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Scripture and Christian Ethics

With a focus on Psalm 119, Oliver O'Donovan here explores the task of Christian ethics and Scripture as God's word to illumine our path. Warning against certain approaches to 'using the Bible in ethics', he explores the task of interpretation, the nature of commands, and concludes with reflections on the historical narrative of the Bible in relation to love and hate, good and evil.

'How shall a young man keep his way pure?' asked the Psalmist. 'By guarding it in keeping with thy word' (Ps. 119:9). Before the American translators turned his question into a general debating topic about 'young people', it seemed that this was a question that really *mattered* to the poet. The 'young man' was himself, poised on the threshold of life, with everything still to be determined. He has need of a word, because he has a way to find, and he is unsure of it. He wants his way to be not merely *safe,* but *pure* – 'uncompromised', we might say, worthy of a human being's one and only venture at life. The poet's own way, on the other hand, is to consist of study and poetic composition. This becomes a metaphor for the task of life itself:

> Thy statutes have been my songs in my pilgrim-lodging (Ps. 119:54).

He depends upon the word of God, then, not only for the *management* of his life but for its *object*. That word is the great need of his existence, and without it he cannot act or live.

I begin from Psalm 119, the most precise artistic composition in the Hebrew Scriptures, because it is wholly concerned with the relation between the word of God and the task of living. God's word is named in every line, in one of a variety of ways: it is law, statutes, testimonies, commands, precepts, judgments, ways, word, utterance, truth. The task of living is also named in a multitude of ways, but always in general terms. We do not encounter any reference to *specific* moral tasks, bringing up children, for example, or forgiving enemies. The focus of this so-called 'law-Psalm' is existential, rather than casuistic. The poet is urgently, all-consumingly concerned with the totality of his existence. The opening lines highlight this in a very dramatic way. For the Psalm begins with a formal-sounding liturgical blessing on the righteous (who are spoken of in the plural), and refers to YHWH, too, in the third person (uniquely in the poem).

> Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord,
> Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart,

And indeed do no wrong, but walk in his ways! (Ps. 119:1-3)

But then the style changes abruptly. A personal terror suddenly breaks through this calm moral and theological framework. The poet cries '*Attah*', '*Thou!*' and pleads urgently for 'my' ways.

Thou hast commanded thy precepts, to be kept diligently.
O that my ways may be steadfast…! (Ps. 119:4-5)

And so he continues for the remaining 171 lines, always addressing YHWH in the second person as 'thou', always referring to himself as 'I', always full of insecurity about his 'ways', yet finding a constant ground for trust in God's variegated and multi-faceted word that remains fixed in his memory, to be repeated over and over again until he comes to his final point of rest:

I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant, for thy commandments I do not forget! (Ps. 119:176)

Approaching the questions of ethics

This poem is a model for our approach to the questions of ethics. This must be an *existential* approach, in which the questions of ethics are our questions, the issue of which will determine the success or failure of our lives as human beings. It must be a *poetic* approach, for our task is not mere repetition but a creation in action, a *poiesis*. But it is not in any way an improvisation. It is a response to the word of God which, in giving the world its meaning and intelligibility, gives meaning also to our active engagement with the world. Of this word we stand in urgent need. Why?

The only way we have of engaging with life is by *thinking* about it; and thought requires a shape, a form. To my students in Oxford I sometimes gave lectures called 'How to think about how to act'. But, of course, this title is strictly speaking redundant. If I simply called it, 'How to act', I would have to speak about thinking, because without thought we cannot act, properly speaking; we can only *re*-act inconsiderately. But to *think about acting* we need a conception of the context into which we act, and of the kind of action it requires. The 'word' gives us our conception of what we are doing at any moment, and of the context in which we are doing it.

