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0521430593 - Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics

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Excerpt

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Introduction: Relating the Bible to Christian ethics

As drink is pleasant to them that be dry, and meat to them that be hungry; so is the reading, hearing, searching, and studying of Holy Scripture, to them that be desirous to know God, or themselves, and to do his will.¹

One of the more rewarding features of the current academic scene is the growth of interdisciplinary studies. As the above quotation shows, the Reformation viewed interpretation, theology, self-understanding and ethics as part of an organic whole, an integrated movement in the divine-human symphony. It is only in recent times that 'biblical interpretation' has re-emerged as an attempt to co-ordinate and interrelate a variety of disciplines accustomed to operate with a jealous regard for their independence: textual study, exegesis, theology, history, hermeneutics, ethics... Whereas the legacy of the Enlightenment was fragmentation into separate disciplines, detailed attention is now being given to the process of reading texts, which involves many disciplines. Diplomatic relations have been re-established also with the world of literature. Results are already impressive. 'In the waning years of the twentieth century, and at the heights (or depths) of secularisation, the Bible is being reaffirmed and re-examined as one of Western literature's greatest texts.'²

Ethics has resurfaced in hermeneutical debate. Prominence has been given, for example, to the ethics of biblical interpretation,³ and new studies have been made of ethics in the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament.⁴ In the context of such developments, this book sets out to examine the whole range of interaction between biblical interpretation and Chris-

tian ethics. Such a project is facilitated by the fact that Christian ethics itself has emerged as a discipline from a long subservience to philosophy, theology, exegesis and social science to stake its claim to its own integrity, although it is unlikely to lose sight of its compound nature, one element of which is its biblical base. Indeed, an intrinsic relation between biblical interpretation and Christian ethics can be claimed with some confidence. The area of difficulty lies not in the general principle, but in the practicalities of this interaction, which involves not two disciplines, but two interdisciplinary areas. Such complexity can lead to the taking of shortcuts, with damaging consequences – thus giving further legitimation to a study such as this! It is well, therefore, to begin by frankly recognising some of the difficulties.

ACCESSIBILITY

The New Testament does not set out to be a handbook or compendium of ethics or moral instruction. The moral teaching which it contains is embedded in the context of the life and mission of the church. It is true that early studies in the field tended to focus on such themes as ‘the ethics of Jesus’ or ‘the ethics of Paul’, and some modern books still follow this time-honoured model. But generally speaking, as New Testament studies became more sophisticated, the moral teaching of Jesus was seen to be accessible only in as far as it was preserved, interpreted and transmitted by the evangelists and the communities they represented.⁵

But the world of the New Testament is qualitatively different from that of the modern interpreter, who has not only inherited the bequest of the scientific and technological revolutions, but is living in a time of astonishing cultural transformation. The inherently strange New Testament world view represents a wholly different civilisation, and one which, as Schweitzer demonstrated memorably, was determined and permeated by eschatological expectation. The notion that the End was rushing in to overwhelm the present age, and that the breakdown of the present cosmic order was already evident, deeply affected the

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way ethics was conceived, whether in epistles, gospels or apocalypse.

Thus interpreters came to accept – in many cases only slowly and with notable reluctance – that one did not have the kind of access to the moral teaching of Jesus or his followers which would readily allow one to read off from the pages of the New Testament definitive solutions to moral problems. At best, one could hope to join in the process of Christian moral decision-making which clearly exercised the minds of apostles and house churches alike and perhaps share, however remotely, in the moral integrity of Jesus. But any investigator who wished to do so had to master the tools of the trade, namely the tradition-historical approach with its emphases on source, form and redaction criticism, and its concern for the socio-historical context of the material in question.⁶

A price has to be paid for such scholarly discipline, and one must ensure that one is not overcharged for it! It may tend to represent the study of ethics in the New Testament as a minor offshoot, almost a by-product, of a relatively arcane academic discipline, to which only the guild of New Testament scholarship has access. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, speaks of the great gulf which separates the communities of faith today and historical biblical scholarship.⁷ This is a matter of serious concern; yet, if the extremes of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism can be avoided, the New Testament may impress the reader not only with the strangeness and intensity of its eschatology, but also with the vigour and challenge – the real presence⁸ – of its moral concern.

