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Loving One's Neighbour: Old Testament Ethics in Context

The Ethel M Wood Lecture
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by

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Mrs Ethel M Wood was daughter of Quintin Hogg, founder of the Regent Street Polytechnic, and herself deeply interested in education. When she died in 1970, she left a bequest to the University to provide for this annual lecture on the English Bible. The bequest made possible the continuation of the series initiated in 1947 by a lecture on 'The Bible and Modern Scholarship' by Sir Frederic Kenyon and directly supported by Mrs Wood during her lifetime. SHe also presented to the University her unique collection of Bibles, together with a sum of money to enable that collection to be extended. It was her love of the English Bible and her belief that it forms so rich a part of the cultural heritage of this country that led her to these generous actions and we express our appreciation on today's occasion.

The past decade has witnessed a very marked increase of attention to the subject of ethics in the Old Testament, and certainly also in the Bible generally[1]. Perhaps our contemporary ethical dilemmas have had something to do with this, but I believe that a major contributory factor lies in the increased awareness of the complexity of the subject. We have been guilty in the past of treating it too superficially, or at least of believing that the ethical significance of the Bible an be treated too readily, as it so often has seen, merely as a consequential sub-division of theology.

By taking as a focal point one of the best known ethical pronouncements of the Old Testament from Lev. 19.18 - "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" - I hope to suggest some of the ways in which recent scholarship has sought to avoid the turgid swamps of superficiality, without getting hopelessly swept along by the rushing torrents of complexity. That it is a good idea to adopt a loving and caring attitude towards one's neighbour seems so obvious and reasonable that to affirm the need for it in a short, but very imposing, set of rules concerning respect for the law appears superfluous and positively banal.

Yet this Old Testament injunction is singled out and alluded to no less than nine times in the New Testament as a point of primary emphasis for the new Christian ethic[2]. Jesus, in a celebrated parable recorded in Luke's Gospel, refers back to this admonition from Leviticus as the most comprehensive of all the Old Testament commandments, second only to the primary commandment to love God (Luke 10.25-37). Yet even this publicity scarcely rescues it from the appearance of being a self-evidently good idea which every reasonable person should be expected to adopt. It appears to savour more than a little of President Bush's desire, voiced during the 1988 American presidential election campaign, that his period of tenure of this high office might lead to "a kinder and gentler nation". Why all this attention then, to an admonition that appears so obvious that it could be left unsaid?

I would insist, however, that this injunction to love one's neighbour is neither obvious nor irrelevant when viewed in the context of the moral problems facing ancient Israelite society, or indeed those that confronted ancient society more internationally. Certain features immediately stand out in regard to it.

As a preliminary general point we can recognize that a whole range of moral questions and challenges arise, not because human beings have been unable to perceive that certain behavioural attitudes are desirable and good, but because demands of one course of conduct conflict with others. It becomes a question of establishing priorities. Which consideration should take precedence over these others, so as to determine human actions?

It is against such a background that the parable of Jesus illustrates the significance of the admonition. Might not being a Samaritan, and therefore one who had ample historical reason for feeling deep social and racial animosity towards a Jew, take precedence over the human responsibility for caring for someone who was in deep, and probably life-threatening, distress? In the parable those who failed to respond to the need, respectively typified as a priest and a levite, no doubt are assumed to have felt that they had justifiable grounds, of a religious and social nature, for leaving the problem to someone else.

We can sense immediately that, once we substitute for these figures some of our modern badges of self-identity, not necessarily of a religious nature although these should certainly be included, the problem of where to attach priority becomes far more acute. In a multicultural pluralist society we have abundant opportunity for finding reasons for limiting the claim of the injunction to love our neighbour, possibly more even than the ancients could have felt! The decision where to place priority therefore throws us back on fundamental questions concerning the nature of human society and of human responsibilities. The mere admonition to love our

neighbour faces us immediately with several profound philosophical and religious issues, as St. Augustine fully recognized[3].

I want to deal with the issues raised by this injunction in a series of broad surveys. In the first instance, the fact that the injunction, is set as an excursus to a series of rules dealing with legal affairs shows that its very existence says something important about the rule of law in the ancient world, and about the biblical concern with this[4].

Secondly the fact that it defines the person to whom responsibility is owed as a 'neighbour', is of greater interest than might at first appear. When compared with other designations of fellow citizens in the Old Testament this stands out as indicative of a most far-reaching shift in the make-up and structure of the Israelite community. From being a family of tribes it had become a congeries of 'neighbourhoods' in which most fellow-Israelites were encountered as unrelated workers and neighbours living together in a city. The consequences of this shift upon popular feelings of self-identity, upon behavioural standards and personal values was probably the greatest of all the ethical transformations that the Bible reveals to us. 'Loving one's neighbour' became a distinguishing moral standard in a social world where the older kinship values and principles were fast disappearing.

Thirdly we have to look a little more closely into a more controversial and vexed question. The proper translation of the concluding phrase 'as oneself', which has led generations of scholars and philosophers to develop from the injunction a doctrine of 'reasonable self-love' is a matter of contention. The linguistic facts are simple, but their significance is less so. The Hebrew word, which becomes a clause in its English translation, has customarily been taken adverbially to mean 'as you love yourself'. This is how it appears in most modern translations, although the New English Bible is an exception[5]. Yet the point has

long been current among Jewish scholars that it can more properly be understood adjectivally describing the neighbour as a person who is 'like oneself'[6]. This has been widely recognized since the publication in 1782 of a commentary on Leviticus by the Hebrew poet and scholar, Naphtali Hirz Wessely (1725-1805), and has yet earlier origins. From the grammatical point of view either translation is possible, depending on how the word is understood syntactically. It comes back to the question of which translation yields the better and more probable sense in the context.

