CHAPTER FORTY THREE

ETHICS

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INTRODUCTION

Whilst the Jewish interpretive tradition has an extensive history of attention to ethical issues, the Christian tradition arrived at a similar intensity of focus on ethical concerns only in connection with twentieth century efforts toward the production of a 'biblical theology'. These reflections stemmed from the texts' status as authoritative Christian scripture and were accordingly dominated by explicitly normative interests. More recently, there has been a spate of investigations undertaken from a descriptive or historical point of view. These two types of studies are not unrelated; historical work often informs contemporary moral thinking and practice. Nevertheless, they employ somewhat different methods as they approach the biblical texts and should be distinguished. In this chapter we discuss each of these approaches to biblical ethics, before turning to some further methodological considerations, an examination of the biblical texts' ideas about whence ethical norms derive their authority, and, finally, an analysis of certain major themes in biblical ethics.

Historical ethics

Historically orientated studies into biblical ethics aim to uncover the ethical thought processes of Israelites in the first millennium BCE and/or the ethical thinking of the early Christian churches around the eastern Mediterranean in the first century CE. They examine explicit statements about right and wrong behaviour, as well as implied condemnation and approbation; clarify such statements where they are obscure; and look for the undergirding patterns and principles of such statements. Insofar as they mean to inform the reader about ancient thinking, without making any judgments about it, this approach may also be referred to as 'descriptive ethics'.

This kind of work is a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, for many years it was necessarily preoccupied with preliminary theoretical issues; John Barton and Eckart Otto loomed especially large, as they debated whether and how texts that do not talk explicitly about ethical norms could be read from an ethical perspective. This early attention to *genre* has influenced the field's development, producing a strong tendency toward works corresponding to the biblical corpus's various genres: studies

on ethics in narrative, ethics in law, and so on. Among early forerunners, Gordon Wenham attended especially to the importance of the Psalms and narrative as ethical texts.

One of the reasons to investigate biblical texts from an historical perspective is that moral imperatives exist in and relate to particular contexts. Paul's moral exhortations, for example, always respond to a specific historical context; they come in letters to living Christian communities with specific and individual needs. The names traditionally used to refer to his letters underscore this: they are the Letter to the Galatians, the Letter to the Romans, and so on. When Paul exhorts the Thessalonians on how they 'ought to live' (Thessalonians 4:1), this is not an abstract imperative but particular to the circumstances at Thessalonica and to Paul's understanding of the issues facing that community. Although the preservation and circulation of these letters by the early Christian communities suggests that such reflections were thought to have wider relevance, knowledge about the challenges facing the original recipients can help the modern reader appreciate the origins, motivations, and implications of the advice Paul offers.

An historical approach to biblical ethics can also help make sense of a text's concerns by elucidating the logic driving its moral reasoning. Individual exhortations are closely connected to ideas about the right structure of a society, about the right relationship between that society and the individuals who comprise it, and even the way that the world as a whole is organised. In other words, they are part of wider intellectual and ethical systems, in relation to which the rightness or wrongness of individual acts are judged. When the point of a particular verse or passage is opaque, locating a text in this wider intellectual and moral context can help to make sense of the meaning of its imperatives and its rationale in putting them forth. As an example: Paul was born a Jew and a Pharisee, with certain moral and cultic obligations arising from this. His perception of these obligations, however, was profoundly affected by his conversion and, in particular, by his commitment to a mission amongst non-Jews. Much of Paul's writing reflects on the changes to Jewish behavioural norms that he sees as necessary in this new context, revealing in the process his struggles to find an appropriate balance between his Jewish identity and traditions and his confession of Jesus as the Christ. When Paul ties himself up in knots over what Christians may or may not eat (Romans 14; cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-4), the crux of the matter is the status of Jewish dietary restrictions amongst Christians, both Jewish and gentile. The issue's significance is difficult to grasp without an appreciation of Paul's own personal background and his evangelising priorities.

In addition to the purely historical objectives of such studies, historical ethics may also contribute to normative ethical undertakings. If we want to think about the modern relevance of the biblical texts, understanding their ancient contexts enables a more informed judgment about whether a particular text might be meaningful in the modern world, as well as a richer statement of how and why it might be so. It is important to recognise, however, that historical ethics is logically prior to normative ethics, even when the ultimate objective is normative. That is, the clarification of these texts' origins and intentions through historical study should precede efforts to derive normative principles from them.

Normative ethics

For those interested in the biblical texts for normative purposes, it is hard to avoid the realisation that the use of ancient texts to address modern moral problems can be quite a challenging undertaking. The distance between ancient and modern contexts—highlighted both explicitly and implicitly by historical researches—immediately complicates efforts to relate these texts to modern life. These inherent difficulties are exacerbated further by the fact that normative biblical ethics has tended to focus on the most contentious moral debates of the contemporary world, about which readers often have a wide range of existing opinions. Consciously or unconsciously, these other beliefs and concerns affect the way that readers approach the biblical texts for insights into these thorny ethical issues.

