

Old Testament Ethics Reflective Reading Report

On

Old Testament Ethics for the People of God

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OT Ethics

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I. Introduction

As I completed reading the introduction and first chapter of Wright's work, I become intrigued with his assertion that "the ethical teaching of the Old Testament is first and foremost God-Centered" (46). Further, Wright suggests that this "underlines for us the importance of deriving our ethical teaching from the whole Old Testament" (47). How does one properly put into perspective such a broad spectrum of literary types and ancient cultural heritage were thoughts that came to my mind? Wright states "the combination of these two poles of Israel's historical faith, the past and the future, gave immense ethical importance to the present" (35).

In much the same way I believe that our present must properly bear the weight of the history of our faith as well as equip us with the tools we will need to continue the work of the New Testament Church. To this end I selected the reading from chapters eight through twelve as they dealt with issues that range from justice and righteousness, law and the legal system, culture and family, the way of the individual and a survey of historical approaches. I felt that these provided me with the best balance of historical understanding and tools for future use as I seek to develop ethical tools for use in God's kingdom today.

II. the Author's use of Scripture and it's Moral Authority

Wright certainly agrees in the New Testament assertion of 2 Timothy 3:16, "all scripture is God-Breathed and profitable" (405). His work is thoroughly laced with the regular utilization of scripture in which he does not appear to proof-text but rather provides a wide angle view that keeps scripture in clear perspective. Often Wright's assertions are clearly outlined or examined with consistent scriptural references. The appropriate context of scripture is also delivered by Wright for the reader's full examination. This author's thoughtful utilization of scripture and

natural style highlight the truth of scripture rather than attempt to simply highlight his points from scripture as many writers tend to do. I welcomed Wright's high view of scripture and reliable homiletical pattern as it was very fruitful in delivering a great harvest of information from God's word.

III. Breadth of Issues Covered under the Umbrella of Ethics

From Chapter one's examination of the theological angle of Old Testament Ethics, I chose to move to chapter eight as the breadth of Wright's work is quite impressive and I personally wanted to examine further the role of justice and righteousness and the law and legal systems as they were directly related to the culture and family of Israel and influenced the way of the individual.

When Wright begins his work by making comments such as "Israel's ethics is that of walking in the way of the Lord. That is, walking in the Lord's way as distinct from the ways of other Gods, or of other nations, or one's own way, or the way of sinner's" (39). I could see the pattern that he utilizes in the later chapters of his work. "We tend to begin at the individual level and work our way outwards" (363) states Wright. However, in the Old Testament ethics are clearly 'community shaped.' One must definitely seek to understand "the social aspects of Israel as a nation before narrowing the focus to the individual" (363).

Chapter one highlights the theological importance of Israel's "imitation of the Lord [as] the application of wisdom" (41) and also the importance of Israel's acts of worship as this is where "their deepest convictions are to be found" (45). For this reader, this compelled me to question how then these spheres of influence are directly brought to bear on justice, law and the legal system. Chapter eight highlighted for me two key points; first "the main focus of this book is on the social ethics of Israel" (254). Secondly that to,

“Judge- in the authentic Old Testament sense of the word – to right wrongs, destroy wickedness, vindicate the righteous and finally establish justice, right relationships between God people, among people, between people and the created order” (278).

Thus “God’s action of justice, characteristically, was based on love for His people and faithfulness to His promise” (261) and with this understanding of justice and righteousness one can begin to examine the law and the legal system of Israel.

Chapter nine continues to highlight this theme from scripture and stresses that “they urged one another to obey it, [the Law] not in order to get saved, but because God had already saved them” (282) (Deuteronomy 6:20-25). Wright’s explains that,

“The law meant more for an Israelite than the word normally means to us...The Torah is a rich tapestry of many threads. The narrative framework is of particular importance in gaining a right perspective on the law” (283).

This is very helpful in urging the student to more highly regard the cultural living conditions of God’s people and their observance of the law as a way of “being with God” (287), “the law was much more than a dry crust of legalism: it was the very bread of life” (288) for the nation of Israel, therefore, “the national interest was bound up with preventing and punishing crime against the covenant in a sufficiently serious manner” (291). To this end the legal system extended into the very homes and families of Israel and was much more comprehensive in its duties than one might see today.

