

dermine religion, whereas Freud is attempting to establish a credible thesis about the origin of religion and culture.

Finally, whatever inconsistencies or difficulties that may be found in their theories of cultural origins, clearly the theme behind Freud's views on religion is that the psychological needs served by religious beliefs, make such beliefs no longer believable. For Nietzsche, the theme behind his views was a conviction of awakening to the real or higher purpose of humanity that was being restrained by religion. To them (however they may have arrived there), ethics is embodied in the human instinct or unconscious and needs to be developed and realised.

Notes

1. S Freud, *Totem and Taboo* in *The Pelican Freud Library*, Penguin Books, vol. 13, 1986, p219.
2. E Figs, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, London, 1981, p135.

3. S Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, London, 1970, p50.
4. F Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 2, ch 6.
5. *Ibid.* ch 16.
6. *Ibid.* ch 19.
7. S Freud, *op cit.* p224.
8. F Nietzsche, *op cit.*, Essay 2, ch 6.
9. S Freud, *op cit* p130.

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The Bible and Ethics

Robert K McIver
Avondale College

The Bible is not a handbook of ethics¹, but because biblical religion (both Judaism and Christianity) strongly links religious commitment to behaviour, the Bible deals extensively with ethical issues. It is precisely in the area of ethics that biblical religion makes itself real in the life of the believer, and it is the point at which the relevance or irrelevance of religion is felt most keenly. The question, "Is the Bible still relevant today?" is frequently answered in terms of the perceived ethics inherent in the Bible.

This article will survey some of the more prominent themes in biblical ethics, and will discover these to be astonishingly relevant to modern societies, societies far removed in time and culture from those who first received the written word of God. Ethics are normally divided into personal and social ethics, but it is perhaps slightly more convenient

to subdivide the ethical principles found in the Bible into two categories: those effecting individual Christians, and those that effect wider society (Christian and non-Christian alike).

Ethical Principles Effecting Wider Society

The Rule of Law

If the king is the source of law, then he is above the law. Whatever the king did is, ipso facto, lawful and right. This was the case in practice (if not in theory) in all of the kingdoms of the Ancient Near East. Israel stands as unique in this matter, because, as George Mendenhall points out, "... there was no independent religious tradition in the pagan nations of the ancient world which had enough vitality and support to become the basis for a condemnation of royal policy while the king was still alive."²

The religious traditions embodied in the Old Testament carried the strong conviction that everybody in society was subject to the one law. That law was the law of God. Everybody in Israel and Judah, from the king(s) downwards, was obligated to keep this one law. Although often circumvented, it was an ideal enshrined in the deepest religious convictions of the nation, and the king defied it at some risk to his throne.

Not only was the king and the ruling elite subject to the rule of divine law, this same law was applicable to the disadvantaged and poor of society. "You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge; but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there;

therefore I command you to do this" (Deut 24:17-18)³. In all ancient societies (and in many modern ones) the law was often used to the advantage of the rich over the poor. Some ancient societies even had different law codes for the different strata of society - different laws for the princes, the priests and the common people⁴. But Yahwism abhorred this. All those in Israel were of the one family, and were entitled to equal access to law.

Consequently, any society wishing to model itself on biblical ideals will be a society under the rule of law. There will be one rule for all - one law for the poor, and the same law for the rich and politically powerful.

Separation of Church and State

The doctrines of the separation of church and state and the right of free worship according to conscience have been principles that have only emerged out of the inability of post-Reformation states to enforce one religion in one region. At the outset they owed their promotion to pragmatics and humanism rather than religion⁵, but there is a strong ethical basis for it dating back to New Testament times. Jesus and the early church were challenged by this matter again and again. How can one legitimately challenge the dominant religion, especially when such is closely allied to the ruling political forces? Is civil disobedience in religious matters unethical? Is the governance of religion another of the legitimate spheres of government? On the other hand, does the acceptance of the radical demands of the kingdom of God exempt Christians from the obligations of society?

