

Why We Think the Way We Think about Ethics and Morality:

Hebrew Thought



The Prophets: Raphael

A Scene from the Film Philadelphia (1:35:31-1:36:05)

Andrew Beckett, a gay lawyer who is dying from AIDS, takes legal action against his former employers, for alleged wrong dismissal. He argues that the real reason for his sacking has to do with the company's directors' discovery of his gay identity and their suspicion about his contraction of the AIDS virus; not, as they claim, his incompetence. The trial scene is fascinating; especially when the CEO of the company takes the witness box, and frustrated by the line of questioning, honestly reveals his thinking, appealing to the rules of the bible, with regard to morality:

Lawyer Miller: *"Who makes these rules that you are talking about? You?"*

CEO: *"Read your bible Mr Miller; Old and the New Testament. Pretty valuable rules in there"*

Question: *Let's talk about this! What is your reaction?*

What I want to do in these next few paragraphs, is point to the way in which Hebrew Biblical moral thinking, is not uniform but broad, so broad at times that it is in discord with itself. To talk of *a single* biblical morality then, is not accurate, unless you embrace one 'take' and ignore the others. Let us look at several tensions that exist in Hebrew ethical

thought, all of which have implications for the way we interpret the Bible to arrive at our ethical conclusions.

Tension Once: Grace versus Law

The tension between grace, or kindness and a more rules-based approach to morality and ethics, is grounded in the basic idea of salvation. In one sense, Hebrew thought emphasizes morality as a response to salvation. The Hebrew law codes in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, embody a standard for the people who have been liberated from oppression in Egypt. This historical memory reinforces the idea that they were *liberated from and freed for something*, for a purpose: namely to be a light to the ancient world, a beacon of freedom and equality. To break the divine law, was to break faith with Yahweh. The Ten Commandments (Decalogue) was and remains at the heart of what many Jews and Christians deem to be essential to faith.

For its part, the New Testament, on the one hand, appears to sharpen the demands – in particular in Matthew’s Gospel – where Jesus speaks about not abolishing the law but fulfilling it (Matt 5: 17, 19-20). Matthew’s Gospel really does believe that Christian perfection is reachable. The apostle Paul also makes it clear that certain behaviours are inconsistent with “life in the Spirit”, and James’ Letter reads like an Old Testament prophet. But there is in the New Testament – *and here is the tension* – a deep expression of God’s love for the undeserving sinner, for the one who is not even necessarily conscious of their brokenness. This is central to Jesus’ ethos and is clear in all the gospels, especially Luke. But it is also a current that predates Jesus, since in the Old Testament, forgiving love (*ἔλεος chesed*) is central in the prophet Hosea, where God is depicted as insistently faithful to an unfaithful wife (Israel), and in Jeremiah where God continues to love despite his people’s lack of fidelity, as they break the covenant with God and the social contract with each other, through their negligent exploitation of the poor.

Clearly, the idea of God’s forgiving love (grace) stands in tension with God’s moral demands. The way we think ethically: the moral as rules or the moral as a reflection of God’s generosity, tends to shape our responses to ethical challenges, as in the case of the CEO in the film Philadelphia.

Question: What do you think is the basis for your understanding of ethics and morality?

Tension Two: Universalism versus Group Identity

Morality is always cast in the light of context. Today, we struggle to understand the aggression of fundamentalist Islam (the most extreme being Wahabi). Sometimes, it is made more comprehensible when seen through the lens of group identity: a sort of defence of Islam against the incursions of the liberal secular and commercial West. There is a sense then in which the violent defence of a particular interpretation of Islam, appears in moral garb.

Fundamentalist Islam is not the only expression of this morality of group identity. In the Old Testament, there is the idea of the “chosen people” which carries over into some conservative Christian theologies. In fact, the very idea of the “Promised Land” for the chosen people, a central component of the Exodus story of liberation, takes on nefarious dimensions, when it is understood that others, were driven out from their lands or

murdered, to accommodate but a few.+ The rise of group identity in the Old Testament becomes especially formidable in the crisis of the exile in 587BC to Persia, where all hope of real group identity seemed lost: “How can we sing the Lord’s Song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137:4). Still later, with the Jewish restoration, group identity was fundamental to the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. In Ezra, Jewish men are called to “put away their foreign wives and children”. That said, other Old Testament books assert the priority of universalism: for instance, the Book of Ruth, where Ruth the Moabite, a non-Jew, shows extraordinary loyalty to her vulnerable Jewish mother-in-law Neomi, and is rewarded accordingly by God, in her marriage to the wealthy Boaz.