Law in Israel and the Ancient Near East

The first point that I want to draw attention to regarding this well-known admonition is that it expresses a complete and unreserved commitment to the rule of law, administered by an established governmental authority. Originally such authority would have been that of a native Israelite king, but later generations of Jews had to maintain this recognition of a legitimate state authority, while living under the jurisdiction of a foreign ruler. Most commentators believe that, from a purely literary point of view, the admonition of Lev. 19.17-18 to love, and not to hate, a fellow member of one's own community, has been added to what was originally a very compact list of pronouncements dealing with major religious and social issues[7]. These were originally probably ten, or twelve, in number, forming, like the more familiar Ten Commandments of Exodus 20.2-17, an easily memorisable series of primary responsibilities towards God and the community. That this addendum was intended to affirm something central about the nature and administration of law in Israelite society can be taken as certain. It is not simply a pious aside, but a fundamental assertion about respecting and upholding the rule of law in the community in a right spirit.

When in 1861 Henry Maine (1822-1888) published his book on *Ancient Law* it acquired immediate recognition as a major work, not only on the history of jurisprudence, but also as contributing

to the understanding of the development of ancient society and its institutions[8]. The rise of codified systems of law, and the concomitant growth of institutions to administer them, have become hallmarks of civilization. Their formulation, extension and application have become a primary means of spreading the light and freedom of justice and of removing from communities the darkness and fear of arbitrary violence and barbarism, without which civilization as we understand it cannot survive.

Later in the 19th century the remarkable discovery of the tablet containing the law code of the ancient Babylonian ruler Hammurabi, dating from more than seventeen hundred years before Christ, served to illustrate and confirm the rightness of the emphasis placed by Maine on the role of law in promoting civilized society[9]. At the same time it pushed back our horizon of knowledge about such laws by a full millenium. Since then further discoveries of ancient law codes have extended our historical horizon a millenium further still, although without quite the same degree of dramatic fullness which the Hammurabi code displays. In general we can say that tracing the history of written laws from their earliest appearance in Sumeria about 4000 BCE down to Roman times provides the single most important line of evidence regarding the organization of ancient communities and the moral problems which beset them[10].

The ancient Near East was a society in which the formulation, codification and administration of systems of law was nurtured and developed as a primary agency for improving the quality of human life and for the promotion of human dignity. The compilation and use of such laws made the spread of a morally alert and responsible civilization possible, of which we are all ultimately the heirs. The two indispensable institutions which promoted the growth of such a legal system were those of government by kingship and the building and organization of cities. In order to promote peace, economic advance and the development of intellectual skills kings imposed systems of law[11].

They then administered them from the cities which they founded. Law was the social instrument for establishing peace and prosperity. It was the outward and visible sign of the elusive concept of justice.

It comes as no surprise therefore to discover that the ideology of monarchy, both in ancient Israel and in the ancient Near East, has received a high level of attention among scholars, chiefly on account of the extraordinarily high place that it accords to the king, He is acclaimed as no less a figure than 'the son of God'. Nonetheless the evident failure of so many kings of antiquity, and not least in ancient Israel, to fulfil the promise of what this high kingly ideology accorded to their office has created a very negative impression. There is as much criticism of monarchy among the prophets as there is support for it. Moreover the portrait of the tyrannical pharaoh of the exodus story reinforces such a critical perspective. Solomon too is presented in a very ambiguous light[12].

Yet this provides the basis for my first main point. In spite of the many and varied criticisms of kingship which the Bible contains, from the tyrant oppressors of Egypt and Babylon through to the acerbic comments of Ben Sira upon Queen Cleopatra's royal forbears, the necessity of a central political authority is maintained to be a part of the divine social order. Inevitably this took the form of kingship, even well into Hellenistic times. If the trumpet sounds which herald the presence of the king are more muted in the Old Testament than in the literature of ancient Babylon, they are nevertheless distinctly audible[13]. The principle is upheld that the rule of law is to be upheld through an effective central government.

It is this feature which draws out the significance of what I want to say concerning the importance of the injunction of Leviticus 19.18 to love one's neighbour in what it implies about the rule of law. In its concern to uphold the proper use and respect for law

in society (commanded in Lev. 19.15), it frankly recognises that all legal systems encounter difficulties and can all too easily fail in their objective. They can be manipulated, distorted, or neglected, with painful consequences for the societies which then suffer their limitations. Moreover they cannot deal with every situation in which conflicts and disputes may arise.

It is in such a setting that the urgent appeal of Lev. 19.18 finds its place, not to offer an alternative remedy for society's moral health than that offered by the rule of law, but in order to present a higher goal than mere assent to verbal formulas can provide. In his work on *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch, who is better known to biblical scholars for his magisterial work on *The Principle of Hope*, includes a richly interesting survey of the way in which the Old Testament ethical codes, especially that enshrined in the Ten Commandments, have provided for Western Society a basic concept of 'natural law'[14]. It has achieved this for the very reason that neither the Ten Commandments themselves, nor the injunction to love one's neighbour, are properly speaking laws. What they offer is a series of affirmations, or principles, which have served as witnesses to the elusive concept of 'natural law'. More recently Walter Harrelson has compared them to 'human rights'[15].

