

Introduction

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The study of ethics and the Hebrew Bible either side of the new millennium has generally fallen into two categories: a more traditional genre of 'Old Testament ethics', in which remarks on the biblical text are undertaken from a confessional and normative perspective, and more recent forays into the 'ethics of ancient Israel', which investigate the text from a historical perspective and reflect varying degrees of interest or attention to contemporary concerns. The aim of the essays in this volume is to bring these two scholarly enterprises into conversation.

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Major works of Old Testament ethics include Christopher Wright's *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*,¹ Bruce Birch's *Let Justice Roll Down*,² Andrew Sloane's *At Home in a Strange Land*,³ and Hetty Lalleman's *Celebrating the Law? Rethinking Old Testament Ethics*.⁴ All are compatriots and descendants of Walter Kaiser, Jr.'s classic *Toward an Old Testament Ethics*.⁵ Such works are usually implicit or explicit attempts to grapple with the Hebrew Bible's moral content from a Christian perspective, reading the Old Testament in conjunction with and in light of the New Testament. The authoritative status of the Bible amongst evangelical Christians in particular has meant that many such

¹ C. J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), bringing together C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) and C. J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995).

² B. C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991).

³ A. Sloane, *At Home in a Strange Land: Using the Old Testament in Christian Ethics* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008).

⁴ H. Lalleman, *Celebrating the Law? Rethinking Old Testament Ethics* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004).

⁵ W. C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

attempts have been undertaken from an evangelical perspective, as the status of the Bible dictates its normative authority and demands that it be reckoned with, at the same time that its frequently awkward, embarrassing, or confusing contents require exegesis and explanation. Thus far, efforts to engage the biblical texts from a normative but non-evangelical perspective have been concentrated primarily in edited volumes, such as M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley's *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*,⁶ John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies, and M. Daniel Carroll R.'s *The Bible in Ethics*,⁷ and Juliana Claassens and Bruce Birch's *Restorative Readings*.⁸ John Rogerson's *Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics*⁹ and Cyril Rodd's *Glimpses of a Strange Land*¹⁰ are partial exceptions, although both are essentially single-author essay collections. Cheryl Anderson's *Ancient Laws*¹¹ and *Contemporary Controversies* and Mark Brett's *Political Trauma and Healing*¹² have been welcome exceptions in this regard.

Anderson and Brett also stand out as methodological exceptions. Driven by normative aims, most works of Old Testament ethics tend to read the texts synchronically and systematically, smoothing out differences and seeking out one or a few unifying principles perceived to characterise the collection as a whole. Waldemar Janzen's *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach*, for example, identifies five paradigms governing Old Testament ethical thinking and argues for an underlying interrelationship amongst them.¹³ While differences of opinion within and amongst the biblical texts are sometimes acknowledged, normative works' ultimate interest in practical application has tended to favour an emphasis on unity and coherence. Such efforts are obliged, to greater or lesser degrees, to work against the heterogeneity of the Bible

⁶ M. D. Carroll R. and J. E. Lapsley (eds), *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

⁷ J. W. Rogerson, M. Davies, and M. D. Carroll R. (eds), *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium*, JSOTSup 207 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1995).

⁸ L. J. M. Claassens and B. C. Birch (eds), *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Human Dignity* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015).

⁹ J. W. Rogerson, *Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics*, JSOTSup 405 (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

¹⁰ C. S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics*, OTS (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

¹¹ C. Anderson, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies: The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹² M. Brett, *Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

¹³ W. Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

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itself: although the biblical texts contain a great deal of theological and ethical continuity, it is difficult ever simply to say, 'the Bible says', without further qualification. Yet, at the same time that this scriptural polyphony may be one of the most challenging aspects of the Hebrew Bible for those with normative concerns, it also has the potential to be one of its most exciting aspects; this vivacity is well reflected in the recent work by Anderson and Brett, which acknowledge and explore the text's responsiveness to changing circumstances and interpretations. Human moral experience is a diverse, complex phenomenon, and faithful readers are invited by the contributors of this volume to recognise the complexity of their own moral lives in the complexity of the biblical tradition's many voices.

Undoubtedly the most significant recent development in the study of the Hebrew Bible and ethics has been a rapidly proliferating attention to historical ethical concerns. In these works, the biblical texts are taken as a window into the moral world of ancient Israel, through which we may view the ethical thought processes of ancient Israelites. Insofar as they seek to unveil aspects ancient thinking, without making any judgements about it, such work may also be referred to as form of 'descriptive ethics'. Because it is interested in specific historical contexts, works in this category also tend to focus on individual texts or groups of texts.

