EVANGELICAL REVIW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 18

Volume 18 • Number 3 • July 1994

Evangelical Review of Theology

Articles and book reviews original and selected from publications worldwide for an international readership for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS

Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

> Gentiles' is lost, and the Western problems of conscience becomes its unchallenged and self-evident substitute.[44]

This may explain how commentators, without any evidence to the contrary, find it natural to interpret Romans 2:15b as referring to an inner struggle of the soul, even though the context is one of objective external judgement.

Romans 2:14–16 could therefore be paraphrased as follows in the light of the Osiris myth:

> The fact that Gentiles sometimes instinctively do what the law requires is clear proof that they have access to the demands of God even though this is not through the Law of Moses. Depending on the kind of life they lived their consciences will either defend them or accuse them on the day of judgement when, according to my Gospel, God will judge the things that men have tried to hide (but which were known to God and to their own consciences). Jesus Christ will be the agent of this judgement (he is Truth—the standard by which men will be judged!)

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

To recapitulate, Romans 2:15b has been understood by most commentators as referring to the role of conscience in the struggle between good and evil within the soul of man. This interpretation, although supported by some parallels in Jewish literature, scarcely suits the context of the text, which is one of final objective judgement rather than inner subjective conflict.

This study has attempted to present an alternative understanding of Romans 2:15b based on the role of conscience in the Judgement Scene of the Osiris myth. In that scene the 'heart' (equivalent to conscience) of the man being judged testifies either on behalf of or against him. It presents evidence from the life of the one being judged which p. 213 determines whether he is to be condemned or acquitted. The Ancient Egyptian myth thus unfolds the possibility of understanding the role of conscience in Romans 2:15b as that of an objective witness on the clay of judgement rather than as an inner arbiter between conflicting thoughts.[45]

———————————

The Rev. Ramez Atallah is General Secretary of the Bible Society of Egypt. p. 214

Ethical Responses to God the Creator

Chris Wright

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 207.

[45] The present study has raised two questions which must remain for a later study: (a) Did Paul or any other New Testament writers have access to Ancient Egyptian thinking (regardless of the channels through which this was communicated)? If so, how can this dependency be determined? (b) Are there other texts in the New Testament which could be illuminated by parallels from Ancient Egyptian religion?

Reprinted from European Journal of Theology *Vol. 1, No. 2, 1992, (abridged) with permission.*

In this first section of an extended article on Ethical Issues in the Old Testament*, the author gives a clear and cogent analysis of ethical actions for all humanity as well as for Israel as an obedient response to the one God who created the universe. The order and completeness of creation affirms that moral choices have predictable moral consequences. Yet ethical decision-making also demands responses to evil and chaos in a world disordered by humanity's fallenness. The author appeals to the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament for a theology grounded in creation.*

INTRODUCTION

It is something of a truism to say that biblical ethics is theistic. That is to say, it assumes the existence of one living personal God and sets the whole of human life in response to him. Ethics is not an agenda, a means to an end, an inflexible law, self-fulfilment or any of the other terms that may secondarily describe various human formulations of it. It is primarily response to God, who he is and what he has done. In the Hebrew Bible that response is first set in the context of God as creator, so that is where we begin. Secondly, we meet the revelation of the God of covenant purpose whose commitment to bless the human race leads him to initiate a special relationship with Israel within which their ethical response is a central feature. Thirdly, we find that purpose given concrete historical form as we meet the God of redemptive action who delivers his people and then gives them land to live in and law to live by.

I. RESPONDING TO THE GOD OF CREATED ORDER

'The fear of the Lord …'

The assumption of monotheism in the opening chapters of the Bible is p. 215 so obvious that we easily miss its ethically revolutionary character. The creation narratives almost effortlessly exclude polytheism and dualism, and the pervasive ethico-cultural edifices that go with them. Only one God created the heavens and the earth. Human beings are answerable only to that one God. Whether walking and talking with him in the garden in Eden, or fleeing from him in the restless land of Nod, east of Eden, it is one and the same God with whom we have to do. This immediately introduces a fundamental simplicity into biblical ethics. Commitment to love and obey the one living God rescues one from the fear of offending one god by trying to please another, from the confusion of moral requirements, or from the moral cynicism that arises when people feel that it doesn't really matter in the end how you live because you can't win. The gods will get you in the end.

