

Thoughts on the Use of the (Hebrew) Bible in the Assessment of Current Ethical Issues – Part I: The Question of the “Why?”

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Abstract: This study addresses the question why the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible as a whole can be seen as valid and helpful dialogue-partners and guides in the assessment of current ethical issues. It begins with an overview of the broad range of answers that have been given to the question, arguing for a position that views the Bible as an important point of orientation even though in many cases there is no meaningful way to directly “apply” biblical texts, mostly because of the differences between “then” and “now”. An important argument for the usefulness of the Bible can be found in its positive role in shaping ethics and life in societies in which it had a dominating influence in the past.

Keywords: biblical ethics, influence of the Bible

Introduction

It is obvious that questions relating to the use of the (Hebrew) Bible to assess current ethical issues are difficult and complex – just consider that scholars and other participants in the relevant debates come up with contradictory opinions about what the Bible has to say with respect to almost any issue, one of the recent big examples being the Corona pandemic.²

There are, of course, many who have looked into these questions over the past decades, centuries, and even millennia.³ I do not claim that I am able to come up with many genuinely *new* thoughts, except perhaps for some detail here or another there – so the aim is much more modest: Offering some thoughts that may stimulate the next steps in the discussion in a positive way, and perhaps identifying points that are of special importance in our current situation, both in terms of highlighting elements that must not be missed, and identifying elements that may be pitfalls or dead-ends rather than helping tools.

The discussion about the use of the (Hebrew) Bible in the assessment of current ethical issues has various layers. In the first part of this two-part article we want to look at the following question:

What authority, if any, can or should be assigned to biblical texts in the assessment of ethical issues? Why should the (Hebrew) Bible be considered as an ethical guide, and in what ways?

¹ I thank the organizers of this conference for the kind invitation to present a paper on the wonderful occasion of a combined 200 years anniversary of my dear colleagues Jens Bruun Kofoed, Nicolai Winther-Nielsen, and Carsten Vang.

² See, e.g., the conference volume, edited by the present author, on *The Bible and Pandemics* (forthcoming).

³ My own preoccupation with issues related to biblical ethics goes back to my work on the way metaphors in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East (see Zehnder 1999, 484–503).

The main thesis of this essay is the following: The (Hebrew) Bible is in fact a prime source in assessing current ethical questions – but it is not the only one. One of the main reasons that it can be ascribed such a role is its historic credential in positively shaping societies that used the (Hebrew) Bible as a guide in ethical questions.

1. Important Views on the Authority of the (Hebrew) Bible in Assessing Current Ethical Issues

As most readers will be aware, there is a range of views concerning the question whether the Hebrew Bible (or the Bible as a whole) should be given some kind of authority in assessing current ethical issues, and – in case the question is answered in the positive – what kind of authority or what degree of authority this should be. The main proposals range from

- none at all (e.g., Niebuhr 1943, 2:152; Avalos 2007, 17),⁴
- to the concept of loose inspirations and principles,⁵ impulses and suggestions – where they seem acceptable – (e.g., Barton 2014, 7–8),
- to concepts in which it is more about the “how” than the “what” (Boff 1987, 149),
- and similarly: concepts where it is more about the formation of character through narratives (e.g., Birch and Rasmussen 1976, 107–121),⁶
- or general tendencies that can be derived from legal instructions as a collective whole, rather than adjudication of issues (e.g., Rabens 2021, 89, 120);⁷
- and then, moving towards the other end of the spectrum, concepts that operate with models in which a stricter and more direct adherence to Biblical regulations is favored (e.g., Wright 2004, 68–69, 103–362),
- culminating in the most radical position of theonomy.⁸

⁴ One of the reasons for such a position is the view that the authors of the Bible are attached to values and beliefs that are immoral and no longer held to be relevant (see Avalos, 2007, 16). The accusation of immorality addressed against the Hebrew Bible is, of course, not new; see, e.g., the Greek philosopher Celsus (see, e.g., Frevel 2021, 130). In a milder form, the rejection of transferability is based on the notion that biblical maxims are anchored in the culture of their time and limited to their particular historical context (see, e.g., Otto 2015, 2:272–273); however, he does still concede that the description of biblical ethics “can be of interest to ... contemporary societies” (Otto 2015, 273).

