

3 The economic angle

THE LAND IN ISRAEL'S STORY

The Bible's story of redemption begins with God's promises to Abraham. A fundamental constituent of that promise, as it is revealed and repeated in the patriarchal narrative, is that God would give to Abraham and his descendants a *land*. That land becomes one of the most prominent features of the entire sequel of the Old Testament story.

Once again it is important that we allow the Old Testament to speak to us, not in bits and pieces taken at random, nor from the perspective and in the technical terms of one systematic theology or another, but as a *narrative*. When we do so, it is at once very apparent that the overarching theme of the great history of the Pentateuch, on through the books of Joshua and Judges and up to the establishing of the territorial limits of the kingdom of David, is the promise and the possession of the land.

The Pentateuch generates tremendous suspense concerning the land. Genesis records the patriarchs wandering in the land with no secure footholds, except for the elaborately achieved purchase of a burial site (Gn. 23), and concludes with the whole family settling down in Egypt. The land was not lost sight of, however, for the book ends with the dying words of Joseph recalling the promise of God and trusting in its fulfilment.

Exodus is launched with God's 'awakened' intention to keep that promise. When, in the course of the momentous events of the first nineteen chapters, Israel has been freed, mobilized, organized and bound together and to God by covenant at Sinai,

the reader would be inclined to think that occupation of the land was but a step away. First, however, he must grapple with a detailed description of the tabernacle and its furnishings, not once but twice! The lesson was as clear as the prayer of Moses in Exodus 33:15f.; the presence of God in the midst of his people was even more important than the gift of the land. And so the book ends with the glory of the presence of God settling on the 'Tent of Meeting' and accompanying the Israelites in all their forthcoming travels (Ex. 40:34-38).

Leviticus suspends the story still further as detailed laws are given. But in the latter section of the book, often called the 'Holiness Code', the land comes back into focus. For many of the laws are framed from the perspective of life in the land after the conquest. Indeed, the land is personified as the agent of God's blessing or curse, inasmuch as it is described as 'vomiting out' the present inhabitants for their wicked ways, and quite capable of repeating the performance on the Israelites if they imitate them (Lv. 18:24-28; 20:22-24). That is even foreseen in chapter 26, but not without another concluding reassurance of the permanence of the promise to the patriarchs (26:42-45).

Numbers brings the suspense to a climax with the stories of the spies, the people's failure of nerve, the abortive first attempt at invasion, and the dreary years of a whole generation spent in the wilderness (Nu. 13 - 14). Will this people ever capture Canaan? Can the promise really be fulfilled? Eventually, however, the painful journeys through hostile territories come to an end with the tribes encamped in the plains of Moab, and only the Jordan to cross. The oracles of Balaam reassure the reader of God's benevolent purpose. But the action of the Reubenites and Gadites again raises our suspense (Nu. 32). Will they seduce the whole people into accepting life on the wrong side of Jordan? That threat is averted diplomatically and the book ends optimistically with the map of Canaan already being redrawn to accommodate the victorious Israelites. But they are still not actually in.

Surely the new book must take us into the land. But no! Deuteronomy begins and ends in Moab. We are treated to a detailed recapitulation of the story so far, with sustained exhortation to obedient faithfulness to the covenant (Dt. 1 - 11). Then comes the major part of the book, devoted to the law - some old ones modified, some new ones introduced (12 - 26),

but all based on life in the land they have *still* to occupy. As at the end of Leviticus, the land itself will be both the arena and agent of God's blessing or curse, depending on the people's obedience or otherwise (28 – 30). Finally, after the song and blessing of Moses, Deuteronomy brings to a close both itself and the whole magnificent structure of the Pentateuch, with the moving account of the death of Moses, who had led his people to within a day's march of the land of promise but would not himself set foot in it (34). So the story of God's people in the Pentateuch ends, as it began, with the promise of the land to Abraham (Dt. 34:4), but with that promise still unfulfilled.

Joshua begins with words the reader has begun to wonder if he would ever hear: 'Get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them – to the Israelites' (Jos. 1:2). The rest of the book then has the land as its principal theme: its invasion, conquest and division. It ends in the same way as Deuteronomy with a renewal of the covenant, but with one of its promises now an accomplished fact, no longer a future hope.

