**The Bible and Culture in Ethics
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Christians believe that the Bible is the primary, authoritative guide to faith and life. Cultural conventions do not have an authority that overrules Scripture. When Christians differ, whatever their culture, they rightly search the Scriptures to find wisdom.
William Dyrness has argued that “it is scripture, and not its ‘message,’ that is finally transcultural.”1 The message of the Bible, or the way it is interpreted, is always perceived and stated in human language that reflects the priorities of particular people in a particular culture. The entire canon of the Bible, on the other hand, is constitutive of what it means to be a Christian in every time and place. David Kelsey writes that to call a text “scripture” is to say:
1) that its use in certain ways in the common life of the Christian community is essential to establishing and preserving the community’s identity…. 2) It is authority for the common life of the Christian community…. 3) It is to ascribe some kind of “wholeness” to it…. 4) The expression, “Scripture is authoritative for theology” has self-involving force.2
The term scripture implies commitment. In every time and place, believers define themselves in relation to Scripture. Whatever their differences in doctrine or practice, all accept a common written source as the vehicle of the revelation of God in Christ.
Yet the Bible is not self-interpreting. While all accept the text,3 what they think it means differs widely.
The Cultural Context of the Bible
Not only the culture of the reader but also the many different cultures that lie within and behind the text compound the task of understanding. We can understand what we read only in relation to our cultural experience. But everything that is written in the Bible is located within the cultural experience of its author or editor.
There is an overlap between the cultures of the Bible and the cultures of its readers in every age. If there weren’t, the task of reading such a foreign text would be impossible. But there are also pervasive differences. If we do not understand these differences, the ethical teaching of the Bible remains incomprehensible.
Christian commitment to the Bible reflects the conviction that God is revealed through this text. As Robert McAfee Brown has commented:
Christians make the initially bizarre gamble that “the strange new world within the Bible” is a more accurate view of the world than our own and that we have to modify our views as a result. This means engaging in dialogue with the Bible — bringing our questions to it, hearing its questions to us, examining our answers in its light, and taking its answers very seriously, particularly when they conflict with our own, which will be most of the time.4
The problem comes when the Bible’s questions and its answers seem totally foreign and incomprehensible to us. Whatever their doctrine of Scripture, most Christians simply ignore the parts that seem irrelevant. But more difficult to ignore are differences in interpretation between different believers or even in , the same person at different times.
Devout Christians sometimes marvel that each time they come to a familiar passage they learn something new. The Holy Spirit opens their eyes to new insight. Whenever a person reads a text again, she comes to it from a slightly different context. This week she has different problems and concerns from those she faced a year ago. As the context of her interpretation changes, she sees new things in the text. Just as two photographs of the same scene can look dramatically different because of how they are framed, what focus is used, the light setting chosen and the type of film and camera used, so a text looks different to us as we visualize it from different vantage points. With dramatically different cultures, the range of vantage points widens.
This does not mean that the text changes. The number and types of legitimate interpretations are controlled by what is really in the text.5 What is in the text itself is ruled by the finite number of meanings possible in its original context. Ethical instructions, laws, examples, and narratives cannot be abstracted from the context without affecting their meaning. Whether the Bible says, “Do not kill,” “Greet one another with a holy kiss,” or “Jesus wept,” the meaning of the text cannot be understood without the context.
Without this understanding, much of the Bible would be even more puzzling than it is. For example, in Exodus 23:19 the Israelites are commanded, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” Knowing that “a kid” means a baby goat does not get us much closer to understanding why there should be such a prohibition. While animal-rights activists might be delighted with this verse, it is unlikely that prevention of cruelty to animals was the motive for the law. Archaeological discoveries concerning Canaanite fertility practices provide a much more plausible explanation. Boiling a kid in its mother’s milk was evidently part of a common fertility rite. Thus the law should be understood as forbidding syncretism with Canaanite religions. Those who have no connection with fertility rites may find the literal meaning of the law irrelevant. On the other hand, insofar as we can find analogies in our own culture, we may still learn from this rule.