For Israel, the fear of Yahweh alone was the first principle not only of wisdom, but of ethics. 'Fear him, you saints and you will then have nothing else to fear.' In Psalm 33 the thought moves directly from the sole creative word of Yahweh to the universal challenge to all human beings to fear him (6–8), since he is the moral adjudicator of all human behaviour (13–15). The same universal ethical thrust is found in some of the Psalms celebrating the kingship of Yahweh (*e.g.* 96:4f., 10–13).

To say that ethics in the Old Testament was simple is not to say obedience was easy or that ethical decision-making was a matter of black and white choices. It is to say that the task of living in this world is not complicated by divided allegiances to competing gods, or

obscure philosophies which demand religious or 'expert' elites to interpret them for us. Sometimes this essential simplicity is referred to by way of encouragement to act in accordance with God's will. 'Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach', says Moses, '… No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it' (Deut. 30:11–14). 'He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Mic. 6:8). Although these texts were spoken to Israel, they can be relevant to humanity at large inasmuch as Paul generalizes the requirements of the law as something written on the hearts even of those who never heard it (Rom. 2:14f.).

'The earth is fixed …'

Another unmistakeable feature of Genesis 1 is its presentation of the creation as a place of order, system and structure. We live in a cosmos, not a chaos, and we do so because of the creative word and action of God. This is not only affirmed in Genesis 1 but celebrated in Israel's worship and used by prophets to exalt the power of Yahweh as over against the gods of the nations (Isa. 45:18ff.). This created order has two effects on biblical ethics.

i) As a bulwark against relativism

The most important effect of this truth as regards ethics is that it provides the objective basis and *p. 216* authority for the exercise of moral freedom, while exposing the wrongheadedness of moral relativism. Oliver O'Donovan has reinstated the importance of the creation basis for evangelical ethics in his programatic study *Resurrection and Moral Order*.

While it is clear that biblical ethics is very securely tied to the action of God in history (which we consider below), it is important that we give adequate attention to the Hebrew Bible's creation doctrine with all its implications for our world-view. An emphasis on history alone, without the safeguards of the biblical creation faith, could deliver us into the kind of historical relativism which puts all things, morality included, at the mercy of the historical process. This is a danger which O'Donovan also warns us of, insisting that the only proper protection from it is the biblical affirmation of a given order of creation which, though disturbed by the fall, is still the order within which we live, and which will finally be restored to its perfection and glory through God's redemptive action, which has already been achieved on the resurrection of Christ and will be complete at his return.

> That which most distinguishes the concept of creation is that it is complete. Creation is the given totality of order which forms the presupposition of historical existence. 'Created order' is that which is not negotiable within the course of history, that which neither the terrors of chance nor the ingenuity of art can overthrow. It defines the scope of our freedom and the limits of our fears. The affirmation of the psalm, sung on the sabbath which celebrates the completion of creation, affords a ground for human activity and human hope: 'The world is established, it shall never be moved'. Within such a world, in which 'The Lord reigns', we are free to act and can have confidence that God will act. Because created order is given, because it is secure, we dare to be certain that God will vindicate it in history. 'He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth' (Ps. 96:10, 13).[1]

Whatever the culture or whatever the juncture of history, we all have to live in God's created world as his human creatures. There is a basic shape to that world which we did

[1] O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, (IVP, 1986) p. 61.

not invent, and therefore a corresponding shape to the moral response required of us if we are to live within it with the kind of freedom which, by God's so ordering, it authorizes. Morality, in biblical terms, therefore, is preconditioned by the given shape of creation, which underlies the relativity of cultural responses to it within history.