The stage lights dim, however, as the book of Judges shows how incompletely the initial conquest had been effectively followed up. The land of promise becomes a land of struggle, where long periods of defeat are interspersed with hard-won, short-lived victories. Our suspense revives, no longer as to whether the people will enter the land, but whether they can survive within it. With the onslaught of the Philistines, the obstacles to secure possession of the whole land seem insuperable. The last and greatest of the judges, Samuel, achieves a victory that holds them at bay during his personal rule (1 Sa. 7). But Israel's first king, appointed for the very purpose of leading Israel against them (1 Sa. 8:20), witnesses at the point of his own death the Philistines achieving their deepest inroad into Canaan, virtually cutting Israel's land in half (1 Sa. 31). What has happened to the promised secure boundaries of the land (Gn. 15:18f.; Ex. 23:31; Nu. 34:1–12)? Not until the sustained victories and long rule of David does Israel eventually live at peace within secure borders embracing the territory actually promised (2 Sa. 8; 10). At last the promise is manifestly and effectively fulfilled.

But the land does not disappear from the continuing story of the Old Testament. The accumulated burden of oppression and injustice in the nation during the centuries after Solomon led

to a fresh outburst of prophetic activity in the eighth century. The most shocking ingredient in the prophets' message was the threat and prediction of exile from the land. This new and jarring note had not been heard before. It had not been part of the message of the ninth-century prophets such as Elijah and Elisha. It may well have been the factor which precipitated the writing down of the prophetic oracles – beginning with the earliest of the written prophetic collections, Amos. Imagine the electrifying effect of oracles like these:

‘Fallen is Virgin Israel,
never to rise again,
deserted in her own land,
with no-one to lift her up.
I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,’
says the LORD, whose name is God Almighty
(Am. 5:2, 27).

In fact we need not imagine, for their effect on the religious and political establishment is vividly described in 7:10ff. Bluntly, Amos is told to shut up and get lost (7:12f.). The threat recoils on its bearer, however, for Amos makes a 'private' prediction for Amaziah the priest that he and his family will personally suffer the calamity that will overtake the nation (v. 17).

Such threats, when set against the cardinal tenets of Israel's faith in God's promise and gift of the land, cannot but have sounded like gross heresy. Yet they remained a constant feature of the message of all the pre-exilic prophets right up until the events which vindicated them – namely the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by Assyria in 721 BC, and the sack of Jerusalem and exile of the Judean kingdom to Babylon in 587 BC. In those events the warnings of the law (Lv. 26; Dt. 28) and the threats of the prophets came true, and another generation of Israelites learned what it was to live without their own land, under the hand of God's chastisement. The pain of the experience of exile can be felt in passages such as Psalm 137 and Lamentations. Life without the land was scarcely life as God's people at all.

Yet God's people they still were, for he had not abandoned them. Nor had he abandoned his promise to Abraham or relinquished his claim to the land. It was the great achievement of

the prophets of this searing period, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to reinforce this hope, with specific reference in both cases to the land. One of the most outstandingly courageous acts of any prophet, in practical demonstration of faith in his own prophetic word, was Jeremiah's purchase of land from his kinsman Hanamel, at a time when Jerusalem was in the last throes of its final siege and Jeremiah was cooped up in a dungeon (Je. 32). He would never set foot on it, nor, being unmarried, had he any family to pass it on to. But it was a tangible token of his faith in God's promise that, after the judgment of exile,

Once more fields will be bought in this land of which you say, 'It is a desolate waste, without men or animals, for it has been handed over to the Babylonians.' . . . because I will restore their fortunes, declares the LORD (Je. 32:43f.).

And so he did. The restoration of the relationship between God and his people was sealed by the restoration of his people to their land – described in the visionary language of a new exodus (Is. 43:16–21; Je. 23:7f.). The wheel had turned full circle.

The point of this rapid review of the Old Testament story has been to show that the land is one of its dominant themes. It was *not* just a neutral stage where the drama unfolds (since, let's face it, people have to live somewhere!). The land, in all its dimensions – promise, conquest, shared possession, use and abuse, loss and recovery – was a fundamentally theological entity. The story of Israel is the story of redemption and we have seen that the social shape of Israel was part of the purpose and pattern of redemption. The same can now be said of the role of the land within the Old Testament story of Israel. The land was part of the pattern of redemption too, because the social shape of Israel was intimately bound up with the economic issues of the division, tenure and use of the land.