⁵ In one of his articles, Barton (2017, 119–120, 125) singles out wisdom literature as the main source of inspiration, in dialogical ways, however, not in terms of prescriptions.

⁶ They state that it is especially the story of God’s action in Christ that has primary importance in this process (see Birch and Rasmussen 1976, 24). Of specific importance is Janzen’s (1994, *passim*) paradigmatic approach. He focuses on five stories which evince ethical principles, and then elaborates on precepts of right and wrong. The Biblical principles are not applied directly but are understood as being important in shaping a Christian character. Various authors add an additional important angle: The formation of the character happens through biblical stories not in abstract terms, but set in practice within the church (see, e.g., Hauerwas 1981, 45, 54; Laytham 2005, 354–355). For a similar point see Wan-nenwetsch (2007, 58–59).

⁷ Frevel (2021, 142–143) advocates for a dialogical model in which the Bible and reason are allowed to have their respective voices heard in ethical deliberations. While the Bible has “no *natural* or *given* authority”, it can still be “a valuable source of arguments within ethical modern discourses”, a source which a person can choose to give weight to in an act of “voluntary self-obligation” (Frevel 2021, 143–144; *italics* his). He proposes a “canonical discourse ... in which meaning is constituted by complementary voices”, conceived of as “a never-ending negotiation with different voices” (Frevel 2021, 147).

2. A Way Forward

My own proposal is not to choose in a general way between the various options mentioned above, but to be open to move back and forth along this spectrum and look at the individual case. This means that depending on text and situation, the best answer may be almost anywhere on this vector, sometimes more on the side of direct transfer and strict adherence, sometimes more on the side of indirect inspiration, the latter marking the minimum applicable in every case. There is, in my view, no need to exclude one or the other possibility a priori. Methodologically, the decision in each case needs to be built as much as possible on signals inherent in the biblical texts themselves, not on criteria imposed on them from outside.

Regardless of how authority of Scripture is defined with regard to ethical questions, *from a faith perspective*, all of life is under the authority of the divine creator and suzerain.

What I do not support is the position that the (Hebrew) Bible can basically be discarded in principle in the assessment of current ethical questions. In addition, I cannot subscribe to a view which posits that biblical texts must be critiqued and challenged where they appear to be offensive to contemporary readers, apart from considerations of accommodation (thus, e.g., Davies 2021, 165–166). One of the main problems with this approach is, in my view, that it is not clear what the criteria would be that help decide which parts of the biblical ethical positions are acceptable and which are not. How would it be possible to not simply make personal or random cultural predilections the subjective arbiter?⁹

With all of this being said, this does not mean that there are no other sources of inspiration in ethical decision making outside of the Bible. Interestingly, the Bible itself opens the window for this, for example in Rom 1:29–32.¹⁰

⁸ For an overview of the various approaches ranging from moral direction through prescriptive terms to moral formation by means of biblical images see Kaiser (1983, 41, 48–56; cf. Gane 2017, 163–195). Frevel distinguishes between “ethics based on the Old Testament” and “ethics with the Old Testament” (2021, 134; italics his).

In some ways, the approaches of Luther and Calvin respectively are related to the various positions mentioned here. According to Luther, the ethical teaching of the Old Testament applies to Israel only and to the periods before Christ; however, there are ethical principles that can be deduced from the Hebrew Bible, but they do not have ultimate binding authority. The tendency in Calvin’s view is to see the commandments of the Hebrew Bible as still valid; the ethical directives express God’s moral will and are valid for all societies, except for those that are explicitly abrogated in the New Testament.

⁹ Davies (2021, 165) claims that his approach is actually biblically founded by pointing to Abraham’s plea against God in Gen 18:25, Job’s doubts about the justice of God and the psalmist’s question concerning the prospering of the wicked in Ps 94:3. It does not seem to me, however, that these texts provide a solid basis for Davies’ far-reaching methodological setting of the course. On the other hand, Davies adds that also the Bible should be allowed “to pass judgment on us” and that we need to be willing “to transcend our own narrow horizons” (2021, 168); it remains, however, unclear *how* this could happen.