The biblical authority, then, for our ethics in a world of moral relativism, is based on its twin affirmation of creation and history: creation as the fundamental order that shapes our existence in history, and which is destined for restoration in the new creation of the kingdom of God; and history as the stage on which we observe the acts of the God whom we are commanded to imitate by 'walking in his ways'.

ii) As a basis for legitimate consequentialism

In Christian evaluation of different ethical stances, 'consequentialism' *p. 217* usually gets a bad press. It is the view that moral choices should be evaluated in terms of their likely consequences, not in terms of *a priori* moral principles which are regarded as absolute and necessary (the latter view being termed 'deontological'). The most influential secular brand of consequentialism is Utilitarianism, which at its simplest argues that the correct ethical choice in any matter is that which is likely to achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. This is not the place to enter into a critique of it.[2] What I would like to show is that among the effects of the biblical teaching on the established order of creation is a degree of confidence in the reliability and predictability of life in this world. This is not, of course, to suggest that nothing untoward ever happens unexpectedly (see the discussion of Ecclesiastes below), still less to endorse an unbiblical fatalism. It is simply to note that the Hebrew Bible does move from the observation of regularity, consistency and permanence in creation itself (*e.g.* in Jer. 31:35ff.), to affirmations of the same characteristics in God, and thence to the assumption that certain consequences will always follow from certain actions. There are causes and effects in the moral realm, as in the physical, and it is part of wise living in this world to take note of them and behave accordingly.

It is interesting that a consequentialist view of ethical decisions is found precisely in the Wisdom literature, which tends to be grounded in a creation rather than a redemption theology. Much of the advice and guidance given in Proverbs is prudential. 'Think what will happen if …' Behavioural cause and effect are repeatedly linked. Hard work produces wealth. Lending and borrowing will lose your friends. Careless words cost lives. And so it goes on.

Possibly the most interesting example concerns the Wisdom tradition's sexual ethic. It is in full accordance with the law, of course, but it is not explicitly sanctioned by law. Whereas the law simply says 'Do not commit adultery, on penalty of death', the Wisdom teacher says, 'Do not commit adultery because of the appalling consequences that you will expose yourself and your whole family and property to.' It isn't worth the risk. Common sense itself warns against what the law prohibits. Moral rules and moral consequences actually reinforce one another in this way of thinking (*e.g.* Prov. 5; 6:24–35; 7). We need to remember however, that the Wisdom tradition's consequentialism is thoroughly personal and theistic. It is not impersonal fate, or *karma*. Behind all the prudential advice of the sages stands their own foundational axiom, 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. Whatever results follow from our actions are not mechanical cause and effect, but the outworking of God's own order in his world. The consequentialism of Wisdom is thus based on what we would theologically call God's sovereign providence and justice.

---

[2] A very lucid account of it is to be found in R. Higginson: *Dilemmas: A Christian approach to moral decision-making* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), chs. 2 and 8.

In the narratives we come across a kind of empirical consequentialism p. 218 when appeals to conscience are made on the grounds of likely outcomes. Abigail's warning to David takes this approach (1 Sam. 25:30f.). Conversely, the category of 'folly' is sometimes portrayed not merely as the absence of common sense (though it can be that, as Jonathan's reaction to his father's absurd prohibition on his soldiers eating on a day of battle shows, 1 Sam. 14:245–30), but a failure to look beyond the pressure or emotion of the moment (2 Sam. 13:12ff.).

A desacralized world-view

Another dimension of the creation ethic of the Hebrew Bible is the way it desacralizes certain areas of life which in polytheistic cultures tend to be shrouded in mystique, taboos and risk for mortal men and women. Death, for example, is not some external power or independent deity, but a fact decreed and controlled by God, and given moral and spiritual rationale in relation to human sin. It remains a horror and an enemy, but has no personal power to direct or guide how one lives here and now. For that you go to the living God and his express law alone and neither to Death itself nor to the dead. (Isa. 8:19f.).