Now since, as we have already seen, Old Testament ethics are inseparably dependent on Old Testament theology, it follows that anything so important to its theology as the land must be correspondingly important to its ethics. This is indeed so, as we shall now proceed to discover.

THE LAND AS DIVINE GIFT

As we have now seen, the promise of land and its historical fulfilment in the gift of the land together form the major theme of the Pentateuch and early historical books. Israel had a land to live in because God, quite simply, had given it to them. This strong land-gift tradition had wide implications on Old Testament thinking and practice.

In the first place, it was a *declaration of Israel's dependency*. Right at the start Abram was called to leave his native land and go to a country which, in the event, was not specified until he got there. The patriarchal narratives emphasize the alien, 'sojourning' state of these ancestors of Israel. Israel, therefore, could make no 'natural' claim to any land. The only one they possessed they owed solely to God's election of and promise to Abraham – just as indeed they owed their very existence as a nation to these same two facts. These points were forcefully and unflatteringly impressed upon Israel in Deuteronomy's preparation for the conquest. They must not think they had any claim upon God's acts on their behalf: they had been, and always would be, utterly dependent on his love and faithfulness.

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers . . . (7:7f.).

You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers . . . (8:17f.).

It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers . . . (9:5).

Belief in the givenness of the land, then, preserved the right perspective in Israel's relationship with God. He could not be regarded in the same way as the gods of other nations – a figurehead for their nationalism or a merely functional protector of their territorial claims. Rather the reverse; without him they would have been no nation and had no land. His moral sovereignty was therefore absolute. As they were to discover, on account of their moral disobedience he would bring both nation and territory to the brink of extinction, were it not for the fact that his wider redemptive purpose was unshakeable.

Secondly, the land-gift was a *declaration of God's dependability*. Every harvest reminded Israel of this. This land whose produce they now enjoyed had not always been theirs. They had not always even desired it, as the traditions of their wilderness grumblings painfully reminded them. But here it was. God had kept his promise even in spite of their resistance. His dependability knew no limits: 'his steadfast love endures for ever'.

The strength of this proven article of faith is seen not only in worship, such as in the refrain just quoted (Ps. 136 rsv), but in the almost 'credal' statement placed on the lips of the farmer bringing the firstfruits of his harvest to the sanctuary. It is worth savouring to the full. Having been instructed to place his basket of harvest produce before the altar, he is told:

Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labour. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me' (Dt. 26:5–10).

What is remarkable about this declaration is that although the occasion of it is the goodness of God in the fruitfulness of *nature*, its total emphasis is on the faithfulness and power of

God in control of *history*. And the focus and climax of the recitation is the gift of the land, for it was the monumental, tangible proof of God's dependability. Here in these few succinct verses an Israelite could recount a history that embraced several centuries, moved through several national and cultural 'zones', and yet was 'contemporized' in the harvest he had just reaped. And he could unify all of it under this one theme of the fulfilment of God's promise in the gift of the land. There was no greater visible proof of the qualities of the God of Israel. (Would that our own harvest festivals had such a sense of history and of the faithfulness of God's redemptive purpose!) Morally speaking, therefore, he was a God *worthy* of obedience; his response to human behaviour would be consistent and dependable, not a matter of arbitrary whim. He could be pleased, but not humoured.

Thirdly, in combination of both the above points, the land-gift functioned as *proof of the relationship between God and Israel*. Israel knew they were the people of God because he had given them his land, and that gift verified the relationship written into both the covenant with Abraham and the covenant made at Sinai with the whole people.

Another way in which this was expressed was by the use of the term *inheritance* to describe the land, implying as it does a relationship of sonship between Israel and God. It is interesting that in the Exodus narrative God refers to Israel as 'my firstborn son' (Ex. 4:22), for whom he demands release from captivity, with the intention of bringing him to the land of promise. The situation was intolerable. What was God's firstborn son doing languishing in a foreign country when his inheritance awaited him? The language of inheritance as such is not found often in Exodus (*cf.* 15:17; 32:13), but it comes to the fore in Deuteronomy. The word frequently used for 'to take possession of' or 'to give possession to' was commonly used in connection with inheritance. In some passages the land is explicitly called an inheritance (*e.g.* 4:21; 4:38; 12:9; 15:4; 19:10; 26:1), and in others Israel is called God's son or offspring (14:1; 32:5f., 18f. and, metaphorically, 8:5) – and thereby his heir.