Early, methodologically-groundbreaking works in this area include John Barton's *Ethics and the Old Testament*¹⁴ and *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*,¹⁵ capped off by his magnum opus, *Ethics in Ancient Israel*;¹⁶ Gordon Wenham's *Story as Torah*¹⁷ and *Psalms as Torah*;¹⁸ and Eckart Otto's *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments*.¹⁹ Although not an exclusively historical study, Eryl Davies's *The Immoral Bible* is similarly methodological in orientation.²⁰ These trailblazers have been followed by a veritable *floruit* of research undertaken from specific

¹⁴ J. Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998).

¹⁵ J. Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

¹⁶ J. Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ G. J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

¹⁸ G. J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically*, *Studies in Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012).

¹⁹ E. Otto, *Theologische Ethik Des Alten Testaments*, *Theologische Wissenschaft* 3, 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994).

²⁰ E. W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Old Testament Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

genre- and text-based perspectives. Without claim to exhaustion, in this category are works such as Peter Lau's *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth*,²¹ Carol Newsom's *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*,²² Andrew Mein's *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*,²³ Jonathan Rowe's *Michal's Moral Dilemma*,²⁴ and Harold Bennett's *Injustice Made Legal*.²⁵ Edited volumes taking a similarly historical tack include Dirk Human's *Psalmody and Poetry in Old Testament Ethics*²⁶ and Katharine Dell's *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament*.²⁷ Many of the contributors to the present volume have written ethical analyses of this kind, examining a particular book or a particular genre of the Hebrew Bible in search of its moral aims and assumptions.

Many of these works have been at pains to emphasise that historical investigations are not divorced from contemporary concerns, inherently anti-theological, or interested only in antiquity. Rather, they proceed from the basis that historical knowledge is essential for an accurate understanding of the ethical thinking of the Hebrew Bible and the ethical thinking of ancient Israel, as well of the intentions of the biblical texts vis-à-vis the moral formation of their audiences. Ethics, like theology, always happens in context. Investigating the ancient contexts of the biblical texts is thus a crucial part of the equation, if a student or a scholar wishes to consider how – or, indeed, whether – the texts are meaningful in the modern world. Historical work is thus a valuable undertaking in its own right, but also an essential prerequisite for normative work.

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With this conversation between descriptive and normative ethics in mind, this volume seeks to balance historical and contemporary

²¹ P. H. W. Lau, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach*, BZAW 416 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

²² C. A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²³ A. Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, OTM (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁴ J. Y. Rowe, *Michal's Moral Dilemma: A Literary, Anthropological, and Ethical Interpretation*, LHBOTS 533 (New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

²⁵ H. V. Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal: Deuteronomic Law and the Plight of Widows, Strangers, and Orphans in Ancient Israel*, *The Bible in Its World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

²⁶ D. J. Human (ed.), *Psalmody and Poetry in Old Testament Ethics* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

²⁷ K. J. Dell (ed.), *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, LHBOTS 528 (New York: T&T Clark, 2010).

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concerns in an engaging and informative way, drawing connections between ancient and contemporary ethical problems and reflecting on both the advantages and the disadvantages of attempting to study these texts from an ethical perspective. Each contributor has been asked to address the historical and literary contexts of a book or a group of books, unpacking these texts' assumptions and concerns within their ancient contexts and identifying some of the key social, political, and cultural factors that have affected their ethical interests and aims. Each essay builds on these historical and literary foundations when they turn to contemporary concerns, examining the implications of their descriptive ethical analyses for normative ethical discussions. At times this is relatively straightforward and relatively uncontroversial, but often it is problematic – demanding careful, nuanced discussion of the relationship between ancient texts and contemporary contexts.

One of the specific aims of the volume is to recognise the contextual nature of ethical reflection. Moral imperatives exist in and relate to particular historical, political, social, and economic situations: ethics is always in context. Each of the essays in the volume conveys the importance of historical knowledge and understanding in illuminating the concerns, the logic, and the intentions of the biblical texts, especially if the author (or reader) wishes to consider the texts' normative ethical applications. The significance of context is reflected in the structure of the volume, with essays grouped into four, broadly genre-based sections: legal ethics, narrative ethics, prophetic ethics, and wisdom or poetic ethics. A fifth section addresses the role of the Hebrew Bible in Jewish and Christian ethical thought, both historically and in the contemporary context.

Finally: that the volume is not simply a series of topical essays is a way of recognising the polyphonic chorus that makes up the Hebrew Scriptures. Both the bane and the blessing of the Hebrew Bible when it comes to ethics is that it does not readily lend itself to simple 'dos and don'ts'. Instructions given in one place are complicated or contradicted elsewhere, and different ethical principles dominate different texts. The structure of this volume highlights the diversity of the Hebrew Bible's ethical thought processes and seeks, in turn, to encourage its readers to engage with a diverse array of approaches to contemporary ethical issues.

FURTHER READING

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