



Reading the Bible

Ethical Issues

People are sometimes shocked to discover that some of the apparently historical events recorded in the Bible did not actually happen. But this shock wears off easily enough, when they recognize that they had just been making a genre mistake, as if one were to assume that everything one sees in a movie or reads in a novel must have happened. The more difficult problem for many people is that the Bible is not always morally edifying, and indeed sometimes seems to endorse actions that are morally repulsive.

An obvious example is provided by Psalm 137, which concludes, in verses 8 and 9:

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!

Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rocks!

While the idea of bashing small children against the rocks is shocking, we can at least understand where this sentiment is coming from. Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem and shown no mercy to its inhabitants. Desire for revenge is not a noble sentiment, but sometimes it is hard to avoid. One might even argue that people need a way to vent such sentiments, without actually acting on them. We will return to this issue a little later.

A more difficult problem is posed by passages where God seems to command actions that we can only regard as evil. One notorious example is provided by Deuteronomy 7, where God commands the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites:

You must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them . . . break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God (Deut 7:2-6).

The Book of Joshua describes how this command was supposedly carried out. The Israelites are only faulted for not carrying it out thoroughly enough.

The consensus of scholarship, at this point in time, is that the conquest described in the Book of Joshua never happened. Archeological evidence shows no evidence of mass destruction of cities, or any abrupt change of culture. But this does not relieve the moral problem, which is that the Bible commends this way of dealing with other people who worship different gods. Moshe Greenberg, a great Hebrew Bible scholar who taught at the Hebrew University in

Jerusalem for many years, argued, against Jewish extremists, that the command only applied to seven specific peoples (Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites), none of which still exists. Therefore, Deuteronomy provides no mandate to slaughter Palestinians. But the Bible lives by analogy, and if it cannot be applied by analogy to new situations, it loses its relevance to the modern world.

One traditional way of dealing with the command to slaughter the Canaanites is to say that it was justified by the wickedness of the Canaanites. God tells Abraham in Gen 15:16 that his descendants will not inherit the land until the fourth generation, “for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” This justification for the divine command in Deuteronomy goes back at least to Calvin. But there is no good evidence that the Canaanites were any more wicked than other people in the ancient world. They do not get good press in the Bible, but then the Canaanites were the proximate others from whom the Israelites wanted to distinguish themselves. We must remember that the biblical narrative was transmitted by Israelites and reflects their point of view. The divine command in Deuteronomy 7 is a human construct, just like the account of the destruction of Jericho in Joshua 7; and it reflects the ideologies and agendas of its human authors.

The problem modern Christians have with a passage like Deuteronomy 7 does not just arise from a clash between ancient and modern values. It arises just as much from a clash between different values within the Bible itself. Indeed, our modern humanitarian values are in large part derived from the Biblical commandment that we should love our neighbor as ourselves, or from the Golden Rule that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us. What Joshua and the Israelites are depicted as doing to the Canaanites cannot be construed as love, by the widest definition. The problem then becomes not one of accepting or rejecting biblical authority in ethical matters, but rather one of deciding which biblical commandments are central and have lasting value, and which are simply reflections of ancient culture.

Another consideration is relevant to our discussion of this material. The Bible does not always teach by positive example. It often describes human failure. The entire Book of Judges can be read as an example of human infidelity and its disastrous consequences. If Israel survives, it is only by the grace of God. The supposed slaughter of the Canaanites may be neither historical nor moral; but it still tells us much about human nature, even about the nature of people who claim to worship the God of Israel.

The story of the conquest appears early in the Bible. Do attitudes to violence change over time?

Historically, Israel and Judah were seldom in a position to be perpetrators of violence. In the later period, only the Maccabees could be seen as aggressors, after their initial war of liberation. What we typically find in the biblical material, however, is that violence is projected into the future. There are several examples in the prophetic books. A fine example is provided by Joel chapter 3, where God will gather all the nations for judgment in the valley of Jehoshaphat and then put in the sickle, for the harvest is nigh.

The New Testament famously enshrines an ethic of non-retaliation, in the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to “turn the other cheek” (Matt 5:39) and to “love your enemies”

(Matt 5:44). Although Christians have not always followed that command, some like Martin Luther King made it central to his challenge to the racist structures of segregation. At the same time parts of the New Testament, such as the Book of Revelation, offer a vision of violent punishment for the wicked, for “Babylon,” a symbol of Rome, whose destruction is joyously celebrated (Rev 18:1–19:10). Here again, one might argue that violent fantasy may provide a necessary relief valve, to release pent up anger and vengefulness without actually putting the fantasies into action. Revelation, like most of the Jewish apocalypses, actually counsels non-violence (Rev 13:9-10). Violence, in short, should be left to God.

