

Is the Old Testament Too Old for Christian Ethics?

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1. Introduction

One of the perennial issues that pastors often need to address in Christian ministry is the relevance of the Old Testament (OT) to Christian moral life. For instance, many believers would gladly regard the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 as normative, but they might be wondering if the law of slavery in Exodus 21 is still relevant. The issues of whether and to what extent the OT can provide a moral guide for Christians have been equally complex for biblical scholars. The factors that make them hesitant to readily accept the authority of the OT for Christian moral life include the sheer cultural gap between then and now,¹⁾ competing views in the OT on a same moral issue,²⁾ the presence of immoral values and stories in the OT,³⁾ the historically conditioned character of OT ethical teachings,⁴⁾ and the fact that the OT never intended to provide “a comprehensive ethical system” for Christians.⁵⁾

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1) Cyril S. Rodd, “The Use of the Old Testament in Christian Ethics”, Cyril S. Rodd, ed., *New Occasions Teach New Duties?: Christian Ethics for Today* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 6-7.

2) John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 94-120.

3) Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 3-15.

4) David A. Dorsey, “The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34:3 (1991), 325-329.

5) Robert R. Wilson, “Sources and Methods in the Study of Ancient Israelite Ethics”, *Semeia* 66

However, the good news is that these difficulties have not stalled scholarly endeavors to relate the OT to Christian moral life. In an attempt to reclaim the relevance of the OT, this article will identify three overarching problems (i.e. historical, hermeneutical, and moral problems)⁶⁾ and address how those problems can be resolved. Then in light of this discussion, this article will make constructive proposals about how to use the OT judiciously as a moral guide for Christians.

2. Identifying and Resolving the Problems: Historical, Hermeneutical, and Moral Problems

2.1. Identifying Historical Problems

In view of the historical distance between the biblical world and ours, some doubt the viability of the OT as an authoritative source for contemporary moral issues. The basis of this position centers around two issues: (1) the historically conditioned nature of OT commandments and (2) different sets of moral issues in the modern world. Concerning the first issue, proponents of this position accentuate the fact that OT commandments were given to a particular people who lived in a particular historical, social, and cultural milieu.⁷⁾ Due to this

(1994), 56.

6) Another important problem in doing Old Testament ethics is a methodological problem. I will not deal with this issue because it is not much pertinent to our present concern. For further discussion of this issue, see John Barton, "Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament", John W. Rogerson, et al., eds., *Beginning Old Testament Study* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1998), 114-131; John W. Rogerson, M. Daniel Carroll R., and Margaret Davies, eds., *The Bible in Ethics*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 207 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995); Eryl W. Davies, "Ethics of the Hebrew Bible: The Problem of Methodology", *Semeia* 66 (1994), 43-53; Eckart Otto, "Of Aims and Methods in Hebrew Bible Ethics", *Semeia* 66 (1994), 161-172.

7) John Barton, "Understanding Old Testament Ethics", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 9 (1978), 48: "to discuss the ethical standards of one group, in a given period, as if they were the standards of the whole nation, inevitably distorts our understanding even of that group from which we draw our evidence"; similarly, John W. Rogerson, "The Old Testament and Social and Moral Questions", *Modern Churchman* 25:1 (1982), 34: "The approach suggested here is that much of the Old Testament material about command and instruction is the natural morality of Old Testament times."

historical particularity of OT ethical teachings, they believe that these commandments are not timeless moral principles and may not be applicable to all circumstances. For example, for Israelites, the command not to boil a baby goat in its mother's milk was significant enough to appear three times (Exo 23:19; 34:26; Deu 14:21), but it is irrelevant and thus inapplicable to modern Christians.⁸⁾ Some scholars point out that even the OT teachings that many Christians would consider to have universal values were in fact given in a particular context. Ronald E. Clements, taking the second greatest commandment ("Love your neighbor as yourself") in Leviticus 19:18 as an example,⁹⁾ shows that the original context indicates a specific occasion in which this commandment must be interpreted. He basically argues that the injunction, which was originally addressed to a specific group ("sons of your own people"), was thus not meant for everyone.¹⁰⁾

Regarding the second issue, these scholars emphasize that the modern world raises radically different sets of ethical issues that the OT does not directly address.¹¹⁾ The OT does not offer any explicit moral instructions about current ethical issues such as nuclear war, intellectual property right, genetic decision-making, medical ethics, and diverse issues related to advanced technology. As the forms and needs of human society change, so do its moral issues and views. According to this position, the OT is at best partially authoritative, simply because it does not deal with new moral issues of the modern world.