In many parts of the world, rites to appease spirits and assure fertility are common. In such a context this law is very relevant. It teaches us how God viewed fertility magic in the context of ancient Canaan. Even in contexts where such rites are rare, the meaning within this law may have relevance today. For example, a cosmopolite might extrapolate that in some situations, use of a dangerous fertility drug (trust in the magic of science to manipulate what rightly belongs to God) is an unwarranted means of increasing fertility. Perhaps Asians who hunt the rhinoceros (and are threatening its extinction) because of the purported powers of its horn in Chinese medicine should also take note.
Some biblical commands cannot be understood apart from their original context. Others are clear enough but should not be followed in most places today because the cultural conditions that gave them meaning are no longer pertinent. Whether the command is Peter’s instruction to “greet one another with a kiss of love” 1 Pet 5:14), Paul’s observation that “any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head — it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved” (1 Cor 11:5), or the Deuteronomic law that rebellious children should be stoned (Deut 21:18 – 21), the commandments of Scripture must be understood for what they meant to people in a specific time and place before we can begin to understand what they might mean in our time and place.
In the Old Testament, God does or commands many things that appear abhorrent today. It is hard to imagine anything good that can be learned from a law that allows parents to have their children executed. We might speculate that since the law provided for a legal procedure that involved the whole community, it was unlikely to be used except in very extreme cases. Thus, in addition to protecting the community from a youth who was entering a life of crime, the law protected children from arbitrary execution by parents who in that culture had unlimited power over their offspring. At the very least, the law required the agreement and participation of the entire community in the death sentence.
The meaning of the law can be understood only in relation to the actual conditions of its context. Possibly the law was intended to prevent even crueler practices. If so, like the divorce law (“because you were so hardhearted,” Mt 19:8), it did not legislate something good but only prevented something worse.
Even so, I am not happy with this law and do not pretend to fully understand it. I don’t think that under any circumstances disobedient children should be killed. Apart from the hazard of allowing my modern consciousness to stand in judgment on Scripture, I am culturally too distant from the events reported to fully understand them. But it is clear that the meaning of goodness is sometimes understood differently by the authors of the original text from the way we understand it today.
For example, in Numbers 15 Moses is instructed by God to have a man stoned to death for gathering wood on the Sabbath. Functionally the man was doing exactly the same thing as Jesus and his disciples did when they plucked grain to eat on the sabbath (Mt 12:1 – 8). But Moses, in accordance with the law, had the wood-gatherer stoned.
Korah, one of Israel’s leaders, was outraged by Moses’ seeming abuse of power. Korah said, in effect, “Moses, you have gone too far. Why should you have such power to act unilaterally? Are you the only one who knows the mind of God?” (Num 16:3).
Korah was not alone in his concern. He brought with him 250 well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council, a group meant to serve as judges of the people. Korah argued that all of God’s people are holy. “All the congregation are holy, everyone of them, and the LORD is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?” (Num 16:3). As far as I know, this is the first biblical approximation of an argument for the priesthood of all believers.
When we read with modern eyes, Korah was admirable. He didn’t grumble off in a corner but responsibly brought his concern to an appointed council. His concerns were ethical and related to human rights; his instincts were democratic; his methods were responsible; and his theological arguments were sophisticated by modern standards. Ah, therein lies the rub. Korah’s actions cannot be judged by modern standards. Their meaning can be accessed only within the context of the birth of the nation of Israel in the early bronze age.
The meaning of Korah’s action, in his cultural context, was rebellion against Moses and against God, threatening the very existence of the nation of Israel as a unified people of God. In this context, not only was Moses’ leadership challenged, but God’s leadership, God’s law, and the discipline required for the formation of a nation were at stake. Apparently the Ten Commandments were also at stake, as gathering wood was a violation of the sabbath.
According to the account in Numbers, God considered Korah’s sin so grave that Moses had to plead before God for the survival of the whole nation. As it was, God created an earthquake that scared the Israelites half to death. “The ground under [Korah and his family and followers] was split apart. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up…. And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the two hundred fifty men offering the incense” (Num 16:31 – 32, 35).
