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PART I

The Bible as Moral Witness

1.

A Two-Part Consensus

This new conversation must begin with an initial treatment of the Bible as a moral document or, more accurately, a collection of moral witnesses. Yet, even this new conversation is based on “an important two-part consensus, held by biblical scholars and ethicists alike.”¹ This consensus consists of two claims. First is the claim that *Christian ethics is not synonymous with biblical ethics*. The second is that *the Bible is somehow formative and normative for Christian ethics*.

This two-part consensus is an important starting point. From it has sprung in the last two to three decades a rich literature of voices reflecting on the distinction between Christian ethics and biblical ethics, and on the fuller understanding of the complex and sometimes divergent ways in which the Bible exercises its formative and normative role in Christian moral life. In many ways, this entire volume is intended as a contribution to that ongoing conversation, growing

1. Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, rev. and expanded ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 11, 14. Hereafter cited as Birch and Rasmussen, *BECL*, rev. As the preface to this volume makes clear, this new conversation revisits a topic taken up by Birch and Rasmussen’s earlier work. However, we intend the discussion of this volume to be in no way dependent on familiarity with that earlier work. It is useful for readers to know that this discussion stands at a point following over thirty years of new literature on the relationship between Scripture and ethics. Yet, we believe the two-part consensus described here and in that volume is still basic to all of that literature as a starting point.

This chapter builds upon and further develops work previously published in Bruce C. Birch, “Ethics in the OT,” in vol. 2 of *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 338–48.

from that consensus and our assessment of where that conversation has come and might profitably continue.²

BIBLICAL ETHICS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

There are a variety of reasons why biblical ethics and Christian ethics cannot be equated. The first is that the term “biblical ethics” itself has suffered from a variety of meanings and usages, and this has resulted in some confusion in the literature. “Biblical ethics” can be used to refer to different arenas within which the Bible’s relationship to ethics might be explored. Each of these arenas provides a different angle of vision on that relationship and faces different questions and problems.

The Bible for all Christians includes the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament (the Greek canonical writings of early Christianity),³ collections of writings drawn from a span of as much as fourteen hundred years, collected and handed on through generations. Thus, in dealing with the Bible we are always dealing with a text. That text varies somewhat in differing manuscript traditions and is read by most church members in various translations from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Nevertheless, even in an age of technological media, the Bible remains a text to be read, interpreted, and appropriated.

One of the arenas where interest in the Bible and ethics has focused is on the world behind the text. The focus of studies in this area is on discovering, describing, and assessing the morality of the social contexts and communities out of which the biblical texts were produced. In the mid-twentieth century, there were some who thought they could describe either a unified or developing system of Israelite morality in the Old Testament (OT).⁴ Such efforts are now largely

2. Allen Verhey has offered a thoughtful reflection on this two-part consensus and the fuller discussion of its implications and elucidation in “Scripture and Ethics: Canon and Community,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 58, no. 1–2 (2004): 13–32.

3. For Roman Catholics and most of Eastern Orthodoxy, the books of the Apocrypha would also be considered Scripture and part of the Bible. Although this volume writes from a Protestant perspective, the methodological issues of relating the Bible to Christian ethics remain largely the same. Only the field of texts used in the life of the church would be expanded in other traditions. Since this volume is not aimed at interfaith readership, we have kept the usage of the terms Old and New Testament as they still appear in most Christian Bibles.

4. Johannes Hempel was a very influential proponent for finding a historically developing system of morality in Israel related to various social strata in Israel’s life (peasants, pastoralists, urban dwellers, royal noble classes). See Johannes Hempel, *Das Ethos des Alten Testament* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1938), and Johannes Hempel, “Ethics in the Old Testament,” in vol. 2 of

abandoned because of new appreciation for the complex diversity of the OT. Individual texts are moral witnesses out of a variety of social contexts but may be reflective of a common majority opinion (the Decalogue) or be a minority voice declaring the popular morality bankrupt or ignored (Jeremiah).

The Old Testament is evidence for, not coterminous with, the life and thought of ancient Israel; Old Testament writers may at times state or imply positions that were the common currency of ancient Israelites, but they may also propound novel, or controversial, or minority positions. . . . The mistake is . . . to assume that *extant* evidence is also *typical* or *complete* evidence.⁵

In New Testament (NT) studies, some have sought to find the outlines of a Jesus-movement morality that predates the NT literature and the concerns of the early church. But the only NT literature we have is from the diverse communities of the early church, and we have no direct access to Jesus that does not reflect the concerns of these early Christian communities to shape their moral life in response to Jesus.⁶

More recent interest in biblical ethics as recovery of the morality of communities in biblical times has focused on the use of social scientific methods, which have been helpfully applied to deepen our understanding of the morality reflected in certain sets of texts, or particular voices of moral witness, without trying to synthesize these understandings into some larger unified or developmental understanding of the morality of the OT or NT. Such studies deepen our

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville, Abingdon, 1962), 153–61.

