The moral authority of Scripture

by Julian Rivers

When it comes to looking for ethical guidance from the Bible, we all pick and choose. C. S. Rodd[1]

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16

Summary

This paper explains the evangelical commitment to the moral authority of Scripture. After emphasising the literary diversity of Scripture and justifying the idea of moral authority, it identifies the 'judgements' of Scripture as the relevant authoritative component. It shows how these are to be constructed into a coherent ethic and it rejects the notion of ethical development after the canon has closed, on the grounds of Scripture's finality in witnessing to Christ. Finally, it stresses that the point of all this lies in our individual and collective calling to put Scripture into practice.

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Introduction

As an evangelical, I would like to believe that my moral judgements are biblical, and that I submit myself to its authority. Others, for a variety of reasons, think that this is not possible.[2] Appeal to the Bible in ethical matters then sounds inconsistent, hypocritical or even abusive. Inconsistent, because I seem to ignore the awkward bits; hypocritical, because I don't always live as I claim we should; abusive, because I give the impression of throwing the weight of God behind what are really only my own opinions.

If we claim to take the Bible seriously, we must mean not only that we seek to be 'doers of the word',[3] but also that we seek 'correctly [to] handle the word of truth'.[4] So the purpose of this paper is not to consider the grounds we have for accepting the moral authority of Scripture, useful apologetically though that would be. Its purpose is rather to think more carefully about the handling and the doing. If we are committed to the moral authority of Scripture, what exactly is it we are committed to?

We are committed to the literary diversity of Scripture

There is a tendency in scholarly circles to criticise evangelicals for their reductionism.[5] It is suggested that the texts get reduced to a set of propositions to be believed, a doctrinal system, and that this mistakes the nature of the Bible as literature.[6] The criticism needs taking seriously, and is as true in ethics as it is of doctrine: the construction of a Christian ethic is dangerous if it leads us to place greater weight on our ethical system than on the Bible itself. We can end up in practice denying that Scripture is the Word of God, replacing it with the idea that Scripture contains the Word of God. In spite of its eminent theological pedigree, this ultimately puts our own construction above the historically constituted text.

Although exaggerating to make a point, John Barton's comment regarding the Old Testament writers holds to some extent true for the New as well: '[They] are maddeningly unsystematic. Asked for a general statement of principle, they reply with a little rule about local legal procedures, a story about obscure people of dubious moral character, or a hymn extolling some virtue in God with which human beings are supposed somehow to conform.'[7]

Indeed, the literary diversity of Scripture's teaching is quite remarkable. To take

1 Cyril S. Rodd (ed.), *New Occasions Teach New Duties?,* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995, p.5.
2 Robin Gill, *A Textbook of Christian ethics*, 2nd edn., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995, pp.12–17, identifies seven problems encountered by appeals to the Bible in ethics.
3 James 1:22.
4 2 Tim. 2:15.
5 Most notably since James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, OUP, 1961.
6 This is also the starting point for Tom Wright's 1989 Laing Lecture, 'How Can the Bible be Authoritative?' available at www.ntwrightpage.com
7 John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 2nd edn., London: SCM Press, 2000, p.15.

just one example, a consistent critique of materialism can be found expressed in law, as in the rules on not lending with interest or on leaving the gleanings;[8] in wisdom literature: 'the wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall';[9] in song: 'a man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish';[10] in the prophetic call to build the house of the Lord rather than comfortable homes;[11] in Christ's teaching, both direct: 'you cannot serve both God and Mammon',[12] and in parables such as the Rich Fool or the Rich Man and Lazarus;[13] in narratives such as the joyful sharing of the early church,[14] in practical advice: see Paul on how to excel in the grace of giving;[15] and in the apocalyptic vision of the degenerate luxury of Babylon.[16] The one literary form that Scripture does *not* contain is a comprehensive ethical system of property relations!

Genre obviously affects meaning. Fraudulent behaviour that serves to make a point in a parable can be condemned in an epistle.[17] Legal concessions must not be confused with moral ideals.[18] And images evoked by the prophet's passion may be out of place in the daily lives of the children of light.[19]

But the literary diversity of Scripture is not limited to questions of genre. As Kevin Vanhoozer argues, we must also have regard to its 'illocutionary force'.[20] We must consider what Scripture is doing as well as saying. The linguistic philosopher John Searle suggested that we use language to do five basic things: to assert what is true, to issue requests and commands, to make promises, to express feelings, and to change things.[21] Scripture does all of these things too. Not only does the Bible assert that God has a character wholly good, it commands us to avoid evil and seek good, it promises punishments and blessings, and it expresses outrage at sin and delight in goodness. Most importantly, in the fifth category, it judges us.[22] Different speech-acts relate to ethical standards in different, and sometimes difficult, ways. Promises can raise complex questions about the relationship between ethics and self-interest;[23] feelings may be both outbursts of ethical delight and struggles with sinful desire.[24] This diversity must be respected if we are to read Scripture properly.

