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Ethics

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Over the last century or so there have been a number of attempts to address the nature of the ethical content of the Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible. The majority of these are appropriately described as investigations into "the ethics of the Old Testament," by which we mean investigations into the ethical instruction and moral logic of these texts as Christian scripture (hence: "Old Testament"). The motivation behind studies of this kind lies in the fact that these biblical books form a (large) part of the Christian canon and, as such, are considered normative texts for contemporary Christian communities. Their instructions and insights on moral and ethical matters are therefore relevant to Christians today. With the modern application of these biblical insights in mind, this kind of investigation tends to be interested in the ethics of the texts as a canonical whole, often seeking to elicit overarching moral principles or ethical paradigms. While differences of opinion within and among the texts may be acknowledged, the ultimate interest in practical application of the results tends to favor an emphasis on unity and coherence.

A much smaller number of investigations into ethics and the biblical texts, most of them relatively recent, have been interested in the ethical and moral thinking of these texts from a historical point of view. In these studies the texts are used as a window into the moral world of ancient Israel and its people. This kind of investigation is thus sometimes referred to as the study of "ethics in ancient Israel." Because they are interested in the specific historical contexts of the biblical texts, these investigations tend to focus on individual texts (or groups of texts): ethics in the book of Ezekiel, for example, or ethics as reflected in the narratives about David in the books of Samuel.

As with other historical investigations, this kind of study may be undertaken for the purpose of better understanding the biblical text, so

that the text may be better elucidated for contemporary audiences—and, sometimes, so that they may be used to inform contemporary moral thinking and practice. These two kinds of investigations into ethics and the biblical texts are therefore not unrelated to each other, though they have different objectives and their methods are important to distinguish. The kinds of questions and methods used to investigate how ancient Israelites fought and justified war, for example, will be different from those employed in a discussion of how the depictions of kings as divinely sanctioned warriors in pursuit of justice and righteousness might inform our own thinking about modern warfare—though we might want to use the answers to the former to inform our discussion of the latter.

A related point is that the ethical interests and concerns of a modern audience may not overlap with those of the ancient authors; there are many matters of contemporary moral concern that have no direct counterparts in the biblical texts. Likewise, actions and principles that were quite ordinary in the ancient world may not be so today (and vice versa). This might seem obvious, but especially when thinking about ethics, which are part of how we see and approach the world, it can be easy to conflate our own moral concerns with those of the authors and audiences of the texts, forgetting that the world we live in is very different from the world inhabited by these texts' authors. On the one hand, this can cause an anachronistic kind of moral quandary (*How could the Israelites slaughter the Canaanites when genocide is morally reprehensible?*), and on the other, it can preclude further investigations into the moral logic and moral priorities of the biblical texts—the kinds of investigations that might help bridge the gap between ancient and modern moral concerns.

One of the reasons to investigate the biblical texts from a historical perspective, then, is that no single moral imperative exists in a vacuum. Ethics are connected to other ideas about right and wrong behavior as well as to more general ideas about the structure of society, the relationship between this society and the individual, and even the way that the world is organized and operates. This means that knowing more about the context of a biblical text can result in a better understanding of its moral logic. More specifically, we might think about the political context, social context, or theological context of an ethical idea or imperative, asking how a particular idea responds or relates to its particular

circumstances. Ezekiel, for example, is presented as having been a priest in Jerusalem, with certain moral and cultic obligations arising from that fact. These obligations would have been profoundly affected by deportation and exile, requiring adaptation and modification in order to have meaning in a new context. The account of the simultaneous creation of male and female in Genesis 1 was written in a context of male social dominance; it would be easy to miss how radical this depiction is if this context is ignored or forgotten. Both Ruth and Tamar are faced with a choice of moral priorities, in the context of the conflicting imperatives of family survival and sexual reserve. One contribution of studies on "the ethics of ancient Israel" to "the ethics of the Old Testament," then, has been the recognition of the usefulness of historical context for understanding the moral logic and intentions of the biblical texts, insofar as knowing more about the ancient context that provoked a particular text can help the modern reader to recognize and engage with the text's moral complexity. If we want to think about the modern relevance of these texts—for Christians, for Jews, for nonbelievers, and so on—knowing something about context 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.

We might also think about *literary* context, and to this we now turn in greater detail.