CONTEXTUALITY

Does this combing of the sources enhance or inhibit the contribution of the New Testament to ethics? In a strange way it may do both. The ancient world to which the New Testament belongs is not completely closed to the modern investigator. It is open to historical criticism and to sociological research, and these disciplines not only present the wider moral and cultural

milieu of the early Christian communities, but also set their eschatology and moral practice in perspective and thus render them more meaningful to the outside enquirer. As the world of the New Testament thus evinces an ethos of Christian moral concern, an affinity is established between the ancient setting and the modern interpreter who is reading this material in the context of moral concern today.

If, however, one fails to take due note of considerations of context, the attempt to use New Testament material may be invalidated. A non-contextual use of the Bible can perpetrate serious error and prompt overcorrection. Thus Jack T. Sanders:

The ethical positions of the New Testament are the children of their own times and places, alien and foreign to this day and age. Amidst the ethical dilemmas which confront us, we are now at least relieved of the need or temptation to begin with Jesus, or the early church, or the New Testament, if we wish to develop coherent ethical positions. We are freed from bondage to that tradition, and we are able to propose, with the author of the Epistle of James, that tradition and precedent must not be allowed to stand in the way of what is humane and right.⁹

Several points are being telescoped here. The writer's emphasis on context is entirely appropriate. But one should also point out that tradition is a double-edged sword – Sanders stands in a tradition too! – and that, while tradition can inhibit, it can also guide and inform. The New Testament tradition – and not only the Epistle of James! – contains material which gives pre-eminent recognition to what is humane and right. Contextual considerations in themselves do not justify Sanders' apparent abandonment of a biblical basis for Christian ethics, but his strictures on non-contextual exegesis are certainly in order. B. C. Birch put the matter thus: 'in Christian ethics the Bible is always primary but never self-sufficient'.¹⁰

Recent developments in the sociology of knowledge have put great emphasis on social context as the ground of all thinking. The logical conclusion is that all documents have to be deconstructed in terms of their socio-historical and material presuppositions. The problem is then to ascertain whether we are dealing simply with a culture-bound phenomenon, a piece

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of ancient social history, or whether there is an ideological tension in the material pointing to moral and religious issues of perennial or universal significance.

INTERPRETATION

The New Testament – let alone the Bible – is diverse. Not only does it contain many different genres and forms, but there are striking contrasts within the same genre (for example, the Synoptic Gospels and John). Different documents reflect different contexts: such as the Gentile mission, the Hellenistic Jewish milieu and Jewish Christianity. There are also different ways of reading the New Testament: the historical and literary approaches are not always easy to yoke together. Above all, while the New Testament witnesses to the supreme event of Jesus Christ, its understanding of that event is informed by the Hebrew scriptures, which (often in translated form) constituted the scripture of the early church communities. When Old and New Testaments are placed side by side (as they eventually came to be), the diversity is immense and gives urgency to the question of overall structure.¹¹ The question is complicated by the emergence of the concept of the canon of scripture, which provided the church with a rule of faith and life. In view of the diversity discussed above, we may well ask if there is effectively a canon within a canon. Do we quietly assume the priority of certain books? And if we appeal to ways in which the ancients interpreted the Bible, are the interpretive procedures of a millennium ago defensible today? How then is the Bible to be read?