The point here is not whether Moses was intrinsically right or wrong to cast a death sentence on someone for gathering wood on the sabbath, but that Korah was horribly wrong to challenge Moses’ leadership at this pivotal moment in the formation of Israel. Korah’s action cannot be judged in itself, apart from his cultural context. This is the story of a power struggle. The action of God leaves no question that Korah’s action was wrong in that time and in that place.
It does not follow from this that stoning people who gather wood on the sabbath is a good idea today. The conditions that existed during the time of the exodus will never be repeated. Does this mean that the passage has nothing to teach us? Of course not.
We might learn that keeping the sabbath is very important in the eyes of God — an important lesson for those enslaved by the twin gods of workaholism and materialism. We might learn that democracy is not an absolute good — an important lesson for those who think liberal political culture is the apex of civilization. We might learn that community solidarity and respect for leadership can be more important than individual human rights or even the deaths of 251 people — an important lesson for those who have elevated individualistic autonomy to the central place in ethics.
The story is rich with ethical content. But the content cannot be abstracted into timeless truths that are alienated from real times and places. The story as a whole is far more fertile for ethical learning than any principles abstracted from it. The principles may prove false if they are applied at the wrong time, in the wrong place, by the wrong person. Fortunately, the lessons I drew from the story of Korah are not absolute. From other stories we might learn opposite kinds of lessons.
From the story of the disciples plucking grain, we might learn that human need can be more important than legalistic forms. From the story of Nathan the prophet’s rebuke of David, we might learn that leadership should not have unlimited power and that it is important to stand up against leaders when they violate the rights of individuals (2 Sam 11 – 12). From the story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery, we might learn that mercy in the judgment of sinners is wise for leaders who are also sinners (Jn 8:2 – 11). Even from other stories in the life of Moses, we might learn lessons balancing the story of Korah.
For example, when the people worship the golden calf, Moses pleads for their lives: “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin — but if not, blot me out of the book you have written” (Ex 32:31 – 32). Presumably worshiping a golden calf was more serious than gathering firewood on the Sabbath, but in a different context, in a different life situation for God’s people, a different ethical judgment is brought into play.
Does this mean that biblical ethics are relativistic, that there are no absolutes and we must make our decisions according to subjective criteria? By no means! Ethics in the Bible are contextual. They are incarnate words. But they derive from the character and will of God, which do not change.
Eugene Nida, followed by Charles Kraft, suggests that the Bible teaches a “relative cultural relativism.”6 The point is not that all truth is relative, but that all truth is enfleshed in specific language that relates it to specific cultural concerns. We can have an adequate but never an absolute understanding of moral principles: adequate because we can clearly see goodness and evil at work in biblical and modern times, never absolute because goodness and evil are grounded in specific realities of which we know only a tiny part. Nida goes so far as to say:
The only absolute in Christianity is the triune God. Anything which involves [a human being], who is finite and limited, must of necessity be limited, and hence relative. Biblical cultural relativism is an obligatory feature of our incarnational religion, for without it we would either absolutize human institutions or relativize God.7
The poles of absolutism and relativism in ethics will be explored further [elsewhere]. For now we must turn to the question of how ethics are learned from the Bible.
Learning to See the World through the Stories of the Bible
The primary way we learn goodness from the Bible is by making the story of the Bible the interpretive framework through which we view all of life. This approach does not deny that we learn propositions or doctrines from the Scriptures. But unlike traditional conservative theology, we do not view these doctrines as propositions that we learn and then apply to various contexts. Rather,  learn and then apply to various contexts. Rather, they are a lens through which we see reality. They help us to see the truth. The lens is not the truth, but it helps us to describe what is true.