GENRE

Given that our ethical investigations are focused on the biblical texts themselves, one important component of the context of these texts is their *genre*, or the *kind of text* that they are. Different kinds of texts develop for different kinds of purposes; as a result they often have different ways of revealing moral norms and opinions. Some texts are quite overtly trying to make a moral point, for example, while others' moral logic is revealed accidentally, while they are busy doing something else. Legal and proverbial material, for instance, tends to be explicit (at least about the imperative, if not always about its logic): "You shall not kill." Often, however, ethical norms are less obvious: a psalm might praise the king for being "just" and "righteous," without saying directly what that justice

and righteousness involves. A story might reward its hero at the end of the tale, but we might have to examine the story carefully to figure out which of the hero's actions merited the reward.

Law

Legal texts are often what people think of first when they think of ethics and the biblical texts. These texts have an obviously instructive format, with explicit instructions about what people should or should not do. For this reason they have been the focus of many scholarly discussions of ethics as well as serving as a go-to source for contemporary ethics. Conversations about Christian attitudes to same-sex marriage, for example, often refer to Leviticus 18:22 ("You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination") and 20:13 ("If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them"), while, in positive terms, the injunction in Leviticus 19:18 to "love your neighbor as yourself" appears in the New Testament and is often cited as a key principle for Christian ethics. Besides their obvious instructive intent, one advantage of legal texts for thinking about ethics is that they often include an explanation of their rationale. Deuteronomy 22:8, for example, is clear that its roof-building instructions relate to the importance of making sure that no one is injured falling off it, while the Leviticus texts just mentioned explicitly base their objections in statements that the same-sex activities they describe are an "abomination."

Keeping in mind the two kinds of investigations into ethics, there are at least two different kinds of questions with which we might further probe these texts. We might, first, inquire as to the historical circumstances that prompted a particular law and its rationale: Why is Deuteronomy so worried about people falling off roofs that it includes a law mandating parapets? If we know that most ancient houses were built with flat roofs that doubled as terraces, the law makes more sense: if people are on the roof frequently, there is a high risk of falling and a need for parapets in order to prevent tragic accidents. Still thinking historically, we might also ask what the rationale suggests about the moral principles underlying the legislation. Thus we might ask: Why is it so important to keep people from falling off the roof? In this case, the

underlying issue is obvious: when people fall off a roof they are liable to die or at least suffer significant injury. Developing this line of questioning toward more general principles, we might observe that the very fact of legislation designed to prevent fatal or injurious consequences suggests that the author values human life and sees it as something that ought to be protected. The warning that the owner of the roof might incur guilt if someone does fall also suggests that the author views his audience as morally responsible for the consequences of their actions.

For an "ethics of the Old Testament," the key question is, *What relevance does this have for today?* At first glance, the answer might be: *Not a lot!* (Certainly there are not very many houses built with parapets these days.) On closer inspection, however, the historical investigation can push this application question in a more productive direction. Thus, having worked out the law's motives, we might still conclude that a house with a slanted roof and no roof terrace has no need of a parapet—but by recognizing the underlying emphases on the value of human life and on moral responsibility we might argue that a modern application of the text means ensuring that buildings are safe for their inhabitants and visitors. Depending on the modern context, that might mean the installation of reliable electrical wiring or designing a house to be earthquake resistant.

Unfortunately for both kinds of investigations, the reasoning behind a law is not always so clear. The laws in Leviticus, for example, base their prohibitions on the idea of an act being "abominable"—but what does that mean, and what might it tell us about the underlying principles at work? Elsewhere, Deuteronomy 22:5 prohibits transvestitism, again using the language of abomination. Here matters are complicated even further by the laconic phrasing: Does the law apply to all garments or only certain specific kinds? Most ancient clothing was more or less unisex: Is the law referring only to items of clothing worn only by men or only by women, or does it mean to include all clothes based on who owns them? The answers to these and other questions will affect our interpretation of the law and, in turn, interpretations of whether or how it might inform modern life. If we conclude that transvestitism was linked to the worship of other gods, then we might interpret the law as reflecting religious concerns and its current relevance to be in the liturgical domain. Knowing that the word *abomination* often appears in contexts

concerned about certain kinds of boundaries (ethnic boundaries, social boundaries, religious boundaries) might suggest that the law is trying to preserve what it sees as a categorical distinction between men and women—which, in turn, might prompt questions about ancient ideas about human biology and male-female social relations. Eventually we might want to bring this into dialogue with developments in the field of human biology—and perhaps also with the aforementioned depiction of male-female relations in Genesis 1.

