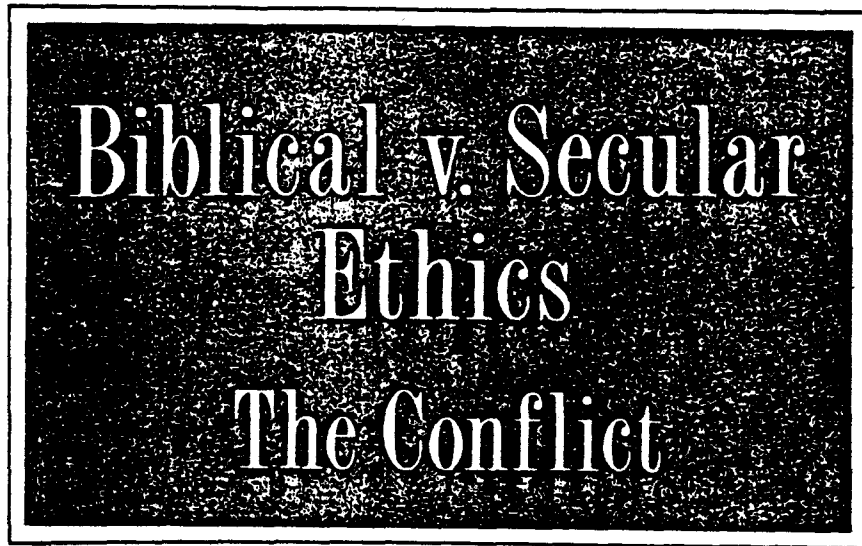


*Buidling A Biblical  
Foundation for  
Contemporary Ethics  
By Ellis Rivkin  
in*



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## Building a Biblical Foundation for Contemporary Ethics

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At the outset, I should like to stress the fact that the Bible was centuries in the making and consists of a diversity of books written at different times for different purposes, by a wide variety of individuals impelled by a wide variety of interests. Many of the books of the Bible gave compelling evidence that they were not written by a single hand. The five books of Moses, for example, are so completely multi-layered that scholars are still seeking to unravel their intricate webbing. To speak then of biblical ethics as though it were a body of agreed upon principles is to speak of a body of ethics that is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Only if biblical ethics is taken to be that record of the variety of ethical responses to changing problems that prophets, priests, kings, and other Israelite leaders came up with in the course of the historical experience of Israel can we juxtapose biblical ethics to contemporary ethics.

When we do make such a juxtaposition, we discover that though the conceptual frameworks may radically differ, the process by which ethical principles are established turn out to be very much the same. In the biblical world, as in our own, human beings grappled with internal and external realities that were only partially understood; sought to comprehend them as best they could with the conceptual tools at hand, came up with now this now that judgment as to how they might best be handled; and did not hold back from modifying, or even discarding,

judgments previously made, or from making quantum leaps into as yet unexplored realms of ethical possibility. Although "Thus saith the Lord" may, on first reading, seem to resonate with an almighty absolutism, this absolutism fades away as one goes from one "Thus saith the Lord" to another.

When, however, one dissolves the framework of Yahwistic absolutism, one discovers that biblical ethics is neither more nor less relative, neither more nor less compelling, than the ethics that has emerged within the framework of critical reason.

The biblical framework does indeed presuppose an omnipotent and omniscient God, but the stuff that is found therein testifies to a God who has continuously given his assent, if not his mandate, to whatever time and tide demand. Every major structural stage was given its distinctive imprimatur: patriarchal, prophetic, monarchical, and hierarchical. Every significant historical event was stamped, as a matter of course, with divine confirmation: enslavement, wilderness wandering, conquest, settlement, imperial ravaging, exile, restoration, and Persian hegemony. Every prophet's oracle was fitted to the occasion, and not subjected to a repetitive formula. There were in fact times when one did not know from moment to moment what God's will might be, and there were other times when God seemed to be speaking in a cacophony of prophetic voices demanding both this and that, both right and left, both yea and nay. When the Bible is liberated from the forbidding framework of divine absolutism and then read, it reveals a God who is responsive to the vicissitudes of history, open to the implications of change, and supportive of the quest for ethical and moral principles without dogmatic precommitment to any previous revelation. The God of Israel thus shows himself in the biblical record to have been seen as an ever-changing God whose will today could not be counted on to be his will on the morrow. As a consequence, biblical ethics emerges as a mosaic of insets configured by a problem-solving people bound in covenant to a problem-solving God.

The insets of this mosaic are not difficult to extricate from the biblical record so that the ethical components of each can be seen and evaluated independently. Thus when we look at the patriarchal inset, we are struck by the deep appreciation of the patriarchs for the willingness of the settled people among whom they sojourned to allow them to move freely throughout the land, and by their wish to reciprocate in such a manner as to earn the approbation of their gracious hosts. Indeed this memory of abiding hospitality became so sharply etched in the

minds of the people of Israel that it came to be woven into the warp and woof of the people's concept of its highest self as a people duty-bound to cherish and love the stranger.