2.2. Resolving Historical Problems

It is true that we cannot deny the historical distance between OT times and now; however, that does not necessarily lead to negating any attempts to draw abiding principles from particular ethical teachings in the OT.¹²⁾ The primary

8) John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 52.

9) Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural citations are from the NRSV.

10) Ronald E. Clements, "Christian Ethics and the Old Testament", *Modern Churchman* 26:3 (1984), 17-18 (Clement's translation).

11) Elmer A. Martens, "The Problem of Old Testament Ethics", *Direction* 6:3 (1977), 26-27; Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 11-12.

12) Even scholars, who highly emphasize historically conditioned nature of OT ethical teachings,

question here is: If the historically conditioned OT teachings can be universalized in one way or another, what are the responsible ways of deriving universal principles from particular commands? A traditional way of answering this question is to divide OT teachings into three categories (i.e. civil, ceremonial, and moral) and then to claim that only moral commands are still binding on Christians while the other two types are no longer valid.¹³⁾ However, as Joe M. Sprinkle correctly points out, “The categories moral, civil, and ceremonial are not strictly distinct.”¹⁴⁾ For instance, the ceremonial law of Sabbath appears in the Decalogue, the prime example of moral teachings. Likewise, the civil laws on murder and a city of refuge are stated in a broader context of ceremonial precepts about purity (Num 35).¹⁵⁾ After all, Jesus explicitly claims that he comes ‘not to abolish but to fulfill’ the entire law and the prophets (i.e. referring to the OT), not just moral teachings of the OT (Mat 5:17-18).

If Jesus has in view fulfilling the OT in its entirety, then Christians probably need to posit their questions differently. If Jesus takes it seriously to accomplish the OT (not simply dispensing with it), then the OT must be regarded as still relevant to Christian moral life at least in some sense. The question that we need to grapple with is this: if OT teachings, due to their historical particularities, cannot be directly transferred to Christian moral life, then in what ways can we say that the OT can still speak to Christian moral life? On this, Richard Bauckham’s comments are profoundly insightful. Although his original discussion was about the use of the OT for political issues, the insights remain

are open to the possibility that one may draw some “example[s]” or “imperatives” that may still speak to today’s situation; see John W. Rogerson, “Christian Morality and the Old Testament”, M. Daniel Carroll R., ed., *Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 405 (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 28.

13) The detailed descriptions of this position can be found in O. M. T. O’Donovan, “Towards an Interpretation of Biblical Ethics”, *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976), 60-61; Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 44-48; Robert R. Wilson, “Approaches to Old Testament Ethics”, Gene M. Tucker, David L. Peterson, and Robert R. Wilson, eds., *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 66-67.

14) Joe M. Sprinkle, *Biblical Law and Its Relevance: A Christian Understanding and Ethical Application for Today of the Mosaic Regulations* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), 5.

15) *Ibid.*, 4.

the same as long as we switch the word “political” to “moral”¹⁶):

In view of this [historical] complexity, some may be tempted to dismiss the [moral] relevance of the Old Testament altogether. But there is a good reason for not doing so. God and his purposes for human life remain the same in both testaments, and it is primarily the character of God and his purposes for human life which are expressed in the [moral] material of the Old Testament. They are expressed in forms appropriate to the specific conditions of Old Testament Israel . . . This means that, while the law and the prophets cannot be *instructions* for our [moral] life, they can be *instructive* for our [moral] life. We cannot apply their teaching directly to ourselves, but from the way in which God expressed his character and purposes in the [moral] life of Israel we may learn something of how they should be expressed in [moral] life today. This means that our first concern should not be to select those parts of the Old Testament which still apply today. None of it applies directly to us, as *instructions*, but all of it is relevant to us as *instructive*.