These questions, though fundamental, are not unanswerable. It is not difficult, for example, to locate the centre or focal point in the structure of scriptural understanding found in the New Testament. It is, in a word, Christ.¹² To put the matter more strikingly:

Christianity was born in hermeneutics. Its primal act of appropriation was the claim that the life and work of Jesus were the preordained fulfilment of earlier prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures. This was the famous ‘key’ without which there was no access to the Bible.¹³

Hence the importance of the trajectories of understanding which run in both directions from the centre throughout the whole complex of Old and New Testaments. Provided that the centre is clearly located, Christian moral teaching can draw from these trajectories and thus make creative use of selected material from the Hebrew Bible and, indeed, from an even wider cultural context.

APPLICATION

The problems of application in the field of ethics are considerable. Does the New Testament – or the Bible – provide a set of coherent principles or rules for application in all situations? If the exegete has doubts, the ethicist has even stronger misgivings. Even if situation ethics is regarded as extreme,¹⁴ issues may well be specific to the context in which they arise. Many modern issues have no counterpart in the New Testament, and even recurrent issues such as abortion are culturally relative.¹⁵ Further, some ethicists might argue that the autonomy of ethics, which they endorse, is infringed if an external authority such as the Bible is intruded. Against this notion theologians such as Barth and Bultmann protested so vehemently that they denied the validity of human systems of ethics. Human beings must be open to the Word from beyond them, the Word that sets them free. Or, as Iris Murdoch has suggested, they must look outward at Christ. ‘The argument for looking outward at Christ and not inward at Reason is that self is such a dazzling object that if one looks *there*, one may see nothing else.’¹⁶

The use of biblical material in ethics can be controversial and open to challenge, but it is not thus automatically invalidated. On the contrary, by virtue of its transcendent horizon or ultimate concern it may well be in a position to present a radical challenge to conventional ethics. The claim of biblical ethics to serious consideration in moral decision-making today rests on its radical openness to the Other – God, neighbour and (at least in Jesus’ teaching) enemy, as well as the poor, the needy and the victims of oppression; and on its insistence that one can attain

such openness only through the conquest of those powerful forces, operating both internally and externally, which close mind, spirit and will to transformative possibilities. How such a claim was handled in major phases of modern scholarship and in contemporary debate is the central theme of this book.

BEYOND THE DIFFICULTIES

Merely to outline difficulties, however, would be excessively negative in the introduction to a book such as this. One can be positive about interpretation today. The place of cultural tradition has come to the fore in recent philosophical discussion: all debate takes place within its parameters.¹⁷ Christian interpretation and ethics stand in a tradition that goes back to New Testament and Patristic times, to the Middle Ages and the Reformation, and includes the critical tradition that stemmed from the Age of Enlightenment. But traditional understanding can also be challenged and reworked. In the exciting times in which we live, interpretation and ethics find their context in a time of rapid cultural change where the parameters sketched out by Enlightenment thinkers have been decisively shifted, not least in the era of science post-Einstein. No longer is it acceptable to view the world in simple subject–object terms. Today, there is a recognition of relativity; we *participate* in the reality we study; we are an integral part of the universe whose secrets we would unlock. And, as we do so, we discover *ourselves*. The Enlightenment mode, for all its concern for freedom, rationality and culture, had about it an aspect of domination which had its correlative in alienation,¹⁸ and its critique of religion combined valid appraisal with, at times, neurotic hostility. The relatively open holistic ethos of the emergent modern paradigm may well provide a more promising scene for biblical interpreters and ethicists.

Like all cultural developments, interpretation is part of a developmental chain: to understand where we are at the present time requires awareness of the process by which we got here. In this book, we begin with the liberal modernism which, after predictable apologetic defensiveness, embodied the posi-