Just as the gift of the land was God's act and owed nothing to Israel's greatness or merits, so with Israel's sonship. They belonged to God, not by their choice of him, but because he had brought them to birth. The bond between Israel's land

theology (the 'economic angle') and their unique relationship with God is here seen at its closest. The one is, as it were, the tangible manifestation of the other.

One practical consequence of this was the unreserved enjoyment of the land as a blessing. Its praises are sung with luxuriant detail in Deuteronomy (e.g. 8:7-9; 11:8-12). There was no embarrassment over the prospect of abundant fruitfulness and prosperity. The land was the good gift of their bountiful God and was meant to bring joy, festivity and gratitude. Now of course, as we shall see in a moment, this was contained within a strong moral framework of responsibility to God for one another - especially those who would become poor as a result of corporate disobedience (cf. Dt. 15:4ff.). The answer to poverty was not the reduction of all to equivalent frugality, but rather, a return to repentant obedience to God that would raise all to renewed blessing and bounty.

Fourthly, it was the historical land-gift tradition which generated *individual property rights* in Israel. We have already caught a passing glimpse of this in the harvest declaration quoted above. The Israelite farmer speaks of 'the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me'. Not, we take note, 'to us', but 'to me'. The Israelite did not think only in terms of the whole land given to the whole nation. That concept could have been compatible with the whole land being held on the nation's behalf, as it were, by a king as their representative. That, in fact, was the Canaanite system. But such a notion was strongly resisted among the Israelites. The gift of land 'percolated', so to speak, down to the lowest social level, so that each individual household could claim that its right to the land it possessed was guaranteed by God himself. Thus, inheritance language was used of the small portions of land belonging to each household, as well as of the territory of whole tribes or the whole nation. They, too, were held as the gift of God.

This is what gives significance and importance to Numbers 26 and 34 and Joshua 13 - 19, which describe the division of the land. It is repeatedly referred to as a division 'according to their clans', i.e. the sub-groupings of families within the larger unit of the tribe. To us these detailed lists seem tedious and interminable, but for Israel they enshrined a fundamental principle: the land was intended to be equitably shared out, so that every household had its part in the national inheritance.

The strength of this belief is seen in Naboth's reaction to King Ahab's suggestion, which seems innocent enough to us. Ahab proposed that he should purchase, or exchange other land for, Naboth's vineyard. The response was vehement: 'The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers!' (1 Ki. 21:1-3). It was not really Naboth's to give, sell or exchange. He held it on trust from the LORD for the benefit of his family. It was not a question of 'human rights', 'natural justice' or anything so abstract. It was a staunch upholding of the right of a member of God's people to maintain that part of the national inheritance which God had assigned to his personal household. Significantly, the only way Ahab could get the vineyard was by falsely convicting Naboth of blasphemy, an offence by which he forfeited his right to belong to God's people. He was stoned accordingly, and his land confiscated (1 Ki. 21:11-16). The whole incident shows how closely possession of a share in the land and personal belonging within the covenant relationship to God were bound together.

Fifthly, the sequel to the Naboth incident opens up our understanding of *the prophets' preoccupation with economic exploitation*. Scarcely had the dust of Naboth's stoning settled before Elijah was bearing down on Ahab as he inspected his ill-gotten possession. His message was blunt and simple: God is angry at your compound crime and will punish you in like manner (1 Ki. 21:17-22). But Naboth's fate became typical of what happened to large numbers of the ordinary populace, as royalty and its attendant wealthy nobility made ever-increasing incursions into the traditional Israelite system of inalienable family land tenure. More and more people were deprived of their ancestral land and forced, by debt-bondage and other means, into a state of virtual serfdom on land once their own but now in the hands of the wealthy, powerful few. And it was the prophets who came to their defence, exposing the corruption and exploitation as mercilessly as it was being practised.