This contextual aspect of normative ethics is apparent, first, in the tendency of normative analyses to focus on certain 'hot topics'—gender, sexuality, and the family have loomed especially large at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. It is also apparent in the consistency with which such studies present the biblical witness(es) according to a model of 'relevance' and 'resistance'. This model aims, on the one hand, to identify the biblical texts' *relevance* for a modern 'good life', eliding the historical gap between the ancient and modern contexts. In the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:4–21), for example, there is much that feels immediately applicable to modern life: that we should not covet the possessions of our neighbours is still generally considered a sound moral principle. The faithful reader, however, will also call attention to the fact that the list of possessions we are exhorted not to covet includes slaves (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21); the assumption that the reader and his (the text also assumes that 'you' are male) neighbour will own other human beings is deeply problematic in an abolitionist age. By *resisting* the temptation to take on the point of view of the biblical texts completely, this strand of normative ethics reminds us of ways in which the Bible has been invoked to condone morally reprehensible behaviour. It raises, in turn, a crucial question for the normative ethicist: How does a modern reader looking for ethical guidance in this text reconcile its implicit acceptance of something as abhorrent as slavery? Despite such challenges, normative biblical ethics proceed from the premise that the biblical texts *are* normative for contemporary Jewish and Christian communities; they therefore *ought* to be taken into account in faithful communities' thinking on difficult ethical issues. Both those who emphasise the *relevance* of the Bible for modern life and those who take care to *resist* certain of its assumptions aim to develop an approach to biblical ethics that allows modern readers to stay in conversation with the text.

Before moving on, it is worth noting that a significant feature of normative biblical ethics has been a tendency to (try to) read biblical texts synchronically or systematically. That is, because each biblical text stands as part of a canonical collection which is authoritative as a whole, normative work has preferred to speak of what 'the Bible' says, smoothing out differences between texts and seeking one or a small number of unifying principles perceived to characterise the collection as a whole. If we return to the Ten Commandments, this kind of approach might smooth over the issue of slavery by considering the verse in the context of imperatives against coveting that do not mention slavery, such as the scathing rebuke of those who 'covet fields'

in Micah 2:1-13 or 'the stingy man who hastens after wealth' in Proverbs 28:22. By doing this, one can talk about the moral imperative against coveting as a normative principle in the Bible, without being weighed down by the potentially awkward particularities of one particular text. As the discussion to follow will highlight, however, such efforts are obliged to work against the heterogeneity of the Bible itself. Although there is a great deal of theological and ethical continuity across the biblical texts, it is ever difficult to say, 'the Bible says' without needing to follow this up with 'and also'. Indeed, given the diversity of the biblical texts' chronological, geographical, and social backgrounds, it would be surprising to see only a single point of view. Yet, although this diversity may be one of the most challenging aspects of normative biblical ethics, it has the potential to be also one of its most exciting aspects, as readers recognise the complexities of their own moral lives reflected in the biblical tradition. For example, one could consider how the issue of debt slavery in the Bible speaks normatively to contemporary relationships between debtors and creditors; to this we will return below.

DIVERSITY

Both normative and descriptive-historical ethics, therefore, have a significant interest in the variety of ethical thought reflected in the biblical tradition. This section will consider two particular aspects of this diversity. First, we will examine the different kinds of texts that reflect on ethical behaviour, both explicitly and implicitly. Second, we will examine the different kinds of assumptions that these reflections make about the origins of ethical norms.

Genre

Different kinds of texts have different purposes and different ways of reflecting on and revealing their ethical thinking. Some make their point overtly, but others divulge themselves whilst busy doing something else. In this section we consider some of the different genres in the Bible and how we might approach these genres ethically.

Some biblical texts, such as the laws in the Pentateuch, the aphorisms in Proverbs, and the extensive instruction sections of the New Testament epistles, are clearly meant to be instructive. Yet, despite their overt didacticism, these texts frequently pose a challenge at the first hurdle, because their intentions are obscured by the temporal, geographical, and social distance between their authors and modern interpreters. What, for example, does Paul mean to describe when he refers to 'unnatural' acts in Romans 1:26-27? How should we relate his words, made with reference to a first-century understanding of human nature, to the twenty-first century? At other times the immediate meaning of a text appears obvious, but the rationale is not. Identifying not only *what* an author commends (or condemns) but *why* he or she commends it, however, improves our understanding of the text's meaning and intention. Especially if our interest is normative, discernment of a text's rationale helps to bridge the gap between ancient and modern contexts by inviting reflection on how an ancient text's moral logic might be mirrored in a modern context.

For example, when Deuteronomy 22:8 legislates the construction of parapets, the immediate instructions are clear enough. How this fits into a wider system of

meaning, however, requires closer examination. First, it is useful to know that ancient houses often used flat roof terraces as living spaces—the law thus intends to prevent someone from falling off the roof and injuring herself. In seeking to preserve life and limb, it implies that human life is valuable and ought to be cared for. Furthermore, the author considers his audience morally responsible for their actions; the owner of the building without a parapet is liable if someone falls. If we wished to proceed to normative implications, we might suggest that the law's emphasis on the value of human life is a general principle worth reflecting in modern life or, more specifically, that to ensure a building's safety could be framed as a 'biblical' moral imperative. We might also suggest that the law's assignment of moral responsibility to the ancient homeowner or -builder implies a similar burden on their modern counterparts.

The successful explication of overtly didactic texts is hardly the end of the matter, however; the rest of the Bible has plenty of ethical potential. We turn first to the Bible's narrative texts. Although these might not be the first thing to come to mind when thinking about ethics, the use of stories to convey moral ideas is a long-standing feature of human moral reflection. Outside the Bible, we might think of Aesop's fables, or indeed more generally of the care with which parents select books for their children, recognising the power of stories to influence a person's outlook on life.

