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Introduction

Religion and Morality

What is the relationship between religion¹ and morality²? Can religion and morality conflict? Does a religious worldview recognize morality as an independent standard or does morality depend upon religion? What is the nature of ethical obligation? The Bible presents opposing views on many moral issues. For instance, murder is prohibited in the Decalogue, yet Abraham is commanded to kill his son and a divine imperative obligates the Israelites to eternally annihilate Amalek. God is described in the biblical text as exacting fair retribution upon humanity, but, at times, the righteous suffer, as in the Book of Job. One is cautioned to distance oneself from falsehood in Scripture, even though numerous episodes of deception are recounted throughout the Bible, some even instructed by God. How are such contradictions to be understood? In this book, I aim to elucidate the Scriptural moral tradition by subjecting ethically challenging biblical texts to moral philosophical analysis. Each chapter comprises a self-contained topic in ethics and begins with a discussion of the moral debate informed by philosophical arguments, and then applies that ethical framework to biblical narratives to question

¹ By 'religion' I refer to the essential features of monotheistic religions, including belief in the existence of a personal God, His revelation to humanity, and His essence as a commanding God.

² Morality is an understanding of the distinction between right and wrong and living according to that understanding. Ethics is the philosophy of how morality guides behavior. Morality and ethics are closely related, with morality being the foundation of ethics.

the morality of the actions described in the text. I strive to present balanced arguments on both sides of the philosophical debate which advance alternative readings of biblical stories for the reader to evaluate. An exploration of the larger moral problem, in light of ancient, medieval, and contemporary philosophy, can unsettle established assumptions and beliefs and foster moral reflection. Since one interpretation does not exhaust the meaning of a narrative, especially regarding the many biblical stories that are characterized by moral ambiguity, the application of such philosophical arguments to Scriptural episodes can challenge traditional readings, decipher textual ambiguity, and offer alternative interpretations from different perspectives. This work reflects a modest, yet significant, effort to deepen the reader's ability to interpret Scriptural narrative ethically. At the conclusion of each chapter, I offer my own thoughts in response to the moral problems depicted in the narratives.

My research was inspired by Professor Michael Sandel's book and Harvard University course on justice, as I also seek to challenge ethical perceptions through contemporary moral debates. As in Sandel's work, I want to introduce my readers to diverse philosophical views, such as those of Aristotle, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Constant, and examine the implications of the arguments developed by advocates of various positions. Philosophical concepts including utilitarianism, consequentialism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics are explored and the reasoning behind moral choice is challenged. However, unlike Sandel's work, I use the ethical debates to analyze the Jewish moral perspective derived from Scripture. The ethical considerations articulated by the philosophers contribute to a better understanding of challenging biblical episodes and their implications for normative morality. Following a discussion of the philosophical issues, the reader is in a position to broach the biblical text from a new perspective, ask difficult ethical questions, and investigate the teachings of Scripture and its interpreters. Drawing on rabbinic, exegetic, and philosophic literature, both Jewish and non-Jewish, this book critically analyzes biblical texts and probes biblical figures' conduct and character in an effort to enrich the reader's understanding of the Scriptural lessons.

The Bible rarely offers any explicit evaluation of the behavior or character of its protagonists. It is unclear whether the silence

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of the biblical text surrounding immoral conduct implies a condoning attitude or whether the omission of any praise in most circumstances reflects biblical disapproval. Often rabbinic and exegetical interpretations of the Bible offer apologetic explanations to neutralize a pejorative evaluation of seemingly immoral behavior of biblical figures, and to afford them more positive portrayals, as if to imply that their actions are justified. Some of these comments even diverge far from the literal meaning of the text, as exegetes and philosophers try to rationalize and explain away seemingly blatant unethical acts. However, such arguments may not be entirely satisfying and are, perhaps, unsound from a literary or philosophical perspective. Rather, an analysis of literary hints in the text or the development of events connected to the character involved in the morally questionable act can contribute to moral evaluation. Even though no clear judgment of the character's conduct is included within the episode, subtle textual parallels to other references in Scripture or future events in the figure's life can be interpreted as a reward/approval or punishment/retribution for the earlier immorality. Biblical characters do not necessarily need to be viewed as infallible beings or exempt from moral scrutiny. The literal meaning of Scripture portrays its heroes as complex individuals who achieve spiritual heights and, at times, also struggle with weaknesses. Perceiving biblical figures as human beings who grapple with moral challenges allows readers to better identify with such characters and learn from their experiences.