George A. Lindbeck writes:
A comprehensive scheme or story used to structure all dimensions of existence is not primarily a set of propositions to be believed, but is rather the medium in which one moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one’s life. Its vocabulary of symbols and its syntax may be used for many purposes, only one of which is the formulation of statements about reality.8
Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.9
Christians are inescapably influenced to see and experience the world through the lens of their culture. The reality we experience is socially constructed. It is difficult for even a strong-minded individual to maintain a belief that is contradicted by everyone else. There is a well-known story of an anthropologist who went to study a tribe and ended up becoming an animist. The story of reality the tribe told became the interpretive framework through which the anthropologist perceived all of reality.
A friend of mine experienced a radical loss of faith while studying for his Ph.D. One day he looked out the window in Cambridge and was overwhelmed with the feeling that the buses below, and all the material things he saw, were all that mattered, all that existed. The story of the universe he imbibed day after day from the university and from popular culture was in stark contradiction to his faith. The result was radical doubt.
Our lived morality is a result of the way we perceive reality. People usually act in relation to their interpretation of the way the world really is, far more than from a set of beliefs or principles. Iris Murdoch has observed that “we are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy.”10 In this situation, morality is, as Simone Weil suggested, a matter of attention. We act in accordance with what we think matters, what we see as true. Our actions toward our family or colleagues, or employees or bosses, are more a natural outflowing of the story we are living than a rational choice of good or evil.
Our perception of reality derives from a tradition. In modern liberal culture, reality is perceived as an object accessible to universal, scientific, liberal rationality. In contrast, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that rationality itself is determined by particular traditions and by the social institutions and relationships that embody them. He writes, “What each person is confronted with is at once a set of rival intellectual positions, a set of rival traditions embodied more or less imperfectly in contemporary forms of social relationship and a set of rival communities of discourse, each with its own specific modes of speech.”11
Modern liberals reject this position and continue to impose their own brand of rationality on everyone. The great temple to universal, scientific rationality is the modern university.  Adherence to any particular tradition, especially if it is explicitly religious, is ruled out of the classroom. In contrast, “postmodern” thinkers have radically “deconstructed” or destroyed the pretensions of universal, scientific rationality, along with its liberal institutions. They acknowledge diversity along with the assumption that there is no truth and every tradition is equally untenable.
MacIntyre critiques both the pretensions of liberalism and the cynicism of some forms of postmodernism.12 He argues that we can be coherent about reality only if we perceive it out of a coherent way of seeing the world. Much of the incoherence of the modern world derives from the fact that people live out of half-believed liberalism, an incoherent mixture of traditions or no tradition at all. The fact that we need a tradition, along with its community of practices, does not imply that only one tradition is true or that all are false (or equally true). All traditions are limited by the perspective of their histories, their institutions, and their standpoint in time and place.
In order to escape the deformed fantasies of our age, Christians believe we must see the world from the perspective of God’s work in history.13 The stories of the Bible provide the language and categories through which we see the world truly. Lindbeck says:
It is important to note the direction of interpretation. Typology does not make scriptural contents into metaphors for extra scriptural realities but the other way around. It does not suggest, as is often said in our day, that believers find their stories in the Bible, but rather that they make the story of the Bible their story. The cross is not to be viewed as a figurative representation of suffering nor the messianic kingdom as a symbol for hope in the future; rather, suffering should be cruciform, and hopes for the future messianic…. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.14
Christians learn to be good from the Bible by telling themselves and each other the story of their lives as a part of the story of the Bible. More important than the stories believers tell are the stories they live. Goodness comes by the work of the Holy Spirit when a person lives as part of the people of God. That happens when she has learned the story of Israel, of Jesus, and of the church so well that her life becomes a continuation of the story. Then a Christian becomes “a letter of Christ … written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor. 3:3).
The great problem for ethics is, of course, How do we learn the story of the Bible? There seem to be many stories in the Bible. The stories that are there do not all seem consistent with each other. The cultural contexts of the stories are often strange to us. And the way the same stories are related by different parts of the Christian community are sometimes unrecognizable to each other. These are very large questions which are beyond the scope of this book. As a start, however, let’s consider several of , the many ways in which we are formed by the biblical narratives.