Even if we were always clear on the intentions and principles of the laws, however, they would still pose another challenge, directly related to the diversity of moral opinions that they preserve. Instead of all reflecting a single underlying principle and being directed toward a single overarching goal, different laws prioritize different moral principles or even instruct different things. The biblical text includes not just one but several legal collections: the Covenant Code (Exodus 20–23), the Decalogue (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5), the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17–26), the priestly legislation (parts of Leviticus and Numbers), and the Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12–26). Each of these has its own unique history and its own particular interests, reflected in the laws each collection contains and the explanations it provides. The Holiness Code and the priestly laws, for example, are concerned with the priesthood and with applying priestly values to the people as a whole. Deuteronomy is focused on what it means to be an Israelite and a faithful worshipper of Israel's one God; although it draws on many of the laws contained in the Covenant Code, it excludes some, alters others, and adds its own, reflecting its own special interests. We can see a similar phenomenon in the two versions of the Decalogue: though both include the commandment to keep the Sabbath, Deuteronomy connects it to the Israelites' experience as slaves in Egypt, while Exodus connects it to God's rest on the seventh day of creation. Elsewhere, some laws about debt slavery command the release of the debt slave in the sabbatical year (the seventh year) (Exodus 15:2–6 and Deuteronomy 15:12–18), while a third version legislates release only in the Jubilee year (the forty-ninth or fiftieth year) (Leviticus 25:39–46).

Such differences raise questions about the origins and intentions of individual texts—Why do different texts instruct different things?— as well as the intentions and principles of those who brought the texts

together—Why not make sure that instructions were consistent through-
out the whole collection? (Perhaps relevant is that no one knows whether
these laws were written to be used in everyday life or, if so, how. Even all
together they contain only a small number of laws; many topics are not
covered or are only covered to a limited extent. The evidence of other
ancient Near Eastern law codes, such as the Laws of Hammurabi, also
suggests that law codes could be used as school exercises or as a formal-
ized way of asserting a king's commitment to justice and righteousness,
without necessarily meaning that the individual laws were put into prac-
tice.) If we are interested in the use of these texts today, we also need to
think about how we might deal with this diversity; since this is a ques-
tion applicable to all genres of biblical text, we will return to this question
at the end.

Narrative

The canonical location of these legal texts might also have an effect on
our understanding of their ethical content: What is the significance—or
is it significant at all—that these law codes are now embedded in narra-
tives? Although narrative might not be the first thing to come to mind
when thinking about sources for thinking about ethics, there is a very
long tradition of using stories to convey moral ideas, promoting values
such as honesty and loyalty over the pursuit of power and material suc-
cess. Including narrative texts in investigations into biblical ethics also
has a significant practical advantage insofar as it dramatically expands
the corpus of relevant texts. These include the stories of Noah and the
other antediluvians, the travels and encounters of the patriarchs and
their families, and the adventures (and misadventures) that form the
many episodes in the long narrative of Israel—from Moses and Miriam
in Egypt to David, Solomon, and their fellow kings in the land to the
stories of Daniel and Esther and so on, not to mention the many minor
and sometimes nameless characters who come and go throughout.

Like the laws, these stories present both opportunities and challenges.
First and foremost, the ethical aspects of biblical narratives are rarely
offered up to the reader in a neat, clear assessment. The "moral of the
story" is often ambiguous or at least open to interpretation; though the
narratives often exhibit an interest in the behavior of their various char-

acters, they rarely pronounce their judgment explicitly. It can therefore be difficult to discern who gains or loses the text's moral approbation and why. Indeed, the activities of many of the most famous players are often exceedingly suspect: Jacob steals his brother's birthright (Genesis 25) and conspires with his mother, Rachel, to steal his father's blessing (Genesis 27); both Abraham and Isaac deceive foreign kings by pretending that their wives are their sisters (Genesis 12, 20, and 26); David is an adulterous murderer (2 Samuel 11). One is left wondering whether, or to what extent, these heroes are intended to serve as moral paragons—while at the same time asking after the principles and values that might enable the recognition of these morally complicated characters as worthy nonetheless. At other times it is not at all clear that the text is even interested in ethics. While Nathan's condemnation of David for his behavior with Bathsheba and his treatment of Uriah the Hittite is explicit ("You are the man," 1 Samuel 12:7), whether the authors of the stories about the patriarchs are even interested in the morality of their various activities is a matter for debate. This in turn raises a question for the interpreter: Is it a legitimate interpretive move to investigate the moral logic of a text whose interests are elsewhere?

