

OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS

(M. Daniel Carroll)

The Old Testament is a wonderful resource for ethics. It begins where all ethical systems must begin: the value of human life and the care of the created order (Genesis 1–2). Human beings are made in the image of God. All people, therefore, have worth and potential as his representatives and are to steward the creation. The breadth of the Old Testament's concerns is impressive: it addresses personal issues (like sexuality, the use of money, and honesty in the workplace), as well as socioeconomic and political matters, such as oppression of the poor, corruption in government, and war. This wide purview of moral matters allows for different perspectives on many topics. One example is the treatment of the poor. Whereas Proverbs locates the blame for some misfortune in laziness or lasciviousness, the prophets denounce the systemic injustice that perpetuates the exploitation of the vulnerable, and the law legislates measures to alleviate the needs of the poor, widows and orphans, and the sojourner. Each view contributes to a fuller understanding of the problem and its treatment.

In the Old Testament, Israel, the chosen people of God, was to be an ethical light before the world. They were to be God's channel of blessing—both spiritual and material (Genesis 12)—and their society a model of what God would want of all nations (Deut. 4:5–8). The Historical Books chart the failure to live up to that role, and the prophetic literature is full of scathing denunciation for the ills of Israelite society. The prophets also emphasize that it is impossible to separate ethical life from worship of God, something Jesus and the New Testament writers echo.

The perennial challenge for those who embrace the Old Testament as Scripture is ascertaining the best way to appropriate the text for moral life today. On the one hand, it contains material many find objectionable. There are accounts of lying, political dishonesty, adultery, murder, and rape—even by some of the most respected leaders of the people of God. In these cases, it is important to distinguish the biblical portrayal of such acts from a prescription to emulate those behaviors and attitudes. Much of what is described is offered as negative examples to avoid. On the other hand, some Christian theological systems are reluctant to appeal to the Old Testament, because the theocracy that was Israel no longer exists.



The way forward is to appreciate that the Old Testament presents enduring values that transcend the centuries. The law is a paradigm. It establishes how an ancient people were to incarnate the ethical standards of God in every sphere of personal, social, and religious life. Those principles necessarily take a different shape in the modern world. The Old Testament also depicts the lives of godly and wise people in its narratives, proverbs, and prophetic books. It predicts as well a kingdom of worldwide abundance and peace. The Old Testament, in other words, is an ethical guide in the present and provides an ethical hope for the future.