds of likely outcomes. Abigail's warning to David takes this approach (1 Sam. 25:30f.). Conversely, the category of 'folly' is sometimes portrayed not merely as the absence of common sense (though it can be that, as Jonathan's reaction to his father's absurd prohibition on his soldiers eating on a day of battle shows, 1 Sam. 14:24–30), but a failure to look beyond the pressure or emotion of the moment (2 Sam. 13:12ff.).

### A desacralized world-view

Another dimension of the creation ethic of the



Hebrew Bible is the way it desacralizes certain areas of life which in polytheistic cultures tend to be shrouded in mystique, taboos and risk for mortal men and women. Death, for example, is not some external power or independent deity, but a fact decreed and controlled by God, and given moral and spiritual rationale in relation to human sin. It remains a horror and an enemy, but has no personal power to direct or guide how one lives here and now. For that you go to the living God and his express law alone and neither to Death itself nor to the dead. (Isa. 8:19f.).

With greater practical and ethical relevance, OT creation faith also desacralized sex. It played no part in the process of the creation of the world, but is simply one feature internal to creation. Human sexuality is part of the image of God, but not in itself part of God. It is a gift within creation, to be enjoyed with God's blessing, but not a means of manipulating either God or nature, as it is within the fertility cults that usually exist symbiotically with polytheism. Thus it is that in the Hebrew Bible strict laws on the proper context for the exercise of our sexuality coexist with the unrestrained freedom of the Song of Solomon's exaltation of the joy of sex under God's blessing. In this case, the Wisdom tradition adorns what the law protects.

This desacralizing of important areas of life in the Hebrew Bible actually increases the scope of personal freedom. Old Testament law can sound restrictive because of its negative tone. But on reflection it is actually the case that negatively framed law is much more liberating than positive or directive law. It is more liberating to be told you may do what you choose, with specified limits and exceptions, than to be told what you must choose or do in all circumstances. The park which allows you freedom to do what you like, but has a notice which says 'do not pick the flowers' is a better place to be than the safari park where you must follow the prescribed route and stay in your car. Even in the garden of Eden it was thus. 'You are free to eat of any tree of the garden – except . . .'. This gave to humanity a range of freedoms in the world which so many 'religions' would have hedged much more restrictively.

Yet, having given to humanity such free-

dom to act within the created order, and having entrusted to us dominion over creation, one route to achieving mastery was prohibited – magic and the occult. The creation narratives themselves exclude any magic dimension to the way in which God created and ordered the world, and likewise the task of working out our appropriate ethical task in the world is not to be short-circuited or bypassed by magical mechanisms. The fact that magic as it is practised in many cultures can be 'white' or 'black' shows that it is in fact an amoral force. It attempts to evade the responsibility of making the moral choice which expresses personal response to our personal God and instead yields up to other forces and means the mastery that God entrusted to us.

## The image of God

Perhaps the most familiar of all the implications of the creation material for biblical ethics is the affirmation that God made human beings in his own image. This has been explored in great depth by many scholars, biblical and ethical. I would want to pick out just two main results of it as regards ethical decision-making in the Old Testament.

### *i) The sanctity of human life*

As early as the texts of the Noah covenant the principle was stated that human life was to be treated as inviolable on the grounds of the image of God. Even animals would be held to account by God for the killing of humans. The influence of this principle can be seen in Israel's law. Laws about domestic animals that injure or kill humans are common in ancient Near Eastern legal *corpora*. All of them prescribe various degrees of compensation and punishment of the owner. Only the Hebrew law prescribes also that the 'guilty' ox was to be stoned to death (Ex. 21:28ff.). It seems most likely that this was because of the religious influence on the law of the principle of the sanctity of human life, as crystallized in Genesis 9:5.<sup>3</sup>

Empirically, this high value shows itself in the narratives in several places where there is an abhorrence for the shedding of innocent



blood (e.g. 1 Sam. 19:4–6, 25:26, 2 Sam. 2:22, 3:28, 37).

## ii) *The equality of human beings*

The Old Testament did not eliminate all social distinctions, such as, for example, the social and economic inferiority of the slave. It did, however, go a long way in mitigating the worst effects, by a theology of essential human equality based on our common createdness. In its law, the Old Testament knows nothing of the graded penalties for crimes against different ranks of victim, as is common in ANE law. There was equality before the law for native and alien. The slave was given human and legal rights unheard of in contemporary societies. This is reflected in Job's great ethical self-defence in which he bases his claim to have treated his slaves with justice in any case they brought against him upon an unambiguous statement of created human equality between master and slave: 'did not he who made me in the womb also make them?' (Job 31:15). Once again it is in the Wisdom literature that we find the broadest outworking of this creation theology into the social ethos of Israel. There are several texts in Proverbs which affirm the equality before God of rich and poor (22:2, 29:13), and others which so identify God with every human being, regardless of status, that what we do to them we do to God himself (14:31, 17:5, 19:17). This is not the only place where we can hear distinct echoes of the Wisdom tradition in the ethical teaching of Jesus.

## Disordered creation

All the points above flow from Israel's understanding of the world as a place created and ordered by God. But of course it is also a place spoiled and disordered by humanity. Ethical decision-making, therefore, has to respond to the presence of evil and apparent chaos within human society and the world itself. It could be said that the whole Bible from Genesis 4 on is the deposit of that struggle. But as regards specific ethical behaviour, the main thrust of the Old Testament is that a person must persevere in his commitment to upright behaviour in the sight of God, even in the face of contradiction

from fellow human beings or from adverse and inexplicable circumstances. I would point to two significant areas.