Even if there is reason to think that the text has an interest in the moral lives of its characters, discerning ethical information from texts that address those concerns only in a roundabout, indirect way remains a challenge. An added layer of complexity derives from the fact that the moral values discerned in a narrative may belong to the author, or they might reflect the norms of the audience—or they might belong to the moral world of the characters, without a clear connection to either the author or the audience. Yet this moral complexity, the ability to explore ethical gray areas, is also one of the great strengths of the narrative form. Narratives are not obliged to make the kinds of absolute statements that laws do; as a result, they are able to bring into the picture a greater degree of nuance and complexity. Given the potentially hostile situations with which they are faced, are Abraham and Isaac right to pass off their wives as their sisters? Is Jacob's craftiness praiseworthy, or does it go too far? Is David a hero because or in spite of his willingness to make controversial moral decisions—or is he a hero in a moral sense at all? Though the indirectness of this kind of ethical contemplation can be frustrating, because it is not always clear whether a narrator approves of a character's

acts (or which ones), the narratives offer a way of thinking morally about the complexity of actual human life. The unnamed messenger of 1 Samuel 11 disobeys his senior officer's order when he tells David immediately of Uriah's death, apparently in order to preempt a royal rage; Ruth risks shame and humiliation in the pursuit of economic and social security; Abigail, faced with David on the warpath, belittles her husband to save their skins (1 Samuel 25). By avoiding explicit evaluations, these narratives invite readers to reflect on the difficult choices made by their characters.

Prophecy

The prophetic books contain some of the most powerful ethical statements of any biblical texts. These books are strong proponents of social justice, condemning the neglect and abuse of weaker members of society and adjuring the pursuit of justice and righteousness. The book of Micah implores its audience "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 4:3), while Amos's injunction to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24) inspired Martin Luther King Jr. in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Micah and Amos speak against judicial corruption and those who would take advantage of the poor; both Isaiah and Micah preserve a desire to see the end of war and a future full of peace; and Isaiah berates his audience for their failures to live up to Yʜwʜ's standards of justice and righteousness.

From the interpreter's perspective the prophetic texts fall somewhere between law and narrative, albeit with their own particular challenges as well. Many of the ethical issues in the prophets are obviously so: there are passages dealing with the (mis)use of wealth, the treatment of the poor, the behavior of Israel's leaders vis-à-vis the people, and so on. Thus when Amos condemns those "who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate" (Amos 5:12), the moral issue is one that is recognizable to a modern reader. It helps flesh out the picture to know that the city gate was the locus of an ancient town's justice system, and thus "to push aside the needy" means not only to ignore those in need but to subvert their access to the means of justice, but the abuse of

weak and marginal members of society by the powerful is one that is as much an issue in the modern world as it was in the ancient one and is easily recognizable as a moral concern.

Other parts of the prophetic material, however, are concerned with issues that are less obviously ethical. Prophetic tirades about Israel's cultic practices, for example, at first might not seem relevant to discussions of ethical behavior, either ancient or modern. Thus when Amos, speaking for Yʜwʜ, declares that "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies; even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them" (Amos 5:21–22), this looks like a rejection of sacrifice—a matter perhaps of liturgical interest but not obviously an ethical issue. Yet, though it might take a different form, this prophetic condemnation contains an implicit imperative, akin to the explicit instructions contained in the legal material: the sacrifices offered are unacceptable. The implied imperative: "You must not make these sacrifices (at all)" or "You must not make these sacrifices (like this)." This suggests that there is either something wrong with making sacrifices or something wrong with the way that the sacrifices are being made. As with the laws, then, it is instructive to ask after the underlying rationale: Why does Amos condemn these sacrifices? Once we start to investigate, we realize that this is the immediate context of the famous summons to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." This suggests that the problem is not the sacrifices themselves but their relationship, or lack thereof, to justice and righteousness. What initially appeared to be a cultic matter turns out to be also an ethical issue. Further investigation might flesh out the details of what this justice and righteousness entails, but already at this stage the inquiry has implications for both historical and contemporary ethical investigations. First, it is significant that the ethical principle at work here is intimately connected to Amos's understanding of God. This is also the case for Isaiah and Ezekiel, for whom Yʜwʜ's supreme holiness correlates to an expectation that Yʜwʜ's people act in a holy fashion. (Further investigation might reveal how these prophets' different ideas about Yʜwʜ's character, or different emphases, affect their expectations for human behavior.) Second, we might consider how the principle underlying Amos's condemnation—that the rightness or wrongness of a

