

Bible Books: In Search of Biblical Morality

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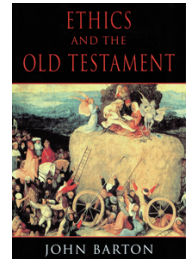
Ethics and the Old Testament

John Barton

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I once saw a bumper sticker that warned, “Read the Old Testament. It will scare the hell out of you!” While the religious intentions that probably lie behind that admonition are not congenial to my own way of thinking, the statement at least underscores that the Hebrew Bible includes many unsettling parts likely to disturb our modern moral sensibilities.

John Barton, professor at Oxford University, moves beyond the usual hand-wringing over objectionable parts in the Bible—the bloodshed, the oppression and exploitation, the harsh punishments, the treatment of women and slaves, and more. Although he acknowledges all these troubling elements—stating at the outset that “establishing the relevance of Old Testament ethics to life today is an uphill task”—his own concerns lie elsewhere: in trying to ascertain whether, in light of the Bible’s obvious diversity and inconsistencies on numerous moral points, there is any coherence to the moral positions taken in the Hebrew Bible. To accomplish this goal, he focuses attention not so much on the laws, as is commonly done, as on the stories that fill so many pages of the Bible.



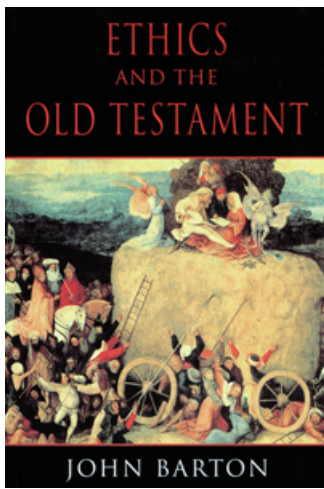
Unlike Aesop’s fables, the stories in the Old Testament do not normally end with a moral, a simple instructive point. Rather, they portray fallible human characters who interact with other fallible persons, with luck and misfortune, and with their sense of the divine. Barton points to incidents in the life of David, not least his affair with Bathsheba, to show how the stories do not offer direct moral advice but instead press us to ask, “What does it mean to live in a world where guilt, innocent suffering, and bad luck mix to make a cocktail of disaster and despair?” We do not come away from the stories with a neat formula for moral action but are invited to ponder their details. Part of the unity in the Old Testament’s moral vision must be sought at this level of the interplay among figures in the narratives.

Barton uses three specific moral issues to show how the Hebrew Bible has more to contribute to modern moral decision making than is commonly thought: ecology, sexual morality and property. While the injunctions in Genesis for humans to take dominion of nature seem to represent a hostile stance toward the environment—and have often been used or interpreted just that way—there are many more texts that emphasize a respectful and appreciative strategy of the natural world. Regarding sexual morality, Barton emphasizes that all issues must be understood against the background of the patriarchally defined family structure in ancient Israel, where men had more sexual license than did women, wives were virtually considered the property of their husbands and prostitution and concubinage were legal. The Old Testament includes homosexual acts among the list of forbidden sexual practices but has no awareness of “sexual orientation,” and modern interpreters who wish to affirm the text’s condemnations for today distort the sexual morality of the Bible by appropriating this one aspect and leaving aside other components they now find objectionable, such as polygamy or prostitution. Finally, on the subject of property, Barton again draws attention to the familial context: As the ideas of the sabbatical and Jubilee years indicate, the notion of ancestral land predominates over a concept of individual land ownership.

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Barton concludes his book with two interesting discussions. In the first he argues, as he and others have been doing in recent years, that the Hebrew Bible in its final form may well be heavily oriented toward laws commanded by God, but at an earlier stage, and still at a subterranean level, one can discover a type of natural law, where certain moral expectations are regarded as inherent to the character of humanity and of the world. Here, in fact, can be found a further level of “moral coherence,” about which Barton speculates at the start of the book. Second, he shows that moral instruction in the Old Testament does not rely simply on command but typically seeks to motivate people to action.

John Barton, who has had a long-standing interest in biblical ethics, treats these complex moral problems, both ancient and modern, with understanding and insight. *Ethics and the Old Testament* is written in a conversational style, making it an accessible resource for anyone interested in Old Testament ethics, and lay groups will find it ideal for study and discussion.



Magazine: Bible Review, February 1999

Volume: 15

Issue: 1

Source URL (modified on 2016-08-24 21:09): <https://www.baslibrary.org/bible-review/15/1/8>