We may, of course, act on the basis of a *false* word, a *mis*-conception of our task, of the context, of the good to be pursued. And so we seek to make our word responsive to a true word, a word that can shape our word, test it and purify it, ensuring its truthfulness to reality. This will be

- a *descriptive word,* that tells us of the world into which we must act.
- a *commanding word,* directing us to the action we are to perform.
- a *reconciling word,* accommodating our act to its context in the world.
- a *word of judgment,* displaying what is right in the world in which we must act.
- a *prophetic word,* disclosing that act which is in the purposes of God.
- a *reasonable word,* illuminating the practical logic of our situation.

- a *saving word*, delivering us from the self-destruction of acting wrongly.
- a *condemning word,* excluding the way of self-destruction.

Many false polarities and oppositions that we like to throw up in abstract debate are overcome in this description. The word will not be *either* descriptive *or* prescriptive; it will be both. It will not be *either* Gospel *or* Law, but both. It will not be *either* rational *or* revealed, but both. These poles are bridged by the word that guides our action and gives us life.

Finding a true word: how is such a word to be found?

We cannot derive this word from the circumstances of our action. Circumstances may demand that we act, but they are powerless to instruct us *how* we are to act. To try to guide our action by the circumstances is to take the question for the answer. If the circumstances already contained a knowledge of the action they required of us, it would not be *action* at all that they required, only *reaction*. Then we should be creatures of the course of events, passive playthings of events, not poets of action. If we come upon a road accident, nothing in the bare fact of the road accident dictates that we stop and get out and offer help. If we respond to *that* circumstance in *that* way, it is because we construe it in a certain way, and that goes beyond the bare fact that the accident has happened.

We cannot derive this word from our own judgment. If we could do that, of course, all the Psalmist's anxiety would be unnecessary. We would already possess the enlightenment that we seek. It is, it seems, the typical belief of an Olympic athlete on the starting line that long training and preparation has given him or her everything necessary, so that all that remains is to 'pull it out' and victory will be assured. The wise athlete, however, remembers that there are competitors thinking in exactly the same way. 'All the runners compete, but only one receives the prize' (1 Cor. 9:24). To claim to find the word we need within ourselves is like denying that the risk of failure exists. The peril is precisely that we cannot be sure of ourselves. The threat of misjudgment is always a real one; self-destruction and shame are always threatening possibilities. And so our moral judgment looks to find a word that it does not already possess in itself, an 'illumination' for the way. It needs to be *given* a word, and for such a gift it needs a giver.

We cannot derive this word from traditional wisdom. Tradition mediates. It is not a source, but a communication. Everything we learn comes *by* tradition, but nothing derives *from* tradition, since tradition originates nothing and conveys everything. The question we have to answer in our search for a word of direction is precisely, *what* tradition? Where, among the multitude of words conveyed to us by society, church and books do we identify *this* word, the word that will illumine our way before us truthfully? Our ancestors would not have needed much prompting at this point, but would have replied, that God has supplied us with such a word in Holy Scripture. The untutored piety of the faithful concurs with this. It is, indeed, the right answer. But we are not in a position today where this answer, which is in itself simply an answer of tradition, can be taken for granted. We have to explore this answer rather carefully.

Scripture and God's Word

God's word is a history, a sequence of events. 'In many and various ways God spoke… through the prophets…but in this last age he has spoken through his Son' (Heb. 1:1). He gives it to us in announcing himself to us as our God. He announced himself as our God first in the act by which he *elected Israel* to its vocation in the economy of salvation, and then in the act by which he *elected Jesus* as his Servant. In announcing himself to us as the law of our action, he is not presenting himself in *any other way* than he announces himself as God of Israel and the Father of the Lord Jesus. His presentation of himself as the foundation of our active life is one and the same as his presentation of himself as the foundation of our human history: he presents himself as the Word made flesh. All our active life follows upon that historical self-presentation, attested by prophets and apostles. Their testimony is present to us in the Holy Scriptures, which are God's chosen means, together with the sacramental practices of the church, of making his self-announcement known in all ages.