certain action is related both to the attitude of the actor and to other acts—might reflect a wider moral system, beyond the morality or immorality of isolated acts. Third, we might ask how the principles of this ancient system might influence a modern moral system.

Poetry

An added complication inherent to much of the prophetic literature is shared with other, nonprophetic poetic texts. The majority of this comprises the poetry of the psalter, but it also includes the Song of Songs and several hymns that have been set into narrative texts elsewhere (such as Deuteronomy 32 and Exodus 15), in addition to the poetic material from the prophets. This poetry includes a diversity of form and subject, ranging from royal psalms and meditations on wisdom to victory hymns to love poetry to hymns of praise to Yhwh for his activities and attributes. Like the narrative and prophetic material, poetry can be difficult to deal with but also rewarding. Its major challenge for the student of ethics is that much of its contents are couched in metaphorical language and artistic imagery—a far cry from the direct statements of the legal material!

Wisdom

The final genre to note is the wisdom literature. This contains many elements of the genres already discussed: explicit instruction, akin to the legal material, in Proverbs; poetry, including both the poems about Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9 and the arguments among Job and his friends in the book of Job; and narrative texts, in the form of the introduction and conclusion to Job and some of the musings of Ecclesiastes. While none of the "wisdom" books contain prophecy as such, many parts of the prophetic books also reflect this tradition.

Summary

Each of these different genres raises its own particular methodological issues for the study of ethics. Common to most of them are issues about whether, or to what extent, we are able to extract ethical information

from texts that may not have been written with ethical instructions in mind. I have also noted that there can be, and often are, issues of consistency among different texts. Depending on what we are trying to achieve with our ethical investigations, the implications of these points may vary: if we are interested in the historical relationships among these texts, we may approach such variations one way, while if we are interested in the contemporary application of these texts' ethical ideas, we may approach them in another.

ORIGINS

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned that specific ethical instructions always exist in the midst of a wider collection of ideas about the world and society. One element of this wider context that is particularly important in thinking about ethics has to do with the perceived source of ethics. That is to ask, Where do these moral norms come from? Related to this is the question of how human beings are supposed to know whether something is (or is not) morally commendable.

The first and perhaps the most obvious answer to the first question, at least in the biblical context, is that ethics come from God and, to the second, that human beings know about these moral norms because God has told humans about them. That is, human beings are able to distinguish between right and wrong behavior on the basis of explicit moral statements that are attributed to the deity. In their current narrative context, many of the laws in the Torah are presented this way: Moses is said to have gone up onto the holy mountain in order to receive the commandments, whereupon he wrote them down on stone tablets for Israel's future reference (Deuteronomy 5 and elsewhere). Israel's moral imperatives are thus presented as deriving directly from God, and the Israelites know about these imperatives as a result of direct divine revelation.

It is important to notice that this explanation requires the God who gives these instructions and the people who are expected to follow them to have some kind of relationship, so that the people pay attention to the instructions and so that God is able to communicate them. As far as Israel is concerned, this works just fine. Yhwh is Israel's god and is clearly

able to communicate information to Israel, first through Moses and later through other prophets and priests.

Yet numerous other biblical texts assume that other, non-Israelite peoples also have moral responsibilities. The punishments that Amos calls down on the nations for their war crimes, for example, imply that these nations ought to have known that such deeds were reprehensible. Other texts also presuppose moral norms valid for all humanity—regardless of whether a person is privy to the more specific instructions revealed to Israel. In Genesis 9:6, for example, we read 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." This is presented not as an imperative revealed to and only applicable to Israelites ("You, an Israelite, will not kill another human being") but as a moral norm based on the very nature of all human beings and which all human beings are expected to reflect in their actions.