Several important points are made here regarding the universalizability of the OT teachings. First, the historical particularity of OT teachings should not be emphasized as much as God’s immutability.¹⁷) The fact that God remains consistent throughout history makes OT teachings all the more relevant for Christians. Second, the historical particularity of OT teachings proves to be a positive attribute because each teaching provides a concrete example of God’s ways of shaping the moral life of his people in different times. The OT teachings, leaving their particular terms and conditions intact, may not function as direct applications to Christian moral life, but these very particularities may offer invaluable insights into discovering general principles or patterns about

16) Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 6, emphasis original.

17) Elmer A. Martens, “How Is the Christian to Construe Old Testament Law?”, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12:2 (2002), 207: “The ethics for the Israelite, as for the Christian, centers first not on laws but on the lawgiver, God”; similarly, Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 239: “The true basis of ethical behaviour in the OT is the nature and character of God himself”; again similarly, Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 29-30: “The ethical directions and morality of the Old Testament were grounded, first of all, in the nature of God directly . . . Therein lies the strongest and first presumption for the unity, consistency, and harmony of the Old Testament ethics.”

how Christians should behave.¹⁸⁾ Third, what matters in using the OT for Christian moral life is not an appropriate choice of material (which parts of the OT are still binding on Christians?), but an appropriate interpretation of material (in what sense are all teachings of the OT normative for Christians?).

Thus, the claim that the historical distance is so wide that OT teachings may not be relevant for Christians cannot be substantiated. The historical particularity should not stop us from pursuing general principles,¹⁹⁾ paradigms,²⁰⁾ or stories²¹⁾ that express God's moral visions, which remain consistent despite different forms and expressions.

2.3. Identifying Hermeneutical and Moral Problems

Even when historical problems have been resolved, hermeneutical and moral problems still remain. Despite the different natures of these two problems, I will

18) John Goldingay, *Approaches*, 55: "We rejoice in their particularity because it shows us how the will of God was expressed in their context, and we take them as our paradigm for our own ethical construction."

19) Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 155-166; John Goldingay, *Approaches*, 41-42; Philip Jenson, "Snakes and Ladders: Levels of Biblical Law", Katharine J. Dell, ed., *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies [formerly Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series] 528 (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 187-207.

20) Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 171-178; idem, "The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament: A Survey of Approaches. Part II", *Tyndale Bulletin* 43:2 (1992), 227-231; idem, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 62-74.

21) Scholars, who see the significance of story in OT ethics, tend to emphasize that the task to draw moral imperatives from the OT is much more complex and ambiguous than principle/paradigm approaches. There are in this camp many scholars who highlight more on the normativity of biblical narrative; see Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 51-65; Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 1-9; Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 1-4. However, others such as Lipton stress more on ambiguities and complexities of biblical narrative; see Diana Lipton, "Desire for Ethics or the Ethics of Desire?", Katharine J. Dell, ed., *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies [formerly Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series] 528 (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 34-55.

address them under the same heading, because both can be resolved through a proper understanding of how God reveals his will and purpose in this world.

The hermeneutical difficulty lies in the fact that the OT itself presents an array of different viewpoints on a same moral issue.²²⁾ Stated otherwise, within the OT there is ample room for diversity, modification, and expansion of ethical viewpoints. For instance, some laws are concerned with protecting the rights of foreigners (e.g. “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt”, Exo 22:21), while other laws impose a certain level of inequality upon foreigners (e.g. “On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest”, Deu 23:20).²³⁾ Whereas many prophets (Eze 18:12-13; Amo 5:12; Zec 7:10) rebuke those who oppress the poor, the writer of Proverbs unveils the laziness and irresponsibility of the poor (Pro 10:4; 21:17).²⁴⁾ Similarly, regarding the relationship between God’s people and empire, Exodus depicts Egypt as an enemy that oppresses the Israelites as slaves, while Ezra portrays Persia as a patron that supports the rebuilding of a temple at Jerusalem. One can find differing viewpoints even in the same biblical book. “If its [Genesis’s] opening chapters imply an egalitarian vision of human relations, its later chapters record and apparently condone conduct and attitudes that presuppose hierarchies of gender, class, and race.”²⁵⁾ If we consider the entire Christian canon (both the OT and the NT) in the process of ethical decision-making, even more various viewpoints will emerge and thus the task of weighing different scriptural witnesses will become all the more complicated.