Undoubtedly it is true that a significant measure of interpretative skill, by such diverse intellectual giants as Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther, has been needed to clarify and codify what it is that such biblical commandments imply about 'natural law'[16]. Nevertheless the point remains important that behind any system of laws, there must rest a larger and more philosophical conviction about the very nature of law and justice itself and its place in human affairs. A system of law requires an understanding of love, not because, in the manner of Shylock, law may leave no room for love and compassion, but because law itself must be the supreme expression of such loving compassion.

I do not wish to philosophise further on this point, but it has an important bearing upon the way in which we approach the subject of Old Testament ethics. The first is to suggest that too often and too clumsily, the approach to biblical ethics has been marred by a failure to appreciate the continuities which exist between the biblical material and the other traditions of law and morality which the law codes of the ancient Near East have brought to light[17]. In a misguided zeal to show that 'Bible' means 'Better', too much effort has been expended upon trying to contrast the biblical ethic with that found earlier in the ancient Near East. The prophets of Israel are assumed to have been more insightful than the scribes of ancient Egypt and more caring than the lawmakers of Babylon. I am not at all sure that they were, or that it could ever be useful, or desirable, to try to quantify virtue in such a fashion. It is simply a false apologetic!

The truth is that all communities, not least those of ancient Israel and of the ancient world more generally, encountered a great many problems in compiling, elaborating and imposing a system of laws which ensured justice with reasonable freedom for individual human achievement. Justice is not a transparently obvious concept, and systems of law are dependent upon the skill, insight and constructive will of those who have to administer them. Ancient Israel encountered this fact, as the prophets tell us very loudly, but so also did other ancient societies. The remedies that were initiated, tried, and in some cases rejected or refined more extensively, were many and varied[18]. Nevertheless the fundamental point remains clear that the biblical ethic was founded upon a concept of law. This point has rightly been taken more seriously by ancient Jewish and Christian commentators than some of their recent successors. Any system of law must constantly submit to re-examination, and this demands of those who appeal to it, and those who administer it, a never ending commitment to self-examination if it is to succeed in its goal.

The second point that I wish to draw from this relates closely to it. Not only does the Old Testament reveal a deep commitment to a system of centrally administered public law as the foundation of its moral structure, but it recognizes the right and duty of the state to administer this. This is not to re-open the debate concerning the ancient Israelite attitude to kingship as an institution, since I have already referred to the many points at which actual kings are subjected to criticism.

Nevertheless overall, the biblical evidence points clearly and unmistakeably to an affirmation of the rightful place of an appointed government to rule[19]. The Kingdom of God is not a kingdom belonging to another world[20]. For all the frank awareness that we find in the biblical writings that actual earthly kings were often sadly defective in their moral duties, the principle of the sovereign state is fully upheld. There is no private morality which is not also, in its varying commitments, a public morality. The Old Testament knows nothing of the notion that morality could be a purely private and individual affair[21]. The call to love one's neighbour comes within a series of rules and admonitions concerned to uphold respect for, and submission to, the idea of a just society. Accordingly therefore the concept of the state, with its varied rights and duties, belongs at the very foundation of any attempt to understand the ethics of the Old Testament.

This strikes very deeply into the widely canvassed attempts to construct a portrait of an older 'ideal' age of Israelite tribal society. With the profoundest respect for Norman Gottwald's passionate political commitment to his reconstruction of the ideas and ideals of the Israelite tribes before they were incorporated into a kingly state, such a reconstruction cannot, by being singled out in such a fashion, provide a biblical ethical norm[22]. Perhaps there often is a temptation peculiar to historians to idealise a favoured epoch of the past. However, the more serious problem is that an obscurely known period of Israel's past has been made the peg upon which has been hung a very modern ideology. Modern ideas and ideals

are projected onto a very imperfectly known period in which a tribal community was transformed into an emergent monarchic state[23].

The biblical communities passed through many stages of growth and upheaval, but they did not enjoy any time of untainted purity of political or ethical vision. Like us, its citizens had to fight hard to keep alive a goal of a just society that brings true liberation, while recognizing the necessity for, and fragility of, any system of law. Far from the command to love one's neighbour being oddly located in a series of commands to respect the law, that is properly where it belongs.

We may summarise our first conclusion therefore regarding the social context of biblical ethics by noting a primary point. Israel was a nation which was struggling to introduce a system of written law under a central government as part of the much wider civilizing process which took place across the ancient Near East. In doing so it experienced inevitable setbacks and difficulties, many of which were commonplace in antiquity because the laws themselves were in a relatively early and unsatisfactory state. Such difficulties were exacerbated by Israel's own political misfortunes and weaknesses. Nevertheless the Old Testament points us unequivocally to respect for the principle and practice of law, administered through a central government of fallible human beings. At the same time it recognizes that this can only function adequately when it is made the instrument of a caring and compassionate society and is built upon a deeply based concept of 'justice and natural law'.

Ethics in a Social Setting

We move on to consider the second point of my programme, which it to enquire why it is significant that the person towards whom such love is commanded is defined as a 'neighbour'. In one of the relatively few major studies of the biblical concept of

'neighbour', J. Fichtner defines it in the following way: "'neighbour' (Heb. *rea'*) denotes in general someone of the immediate neighbourhood with whom a person comes into contact through daily life, through living as a neighbour, through working together, or through casual encounter"[24].