First, in the Psalms there is a remarkable reflection of Israel's ethical value, struggles and endeavour, scarcely matched at all in Christian hymnody. It is noticeable how often the Psalmists affirm their intention to continue to pursue righteous behaviour in spite of a surrounding climate of evil, to speak and do the truth when engulfed in lies, to keep clean hands in a dirty world. The cost of this stance is considerable and is also reflected in the anguish of the Psalms. The person who keeps his word will sometimes find that he ends up hurting himself, but it is a qualification of acceptable worship that he still does so (Ps. 15:4). Surrounded by prosperous, complacent evildoers, the believer is tempted to think his own moral efforts are futile, and can only find respite and perspective in worship (Ps. 73). The world is a wicked place, but the only path to happiness in it, as the deliberately prefatory Psalm 1 makes unambiguously clear, is the committed, systematic choice of the way of the Lord. Such a stance is wise and good and godly. That is to say, the ethics of the Psalmists bind together, in one inclusive world-view, the intellectual, the moral and the religious spheres. For, conversely, the opposite stance is foolish, evil and ungodly: The *fool* says in his heart '*There is no God*', because he has chosen the way of *corruption* (Ps. 14). If the ethos of a people's worship is a good guide to the ethics of their society, then the strong ethical character of the Psalms is very revealing of the moral climate among devout Israelites.

Secondly, the Wisdom tradition, for all its commitment to a consequentialist view of the world in which moral causes and effects are broadly predictable, so that ethical decisions can be made with reasonable confidence, is aware that it does not always work out like that in real life. Ecclesiastes is often regarded as in a sense Wisdom's own self-criticism, as a counterbalance to the broad optimism of Proverbs. It refuses to ignore the brutal realities of life in this world (some have said it is the Hebrew Bible's best commentary on Genesis 3), the absurdities, the injustices, the way the



unexpected disaster can ruin our best endeavours, the unpredictability of life (how a tree will fall or the wind will blow) and above all, the menacing enigma of death. Yet in the midst of all these, Ecclesiastes remains both a theistic believer – this is still God's world and we are accountable to him – and a committed subscriber to the essential moral stance of Yahwism – to fear Yahweh and keep his commandments (12:13), for that is what it means to 'remember your Creator' (12:1).

In conclusion to this first main section, then, we have seen that ethical decisions in the Old Testament were made first of all in response to God as creator. That includes: a monotheistic stance which both excludes the moral degeneracy of polytheism and also simplifies ethics to a fundamentally single choice – to love and obey Yahweh, or not to; basic confidence in the world as a place created and ordered by God in such a way that moral choices matter and have predictable moral consequences that can be known and anticipated; a high degree of 'secular' freedom in how we live in the earth, unfettered by the bondage of occultism, sacral taboos and the fear or manipulation of magic; a primary regard for the value of human life as made in the image of God, which both sets the shedding of innocent blood near the top of the list of ethical negatives and sets the equality of all human beings near the top of the list of ethical positives. And we have seen that the ethical values that flow from these sources are to be preserved and lived out, even in the midst of a cursed earth and a fallen humanity which constantly undermine, deny or reverse them.

## II. RESPONDING TO THE GOD OF COVENANT PURPOSE

The God who created our world and then watched us spoil it chose neither to destroy it nor us, but instead to commit himself under covenant to a project of ultimate redemption and recreation that would involve the whole of the rest of time and space. This is the scope of what God initiated through his dealings with Abraham, beginning in Genesis 12. It is the covenant of grace which stands behind all subsequent

acts of God in history, for it represents God's commitment to the ultimate good of humanity. 'In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed'. The universal scope of this promise echoes throughout the patriarchal narratives (Gen. 18:18, 22:18, 26:4f., 28:14) and then on through the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

### Teleological ethics

A major effect for ethics of this commitment to a covenant purpose of redemption on God's part is the injection of hope. We live within history and all our ethical decisions and actions are subject to its apparent uncertainties. As Ecclesiastes observed so long ago, it is easy to succumb to the meaninglessness of life if we cannot see beyond even our own lives, let alone fathom a grand design to 'life, the universe and everything'. Ethics becomes little more than short term expediency for a slightly more tolerable social existence in our short allotted span. From such nihilism we are rescued only by the teleological view of history which sees an ultimate goal declared by God's covenant promise to Abraham and amplified in the rest of the Hebrew Bible to include a whole new creation. There is a future. There is hope. There is purpose. With such foundations, ethics is worth the effort. The empirical impact of this eschatological context for OT ethics is rather indirect, but still discernible and we shall take it up shortly.

### The people of God

The second very significant dimension of the covenant with Abraham for biblical ethics was the promise of a people. God's answer to a world of nations scattered in arrogance and strife, which was the world portrayed through the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, was to create a new community. It would be a people descended from Abraham and blessed as he was, but who would ultimately be the vehicle for the blessing to the whole world of nations. And it would be a people whose contribution to that purpose would be by their ethical distinctiveness. Simply being Israel was an ethical agenda



and mission in the midst of the world. To be an Israelite was to be called to respond to God's covenant purpose for the nations by living as the people of God in their midst.