¹⁰ More will be said on this in the second part of this three-part article.

3. Why the Hebrew Bible Is Important for the Assessment of Ethical Issues

Why is it legitimate to argue that the Hebrew Bible should be assigned an important role in deliberations concerning current ethical issues, in spite of the fact that it is a collection of documents far removed from our present age, and in spite of the fact that for Christians the Hebrew Bible is not in itself the last word of God, but rather only part of a multi-step communication that consists of both Old and New Testament, with the latter having a somehow privileged position in the sense that it contains God's final word?

3.1. Argument Based on the Witness of the New Testament

For Christians, an important part of the answer to the question of the importance of the Hebrew Bible for the assessment of current ethical issues consists in the observation that the New Testament authors themselves support the notion that the Hebrew Bible is important to assess ethical issues in their own time, the time of the inauguration of the new covenant.

Important witnesses within the New Testament are Matt 5:17–18 (Jesus's claim that he has not come to abolish the law)¹¹ and 2 Tim 3:16 (assertion that all Scripture – referring, of course, to the Hebrew Bible – is God-inspired and good for instruction). Also Gal 5:13–25 (definition of the law as a guide for those who are saved) and 2 Pet 1:21 (claim that all prophecies are spoken by the Holy Spirit) are passages that point in the same direction.

We also note that in all major parts of the New Testament there are constant references to the Decalogue (see, e.g., Rom 13:9; 1 Cor 6:9–10), and sometimes other Old Testament ethical regulations as well (see, e.g., Matt 19:3–12 [Gen 2:24; Deut 24:1–4]; 1 Cor 5:1–5 [Lev 18:8; 20:11]).

On the other hand, Acts 15 shows that Christians from the nations who have become members of the new covenant are not subject to the legal regulations of the Hebrew Bible in the same way as the Israelites before them were.¹²

3.2. Argument Based on the Continuity between the Two Testaments

In addition to the textual evidence from the New Testament, we can point to the continuity that can be observed between the Two Testaments. This continuity forms the basis for the ongoing relevance of regulations contained in the Hebrew Bible in the context of the new covenant. Here are five elements of this continuity:

1. Some prescriptions of the Hebrew Bible can easily be transferred directly across the ages, because they are independent of specific situations and their moral power is evident to most people, like "You shall not murder."

¹¹ For the importance of this passage for the question at hand see, e.g., Goldingay (2021, 172–173). In the remainder of his article, he offers helpful thoughts on how the ethical messages of the two Testaments can be understood in their mutual relationship.

¹² One can also point to Jer 31:31–34 and Ezek 36:22–32: These texts describe the period of the new covenant as an era in which the Law is still valid. The change with regard to the old dispensation does not consist in the abolition of the Law, but in its inscription directly into the hearts of the people (Jeremiah) and God's Spirit working himself in the people's heart so that they walk in the ordinances (Ezekiel).

2. There are aspects of human life that are constant, not depending on specific cultural or historic contexts. Prescriptions found in the Hebrew Bible that are related to such aspects can claim continuous validity. Examples would be honoring parents, helping needy people, being loyal to a spouse.

Both of these aspects may also have some relevance for people that are not what could be – somewhat loosely – called “Bible-believing.”

3. It is the same law-giver in both Testaments, and he must be morally consistent. This means that what he requested the Israelites to do reflects his character which is still the same, and therefore has bearing also for the people of the new covenant.
4. There is also (some) continuity with regard to the people of God. Therefore, what God requested from the people of the old covenant will in some ways be relevant also for the people of the new covenant. This explains why the New Testament writers do in fact apply regulations found in the Hebrew Bible also to the new congregation.¹³
5. Israel is elected and formed by God with a universal goal.¹⁴ Therefore, the character of the moral requests addressed to Israel is also relevant when it comes to determine the moral requests addressed to humanity at large. In other words: What God requests from Israel morally is given with a view to the redemption of humanity at large.