Scripture's witness to God's deed of salvation is, therefore, an *aspect* of God's own self-witness in deed and word. The Scriptures are not the *primary* aspect of God's self-witness. The primary aspect is the historical deed by which God summoned Israel and Jesus. But the Scriptures are not something *separate from* God's self-witness, not a later commentary on it that could be removed leaving the original self-witness intact. They are, we could say, God's *administration* of his self-witness in his deeds, the testimony he has authorised to them, the seal he has set on them to confirm and declare that they are true.

The faith required of the reader of Holy Scripture is faith in the testimony of God to his saving work, and that is one and the same as faith in salvation. The prayer of the Psalmist, 'Give me life according to your word!' is the prayer of faith in Scripture. Faith in Scripture is a readiness to risk living by it and placing our hope in it. It is not a posture of knowing everything or of having the answer to every question. It is a willingness to accept Scripture on its own terms, without presuppositions or conditions that we have imposed upon it. It is an expectation that God will guide and direct us as we read, recite and constantly re-visit those testimonies to the miracle of the Word made flesh. It is faith in *reading,* the discipline by which the Holy Spirit binds our lives and their practical questions into the central drama of history.

'The Use of the Bible in Ethics': A Critique

What we sometimes call 'the use of the Bible in ethics' is simply that faith in Scripture extended into obedience. It is, in my view, an unfortunate phrase.

In the first place, it can create the false impression that *we* form the *project* of moral deliberation, and the Scriptures prove useful to it, they 'come in handy', as it were, like a tool, or, to use another unfortunately common expression, as 'resources' for our self-directing project. Against this impression we have to say that there is no 'use' that is not *obedience,* and there is no obedience that is not simply faith carried forward, as living faith always must be, into action. This obedience is required of

us not by Scripture *as a text,* in the abstract, but by Scripture *as the self-testimony of God,* in which we put our trust as the word that gives us life.

The task of interpretation

There are distinct stages in the task of moral deliberation in response to Scripture. The *interpretative,* or *hermeneutic,* task of understanding what Scripture means is followed by a further task of discernment, a discernment of ourselves, which tradition has called *conscience.* This discernment is not given us within the text of Scripture, but is given by the Holy Spirit as we frame questions about our situation under the illumination of Scripture.

The Scripture tells us not to bear false witness against our neighbour; but whether this or that ambiguous statement that we have in mind to produce in court will be *false* or merely *discrete* or even *charitable*, is something the Scripture will not tell us; we must judge that for ourselves by considering the situation we are in. Moral theologians have a secret knowledge, apparently concealed from other kinds of theologian, especially those devoted to hermeneutics. They know that the most mysterious and most difficult question we ever have to answer is not, *what does Scripture mean?*, but, *what does the situation we are facing mean?*, where do we find ourselves existentially? People speak as though our selves and our situation were known quantities, so that it only remained to choose out of Scripture whatever seemed to fit our situation as we conceived it. But Scripture proves its authority to us precisely by its capacity to *shed light* on our selves and our situation, to overcome our preconceptions about them. We do not, of course, read about our situation *directly* in the Scriptures, yet it is from the Scriptures that we gain the categories of understanding that re-frame our view of our situation and ourselves.

A second false impression that may arise from speaking of the 'use of the Bible in ethics' is that we read the Scriptures in a different way when we have ethical reflection in hand than we do otherwise. The mistake about *ethics* which is made in this case is to conceive it a *specialised* enterprise to think about what we are to do, rather than the *whole* of our active response to God. An ethical reading of the Bible can be no different from a doctrinal or theological reading, because doctrine and ethics are not alternative undertakings, like swimming and sailing, but two phases in one and the same undertaking, that of living. The mistake about *the Bible* which is made in this case is that only some parts of it are relevant for how we shall direct our way. It is a mistake to look in Scripture for certain specifically 'ethical material', which will be different from whatever other material there is in Scripture.