This may not seem to fit with the common view that the covenant with Abraham was unconditional. But I question whether that view is correct. In a sense all God's covenant arrangements in the Bible are unconditional in that they do not depend for their initiation on any action or merit of ours and in that they will be fulfilled ultimately by God's grace and not our power to sustain our response. Yet at the same time, all the covenants recorded in scripture are also conditional in the sense that a response is required. In the case of the covenant with Abraham this was not merely the personal requirement of faith and obedience on his part but included also the intention that the people descended from him should be committed to the way of the Lord in full ethical obedience.

The clearest expression of this is Genesis 18:19.

I have chosen him *so that* he will direct his household and his children after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice *so that* the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.

The context of this verse is God's imminent judgement upon Sodom and Gomorrah. It is, in fact, part of a conversation between God and Abraham while God, with his two angelic deputies, was on his way down, so to speak, to find out the truth about the cities and act accordingly. This makes the ethical heart of the verse even more notable. In the midst of a world characterised by Sodom – whose evil is causing an outcry (vs. 20f., twice: *tsa'qah*: *one wonders if the word play is intentional here, as it certainly is in Isa. 5:7*, where 'righteousness' (*tsedaqah*) and 'a cry' (*tsa'qah*) form a contrast parallel to that between 'justice' (*mishpat*) and bloodshed). The presence of these two phrases, 'The way of Yahweh' and 'doing righteousness and justice' (both of which would come among the top five of the most used summaries of OT ethical values), here in the patriarchal narratives shows that Israel's

identity as a distinct ethical community comes well before the Sinai covenant and Mosaic law. It was something written into their genetic code, so to speak, while they were as yet in the loins of Abraham. In fact, such ethical distinctiveness is put forward here by God himself as the very reason for the election of Abraham: 'I have chosen him so that ...'. The sense of purpose is very strong in the verse. Election means election to an *ethical* agenda in the midst of a corrupt world of Sodoms.

But that ethical agenda is itself only part of a still wider purpose. The goal of the verse moves on into a third purpose clause: '... so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him'. That is a clear reference, in the light of the preceding verse, to God's ultimate intention to bring blessing to all nations through the descendants of Abraham. That is God's mission, God's universal agenda. That too was the reason for the election of Abraham. What is therefore highly significant in the structure of the verse, syntactically as well as theologically, is the way ethics stands as the middle term between election and mission. The distinctive quality of life of the people of God, committed to his way of righteousness and justice, stands as the purpose of election on the one hand and the means to mission on the other. It is the fulcrum of the verse.

## Ethics and eschatology

What we have seen, then, is that Israel was called to specific forms of ethical life in order to facilitate God's purpose of bringing the blessing promised to Abraham to the nations. Old Testament ethics is set in a universal and eschatological framework, linked to the mission of being the nation for other nations. This was a dimension of their calling that Israel tended to forget and so it could not be called common or widespread. But there are echoes of it in some places in the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

### i) Psalm 72

There are a number of connections between the Abrahamic covenant and the covenant with David.<sup>4</sup> Among them is an interest in the universal scope of what God was doing.



In David's response to God's covenant promise, for example, there is the awareness that what God would do through the house of David would become a talking point among the nations (2 Sam. 7:25f.). The prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple (which was the historical outcome of the immediate desire of David that had led to the declaration of God's covenant with him), has the remarkable section asking God to fulfil the prayers of foreigners who will pray to him there having heard of his reputation (1 Kgs. 8:41–43). The motive behind the prayer is that 'all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you'. God's ethical demands on the house of David were written into the covenant from the start in the sonship response of obedience (2 Sam. 7:14f.). They had in any case been spelt out in the law of the king in Deut. 17:14–20, which unmistakably put the king under the covenant law of Sinai, with its demands for justice and protection of the weak. This was precisely what so many kings failed to do. Towards the end of the monarchy, Jeremiah stood at the gate of the royal palace itself to declare the ethical requirement on the incumbents of David's throne – a declaration which clearly subordinated Zion to Sinai (Jer. 22:1–3). Note that the nations are in view again, if only in bafflement (v. 8f.).

The clearest link between the universal scope of the Davidic ideal and the ethical demand is found in Psalm 72. In the form of a prayer for the king, it concentrates strongly on the various forms of moral government that should flow from it, emphasizing yet again the socio-ethical combination of 'righteousness and justice' which he, as the embodiment of Israel, should manifest *par excellence*. And in v. 17 it looks beyond Israel to the rest of the world, with a clear echo of the Abrahamic covenant of blessing to the nations.

All the nations will be blessed through him (*i.e.*, in this context, the royal son of David, ruling in justice) and they will call him blessed.

The main thrust of this Psalm is that if the king leads the nation in line with God's moral requirements then, first of all, the nation itself will enjoy peace and prosperity.

But beyond that, by linking the king's rule to the Abrahamic covenant, the Psalmist makes the point that God's purpose of blessing for the nations is inseparable from the ethical quality of life among his own people.