Another major obstacle to using the OT as an ethical resource is the presence of immoral values, stories, and institutions in the OT.²⁶⁾ For instance, immoral institutions such as polygamy and slavery are sanctioned in the OT. Bible

22) Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 444-445. For a general discussion on the diversity of biblical witnesses, see J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 517-532.

23) John Goldingay, *Approaches*, 56.

24) Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics*, Old Testament Studies (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 169-178.

25) John Goldingay, *Models*, 95.

26) John Barton, “The Dark Side of God in the Old Testament,” Katharine J. Dell, ed., *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies [formerly Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series] 528 (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 122-134.

characters that are supposed to be pious engage in serious wrong doings — Abraham’s lie about his wife, Jacob’s trickeries, Moses’ murder, and David’s adultery. Even God acts in morally unedifying ways — promoting favoritism, punishing harshly for accidental mistakes (e.g. Uzzah in 2Sa 6:6-8), and encouraging violence and slaughter.²⁷⁾ The question remains for us: How can we consider the OT, which presupposes or condones immoral values and practices, as the moral resource for Christian life? Despite scholarly attempts to explain moral difficulties of the OT,²⁸⁾ we cannot deny that this is a major stumbling block to using the OT as an ethical resource.

2.4. Resolving Hermeneutical and Moral Problems

Scholars have proposed ways to cope with these problems, among which we will examine three approaches here: an evolutionary approach, the principle of God’s condescension, and a canonical approach. We will examine these approaches in turn briefly and then discuss how each approach may contribute to resolving hermeneutical and moral problems.

An evolutionary approach relies primarily on the idea of progressive revelation. Progressive revelation assumes that God’s revelation is given not once and for all but unfolded developmentally. If we apply this idea to OT ethics, then God is depicted as the one who has gradually revealed a higher level of moral standards for his people as time goes on. The evolutionary approach

27) God in the OT has been often seen as a supporter or an advocate of war; but in order to understand a number of war narratives in Judges from a different perspective, see Janet Tollington, “The Ethics of Warfare and the Holy War Tradition in the Book of Judges”, Katharine J. Dell, ed., *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies [formerly Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series] 528 (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 71-87, esp. 86-87: “I maintain that those responsible for the final form of Judges share the views of Patch and produced a text proclaiming God neither advocating, nor supporting, warfare. In the text, divine power overrules situations of conflict and transforms the balance of human powers with minimal injury or death being caused. The accounts of mayhem and massacre present humans time and again seeking revenge, or displaying gratuitous violence in war to advance their own status, with little regard to ethics. Finally, biblical translators have enhanced the violent descriptions of war in these narratives based on ethical presumptions of their own about the rightness or inevitability of war in human situations. I suggest that a close reading of Judges challenges us to reflect more carefully on our own ethical response to conflict and war.”

28) Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 247-304; Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).

envisages that God's people in different times are under the religious education of God, expanding their ethical perspectives and insights.²⁹⁾ According to this position, different ethical viewpoints on the same issue may be more understandable, because God discloses his will only to the extent that his people can appreciate it. The morally objectionable passages, they argue, can be taken as something in which God's ultimate will is yet to be revealed. Despite possessing some merits, the evolutionary approach is not entirely satisfactory because it ignores the fact that "the high points of OT ethics come as often at the beginning of the OT canon as toward its end."³⁰⁾ For example, the creation account in Genesis 1-2, which envisions an egalitarian view of humanity, is one of the earliest materials in the OT. The more serious drawback of the evolutionary approach is the danger of too readily discarding earlier materials in favor of later ones.³¹⁾ This tendency to prefer later materials may lead to the disparagement of OT ethical teachings altogether. After all, since later teachings are to be preferred and we have the NT, "adherents of this strategy [the evolutionary approach], in effect, made the injunctions of the Hebrew Bible appear outmoded and irrelevant."³²⁾

