Review

Old Testament Ethics for the People of God

Christopher J. H. Wright

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Christopher J. H. Wright's book, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, is an excellent volume that explores and attempts to apply many of the Old Testament ethical paradigms. The work he has done in this field is desperately needed for application both in two-thirds and first-world cultures. As a former missionary to India and social ethicist, Wright integrates both field experience and a scholarly understanding of both ancient and modern cultures into his work. I use it as a key textbook along with Walter Kaiser's, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Kaiser 1983)[1] in a Ph. D. seminar on Intercultural Ethics.

Wright is theoretically a wholist[2] in that is he sees every area of life under the Creator's comprehensive ethical reign. Consequently, he correctly sees that at least the models and paradigms of that ethical kingdom are defined by Scriptural revelation, beginning in the Pentateuch. As a result of his comprehensive perspective, Wright explicitly rejects one of the most common dualisms of modernity, that of dividing theology and ethics into two "non-overlapping magisteria," to borrow a phrase from Stephen Jay Gould. "Theology and ethics are inseparable in the Bible. You cannot explain how and why Israelites or Christians lived as they did until you see how and why they believed what they did" (Wright 2004, 18). This wholistic approach is necessary to combat both modernity, which explicitly divides the two, and postmodernity, which falsely claims to bring both together.

To his great credit, Chris Wright also believes that the state is a proper sphere for applying the universally valid principles of OT law. Probably this is a result of Wright's covenantal perspective on Scripture. His view is that there is no such thing as a neutral sphere but that everything must be under God's ethical reign. If the state is not a proper sphere for God's ethical reign, then it is a neutral sphere; and by default it must be the realm of the "prince of this age." However, Jesus said, "if you are not for me, you are against me." There is thus no neutrality.

Wright also establishes his perspective within worldview thinking. He carefully summarizes the theological worldview of Israel and, what he terms, the three foundational focal points or "pillars of Israel's worldview" (Wright 2004, 19). These three he places in a triangular arrangement. At the top of the triangle, is the "theological angle" that is Yahweh the God of Israel and of the whole earth. On the bottom left is the "social angle," which demonstrates how Israel was to live as the chosen, special people of God, who were to be the Lord's model response to the rebellion of Babel. Israel thus was to be a "nation that would be the pattern and model of re-

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[1]Walter Kaiser. 1983. *Toward Old Testament Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan.

[2]Although it is common to spell this "holist," that spelling is in fact inexact. Holism is a theory developed by former South African Prime Minister and designer of the League of Nations, Gen. Jan Smuts. It is an evolutionary monist theory, which claims that diversity is more or less abnormal and that all things are evolving back to an undivided monad. Former Press Secretary, Piet Beukes, claimed that Smuts was "prone throughout his whole life to lapse into the pantheistic heresy" (Beukes 1989, 44). See Piet Beukes. 1989. *The Holistic Smuts: A Study in Personality*. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, Ltd.

demption, as well as the vehicle by which the blessing of redemption would eventually embrace the rest of humanity" (Wright 2004, 49). Israel's distinctiveness was not to be ethnic but "ethical" (Gen 18:19) (Wright 2004, 50). In his discussion, Wright shows that in complete contrast to the pagan Canaanites Israel was organized to be a "socially decentralized and non-hierarchical" society, "geared toward the social health and economic viability" of the multitudes of "land owning households" instead of a hierarchical elite (Wright 2004, 55). Land, hence, was "distributed as widely as possible" in order to preserve a "comparative equality of families on the land" and to protect "the weakest, the poorest and the threatened" instead of a wealthy landowning minority (Wright 2004, 56). This meant, Wright states in summary, that "there was resistance in Israel to centralized power and a preference for diverse and participatory politics, which tolerated – indeed sought – the voice of criticism and opposition from the prophets, even if some of them paid a heavy price" (Wright 2004, 57).

Likewise, he states correctly, that there exists "an inseparable link between the kind of society Israel was (or was supposed to be) and the character of God." When Israel turned from God, centralized oppression and injustice was the result even if externally the people claimed they were worshipping him with "lavish gusto" (Wright 2004, 58). These insights are excellent and worthy of emulation in the development in modern constitutional orders such as that of the original American or the Swiss constitutions.

Last, the final right-hand corner of the worldview triangle is the economic angle," that is "the land," which God has promised and then gave to his people by grace (see Wright 2004, 18-20). Wright then uses these three angles to apply OT social and economic ethics to the "New Testament Israel, the messianic community" and from there into a state made up of believers and non-believers. "Citizenship of the kingdom of God most certainly has a social and economic dimension," he writes. This "transcends" the kinship and land aspect of the OT social ethic, but "not in such a way as to make that original structure irrelevant" (Wright 2004, 196).