5. John Barton, "Understanding Old Testament Ethics," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 3, no. 9 (October 1978): 46, 49.

6. We want to acknowledge the wide breadth of early church communities and their perspectives on Jesus. Our NT is the final result of a long process of identifying the writings that would be accepted by the wider church as scriptural canon. Many gospels and other early Christian writings that were not included in the canon survive even today. These are important witnesses to the breadth of the theological perspective in the early centuries of the Christian era. Some of these reflect early communities and viewpoints that continued, in some cases, for centuries. Study of these writings enriches our understanding of the dynamics out of which the canonical collections emerged and the present-day branches of the Christian faith formed. None of these other ancient writings, however, are formally recognized by any contemporary church community as part of its scripture or as authoritative for theological beliefs or faith practices. See Hal Taussig, *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-First Century Combining Tradition and Newly Discovered Texts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), for a full discussion of this extracanonical literature and an argument for its importance.

understanding of the world that produced our biblical texts, but these are only glimpses of the multifaceted moral world of ancient Israel and the early church. There is no biblical ethics that can be discovered behind the text and simply adopted as Christian ethics.

The term “biblical ethics” might also refer to the world of the text created by the formation of the canon. Both Old and New Testaments have gone through a process whereby witnesses to the community’s experience of God have taken a variety of written forms, which have then been selected for preservation and inclusion in larger collections of texts until the result is an authoritative canon given scriptural status through ongoing generations. The study of biblical ethics in a canonical context goes beyond an inquiry into the origins of biblical texts. Moral dialogues are created within the canon. The ethical witness of biblical texts takes multiple forms when placed within the canon: agreements, tensions, continuities, contradictions. In the context of the canon, biblical ethics creates a new moral world that transcends the moral world behind individual texts.

For example, the moral concern to feed the hungry will draw perspectives across the canon from texts as diverse as manna in the wilderness, laws from rural/tribal Israel, prophetic mandates for Israel returned from exile, Jesus’s teaching on the priority of the poor, and Paul’s collection for the church in Jerusalem. The goal is not to replicate any of those contexts in our own response to the hungry but to allow these witnesses to all inform the moral context, choices, and actions of those who read these testimonies as Scripture.

Thus, the community that claims the canons of the OT and NT as Scripture enters a new conversation on biblical ethics that engages the moral world of the canon in all its complexity, in dialogue with the faith community’s own complex and highly diverse world through generations. In this way, biblical ethics as canonical moral witness becomes central to Christian ethics but is not synonymous with Christian ethics. We will have more to say later about the function of the canon.⁷

A further obvious reason why biblical ethics cannot be synonymous with Christian ethics is that biblical communities did not confront some of the moral issues and social forces that shape our lives today. The Bible does not begin to imagine some of the moral issues that are part of modern life in the twenty-first century.

7. We will expand on the nature and importance of the canon in chapter 2.

In 1973, Stanley Cohen and Herbert Boyer first spliced genetic material from one microbe into another to create a bit of life that never existed before. James Watson and Francis Crick had, in 1953, determined the chemical arrangement of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), a double helix strand that carries the hereditary blueprint of all living things. In 1987, the United States Patent and Trademark Office decided that patents for new life forms can be extended from microbes to higher life forms, including (new) mammals.⁸ In 1988, the Office determined that companies holding patents on new animal forms can require farmers to pay royalties on the animals and their offspring through the seventeen-year life of each patent.⁹

The ancient peoples of the biblical communities did not possess the knowledge and power to manipulate the very building blocks of life itself. It is we who have “cracked” the genetic code and positioned ourselves to create new life forms. “Cellular engineering,” “gene-splicing,” “genetic counseling,” “biotechnology,” and “bioethics,” relatively new terms in the dictionary thirty years ago, are now commonplace and have spawned major industries. These human initiatives have resulted in increased human power unforeseen by the biblical communities, but like all increases in human power, they carry corollary moral responsibility.