To think ethically about biblical narrative presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the moral of the story is rarely offered up in a neat, clear assessment: it is often difficult to discern who has gained (or lost) the text's approbation, or why. Yet, by avoiding explicit evaluation, narratives invite readers to reflect on the difficult choices made by their characters and on what choices they might have made in their place. Many of the Bible's greatest heroes engage in morally suspect behaviour: Jacob steals his brother's birthright (Genesis 25), David is an adulterous murderer (2 Samuel 11), and even Jesus is recorded as lobbing insults at his interlocutors (Matthew 6; 7; 15; 22; 23; 24). One is left wondering whether, or to what extent, these people are meant to be moral paragons. At the same time, the presentation of such imperfect men and women amongst Israel's greatest heroes forces the reader to recognise that the pursuit of a moral life is, in real life, messy and uncertain. In their ambiguity, narratives encourage reflection on the principles and values that render morally complicated human beings worthy, despite their manifold flaws. A great advantage of narrative ethics is its ability to handle the nuance and complexity of human life.

The narrative format can also enable the biblical authors to explore the moral difficulties posed by conflicting imperatives. For example, the laws of the Pentateuch are nearly unanimous in their condemnations of women who engage in pre-marital or extra-marital sexual activities. Narrative portions of the Pentateuch and the subsequent historical books, however, contain a number of stories that complicate the apparent clarity of the laws on this point. Ruth, for example, lays down next to a drunk Boaz on the threshing floor in an overt, provocative sexual overture. Tamar deceives her father-in-law into sleeping with her, after having been married to, but failed to conceive with, two of his sons (Genesis 38). On the face of it, both women are in flagrant violation of the law's limitations on female sexual activity. The narrative format, however, allows an exploration of what happens when someone is faced with conflicting moral priorities: between family survival and social expectations about female sexual reserve. Neither chooses a course that aligns neatly with the imperatives

of the Bible's legal material, yet both are recognised as amongst the Bible's most courageous heroes.

The prophetic texts fall somewhere between law and narrative. Many of the ethical issues in the prophets, such (mis)use of wealth, the treatment of the poor, and so on, are obviously ethical, and the prophetic texts are often explicit about their moral priorities. Abuse of power by political, judicial, or religious functionaries, for example, is a recurrent and resonant theme in prophetic texts. 'Learn to do good', implores Isaiah 1:17: 'seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow'. Look out, in other words, for the needs of the weakest members of society; resist the temptation to trample on their rights in pursuit of your own gain. Micah 7:3 rails against 'the official and the judge [who] ask for a bribe', whilst 'the powerful dictate what they desire: thus they pervert justice'. The persistence of such issues down the centuries have made these texts a favourite source of moral exhortation. Other prophetic material, however, can strike a modern audience as quite bizarre; Isaiah's anxiety about the impurity of the people amongst whom he resides, for example, is intimately connected to an understanding of society as a moral aggregate (Isaiah 6). His moral responsibility is not an individual matter between himself and God; rather, the moral failures of the wider community impinge on Isaiah's own moral status. Something similar underlies the commissioning of Ezekiel as a 'watchman' or a 'sentinel' for the people: if he fails to warn them of their shortcomings and the necessity of changing their behaviour, he will be guilty for their deeds (Ezekiel 3:16-21). Such a social conception of ethical responsibility may seem quite strange to someone used to thinking of religion and ethics in individual terms.

Throughout this multiplicity of genres, the route from historical to normative ethics is not always straightforward. In part this is because the texts preserve such a diversity of opinions. Instead of a single underlying principle directed toward a single overarching goal, different texts instruct different things and prioritise different moral principles. A classic example is the matter of debt slavery. Laws in Exodus 15:2-6 and Deuteronomy 15:12-18 command the release of the debt slave in the sabbatical year (the seventh year), whereas Leviticus 25:39-46 legislates release in the jubilee year (the forty-ninth or fiftieth year). The only time the principle appears in practice, there is no mention of frequency and the people fail to adhere to it anyway (Jeremiah 34:8-16). The New Testament passages on slavery are notoriously vexed. The practice is frequently assumed by Jesus (e.g., Matthew 6:24; 13:24-30; 18:23-28; Luke 12:37-38) and by Paul (1 Corinthians 7:21-22). Paul declares the distinction between slave and free null in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11), but invokes it as a potent metaphor throughout his letters, both to describe the faithful's relation to Christ and to God and to describe their relationship to sin and the law (e.g., Romans 6-7; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Galatians 4-5). Slaves are several times exhorted to obey their masters (e.g., Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-19). The difficulty of discerning a 'biblical' moral path from such material may be seen in the use of the Bible by both sides in the nineteenth-century arguments over the abolition of slavery. On a more recently fraught topic Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, appears to contradict himself within the space of just a few chapters, as he advises first on the appropriate attire for women as they pray and prophesy, then asserts that women should be silent in church (1 Corinthians 11; 14).