Woe to those who plan iniquity,
to those who plot evil on their beds! . . .
They covet fields and seize them,
and houses, and take them.
They defraud a man of his home,
a fellow-man of his inheritance (Mi. 2:1f.).

Woe to you who add house to house
and join field to field
till no space is left
and you live alone in the land (Is. 5:8).

Everywhere you look in the prophets, this vehement indignation at economic injustice is either evident or not far from the surface.

In the light of the principles outlined above we can see that this aspect of the prophetic message did not stem from a general concern for human rights, nor from an advancing ethical sensitivity. It was not even a merely economic issue. It was deeply spiritual. Anything which threatened a household's economic viability or drove them out of secure tenure of their portion of land was a threat to its secure membership of the covenant people. To lose one's land was more than economic disaster: it struck at one's very relationship with God. That is why the wealthy establishment was so appalled at the language of Amos, when he insisted on calling 'the righteous' those who were being oppressed and dispossessed. Popular thinking of his day would probably have 'excommunicated' them. Amos reverses the evaluation (2:6; 5:12).

But the other aspect of the matter which so hurt the prophets was that it was *Israelites* who were so viciously oppressing their fellow-Israelites, and that they were using the greatest token of God's common blessing on them all, the land, to do so. Here was a horrible perversion indeed. One section of God's people was depriving another of what was God's gift and every Israelite's right: freedom and land. Such internal exploitation had been forbidden in the law on the grounds of the equality of all Israelites as God's freed slaves (Lv. 25:42f., 53-55). But now the defenceless were being devoured by an enemy *within*.

Lately my people have risen up
like an enemy. . . .
You drive the women of my people
from their pleasant homes.
You take away my blessing¹
from their children for ever (Mi. 2:8f.).

¹ Or, 'glory'.

Economic exploitation is a moral evil which could be condemned on the wide basis of common humanity and an ethic of stewardship (which we shall consider below in chapter 4). But when those who are the agents and victims of the exploitation are members of the people of God, and when the means of exploitation is a supreme and 'costly' gift of God to his own people, then the evil is seen in all its unnatural perversion, and the vehemence of the prophets' denunciations can be properly understood.

THE LAND UNDER DIVINE OWNERSHIP

A cynic might be tempted to shrug off the prophets' indignation by saying that surely, if the land had been given to Israel, they were free to use or abuse it as they pleased. The answer to this lies on the other side of the coin of Old Testament land theology: *the land was still God's land*. He retained the ultimate title of ownership and therefore also the ultimate right of moral authority over how it was used. This is hinted at in one of the earliest pieces of Israelite poetry, the song of Moses in Exodus 15. It celebrates the miracle of the exodus and looks forward to the entry into the land, which is described (addressing God) as 'your holy dwelling' (v. 13), 'the mountain of your inheritance' (v. 17) and 'the place, O LORD, you made for your dwelling' (v. 17). Another early poem refers to 'his land and people' (Dt. 32:43). The clearest statement, however, comes in Leviticus: 'the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants' (25:23).

The description of the Israelites' relationship to God in respect of the land in this verse is interesting. The terms 'resident aliens and tenants' ('strangers and sojourners', rsv) referred to a class of people within Israelite society who did not own any land, being descendants of the old Canaanite population or else immigrant workers; they were wholly dependent, therefore, on being able to reside within a landed Israelite household. As long as the host household retained its land and was economically viable, their position was secure. But without such protection they were very vulnerable indeed. God casts himself in the role of the landowner and the Israelites as his dependent tenants. As long as their relationship was maintained and his protection

afforded, they were secure. But if they rebelled against his authority and his protection were withdrawn, they would have to face the consequences. The implication was clear: 'Be careful what you do on and with my land'. A socio-economic phenomenon (dependent labourers in Israelite households) has been taken to describe figuratively a theological relationship (between Israel and God), in such a way that the ethical implication can be directed back into the socio-economic realm.

Another way of looking at the claim of divine ownership on the land is to compare it with the systems of land tenure in some contemporary cultures. In pre-Israelite Canaan, for example, the king held title to the whole of his land. His subjects lived on it and farmed it as his dependent tenants, usually with a heavy burden of taxation (*cf.* Samuel's description, 1 Sa. 8:11-17). That whole demand of human authority is now lifted out of the reach of any human individual or group, where it results in inequality and oppression, and claimed by God alone. The whole land belongs to him and therefore he alone has the right to lay claim to his people's dependency. Under a *human* land-owning king, people live in the equality of oppression. Under their land-owning *God*, Israel lives in the equality of freedom.