#### ii) *Jeremiah 4:1–2*

The same thought exercised Jeremiah's mind as he called the people to repentance at a time, probably early in his ministry, when that was still felt to be a possibility. In 4:1–2, Jeremiah first urges the people to renounce idolatry and make their worship and general social life (which is probably what is meant by swearing 'as the LORD lives') compatible with 'truth, justice and righteousness'. Only such a radical return to the covenant demands would be credible as a genuine 'return' to Yahweh (4a, which follows the lengthy exposition of the 'return' sub-theme in ch. 3). But what if they do respond thus? The fact that judgement would thereby be averted from Israel herself is taken for granted and Jeremiah's vision skips forward to a more universal vision, and another clear allusion to the Abrahamic covenant:

Then the nations will be blessed by him  
and in him they will glory (Jer. 4:2b)

Clearly Jeremiah believed that the quality of Israel's ethical life was not just an end in itself, but was supposed to have far-reaching consequences for the nations as well. Much more was at stake in the matter of Israel's moral and spiritual repentance than just saving Israel's own skin from judgement.

#### iii) *Isaiah 48:1, 17–19*

In the following generation, those who had failed to heed the warning of Jeremiah and the pre-exilic prophets heard the almost wistful voice of God ruefully pondering on what might have been the case if they had done so. In v. 1, the prophet makes a similar point to that of Jeremiah above: the people were claiming the name of God's people and were using his name in worship and social life. But all this was contradicted in their practical life by the absence of 'truth and righteousness'. Then, in vs. 17ff., in a kind of 'unrealized eschatology', God indulges in a very human kind of 'if only ...'. V. 19



effectively says that if only Israel had been the community of obedience and righteousness that he desired and planned for them, then the promise to Abraham could have been fulfilled! The point is rhetorical and hypothetical, of course, and not to be pushed literally. But it does very strongly bind together again the link between God's redemptive purpose for humanity, as signalled in the Abrahamic covenant, and his ethical demand on Israel as the people of God.

#### *iv) Folly in Israel?*

The above examples are taken from Israel's worship and the words of the prophets. Thinking empirically, I cannot point to any examples from the narratives where one could argue that an ethical decision or stance was governed by this consideration, at least explicitly. Nevertheless it is apparent that there was an awareness that Israel was called to a high moral standard as a distinctive of national identity. I wonder if such a concept lies, almost sub-consciously, behind the expression that occurs several times 'folly in Israel'. When certain events happen that are abnormally wicked, the verdict on them, whether in the mouth of participants in the events, or in the interpretation of the narrator, is that such things ought not to be done in Israel. Israel is called to a better way, and such things must be ruthlessly excluded. The expression features in the following passages: Gen. 34:7; Deut. 22:21, Josh. 7:15, Jdg. 19:23, 20:6, 10; 2 Sam. 13:12.

### III. RESPONDING TO THE GOD OF REDEMPTIVE ACTION

The God who declared his covenant purpose to Abraham went on to act in accordance with it in the historic deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The exodus is explicitly said to be motivated by God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham. And within three months of the event, God introduced Israel to the ethical implications of what had happened to them.

#### **Priestly and holy**

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles'

wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:4-6).

This is a crucial text. It is a hinge between the redemptive history of the exodus and the law and covenant texts that follow. In these verses God gives to Israel an identity and a mission, which is the basis for the ethical demands of the law. And behind both stands the redemptive action of God himself. So by way of preface to all the detailed legislation to follow, the fundamental ethical principle is that God's requirements depend, first, on what God himself has done and, second, on who Israel is. We shall look at both of these.

#### *i) God's initiative and universal interest*

'You have seen what I have done . . .'. Just as he would later do when introducing the ten commandments, so here God begins with a historical reminder of his own action. For those listening on this occasion it was a recent memory. Three months previously they had been slaves in Egypt. Now they were free. And God reminds them that it had been because of his own initiative of grace and promise-keeping. The importance of this cannot be overstated, for it is a principle running through the whole of biblical ethics. Whatever moral endeavours we may make can never be more than a response to what God has already done for us. The priority of grace over law was not a New Testament discovery or revolution, but built into the nature of divine-human encounter from the beginning and an explicit part of the covenant with Israel. We will note the theme of gratitude as a motivation for some OT laws later.

But even as the historical reference homes in on God's special action for Israel, his 'treasured possession', two phrases make sure that the perspective stays broad – as broad as God's concern for 'all nations' and 'the whole earth'. Israel as God's special possession were not his exclusive possession, for he can say 'the whole earth is mine'. Even while they had been in Egypt God had made this clear, in word and deed, to Pharaoh



(Ex. 9:14, 16, 29). So, although at this point in the canonical story the focus is primarily on Israel and the unique redemptive and covenant relationship between them and God, the universal scope of the Abrahamic covenant has not been lost sight of. Whatever ethical demands follow must be set not only in the immediate historical context, but in the same broad context that we sketched above in section II.

ii) *Israel's identity and moral obligation*

Having laid the foundation of his own redemptive action and universal concern, God goes on to spell out the roles and mission of Israel in two phrases which echo elsewhere in the OT and indeed are picked up and applied to the church in 1 Peter 2:9. 'You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.' It is the qualifying terms, priestly and holy, which are significant. That is the kind of kingdom and nation Israel were to be in the midst of the world of nations. Each term deserves some explication for both are key words in Israel's ethical system.

a) *Priestly*. A priest in OT Israel was someone who stood in between God and the rest of the people. He was a mediator in both directions. On the one hand he represented God to the people, both in his life and example, but especially through his responsibility for teaching the law (Lev. 10:9–11, Deut. 33:8–10, Jer. 18:18, Hos. 4:6, Mal. 2:1–9). Through the priest, then, the people *could know God*. On the other hand, he represented the people before God, since it was his task to bring the sacrifices and to make atonement for the people at the altar. Through the priest, then, the people *could come to God*.