Nor did those ancient biblical communities know the terms “climate change,” “global warming,” “acid rain,” or “species extinction,” all realities that drastically affect the moral landscape and the discussion of ethical response. In spite of some climate change deniers, scientific evidence is clear that human beings have proven capable of damaging their planetary environment in ways threatening to the continued well-being of life on Earth. These results of the exploitation of creation stand alongside the capacity of humans to cataclysmically destroy life on this Earth through weapons of mass destruction and nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Such moral realities were not on the horizon of biblical communities. Nor could they have foreseen the reality of nearly 8 billion people pushing the very carrying capacity of the planet, to say nothing of the pressures, economic and political, this volume of population places on the quality of life worldwide and the suffering that results.¹⁰

8. “New Life: The Promise and Risk of Genetic Engineering,” *New York Times*, June 8, 1987.

9. Keith Schneider, “Farmers to Face Patent Fees to Use Gene-Altered Animals,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1988, <http://tinyurl.com/ycy44nob>.

10. Larry L. Rasmussen has argued that such realities demand a new perspective for Christian

While there is much in human nature that binds us all together across vast stretches of time and culture, and much moral wisdom and folly that makes its way from age to age, it is yet undeniable that Christian ethics today must find its way amidst moral questions that never appeared on the horizon of biblical ethics. Christian ethics cannot be a synonym of biblical ethics when ethics includes unprecedented moral issues.

Even when a moral issue stays much the same in its basic outline, the context is so altered that the biblical response no longer applies directly. Hunger and starvation are gruesome realities, and people starved in the ancient world in the same way biologically that people do now. Cells died in an excruciating process of physiological deterioration, then as now. But addressing the *causes* of hunger and working to alleviate it are very different in our time. Although political realities could affect the availability of food, the biblical world still suffered from drought and crop failure that often left populations without food available from any source. The Joseph story in Genesis is remarkable for its unusual description of planning and making food available across national borders, not the norm of the era. Today, most hungry people are hungry because they are poor and do not have access to food, not because food is unavailable. Pursuing poverty's causes in the modern world leads into a set of local, regional, and international arrangements of trade, finance, and economic and political realities more complex and far-reaching than people of the biblical world could have imagined. The basic moral issue of responding to the needs of the hungry remains, but the context and response will be considerably altered compared to those of biblical times.¹¹

A final reason biblical ethics cannot be considered synonymous with Christian ethics lies in Christian affirmations about the character and activity of God and the nature of our faith in response to God. Both Judaism and Christianity insist that they are *historical* religions. The God they worship is a God who has made the divine self present

ethics: *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), and *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

11. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, although dealing with a much broader range of moral issues than hunger alone, has written about the radically changed moral reality of our world while maintaining a solid biblical grounding. What makes this possible is one of the central questions of this volume. See Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), and *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

in particular times and places in an ongoing way. This is the force of ancient Israel's claim that God had "come down to deliver" from bondage in Egypt (Exod 3:7) and is not only a God of Israel's memory but is a God who is constantly "about to do a new thing" (Isa 43:19). This God of ongoing historical relationship for Christians becomes known in the incarnation ("The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," John 1:14). Jesus is seen as the embodiment of the claim of Isaiah that God in Christ is Immanuel ("God with us," Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23). The Scriptures are the testimonies of varied communities in ancient Israel and the early church seeking to discern "a word from the Lord" for their own times and circumstances. The Scriptures are not repositories of timeless truths simply to be applied in the generations after the biblical period, thus relieving future generations from the effort to discern God's "new thing" in their own times and places. Scripture as the record of these testimonies to the character and action of God plays a role in future moral life for the community of faith, as we seek to explore in this volume, but such ancient moral testimony cannot be torn from its moorings and simply applied to modern moral challenges as if God had ceased to act and reveal the divine self with the end of the biblical period. Scripture cannot be transported as changeless content across centuries and applied in an unqualified way to different circumstances and different modes of life and thought in the generations stretching from biblical times to our own era. God is incarnate, as "God with us," in our present world as well as the biblical world. God as spirit, ongoing in our midst, enables "new things" and not simply replication of the old.

One of the most dramatic examples of such historically ongoing revelation of God's character and will can be seen in the multiple instances where we find ourselves in a completely different place in moral judgments on particular issues from those made or accepted by biblical communities. Christian ethics today does not find sound justification for accepted biblical codes on slavery, the treatment of women as personal property, capital punishment for a greatly broadened range of offenses, or the limited catalog of proper gender roles or sexual relationships. Time and much serious, painful moral struggle has rendered some "ancient good uncouth."¹²

In a word, the ethics of biblical communities are not and cannot be

12. This phrase was penned by James R. Lowell in a poem protesting American involvement in the Mexican War in 1845: "time makes ancient good uncouth." The poem was set to music by Thomas Williams and became the widely sung hymn "Once to Every Man and Nation."

the same as Christian ethics for us. It is precisely *because* they are not the same that the issues arise that are addressed by this book.