This equality of redeemed brothers, now slaves of God, is reiterated throughout Leviticus 25. If God alone ultimately owns the land, then no Israelite has the right either to treat his own land as if he 'owned' it, in the sense of being able to do as he liked with it, or to lay claim to the land of any other Israelite, except according to the laws of inheritance and kinship. Even a king is but a tenant in God's land! Ahab is only a fellow-tenant to Naboth.

So it emerges that just as, on the one hand, the concept of the land as divine *gift* generated a strong set of *rights* for both the nation and individuals, so, on the other hand, the concept of the land as under continuing divine *ownership* generated a wide range of *responsibilities*. These responsibilities can be classified broadly under three heads: responsibility to God; to one's family; to one's neighbours.

Responsibility to God for the land included such things as tithes and firstfruits of the harvest, other harvest laws, and the sabbatical legislation as it affected the land – the fallow year and the release of debt-pledges. Responsibility to the family included the fundamental law of inalienability – that is, that

land was not to be bought and sold commercially but preserved within a kinship framework. This principle was then buttressed by other kinship responsibilities that related directly or indirectly to land – redemption procedures, inheritance rules and levirate marriage. Responsibility towards one's neighbours included a host of civil laws and charitable exhortations concerning damage or negligence to property, safety precautions, respect for integrity of boundaries, generosity in leaving harvest gleanings, fair treatment of employees and, indeed, of working animals.²

So many of the detailed instructions of the law come into this category of responsibility in respect of the land, directly or indirectly, that it is easily the most comprehensive of the ethico-theological principles governing the law. It is the belief that *God owns the land and demands accountability in the use of it* from his 'tenants' that generates the literal 'earthiness' of Old Testament ethics. Nothing that you can do in, on or with the land is outside the sphere of God's moral inspection. From major issues of the defence of the national territory down to how you prune your fruit trees, every area of life is included. Based on such a principle, so simply stated, Old Testament ethics could be both comprehensive and yet deeply practical and particular.

THE LAND AS 'SPIRITUAL THERMOMETER'

Now that we have outlined the substance of the theology of the land in the Old Testament we must summarize the function it performed within our 'basic framework'. What is the role of this 'economic angle' in our overall understanding of Old Testament ethics? Its function can be described as a measure or gauge of the effectiveness of the other two angles.³ That is to say, the economic sphere is like a thermometer which reveals both the spiritual temperature of the theological relationship between God and Israel (angle A), and also the extent to which Israel was conforming to the social shape required of her in consistency with her status as God's redeemed people (angle B).

² Details and references for all the above are provided in chapter 4.

³ See again the diagram on p. 19.

As regards the first of these, the theological angle, there appears to have been a prolonged struggle in early Israel to bring them to realize that the LORD, the victorious God of their redemptive history, was also entirely competent in the matter of land use, rain, fertility, crops and herds. The tendency to regard the Baals of the previous occupants of the land as more likely to 'produce the goods' in the economic realm seemed ineradicable, from the conquest to the exile.

This issue is explicitly tackled by Hosea, though it can be seen as early as Elijah and as late as Jeremiah. Speaking of Israel's self-prostitution to the Baals as 'lovers', Hosea declares:

She said, 'I will go after my lovers,
who give me my food and my water,
my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink'. . .
She has not acknowledged that I was the one
who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil
(Ho. 2:5, 8).

The irony was that Israel did not apparently perceive this as disloyalty to the LORD, for were they not still worshipping him with all his appointed festivals, sabbaths, *etc.* (v. 11)? But such worship was hollow. Indeed, it was abhorrent to God, inasmuch as it excluded him from the economic realities of daily life. The measure of the sincerity and integrity of the nation's acceptance of God's authority over them as his people was the extent to which they would acknowledge his sovereignty in the economic, as well as the religious, sphere. Looked at in terms of the geometry of our diagram, the 'theological angle' was not complete unless line AC and line AB converged under the sole authority of the LORD. Failure to honour God in the material realm cannot be compensated for by religiosity in the spiritual realm.