With greater practical and ethical relevance, OT creation faith also desacralized sex. It played no part in the process of the creation of the world, but is simply one feature internal to creation. Human sexuality is part of the image of God, but not in itself part of God. It is a gift within creation, to be enjoyed with God's blessing, but not a means of manipulating either God or nature, as it is within the fertility cults that usually exist symbiotically with polytheism. Thus it is that in the Hebrew Bible strict laws on the proper context for the exercise of our sexuality coexist with the unrestrained freedom of the Song of Solomon's exaltation of the joy of sex under God's blessing. In this case, the Wisdom tradition adorns what the law protects.

This desacralizing of important areas of life in the Hebrew Bible actually increases the scope of personal freedom. Old Testament law can sound restrictive because of its negative tone. But on reflection it is actually the case that negatively framed law is much more liberating than positive or directive law. It is more liberating to be told you may do what you choose, with specified limits and exceptions, than to be told what you must choose or do in all circumstances. The park which allows you freedom to do what you like, but has a notice which says 'do not pick the flowers' is a better place to be than the safari park where you must follow the prescribed route and stay in your car. Even in the garden of Eden it was thus. 'You are free to eat of any tree of the garden—except….' This gave to humanity a range of freedoms in the world which so many 'religions' would have hedged much more restrictively.

Yet, having given to humanity such freedom to act within the created order, and having entrusted to us dominion over creation, one route to achieving mastery was prohibited—magic and the occult. The creation narratives themselves exclude any magic dimension to the way in which God created and ordered the world, and likewise the p. 219 task of working out our appropriate ethical task in the world is not to be short-circuited or bypassed by magical mechanisms. The fact that magic as it is practised in many cultures can be 'white' or 'black' shows that it is in fact an amoral force. It attempts to evade the responsibility of making the moral choice which expresses personal response to our personal God and instead yields up to other forces and means the mastery that God entrusted to us.

The image of God

Perhaps the most familiar of all the implications of the creation material for biblical ethics is the affirmation that God made human beings in his own image. This has been explored

in great depth by many scholars, biblical and ethical. I would want to pick out just two main results of it as regards ethical decison-making in the Old Testament.

i) The sanctity of human life

As early as the texts of the Noah covenant the principle was stated that human life was to be treated as inviolable on the grounds of the image of God. Even animals would be held to account by God for the killing of humans. The influence of this principle can be seen in Israel's law. Laws about domestic animals that injure or kill humans are common in ancient Near Eastern legal *corpora*. All of them prescribe various degrees of compensation and punishment of the owner. Only the Hebrew law prescribes also that a 'guilty' ox was to be stoned to death (Ex. 21:28ff.). It seems most likely that this was because of the religious influence on the law of the principle of the sanctity of human life, as crystallized in Genesis 9:5.[3]

Empirically, this high value shows itself in the narratives in several places where there is an abhorrence for the shedding of innocent blood (e.g. 1 Sam. 19:4–6; 25:26; 2 Sam. 2:22; 3:28, 37).

The equality of human beings

The Old Testament did not eliminate ali social distinctions, such as, for example, the social and economic inferiority of the slave. It did, however, go a long way in mitigating the worst effects, by a theology of essential human equality based on our common createdness. In its law, the Old Testament knows nothing of the graded penalties for crimes against different ranks of victim, as is common in ANE law. There was equality before the law for native and alien. The slave was given human and legal rights unheard of in contemporary societies. This is reflected in Job's great ethical self-defence in which he bases his claim to have treated his slaves with justice in any case they brought against him upon an unambiguous statement of created human equality between master and slave: 'did not he who made me in the womb also make them?' (Job 31:15). Once again it is in the Wisdom literature that we find the broadest outworking of this creation theology into the social ethos *p. 220* of Israel. There are several texts in Proverbs which affirm the equality before God of rich and poor (22:2, 29:13), and others which so identify God with every human being, regardless of status, that what we do to them we do to God himself (14:31; 17:5; 19:17). This is not the only place where we can hear distinct echoes of the Wisdom tradition in the ethical teaching of Jesus.