Chapter ten’s emphasis on Culture and family directly relate to this important dynamic as “Israel was called to be a holy nation” (327). Therefore Wright examines three areas in which God influenced the relationship of Israel’s faith and cultural setting. First through the rejection and prohibition of some customs, secondly through the toleration and careful regulation of others and thirdly through critical affirmation and ‘value added’ theological interpretation of other customs (328). The ethical framework provided here for Wright strongly suggests what he calls

“The Familial Paradigm’ [as] the dominant motif in the ethical consciousness of Israel” (343). Certainly in Israel “destroying these family land units would inevitably and ‘internally’ destroy the nation’s relationship to God” (346). Therefore the individual family’s vitality was to be of great interest to the state as well as the continuation and support of appropriate state ethics were to be honored within each household.

Chapter eleven then examines the ethical role of the individual. Here the presence of ‘personal responsibility’ is examined from the perspective of how the individual’s ethics have been shaped by the community. There are several lists found in this chapter that seem to echo the charges provided by the Law and legal system for Israel to maintain and further for the family to support and teach. It is no wonder by the time Wright speaks of individual right’s that there are prohibitions against oppressing the alien, idolatry, or perjury as these have already been established as guidelines both for the acceptable “people of God” as the nation of Israel and the appropriate family practice.

IV. Relevance of This Material to my Ministry Context

‘Preaching from the Old Testament’ was a homiletics class that I greatly enjoyed. However during the discussion of continuity and discontinuity I found myself asking many questions regarding the appropriate utilization of this research method for preaching from the Old Testament. Chapter twelve of Wright’s work provided additional fuel for thought in my ongoing endeavor to preach appropriately from the entirety of God’s word. The historical research Wright provided in this area was helpful at encouraging me that “when necessary cultural and historical adjustments have been made, the law still retains its moral force in principle by way of concrete example” (412).

There were also three other major thrusts from Wright's work that I personally felt impressed by in my context of ministry. The first was the direction that pastoral ministry can sometimes take. Wright seems to suggest a pattern in the Old Testament work of God that builds community first (establishing the basis for the complete social system of Israel) rather than begin with the individual. In the context of ministry, many times a pastor can become so deluged with assisting individuals that there is little time left to build and foster the needs of appropriate community dynamics. To note that 'community creation' is an important aspect of God's intent is a helpful consideration for me personally to utilize in my ministry setting.

Next, I was impacted as a pastor and person when Wright stated,

“The concept of the distinctiveness of God's people from the rest of the world, and the need for God's people to strive for holiness, cleanness and purity in a world marked by ungodliness and moral filth are far from irrelevant and outdated” (299).

The New Testament writers certainly realized that the symbolism and outward expression of the Law had changed, but saw this dynamic as being a powerful and driving force among the New Testament people of God. I was forced to pause in my reading here and log this important concept that provides a stream of continuity from the Old Testament to the new. Upon writing this in my journal I took pause to consider how this dynamic can be emphasized as a pastor seeks to build community among God's people as he seeks to see and guide others in 'kingdom life.'

Thirdly, I took pause when Wright said,

“though we may have technically abolished slavery, there remain structures of economic and industrial life that fall far short of human dignity. Christians have to tolerate these to the extent of being able to work within them and address them” (351).

I began to consider the horror of abortion in our society. As observed in the weeping of Rachel over the children; who mourns for this terrible injustice? While our Ethics class spoke openly

and critically of the war (which became a convenient bridge to criticize our president), there was no mention of the horror of abortion, or the repugnant acceptance of homosexuality and sodomy that currently exists in our country. I found myself wondering if slavery, war and the death penalty are the only issues that can demean human life or if they conveniently represent one political cultural view over another. This thinking encouraged me personally to contemplate a perspective that seeks to observe God's desire for how we are to live not through the lenses of a political structure but rather from His counsel. This certainly is a view that would separate the Christian community from fully embracing either side of our political system fully or criticizing either standpoint as entirely without merit, but rather it would seek from God's Word what Wright observes in chapter ten which is to reject and prohibit some current customs, tolerate and carefully regulate others and keep other customs only after critical affirmation and 'value added' theological interpretation of them (328). In an individualistic society the church is provided the freedom to create these communities and support families that can then encourage individuals to think in these ways.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to encourage the utilization of Wright's work in the future editions of this class. I found it to be both a sound Biblical study and an excellent backdrop to many of the discussions which were held in class. As stated in my introduction, I personally found many useful tools in the reading of Wright's text that have helped to bring the weight of God's past work to bear on my present that seeks to serve the future of His kingdom.