The idea of 'authority' does not sit well with some of these genres and speech-acts. We cannot meaningfully say that a song, or an expression of feeling, is authoritative. 'Authentic' might be a better word for their divine inspiration, just as 'infallibility' or 'inerrancy' is particularly suitable for assertions. Nevertheless, we can still insist that authority *is* the right word in the field of ethics, and that there is a component even within the artistic-expressive elements of Scripture which carries ethical authority. But to see this, we have to consider the idea of moral authority more closely.

We are committed to the idea of moral authority

We might suppose that the role of the Bible in our moral life is no different from other great literature.[25] It broadens the imagination, engages the sympathies and makes it easier for us to treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated. Whatever its merits, clearly such an approach does not treat Scripture as authoritative.

Is moral authority possible? Cyril Rodd writes, '…I simply state my own view that I cannot see how any book can form an absolute external authority for the individual. We have to choose what will be authoritative for us…'.[26] If Rodd is right, not only is it impossible for the Bible to have moral authority; in principle we cannot avoid being our own authorities in ethical matters. Self must reign supreme over every other source of moral insight.[27] This is implausible. While it is correct that we have to make up our minds as to what is true and good, we do not think that something only becomes true because we believe it; nor, as theists, can we really think that something only becomes good because we desire it.[28] Christians, above all others, should be ethical objectivists, for we become aware of the irresistible claims of the perfect God who created and re-created us, rather than granting him authority by an independent act of our own submission.

So what is the relationship between the authority of God and the Bible? The concept of authority varies according to the domain in which it is used. In relation to questions of fact, an authority is someone who can vouch reliably that such-and-such is the case; they are good at giving other people reasons for believing something to be true. We could call this 'evidential authority'. A good witness gives evidence with authority. Political authority, by contrast, is quite different. A person has political authority to the extent that they can create new reasons for others to act. Joseph Raz explains the notion of political authority by reference to what he calls exclusionary reasons for action.[29] The most obvious example of an exclusionary reason is a promise. When we promise to dine out with a friend we commit ourselves to ignoring the balance of reasons for action that evening and to acting on the promise instead. Another example of an exclusionary reason is a rule. The rule that we should stop at a red traffic light is designed to prevent us from considering in each case whether we should or should not stop. It is intended for obedience, not a weighing up of pros and cons.

The relationship of moral authority to these two types of authority is problematic and has been subject to a long-standing dispute within theological ethics.[30] If we think of morality as a matter of the will of God, we will think of moral authority as political authority. God has said, 'do not commit adultery', so don't! He could have said 'commit adultery!', but he didn't.[31] On this account, the Bible is authoritative because it consists of divine commands. However, if we think of morality as a matter of the character of God, we will think of moral authority as evidential authority: the capacity to inform truthfully about what is the case. God really is faithful; so faithfulness really is good! It's written into the fabric of the universe. On this account, the Bible is authoritative because it reliably tells us how things are about God and ourselves, and these facts have moral implications.

Recent evangelical writing has tended to emphasise the Bible's evidential authority, perhaps in reaction to the seeming arbitrariness of divine-command ethics.[32] We can agree that God's command adds nothing by way of content to what we are already