Not that there was any illusion in the Old Testament that such economic obedience to God was easy. It was one thing to celebrate the victories of God in *past* history. It was another to trust his ability to produce the *future* harvest. It was still another to trust his ability to provide you and your family with sustenance for a year if you obeyed the fallow or sabbatical year laws and did not sow a crop – or for two years if you had a double fallow at the jubilee! And could you afford to let your slave, an

agricultural capital asset, go free after six years, still less with a generous endowment of your substance, animal and vegetable? Were you not entitled to extract maximum yield from your own fields and vineyards without leaving valuable remainders for others? How could you possibly cancel debts after six years? Would it not ruin your own family if you had to redeem and look after the land or personnel of some incompetent kinsman? The whole range of economic requirements in the Old Testament demanded trust in the providential sovereignty of God over nature and a readiness to obey him in spite of the sort of questions posed above (of which the Old Testament was well aware, Lv. 25:20; Dt. 15:9).

As regards the second angle, the social shape of Israel, this can be seen at its most distinctive in economic terms. We saw in the last chapter that the introduction of monarchy politically compromised that distinctiveness. But it was not utterly incompatible, inasmuch as the king could still live by and under the law of God and lead the nation in the way of God's righteousness. Indeed, theologically, the monarchy, although its human origins are seen as tainted with sin and apostasy, became a vehicle for a new set of ideas and expectations regarding God's kingly relationship to his people and his future messianic purpose for them (see chapter 5). It was the baleful effects of monarchy in the *economic* realm that so dangerously threatened the distinctive social shape of Israel, as was so perceptively foreseen by Samuel (1 Sa. 8:11–17).

We have already seen some of these and the prophets' reaction to them. Viewing the situation from God's standpoint, they realized the tragedy of what was happening to God's people. A nation which allowed itself to succumb to the same economic evils as the world around could not function as a 'light to the nations'. It was no paradigm of the social shape of a redeemed people if it was the same shape as the unredeemed Gentiles – worse still, if it descended below the level of those paradigms of wickedness, Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet that is the comparison drawn by more than one prophet. Ezekiel puts Judah and Sodom in the same family as sisters, and comments: 'Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy' (Ezk. 16:49) – a thoroughly *socio-economic* analysis. He then goes on, breathtakingly, to say of Judah, 'You have

done more detestable things than they, and have made your sisters seem righteous' (v. 51). The sisters, remember, include *Sodom!*

So we see that it was the content of the 'economic angle' which in large measure acted as a test of Israel's conformity to the social paradigm of redemption that was God's purpose in calling her into existence. The prophets simply would not allow Israel to get away with claiming the blessing and protection of the covenant relationship for their society while trampling on the socio-economic demands of that relationship (*cf.* Je. 7:1-11).

Conclusion: Covenantal, canonical, comprehensive

In the introduction to these first three chapters, we claimed that this basic framework of God, Israel and the land enables us to study Old Testament ethics in a way which is covenantal, canonical and comprehensive. It remains now to expand this claim a little more fully.

The pattern of relationships outlined in our framework includes all the essential features of that relationship between God and his people for which the term *covenant* was used – both the covenant of election and promise with Abraham and the national covenant and giving of the law at Sinai. The basis of the covenant was the sovereignty of God: his free choice, in love, of Abraham; his historical faithfulness in redemption from Egypt; his moral authority to stipulate the contents of his people's obedience in the giving of the law. The other side of the statement: 'I am the LORD your God' was 'You are Israel, my people'. This affirmation defined not only their identity but also their purpose in the world. They were to be, and also to live as befitted, the people of God. It was to fit them for this purpose that the host of vertical and horizontal obligations formed part of the covenantal relationship.

As token and proof of that relationship, there was the land of promise and gift, with all the rights and responsibilities we have examined. All of this was of the essence of the covenant. Whenever we seek to interpret any passage ethically, by locating it within this framework, seeing where it 'fits' and how it functions, we shall be seeing it in the light of the 'main beams' of Israel's spiritual constitution – namely the great themes of election, redemption, law and land.