Patriarchy, Slavery, and Sexual Behavior

Violence is not the only ethical problem in the Bible. As feminist scholarship has taught us over the last forty years, Biblical attitudes to women leave much to be desired from a modern perspective. The subordination of Eve in Genesis may be a consequence of the Fall rather than part of the initial divine plan, but the story nonetheless assumes a hierarchy, in which Adam comes first.

A few years ago, a professor at a theological school in Tennessee wrote a piece in the Huffington Post in which he said that the Old Testament was patriarchal. (Huffington Post 08/31/12: “The Marginalization of Women: A Biblical Value We Don’t Like to Talk About”). Most biblical scholars would have said that he was stating the obvious, but he was fired for his candor. But no one should be surprised that Bible reflects the culture of its times. This was a world where a man could sell his daughter as a slave or have her stoned or burned for fornication. (Again, the issue is not whether, or how often, these things happened, but that the Bible condones them).

The New Testament also contains passages that have been used to support various structures of oppression. Women seem to have played a major role in the support of Jesus (e.g., Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42; John 20:11-18); and they clearly played important roles in Paul’s communities (Rom 16:1, 6, 7, 12), even playing a leadership role in worship by “praying and prophesying” (1 Cor 11:5). Nonetheless, some epistles, probably composed by Paul’s disciples, severely restrict the role of women (1 Tim 2:11-15).

Slavery similarly received different treatment in various parts of the New Testament. Paul generally advises people to stay in the social condition in which they were called to faith (1 Cor 7:24), although he may make an exception for a slave who had an opportunity to become free (1 Cor 7:21). He certainly takes up the cause of a slave, Onesimus, who has run from his master and Paul, may implicitly ask for the slave’s freedom (Philem 15-16). Whatever Paul’s behavior in a community in which there was “no longer slave or free ... male and female” (Gal 3:28), his disciples insisted that slaves be obedient to their masters (Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22-25; 1 Tim 6:1-2). Passages such as these were long used to justify the institution of slavery in the west in general and in the United States in particular. Yet beside these texts stand affirmations such as Gal 5:13, that Christians are called to freedom. Working out the implications of such declaration,

sometimes in critical dialogue with other parts of scripture, is part of the process of Biblical Interpretation.

Another highly controversial topic for readers of scripture in recent decades are the Bible's passages dealing with same sex relations. Although they play a very

small role in Scripture generally and are not part of the teaching of Jesus, they have received considerable attention. The priestly code of Leviticus (Lev 18:22; 20:13) strongly condemns same sex relations among men. These passages seem to be in Paul's mind in Rom 1:24-27, when he describes the condition of Roman society in which idolatry is practiced, leading both men and women to "exchange natural intercourse for unnatural." These few passages have traditionally grounded Christian condemnations of same-sex relations, although they have sometimes been bolstered with a theoretical framework such as that of "natural law."

In recent years many Christians have come to believe that these condemnations are based on an inadequate understanding of the realities of human sexuality. The particular morality that they convey is as problematic as Biblical statements about slavery. The ethical principle that should govern judgments about proper sexual relations should focus not on the gender of those involved but on fundamental principles of love and justice expressed in their relationship.

In sum, on matters of human rights, gender roles, sexual morality and other controversial issues, readers of scripture have learned to enter into critical dialogue with the sacred text, a dialogue that has always been part of the tradition.

Is the Bible Then Inspiring?

The Bible then presents us with much that is morally challenging. Nonetheless, it remains on the whole an inspiring document. Deuteronomy 6:6, in its call to Israel to "Hear" that the Lord alone is God, calls on God's people to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." The Holiness Code of Leviticus 19 combines ritual prescriptions with fundamental ethical imperatives, to be just and impartial in judgment, to care for the poor and the alien (Lev 19:10), not to hate or bear a grudge, but "love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18). The passages from Deuteronomy and Leviticus were identified by Jesus (Matt 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-38) as the greatest commandments in the Law, commandments in turn paralleled in the other Abrahamic faith, Islam. No other literature from the ancient world takes as strong a stand on social justice as the prophetic books of the Old Testament, calling out as does Isaiah 1:17 to "seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" or Amos 5:24, who cries "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," or Micah 6:8, who says, "He has told you, O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?". In the New Testament, Jesus' teaching about loving as he has loved (John 13:34; 15:13), loving even one's enemies (Matt 5:44), remains the touchstone of ethical behavior for Christians.

Not everything in the Bible lives up to its highest ideals, but those ideals continue to give the Bible power in shaping peoples' lives.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org