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tive and optimistic response within biblical interpretation and Christian ethics to the new rationalistic spirit. The result was the 'eternal values' (Part One) which the liberals generated through their interpretive approach and which informed their personal and social ethics. But liberalism, with its reliance on historical criticism, nurtured within itself the seeds of its own downfall. Part Two traces the undermining of the liberal consensus, largely through contextual emphases which highlighted eschatology. Eternal values are now replaced by 'interim' or 'charismatic' ethics, by various forms of divine command given in the address of the Word, or by 'faith ethics', while acute difficulties emerge in the realm of social ethics. Part Three is concerned with radically participative paradigms, which mark a new age in interpretation and raise acute ethical issues. These include the ethics of historical reading – and its consequences for ethics; and the ethics of contemporary reading – which holds interpreters accountable for the use they make of the texts. As well as traditional Western paradigms, feminist and global perspectives are also taken into account. Thus, to relate Christian ethics to biblical interpretation is not to impose a strait-jacket upon it, but to empower it, through the horizons which are thus opened up, to contribute meaningfully to global discourse about the priorities and options confronting humankind today.¹⁹

PART ONE

Liberal principles and practice

The rationalists of the Enlightenment were correct in their view of the mind's ability to know the world. But they claimed too much, too confidently and too soon. They aimed at an omniscience that is not for human knowers to obtain, or even to aspire to.

(Colin Gunton)¹

PHILOSOPHICAL AND CRITICAL GROUNDWORK

Problematic though it may be, the *Aufklärung* or Age of Enlightenment is the starting-point of our study. How can it be characterised? Sometimes it seems to epitomise a society developing a new confidence, a new awareness of its own potential: a society ready to solve its own problems by initiative and effort, and evincing a belief in its ability both to achieve and to progress materially and culturally. The pre-Copernican, geocentric world was now replaced by an increasingly confident anthropocentric universe. The new confidence could therefore strike a more iconoclastic note. There was a readiness to question, even to overthrow, the structures – whether of authority or power or dogma – which seemed to have retarded freedom and truth. Generally, the *Aufklärung* evinced an enquiring and creative spirit – in this respect, as in some others, the heir of the Renaissance. Human reason and will, human feeling and creative energy: on these foundations humankind would build its house, and neither heaven nor hell would prevail against it!

Sometimes, as in the microcosmic Scottish Enlightenment, the resultant picture is gracious and attractive: like Allan Ramsay's picture of David Hume, a figure of light emerging from the darkness.² But the gentler nature of the Scottish Enlightenment must not obscure the extent of the challenge to existing structures: especially when we revert to the macrocosm of Europe, with its many-stranded new initiatives. In Germany,

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Wolff and Lessing emphasised the centrality of reason, while the romantics, the *Sturm und Drang* movement to which Schiller and Goethe were related, reacted against rationalism, yet philosophers and romanticists alike challenged the grip of traditional institutions and beliefs. The French Revolution was hailed by the Romantic movement as a great blow struck for the freedom of the human spirit. Wordsworth wrote of it:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!³

With its noble principles and horrendous outcome, the revolution was, in fact, an explosive combination of Enlightenment idealism, resentment at social and economic oppression, and political opportunism. Its complex ideological roots included the writings of the philosopher John Locke, on whom Rousseau and Voltaire drew so heavily. His philosophy, which invoked the laws of reason and nature and spoke of 'natural rights', presented a picture of the human being as born free, equal and virtuous, but gradually corrupted by property and luxury, against which it was the role of civil government to give protection. One thing is clear: if existing belief systems were to survive, let alone make a meaningful contribution, they would have to relate to the new age, with its aspirations for freedom and fulfilment, its critical and scientific spirit and its emphasis on human experience.

The position of the apologist was not easy. Among the *philosophes* in France, for example, there was a consensus view that, if the organized churches had legitimate business, their sphere was strictly spiritual and related to the salvation of the soul. The realms of science, government, economics and even morality were autonomous, and had to be freed from the dead hand of ecclesiastical and religious authority. Dogma was rejected as a closed authoritarian system, imprisoning the free spirit, as did autocratic political systems. Thus, as far as possible, religion was marginalised and privatised. The new approach enshrined a reaction, even a neurosis, evidenced in the disowning of the spiritual and cultural heritage of a millennium and a half. It affirmed the dominance of *homo sapiens* over his