In the New Testament, there is also tension between group morality and universal morality. First, regarding Jesus, the Gospels paint a rejection of ‘groupiness’, a radical openness to the outsider, and Jesus himself, is interpreted crucified as *an outsider* (The Book of Hebrews). This questions any legitimate possibility of a closed group identity for Christians. Second, and in a similar direction, in the apostle Paul’s struggle with most of his fellow Jewish apostles – including James and Peter – over whether Christian identity required you to be Jewish first, Paul fights back through his ‘theology of grace’ which transcends cultural or religious identity. This theology has stayed with the Church ever since and has served to shape the contemporary Church’s rejection of racism. Perhaps the most clear-cut contemporary example was the south African struggle against apartheid.

Third, and at the other end of the spectrum, there has been a tendency to consider Christians as an elect (Romans 8:33 and Matt 24:22), implying that God has chosen some to be saved while others are excluded. This is especially strong in some Calvinist Reformed traditions, and again explains the theology of the white Afrikaner Reformed Church of South Africa, a singularly important tool in the building of apartheid, which had an ethics of sorts: the *Broederbond*, the iron clad loyalty between Afrikaners.

In 2017 debate over the Australian government prioritizing Christian immigration from Syria, has raised this issue sharply. Those who propose it, see it as the ethical thing to do, in the light of Islamic aggression toward Christian minorities. Others, are wary, warning against a policy which favours group identity, while tens of thousands of Muslims, among others, are also being persecuted.

Question: what is the down side of social ethics shaped by group interest, or the opposite, by universal concerns e.g. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)?

Tension Three: Privilege versus Equality

This question stands at the heart of our modern reality. In the last few years, with marked inequality in free market economies, especially in the Anglo world, inequality is becoming an increasing concern, where household’s share of national income has plummeted: in Australia, to its lowest level in fifty years: see the two articles below (<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/jun/10/households-share-of-national-economic-pie-nears-50-year-low>).

<https://www.rba.gov.au/publications/bulletin/2019/mar/the-labour-and-capital-shares-of-income-in-australia.html>

From a Hebrew and biblical perspective, again there is split view on the question of equality, although the weight of the evidence falls against status, hierarchy, and imbalance.

The Exodus itself is the quintessential event of God's grace, as he frees his people from oppression and all that oppression entails. Still later, when the Hebrews want to establish the new political science of monarchy, 'aping' those advanced empires around them, Samuel warns against it, predicting that such centralized power will lead to a myriad of abuses: he was right (1 Samuel 8: 4f). Perhaps most importantly, the legal construct of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) and later, the prophets who rail against inequality, do not appeal to abstract argument, but constantly condemn palpable and visible abuse of the poor (Amos 8:4-6, Micah 2:2). That said, there does exist a minority view, in Genesis regarding the patriarchs and the Psalms and the Proverbs, where wealth is deemed to be an expression of God's blessings – this is the line pursued by Pentecostal denominations with their prosperity theology – among which the problem of inequality due to concentration of wealth is seldom if ever addressed.

In the New Testament, the scepticism about privilege and inequality is even more obvious. In Luke's Gospel in particular, the Magnificat of Mary, which we read each Advent 4, reflects this ethos (Luke 1:51-53). For Luke, Mary the mother of Jesus represents the poor, *the anawim*. Again, in Luke, Jesus commands the rich man to sell all he has (Luke 18:18-25). And again, quite unique to Luke, there is the telling of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). But perhaps the most significant of accounts is the Final Judgment in Matthew, the projected account of the ending, the culmination of history which concerns the criteria for how human beings will be assessed, held accountable (Matt 25:31-46). Significantly, it is about how the poor are treated. In Paul, the idea of equality is dealt with more obliquely, but not for that matter can it be considered a major theme in his writing. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he berates the rich Christians of that community for their mistreatment the poor at the sacrament. This he sees as direct abuse of the Eucharist (1 Cor 11 :17-34). Moreover, it is Paul who celebrates the way cultural, social and gender definitions are overcome in Christ: neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3:28).

Question: What is your general sense about equality? What weight do you give it in Christian ethics and the Christian worldview?

Conclusion

We have examined the main Hebrew ideas which pertain to community ethics. These ideas were important in the institutional structuring and the public policy within both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

We have seen that within the Hebrew Biblical tradition, there were always tensions: social ethics grounded in grace or law, social ethics as group morality or with universalist tendencies, and social ethics with greater or less tolerance for privilege. In each case – and this may be a surprise to you – the New Testament and in particular Jesus' stance seems to be more radical than even the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament period. In Jesus, social ethics are framed in grace and generosity, not law. In Jesus, social ethics have a strong universalist thrust, rejecting group loyalties. In Jesus, social ethics are especially harsh toward privilege. There is no suggestion in Jesus' teaching that he agrees with today's prosperity gospel.

Next time, we shall explore the Greek ethical tradition, which has been another major influence in the way we westerners think about social morality.