

an ideal nor merely an idea; it is a *promise*. It is a promise, furthermore, that can only be grasped by faith, hope, and love. While a great many aspects of this present age may well be characterized as confidence games, then, our world is not, thankfully, a “world without redemption.”

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## Old Testament Ethics for the People of God

**Christopher J. H. Wright**

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004 (520 pages)

In this book, Christopher Wright has published a considerably expanded and updated version of his earlier work, *Living as the People of God* (InterVarsity, 1983). He claims to offer the only such “overview of the subject as a whole.”

Wright’s approach to the text of the Old Testament grows directly from a typically evangelical Christian theology of Scripture. Not until well past midway into the book does he explicitly lay out what the discussion has led one to suspect all along. His beliefs about divine inspiration (unexplained) lead directly to fundamental, controlling assumptions. Not just the Old Testament as a whole, but every single, discrete text has “authority and relevance” for Christians. All of Scripture consists of a unity, by which he means (I think) a moral and theological continuity that transcends elements of obvious discontinuity between the testaments (the continuity includes teachings on divine universality and grace in God’s treatment of Israel). The upshot is (perhaps Wright’s most constant theme) that Old Testament texts are paradigmatic, and, in that way, they extend their reach beyond historical and cultural Israel into all times and places.

Does the concept of paradigm operate as a kind of hermeneutical pirate that pillages more than interprets the original text? Few Christian readers will think so. However, the theology that controls Wright’s method will be objectionable to readers who do not endorse it. Those readers will sense in the work intense desire to put things into a properly modern evangelical Christian order. In so doing, Wright seems often more to be constructing an apologetic defense of the Old Testament (for Christians) than really facing its indifference to our modern moral sensibilities. Those readers will judge (as I mostly do) that the outcome is too often (not always) a domesticated version in place of the untamed original. Of course this systematic rendering relieves one of any obligation to engage in serious historical, redactional, or tradition-based criticism (and Wright takes full advantage of this freedom).

Three examples of this apologetic dilution will have to suffice in this space. One is in Wright’s way of handling Israel’s conquest of the Canaanites. The second is his treatment of legal texts on slavery. The third has to do with his general handling of the moral status of individuals with respect to notions of freedom and responsibility.

In a book that purports to give an overview of Old Testament ethics for modern Christian people, one naturally expects to find a major section devoted to the topic of

war. Wright omits this topic (as well as the topics of sexism and racism). He does include discussion of the Canaanite conquest in an appendix. Indeed, for anyone with Wright's assumptions about the inspired unity of Scripture—in which every discrete text has moral authority and relevance for Christians—these narratives constitute a first-rate problem that has to be ironed out somehow. Wright demurs from a thorough ironing but proposes in admittedly too-short order that we consider that this slaughter (my term) was limited (authorized just one time), that some accounts engaged in rhetorical exaggeration, and that, in any event, the Canaanites were very wicked people and (if we accept that fairness is a slippery concept) deserved what happened to them. Furthermore, the event is proleptic—it is a sort of window into the Last Judgment yet to come (one is left to ponder how this goes, exactly, and what *its* moral authority and relevance is to Christians now). At the end, Wright admits that he has passed over a “whole raft” of Old Testament texts that violate our Christian sensibilities. He hopes one day to write another book, in which he deals with these texts, and his purpose will be to provide for the Old Testament the “defense” that he thinks it badly needs. In this space, these omissions and that promise must be left to speak for themselves and for readers to assess in their own appropriate theological and moral terms.

Whatever his apologetic omissions, Wright offers a bracing defense of Old Testament teaching on slavery. Whereas one might have deployed the resources of tradition-criticism, and thus explored evolution in ancient Israel's social and ethnological outlook, Wright mainly stresses the comparative humaneness of Israelite slavery and the admirable “swimming against the stream” of culture that it displayed. He asserts that many slaves actually preferred slavery to freedom and that, at any rate, being a slave in Israel was “little different *experientially* from many kinds of employment in a cash economy.” Wright does not seem aware that he has just described a paradigm for the ethics employed typically by Christians in the Deep South and differently by defenders of *apartheid* in South Africa. I think we ought to seek some other sort of paradigm. (We pass over for now the questionable social-economic presumptions apparently in play.)

Why did Israel not banish slavery? After all, former slaves would surely have sensitivity here. Wright explains that slavery was too ingrained in ancient societies—to the extent that “it is difficult to see how Israel could have excluded it altogether.” Of course idolatry and other forms of immorality were ingrained in ancient societies and were hard to exclude altogether. Nevertheless, Israel was under unequivocal orders to do so. The abolitionist teaching—that *Hebrew* slaves must be set free every seven years—was decidedly discriminatory along ethno-religious lines. Wherein lies the authority and moral relevance of it?

As for the freedom and responsibility of individuals, Wright is mainly concerned with the second subject and is mainly interested in restraining Old Testament affirmations of the first. In this respect, it is too bad that he does not follow his own technique in working out an ethical paradigm for environmentalism. In that discussion, he appeals to God's antecedent desire to see nature not just get by but to flourish in all its diversity and abundance. He appeals as well to the visionary eschatology of Scripture, in which

nature does so flourish. With the addition of teaching on humankind—made in God’s image—implying a dominion of redemptive love over nature (including animals), we have our paradigm.

In contrast, on the matter of human flourishing, Wright omits discussion of creation narratives—most notably Eden—and he works very hard to remove all traces of extravagance from key narratives of the Land, so as, we suppose, to bring them into line with a Christian ethics of temperance and moderation. In consequence, the exorbitant description of God’s vision for Israel’s (Deut. 8) flourishing in a good land, flowing with milk and honey, bursting with copper and iron, where their herds and houses will become large, and so forth, gets distilled into a paradigm of sufficiency, as understood in the famous prayer for moderation (“neither wealth nor poverty”) in Proverbs 30:8–9. Wright performs this remarkable feat by inserting a break at the eleventh verse, so that the prospect of Israel’s surplus is not the divine promise but rather is part of the warning that follows, and thus the *cause* of Israel’s ruin rather than the material aspect of its *blessing*. (Close inspection shows that Wright does concede that Wisdom “accepted growth and prosperity as divine gifts,” but this understatement speaks volumes.)

The apparent need to block off all avenues into license also marks his chapter on the ethics of the individual. The prelude to this section is a solemn warning against the evils of Western individualism (no comparable worries expressed about non-Western communitarianism, as there well might be), and the first main part falls under the sub-heading of “personal responsibility.” The entire section elaborates what these responsibilities are. Readers should not expect anything in the way of a case for liberty and free political and economic orders as being somehow anchored preferentially (over alternative such orders) in the paradigms of the Old Testament. Wright seems to be neutral as to whether the paradigm of Sinai favors the democracy of early Israel or the later order of monarchy. If material surplus is a deadly danger, slavery and tyranny seem not to be.

In fairness, all readers should appreciate particular features of this book, if not its presentation as a theological and moral whole. I have mentioned his able discussion of ecology. He also makes many good observations about Israel’s ethics being grounded less in laws and rules than in the character virtues of God, most notably love and justice. His correction of older distinctions among moral, ceremonial, and civil law in the Old Testament is also sound. His writing is lucid, and his summary of literature is helpful (and thankfully at the end rather than beginning of the book). For these reasons, I do recommend it as a resource for Old Testament Christian ethics.

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