
Review Article

Living as the People of God

C.J.H. Wright

IVP 1983 224pp £5.95

The relevance of Old Testament ethics

Mr. Wright declares his aim in writing this book as attempting "to provide a comprehensive framework within which Old Testament ethics can be organised and understood." (p.9). In the Prologue he demonstrates how necessary such an overview is by a reconstruction of a discussion — a Shaftesbury Project meeting, perhaps — in which various approaches to Old Testament moral and social legislation are expressed. In the book he proceeds to unfold his own. This is, therefore, not only a book about Old Testament ethics but about Old Testament interpretation.

The work falls into two parts. Part 1 (pp.19-64) is general in nature and is entitled "The Framework of Old Testament Ethics". Part 2 is devoted to a consideration of particular areas of that field (pp.67-212). Mr. Wright focusses attention on social rather than individual ethics, apart from the very last chapter of the book, because Israel was a community. A general bibliography and extensive bibliographical references for each chapter (and subject)

together with biblical and subject indexes complete this important, enlightening and thought-provoking book.

The author describes his proposed framework in terms of an "ethical triangle". This he represents diagrammatically with God at its apex and with Israel and the land forming the corners of its base. He writes:-

"Old Testament ethics are built upon Israel's understanding of who and what they were as a people, of their relationship to God, and of their physical environment — their land. These were the primary factors of their theology and ethics ... in a triangle of relationships, each of which affected the others." (pp.19-20)

Though it may be felt that too much is made of "Israel's understanding" in this statement rather than God's revelation being referred to, the content of the book is not a psychological study of Israel's self-consciousness, but an examination of the data found in the Old Testament. (After all, understanding is a necessary precondition of ethical behaviour.) The content of the Old Testament is presented in relation to the big theological

themes namely Creation, Fall, Redemption, Eschatology and the inter-relationship between the two Testaments. These supply the grid on which the Old Testament is interpreted.

Part 1 unfolds the significance of this “ethical triangle” by a survey of Old Testament ethical teaching viewed from its theological, social and economic angles. (The first of these is primary and conditions the other two while they in turn either reflect the actualisation of the first in the life of the nation, or its absence.) In this part of the book historical and prophetic material is included as well as the legislative sections of the Old Testament. Mr. Wright succeeds in demonstrating how harmonious Old Testament literature is and that it is God’s covenantal relationship with Israel which supplies its integrating factor. Many points which are most relevant to an Old Testament theology are to be found in these chapters. Of particular importance for the major thesis of this book as indicated in its sub-title is the section with the heading “Israel as God’s Paradigm” (pp.40-45). In this, Israel is regarded in terms of the totality of her character and existence as intended to display God’s **paradigm** (pattern) for living to the nations. The section on the land is most helpful. Mr. Wright sees “land-theology” as providing “a measure or gauge of the effectiveness of the other two

angles” i.e. Israel’s spiritual relationship with God and her “social shape” as God’s people. In this part attention is given to Old Testament material and references to the New Testament are rare.

Part 2 applies the framework of Part 1 to particular matters. These are “Economics and the land; Politics and the world of nations; Righteousness and justice; Law and the legal system; Society and culture and the Way of the Individual.” Each of these chapters is a mine of information about the Old Testament and will repay careful study in conjunction with an open Bible. They will also make what Israel ought to have been come alive. There are studies here on the land, the Tower of Babel, the value of life, the monarchy, differing responses to heathen nations and culture, the Decalogue, punishment, capital offences, family law, and slavery. The discussion about the “wise man” in Proverbs in the light of what is said elsewhere in the Old Testament about the character of God is most striking and fruitful. The continuance and treatment of many of these themes in the New Testament is dealt with and the eschatological dimension of the material is also highlighted i.e. a perfected community in the heavenly land.

The most distinctive feature of this book, however, and certainly the most thought-provoking is

the claim that Israel as a society within as given territory was intended by God to convey a pattern of social ethics for other nations (heathen ones) in their own lands and that it is the responsibility of Christians, especially those in the various professions to translate the principles behind Israel's format into different cultural settings. Mr. Wright bases this on the belief that "Israel's existence and character as a society were to be a witness to God, a model or paradigm of his holiness expressed in the social life of a redeemed community." (p.43). By a paradigm he means "something used as a model or example for other cases where a basic principle remains unchanged, though details differ." (p.43). This means that Israel's social ethics should become *mutatis mutandis* India's social ethics.

The significance of this as a hermeneutical principle can be seen by comparing it with typology with which at first sight it may appear to bear close similarities in that typology too exhibits a continuity of principle with differences of detail. But they are by no means identical. In fact they are widely apart.

Typological interpretation enables Mr. Wright to say that Israel's social life in its divinely given form and land is a type of the church's life of fellowship in Christ begun on earth and con-

summated in heaven. This is sound. In this hermeneutical method there is an identity of principle or reality, in this case fellowship with God, but with that progression from a lower and provisional plane (the land) to a higher and permanent plane (Christ). Such correspondence and progression is of the essence of Typology.