The Bible's ambiguity makes its narratives rich, complex, and open to profound and paradoxical interpretations. The biblical text deepens moral ambiguity by often neglecting to portray characters, even apparent villains, in an explicitly negative light, thereby allowing for varied readings. The reader neither needs to simplify or stereotype morally ambiguous identities and situations in the Bible, nor attempt to fill in gaps and resolve the narrative ambiguities if that means reducing the text to a definitive moral lesson. Rather, multiple competing reasonable and defensible interpretations may be possible, even if none satisfy every moral challenge. The reader may be guided by his personal value system in forming his interpretative decisions, while recognizing the wide range of alternative possibilities.

Not only is moral evaluation not overt in the Bible, the term ‘morality’ does not appear in the Hebrew Scriptures at all. This, however, does not mean that there is no concept of biblical morality. The Bible certainly discusses the nature of right and wrong behavior; however, it does not present a cohesive philosophical perspective on the relationship between morality and religion. As a result, there is a need for contemporary scholarship to analyze the moral assumptions that underlie biblical law and narrative. There are several works devoted to ethics in the Old Testament. Johannes Hempel’s *Das Ethos des Alten Testaments* synthesizes ethics in ancient Israel in light of philosophy, theology, and anthropology. Walter Eichrodt devotes a section of his *Theology of the Old Testament* to Old Testament ethics.³ Eckart Otto’s *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments*⁴ deals with explicit systems of norms attested to in the Old Testament. John Barton composed several books on the ethics and history of ideas of ancient Israel and the Old Testament. However, all of these works are limited to legal and Wisdom texts and largely exclude narratives and their implications for ethics. As these books reflect, ethics in the Bible is generally perceived as a list of moral directives imposed by God upon humanity which warrant divine retribution. Scholars tend to neglect the ethical potential of normative texts because they seldom include moral instruction in imperative form. However, biblical ethics should not be confined to law, because even what the law prescribes is not necessarily the ethical ideal. While there is a connection between law and moral ideals, law can be a pragmatic compromise between a legislative ideal and a minimum standard that can be enforced. Ethics is more than the observance of law. Just as law does not always describe ideal behavior yet can still elicit moral reflection, so too biblical narratives, at times, portray less than optimal conduct, yet can still foster ethical thinking. Moral instruction can be ascertained from biblical stories in which ethical themes and attitudes are dramatically enacted and replete with moral significance, even though not clearly codified into theoretical principles.⁵

³ Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. John Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961).

⁴ Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994).

⁵ Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil and Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 171–8.

Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, and others who write about ethics in literature similarly recognize narrative as a source of ethical guidance. Nussbaum does not reduce literary protagonists to paradigms of general moral principles, but explores what can be learned from them about the difficulties and merits of living a moral life and the challenges when failing to do so.⁶ Such an approach can be applied to biblical literature, the aim of which is not to extract moral principles from Scripture, but rather to broach biblical stories as an encounter with other moral agents which challenges the reader to grapple with the human condition. Hebrew Scriptures *illustrate* moral problems and inspire free thought, rather than promulgate unequivocal dogmas or normative moral judgments. By revealing the intricacy of the moral world, the Bible presents complex characters and texts that can provide ethical guidance to inform the moral life of the contemporary reader.

Though there has been recent scholarship devoted to biblical narrative, there is need for further exploration. For example, Gordon Wenham's *Story as Torah* deals with biblical narratives, but does not analyze them in light of the ethical consideration of the larger philosophical debate, nor does the work probe into the attitudes of the characters within the story. Rather, Wenham attempts to discover the outlook of the text's implied author and focuses only on episodes in Genesis and Judges.⁷ Mary Mills also discusses narratives in *Biblical Morality*.⁸ However, Mills presents character analyses of biblical figures, including Abraham, David, and Esther, but dedicates less attention to a deep investigation of the ethical considerations of particularly challenging episodes they encounter. While Mills addresses a few of the narratives that I will

⁶ Literature has been ascribed the idiosyncratic, if variegated, ability to make us see, feel, and realize "certain truths about human life [that] can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the ... artist [as opposed to] abstract theoretical discourse" (Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990], 5). Whereas Nussbaum emphasizes the ethical value of emotions, my analyses of characters in narrative focus on the conduct, motivation, and character of biblical figures.

See also: Michael Eskin, "On Literature and Ethics," *Poetics Today* 25, no. 4 (2004): 573–94; Louis Pojman, *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷ Gordon Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

⁸ Mary Mills, *Biblical Morality: Moral Perspectives in Old Testament Narratives* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001).

discuss, the majority of the stories I examine are beyond the scope of her book. My study seeks to discuss numerous biblical narratives organized topically by moral issue. Scripture invites the reader to grapple with these difficult ethical questions, and does not impose easy answers, since such philosophical problems do not have simple resolutions. As I aim to demonstrate throughout this book, the Bible sets up a literary framework for debating moral issues, and it is my hope that a close reading of biblical texts, in light of ethical considerations, helps the reader think about complex moral ideas.