The New Testament makes it clear that the answer to these questions is nega-

tive. When the civil(-religious) authorities tried to gag the earliest Christian preachers, they replied that where there is a conflict between the desires of human government and the requirements of God, then God must be followed, even at the cost of personal liberty, and (sometimes) life itself. In the mouth of Peter this principle becomes: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

On the other hand, Jesus did not advocate a complete withdrawal from the legitimate demands of society. When challenged about the payment of taxes, he asked for a coin. The picture on the coin was Caesar's, therefore Christians were enjoined to "Render . . . to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21). The Christian was expected to pay the hated and oppressive Roman taxes - even taxes used to oil the machinery of a army of occupation, and a pagan government - because this belonged to the legitimate sphere of government.

Consequently, the New Testament develops the principle that there are legitimate spheres of activity for both the church and the state, and that these should be kept separate from each other. One of the features of the terrible oppression pictured in Rev 13 is that the religious and civil authorities combine to enforce an apostate religion by civil means. It is against the illegitimate combination of church and state that the New Testament speaks so strongly. When Christianity achieved political domination, to its shame it forgot its heritage, and even resisted the principle of the separation of church and state proposed by humanists and pragmatists.

The Right of Civil Authorities to Rule

Concomitant with the principle of the separation of church and state, is the Christian's recognition of the civil authority's right to rule in its legitimate sphere. Paul outlines some of these rightful roles in Rom 13:1-7: they are to be terrors to bad conduct (preserving society from the forces of lawlessness and anarchy), to enforce laws, and to raise revenue to do their task. In Paul's day, these tasks included running a civil service, making and enforcing laws, keeping civil order, maintaining transportation networks and providing the infrastructure of the community (water supply, sewage disposal, etc.).

Support of Weak and Underprivileged

The weak and underprivileged were to have equal rights under law. The righteous judge was to ensure that they received the justice due to them (Exod 23:6-9). In Israelite society the agricultural practices were so arranged that the poor would have enough food. The edges of the field and the gleanings were theirs (Lev 23:22; Deut 24:19-25). Interest was not supposed to be charged (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:35-38), protecting the poor from the trap of debt (a law widely flouted in Old Testament times, when interest rates between 50 - 150 % were not unknown⁶).

Egalitarianism

In contrast to surrounding societies, both the Old and the New Testament have a strong stress on the equality of all, expressed, among other ways, by the concept of brotherhood. The Old Testament,

for example, calls a fellow Israelite's lost ox "your brother's ox" (Deut 22:1-4). In the New Testament a fellow believer was often called "brother" or "sister" (Acts 1:15-16; Rom 16:14, 16; Eph 6:23; 2 Pet 1:10, etc.). Within Christian circles there was to be no distinction between rich and poor, Jew or Greek, male or female (Gal 3:28). Christians were to distinguish themselves from Gentiles who wished to lord it over others - a Christian was to take the role of servant (Matt 20:25-28). Clearly, Jesus and Paul were speaking specifically about roles within the community of believers, but Christians were to represent a wider ideal, an ideal embodied also in the laws governing Old Testament society.

Basic Right of Economic Self-sufficiency

The underlying assumption behind many of the Old Testament land laws was that every family should be given the means for self-sufficiency. Each family was given an inalienable inheritance. If debt forced the temporary alienation of the land, it reverted back to the family every jubilee year (Lev 25:13, 28), and could be redeemed at any time (Lev 25:25-28). In this way, each family was given the means to provide for itself. It is interesting to note the combination of private ownership and community sharing. The resources were to be equitably shared, but were privately owned.

Stewardship of the Earth's Resources

That Israelite society was to act as faithful stewards of the resources of the country both physical and human, is made clear from who owned the land - it be-

longed ultimately to God. Israel had been placed in the land to husband it, and preserve it for the good of themselves and of their neighbours. Consequently each individual was responsible to be a good steward of the resources entrusted to him/her. This is but one of many biblical ethical principles that applied to the individual. It is to these individually applicable ethical principles that we now turn.

Ethical Principles Applicable to Individuals

While the ethical principles discussed thus far can be reasonably expected of society in general, and can perhaps be also argued on other than specifically biblical grounds, within the Bible there is a large number of ethical principles which particularly apply to individual believers.