As we saw above, the biblical texts do not speak with a single voice about sexuality and sexual behaviour, a source of significant unease for modern Christians. The laws in Deuteronomy 22 seem to imply, for example, that for a woman to engage voluntarily in pre- or extra-marital sexual activities is forbidden, punishable by death, whilst Paul is notoriously anxious that the early Christians avoid any hint of sexual impropriety (e.g., Romans 1). The book of Ruth, on the other hand, tells of a young woman who actively pursues an older man, Boaz, with the support—or even at the instigation—of her mother-in-law, Naomi. Bathsheba, though her refusal of David's summons may have been politically and socially difficult (if not impossible), is never said to have cried out (2 Samuel 11); according to Deuteronomy 22, both she and David ought therefore to have been put to death for adultery. Although David is indeed punished (albeit not by death), no condemnation of Bathsheba ever passes the narrator's pen. In Genesis 38, Tamar goes so far as to solicit Judah's custom on the side of the road in order to get herself with child—and is declared 'more righteous' than he as a result. The witness of Song of Songs goes one further, speaking to the intensity and power of sexual desire as a fundamental aspect of human experience and, perhaps, invoking such bodily desire as a way of speaking about the mutual desire of God and humanity. In this variety of texts, the biblical authors incorporate sexual behaviour into their accounts in a way which recognises that the reality of human sexuality is complicated and messy, and that discerning what constitutes moral sexual behaviour is both difficult and subject to a multiplicity of opinions. Such differences raise questions about the origins and intentions of individual texts—why does this text advocate this stance or that action—as well as the intentions and principles of those who brought the texts together: how and why has the Bible come to include such a range of opinion? Normative use of these texts requires especially careful reflection about how to deal with the canonical texts' diversity.

Origins

This brings us to the place of ethics in the wider thought world(s) of the biblical authors: how do biblical ideas about ethics relate to biblical ideas about the world and society? Here we attend to two elements of this question. First, where do biblical authors think that ethics come from? Second, how do the biblical texts believe that human beings are to find out about them? The first and perhaps the most obvious answer to the first question is that ethics come from God. As for the second, the Bible makes clear that human beings know about moral norms through divine revelation. That is, human beings are able to distinguish between right and wrong behaviour on the basis of explicit moral statements attributed to God. The Pentateuch's laws are presented this way: Moses went up onto the holy mountain to receive the commandments, then wrote them down on stone tablets for Israel's future reference. Moral imperatives attributed to Jesus by the gospel writers may also be understood in terms of revelation.

Yet, whilst this is a prominent and significant part of the Bible's understanding of the origins and transmission of ethics, the Bible does not assume that revelation is the only means by which human beings might be brought to ethical awareness. This is clearest in texts that assume that non-Israelite or non-Christian peoples also have moral responsibilities, such as the condemnation of non-Israelite nations for war

crimes in Amos 1–2. Other texts imply moral norms valid for all humanity, regardless of whether a person is privy to the more specific instructions revealed to Israel or through Christ. Genesis 9:6, for example, declares that 'whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind'. The prohibition of and consequences for killing another human being is presented not as something revealed and only applicable to Israelites, with whom God has a particular and special relationship, but as a principle to which all humanity is expected to adhere. In the New Testament this kind of moral thinking is evident in, for example, the promotion of virtues characteristic of wider Greco-Roman moral teachings, namely, that humanity as a whole should live according to a particular ideal centred on moderation (1 Timothy; Titus). These letters take the quite remarkable step of drawing on the prevailing ethical expectations of a non-Christian culture in order to define the expectations of new Christians.

Given that God does not have a direct, revelatory relationship with all these other peoples, such statements raise questions about how humanity in general is supposed to know about these mandates. One possibility is that certain moral norms are innate. Isaiah seems to assume something like this when he accuses Israel of acting even less intelligently than animals (Isaiah 1); he implies that human beings, even if deprived of revelation (like the animals), may be expected to have a certain amount of common sense and to behave accordingly. Another possibility is that human beings are expected to work out certain general ethical principles through observation of and knowledge about the world. This is sometimes referred to as 'natural law', reflecting the idea that this is a moral 'law' built into and therefore observable in the natural world. In Genesis 9, for example, the prohibition of killing is explicitly based on the nature of a human being. Human beings are *like this*, and therefore moral action in relation to them should be *like that*. In the context of the Bible's theistic worldview, of course, moral norms derived from the natural world derive ultimately from God, because it is God who created the world and is thus responsible for its natural state. Differing ideas about what constitutes the world's 'natural' state can also make the deduction of universal moral laws more of a challenge in practice than it might seem in principle; the fierce debate over Paul's apparent rejection of same-sex acts as 'unnatural' in Romans 1 is a particularly potent example.

Human beings might also work out what constitutes ethical behaviour by asking, *What would God do?* or, in the common Christian phrasing, *What would Jesus do?* This is the principle of *imitatio Dei*, imitation of God, or *imitatio Christi*, imitation of Christ. Because human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1), ideas about what God is like may serve as a guide to what human beings should be like. Jesus, as the ultimate manifestation of God in human form, functions for Christians as the perfect exemplar of God-like behaviour. Imperatives and adjurations reflecting this principle appear frequently. God's holiness requires holiness on the part of the people (Leviticus; Isaiah; Ezekiel); exhortations to justice and righteousness are implicitly or explicitly based on the attribution of these characteristics to God (Amos 5, Isaiah 56, and so on). Paul urges Christians to imitate Christ, approaching suffering as a way of sharing in Christ's death and resurrection; like Christ, they are to live with humility and to maintain an attitude of self-giving and obedience, loving one another (Philippians 2; Romans 8; 13; Galatians 5). Imitation exists on a sliding scale between revelation and reason; humans may reason out ethical behaviour on

the basis of knowledge about God's nature, but this knowledge ultimately has to be revealed—either directly, through God's word, or indirectly, through God's creation.