While some biblical scholars are committed to the view that biblical thought, including thought about ethics, cannot be compared usefully to secular thought, I argue that the integration of philosophical and biblical study can prove instructive, despite the clear differences in style and genre. Furthermore, the use of contemporary ethical considerations in analyzing ancient Scriptural narrative can contribute to the modern reader's development of his own moral perspective. Notwithstanding objections regarding anachronisms or the reading of modern perceptions into the Bible, the lessons of biblical stories can still be relevant even though such episodes may have operated in a time with different cultural norms and moral standards from those acceptable today. This interdisciplinary work seeks to explore broad philosophical questions through particular biblical illustrations, as Scriptural narrative provides a medium for the exploration of ethics unavailable in discursive philosophy. Narrative which conveys the complexity of the human condition as an exploration of the particularities of challenging human problems yields moral insight rather than moral rules. Abstract philosophical discussion can become lifeless and unrelatable. Literature particularizes general problems and enables its readers to appreciate nuances that are vital to resolving difficult moral issues, possibilities that may not be considered in abstract thinking about moral dilemmas. Narrative presents a more personal dimension of ethics through which moral reality, in all its complexity and drama, can be explored. Scriptural literature compels the reader to rethink established moral notions by setting up powerful images, which serve both as reinforcements and counterexamples to universal ethical principles. Thus, ethics needs literature, biblical literature in particular, in order to integrate philosophical conceptuality within the human and social domain with which ethics is concerned.

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Additionally, biblical literature needs philosophy to decipher ambiguity within the Scriptural text, to abstract from particulars and to universalize principles and intellectual theories that contribute to a rational understanding of existence. Since philosophical evaluation is largely omitted from the Bible, ethical analysis can uncover subtle theological lessons embedded within narrative. The combination of techniques of philosophy and literary criticism achieves that which neither technique can accomplish on its own. The focus of this work on the analysis of ethically complex biblical texts elucidates moral issues and challenges the established assumptions of Scriptural interpretation. Through a critical analysis of biblical and philosophical sources, the reader can gain a deeper understanding of Scripture and moral philosophy, as well as the interplay between disciplines.

My work begins with an examination of the relationship between religion and morality, since a theological discussion of religious ethics serves as a foundation for subsequent chapters in which the interaction between biblical wisdom and contemporary moral issues is explored. Since biblical literature is a significant source for the development of moral knowledge and ethical reflection, I discuss the Bible throughout my study as a literary genre, and examine it from an internal point of view.⁹ An analysis of biblical and philosophical texts contributes to a deeper understanding of the moral teachings in the Bible, as well as contemporary methodological expressions. In addition to elucidating Scriptural narratives, I aim to move from the particular to the general, using a literary analysis of the biblical texts to shed new light on the general philosophical discussion and to teach about moral reasoning and moral judgments. In modern society, systematic thought is rarely given to the principles underlying one's innumerable moral choices and incessant moral judgments. The objective of this study is not only to elucidate Scriptural stories, but to attempt to understand what the Bible seeks to teach about human moral conduct. Questions to be explored include: Should one defer to God's command or follow one's own moral conscience? How is one to make sense of and respond to injustice? Can one capitalize on a situation in which

⁹ I am interested in analyzing biblical texts that are ethically challenging regardless of the question of how the text came into being or other issues regarding authorship of the Bible.

there is great need? Is it ever appropriate to lie or deceive and, if so, under what circumstances? How can human ethical practices be sustained when encountering dilemmas in which morality is challenged and when the agent must choose between competing values? Such ethical topics will be probed through analyses of contemporary philosophical debates and challenging Scriptural stories that depict these moral problems.

The remainder of the book comprises the following chapters.

Chapter 2 commences the exploration of the relationship between morality and religion with a discussion of the concept of divine command ethics and analyzes the debate regarding whether God dictates morality or an independent ethical standard exists. The philosophical problem is then traced back to the famous dilemma posed by Socrates in the *Euthyphro* dialogue: whether the holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods. The biblical narrative of the Binding of Isaac is examined in an effort to understand the moral status of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22). Was the divine imperative to offer Isaac as a sacrifice deemed moral simply because it was commanded by God? Could, or would, God command that which is immoral? Is God subject to an independent standard of ethics, and if so, what are the implications regarding divine omnipotence? The divine command to annihilate the Amalekite nation similarly elicits ethical questions (Deut. 25). What was Amalek's evil deed that warranted such a severe punishment? Is not the killing of women, children, and later generations of Amalekites immoral? While God's command to annihilate the Amalek nation in the biblical era may be justified as retribution for their violation of the norms of just warfare, the eternal imperative to destroy all Amalekite descendants is ethically challenging and may be far less justifiable. A variety of philosophical and exegetical interpretations, including Kant's categorical imperative and Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical, amongst medieval and modern Jewish commentaries, are analyzed to address the moral nature of God's commands and respond to the debate whether morality is contingent upon religion or religion is dependent on morality.