So it is with this double significance that God says to Israel as a *whole community*, 'you are to be my priesthood in the midst of the nations of the earth'. On the one hand, Israel would represent the true God to the nations – revealing his will, his moral demands, his saving purpose, etc. Through Israel, other nations *would know Yahweh*. But also, it would be through Israel that God would eventually bring the other nations to himself in redemptive, atoning, covenant relationship. Through Israel, other nations

*would come to Yahweh*. Later prophets pick up both ideas: the law of God going out from Israel to the nations, and other nations coming up to God to or through Israel (or Jerusalem). The priesthood identity of Israel thus gives to OT ethics yet another dimension of 'missionary' relevance. Right at the start of their historical journey, God sets their ethical agenda in the context of their mission in the midst of the nations.<sup>5</sup>

b) *Holy*. The word does not mean that Israel were to be extra specially religious. Rather it has the sense of distinctiveness and difference. Israel would be a nation as other nations, but they were to be holy – different from the rest of the nations. The so-called Holiness Code expresses this very succinctly:

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you (Lev. 18:3).

This is the practical implication of the priestly doctrine of Israel's election from among the nations:

You shall be holy to me; for I Yahweh am holy, and have separated you from the people that you should be mine (Lev. 20:26).

Even the foreigner Balaam recognized this conclusive sense of distinctiveness about Israel (Num. 23:9).

The outworking of this characteristic affected every dimension of national life, including their religion, but permeating social, economic, political and personal affairs also. This is most clearly seen in Leviticus 19, a chapter full of very practical laws for daily life, all under the heading 'You shall be holy, as I, Yahweh your God, am holy'. Some of the laws in this chapter have to do with the cultic life of Israel, but the majority are social in nature. Holiness affected more than the ritual area of life. What you do with your agricultural produce is part of holiness (9f., cf. Dt. 24:19). Holiness also dictates fair treatment and payment of employees (13, cf. Dt. 24:14); practical compassion for the disabled and respect for the elderly (14, 32, cf. Dt. 27:18); the integrity of the judicial process (15 cf. Dt. 16:18–20); safety pre-



cautions (16b, cf. Dt. 22:8); ecological sensitivity (23ff., cf. Dt. 20:19f.); equality before the law for ethnic minorities (33f., cf. Dt. 24:17); honesty in trade and business (35f., cf. Dt. 25:13ff.). In short, to love your neighbour (and even the stranger) as yourself (18, 34), is not a revolutionary love ethic initiated by Jesus but the fundamental ethical demand of Old Testament holiness.

John Gammie's recent book, *Holiness in Israel*,<sup>6</sup> very helpfully distinguishes the different responses to the demand to be holy that are found in the priestly materials, the prophetic books, and the Wisdom tradition. For the priests, holiness required fundamental cleanness in every part of life. For the prophets, holiness must be demonstrated in societal justice. For the Wisdom schools, holiness must be seen in personal and practical morality. The categories are helpful, but not, of course, mutually exclusive. For example, Gammie appreciates that Leviticus 19 is a most important chapter in demonstrating that the priestly tradition was not concerned merely with the cultic expression of holiness. It not only contains most of the decalogue in one way or another, but also echoes many of the concerns of the Deuteronomic and prophetic movements (not to mention its being a major source behind the ethical teaching of the epistle of James).

[For the authors of the Holiness Code] the meaning of the divine challenge to be 'holy (ones)' extends far beyond the idea of 'separation' from other peoples to include the deepest kind of ethical and humanitarian concerns. . . . Not only are proper attitudes and duties toward fellow human beings enumerated in this chapter as the requirements of holiness but also proper duties and attitudes toward God – among which reverence especially is emphasized (vv. 14, 32). . . . Leviticus 19 must clearly be ranked as one of the high points of Old Testament ethics, along with Amos 5, Micah 6, Ezekiel 18, and Job 31. . . . It is thus altogether misleading and a caricature of the priestly understanding of holiness to reduce it to a set of rules pertaining to purity . . . (pp. 33f.).

## Obeying the law

The first response, then, to God's redemptive action was for Israel to recognize their own identity and mission in the world, as God's priesthood, called to be holy – distinctive in every area of life. That having been grasped, it was then given detailed and specific content in the law itself. The logic of Exodus 19:5 is that *if* Israel will obey the law and keep the (Sinai) covenant, *then* they can function as God's priesthood in the midst of the nations. That is, obedience to the law is a condition of the fulfilment of their mission, not a prior condition of their redemption. That had already been accomplished, as God repeatedly insists. All else is response. But the response is essential to God's purpose for them. Once again we see the vital link between ethics and mission.

Setting the Old Testament law in this perspective (God's redemptive action and human response to it) is helpful in softening the otherwise starkly deontological flavour of the law. In the popular mind, 'Old Testament ethics' is used as a shorthand for absolute rules, mostly beginning 'Thou shalt not', and sanctioned by severe retributive punishments. Like all caricatures, this popular impression exaggerates a feature of the Old Testament which nevertheless does exist. The covenant relationship between Israel and God entailed obedience to 'laws, statutes and ordinances'. Ethics certainly involved rules, not just results. But the important thing is that the Old Testament's deontology was as theistic as its consequentialism. The authority of the law was not that of abstract ethical absolutes but the authority of the personal God whom they knew as creator and redeemer. Obedience to the law was thus not just conformity to the rules *per se* but personal loyalty to the God who gave them.