When we read the stories of Genesis it is noteworthy that, although these are the folk traditions and memories of an ancient nation, they are presented in the form of a family history. It is built around a genealogy in which sons follow fathers, and in turn their sons follow them, and even marriage has to be pursued among cousins and more distant relatives. Such a collection of stories and folk-memories, however, will come as no surprise to the trained anthropologist who will immediately recognize that they derive from a society in which the principle of kinship possessed a paramount significance. The very names that the leading actors carry are names that often presume to portray God himself as Father or Brother. Kinship, with its duties and privileges, provided for Israel's forbears the central store of authority and the structure that gave to each individual his, or her, identity. Education into the traditions of the family was the very cement which held the community together. To ask "Whose daughter are you?" (cf. Gen. 24.23f.) was a question which could ascribe to an individual her place, honour and role in the larger world.

It has long been recognized that the comparative study of the principles of kinship in community life is an indispensable guide towards a fuller understanding of the historical, moral and social world from which the Old Testament emerged. No one more forcibly brought this to the attention of biblical scholars than did the remarkable Scottish genius William Robertson Smith,[25], who was himself heavily indebted to the theories and researches of his fellow-Scot J.F. M'Lennan (1827-1881). Yet, even though the great significance of kinship for an understanding of Israelite origins and social development has gained increasing respect among scholars[26], the impact that it had upon the changing assumptions

of biblical ethics is only now beginning to be adequately explored. Kinship provided the very fabric with which the earliest Israelite society was clothed. To protect the kin-group from violation, to avenge it when its honour had been slighted or its members injured or murdered, was the most obligatory of human duties. Maintaining the integrity of the kin-group could involve complex and protracted negotiations over property, or lead to the seeking of a marriage-partner in a distant land, as the story of the search for a suitable wife for Isaac displays (Gen.24.1-61).

Bearing these considerations in mind it is clear that a serious study of biblical ethics requires a proper understanding of the assumptions and functioning of such closely-knit kin-groups. It is this fact that makes the working of the injunction to love one's neighbour significant. There had clearly been a time when a fellow member of one's community would more naturally and conventionally have been described as a 'sister' or 'brother'. So deep-rooted is the kinship mentality that even a love-stricken youth could address his beloved as 'sister' with no hint or taint of an incestuous relationship (Song of Sol. 4.9f.; 5.1f.). So it is worthy of special attention that, by the time that Lev. 19.13-18 was preserved in writing, the emotional and moral sanctions of kinship were fading and the idea of a 'neighbour' had become more important.[27]

This then provides us with the key to a better grasp of the second major characteristic of the social context of biblical ethics. Israel was a society, which had originally been structured as a community of tribes, and which can essentially be thought of as very large families. Yet this dependence upon the extended family was giving way to the more complex world of urban life. The demands of geography, the pressures of economic diversification, and not least the political collapse of the of United Kingdom of Israel, had worked to reduce families to relatively small household units. The concept of the 'neighbour' came increasingly to be more relevant than the concept of the 'brother' and 'sister'. There is in fact a quite

startling piece of admonitory instruction in the book of Proverbs which makes precisely this point, although its deep significance has not always been grasped:

> There are neighbours who pretend to be friends,
> but there is a neighbour who sticks closer than a brother.
> Prov.18.24

I have to admit that there are translation problems with this[28], as with many proverbial teachings, but two points appear certain. The first is that Hebrew uses the same word for 'neighbour, friend', and it is a translator's convention that has varied its English equivalent. The second, more relevant, point is that being 'neighbour' has clearly become a more prominent and significant basis of social relationships than has that of brotherhood, with its origins in kinship. Society has changed and no longer can the resort to kinship ties and kinship support provide a sufficient and effective basis for ethical action and protection. The moral overtones of the book of Ruth appear largely to have arisen out of a late attempt to revive respect for the feelings and obligations of kinship ties in a society which was tending increasingly to forget them.

This appears to me to be a point of great significance to be taken into account by those who would wish to emphasis the role of the extended family in the Old Testament portrait of the community and its welfare. By saying this I do not wish to decry the importance of the family, nor to appear disparaging of the extent to which the Old Testament urges the family itself to take responsibility for its members in the care of the ageing, the disciplining of wayward and irresponsible behaviour by younger members, and provision for the welfare of those unfortunate enough to experience widowhood early in life. All such characteristics are part of the ethical inheritance which we have drawn from the Old Testament. From it most especially we have come to respect the family as the foundational unit of society. That

the fifth of the Ten Commandments should be a call to honour one's parents is wholly intelligible within the biblical ethic in which the family forms the base-unit of society. It cannot be regarded as a curious archaism, nor should it be denigrated by supposing it merely refers to politeness. Kinship provided an extensive range of duties and responsibilities as well as privileges and opportunities. To recognize this in the present, and to reaffirm it, must surely be wholly in line with anything that we can describe as a biblical ethic.

Nevertheless such features appear to me to be assumed, rather than to lie at the centre of the most urgent and creative side of the biblical ethical scene. One wonders how often the prevalent corruption of which the prophets and scribes repeatedly complain arose because 'families' often acted in a Mafia-like fashion. What the Bible objects to as 'respecting of persons' must often have focused on the exertion of family pressure to subvert the course of justice. In order to understand Old Testament ethics it is essential to recognize its awareness that the 'family' is not always the most impartial court of justice nor does it necessarily provide the most caring of communities. One man's privilege can easily become another man's injustice and ruin, as Israel's scribes were not slow to point out.