Chapter 3 explores the source and nature of God's justice in light of seeming injustice. As in the previous chapter's discussion of divine command morality, a similar question is raised regarding God's justice. Does the divine will dictate justice or is God subject to external

standards of justice? Throughout the Bible, God is characterized as a just and righteous deity who exacts fair retribution through reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. However, does divine justice always reflect just retribution? A number of biblical narratives seem to challenge such a conception. For instance, Abraham objects to the fairness of God's plan to eradicate the righteous among the wicked in Sodom (Gen. 18). In the Exodus narrative in which God hardens Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh is held morally responsible and punished for not liberating the Children of Israel when he was unable to do so as a result of divine causality (Exod. 4–14). The biblical conception of divine justice as just retribution is further called into question by the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. In the story of Jonah, the sinners of Nineveh do not receive their just deserts, despite the prophet's desire for strict retribution (Jon. 3–4). Conversely, in the Book of Job, the protagonist is described as "whole-hearted and upright, and one that feared God, and shunned evil" (Job 1:1), yet all sorts of seemingly undeserved afflictions befall him. Various theories of justice, as well as philosophical and exegetical sources, offer a variety of interpretations in an effort to elucidate the nature of divine justice in light of these instances of apparent injustice.

Chapter 4 follows the earlier examination of God's fair treatment of humanity with a discussion of one's ethical treatment of others through the contemporary debate over price gouging. Is price gouging immoral in that it exploits and disrespects the vulnerable, or is it morally permissible, as sellers ultimately satisfy the needs of the buyer who enters into the exchange voluntarily? Ethical considerations, such as the maximization of welfare, preservation of choice, and promotion of virtue are evaluated and then applied to the biblical text which recounts Esau's sale of his birthright (Gen. 25). Did Jacob act ethically in his purchase of ravenous Esau's birthright or did he seize a propitious opportunity to exploit Esau's predicament? Is Esau responsible for spurning his birthright, or was he misled as he claims Jacob had "supplanted me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he has taken away my blessing" (Gen. 27:36)? An ethical analysis of the intentions and actions of Jacob and Esau in the transaction elucidates the Bible's position on the sale and on the larger moral debate. Two additional biblical illustrations are similarly analyzed according to the ethical considerations regarding price gouging. Ephron charges Abraham

an exorbitant sum to purchase a burial plot for his beloved wife (Gen. 23). Joseph, as vizier in Egypt, acquires the Egyptians' property when the citizens are most vulnerable during years of intense famine (Gen. 47). Multiple readings of such narratives offer divergent perspectives on the ethics of such transactions.

Chapter 5 expands the analysis of the sale of the birthright by probing whether or not it is ever moral to lie or deceive. Is deception ethical if for a greater purpose, for instance, to obey a commandment, to fulfill a divine prophecy, or to save someone's life? Immanuel Kant asserts that lying is wrong since it is at odds with the categorical imperative and is a violation of one's dignity. Thus, lying corrupts the most important quality of humanity: the ability to make free, rational choices. Consequentialists, such as Benjamin Constant, argue that a lie is not always immoral; in fact, when lying is necessary to maximize benefit or minimize harm, it may be immoral not to lie. Despite the Bible's prohibitions against lying, there are many instances in biblical narrative in which deceptive means are used to achieve a desired end. Abram calls Sarai his sister in Egypt in order to save his own life when he fears that Pharaoh will kill him due to Pharaoh's desire for Abram's beautiful wife (Gen. 12:13). Abimelech is later deceived by the same lie by Abraham (Gen. 20) and then by Isaac (Gen. 26). Simeon and Levi respond to Shechem with guile after he violates their sister. The midwives of the Israelites in Egypt (Exod. 1:19) and Rahab, a foreign harlot (Josh. 2:4–5), use trickery against Israel's enemy to preserve the Israelites' safety. Rebekah facilitates Jacob's deception of Isaac by orchestrating a plan in which Jacob pretends to be Esau in order to receive the blessing of his father (Gen. 27:36). Tamar deceives Judah and seduces him in the guise of a harlot when he refuses to allow her to marry his third son, after the deaths of his two older sons to whom she was married (Gen. 38:14). Not only does the Bible not condemn lying in such circumstances, God even encourages, and perhaps, commands Moses and the Israelites to stretch the truth in Egypt (Exod. 3) and Samuel to lie when the prophet expresses fear of danger from Saul (I Sam. 16:1–2). Is there a moral difference between an outright lie and a misleading truth (even if they result in the same consequences)? Do intentions to mislead detract from the value of truth? Exegetes go to great lengths to temper biblical characters' lies and philosophers allegorize or