Disordered creation

All the points above flow from Israel's understanding of the world as a place created and ordered by God. But of course it is also a place spoiled and disordered by humanity. Ethical decision-making, therefore, has to respond to the presence of evil and apparent chaos within human society and the world iself. It could be said that the whole Bible from Genesis 4 on is the deposit of that struggle. But as regards specific ethical behaviour, the main thrust of the Old Testament is that a person must persevere in his commitment to upright behaviour in the sight of God, even in the face of contradiction from fellow human beings or from adverse and inexplicable circumstances. I would point to two significant areas.

---

[3] This is not universally accepted among scholars of Israelite and comparative ancient Near Eastern Law, but it is a view with strong supporters. I have discussed the issue, with full bibliography in *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 156–60.

First, in the Psalms there is a remarkable reflection of Israel's ethical value, struggles and endeavour, scarcely matched at all in Christian hymnody. It is noticeable how often the Psalmists affirm their intention to continue to pursue righteous behaviour in spite of a surrounding climate of evil, to speak and do the truth when engulfed in lies, to keep clean hands in a dirty world. The cost of this stance is considerable and is also reflected in the anguish of the Psalms. The person who keeps his word will sometimes find that he ends up hurting himself, but it is a qualification of acceptable worship that he still does so (Ps. 15:4). Surrounded by prosperous, complacent evildoers, the believer is tempted to think his own moral efforts are futile, and can find respite and perspective only in worship (Ps. 73). The world is a wicked place, but the only path to happiness in it, as the deliberately prefatory Psalm 1 makes unambiguously clear, is the committed, systematic choice of the way of the Lord. Such a stance is wise and good and godly. That is to say, the ethics of the Psalmists bind together, in one inclusive world-view, the intellectual, the moral and the religious spheres. For, conversely, the opposite stance is foolish, evil and ungodly: The *fool* says in his heart '*There is no God*', because he has chosen the way of *corruption* (Ps. 14). If the ethos of a people's worship is a good guide to the ethics of their society, then the strong ethical character of the Psalms is very revealing of the moral climate among devout Israelites.

Secondly, the Wisdom tradition, for all its commitment to a consequentialist view of the world in which moral causes and effects are broadly predictable, so that ethical decisions can be made with reasonable confidence, is aware that it does not always work out like that in real life. Ecclesiastes is often regarded as in a sense Wisdom's own self-criticism, as a counterbalance to the broad optimism of Proverbs. It refuses to ignore the brutal realities p. 221 of life in this world (some have said it is the Hebrew Bible's best commentary on Genesis 3), the absurdities, the injustices, the way the unexpected disaster can ruin our best endeavours, the unpredictability of life (how a tree will fall or the wind will blow) and above all, the menacing enigma of death. Yet in the midst of these, Ecclesiastes remains both a theistic believer—this is still God's world and we are accountable to him—and a committed subscriber to the essential moral stance of Yahwism—to fear Yahweh and keep his commandments (12:13), for that is what it means to 'remember your Creator' (12:1).

In conclusion to this first main section, then, we have seen that ethical decisions in the Old Testament were made first of all in response to God as creator. That includes: a monotheistic stance which both excludes the moral degeneracy of polytheism and also simplifies ethics to a fundamentally single choice—to love and obey Yahweh, or not to; basic confidence in the world as a place created and ordered by God in such a way that moral choices matter and have predictable moral consequences that can be known and anticipated; a high degree of 'secular' freedom in how we live in the earth, unfettered by the bondage of occultism, sacral taboos and the fear of manipulation of magic; a primary regard for the value of human life as made in the image of God, which both sets the shedding of innocent blood near the top of the list of ethical negatives and sets the equality of all human beings near the top of the list of ethical positives. And we have seen that the ethical values that flow from these sources are to be preserved and lived out, even in the midst of a cursed earth and a fallen humanity which constantly undermine, deny or reverse them.

———————————

Dr. Chris Wright is Principal of All Nations Christian College in Ware, England. p. 222