Understanding commands

But what are we to say, then, about the *commands* of the Bible? We all know the joke about the man who sought guidance by opening the Bible at random: after landing first on the statement that Judas went and hanged himself, his second shot brought him to 'Go, and do thou likewise!'. It is not a very funny joke, and suffers from being told too often; but a joke it is, not a tragedy. Why? Because it is about a fool, and jokes are very typically about fools. What made the man in our joke a fool was that he didn't understand something very basic about commanding and being commanded. Namely, that commands are events that occur within a

relationship. A bare order barked out parade-ground fashion means nothing unless there is some parade-ground that will constitute a relation between the barker and the barked at.

Imagine two classes of schoolchildren sitting in contiguous classrooms where, as may sometimes happen, the soundproofing is not perfect, so that the child at the back of classroom A can overhear what is going on in classroom B. The teacher in classroom A says, 'sit quite still and concentrate on the screen', while the teacher in classroom B says, 'get out your books now!' The child has to know *which* class she belongs to and *which* teacher is addressing commands to her, before we can ask sensible questions about whether she is obedient. It is not *obedient* for her to get out her books when another class is told to do so. In order to learn to obey commands, we have to learn to contextualise them, to relate ourselves properly to them.

The fool in the joke doesn't know how to relate himself to the commands he reads in the Bible. The problem is not in the Bible but in him. We might say that he was 'literal minded', but that doesn't quite identify the problem correctly. The two texts he has read make perfectly good sense read literally, on their own terms. It wouldn't help to read them figuratively. But our fool is unable to read them *on their own terms* at all. Preoccupied with finding a reference to himself, he is *diverting* their literal sense in their own context to his context, and so reaching a conclusion that the texts never suggested.

There are, of course, various kinds of writing to be found in the Scriptures. We might say, very roughly and for convenience, that there are four main categories of Scriptural writing: narrative, command, prediction and invocation (*i.e.* prayer and praise). Does it not seem obvious that the commands are what we should look for when we go in quest of the moral relevance of the Bible? That was a tempting step, which some thinkers in the church were taking right back in the patristic period. A fifth-century work called the *Speculum 'Quis ignorat?',* falsely attributed to Augustine, begins: 'Who does not know that within Holy Scripture there are propositions to be understood and believed, and commands and prohibitions to be observed and acted upon?' And then rather tediously it tries to list all the commands in Holy Scripture that are to be observed and acted upon, so that we shall have a compendious code that tells us everything we should and should not do. But no sooner did theologians take this step than they had to step backwards again.

From as early as Justin Martyr we find a distinction made between Old Testament commands that apply to all people everywhere (the 'moral' law) and those that apply only to ancient Jews; and, among these, between those that are superseded soteriologically by Christ (the 'ceremonial' law) and those that are outdated because they presuppose institutions now swept away (the 'civil' law); and then again between commands we keep because they address our created human nature ('natural' law), and those we keep because they summon us to our destiny in Christ ('evangelical' law). The implication of these hermeneutical distinctions is that what appears to be the *immediate* ethical significance of commands can in fact only be grasped when we locate commands within the history of God's self-disclosure.

Commands are *actions,* taken at certain times and in certain circumstances and for certain limited purposes, and divine commands are *acts of God.* They lay claim within their own context primarily, on those to whom they are directly addressed. Because actions have their own intelligibility, and God's actions are understood in the light of his purposes for the world, they may well lay claim importantly upon times and circumstances other than those to which they are first addressed. The Decalogue was not of interest *only* to a barbarous people gathered at the foot of a mountain in Arabia! But in order to judge their bearing on other times and circumstances, we have to observe their function in their historical context first. There is an inference involved. We discovered that a claim of a certain kind was made on them, and then conclude, 'But that applies to us, too!'