8 Exod. 22:25 and Lev. 19:9–10.
9 Prov. 18:11.
10 Ps. 49:20.
11 Hag. 1:1–11.
12 Matt. 6:19–24.
13 Luke 12:13–21; 16:19–31.
14 Acts 4:32–37.
15 2 Cor. 8:1–15.
16 Rev. 18.
17 Compare the unjust steward in Luke 16:1–9 with Paul's advice to slaves in Col. 3:22–25.
18 As with divorce in Matt. 19:1–12.
19 Compare Ezek. 16 and 23 with Eph. 5:8–20, especially v.12: 'it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.'
20 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms', in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995.
21 Reproduced in Vanhoozer, op. cit., p.90. The classic example of the last category is the act of the minister in declaring 'I pronounce you man and wife'.
22 Heb. 4:12. The effect of Peter's proclamation of the gospel at Pentecost was to judge his listeners, by dividing them into those who believed and those who did not (Acts 2:1–41). This is also the expectation of Paul in 1 Cor. 14:24–25 in which 'prophecy' leads to 'judgement' and an experience of the presence of God.
23 Think about the promise, which is also a threat, in Luke 6:38: 'For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.'
24 Among many examples, see Ps. 73.
25 Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, 'On reading the Bible', *Cambridge Lectures*, London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1943.
26 Op. cit., n.1, p.8.
27 Rodd's position is very close to philosophical anarchism. See, above all, R. P. Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism*, New York, 1970.
28 Not even by reference to second-order desires: what in our calmer moments we want to want.
29 J. Raz, *The Authority of Law*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, ch. 1; see also J. Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, ch. 9.
30 Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, Leicester: Apollos, 1994, ch. 6.
31 Although the printers of Barker's 1631 edition of the King James Version famously tried to rewrite the seventh commandment to this effect. David Daniell, *The Bible in English*, Yale UP, 2003, p.460.
32 See, e.g., Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, Leicester: IVP, 2004, pp.454–471.

required to do by virtue of the way things are. However, there are two reasons for retaining the 'political' idea of authority as well. To the extent that we are naturally inclined to view things in a distorted and sinful fashion, we will experience the will of God *as* command, because it can seem as if it requires a disregarding of the balance of reasons. Only to the one perfect in love do his commands cease to appear intrusive.[33] Furthermore, in deciding what to do, we experience freedom of choice. 'You must do' feels like a command, constraining choice, in the way that 'you must believe' does not, even if both are ultimately determined by moral truth. It is noteworthy that the ethical teaching of the Bible often combines what is the case with an imperative: 'since then you have been raised with Christ (what is the case), set your hearts on things above (the command)'.[34] What the Bible combines we should be slow to separate.

Thus to accept the moral authority of Scripture is to accept both that it informs us reliably about morally-significant truth, and that it commands us to do what we ought to do. If the former element requires intellectual assent ('yes, that's true!'); the latter requires obedience ('OK; I'll do it'). This should not surprise us, for faith is both believing and doing together.[35]

Our Western legacy of Enlightenment liberalism makes it hard for us to locate final authority anywhere other than with the individual human being. Autonomy means that I am the court of highest appeal. At its worst this issues in the spurious humility that refuses to be dogmatic about anything and then goes out and does what it likes. For the theologian caught in this Enlightenment tradition, the Bible is an authority, but not fully authoritative. At best it remains a work of 'genius'[36] and a 'classic model'[37] of understanding God, but it may be mistaken in some respects. Thus what purports to be the Word of God is not experienced as truth and command but as hypothesis and proposal. Liberals permit themselves to pass judgement on Scripture; evangelicals can never give up the struggle to reconcile their understanding of Scripture with other sources of ethical insight and – if we are true to our convictions – we ultimately obey what Scripture appears clearly to teach, even when it is incompletely comprehended. Only in this way can we let Scripture judge us, rather than become the judges of Scripture.

However, we should be careful not to misstate the difference in practice between liberal and evangelical views of Scripture. The process of reading the Bible means that what it teaches, and why it teaches it, are closely intertwined. Making sense of an authoritative text necessarily reduces the gap between what we think we are being told to do and what we think we ought to do anyway. When a clear gap does emerge, as occasionally it must, the difficulty of obedience should not be underestimated. Calvin found it impossible to accept a total ban on interest, since he could not rationally explain it.[38] So the difference is displayed not so much in what we do when Scripture's apparent teaching and our considered judgement part company, but in the continual desire to return to Scripture as the source of divine wisdom with an open mind, to rethink our difficulties. The problem with liberal views of Scripture is not so much the hard case, but the habit of noting what the Bible has to say and then leaving it to one side.

We are committed to the judgements of Scripture

In general, we would want to say that it is Scripture in itself, as a whole, that is divinely inspired. We have already noted the awkwardness of the word 'authority' in respect of the divine inspiration of some genres of Scripture. So what is it, within Scripture, that carries authority? The word 'judgement' seems particularly appropriate for two reasons: first, it captures nicely the ambiguity of 'evidential' and 'political' notions of authority. A legal judgement declares with authority both what happened and what must be done. Secondly, a judgement is normally specific and particular to a situation, and much of Scripture's moral teaching is likewise specific and particular. So we are committed to the judgements of Scripture. Several points need to be made.