4. Broadening the Horizon: Why the Bible as a Whole is Important in for the Assessment of Current Ethical Issues

Are there arguments in favor of the position that the Bible as a whole should be taken seriously in making ethical assessments, arguments that could potentially make an impact on an audience that consists of Western secularists for whom the Bible has no authority?¹⁵ In the subsequent sections, I will list three such arguments.

4.1. Argument Based on the Transcultural Relevance of Biblical Prescriptions

Some biblical prescriptions, irrespective of whether they are found in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament or both, make sense for everybody, across the ages, independent of culture, because their moral power is evident to most people, like “You shall not murder,” some kind of protection for marriage, some kind of protection of rights to private property, or even more fundamentally the necessity of following some rules.¹⁶

¹³ However, the transfer is not made to any political state.

¹⁴ See especially Gen 12:1–3; Exod 19:5–6; Deut 4:6; cf. also Isa 42:6 and 49:6. This point is stressed by Wright (2004, 62–65).

¹⁵ This leaves still open the question in what ways the Bible should be taken seriously.

¹⁶ Of course, these prescriptions were not accepted everywhere and at all times; the far-reaching abolition of the right to private property in communist states is one of the more spectacular examples of this. However, it can still be observed that the examples here point to transcultural and transhistoric values that were accepted by a majority of people.

4.2. Argument Based on the Positive Historical Influence of Biblical Prescriptions

The Bible has proven to be historically successful in a special (almost unique) way.¹⁷ This is true also for its ethical impact; through the ages, the Bible has been – and in various ways continues to be – a light for many nations.

In societies where the Bible and its ethics ascended to a dominant position, transformations took place on a large scale, transformation that in the eyes of many – including the eyes of the present author – are positive, with many of these transformations being not or only poorly represented in other cultures. Here are eight examples:

1. Compassion, resulting in care for poor and sick people, regardless of their social status and ethnic background, which in turn led to the establishment of hospitals.
2. The value of education, resulting in the establishment of schools.
3. The concept of human beings as bearers of the image of God, resulting in care for elderly and handicapped people.
4. Related to *imago Dei*, the concept of the sanctity of life, resulting in rejection of abortion and euthanasia.
5. The understanding of woman as God's creature on an equal standing with man in terms of dignity with man, resulting in the expectation for her not to be *used* by man, but *loved*.
6. The special position of Shabbat / Sunday, resulting in a balance between dignity of work and rest, which avoids the idolizing of work.
7. The concept of the whole creation being under God and being the expression of his rational thoughts, resulting in liberation from superstition, which in turn opens the legitimacy of free investigation of creation, and the use of natural knowledge for positive aims for the whole of society.
8. The notion of all men equal(ly) under God, resulting in restrictions on human power and its abuses, and equality of all men before the law.

All of these phenomena are in one way or another and to some degree or another fruits of the spread of the Bible.¹⁸ This does, of course not mean – and especially not in our times in which the Bible is in many ways put aside – that everything was or is well even where the Bible exerted a considerable degree of influence.¹⁹ But compared to other cultures that are or were not influenced by the Bible in the same manner the difference in the degree of freedom and everyday-forms of compassion were perceivable even until recently, in some areas perhaps even until today.

¹⁷ The importance of points 2 and 3 was argued for by Rosenzweig in 1929 when he stated that the importance of the Bible can be seen in its “weltgeschichtliche Wirkung”, i.e., “world-historical impact” (Rosenzweig 1984, 9).

¹⁸ Which happened mainly in the West. Of course, in most Western countries almost all of these elements are now being given up, in lockstep with the decline of the influence of the Bible.

¹⁹ Qualifications and nuancing would be necessary with respect to each item mentioned in the list, and with respect to any specific period in time and any specific region. However, the big picture still stands.

Conclusion

There is an ongoing debate concerning the relevance of the (Hebrew) Bible for the assessment of current ethical issues. As shown in this article, there are good arguments for the view that the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible as a whole consisting of two Testaments is in fact a valid source of ethical orientation. This does, of course, in itself not meant that biblical texts can or should be transferred one-to-one in all cases.

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