Making ethical decisions in the Old Testament, then, certainly took account of obeying God's law (to the extent it was known – a point discussed further below). But the law itself contains a high degree of 'motive clauses' which clarify why and how the law was to be obeyed, and some of these can be illustrated empirically from other parts of the Old Testament.



i) *Love and gratitude*

The very juxtaposition of God's redemptive action with the moral demand of the law creates the impression that the latter is viewed as the appropriate response of those who have enjoyed the blessing of the former. The impression is confirmed by the heavy emphasis on this motivation for obedience in Deuteronomy 4–11. The God who loved Israel's forefathers enough to rescue their descendants from slavery is a God to be loved in return, with a covenant love expressed in obedience. Significantly, the area of law where this motive of gratitude for historical deliverance is most pressed is that which concerned the poor, the stranger, the debtor, the slave – the very conditions from which God had rescued Israel (e.g. Ex. 22:21, 23:9, Lev. 19:33–36, 25:38, 42f., 54f., Deut. 15:15).

There are some examples in the narratives of decisions being taken in the light of God's historical example. These do not simply go back to the paradigmatic history of exodus to conquest, but sometimes set particular decisions in the light of an act of God in the immediate past. Saul's choice of mercy over revenge (1 Sam. 11:12f.) and David's choice of equal shares of the booty (1 Sam. 30:22–25) were both based on immediately prior acts of Yahweh. Likewise it is characteristic of Psalms of individual thanksgiving (and some parts of Psalms of lament) to make a renewed commitment to obedience and upright living out of gratitude for an experience of God's deliverance or blessing (e.g. Ps. 40:6–8):

ii) *Imitation of Yahweh*

The way God had acted on behalf of Israel was not merely to provide the motive for ethical obedience but also the model for it. This is implied in the common expression for obedience to the law, 'walking in the way of the Lord'. In Deuteronomy 10:12–19 this motive of imitation (17b–19) is added to the motive of gratitude (15).<sup>7</sup>

The life of David again affords an example of this particular influence on conduct. His treatment of Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 9 arises from a deliberate desire to show 'the kindness (*hesed*) of Yahweh' to any survivor of the house of Saul, for the sake of his promise to Jonathan. The expression prob-

ably means not only the *hesed* (faithfulness to a commitment) which Yahweh commands, but also that which he characteristically shows. Likewise again, the Psalms give evidence that this dimension of ethics featured in Israel's worship. The constant praising of Yahweh for his *ethical* attributes was bound to have a sub-conscious effect on the ethical conscience of the worshipper. But it was not always left at the sub-conscious level. Psalms 111 and 112 are parallel acrostic Psalms clearly meant to be taken together. The first is a descriptive praise of Yahweh, the second a description of the man who fears Yahweh. In several places the cross parallelism between the two is striking and must be deliberate. Note the following (the verse numbers are the same for both Psalms):

- 3 their righteousness endures for ever
  - 4 both are gracious and compassionate
  - 5 God provides food; the righteous man is generous, and just
  - 7 God is trustworthy; the righteous man is trusting
  - 9 God provided redemption; the righteous man scatters gifts to the poor (used by Paul to encourage Christian giving, 2 Cor. 9:9).
- Again one is led to marvel at the poverty of so much Christian hymnody in making such direct links between the ethical character of God and the ethical quality of life required of the worshipper (cf. Pss. 15 and 24).

iii) *For our own good*

Obedience to the law is not an arbitrary or inexplicable duty, but is constantly buttressed by the assurance that it is for our own good. This is the thrust of the exhortations in Deuteronomy (e.g. 4:40, 5:33, 6:24f., 30:15–20, etc.). Psalm 72 links together the degree of obedience to the law on the part of the king, as representative and pace-setter for the whole community, with the degree of blessing and prosperity enjoyed by the nation. Conversely, the prophets can link together economic or political disaster with practical disobedience (e.g. Hosea 4). Nehemiah counteracts the greedy kind of self-interest that had led to exploitation and impoverishment among the post-exilic community with a higher level of self-interest in



his appeal to the wealthier to 'walk in the fear of Yahweh' lest his judgement fall on the whole nation (Neh. 5).

In these ways, the law is anchored in the covenant reality, which was the personal relationship between Yahweh and not just Israel collectively but also every Israelite. That is why the language of Israel's worship which is richest in praise of the law sees it as the prime way of maintaining, expressing and enjoying that relationship which God had made possible by his redemptive righteousness. The ethos of Psalms 1, 19 and 119 is light years distant from the bondage of legalism. True, day to day ethical decisions must be made in obedience to God's law. Perhaps that makes the 176 verses of Psalm 119 the lengthiest piece of personalized deontological ethics in the Bible! But the author could never be accused of rule-book morality. On the contrary, it is in obedience that, paradoxically, he finds the greatest peace, security and freedom.

I will always obey your law, for ever and ever.

I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts (44f.).

## Knowing the law

Canonically, then, it is clear that ethical decisions in the Old Testament were related to the moral authority and explicit detail of the law. Empirically, however, we must ask how the law would have been known in Israel. There were two main mechanisms for dissemination of knowledge of the law and its moral demands.