First, the judgements of Scripture are not always simplistically borne on the face of the text. King David is a hero, a man after God's own heart,[39] yet the text also clearly condemns his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah.[40] Whole books may hide their judgements for literary purposes. The author of Ecclesiastes does not really think that everything is meaningless. Apocalyptic language must be read as symbol, not the endorsement of genocide.[41] Narrative is often ambiguous: is the description of the early church's attitude to possessions really normative, or just an account of what happened? And one thing that 'answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes' cannot mean is that we should always do just that.[42]

Secondly, the judgements of Scripture are context-specific. Our Western culture tends to think about questions of right and wrong in the abstract. So we ask whether polygamy is acceptable, and having concluded not, think that that is the end of the matter. But ethics is concerned with reasoning about what to do, and abstract moral judgements are only a starting point. Of course, some implications are quite clear, but it is not at all clear what a convert to Christianity who has already got several wives should do, or what a judge should do when faced with a claim for ancillary relief from a lawfully polygamous immigrant. It is not even clear what to do in a culture in which men are scarce and women existentially dependent on men for support and protection.

The judgements implicit in Scripture are contextual, sometimes in contexts radically different from our own; sometimes in contexts which we sense were different but about which we lack substantial information. If we are committed to the moral authority of Scripture we are committed to the view that Paul really was right to advise the Corinthian women when praying or prophesying to cover their hair.[43] But the only thing that necessarily follows from that, in the absence of context, is that there are circumstances in which it is proper for certain Christians to adopt a certain headgear. To put the hardest case: if we are committed to the moral authority of Scripture, we are committed to the view that it was right for the Israelites totally to destroy the Canaanite tribes in their occupation of the Promised Land. The cultural specificity of Scripture's judgements extends even to the category of the 'moral'.[44] OT law does not distinguish what we might now separate into moral, legal, social and cultic requirements. So the selection of certain judgements as 'moral' is already dependent on a reconstruction of Scripture in the light of a category we have created for our purposes.

Third, the judgements of Scripture are audience-specific. Unlike factual assertions, which are implicitly addressed to everyone, norms can be addressed to individuals or groups. That there was a census in the days of Quirinius is to be believed by all, but, unlike Joseph and Mary, we are under no obligation to be counted and taxed. So one immediate question which arises whenever we come across a judgement in Scripture is, 'who does this apply to?' One suspects that in practice we assume rather too quickly that much of the Bible, 'obviously applies to us'. Some

33 'This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world.' 1 John 5:3–4a. Ps. 119 is the song of one who wants to be made perfect in love.
34 Col. 3:1.
35 Consider the verbs that follow 'by faith…' in Hebrews 11: 'understand', 'offered', 'was taken', 'built', 'obeyed and went' etc.
36 C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible*, rev. edn., London: Fontana, 1960, p.34.
37 James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, London: SCM Press, 1973, p.115 ff.
38 Letter to Claude Salmasius, 1545; *Harmony of the Four Last Books of Moses*, (tr. Bingham, 1854), Vol. III, pp.125–133.
39 1 Sam. 13:14.
40 2 Sam. 11:27.
41 E.g. Rev. 14:17–20.
42 Prov. 26:5. In the light of the preceding verse, we might express the moral judgement as 'there are occasions on which a fool is to be answered and occasions on which he is better ignored, and you should think carefully about which is which.' To put it like this would be good advice, but bad poetry.
43 1 Cor. 11:5 ff.
44 Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*, London: Duckworth, 1981, is a highly influential history of the concept of morality.

judgements clearly do apply universally. John the Elder warns 'everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book',[45] but Jesus instructed his band of disciples[46] and the epistles were sent to specific churches. Even the Ten Commandments, so often assumed to be universal prescriptions, are far from straightforward in this respect: the prologue refers to a unique and limited historical experience, which, however, Moses can extend to the descendants of those with whom the covenant at Horeb was made.[47] The tenth Commandment (covetousness) seems limited to men, while the fourth (Sabbath) by implication embraces women as well.[48] Of course, we can very easily think of reasons for treating ourselves as in analogous situations, but once we draw analogies we have moved outside the circle of the addressees. And while we may be relevantly similar, we may also be relevantly different. To reason by analogy is always to exercise judgement oneself.