This brings us back to where the Bible imagines ethical norms to come from. Again, the obvious answer is that ethics come from God. But is an act ethical because God commands it—thus anything divinely commanded is morally sound, simply by virtue of that fact—or does God command certain acts because they are commendable according to divinely recognised moral principles? The former suggests that the only way of knowing what constitutes right behaviour is revelation, because it implies that moral norms are arbitrarily determined by God. We have already seen a number of biblical texts which suggest that moral norms are *not* arbitrary, but may be worked out by human beings apart from direct revelatory experience. In Genesis 18, Abraham negotiates with God over the number of righteous people necessary to make the destruction of Sodom immoral; the discussion implies that there are certain principles recognisable to and acknowledged by both human beings and God, because in order for Abraham to argue with God they have to have a shared idea of what constitutes moral behaviour. In Psalms and in Proverbs, God is expected to serve as the guarantor of justice, again implying that there are moral norms mutually agreed on by and recognisable to both God and humans, on the basis of which a human being may appeal to God for restitution. These texts imply that God either cannot or does not act unethically, either because God is bound by the same ethical norms that apply to human beings, or because to do so would be contrary to God's nature. The book of Job, on the other hand, appears to emphasise just the opposite: whilst Job succeeds, to a degree, in calling God to account for his apparently unjustified suffering, God's ultimate response points to the unfathomable nature of divine being (Job 38). God is not bound by or restricted to a moral system that is comprehensible to human beings; God is not obliged to counteract instances of what appear, from a human perspective, to be injustice. This recognition of God's unboundedness is picked up in Paul's letter to the Romans, as he weaves between revealing the mystery of God's plan for Jews and Gentiles in Christ and reminding his readers that God's actions in Christ are ultimately beyond human understanding (Romans 11).

It is important to recognise that the Bible does not contain any systematic treatment of the origins of ethics or of the ethical relationship between God and his human interlocutors. In some cases, ethical expectations are articulated as divine command; in others they derive from the nature of the world or beliefs about God. Ultimately, it is probably fair to suggest that all the texts agree that God and ethics are intimately connected. Ethics may be explicitly revealed, but may also be discerned by reflection on the natural world; God is creator of the universe, so the moral laws of the universe reflect the nature of God. Indeed, like God, these laws may not be fully comprehensible to human beings—this perhaps is where revelation plays its particular role—but there is an underlying and unifying principle at work that, at least in its broad strokes, may be discerned by human observation.

THEMES IN BIBLICAL ETHICS

Having sketched out some general issues involved in thinking about biblical texts ethically, we turn now to some specific examples. We attend especially to three key

conceptual frameworks that affect the ethical thought of a wide range of biblical texts: honour and shame, righteousness and wickedness, and justice and injustice.

Honour and shame

From a modern western perspective, honour and shame may seem an antiquated way of thinking about ethics, evoking news stories about 'honour killings' and similar horrors. On closer inspection, however, social rubrics of honour and shame continue to play an important role in most people's perceptions about someone's moral compass. In political and educational contexts, for example, honour is a key characteristic of a good politician or a good student. Honourable politicians are aware of the power bestowed upon them by a voting public and do not abuse it; honourable students respect to their teachers and bestow kindness upon students in the years below. An expectation of honourable behaviour is why a politician or student who has committed a moral misstep, and thus acted *dishonourably*, is often expected to make a public apology for his or her actions. This public, self-shaming action lowers them in the sight of others, undoing any gains achieved through the immoral behaviour. The action thus reintegrates the person into the community.

Honour and shame played a similar role in maintaining law and order in the ancient world and are key to understanding interpersonal relationships in the Bible. Such relationships were almost always conceived hierarchically, as relationships between an inferior and a superior. Moral behaviour was behaviour that kept these social relationships stable. To maintain the *status quo*, the inferior party was obliged to acknowledge publicly the superiority of the other person in the relationship, thereby bestowing honour upon him or her. Each time someone performed an act of public deference, it reinforced the existing structure of these social hierarchies. When an inferior refused to perform such an act, however, the superior was dishonoured: he was *shamed*, by being denied the social status that was his due.

For an inferior to dishonour or to shame his superior in this way was not merely a personal affront but a major criminal act, because it threatened to disrupt the entire social order, by turning the proper hierarchy of social relationships on its head. The only way to undo the damage was to re-establish the inferiority of the inferior party and the superiority of the superior party. One way of doing this was to turn the tables back on the offender: to shame him, in a public recognition of his inferiority. As this suggests, honour and shame are part of a complex system of justice, in which shame is both a threat to social order as well as a means of its restoration. To confer shame on someone may therefore be either a wrong or a right, depending on the circumstance for which it occurs.