The patriarchs also seem to have placed a high value on hospitality to unexpected guests; to settling quarrels peacefully; to respecting the mores of peoples who allowed them to sojourn in the land, even when this respect, on occasion, required dissembling; and on societies free of licentiousness, corruption, and base dealing. Reflective of a semi-nomadic mode of life, patriarchal ethics generated and sustained some values worthy, it would seem, of readaptation in our contemporary world.

The ethics that emerged from enslavement to Pharaoh and from the wilderness wanderings likewise have a contemporaneous appeal. Slavery is pictured as unjust, cruelty as reprehensible, and freedom as good. At the same time, forgiveness for past wrongs and mistreatment is held to be a good. The Egyptians are neither to be abhorred nor barred entry into the congregation of the Lord.

The ethics we can glean from the first two stages of Israel's history are not, however, free of what we might now consider flaws. Concubinage was not frowned upon and the casting out of a concubine's son is condoned. Tit for tat is not condemned; deception in a good and worthy cause is not disallowed; and the absolute authority of the leader and of the leader's God is rarely challenged.

With the conquest of the land and its settlement, however, the ethical values of the people look a sharp and harsh turn. Whereas the patriarchs were sojourners in a land freely acknowledged as not belonging to them, Joshua was bent on wiping out the seven nations living in Canaan. He justified so total a conquest by conjuring up the will of a God who insisted that no mercy was to be shown. So, too, the prophet Samuel lashes out at Saul for not having heeded God's command to exterminate the Amalekites, stripping him of his crown for having disobeyed the divine will. The God of liberation from the taskmaster's whip was transmuted into a God who demanded the eradication of the seven nations, who dwelled in Canaan, and who withheld compassion for babe and suckling child whose misfortune it was to have been born to an Amalekite. In the heat of conquest, Israelite leaders forged an ethic justifying total war and gave it a divine hallmark—a hallmark that came to coexist alongside hallmarks no less bearing the imprimatur of a compassionate, loving, and forgiving God who cared for the stranger and the alien.

The ethic of total war achieved its goal. The Canaanites were

thoroughly subjugated, even if they were not thoroughly annihilated. But this biblical ethic did not remain unchallenged. Confronted with both a society wallowing in corruption and the ravagings of imperial nations on the march, prophetic voices bespoke a far different God than that who had commanded the wiping out of the Canaanites and the other peoples living in the land. These prophets articulated an ethic so humane and so redolent with human hope and aspiration that it is hard even today to conceive a humanistic ethic that goes beyond the imperatives that logically follow from those insights proclaimed by Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiahs I and II as being the very word of Yahweh.

Let us consider these insights that lead to an ethic of interpersonal relationships, an intersocietal ethic worthy of contemporary fellow-through. These may be briefly summed up as the pursuit of equity and justice; the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion, as values to be given priority over economic, social, political, cultic, and institutional claims, and according to the individual a sacrosanct status vis-a-vis authoritarian nullification of these values. Did not Amos defy the Yahwistic authorities who denounced his values as threatening to Yahwistic establishmentarianism? And was it not Amos who affirmed his right to speak out in Yahweh's name, even though he was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet but an individual bursting with intuitive insight?

These prophets were thus in effect affirming that there is a hierarchy of values divinely implanted within the universe and that at the very summit of this hierarchy is the right of the individual to be treated justly and with compassion—and to speak out. At that time, "Thus saith the Lord" was the only means at hand by which Amos, Isaiah, and other prophets could give these values an ontological status capable of offsetting the ontological status being given to institutional and cultic values by other prophets who no less proclaimed "Thus saith the Lord."

These prophets in fact gave an ontological status to a whole array of human hopes and aspirations that they believed would be fulfilled in the fullness of time. They brushed aside empirical obstructions to their Utopian assumptions as irrelevant. They believed god, not man, reigned over future possibilities. Thus Isaiah did not hesitate to proclaim that a day would come when Egypt, Assyria, and Israel would be equal in God's sight; when swords would be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks; when the wolf would lie down with the lamb, and children would frolic over the den of the asp; when exploitation would be no more; and when death itself would die.

Prophetic anticipations such as these translate easily into any contemporary ethic aimed at motivating individuals to strive for a world beyond warring nations; for a human community rid of exploitation and repression; for cessation of war between human beings and nature. Today, as then, these hopes, ideals, and aspirations may prove to be vain, but this does not nullify their ethical value.

The ethical imperatives articulated by Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah—imperatives focusing as they did on interpersonal relations, societal infrastructure, international relations, and future possibilities—were themselves capped by a quantum leap that carried with it a first principle from which a biblical foundation of contemporary ethics can be deductively derived. This quantum leap was the first chapter of the book of Genesis.