This suggests that the question of how humans are supposed to know about moral norms is more than just a matter of divine revelation, because Yhwh does not have a relationship with other peoples and there is no indication that other peoples are expected to know the laws given directly to Israel. How, then, are these other peoples supposed to know what constitutes right and wrong behavior? The most convincing explanation is that human beings are expected to be able to figure out certain basic ethical norms for themselves. But how?

The lack of any sustained discussion of the nature and origins of ethics—something akin to a Greek philosophical treatise—makes this a difficult question. One possibility is that these universal norms are perceived to be innate: simply part of the makeup of a human being. Perhaps suggesting this kind of thinking is that some of the prophets' exasperated exhortations, for example, imply an expectation that their audiences (even the Israelites) ought to know certain things without needing to be told them explicitly. Thus Isaiah 1:3 announces that Israel is acting even less intelligently than the animals ("The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know; my people do not understand"), in the process implying that humans ought to be able to work out certain of the divine expectations even if they were, like the animals, completely deprived of revelation. There are certain things that are just "obviously" wrong, for which an explicit divine statement is un-

necessary, and which may be supposed somehow to be built into the human moral compass. Perhaps the condemnations of Amos 1 also fall into this category.

This idea that moral norms might be built into the very fabric of things—human or otherwise—is closely related to another possible explanation. This is the idea that it might be possible to work out certain general ethical principles through observation of and knowledge about the world. This kind of inductive moral reasoning is sometimes referred to as "natural law," reflecting the idea that this is a kind of moral "law" that is inbuilt and therefore observable in the "natural" world (differing ideas about what is "natural" can make this more of a challenge in practice than it might seem in principle). In the biblical context we might point to the passage in Genesis already mentioned, in which the prohibition of murder is grounded in an idea about the nature of a human being. Human beings are *like this*, and this implies that moral action in relation to them should be *like that*. This particular example, however, draws attention to another feature of natural law, at least in the context of a theistic worldview: insofar as creation reflects its creator, any moral norms derived from the natural world may be supposed, ultimately, to derive from God.

This suggests another way in which human beings might work out what constitutes ethical behavior: by asking, What would God do? This is the principle of *imitatio dei*, the imitation of God. The underlying premise is that human beings ought to aspire to be as like God as they can. In the biblical tradition this is ultimately based on the idea that human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27). Ideas about what God is like can therefore serve as a guide to what human beings should be like. Imperatives and adjurations reflecting this principle appear often and across a range of texts. Yhwh's own holiness, for example, requires a certain level of holiness from anyone in proximity to him (much of Leviticus and Ezekiel), while many of the prophetic exhortations to justice and righteousness are implicitly or explicitly based in the attribution of these characteristics to God (Amos 5, Isaiah 56, and so on). *Imitatio dei* is a middle ground between divinely revealed commands and natural law, because reasoning out human behavior on the basis of the divine behavior or essence implies some kind of knowledge of the divine—and knowledge of the divine, it can be argued, also has to

be revealed. It might also be argued, however, that the values and attributes of the deity might be reasoned out from observations about the natural world and the human condition, if those are things that the deity is supposed to have created.

This, finally, brings us back to the second question: Where do moral norms come from? The ultimate issue here concerns the relationship between ethics and God. Is an act considered morally commendable because God commanded it (that is, anything divinely commanded is, simply by virtue of being divinely commanded, morally sound)? Or does God command certain acts because they are morally commendable according to some kind of overarching (and divinely recognized) moral principles? This question also relates to how humans discern moral norms. The first option might suggest that the only way of knowing what constitutes right behavior is revelation, insofar as it implies that moral norms are arbitrarily determined by God. The second option suggests a moral system according to which the deity issues instructions—and perhaps therefore implies that an observant human might be able to work out the general principles of this system even in the absence of direct revelation. Another way of putting this question is: Is God *in* the moral system, or did God *create* the moral system?