### i) *The family*

Much stress is laid on the teaching role of the family. This is not only seen in the hortatory chapters of Deuteronomy (e.g. 6:7, 11:19, 32:46f.), but is also reflected in the Wisdom tradition. The head of each household had a primary responsibility in this domestic education. Some scholars have also detected the evidence of ancient Israelite catechetical materials in the texts where a father is instructed how to respond to a son's questions concerning vital events in Israel's history and also about the meaning of the law itself (Ex. 12:26f., 13:14f., Deut. 6:20–

24, Josh. 4:6f., 21–23).<sup>8</sup> I have discussed this familial dimension to Israel's ethical life elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> The expectation that the moral ethos of Israel should be handed on from father to children is thrown into relief by two notable occasions when it was not met: the failure of Eli's sons (1 Sam. 2:12–17), and even more poignantly, the failure of Samuel's (1 Sam. 8:1–5).

### ii) *The priests*

The teaching function of the priests is often forgotten because of their role in the sacrificial system, but as we saw above, it was of vital importance. It was virtually part of their ordination charge (Lev. 10:10f.). It is put before their sacrificial role in the blessing of Moses (Deut. 33:10), and is the sole, almost proverbial, function attributed to them in Jeremiah 18:18. A reforming king like Jehosphaphat turned to the levitical priests to assist in the dissemination and administration of the law under his judicial arrangements (2 Chron. 19:4–11). Similarly, Ezra employs Levites in his mass programme of 'theological education by extension' in the restored post-exilic community (Neh. 8). Thus, it was through the priests that the people should have known the moral will of God. The prophets' quarrel with the priests was precisely that they had failed in their teaching role, and thus the people, deprived of knowledge of the law were understandably living in disobedience to it (Hos. 4:4–9, Mal. 2:1–9).

In spite of the failures in both mechanisms, there is evidence that apart from the periods of rampant paganism and moral decadence (such as the reign of Manasseh), average Israelites shared a common ethical ethos which was substantially informed by the major distinctives of the Mosaic law. That evidence is to be found in the ethical 'typologies' that are found here and there; that is, the portraits of typically righteous or unrighteous behaviour. These are very revealing precisely because they are not in a legal context, but reflect the extent to which the values of the law penetrated the commonly accepted and assumed values of society. Examples of such lists are found in the narratives (e.g. 1 Sam. 12:1–5), in the Psalms (15, 24), in the Wisdom tradition (e.g. Job



31), and in the prophets (e.g. Ezek. 18). Again, this is material which I have compared in more depth elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> The most notable feature of all these lists is the extent to which they combine what we would call private and public morality – everything from inward thoughts to social responsibility. The narratives also provide some evidence of decisions and actions being taken either explicitly or implicitly in relation to a particular law (e.g. 1 Sam. 28:3, 2 Sam. 11:4, 12:6, 2 Kgs. 14:6).

## CONCLUSION

It is clear from all our discussion that Old Testament ethics overflow any attempt to pour them into a single category. The superficial appearance of being exclusively deontological, because of the prominence and priority of the law in the canonical order of the Hebrew Bible, has to be balanced in several ways. We have seen that the Old Testament itself engages in several kinds of consequentialism and indeed urges the believer to look to the ends of any course of action and evaluate it thereby.

Furthermore, the narratives put before us, usually without much moralistic comment, cases where clashes of moral rules occur and the actors in a story have to make choices according to some implicit prioritizing even of the ten commandments. Saving life appears to justify telling lies (1 Sam. 19:14ff.). Sheer survival seems to demand it also (e.g. 1 Sam. 21:2ff.), though the narrator may be concealing an ethical critique behind the wonderfully ironic compliment that the pagan Achish pays to David who has repeatedly lied to him (1 Sam. 29:6–9, cf. 27:10–12). Another pagan, Abimelech, actually teaches the father of Israel a lesson on the priority of truth-telling over personal protection (Gen. 20).

The ambiguity of situations in themselves is also recognized. Had David slain Saul in the cave or the camp (1 Sam. 24 and 26), both he and even Saul acknowledged that he could have felt morally justified in taking the life of one intent on killing him. His men added to an instinctive situation ethics the theological argument that God himself had engineered the situation for that very pur-

pose. But David (in a rare Old Testament reference to the conscience, 24:5) places a prior principle above the apparent demands of the situation, namely the sanctity of one anointed by God, and chooses the still higher principle of entrusting just retribution to God himself (12) almost as if he had just read Romans 12:17–21 (which is, of course, based on OT texts). On that occasion his own moral reasoning triumphed over an instinctive and opportunist ethic. On another, it was the calm moral reasoning of a woman that prevented him carrying through an emotional and vengeful course of action against Nabal. Abigail's arguments (1 Sam. 25:26–31) included a mixture of deontology (the sanctity of human life, the wrongness of innocent bloodshed, and of taking personal vengeance) and consequentialism (the later effects on David's conscience as king of what he was now planning in hot blood). These kinds of examples of ethical argument and decision in the Old Testament are an illuminating side-light on the more didactic material.