THE BIBLE AS FORMATIVE AND NORMATIVE

This brings us to the second part of the double consensus mentioned at the start of this chapter, which is this: the Bible is somehow formative and normative for Christian ethics. But in what ways formative and normative?

To foreshadow a fuller discussion to come, let us simply note here two inescapable realities. Even though Christian ethics cannot be synonymous with biblical ethics, ethics cannot be Christian without reference to and foundation in the biblical witness.

On the one hand, the Bible is our only source for the foundational story of God in Jesus Christ and in the Spirit. That Gospel story (in four testimonies) is self-consciously rooted in the God of Israel and the sweep of a story with God at the center that stretches from creation to deliverance to covenant community to kings and prophets to exile and restoration. It extends beyond the story of Jesus to the formation of the church, in the power of God's Spirit, and the early witness, from Paul to John of Patmos, out of that early church. Outside the OT, NT, and a few noncanonical early Christian writings, there are only traces of the story that gives Christian faith and the church their identity.

On the other hand, if the Bible is the foundational story for Christian identity, it is also the source of tensions, with prevailing cultural realities throughout the generations. The community that looks to the Bible as the source of identity-forming story often finds itself an alternative to the communities of prevailing cultural contexts.¹³ Thus, the Bible has carried the power to *create* moral problems that may not be problems for those who are not influenced or shaped by Scripture. Almost from the beginning of the church, tensions emerged between loyalties to God and to earthly principalities and powers. Could Christians acknowledge Caesar when "Jesus is our king" (Acts 17:7)? Could Christians take up arms for the state or make offerings to Caesar? Is there not a stark choice between two masters, God and mammon (Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13)? The fundamental loyalty of Jews

13. See this point made forcefully in Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

and Christians to a *faith* community rather than to a *civic* community raised innumerable problems and tensions that have carried forward from biblical times to our own, with traditions making different moral choices in these matters, but all in dialogue with biblical identity.

AGENDA

If biblical scholars and Christian ethicists are generally agreed on these two matters—Christian ethics is not a synonym for biblical ethics, yet the Bible is a shaping force for the Christian moral life—then the issue becomes this: What is the relationship of Scripture and ethics in contemporary communities of faith, in theory and in practice? What is the range of options available in response to this question and how may those options be assessed? These questions, and a host of secondary ones, coalesce into an agenda for this book.

In the next three chapters, we begin with a discussion of the Bible itself as a moral witness: its foundations in community, the nature of its authority for the moral life, and the interpretation of its texts for the sake of the moral witness and ecclesial practice of the church.¹⁴

1. What is the effect of understanding the witnesses of the biblical text not as isolated, individual voices but as community testimonies that, even if originating in particular persons and events, are claimed by the community for preservation and passed on to future generations? What results when these testimonies are coalesced into a canon that creates new conversations on the nature of God, community, and witness so that future generations automatically have a common base for identity and reflection on what it means to be the people of God and, for the purposes of this volume, a moral community?

2. What is the authority of Scripture for formation of moral character and the shaping of moral conduct? How authoritative are non-biblical sources of insight? Is the authority of Scripture somehow different from the authority of other sources? What is the relationship of these various sources? What controls might constrain people from simply choosing among biblical and nonbiblical sources in accord with convictions already held?

14. In this new conversation, we have made a conscious decision to begin with clarification of the nature of the Bible as a moral witness and then proceed to understandings of Christian moral life and the nature of Christian ethics and its concerns. This is a reversal of order from the previous editions of Birch and Rasmussen, *BECL*.

3. Beyond discussing the nature of the biblical witness and the understandings of biblical authority, how does the Christian community actually use Scripture as a resource for the moral life? What kind of exegesis is appropriate to this task? How important are the original form, context, and meaning of biblical texts? Are all materials equally important or appropriate? How do we choose among the bewildering diversity of viewpoints and types of literature in the Bible? What is the relationship of one biblical reference to the whole of Scripture? Does the existence of an official “canon” of Scripture make a difference for how we use Scripture in moral matters? Does the nature of different biblical resources and divergent witness to particular issues suggest different ways in which they might be linked to the moral life? What are those ways and how do individuals and communities make use of them?

We take up these complex questions in the chapters that follow.