Perhaps the most famous example of this ethical framework is the injunctions that children should honour their parents (Exodus 20:1; Deuteronomy 5:16, 21:18–21; Ezekiel 22:7) and the young should honour the elderly (Leviticus 19:32. Isaiah 3:5; Lamentations 5:12). It is also the principle underlying the case of the bridegroom who accuses his bride of not being a virgin (Deuteronomy 22:13–21). If the bridegroom's accusation is correct, the bride's behaviour is an insult to the bridegroom's honour, because she has deceived him. It is also an insult to the honour of the bride's father,

whose authority she has defied; this is why she is put to death outside her father's house. If the accusation is false, the bridegroom's accusation is an insult to the bride's father, because he has impugned the father's authority over his daughter. The father receives the fine levied upon the bridegroom as a sign of his authority. Acts that disrupt or challenge the stability of social relationships merit condemnation and require restitution.

Ideas about honour and shame are deeply embedded into the ethical norms of the ancient societies behind the Bible—so much so that they constitute the essential subtext to some of its most complicated moral and theological dilemmas. Wearing humble clothing, fasting, and bowing before God or another superior person, such as a parent or an elder, are presented as ethically sound and commended because they represent an honour deserved by the recipient (Exodus 20:1; Deuteronomy 5:16, 21:18–21; Ezekiel 22:7). To be stripped naked, starved, or made to bow down before someone who deserves no such honour, on the other hand, is presented as a morally objectionable act on the part of the one who forces the actions. Job's friend Eliphaz accuses him of such actions as a means of explaining Job's terrible fate at the hands of God (Job 22), on the basis that God's treatment of Job must be so shaming because Job has wrongly shamed, humbled, and humiliated others. Although Eliphaz is mistaken in this particular case, his accusations are well founded in the logic of honour and shame: Job's current shameful state is simply a mechanism for restoring the right ordering of the social relations he must have disrupted through his earlier behaviour.

Theologically, putting oneself in an inferior position is integral to a proper relationship with God. Indeed, the expectation that worshippers owe honour to God is the most pervasive biblical example of the idea that honour is due to one's superiors. It is at the base of every exhortation to praise and to obey God and every condemnation of failures to do so. It is also behind Paul's declaration that he is a 'slave of Jesus Christ' (Romans 1): this is not only a sign of devotion, as it is often read by modern readers, but also a sign of inferiority, invoking ideas about social relationships and the right behaviour arising therefrom. It is also the subtext of Jesus' assertion that to be a slave—to be inferior—to two masters is impossible, and that the wealthiest, most honoured person in a society must also become the inferior to God (Matthew 6; Luke 16). This concept of abasement before God is likewise the subtext of wearing sackcloth, of fasting, and of bowing down before God, all consistently portrayed as commendable behaviour by the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16; Haggai 1:8; Malachi 1:6; Psalm 131).

Last but not least, however, we should note that certain New Testament writers attempt to dismember the correlation between honour and shame, superiority and inferiority, as part of their attempts to grapple with the death of Jesus by crucifixion. In Mark, for example, this apparent shaming of Jesus is presented as wrongful, but also as a significant insight into the nature of Jesus as the Christ. His stripping, mocking, and dishonourable death is redefined as an ordeal that results in honour for the one who has endured it. Contrary to all expectations, the true messiah is declared to be the one who is wrongfully shamed, rather than the one who is expectantly honoured. This concomitantly reorders honour-shame dynamics in the new creation, where the last are first and the first are last (Matthew 20:16).

The righteous and the wicked

The relationship between righteousness and wickedness is one of obedience to God. The wicked, whatever the particular injustice they have committed, act in contradiction of God's will, whereas the righteous enact the society God intends. As Malachi succinctly puts it, the distinction is 'between one who serves God and one who does not serve him' (Malachi 3:18). Although there have been widespread debates about what constitutes 'righteousness' in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament—whether it is a judicial or moral concept, for example—key to any act or person called 'righteous' is the way that the actor uses his or her status and power in relation to others.

We see this in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18-19). In this infamous narrative, 'wickedness' describes the cruel treatment of strangers, whereas 'righteousness' describes their protection. The stranger in town was in the most precarious social position possible: unknown to anyone and unable to rely on kin for shelter or support. When Abraham and God debate the number of righteous residents necessary to deter the cities' destruction (Genesis 18), God concedes that he would not destroy a place that contained just ten righteous residents. In Genesis 19 we learn that there is one such person, Lot, whose righteousness is exemplified by his extension of hospitality to the two strange men who arrive in Sodom. He brings them under his roof and offers them food and a place to stay for the night. To offer hospitality to the stranger, however, was to extend not only kindness but also protection. As it turns out, Lot is obliged to protect these strangers—soon revealed as angels—from the wickedness of the people of the city, who surround his home and threaten both the guests and Lot himself.

The relationship of righteousness and wickedness to power may also be seen in the legal material. In the Covenant Code, we hear of the wicked who lodge false reports against their righteous neighbours, attempting to gain materially from their consequent condemnation (Exodus 23). With no recourse to laboratory tests or CCTV, the ancient court system depended entirely on the truthful testimony of its witnesses. A dishonest person could easily use a false accusation to acquire wealth and power, claiming the property and the land of the accused in recompense for the supposed crime. If the crime in question were a capital one, a false accusation could even condemn someone to death. This is why the edict for God's people to 'keep away from false charge' is followed by an admonition to 'not kill the innocent and the righteous': to accuse falsely was tantamount to murder (Exodus 23:7; see also Deuteronomy 25).