Finally, we have to face the question of whether the ethical teaching of the Hebrew Bible is still authoritative for Christians, or relevant at all to the wider world of peoples and nations outside the covenant of grace. I cannot agree with either the theonomist view which advocates literal (but sometimes curiously selective) obedience to the Mosaic law, or the kind of dispensational millennialist view which demotes or postpones the importance of the Old Testament for Christians in a way that seems incompatible with the words of Jesus and Paul.<sup>11</sup> My own view, which I have tried to set out in more detail in *Living as the People of God*, is that there are scriptural grounds in both Testaments for regarding Israel as God's model, a paradigm for both the people of God throughout history and for the nations as well. This depends partly on the fact that Israel were never meant to be 'a law unto themselves', but were chosen precisely because of God's wider purposes for the rest of humanity. So although the ethics of the Old Testament are very particular, historical and specific, they intentionally had a universal relevance from the beginning. God's revelation and redemptive action in Israel



were explicitly unique, as we have seen. But once we accept both the moral consistency of God and the fact that Israel were called for the sake of the nations, there is an essential continuity between what he required of Israel and what he requires of all human beings, including but not confined to Christians. Thus I would argue that the historical particularism and specificity of Old Testament ethics does not restrict but rather sharpens their universal relevance.

In my book I explain the use of 'paradigm' as follows:

A paradigm is something used as a model or example for other cases where a basic principle remains unchanged, though details differ. It commonly refers, for example, to patterns in grammatical inflection – a verb, say, taken to exemplify the way endings or prefixes will go for other verbs of a similar type. A paradigm is not so much imitated as applied. It is assumed that cases will differ but, when necessary adjustments have been made, they will conform to the observable pattern of the paradigm.

The social relevance of Israel is to be seen as paradigmatic. Indeed, I would regard 'paradigm' as a useful category for ethically understanding and applying the Old Testament itself. This way of looking at the social life, institutions and laws of Israel protects us from two opposite dangers.

On the one hand it means that we do not think in terms of literal imitation of Israel. We cannot simply transpose the social laws of an ancient people into the modern world and try to make them work as written. That would be tantamount to taking the paradigms of a grammar book as the only words one could use in that particular language. The paradigms are there, not to be the sum of possible communication ever after, but to be applied to the infinite complexities of the rest of the language.

On the other hand, the social system of Israel cannot be dismissed as relevant only within the confines of historical Israel, and as totally inapplicable to either the Christian church or the rest of man-

kind. If Israel was meant to be a light to the nations (cf. Is. 49:6), then that light must be allowed to illuminate.<sup>12</sup>

What we must do, then, when seeking to apply the relevance of any OT law, for example, is to question the text in order to discover the objective of the law and then seek to preserve that objective while changing the context from then to now, from there to here. We need to ask questions like: What state of affairs is this law aiming to produce? What kind of situation is it trying to prevent? What category of people is it trying to protect because of their vulnerability or to restore because of their loss? What kind of person is it trying to restrain because of their power or to punish because of their wickedness? What moral principles underlie it? What values and priorities does it embody? What is the balance of creation ideals and fallen realities, of justice and compassion, in this law? Then, having thought deeply through all these dimensions of the law in its Israelite context, one has the challenging task of thinking about our own society and asking, what are comparable situations, persons, principles, values and objectives in our own context? What kind of action – legal, personal, collective, charitable or statutory – will be compatible with the paradigm of the OT law? What existing laws or customs in our society should we critique as being out of line with the biblical paradigm? How can we fulfil its objectives in a very different (or sometimes not too different) human context?

That at least is the beginning of our task. From there we would have to go to fill out the whole Old Testament picture, drawing on the riches of its narratives, prophets, worship and wisdom. And then, of course, we have to set all our reflections in the light of the New Testament, relating Old Testament moral teaching to our status of redemption in Christ, our freedom in the Holy Spirit, our fellowship in the church and our eschatological hope. But all that is another story!

1 O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, (IVP, 1986) p. 61.

2 A very lucid account of it is to be found in R. Higginson: *Dilemmas: A Christian approach to moral decision-making* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), chs. 2 and 8.



- 3 This is not universally accepted among scholars of Israelite and comparative ancient Near Eastern Law, but it is a view with strong supporters. I have discussed the issue, with full bibliography in *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 156–60.
- 4 These have been thoroughly explored by R.E. Clements, *Abraham and David* (SCM, 1967).
- 5 This understanding of the text is reinforced by the way it is used by Peter, who binds together the priestliness of God's people (Christians, including Gentiles whom he is addressing), their witness to God's saving action, and their ethical obligation to live visibly good lives in the midst of a watching world (1 Pet. 2:9–12).
- 6 John G. Gammie, *Holiness in Israel*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Fortress, 1989).
- 7 I have discussed more fully these dimensions of motivation for Old Testament ethics in *Living as the People of God* (IVP, 1983), ch. 1.
- 8 See J. A. Soggin, 'Cultic-Aetiological Legends and Catechesis in the Hexateuch', in *Old Testament and Oriental Studies*, Biblica et Orientalia 29 (1975), pp. 72–77.
- 9 In detail, in *God's People in God's Land*, chs. 2. and 3; and in a more applied way, in *Living as the People of God*, ch. 8.
- 10 In *Living as the People of God*, ch. 9.
- 11 For a representative survey of the theonomist view, see Greg Bahnsen, 'Christ and the Role of Civil Government' in *Transformation*, 5.2 and 3 (1988), and for a comparable dispensationalist view, see Norman Geisler, 'Dispensationalism and Ethics', *Transformation*, 6.1 (1989).
- 12 *Living as the People of God*, pp. 43f.