A better way of addressing the hermeneutical and moral problems is the so-called "principle of condescension."³³⁾ According to this view, God declares his ideal purposes for human life at *certain* points (i.e. not necessarily in later times) and reaffirms those purposes in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Between these culminating moments, there may be a number of events and instances in which God lowers or adapts his moral standards. The condescension on the part of God is, however, not because he is fickle or inconsistent, but because of the sinful status of humans. The teachings of both testaments on the issue of marriage and divorce are a good example of this.

In Genesis 2, God reveals his fundamental purpose for marriage by declaring that marriage is a lifelong sacred relationship that cannot be broken apart by

29) Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible*, 22-23.

30) Walter C. Kaiser, "New Approaches to Old Testament Ethics", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35:3 (1992), 292.

31) Walter C. Kaiser, "New Approaches to Old Testament Ethics", 292; Tom Deidun, "The Bible and Christian Ethics", Bernard Hoose, ed., *Christian Ethics: An Introduction* (London: Cassell, 1998), 10-11.

32) Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible*, 38.

33) John Goldingay, *Approaches*, 59.

humans (God's ideal moral standard). However, the law (Deu 24) makes a room for divorce in certain circumstances (God's lowering of moral standard). This issue is later brought up by the Pharisees who ask Jesus about his position on divorce (Mar 10). In responding to their question, Jesus points out that the lower moral standard that allows divorce is precisely "because of your hardness of heart" (God's condescension because of the sinful status of humans; v. 5). Finally, Jesus invites his audience to re-embrace God's original purpose for marriage by referring to Genesis 2 (Jesus' reaffirmation of God's ideal moral standard; vv. 8-9).

At this juncture, it may be helpful to compare the principle of God's condescension with the evolutionary approach. God's condescension and the evolutionary approach certainly have some common grounds. Both approaches assume the presence of different levels of moral standards within the OT, and both agree that this is because God has to accommodate his purposes in an imperfect human world. They will not attribute different moral viewpoints in the OT to God's inconsistency; rather, God has his own legitimate reasons for lowering moral standards. This can explain many morally problematic passages in which God is directly or indirectly involved in immoral activities. However, they differ in one significant point: the principle of God's condescension does not share the evolutionary approach's progressive revelation, namely, the idea that God reveals his will and purposes linearly and developmentally, from incomplete to complete. The evolutionary approach has a tendency to prefer higher points of morality at the expense of discarding lower ones. However, under the principle of God's condescension, every level of moral standards is meaningful and important because each moral standard shows a concrete example of "how God's standards can be at work in the real world".³⁴⁾ Each instance of God's accommodation of an ideal moral standard offers a boundary within which we can imaginatively work out God's purposes in our concrete life situations.

Lastly, a canonical approach deals with the hermeneutical and moral difficulties by grappling with the nature of the continuity and discontinuity of scriptural witnesses. In his book, Brevard S. Childs presents a case of the canonical approach for using the Bible as an ethical resource.³⁵⁾ Rather than

34) Ibid.

35) Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 123-138.

directly addressing the hermeneutical and moral problems, Childs offers a big picture of how we should discern the will of God. Childs argues that knowing the will of God is a central task when making any moral decision, but the task is not an easy one due to the tension between ‘already’ and ‘not yet’. Thus Childs says, ‘God has made known his will to his people with great clarity’ in some places (e.g. Deu 30:11, 14; Mic 6:8), but in others (e.g. Deu 32:27-28; 1Ki 3:9; cf. Rom 12:2) ‘knowing the will of God cannot be simply taken for granted’ and thus calls for continual discernment.³⁶⁾ This tension, Childs argues, reflects how God reveals his will to his people. On the one hand, God’s will is sometimes easy to discern despite its diverse expressions; on the other hand, God in other times, as the living author of his law, confronts his people anew with his will in different times. These moments are when God’s will often comes as a surprise or a mystery and goes beyond our expectations and standards. Thus, for Israel, the law of God cannot be reduced to lifeless precepts or principles that can work apart from the living God himself. Thus he says, “Law is not statues fixed in stone, but the living will of God who shapes a people in all the exigencies of daily life.”³⁷⁾