It would not be difficult to expand upon this point, but perhaps enough has already been said. The struggle to uphold the cause of a legally based justice is voiced in Deuteronomy with a frenetic, and perhaps slightly despairing, repetitiveness:

> 'Justice and only justice shall you pursue'.
> (Deut.16.20)

Surely this says all that is necessary. The point is not that the extended family was not a good and worthy basis from which moral action could spring and a large number of social needs could be met. On the one hand dependence upon the protection

of the family was necessarily limited and could become corrupting. On the other hand reliance upon the support of the family was useless when there was no such family, or when, as in Ruth's case, the family regarded her as so far out on the margins of their concern that they could ignore her and treat her as a pauper.

The more urgent ethical concerns were to extend justice beyond the self-interest of the family group and to awaken moral awareness beyond its borders. Religious commitment strove to transform the ideals of love and steadfastness to enable the protective will of the community to encompass a larger social grouping than the family contained. Tribes are all very well when you live and work as tribes, but when you live and work in cities you need something more than a tribal ethic.

We may summarise our survey so far by reiterating the point that learning to think of other persons as 'neighbours', rather than 'brothers and sisters' could actually entail a good deal of personal ethical re-orientation. It meant looking outward instead of inward and it meant looking ahead, rather than behind. The transition to what is essentially a 'modern' understanding of society, with its complexities and varieties, instead of remaining content with the older protective umbrella of 'kith and kin', was central to the social context of the Old Testament.

It may be appropriate at this point to suggest a further point of relevance. The injunction of Deut. 16.20 to pursue 'justice' above all other virtues raises the question of the many varied terms used to describe goodness and virtue in the Old Testament. Not only do we have to reckon with such terms as 'righteousness', 'justice' and the more contentious 'steadfast love', but a more complex world opens to us once we keep in mind the demands of 'holiness' 'purity' and 'goodness'. During the past two decades a great deal of valuable study and insight has been devoted to the study of these terms[29]. They convey so much of the ethical rhetoric of the Old Testament, but they also, more regrettably, constitute

something like a 'slough of despond' for the biblical translator. What exactly does each of them mean, and what subtle nuances distinguish one from the other? Clearly there is no easy answer to this. Nor could there have been any such easy answer in antiquity, otherwise the constant struggle to re-define virtue, which the Bible reflects, would hardly have been necessary.

The relevance of this to the point in question is twofold. It reminds us that semantics, however refined, cannot replace a proper awareness of the social context of ethics. Words mean what people take them to mean in common usage. This may often be a good deal less than a more studied reflection would like them to mean. A further point is that words like 'steadfast love', which is more often translated as 'mercy' in the Authorised (King James) Version, and 'justice' appear sometimes to have connoted very different lines of commitment. Actions that were 'merciful' and 'steadfast' to the interests of one's family may frequently not have been actions which accorded with the wider demands of 'justice'.

This too is a point that I do not here want to pursue more deeply, except to suggest that one of the ways in which valuable progress can be hoped for in the study of biblical ethics must surely lie in a fuller appreciation of the actual social contexts in which ideas of virtue and goodness operated. Ideas belonged within the context of a social system which operated its own standards and methods of action, as Habermas has drawn to our attention[30]. A further relevant consideration is to be found in the point to which James Barr alerted us in his warnings against the misuse of concordances[31]. This lies in the danger of falsely constructing 'concepts' out of words by a simplistic aggregate survey of their occurrence as shown by the concordance. What Amos meant by 'justice' and 'righteousness' (Amos 5.24) appears to have been rather different from what those who administered the laws relating to debt meant by such words (so Amos 2.6; 5.12).

Instead we must focus upon the real life context in which words

have their currency. This is surely one area in which greater attention to the disciplines and demands of social anthropology can lead positively to a better grasp of the ethical context of the Bible. Careful study of ethical terminology is all very well up to a point, but it leads to a very abstract notion of ethics if it does not relate to actual social conditions.

The command to make one's 'neighbour' the object of loving concern opens a window onto a very large panorama of moral and social interest. Kinship, with its expression in the extended family, was all very well, but it represented a social structure that was increasingly being eroded by the political and economic changes which the biblical communities were experiencing. Law was essentially the prerogative of centralised government which had, of necessity, to displace the power structures of the local communities if it was to be effective. Commitment to preserving the family represents a feature which could be taken for granted, but which was proving to be too limited and circumscribed to cope with the demands made by the social changes that Israel was experiencing. One consequence of this is the way in which the vocabulary of kinship can be seen to be progressively displaced by the vocabulary concerning 'the neighbour'. It is against such a background that we can grasp the full significance of the command we have focused on.

Rediscovering the Theological Meaning of Community

So far I have been concerned to suggest two major points. The first has been that an adequate study of the ethics of the Old Testament cannot achieve its goal simply by giving all its weight to the voices of protest which sound very loudly from both prophets and scribes. Important as these are, protest must give way to prescription, which means that it must be concerned with the proper foundations of law and the implementation of justice in the community.

Only by doing this can we hope to uncover the fundamental assumptions that the Bible makes about the nature of human society and its moral foundations. All too often the belief that ethics is simply a matter of divine commands, and that the Bible sets out these commands in the form of rules, has led to a very inadequate understanding of what light it can shed upon moral issues. Lack of attention to the continuities and connections which the Old Testament shares with the emergent legal systems of antiquity, usually for misguided apologetic reasons, have served to foster this rigid approach to the use of the Bible in ethical discussion. In reality these continuities with the rise of the great law-creating civilizations of the ancient Near East are of very great importance to the biblical ethicist. In the wider perspective I have suggested that they are every bit as important as the prophetic voices of protest against the abuses of social justice which Israel clearly encountered. No doubt all the other ancient civilizations experienced similar defects in establishing a socially satisfactory rule of law.