Therefore, he seems correctly to affirm, that there is no movement away from at least *some of* the old covenant's material and physical particularities into Christ, who becomes in many thinkers virtually an abstract platonic category or form. Instead, he implies that there is a movement away from the typical and pictorial to the fulfillment realities—both spiritual and material, which are in Messiah and under the headship of Jesus the Anointed Messiah-King over all the earth. All this is good as far as he goes.

Wright explains:

> To affirm as 'Hebrews repeatedly does, that what we have in Christ is 'better', is not (as is sometimes disparagingly called) 'replacement theology. It is rather 'extension', or 'fulfilment', theology. In the same way, the multinational community of believers in Jesus the Messiah is not a 'new Israel' (as if the old were simply discarded". It is rather God's original Israel but now expanded and redefined in relation to Christ through the inclusion of the Gentiles – as God had promised ever since Abraham (Wright 2004, 195).

I would wholeheartedly agree with this attempt at developing a non-platonic form of amillennial eschatology with a couple of important correctives. First, Jesus Christ is indeed the one in whom all peoples and lands find fulfillment of life both spiritually and physically (i.e., an integral, comprehensive, wholistic perspective). Wright, however, denies that the believing Jews who remain ethno-culturally Jews repossess the title to their own *land when they repent* and be-

gin the process of applying biblical ethics through faith in Yesu' their Messiah. The land was part of an unconditional promise-gift, just as the Seed of David who was to come and rule was an unconditional gift. Although the promise of a king upon the throne was interrupted for 500 or more years after the fall of Jerusalem, God still fulfilled the promise upon Christ's obedience. The True Israel, Jesus the Seed, earned both eternal life and also the land for the believing Jews. Being in Christ means that all peoples and their cultures are to receive the Spirit and justification (Gal 3:14) in their *own land* and within the contextualized confines of their own culture—including the Jews.

A second corrective is that although Wright valiantly tries to escape from a platonic eschatology, he does not completely succeed. He speaks of the "rarified spiritual air" of the New Testament and implies that Jesus is the total "completion of the story of Israel" (Wright 2004, 213). Unconsciously, it seems, Wright, along with many platonic-minded amillennialists, treats Christ as the form in which the materiality of the old covenant finds its fulfillment. Instead, it is better to see Israel's land-promise as fulfilled in all the lands of the earth as the gospel is granted to all nations. Israel's law, therefore, is to be contextualized into all cultures, and even the Hebrew cultus is to be fulfilled in the real wholistic worship of believers in all the varying languages, peoples, and nations in Christ in their own land (see e.g., Is 19:19-25; Zep 2:11).

In summary, the three angles are indeed very important though they seem to be somewhat artificially selected and then imposed upon the text. Wright even admits his concern over this seemingly forced application, however, he states that it is "both compatible with the shape of the canon of the Old Testament, and with the covenantal basis of Old Testament theology" (Wright 2004, 20). It seems to me that an explicitly covenantal approach would have been an even better organizing principle. Such an approach, which takes into account both the details of the case laws and the paradigms of the OT ethics, and both oath and sanctions, would have avoided the *almost* exclusively paradigmatic approach that Wright takes.

In my opinion, Wright correctly sees that "God's relation to Israel in their land was a deliberate reflection of God's relation to humankind on the earth" (Wright 2004, 183). He also states that modern Christians are correct in "taking the social and economic laws and institutions of Israel . . . and using them as models for our own ethnical task in the wider world of modern-day secular society." However, I believe he is incorrect when he immediately states that "In the economic sphere the Old Testament paradigms provide us with *objectives*, without requiring a *literal* transposition of ancient Israelite practice into twentieth century society" (Wright 2004, 184). This is ambiguous. When, for example, the law clearly states that the state must always be completely impartial with no bias to the rich or the poor, this must be literally transposed to modern society. The same applies to the constant emphasis in OT teaching that the magistrate ought to proactively protect the poor with that impartial justice. This must be literally transposed.

Perhaps Wright will reply that these are paradigms but not practice. But again I would argue that it remains ambiguous. Others scholars give specific methods for discovering the universally valid equity in all of the case law statutes. For example, Walter Kaiser shows that the specific equity of OT judicial laws must be put into practice to have balance. As it stands, Wright opens wide the door to a completely anti-Scriptural centralized welfare state, which could attempt to fulfill the paradigms but not the specific universal equity of the case laws into the modern world. The paradigms must be bound by a more rigorous application of the specific equity within each culturally wrapped judicial law. This equity alongside an equal stress upon the paradigms (the unifying principles) is thus necessary. It is my opinion that Wright's work would

be greatly enhanced if he could come to see that although certain aspects of the Israelite body politic have ceased, yet the specifics of the judicials' equity can be contextualized into each culture that is impacted by the Gospel.

In summary, although the volume lacks specific exegesis and then application of the judicial case laws, it is an excellent work. I highly recommend his discussion of the paradigms for the application of the OT ethic in cross-cultural situations, especially when used in conjunction with Kaiser's volume.