Ethical Decisions Are to be Made on Basis of Inward Convictions, not Outward Conformity to Rules

Jesus consistently showed implacable hostility to the interpretation of the law of the Pharisees because their interpretation was almost exclusively centred on the careful observation of the minutiae of the rules. Instead, Jesus stressed the inward motivation of the law. The Pharisees had built a wall of protection around the Sabbath, for example. They had carefully defined 39 different types of work, and analysed their exact constituents. Consequently, they knew the disciples were guilty of reaping, threshing and winnowing as they plucked the grain to eat as they went through the cornfield on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8). Jesus vehemently dismissed their understanding of Sabbath-observance. In its place he stated the prin-

ciples that God desires mercy rather than sacrifice (Matt 12:7), and that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). This is all rather disturbing for folk wishing to know whether it is permitted to go swimming on the Sabbath on a hot day, because Jesus did not leave a list of rules. Rather, he left a series of principles in this and in all the other areas of behaviour.

Not only did he leave principles, Jesus internalised and intensified the obligations of the law. Whereas the law condemned adultery, Jesus said the Christian should not even look upon a woman with lust (Matt 5:27-28). The external act is transformed into an internal motivation. Similarly, whereas the rule said it was wrong to murder, Jesus said it was wrong to hate (Matt 5:21-22). The goal of Jesus was none other than the ideal embodied in the promise made through Jeremiah, "I will write my law on their hearts." The Christian's motivations to keep the law are internally based, not externally based.

Love, especially for enemy

Jesus made a clear hierarchy of principles of law observance. Several times he identified the most important principle as the principle of love. It is by loving that the law is fulfilled (Rom 13:8; Gal 5:14). It is love of God and of fellow man that summarised the whole intent of the law (Matt 22:35-40).

There is something unique about Christian love, though: not only does the Christian love those that love him, he loves the enemy. The Christian is like God in this respect, whose love includes both good and bad (Matt 5:44-48).

Christianity has practical impact on all of life

When Paul prayed, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:23), the intent was that an individual's Christianity would have an impact in every area of their life. This would included not only what they believed, but how they behaved - their eating habits, choice of friends, choice of career, choice of leisure pursuits, business relationships and dealings.

Strong motivation to keep God's Law

Christians know forgiveness, because they know the love of God revealed by His giving His son Jesus to us. In response, the Christian wishes to keep God's law. The motivation is not to earn salvation, but that of gratitude. The Christian forgives much, because much has been forgiven. We respond to the saying of Jesus, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15, 23). Love is our motivation.

While Christians are characterised by the realisation that there is nothing which will commend them to God (the members of the Kingdom of God are poor in spirit, Matt 5:3), their life is characterised by an intense striving after righteousness. Christians desire righteousness with the passion of a starving man seeking food, or of a woman dying of thirst seeking water (Matt 5:6)

Non-resistance of evil

First-century Christians found themselves a threatened minority. It may be this that explains the great stress that is placed upon the appropriate response to evil and persecution:

Rom 12:14 Bless those who persecute you

Rom 12:19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance in mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'

Rom 12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Matt 5:39 But I [Jesus] say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also;

...

Respect for others and seeking their good

When Jesus said, "whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" (Matt 7:12), he was reiterating the principle of seeking the good and respect of others. The Christian ethic takes the viewpoint of the other into consideration.

Forgiveness

In their relationship with others, Christians remember at all times that God has forgiven them debts of great seriousness and enormity. In their prayers, they repeat "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors," and conclude from the parable of the unforgiving servant that if they do not forgive others, then they are not forgiven. Thus, in Christian interpersonal relationships, forgiveness and reconciliation find center stage.

Situational

Biblical ethics also take the specific situation into account. Since the publication of Joseph Fletcher's book *Situation Ethics* many conservative Christians have been nervous of the label "situation ethics," because of the fear that if the situation is considered then the underlying principles of biblical ethics might be ignored. While it is true such arguments have been advanced with disastrously unbiblical conclusions, this should not prevent us from hearing the testimony of Scripture on this account.

When Jesus was defending his disciple's actions on the Sabbath, for example, he cited the case of David eating the shewbread (Matt 12:4). Normally this would have been forbidden to David, but David's need was more important than the customary way of showing reverence for the temple. The situation changed what was normally the correct behaviour. There were two conflicting needs: the need to observe the sanctity of the tabernacle, and the need of human hunger. The need to preserve human life took priority. Thus, in Scripture, there is a willingness to take the situation into account, and to choose between two competing ethically desirable actions.