The second point has been that constructive ethical concern must relate to those areas where the existing social structures are failing. The importance of the extended family to biblical notions of community should not, and need not, be undervalued. Nevertheless, it was in recognizing the inevitable limitations of an ethical system in which the concept of 'kith and kin' was paramount which marks the most progressive feature of biblical morality. It was also the starting-point for one of the boldest and most enduring features of a biblical ethic. This constitutes my third point and it is one which I want to define as the rediscovery of the theological dimension of community. The fact of living in community is an occasion for reflection in which that very experience raises theological issues[32]. I can illustrate this point by referring you to a short instructional saying from the book of Proverbs:

Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
but whoever is kind to the needy honours him.
Prov. 14.31

The significance of the saying lies in the fact that it makes a theological point out of an essentially economic one[33]. Some people are rich and some are poor. Does this matter? Clearly it did matter to the biblical writer, and a number of reflections upon the way in which such economic differences influenced behaviour and personal attitudes are to be found in the book of Proverbs. Yet the major contribution that this piece of instructional comment makes is a theological one. Both rich and poor share a common Maker (cf. also Prov. 17.5; 22.2; 29.13). Both are children of God, made in his image, born with the same potential and ultimately destined to leave the world by the same path of inescapable mortality. Discovering this same shared experience of human existence, limitation and potential is one of the most vital elements of life's philosophy. Every single human being is a creature of God and must be seen and recognized as such.

It is on this issue that we encounter one of the most central features of the biblical contribution to ethics. This lies in its understanding of human dignity. I have already had occasion to refer to Ernst Bloch's major study on the subject of *Natural Law and Human Dignity*. Perhaps not surprisingly for a philosopher nurtured in a society which was shaped under the legacy of Martin Luther and which experienced the horrors of National Socialism and post-war Soviet repressions, the point that Bloch notes is striking. His opening comment focuses the issue clearly: "You feel it. You believe that you have a sense of what is right. But it is precisely this word that changes so often. From the beginning many things merge. You sense that something is not right. If matters were otherwise, then you would have a sense of well-being."[34]

Moral values ultimately rest on more elusive philosophical notions

of the nature of the world itself and of the role of human beings within it. So much of our behaviour towards one another, and our sense of responsibility towards the vast abstraction which we call 'the Human Race', depends upon our understanding of the significance of each human life. What the Latin word *dignitas* conveys is perhaps a scarcely adequate expression of what we believe each human life merits and demands. Whether we view this with an aura of romantic wonder or of biological scientific detachment, nevertheless we are compelled to recognize the immense impact upon our entire ethical inheritance of the biblical understanding that each human being is a creature made in the image of God (Gen 1.26)[35].

What exactly this imposing phrase means is itself a point meriting much discussion, but its very ability to elude exact definition places it alongside our inability to achieve precise definition of the being of God or the nature of religion. The oft repeated assertion that the Old Testament presents us with a theological ethic must surely not be taken to mean, as it sometimes has been, that these writings present us with a voluntary code of conduct which we can choose to follow if we subscribe to its religious commitments. It is not about joining a religious society in the manner in which one might join a club. Rather the theological nature of the Old Testament ethic rests upon its insight that being a member of the human race calls forth inevitable reflections of an essentially theological nature. Beyond the boundaries of family, of clan, tribe or race, or even city or nation, there is the stark recognition that even the poor man, who has neither wealth nor family to afford him status, shares the same Maker as oneself.

It is not an occasion for too much surprise that the originally intended meaning of Lev. 19.18 has been a cause of discussion and dissension. The arguments in favour of the less familiar translation in which the phrase 'as thyself' is taken to be adjectival and to serve as a reminder that each person whom one meets shares the same feelings and the same Maker as oneself were ably

and persuasively put by Professor Edward Ullendorff to a Theological Summer School at St. Andrew's University[36]. His comment is memorable: "...the translation of Lev.19.18 can only be: '*thou shalt love thy neighbour, for he is as thou*'; he is like you, a human being created in God's image - just like you."

Although this less familiar translation has not received the endorsement of the most recent Bible versions, and is set aside in the extensive discussion of the issue by Hans-Peter Mathys[37], nevertheless it has much to commend it. The syntactical evidence appears to favour it, and the theological point it raises is by no means insignificant. Consequently, and in spite of the conservative preferences of modern Bible translators, I do not propose to discuss the case for a reasoned and reasonable 'self-love'. Rather I want to stress the importance that the Hebrew Bible attaches to learning to think of every other human being 'as a person like oneself'.

The grounding of moral concern and action in an awareness of the exalted, and divinely given, status of every single human being points to a central feature of the grounding of ethics in the Hebrew Bible. Its religious dimension is not sectarian voluntarist, nor narrowly partisan in any restrictive way. If we call it a theological anthropocentricity, this is to assert that when we talk about God we cannot get away from rethinking the nature of the obligations we have towards the whole human scene. The indicatives become imperatives. My special concern is to suggest that central to an Old Testament ethic is the deep conviction that the opposite direction of reasoning is also valid. This is that serious reflection upon the nature of community, and its importance for human fulfilment and achievement, ultimately points us to theological issues concerning the origin and meaning of human life.