I can imagine a certain resistance to this. 'This is just another way,' someone will say, 'of intellectualising our relation with God. The encounter of obedience, which ought to be a matter of immediate obedience, becomes a rational exercise of interpretation'. In a way, yes. In a way, no. Yes, in that our obedience *must be a thoughtful obedience.* No, in that our thoughtful obedience does not exclude the immediacy of the encounter with the commanding God. On the contrary, it is as I give my mind to the witness of Scripture to God's character and will, that the Holy Spirit brings God near to me, and convicts me of what God would have me do. Such moments of fear and trembling before the immediate will of God may come, and we must be open to them. But they are not an *alternative* to the reflective and deliberate thinking, the *logike latreia,* the 'rational worship' (of Rom. 12:1f.), by which our minds are renewed to *dokimazein ta diapheronta,* to 'appreciate distinctions'.

Let us sum it up like this: it is not the *commands the Bible contains* that we obey; it is the *purposes of God that those commands, set in their context, reveal to us.* The purpose of God is the ultimate reason why anything at all is good or evil to do. Sometimes that is what is meant by 'divine command theory', and in that sense any believer will accept it. The Bible is authoritative for ethics because it speaks to us of those purposes and demonstrates them in the acts of God in history.

Biblical history of good and evil

But there is a further step to take. If God's purposes are revealed to us through the *historical narrative* of the Bible, this is because God has revealed them to us progressively, in a series of events. There is a story of God's purposes, from the earliest to latest. Not a story of how God changed his mind – there is a sense in which we may say God changes his mind, and a sense in which we may not say it, but it clearly cannot be said of his purposes for the world he has made and redeemed. It is a story of how God has carried his purposes forward, developed them, progressed from one stage to another with what he has planned whole and entire from the beginning of the world. This historical dimension of God's purposing is what St. Paul calls 'the mystery', the secret purpose which is ready to be made known only in the fulness of time.

This poses an initial difficulty for us. We normally think of right and wrong, good and evil, as a binary system. What is not good is evil; what is not purposed

by God is contrary to God's purposes. This binary perspective is the *deliberative* perspective. That is to say, it applies when we deliberate over a decision. Faced with a question of what to do, we need to bring it down to a binary option, of which we can say: this is the right thing, that is the wrong thing. From this perspective the second-best decision is the wrong decision. But in the reflective perspective we can conceive of *more or less* good, and of *more or less* evil.

'It was a bad decision,' we might say, 'to invade Iraq without certain knowledge that there *were* weapons of mass-destruction; but it would have been worse to have invaded Iraq with the certain knowledge that there were *no* weapons of mass destruction.' But that can only be said in retrospect. From the point of view of the government deliberating whether to invade or not, it is no excuse for making a bad decision that there could be worse decisions. It is only a question of the right decision versus the wrong one.

God, having shaped the successiveness of history in which to display himself to his creatures, has displayed his good purposes successively and progressively. That is, I think, the uniquely Christian view of good and evil, for it is unique to Christian faith to see a purposiveness of this kind in the history of the works of God – to divide the divine revelation into the Old and the New. But it is not easy even for Christians to think consistently about this *narrative of goodness*. The difficulties that every generation feels about the ethics of the Old Testament are really difficulties about this one thing: that we should think in terms of an Old and a New in the revelation of goodness. But if we fail to think in that way, if we impose a binary system and say that whatever is not the best is simply bad, then we will fail to see how the goodness that God offers us *perfects* and *transcends* what we naturally intuit and experience. We shall cut ourselves off from the Kingdom of Heaven.

Loving and Hating
For our example let us go back to the Sermon on the Mount: 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy". But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' (Matt. 5:43,44). We are not at all inclined to believe Jesus when he says 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall hate your enemy"'. Remember all those commentaries that eagerly point out that this is not a word-for-word quotation of the Old Testament. No, but you don't have to look far to find the sense. The Old Testament is full of concern that we should learn to direct our hatred rightly.

> Do I not hate them that hate thee, O Lord? And do I not loathe them that rise up against thee?
> I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.
> Search me, O God and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!
> And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

The Psalmist's self-examination leads him to ask: are *my* enemies *God's* enemies? The only *true* hatred is a hatred of objective evil, modelled on God's hostility to evil. Hatred has its significance for us as a concrete rejection of some evil, and our hatreds must be tested against that measure.