Again, one suspects that we fail to take those judgements 'which obviously don't apply to us' with the seriousness they deserve, perhaps because taking them seriously is confused with treating ourselves as addressed by them. To take a judgement seriously is to seek to understand why it was right in the situation in which it was made. What was it about Corinth, women and hairstyles that mattered so much to Paul?[49] Why, in the context of warfare in the Ancient Near East, might total destruction – if that was what it really was – have been legitimate?[50] Biblical scholarship at its best fills in the cultural background enabling us to make sense of the texts, for it is only when we understand that we can begin properly to draw analogies.

Is it therefore wrong to read ourselves imaginatively into the text? No. How else does God speak to us through his Word except by our willingness to be addressed? Nevertheless, the immediacy of experience must be regulated by good hermeneutics, and in order to do that we have to ask whether we are indeed addressed by the text, and if not, what can rightly be learnt from the fact that others were addressed in a way that we are not. There is a real danger that we silence the text by automatically adopting the bits we agree with and discounting the bits we don't. 'Hermeneutics has at its very heart the attempt to understand the "otherness" of the other.'[51] In that combination of 'understanding' and 'otherness' we have the obligation neither to ignore the seemingly irrelevant nor to assume the immediately applicable.

We are committed to constructing a biblical ethic

If we are to live biblically, we must move beyond simply identifying and understanding the individual moral judgements of Scripture. We have to combine them into a set of right standards which we can apply to ourselves, in our own situations. We have to construct a biblical ethic.

Why should we assume that a single ethic can be constructed out of the disparate texts that make up the Bible? To start with, the unity of ethics is a rational requirement. Since it is logically impossible both to do and to refrain from doing the same act simultaneously; so also it cannot rationally be required that we both ought to do and ought to refrain from doing the same act. Many would go further and assert, with Kant, that there is something universalizable about ethical standards: what is good for me must also be good for you so long as you are not relevantly different from me. If we are committed to the whole canon of Scripture as truth, we are logically committed to the unity of its ethic.

But we should not assume that this unity is imposed on the Bible artificially; ethical unity is discovered as well. In reflecting on the problems of authority in OT ethics, Christopher Wright identifies four unities which bind us to that past: 'This is the God we worship, this is the story we are part of, this is the Word we have heard, and this is the people we belong to.'[52] These continuities are self-consciously articulated in both Testaments as God's revelation unfolds, and in that sense are discovered. For this reason it is legitimate to take that discovery of unity back to the text, as a key principle of interpretation, so that 'neither may [we] so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.'[53]

In constructing a biblical ethic we tend to use certain familiar filters. The classic Calvinist device for handling OT law is an instance of this: ceremonial and civil laws are discounted as fulfilled in various ways, and only the 'moral' is of continuing validity. We often adopt a similar approach in handling the New Testament as well. The edict of the first ecumenical council at Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 15 is filtered through a grid of 'potentially, but not actually relevant' (meat sacrificed to idols), 'culturally specific' (blood and meat of strangled animals) and 'still applicable' (sexual immorality). Other filtering devices seek to soften the teaching by suggesting that its form is of 'example' or 'paradigm' rather than 'precept' or 'command'. This is often tied to the suggestion that we do wrong to take certain passages 'literally', as for example the Mosaic requirement to cancel debts every seven years. Such filters may be fine as rules of thumb, but they carry with them dangers as well. OT law does not classify laws in the threefold way Calvin suggested, so the classification is always the *conclusion* of a train of reasoning which shows why a certain provision is exhausted in its typological or civil significance. It may well be the case that biblical law is more in the nature of wisdom and less apodictic than it seems,[54] but that is a question in the first instance for Ancient Near Eastern legal theory, not for modern ethics.

As we have seen, the linchpin is the recognition that a commitment to the moral authority of Scripture means committing to the view that the judgements of Scripture were correct for their implied audience in their circumstances. This does not require us to assume that they would be correct for other audiences in other circumstances; only that they are correct for relevantly similar audiences in relevantly similar circumstances. The process of constructing an ethic on the foundation of these particular judgements starts the moment we ask 'why?', since the answer to that question will take the form of some more general principle or value which is reasonably applied in the particular context to produce the particular judgement we are seeking to understand. And we are not left unaided in this process. The Bible also contains some highly general starting points for an ethic, most notably in Christ's own summary of the law,[55] but also, for example, in Pauline lists of vices and virtues.[56] The intellectual process that takes place could be described as a 'hermeneutical spiral'[57] in which we seek to home in on moral truth by circling between relatively uncontroversial, but abstract, ethical standards and all the specific judgements of Scripture, seeking a reconciliation between the two. This process merges imperceptibly into the question of application. Here, there is a second spiral, in which we move back and forth between our questions and concerns and the teaching of the Bible. Ultimately, what we have to do is to bring