This concern with power may also be seen in the prophets, where the wicked are those who attempt to thwart justice with a bribe, are guilty of financial corruption, or abuse their social power more generally (e.g., Isaiah 3; 5; 11; 13; Jeremiah 12; 25; Ezekiel 7; Habakkuk 1). Power as the requisite for the exercise of righteousness is also clear from Isaiah's description of the messiah: he is the one who has the power to save all Israel (Isaiah 45). Similarly, the righteous king in Jeremiah 23 is the one to whom God will grant the power to save all Israel and Judah. Perhaps most explicitly, Ezekiel describes the righteous man as the one who has enough power to choose *not* to oppress anyone, *not* to force himself on women, and *not* to call in his debts (Ezekiel 18). Psalms and Proverbs also present the wicked as those of social standing: they are wealthy enough to 'hotly pursue the poor' (Psalm 10) and store up 'treasures'

(Proverbs 10), who have the status to sit in an assembly (Psalm 26) and speak for the city (Proverbs 11), and own land from which they may be banished for their crimes (Psalm 37; Proverbs 2). By contrast, the righteous are those whose 'might' is exercised for 'right'. In the Psalms the righteous figure is often God, who promises to enact justice in response to abuses of power (Psalms 11; 119). In Proverbs, righteousness defines the wise literati (Proverbs 9). In both books it characterises the benevolent patron or patriarch who gives generously (Psalm 37; Proverbs 13, 21). This association is equally apparent in the New Testament. In Matthew 18 the 'wicked servant' is defined by his abuse of his own short-lived power as someone else's unforgiving and abusive creditor. All of the Gospels present Jesus' arrest and eventual crucifixion as the result of the breakdown of righteousness, effected by the collaboration of powerful religious leaders and an unjust ruler, Pilate (Matthew 26-28; Mark 14-16; Luke 22-24; John 18-21).

One different aspect of righteousness and wickedness in the New Testament may be traced to the increasing influence of Greek philosophy and, in particular, ideas about the different fates of the wicked and the righteous in the afterlife. Plato's *Republic*, for example, suggested that wicked and righteous souls would journey to different places after death (Republic 10.614-615). This wider cultural atmosphere helped shape Christian thought about consequences in the afterlife for wicked actions—concerns raised especially by the fact that justice is often not enacted within the lifetime of the oppressed, nor punishment within the lifetime of the oppressor. The New Testament understanding of righteousness still assumes a framework of power—one has to have power in order to enact righteousness—but this is grafted onto interpretations about the meaning of Jesus' death. Jesus becomes the 'Righteous One' (Acts 3; 7), whose resurrection after suffering a great injustice is an event of such power as to bring even the 'unrighteous' to God (1 Peter 3:18; Romans 4:25). There, rather than receive condemnation for their wickedness, they procure forgiveness (Romans 3:25-26).

In the social world of the New Testament, the righteous figure is thus distinguished into two types. The first bears righteousness of his own, which 'comes from the law' (Philippians 3:9-1; Romans 10:3-13). Although not coterminous with it, this idea resonates with the righteous figure that permeates the Hebrew Bible and is assumed in Matthew 18. The law, after all, assumes that the men to whom it is directed are well off enough to own property, servants, hold counsel, and to wage war (e.g., Exodus 22-23). Those who wield this power justly are considered righteous; those who wield it unjustly are condemned as wicked. Alongside this more traditional image of the righteous figure, however, the New Testament also puts forward a second kind of righteous figure, whose righteousness is not dependent on the apparatus of power. This figure is righteous simply by virtue of believing, despite one's observably disenfranchised condition, that God has fulfilled his promise to his people, that this promise has been fulfilled in Christ, and that one can receive the fruits of this promise by faith alone (Philippians 3:9-11; Romans 10:3-13). Both the righteous Israelite who wields power responsibly and the righteous Christian believer, however, are by their righteousness set on the same path: a life in 'the Spirit' (Isaiah 42-45; Ezekiel 33-36; Psalm 51; Romans 5-8).

Justice and injustice

The elevation of 'justice' as a moral ideal is perhaps one of the most strongly resonant features of biblical ethics in the modern world. Most can quote Amos: 'let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5:24). Yet what constitutes 'justice' in a particular culture is highly contextualised, determined in conversation with ideas about the right ordering of society—including and especially the appropriateness of certain kinds of power relationships amongst its members—as well as numerous other ideas, such as the rights or value of human beings as individuals and as members of communities. In attempting to decipher the biblical understanding of justice—and its opposite, injustice—the modern reader brings all the deeds, symbols, and iconic representations that give justice its distinct form in his or her own mind. When talking about justice in the Bible, most modern readers from Europe and North America will do so with their own most familiar form of justice in mind: a large female, draped in robes, blindfolded, and armed with a sword in one hand and scales in the other. Lady Justice is impartial, rational, and a capable arm of the state.

The trouble with importing this image to the biblical text is apparent when confronted with the psalmist's ideal of a just judge: one who 'rebukes in anger every day' (Psalm 7:12). Even more difficult is that this image of justice is often closely associated with God: thus, for example, the righteousness and justice that form the foundation of God's throne in the cosmic vision of Psalm 97 are envisaged as 'clouds and thick darkness', an image that typically draws on fear and dread of impending destruction. Even more alarming is the exaction of divine justice via violent blows to mortal bodies: God is to 'break the teeth' of oppressors (Psalm 3; 58) or 'cut off' their lips and cut out their tongues (Psalm 12).