It is not enough to say that suppressing our hatreds is destructive. That is merely to say that if we have hatred, we must be honest about it, as we must be honest about any weakness – lust, say, or greed for money. But 'what we have heard it said' about hatred is not that it is like lust or greed. It is that we can and must learn a *righteous* hatred, an indignation wholly directed to wickedness and evil, purged of moodiness, petulance, inflamed irritability, unreasonable suspicion. Suppression of hatred is destructive because it hides from our view the injustices that lurk within our hatreds and need to be purged out of it, and because it fails to take the justice that God demands seriously enough. To hate rightly is to purge oneself of collusion with injustice.

And it is against that background that Jesus teaches us to *love* our enemies. When I learn so to hate that I long for the justice of God, then I recognise that that *same* justice is precisely what my enemy needs. The injustice in the relation is to be put right not only *for me,* but *for him*, too, because it is God's justice, which is like the sun which he makes to rise on the evil and the good, and the rain which he sends on the just and the unjust. So I begin to love my enemy as myself, by discovering that what I want for myself I want most profoundly for him, too.

'Love the sinner, hate the sin': we frequently repeat Augustine's summary of Jesus' command, but without any sense of how difficult a discipline it is. Neither Israel nor we could get there in one step. If we reduce our sense of good and evil to the binary alternatives – enmity bad, friendliness good – we shall never learn what it is that Jesus has commanded us: by purging and surrendering our hatreds, to allow them to be transformed into love. The fate of those who will not first learn to hate rightly is that they will not learn to love rightly, i.e. to love *in the truth*.

Therefore, Christian ethics would be the principles derived from the Christian faith by which we act. While God's Word may not cover every situation we face throughout our lives, its principles give us the standards by which we must conduct ourselves in those situations where there are no explicit instructions. For example, the Bible does not say anything explicitly about the use of illegal drugs, yet based on the principles we learn through Scripture, we can know that it is wrong. By using the principles we find in Scripture, Christians can determine the ethical course for any given situation. In some cases it will be simple, like the rules for Christian living we find in Colossians, chapter 3. In other cases, however, we need to do a little digging. The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics - December 2000. And sometimes they are ethical decisions; for example, deciding not to drink and drive. With each of these examples most people will agree that there are certain straightforward motives that explain why people make the decisions they do: it makes more sense; it feels better; it is 'the right thing to do', respectively. All Christian ethics recognizes the Christian scriptures, tradition, and church teaching as the revelatory sources of moral wisdom and knowledge. However, there is much discussion as to how these sources relate to one another and to the nonrevelatory sources of Christian ethics. Protestant Christian ethics has as its distinctive characteristics an emphasis on freedom, an anticasuistic approach, the primacy of Scripture, and an emphasis on the theological nature of the discipline. Martin Luther (d. 1546) and the reformers in general stressed the freedom of the Christian, and freedom has characterized much of Protestant life and ethics. Most Christian ethicists agree that the sources for doing ethics include revelation (scripture) and tradition, as well as human reason and experience. Being shaped by Biblical revelation is the primary way that Christian ethics can be distinguished from alternative ethical perspectives, both religious and secular; thus one important question for a Christian ethicist is how morality (the practice) or ethics (ideas about the practice) depends on religion (convictions and commitments) or theology (critical discussion about those convictions and commitments). Scripture is the Christian authority for ethics, just as it is for theology. This is because God is our ultimate authority and standard, for he himself is goodness. While Christians know God's character through reading Scripture, unbelievers are able to partially and imperfectly understand what is good through the created order and their consciences. And while Christians ultimately derive their ethics from Scripture, different parts of Scripture (like the Mosaic legal code) must be read in their redemptive historical context and not simply applied from one distant culture to another. Philosophical systems that attempt to provide ethical norms can be helpful for the Christian thinking about ethics, but Scripture must remain the authority for any Christian ethical endeavor.