According to Childs, part of reasons for the tension among the biblical witnesses is that the divine commandments are always addressed to specific people in concrete situations.³⁸⁾ Though the will of God remains consistent and unchanged, the forms of its application to concrete situations may represent a degree of variety. The implication is that a fair amount of freedom “in bearing witness to the eternal will of God” should be welcomed.³⁹⁾ The fact that God’s unchanging will can be expressed freshly in various circumstances reminds us that contextualizing God’s will in a modern context may also represent “a degree of variety and disagreement among Christians.”⁴⁰⁾ In other words, what the moral teachings of the OT offer us are not the specific courses of action that may be taken in all circumstances, but boundaries of ethical decisions in which individuals may differ in their specific courses of action.⁴¹⁾

Then Childs goes on to speak of two methodological steps in using the Bible

36) *Ibid.*, 126-127.

37) Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 680.

38) Brevard S. Childs, *In Crisis*, 129.

39) *Ibid.*

40) Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 116.

41) *Ibid.*

for an ethical decision-making.⁴²⁾ The first step is to review the full range of biblical witnesses in the canonical context regarding an ethical issue under consideration. The main purpose of this step is to hear the diverse voices in their own terms and to examine the particular contexts in which different witnesses arise. This comprehensive treatment of biblical witnesses regarding an ethical issue may prevent one from making a moral decision prematurely by appealing to one or two biblical traditions. Then the second step is to explore the inner relationship of the various scriptural witnesses in order to “determine whether there are characteristic patterns or familiar axes.”⁴³⁾ The primary purpose of this step is to treat the Bible as “an integrated and coherent whole” that not only contains a “variety of viewpoints” but also conveys “the total impression” gained from them.⁴⁴⁾ This way of examining an ethical issue in a wider canonical context may give us a more rounded view of the ethical issue in question. The so-called morally offensive passages, when seen in the wider canonical context, may gain a proper balance and thus “not prove to be quite such a stumbling-block as is often supposed.”⁴⁵⁾ In sum, the canonical approach constantly resists a simple proof text for justifying a particular ethical action; rather, it always involves dialogue, discernment, and humility in interpretation.

Then how can the canonical approach speak to hermeneutical and moral problems? Briefly answered, diverse viewpoints on a same moral issue (hermeneutical problem) and morally problematic passages (moral problem) may reflect the ways God reveals his will to his people. That is, God’s will remains unchanged but God may express his will freshly in different circumstances (thus diverse viewpoints), and these renewed expressions of God’s will may sometimes come as a surprise or even an agony to us (thus morally problematic passages). In the canonical approach, differing viewpoints are not the problems to be solved but the great opportunities to discover God’s abiding will. Plus, in this approach, ethically objectionable passages are not insurmountable but explainable.

42) Brevard S. Childs, *In Crisis*, 132-138.

43) *Ibid.*, 132.

44) Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible*, 79.

45) *Ibid.*, 80.

3. Conclusion: Proposed Guidelines for Using the Old Testament as an Ethical Resource

In light of the foregoing discussion, I would like to propose some guidelines in using the OT as an ethical resource.

(1) *Find an abiding relevance of the OT in the immutability of God.* One of the great obstacles to using the OT as an ethical resource is the historical chasm between the biblical world and our world. The recurring question is: How can we assure that “then and there” message still speaks to “here and now”?⁴⁶⁾ The answer can be found in the immutability of God. The fact that the God of Israel is the same as the God of Jesus Christ should be our hermeneutical foundation for discovering abiding moral principles in the OT for Christian moral life.