The significance of some of these images is clarified if we recognise that the task of the just judge in the Bible is to bring about justice as a corrected state of reality—one which existed before a given injustice—through the application of specific punishments corresponding to the crimes committed. This is the idea behind the famous 'eye for an eye' edicts (Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:20) and is a common one across the ancient Near East. Such texts are meant to identify the fitting response to a specific injustice; conversely, the severity of a punishment demonstrates the gravity of the injustice. As an example, consider again the significance assigned to false accusations. Deuteronomy 19:18-19 outlines the consequence for falsely accusing a person of a crime: 'you will do to the witness as the witness intended to do to the other person … life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot'. The idea here is that a false accusation merits the punishment that would have arisen had the accusation been believed. At the most extreme: if the accusation is one which would have merited death, then the accuser should be put to death. The severity of the punishments invoked against false witnesses in this and other biblical texts often baffles modern readers, for whom the judicial and social importance of the spoken word has receded in favour of the written word and forensic evidence. In the absence of such witnesses in the ancient world, the reliability of a witness's testimony was paramount. In this light, it is not so surprising to see the lying witness appear as almost the textbook case of the unjust person. He is the focus of laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, the subject of the lamenting psalmist's calls for justice

and of Jeremiah's accusations against false prophets, he is vehemently condemned in Proverbs, and plays a crucial role in the unfolding of Jesus' last days before his crucifixion.

A helpful exercise when trying to understand biblical ideas about justice is to pay close attention to what is in the text at hand—but also to notice what is absent. In Leviticus 19, for example, there is a law warning against rendering unjust judgments. Without saying so explicitly, the edict effectively admits that unjust rulings can and do happen; aside from this being the wisdom of practical experience, laws rarely prohibit things which no one is doing. In a similar fashion, we may read between the lines in the declarations of the just king in Psalm 101, who promises that he will 'study the way that is blameless'. He then muses over when he will 'attain' that blameless way. The following verses, in making various promises about what he will do to be a more just king, implicitly suggest a number of injustices that have been occurring up to this moment. He promises to rid his house of those who practice deceit: have such persons been in his house until now? Might the vow to destroy the wicked of the land, 'morning by morning', be an admission of an administration so riddled with injustice that the people have been assuming it can never be eradicated? This same tension between the ideal of justice and the reality of injustice appears also in the Daniel stories, which offer a scathing critique on unjust kings and laws and present a vision of the just person based on resistance to unjust political power. But, whilst Daniel refuses to obey the king's laws, he accepts the consequences of his refusal; read through an ethical lens, these stories emphasise that unjust laws must be challenged by the just person, even to his own detriment (Daniel 3-6). Daniel's rescue from the lion's den underscores God's approval of Daniel's subversion.

CONCLUSION

As noted at multiple points throughout this chapter, historical ethics can be and often are used to inform contemporary moral reflection. In the spirit of that inquiry, it is fair to enquire about the contemporary implications of the three conceptual frameworks just covered. The relationship of honour and shame, righteousness and wickedness, and justice and injustice, have all deeply influenced the ethical thinking of the Bible. What principles might one glean from a better understanding of those relationships for biblically informed moral thinking and practice?

In the case of honour and shame, it is clear that the ultimate offense in the Bible was not to consider yourself above another person—even the most senior person in your community—but to believe yourself superior to God. The mechanisms of honour and shame that are built into biblical ethics are not there simply for the purpose of maintaining a hierarchical social order; they are also there to stop human scrambling toward an ultimate, God-like status. In an era in which almost divine-like political and economic power can be secured through any number of shameful measures gone unchecked, the biblical texts drag to our attention the seemingly minor acts with which a demagogue or dictator paves his way to power.

There are, of course, cases wherein individuals acquire vast power by honest means. The biblical framework of righteousness and wickedness speaks directly to the moral dangers that accompany this power. The righteous person is the one who has power and influence yet still chooses to walk in God's path, to obey God's ways,

and, by virtue of these acts, to set an example for others to follow. The danger in honourably gained power is its ability to pervert the mores of people wielding it, if they cannot keep God's ways. The Bible impels us to hold those in power to an exceptional moral standard precisely because of the exceptional chaos they can unleash once transformed into that shadow, the wicked self.

The biblical framework of justice and injustice reflects on implications for the worst-case scenario, when honour is disregarded and righteousness abandoned: life under the tyranny of a shameful leader who thinks himself a god, or a leader whose pursuit of righteousness has been perverted by power. The biblical imperative to justice addresses what one is to do when those in power have flagrantly tossed aside the moral compass. Are the oppressed wrong if they disobey a morally bankrupt leader? The answer the Bible offers, on several occasions and in a number of ways, is an unambiguous 'no'. God sides with the oppressed and cheers the subversion of an unjust leader or king. The biblical texts' invocation of this principle reflects an idea to which contemporary revolutionaries and thinkers have often turned in the face of gross injustice: the notion of a higher law, even a cosmic one, wherein the court in which the oppressed faces ultimate judgment is just, honourable, righteous, and divine.

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