Stripped of its time-bound form and mode of expression, the first chapter of Genesis gives us a single being the consequence of whose existence is a hierarchical universe that has at its apex a single individual, pictured as being the image of God, who is endowed by this creator-God with the right and the power to make of this universe what he or she wills. However omnipotent this God may appear to be, it is evident that this God does not have the power to deprive the individual of his or her free will, even when the individual defies God's commands and goes his or her own aberrant way.

This Being is pictured as having created a universe and not a particular land or a particular people. So, too, did He create a single individual and not a tribe, or a race, or a nation, or a class, or a gender. The first individual was created in this Being's image and often this Being's likeness—an image and likeness that was no more male than it was female—and this individual was given *carte blanche* to draw out either the good built into the universe or the evil that the rejection of the good would bring in its train. All of creation was thus made dependent on the human choice.

What are the ethical imperatives that follow logically from an affirmation that the outcome of the universe is dependent on the choices that the individual will make in his or her efforts to shape the universe in such a way as to fulfill ideal aspirations, whether they be good or evil, worthy or unworthy, possible or impossible in relationship to what the ultimate laws governing the universe allow?

Beginning as we must with the free-choosing individual, it would seem to follow necessarily that the preservation of that individual must be the ultimate concern of ethics. All other concerns must pale before

this and assume the role of corollaries, not axioms. The questions that must be addressed are those that focus on how a universal infrastructure can be built that guarantees freedom and choice to individuals. A cornerstone of such an infrastructure will necessarily be the proviso that no individual, group, race, nation state, or ideology may remove this cornerstone. Since such a cornerstone has yet to be built, the critical ethical imperative on the agenda is its construction. And of all the obstacles that stand in the way of building this cornerstone is the division of the world into sovereign nation states that elevate national rights over the rights of the individual. Was it not the stirring up of national frenzy that made a shambles of Europe in World War I? Was it not an appeal to nationalism and racism that justified Hitler's ravagings of the European continent and the perpetration of an unprecedented Holocaust? Is it not an appeal to national rights that even now justifies the "hot" wars among third world nations, and the cold war between the superpowers? Until this critical problem is solved and the as yet unbuilt cornerstone is constructed, every individual will be haunted with the fear that his or her individuality may some day be ravaged. It thus turns out that the prime ethical imperative that follows from the first chapter of Genesis is the prime ethical imperative we need today: the building of a transnational world in which the right of the individual to choose freely is everywhere vouchsafed.

Here then is a biblical foundation on which a contemporary ethic may be built. It is not *the* biblical foundation. The Bible itself is a storehouse filled with foundations for whatever ethical system one might wish to build. It is the record of a people's odyssey with a God who was responsive to the tides of time, circumstance, and changing futures; a God for all seasons; a God whose omnipotence lay in his power to continuously become other than he was thought and proclaimed to have been. Yet by virtue of this proclivity for change, this God turns out to be but a mirror image of the reality that human beings have contended with and must still contend with when they seek ethical principles and certitudes. For like the God of Israel, reality is always changing, no less for contemporary minds searching with the tools of critical reason than for those minds of yesteryear who searched with the tools of intuitive insight and "naive" faith. How many times since the Copernican Revolution has the reality probed by the critical mind changed? How many mutually incompatible ethical systems have been deduced from the Newtonian, the Darwinian, the Einsteinian, the Planckian models of reality? And what deductions will be made in the years to come? Should

"strings" theory, the mathematics of chaos, and mind-imitating computers compel us to acknowledge that the reality we had come to take for granted was not as total as we thought it to be?

Israel's changing concept of God and our changing realities may thus not be so different despite the radically different presuppositions about God that may separate us from the biblical writers—except in one most important respect. Whereas the changing God of the Bible was enveloped by the dogmatic belief that he changed not at all; and whereas even the most audacious of the prophets ascribed their intuitive insights and mental ruminations to a direct revelation from God, contemporary thinkers are free of those dogmatic and doctrinal constraints that in the past sought to keep critical reason in check. The framework that bounds our quest for truth assures that the quest will be unbounded. It is this difference that makes all the difference in the world and it was for this reason that logical imperatives of the first chapter of Genesis were doomed to be overwhelmed by the logical disjunctions that coexist alongside them in the biblical canon, and by the overarching assumptions of a God external to the universe and humankind and endowed with the power to will and execute the impossible.

By contrast, the ethical imperatives drawn by contemporary thinkers can be spelled out with logical rigor in the hope that rational minds will see that if we begin with the free-choosing individual as the cornerstone of our ethic, and with a reality that is accessible to individual minds irrespective of the bodies in which they are housed, or the country in which they find themselves, then the ethical imperative that follows is the building of a global infrastructure supportive of the free-thinking and free-choosing individual who will be guided by ethical imperatives logically following from this enhanced stage of human possibility. On that day, but only on that day, will a biblical foundation of contemporary ethics become the foundation of a freely acknowledged universal ethic.