One text often thought to shed light on this issue is Genesis 18, in which Abraham negotiates to spare the city of Sodom. The entire passage is a theoretical exercise, but its premise is that both Abraham and God agree on punishing the righteous being objectionable—and thus suggests both that God's actions are not arbitrary and that there are moral principles recognizable by both humans and God. It might also be taken to imply that God is bound by certain moral norms. A similar kind of thinking might be suggested by the hints in Proverbs and other texts that God is expected to serve as the guarantor of justice, ensuring that the right consequences are meted out for any given crime—and thus, again, that there are standards of right and wrong that are mutually agreed on by, and recognizable to, both God and humans. The book of Job, on the other hand, appears to emphasize just the opposite: while 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 the deity. God is not bound by or restricted to a moral system

that is comprehensible to human beings and is not obliged to counteract instances of what appear, from a human perspective, to be injustice. (Nevertheless, Job is restored.)

None of these texts are systematic treatments of the origins of moral norms or the moral relationship between God and his human interlocutors. They reflect a variety of viewpoints and approaches: in some cases ethical expectations are articulated as divine command, while in others they seem to be derived from the nature of the world or beliefs about God. Ultimately, however, the question of whether God is inside and bound by or creates and is outside the moral system is probably a false dichotomy, at least as far as the biblical authors are concerned. It would be more accurate to suggest that God *is* the moral system—and because God is creator of the universe, the moral laws of the universe reflect the nature of God. Like God, these moral laws may not be fully comprehensible to human beings in all their details—and this perhaps is where revelation plays a role—but there is an underlying and unifying principle at work that, at least in its broad strokes, may be discerned from observation of the natural world.

FINAL REMARKS

The biblical texts preserve a remarkable diversity of opinions on matters ethical. For those with historical interests, this diversity offers a delightful variety of points of access to the moral world(s) of ancient Israel. For those for whom these texts are in some way authoritative, it raises questions about the nature of the texts themselves and, in particular, their role and relevance in modern moral philosophies.

The complexity of current arguments over the appropriate use of the biblical traditions in contemporary ethics reflects the complexity of the biblical texts themselves. Such debates are not merely an argument between those for whom these texts are authoritative and those for whom they are not—an argument over whether the contents of these texts are relevant to a contemporary conversation at all. Rather, the cacophony of modern voices reflects the cacophony of the ancient voices with whom they are in conversation. It is possible to point to different texts,

to different interpretations, in connection with current moral challenges precisely because the texts themselves preserve multiple and divergent opinions on the subjects they address.

The biblical texts represent a diversity of ancient opinions on what it means to be human, on what it means to be a human being in relation with the divine, and on the appropriate manifestations of these in ordinary (and extraordinary) human lives. In their diversity, these texts preserve a dialectic—a dialogue—a conversation—about some of the most profound questions human beings face. The mere fact that the canonical collection(s) of scripture preserves this dialectic demands the attention of those interested in the ongoing relevance of these texts. It suggests that the forces behind this agglomeration of texts were less interested in the production and dictation of absolute moral norms than they were in the process of trying to discern them—more interested in the lived experience of human beings, trying to work out what it means to live in a world created by God, than in preempting that process by fiat.

It also suggests that these texts recognize the contingent nature of their interim conclusions and preserve them not as the final word on the subjects they pursue so much as a witness and an invitation to the process in which they are deeply engaged and to which they are deeply committed. A faithful engagement of these texts in the context of modern dilemmas, then, is to accept an invitation to join their conversation. Rather than declaring, *This is what it means to be human*, these texts invite their audience to ask, *How does the Bible acknowledge and engage with both the diversity of human experience and the diversity of interpretations of that experience—and how might I join that conversation?*

FURTHER READING

The most well-known methodological musings on ethics in and of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible have been by John Barton, including *Ethics and the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1998), *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003), and *Ethics in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Another accessible introduction is Eryl W. Davies's *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (London: T&T Clark,

2010). Prominent studies of Old Testament ethics from a Christian perspective include B. C. Birch's *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1988) and C.J.H. Wright's *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004). Recent studies of specific texts include Andrew Davies's *Double Standards in Isaiah: Re-evaluating Prophetic Ethics and Divine Justice* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), Andrew Mein's *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), J. Gary Millar's *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), my *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), Richard G. Smith's *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David's Reign: Narrative Ethics and Rereading the Court History according to 2 Samuel 8:15–20:26* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), and two volumes by Gordon J. Wenham: *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2012) and *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000). There are now also several collections of shorter studies of various texts and topics, including John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies, and M. Daniel Carroll R., eds., *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2007); and Katharine Dell, ed., *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).