By contrast, Paradigmatic interpretation refers to a continuity of principle with different details **but on the same plane of reality** that is between Israel as a nation in its land and other nations in their territories (see the treatment of the land and the Jubilee pp.88ff). Mr. Wright regards the Jubilee as referring typologically to Christ's ministry and message, eschatologically to the consummation and paradigmatically to those "situations where land tenure and land reform are pressing issues of social and political dispute." (p.101).

In evaluating paradigmatic interpretation it is important to bear in mind that both typological and eschatological interpretation have points of anchorage in the New Testament. Paradigmatic interpretation is, however, based exclusively on the Old Testament and New Testament corroboration for it is wanting. This raises a serious question against its validity for while the Old Testament is not to be devalued as Holy Scripture, it is not to stand alone without the New

Testament's endorsement and perspective.

On what Old Testament basis does Mr. Wright rest his case for regarding Israel as a social paradigm for other nations? There are two main grounds at least. On the one hand, Israel was to be "a kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6) and "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). As priests taught the word to the people, so "if Israel as a nation were to be a priesthood, the implication is that they would represent God to the peoples of mankind in an analogous way. God's way would be manifest in their life as a nation." (p.41). As it was Israel's mission which the Servant of the Lord took on, Israel having failed, so what was said of the Servant can be said of Israel namely that she was to be "a light to the nations". Mr. Wright therefore says, "If Israel was meant to be a light to the nations then that light must be allowed to illuminate." (pp.43-44).

Accepting that "for me" is a supportable rendering of the Hebrew in Exodus 19:6 instead of the more usual "to me", (though the latter accords better with the emphasis on Israel as God's special treasure, dearer than the whole earth, of which expression it is partly explanatory) and accepting that as a priest Israel was to teach others in her time as her priests taught her, the big question to be faced is "What was Israel to teach? What was the

word she had to bring?" Was it "God's way in her life?" (Would this not by analogy make *the Church*, the Church's message?) Was her message not identical with her light i.e. God's word of judgment and salvation in relation to a Coming One — The Messiah? He was her light and it was His coming which brought brightness to her (Isaiah 60:1ff) and so to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32).

On the other hand Israel is believed to be a paradigm because the features of her constitution as a society Mr. Wright sees as being the reiteration and amplification of creation principles which centre in stewardship, e.g. shared resources, work, growth and shared produce. To these could be added marriage, the family and the Sabbath. These are re-emphasised and given visible form in Israel in the context of redemption and against the deleterious effects of the Fall. This is a very useful way of integrating Creation and Theocracy. While, however, it can be continued very fruitfully into the context of the church it cannot be extended to include nations which have no knowledge of grace and redemption. Just as the Passover and the Exodus preceded the Theocracy so it is the gospel alone which can renovate a society.

Your reviewer, therefore, has serious doubts not only about the

validity of paradigmatic interpretation but also about the value of Christian social ethics as a discipline and pursuit because the subject is fraught with such difficulty and danger.

On the one hand the difficulty is two-fold. First, Mr. Wright is alert to the error as well as the impossibility of a simplistic transference of Israel's features to a contemporary society. We are told that it is the principles behind the various laws etc. that are to be applied to differing cultures by Christian economists, sociologists, lawyers etc. Is this not a pipe-dream? Given the difficulty, which is great, of agreeing on what those principles are what likelihood is there of getting economists, educationalists etc. etc. to agree on how they should be applied in a complex and fallen society? Secondly, by Christian social ethics he does not mean the Christian's own ethics in society but the ethics of the redeemed applied to society which is fallen. Is not that difficulty almost insuperable? Will such an attempt not smack of legalism and pride and breed hypocrites?

Further, there is an inherent danger in this enterprise. It is that it could prove detrimental to true evangelism and even ultimately become a substitute for it. One had the feeling at times in reading this book that in spite of her faults being recognised, Israel was being spoken of too highly, almost as an Old Testament

saviour. One place would be on page 41 where we read "there is indeed something 'incarnational' about the role of Israel in the Old Testament". The figure of the Servant of the Lord is pointed to as an example of this for in Isaiah the Servant is sometimes Israel and sometimes the Messiah. While that is a fact, a better adjective would "representative" rather than "incarnational". (Is the church 'incarnational' too? Or is this a typical Non-conformist comment on the work of an Anglican?!)

Further to this and when speaking of the Servant and his work Mr. Wright declares that it was "to exemplify and generate all the **social** blessings that should have been displayed in the nation" (emphasis original) that he came. As the passages quoted with reference to this statement speak of justice and righteousness which deal first and foremost with God's relation to man and not with one man and another, let alone one nation and another, the adjective "spiritual" would be better. This is the great danger that is inherent in social ethics — it may become another social gospel.

However, this is an excellent book — plenty of nails for one's knowledge and goads for one's thought (Eccles. 12:11). We look forward to Mr. Wright's next work "God's People in God's Land" which a footnote in this work tells us is forthcoming.

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