45 Rev. 22:18.

46 See Luke 9:1–6 for contextually-specific, and later revoked, instruction.

47 Deut. 5:3.

48 Deut. 5:15 directs this commandment to an Israelite audience, although Exod. 20:11 is more widely cast.

49 For an answer to that question, see most recently, Bruce Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, Eerdmans, 2003.

50 Following Deut. 9:4–6, the traditional answer is to see it as an act of God's judgement on horrendous depravity. See the discussion in John Wenham, *The Goodness of God*, IVP, 1974.

51 Anthony Thiselton, 'Can Hermeneutics ease the Deadlock? Some Biblical Exegesis and Hermeneutical Models', in Timothy Bradshaw (ed.), *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church*, 2nd edn., London: SCM Press, 2003, p.146.

52 Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, Leicester: IVP, 2004, p.470.

53 Articles of the Church of England, 1562, Article 20.

54 See, generally, Bernard Jackson, *Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law*, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

55 Matt. 22:37–40.

56 1 Cor. 6:9–10; Gal. 5:19–23; Phil. 4:8 etc. See the recent helpful discussion in Troels Engberg-Pedersen, 'Paul, Virtues and Vices', in J. Paul Sampley (ed.), *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, Trinity Press International, 2003.

57 The idea of a hermeneutical circle or spiral finds a number of applications. See Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Marshall Pickering, 1992, ch. 6.

together the specific judgements of Scripture, abstract norms such as love of God and of neighbour, and particular issues and problems we face into a coherent whole.

It is tempting to think of this process as involving two distinct stages: 1, the identification of a biblical ethic and 2, its application today. Stage 1 – the first hermeneutical spiral between the Bible's abstract and concrete judgements – is carried out in apparent detachment from modern concerns and produces universally applicable moral theology. Stage 2 – homing in on truth in our situation in the light of the Bible – takes its findings and applies them. This division carries with it the danger identified right at the start of this paper that we end up too easily replacing the actual Bible with our system. In practice, we cannot detach ourselves from our modern contexts, so what counts as a successful stage 1 system will inevitably be one that addresses our questions and agenda. So it is better to be honest about the fact, combine both elements into a single process of construction, and exercise due humility about the outcome.

Stephen Barton gives a good example of moral reasoning as regards the 'household rules' of the epistles.[58] He suggests that a proper contextual appreciation leads us neither to reject these as outmoded relics of patriarchal society – i.e. culturally-specific only, nor to apply them as if we were addressed directly by them, but to see in them a Christian transformation of oppressive social structures. One can quibble with the detail: he notes that part of the context is that of wives winning their unbelieving husbands for Christ, but fails to point out that another part is the desire to model theological truth about Christ and the church.[59] But the strategy is surely correct. It involves understanding why it was right for the first century Graeco-Roman congregations to approach family life in that way, in the light of broader Christian commitments, then to see how we are similar (wives still have unbelieving husbands, we are still called to transform existing relationships) and how we are different (slavery is illegal, wives have full and independent legal personality), and from that to construct an ethic for today.

Or to take another recent superb example of ethical construction on a much grander scale, Christopher Ash has shown at length how the traditional threefold purpose of marriage (procreation, public order and personal relationship), along with the numerous biblical texts on sexual matters, become coherent and combined in God's creation purpose for humanity to rule and order his world. This then explains what is wrong in the modern fixation on personal relationship as the single component of a defensible sexual ethic.[60] Here again we see the threefold combination of specific judgements, overall coherence and modern relevance.