In these three chapters we have noted how each of the three 'angles' forced us to pay attention to the *canonical* order of the Old Testament story. We have to see the whole sweep of Scripture, and ensure that our ethical constructs are consistent with the whole. Now there is a perfectly valid place for studying traditions underlying the finished books, for isolating, comparing and contrasting the varying ethical emphases of different authors, editors and schools within the living kaleidoscope of the Old Testament documents. Such a task would be appropriate in a large-scale analytical work on Old Testament ethics. But it is not only limitation of space and the pursuit of simplicity that keep us from that task here; it is also the conviction that if our aim is a coherent biblical ethic, then our final authority must be the completed text in its canonical form. And the broad framework we are working with keeps us aligned with the order and rationale of the canon itself.

Finally, this framework is *comprehensive*; it permits an inclusiveness that some of the approaches mentioned in the introduction actually hinder or destroy. It enables the student of the Bible to take seriously Paul's assertion that 'All Scripture is . . . useful for teaching . . . and training in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3:16). He can take any particular text and seek to relate it to one or other of these 'angles', and then to interpret it in the light of the major principles embodied in that sector of Old Testament theology. This is simply a widening of the fundamental rule of interpretation, taking a text in its context.

But the reader can then go further, for each 'angle' is related to the other two, so that the text in question can be opened up by whatever light such inter-relations may shed. In this way the ethical relevance of the text is neither denied to it, *a priori*, nor is it imposed on it by non-biblical considerations. Rather it is evaluated from the function it has (which may be quite limited) within the wider framework of Old Testament life and thought. Thus, no text is dismissed just because 'it doesn't apply to us'. It is no longer a question of direct applicability of every text, but of seeing how it functioned within its Old Testament context, as part of a larger model, which then in its wholeness is to be interpreted and applied paradigmatically. During the course of the following chapters we shall see examples of this method at work.

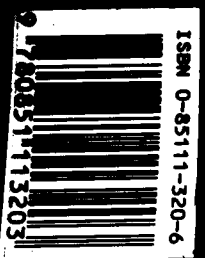
PART TWO

THEMES IN OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS

Christopher JH Wright

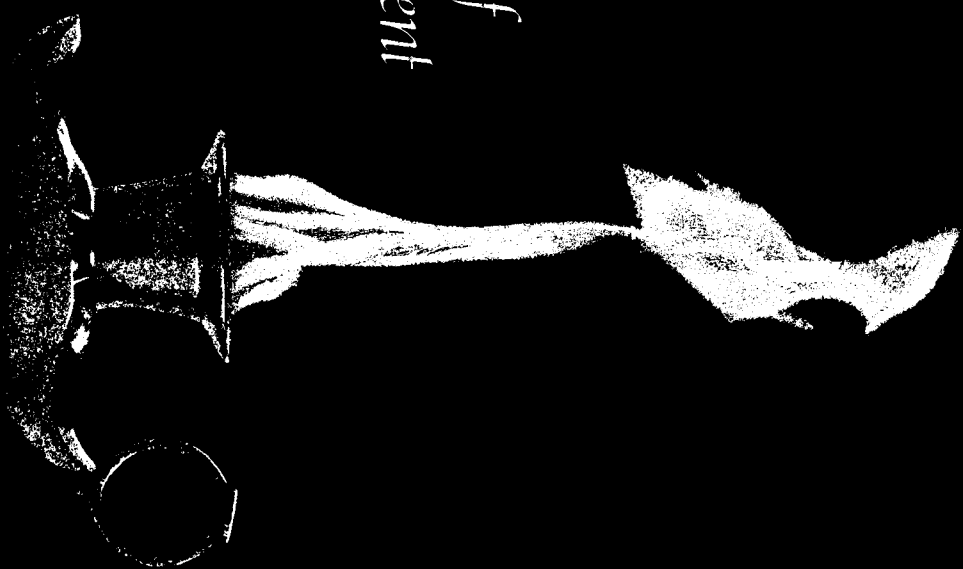
This fresh and original study takes the Old Testament laws in their context and examines their major themes, touching such practical matters as economics, politics, crime and punishment, and the due processes of law. Their unique features are highlighted so as to reveal the principles which modern society can learn from the whole law of God. This unusual book is written in a lively, readable style, which will appeal to specialist and non-specialist alike.

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