The Ethical Dimensions of the Christian Attributes

Christian attributes are listed several times in the New Testament. Perhaps the best known of these lists is that given by Paul in Gal 5:22-24: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against which there is no law." All of these have implications in

the conduct of the Christian. While they are not directed at a specific situation and do not provide a detailed list of rules which must be obeyed, they do give guidelines to the kind of behavioral options available to the Christian. What the Christian does will be determined by love. The Christian's actions are characterised by kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and patience.

Conclusions

If this were an academic article it would carry a title something like: "Some Aspects of Biblical Ethics," because a full description of biblical ethics would take a book-length manuscript. What has been presented, however, is perhaps suggestive of the kinds of issues which such a work might encompass.

The ethical principles implicit in the Bible are striking for their contemporary flavour, and astonishing in their relevance to many of the issues that are facing today's societies and individuals. Once again Scripture is seen to be relevant to the problems of flesh and blood people. Biblical religion does have something to say about the wider issues of meaning, and the doctrines of the faith are challenging to the greatest of intellects, but, where it expresses itself in the lives of people, it is extremely practical and real. The Christian message to society is one that it still needs to hear: that a just society operates under the rule of law, it separates the func-

tions of the church from that of the state, it supports the weak and underprivileged of society, its ethos is basically egalitarian, and it extends to all of its members the right and means for economic self-sufficiency.

The message for the individual Christian is perhaps more challenging and disturbing, but no less relevant. The individual Christian makes moral decisions based on principles, not on rules. The greatest of these principles is the principle of love for others, even for enemies. Neither this principle, nor the fact that Christians recognise that there are sometimes two competing ethical standards between which a choice must be made, mean that the Christian has no regard for the specifics of God's law. Indeed, the Christian desires more than anything else to be in conformity to the revealed will of God. Finally, the Christian attributes of forgiveness, humility, meekness, unselfishness, patience, forbearance and kindness will all play a part in determining what particular course of action will be taken by the Christian in any given circumstance. Indeed, the Christian will try to act as a true ambassador of Christ, to walk where Jesus would walk, to say what Jesus would say, and to act in a way that will sense that in some way they are also dealing with Jesus.

Notes

1. It is not possible to draw a straight line between the ethics of the Bible and ethics for our day. One has to interpret the bible against its own historical context. It is at the level of principles that Biblical ethics can be seen to have universal applicability, not always at the level of the specifics (c.f. what Jesus does with some of the Old Testament specific laws in Matt 5:21-48). There is insufficient space to deal properly with the issue of methodology. Those interested in pursuing the methodological question might read with profit the survey articles, John Brunt & Gerald Winslow, 'The Bible's Role in Christian Ethics', *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 20 (1982) 3-21; and Allen Verhey, 'The Use of Scripture in Ethics', *Religious Studies Review* 4 (1978) 28-39.
2. George E Mendenhall, 'Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law', in *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, Vol 3, edited by E F Campbell,

Jr, and D N Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), p4.

3. This, and other quotations from the bible in this article are from the RSV translation.
4. The 17th Century BCE Code of Hammurabi, for example, establishes different legal provisions for three classes in society: the patricians, the free artisans, and the chattel slaves. R H Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1969), 102.
5. See, eg J H Elliott, *Europe Divided 1559-1598* (London: Collins, 1968), passim, summarised on pp388-397.
6. Isaac Medelsohn, 'Slavery' *Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, edited by Edward F Campbell, Jr, & David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 3:132-33. On the interest laws as protection of the poor, see Hillel Gamoran, 'The Biblical Law Against Loans of Interest', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 30 (1971): 127-134.

The Ethics of Reading and Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Majella Franzmann and Josie Fisher
Philosophy, University of New England

This brief article has its starting point in some preliminary questions posed by the authors for a much larger project that aims to study the correlations between what feminist¹ biblical interpreters are currently saying about the ethical dimensions of reading and interpreting the biblical text, and the philosophical bases of the methods which they use to interpret the text. The broader context of the project comprises current writing on ethics by feminist writers in general.

As Mary Ross indicates, much of the current general literature on ethics ad-

dresses basic concepts such as virtue, personhood and what it means to be human². Although feminists have tended to deal with specific issues such as abortion, domestic violence, and work conditions, they are also looking at more fundamental issues of ethics, as well as critiquing standard categories of moral philosophy, and considering how feminist ethics might differ from various received ethical traditions³.

While there is no single 'feminist ethic' one widely held view is that ethics is situated, that judgments are relationally