We are committed to the finality of Scripture

The biggest challenge facing the idea of the unity of biblical ethics, and hence the constructability of a single ethic, is the idea of ethical development. We may no longer be as optimistic as our Victorian forbears about the possibilities of human progress, we may not even think we are in any significant sense morally superior to earlier generations, but we easily assume that at least we know better what is good and evil. Are we not more sensitive than ever before to patriarchy and other forms of collective oppression, to slavery, torture and human degradation, to the value of (adult) human life?[61]

For some – classically Hegel – the development of Christian ethics is indeed an historical process, involving on-going revelation of the Spirit of God after the canon was closed. The moral reasoning this gives rise to can be understood along the lines of the development of case law in a precedent-based legal system. To explain this, Ronald Dworkin uses the analogy of a 'chain novel', whereby different authors contribute different chapters to an on-going collective project.[62] (The idea of successive instalments of a soap opera is more familiar.) The point is that although it is not possible to change everything in one fell blow, certain decisions and principles get phased out, and new approaches get phased in, just as characters and plots come and go with different scriptwriters. So the church moves on, ethically.

A developmental view of Christian ethics is not compatible with the evangelical view of Scripture, because the Bible gradually gets lost over the horizon. But this does not mean that every use of developmental language is problematic. William Webb has written recently of a 'redemptive-movement hermeneutic' which attempts to identify the 'spirit and direction' of a text, contrasting this with a 'static hermeneutic' which simply derives a more general rule.[63] But it is clear that what he means by this is the attempt to identify the ultimate value which conceivably led the biblical author to give the contextually-situated advice we find in the text. Again, when Richard Bauckham identifies the 'direction' of Scripture in the matter of slavery, he suggests that the texts imply a principled opposition to the institution of slavery and thus hold out as ideal the abolition of slavery, and beyond that the abolition of all relationships of subjection and exploitation.[64] Later on he refers to 'an artificial halt to the biblical dynamic of freedom…until the 19th century.'[65] Neither of these amounts to ethical development in the 'chain novel' sense: the former is a process of evaluative induction, the latter a progressive embodiment of what was accessible all along.

But is there ethical development within the canon? Candidates for ethical contradictions in a strict sense are thin on the ground,[66] but at the very least there is a sense that the ethical 'atmosphere' changes as one moves through the Bible. The instance that springs to most people's mind is Christ's teaching of the law in the Sermon on the Mount, but any interpretation of this must also take account of Christ's insistence that none of the law is being jettisoned.[67] The better way of seeing this teaching is thus that Christ closed down some interpretative possibilities concerning both the form and the content of ethics which until then remained live. Christ rendered the positive moral order implicit in the OT prohibitions more determinate, above all by rooting them in the motivation to love the other. Much of the force of his criticism of the Pharisees is that they should have known how to handle the law properly. This is better described as refinement rather than development.

Problems of development within the canon are actually harder to deal with in connection with the work of Christ, rather than his teaching. Take the imprecatory Psalms as a test case: 'happy is…he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.'[68] Would we now not want to say that we should display a more forgiving spirit? Was this humanly possible before the dying Christ prayed for forgiveness for his executioners? Of course, some will want to say that the Psalmist's attitudes are always right even in the light of the cross – that they are honest expressions of anger (i.e. not normative at all) or culturally-conditioned, but essentially laudable, calls for divine justice. But it is not clear that this will carry us all the way through the Old Testament. The issue really requires a paper in its own right. What we can say is that if there is ethical development, it culminates in Christ, and that part

58 Stephen C. Barton, 'The Epistles and Christian Ethics', in Robin Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: CUP, 2001.

59 Eph. 5:25–33.

60 Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God*, IVP, 2003.

61 This is the force of Dennis Nineham's influential book, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, Macmillan, 1976.

62 Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire*, London: Fontana, 1986, pp.228–238.

63 William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*, Downers Grove, Ill., 2001, ch. 2.

64 Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*, London: SPCK, 1989, p.109.

65 Op. cit., p.116.

66 The only one mentioned in Craig L. Blomberg's helpful essay, 'The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization' (in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995) is between Matthean and Lukan accounts of Jesus' teaching on divorce, which are amenable to several different possible reconciliations. Christ's treatment of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) only contradicts Lev. 20:10 if one reads OT law as if it were a modern criminal code.

67 Matt. 5:18.

68 Ps. 137:9.

of the cultural context in which a moral judgement is made is its salvation-historical location. Christ's work and the Spirit's indwelling open up new moral possibilities, such that what was only ideal is becoming real. Put simply, we should not expect the Psalmist, even when inspired, to behave like a Christian.

So whatever ethical development there is within the canon, and there is less than is generally assumed, can be explained by the uniqueness of Christ.[69] And the uniqueness of Christ is no cause for embarrassment (of course not!), because it also explains our otherwise counterintuitive rejection of the idea of ethical development after Christ. The reason we can think that the tradition stops – in the strong Hegelian sense of tradition required above – is that in Christ all the fullness of God lives in human form.[70] He is the supreme exemplar of goodness, and we can expect no better witness to his nature and will than is brought to us in the Bible.