(2) *Take the historical particularity of OT teachings seriously.* The historically conditioned nature of OT teachings has caused many scholars to balk at bridging “what the text meant” and “what the text means”.⁴⁷⁾ However, the historical particularity of OT teachings should function as a means of encouraging rigorous historical exegesis, not as a means of discouraging any attempts to bring biblical messages to our world. The historical particularity of OT teachings is not something that should be peeled off for drawing general principles, but something that we need to delve into for finding more precise analogies.⁴⁸⁾ The more properly we understand a particular ancient context in which OT teachings were given, the more precisely we may establish a legitimate boundary within which one may contextualize the OT teachings into the present ethical situation.

(3) *Find analogies with imagination between the bible world and our world.*⁴⁹⁾ The use of the OT for Christian moral life is not a simple transference of OT teachings to our situation, but a more dynamic hermeneutical process that calls for our creative thinking. It is one thing to find God’s moral vision in the OT,

46) Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 23-24.

47) For a detailed discussion on how to bridge the two worlds responsibly, see e.g., William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

48) Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*, 12.

49) Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 298-304.

but it is another thing to envisage how that vision can be expressed in our situation. The task to find analogies between the two worlds involves not only rigorous historical exegesis of a text, but also a serious analysis of our contemporary world. Based on this informed understanding about then and now, our imagination plays an important role in finding more precise analogies between biblical commands and their appropriations for our world.

(4) *Hear the diverse voices of the Scripture before too quickly harmonizing them.* The presence of diverse moral viewpoints within the OT in itself does not undermine the authority of the OT; rather, it invites us to examine a moral issue in the whole context of canon. In order to grasp God's moral vision on an ethical issue more properly, one should first examine all the biblical witnesses on that issue in their diversity. In the process of comparing and prioritizing diverse moral perspectives, one will gain a more balanced view of God's moral vision. Here an uncritical proof text should give way to a responsible interpretation.

(5) *Allow for "a degree of variety and disagreement among Christians"⁵⁰⁾ in the process of contextualization.* This is the implication of the principles (3) and (4). The fact that we should use our imagination in bringing the biblical messages to our world invites us to make a room for the coexistence of diverse expressions of God's unchanging will in the body of Christ. Of course, there are times when dissenting voices can be orchestrated into casting a unified moral vision, as the second step of canonical approach suggests. However, there are other times when dissenting voices are to be heard as they are. In these moments, the beauty of diversity may enrich our perceptions and experiences of God's lasting will. Whether diverse ethical viewpoints should be played in a unified chorus or in varied chords is a matter of discernment that always involves both rigorous analysis and creative imagination.

<Keywords>

Old Testament ethics, ethical use of the Old Testament, authority of the Old Testament, Christian ethics, hermeneutics.

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50) Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 116.

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<Abstract>

Is the Old Testament Too Old for Christian Ethics?

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This article examines the issue whether the Old Testament is still relevant for Christian moral life. Affirming the relevance of the Old Testament for Christian ethics is not an easy task due to a number of problems that the OT does have. These problems can be categorized broadly into three: historical (i.e. Old Testament ethical teachings are directed to particular people in particular time and place), hermeneutical (i.e. the Old Testament itself presents various viewpoints on the same ethical issue), and moral (i.e. the Old Testament, from time to time, either allows or sanctions immoral values and actions). This article, having examined these problems in turn, argues that they can be reasonably resolved so as to reclaim the Old Testament as an authoritative source for Christian moral life. In other words, the historically conditioned nature of the Old Testament does not necessarily mean the irrelevance of the Old Testament teachings for Christian moral life, but it reminds us that both rigorous exegesis and imaginative application are required for finding analogies between the Bible world and our world. Concerning hermeneutical and moral problems, they, despite their differing nature, can be equally resolved by a proper understanding of how God reveals his will and purpose in an imperfect human world. In doing so, the present study investigates how an evolutionary approach, a principle of condescension, and a canonical approach, respectively, may enrich our understanding on this issue. Then the article will end with some proposed guidelines for using the Old Testament as an ethical resource.