This conclusion, that the very nature of human society raises theological issues, is also relevant to the question, that has inevitably been raised time and time again, as to how widely the

original command of Lev. 19.18 intended the reader to construe the sense of 'neighbour'. Could the original writer have remotely imagined that it might be taken to include such a distant outsider as a Samaritan, as the New Testament parable extends it? Or could it have even been taken to know no boundary and to include any person who might conceivably be encountered as such a neighbour? Undoubtedly the saying is susceptible of bearing both narrower and wider interpretations and the celebrated Jewish philosopher Martin Buber took a generous view: "'*Love thy re'ah*' therefore means in our language: be lovingly disposed towards men with whom thou hast to do at any time in the course of thy life;..."[38]

Like many significant ethical assertions and pronouncements it is not closely defined and no wholly satisfactory answer to what the original author meant can ever be forthcoming. It has the open-endedness which is important to several of the most memorable ethical admonitions which human history has produced. The usefulness of the individual conscience is not discounted! If there is a discernible leap of understanding present in the formulation it must lie, as I have suggested, in it abandonment of the identities of kinship to assert a larger identity based on experience and encounter. Yet this was itself of great importance and can be held to contain the potential for the later extensions of application which it has received. The ultimate boundaries of neighbourhood are without limit.

I have wanted in this lecture to point to a number of significant insights in the study of the ethics of the Hebrew Bible which have emerged in recent discussion. The image of this literature as a collection of rules, or even of laws, which require no other comment or context save the conviction that God himself has dictated them to humankind, is a misleading caricature. The moral insights which are to be found here do have a context. They emerged at a very significant period of human history and established guidelines and precedents which have remained

fundamental to a very large area of our own ethical heritage. The rich harvest of archaeology, which has brought to light the remarkable and extensive history of law in antiquity, has provided us with a vastly enlarged awareness of what that historical context was. The academic disciplines of sociology and anthropology have then further served to give us valuable tools by which to interpret it. The coming decade promises to be a very exciting one, so far as the study of biblical ethics are concerned.

1 Cf. B.C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down. Old Testament, Ethics and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991); C.J.H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land. Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B.Eerdmans, 1990). John Barton, "Understanding Old Testament Ethics", JSOT9, 1978, pp.44-64. An excellent and comprehensive bibliography of the subject is given in E. Otto, "Forschungsgeschichte der Entwürfe einer Ethik im Alten Testament, *Verkündigung und Forschung. Altes Testament*, 36 Jhrg., 1991, pp.1-91.

2 A detailed study of the biblical material relating to the text in both Testaments is given in Hans-Peter Mathys, *Liebe deinen Nächsten wie dich Selbst. Untersuchungen zum alttestamentlichen Gebot der Nächstenliebe* (Lev. 19,18), Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 71, (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986).

3 The central importance of love for the philosophic ethic of Augustine is well shown in John burnaby, *Amor Dei. A Study of St. Augustine's Teaching on the Love of God as the Motive of Christian Life*, Hulsean Lectures (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938). The theme of 'love of one's neighbour' is dealt with on pp.127ff.

4 Critical scholarship has come to recognize in Lev. 19 an early collection of commandments, probably ten, or twelve in number, which has undergone subsequent expansion and comment. Cf. K. Elliger, *Leviticus*, Handbuch zum Alten Testament 4, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (P. Siebeck), 1966), pp. 242-263.

5 NEB reads "You shall love your neighbour as a man like yourself'. The REB, however, has reverted back to the more familiar rendering "You must love your neighbour as yourself."

6 Cf. Hans-Peter Mathys, *op.cit.*, pp.6-9, 48ff. For Wessely cf. N. Slouschz in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. XII, 506a-507b.

7 Hans-Peter Mathys, *op.cit.*, pp. 57ff.

8 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *A History of Anthropological Thought*, ed. A. Singer, (London: Faber & Faber, 1981) pp. 82ff.

9 G.R. Driver & J.C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); J.B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 3rd ed. 1969,) pp. 163-180.

10 This development is excellently traced in L. Epsztein, *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible*, Eng. Tr. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1986).

11 K.W. Whitelam, *The Just King. Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1979); cf. also the forthcoming volume B.R. Halpern & D.W. Hobson (eds.), *Law, Politics and Society in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

12 The subject of biblical attitudes to the institution of kingship are surveyed in K.W. Whitelam, "Israelite Kingship. The Royal Ideology and its Opponents", *The World of Ancient Israel*, ed. R.E. Clements (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), pp. 119-139.

13 The role of kingship in political development of ancient Mesopotamia is fully demonstrated in H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 232ff.

14 E. Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, Eng. Tr. D.J. Schmidt (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987) especially pp. 25ff.

15 W. Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

16 M. Luther's significant use of the Decalogue as a basis of 'natural law' is set out in H. Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, Eng. Tr. E.W. & R.C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969) pp. 124-135; cf. also H.S. Gehman, "Natural Law and the Old Testament", *Biblical Studies in Memory of H.C. Alleman*, ed. J.M. Myers et.al., (Locust Valley, N.Y.: J.J. Augustin, 1960), pp. 109-122.

17 E. Otto, *op.cit.*, pp. 20f: "In the religio-historical outline concerning the distinctiveness of YHWH, over against the deities of Israel's neighbours, it is much in evidence that the sketches of an Old Testament ethic lack the perspective of continuity between the ethic of Israel and its environment." A valuable exception is the work of L. Epsztein referred to above in n.9.

18 The careful reflection upon, and progressive revision of, the legal corpora of the Hebrew Bible in the light of experience are illuminatingly explored by M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford OUP, 1985). pp. 9 1ff.