We are committed to embodying Scripture

This paper started with a reminder of the diverse forms of Scripture. Scripture does not consist merely of a set of moral truths to be believed. The natural response to a song is to join in. Wisdom is to be pondered. Commands are there to be obeyed. So to read Paul's words, 'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ'[71] and merely register intellectual assent to the proposition that submission is an appropriate attitude for Christians is to misread the verse. It is a command or exhortation, and we have only read it properly when we obey it. Attention to the diversity of Scripture reminds us that the life pleasing to God is not just there to be defined; it is there to be proclaimed, reflected on, sung about, imagined, acted out in private and in public, told in stories and, of course, taught. Tom Wright uses the analogy of a Shakespearean play which has lost its fifth act. We are invited to immerse ourselves in the first four (i.e. the Bible) and then write and perform the most authentic fifth act we can.[72] In short, Scripture is there to be embodied,[73] and this embodiment results in integrity, in Christians whose lives are integrated because the same ethic is at work in everything we do.

So as we read the Bible, a certain tension is unavoidable: on one hand, there is the experience of being addressed by the Word applied by the Spirit to our hearts and minds in power, as it were of *being there ourselves* in the text. On the other hand, if we are not to misread it, we have to engage in the painstaking work of shuttling back and forth between the ancient and often strange worlds of the Bible and our own moral understanding and difficulties, a process which only accentuates our absence from the text. But there is nothing odd about this tension. C. S. Lewis identified it in respect of literary criticism in the following words:

> This is our dilemma – either to taste and not to know or to know and not to taste – or, more strictly, to lack one kind of knowledge because we are in an experience or to lack another kind because we are outside it. As thinkers we are cut off from what we think about; as tasting, touching, willing, loving, hating, we do not clearly understand.[74]

Perhaps the most striking instance of this for most of us occurs when we watch a film. There is the experience of being caught up in its plot, its emotions, of laughing, crying, hoping, fearing. And then there is the review afterwards, the weighing, the working over in our own time, the identification of parts to see again, new perspectives gained in discussion. Both responses are good and necessary.

We must be open to both modes of reading the Bible too: study and careful thought must be matched by engagement, response and action. The former by itself risks dry orthodoxy and hypocrisy; the latter, exuberant insensitivity and error. Only when both are brought together can we truly be said to submit to the moral authority of Scripture.

Conclusion

How then should we 'handle' and 'do' Scripture in our ethics? We do not read the Bible flatly as a book of rules for right living; rather we take full account of its literary and linguistic forms. We do not read it as merely an ancient source of pious thoughts; rather it is the true story of God and his people, which tells us how things really are and commands us to abandon our self-centredness and live for him. We do not think we must do exactly as 'they' did; rather we seek to understand what was right about the judgements the texts make in their historic cultural contexts. We do not proof-text, taking a single verse or passage to have concluded the matter; rather we place it within a coherent and overarching view of God's entire revelation. We do not think that the Bible is simply a starting point, to be left behind as the Christian tradition unfolds; rather it points forward – and back – to Christ, who is the centre of our lives. And we do not read the Bible simply to know what is good and pleasing to God; rather we read it to be caught up into it and then to live it out.

It is no small thing to be committed to the moral authority of Scripture. We are reminded of how much we have to do to read the Bible properly. We are reminded how reliant we are on each other for the literary, linguistic, historical, systematic and practical skills we need. We are reminded of the need as a church to support those engaged in the many fields of scholarship which touch on Scripture, and to encourage each other as we seek to act biblically within our spheres of influence. Above all else we are reminded that we are not pleasing to God on account of the orthodoxy of our ethics, but by his act of undeserved reconciliation, which frees us up to discover more and respond more to what he has revealed of his character and will for us.

69 Heb. 1:1–3.
70 Col. 2:9.
71 Eph. 5:21.
72 See note 6.
73 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics*, Leicester: Apollos, 2002, p.158. Space does not permit a discussion of Vanhoozer's illuminating trinitarian account of Scripture set out in chs. 5 and 6.
74 C. S. Lewis, 'Myth became Fact', in W. Hooper (ed.), *Undeceptions*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1970, p.41, cited in Vanhoozer (op. cit. n. 14) p.76.

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