19 The categorical biblical assertion of divine wisdom is sweeping in its range:

> "By me kings reign,
> and rulers decree what is just;
> be me princes rule,
> and nobles govern the earth."
> Prov. 8.15f.

20 The 'this worldly', and hence profoundly ethical, nature of the religious emphasis of the Old Testament is well brought out in the study by W. Zimmerli, *The Old Testament and the World*, Eng. Tr. J.J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1976).

21 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 22f; L. Newbiggin, *Foolishness to the Greeks, The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), pp. 95ff.

22 Especially argued in N.K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1000 B.C.* (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1979). *Ibid. The Hebrew Bible. A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Four major critical reviews are brought together in N.K. Gottwald, *The Bible and Liberation. Political and Social Hermeneutics*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984, pp. 166-189. Cf. also the more far-reaching criticisms of G.E. Mendenhall, in "Ancient Israel's Hyphenated History", D.N. Freedman and D.F.. Graf, *Palestine in Transition. The Emergence of Ancient Israel*, The Social World of Biblical Antiquity Series 2 (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), pp. 91-103.

23 The critical comment of G.E. Mendenhall (*art.cit.* p. 102) is not too much of an exaggeration: "Gottwald's attempt to present us with a historical account of the beginnings of biblical history is truly a tragic comedy of errors. He has not really succeeded in projecting himself back in time beyond the late 1930's. This world certainly needs no more of that sort of enthusiasm, for we already have far too much materialist and technological elaboration driven by ideologies that are for that very reason far worse than those of primitive tribes."

24 J. Fichtner, "Der Begriff des "Nächsten" im Alten Testament *Gottes Weisheit. Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, ed. K.D. Fricke, Arbeiten zur Theologie 11/3 (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1965, pp.88-114) p.89. The essay was originally published in *Wort und Dienst* N.F. 4, 1955, pp. 23-52); cf. also D. Kellermann, *"rea", Theologisches Wörterbuch zum A T,* eds. H. Ringgren & G. Botterweck, Bd. VII, cols. 545-555.

25 W. Roberston Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1885); cf. also the studies included in Jack Goody, ed. *The Character of Kinship* (Cambridge: CUP, 1974). Smith was undoubtedly influenced by the theories about kinship in early societies advocated by L.H. Morgan and J.F. M'Lennan.

26 Cf. John Rogerson's review of the evidence in J.W. Rogerson & P.R. Davies, *The Old Testament World*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1989), pp. 45-62.

27 A related, though slightly constrasting, pattern of development is to be found in the extension of the concept of 'brother' beyond members of the actual kin-group to embrace all one's fellow-countrymen. Cf. L. Perlitt, "Ein einzig Volk von Brüdern", *Kirche: FS G Bornkamm zum 75 Geburtstag*, eds. D. Lührmann & G. Strecker (Tübingen: J.CB. Mohr, 1980), p.27-52. This development is markedly evident in the lawcode of Deut. 12-26, where it appears that the older description in lawcodes of a fellow-Israelite as a 'neighbour' has been transformed by such an extended concept of 'brotherhood'. I am grateful to Dr. Walter Houston of Westminster College, Cambridge for drawing my attention to Perlitt's essay.

28 It is the verb in the first line of the saying which is uncertain and readers may prefer the rendering of W. McKane, *Proverbs. A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1970), pp. 239, 518f. which reads:

> "There is a companion who does nothing but chatter,
> but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."

This understanding of the verb goes back to a suggestion made by G.R. Driver, "Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs", *Biblica* 32 (1951), pp. 183f.

29 Cf. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); John G, Gammie, *Holiness in Israel*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, pp. 148-156.

30 J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Eng. Tr. J.J. Shapiro (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). Cf. also Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, (London: Sage Publications, 2nd ed. 1991), pp. 178ff.; Millard C. Lind, "Law, Justice and Power", *Monotheism, Power, Justice*, Text Reader series No. 3 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies) pp. 61-152.

31 J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, (London OUP, 1961), pp. 206ff. Barr singles out the meanings of "Faith", 'Righteousness' and "Truth" as particular examples, pp. 187ff.

32 This is the main thrust of the work by P.D. Hanson, *The People Called. Growth of Community in the Bible.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

33 The saying is fully discussed in the study by Peter Doll, *Menschenschöpfung und Weltschöpfung in der alttestamentlichen Weisheit*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 117, (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1985; cf. also R.N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, JSOTSupp 99, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), pp. 41ff.

34 E. Bloch, *op.cit.*, p.1.

35 The widespread variations in what has been understood by the term "in the image of God" are surveyed in the excursus C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, Eng. Tr. J.J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984), pp. 147-158.

36 E. Ullendorff "Thought Categories in the Hebrew Bible", *Is Biblical Hebrew a Language? Studies in Semitic Languages and Civilizations*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977), pp. 55f. Ullendorff's further comment on the origin of the long line of mistranslations is also of interest: "I do not know if the Septuagint misunderstood the Hebrew original and thus gave rise to this long chain of inaccurate translations or - as is quite possible - based its version on a midrashic interpretation of the verse current at that time." (p.56). Professor Ullendorff's lecture was originally published in *Studies in Rationalism, Judaism and Universalism in Memory of Leon Roth*, ed. R. Loewe (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966), pp. 273-288.

37 Hans-Peter Mathys, *op.cit.*, pp. 46-55.

38 M. Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, Eng. Tr. N.P. Goldhawk (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p.70. Buber's discussion (pp. 69f) of the significance of the commandment in Jewish and Christian understanding is of relevance to the larger point raised in the lecture.