

SOME PHASES OF THE ETHICAL CHARACTER  
OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE  
ETHICS OF ANCIENT ORIENTAL  
PEOPLES.

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The morals of a person or a people are a true index of character. The ethical code of the Old Testament has been, and is to-day, a stumbling-block for many to belief in the Bible. It is presented, however, not as an organized and complete system of morals, but is rather gathered up from here and there throughout the various and diverse books and set forth in accordance with modern occidental methods.

The necessity of treating this theme is increasingly apparent. To some readers, the Old Testament is full of the impossible, and inexplicable, and the unthinkable. Many of its characters, though nominally believers in God, they say, were inexpressibly bad, and their conduct such as to condemn them without a hearing. Their code of morals would not be tolerated in any civilized nation on earth, and their presence in the Old Testament involves the whole book in their guilt. With such a decision there is large sympathy on the part of the apathetic who are looking for some pretext behind which they can hide their neglect and their indifference.

Again, some of the most vigorous and telling attacks on the Old Testament, and that includes the New as well, have been and are hurled against the sins, both individual and national that are there spread out with so much gruesome detail. One of the latest books on Old Testament history vigorously condemns and practically excommunicates from the roll of the saints some of the characters who have in the past occupied honorable places. Even

the actions of Jehovah himself, in commanding the extermination of the Canaanites, and the slaughter of the Amalekites are characterized in the famous lectures delivered in royal audience in Berlin within the past three years, as savagery and butchery of an incredible and uncompromising kind. The presence in the Old Testament of many chapters, hundreds of expressions, figures, and facts, that ill-become the modesty of this age, have given occasion for many bitter condemnations of the Bible.

On the other hand, there is another class of readers and students of the Old Testament, whose unswerving belief in the wisdom and truth of its every act and utterance, feels called upon to defend it. In their attempt to justify and vindicate the language and the characters of the Bible, they usually employ such arguments and methods as rather confuse than aid the man or woman who is seeking the truth. A practical example: A few years ago I heard one of the most eloquent preachers in this land publicly declare with solemn emphasis, that the so-called immodest language of the Bible was intended by God only for private reading, and therefore forms no objection whatever. Whence did he obtain such information?

Again, some of our most zealous defenders of God's Word seem to think that they are required to justify the words and deeds of Old Testament characters on the basis of New Testament standards of right; and in the process, they slip down themselves, and thus display their own lack of footing. For example, when Abraham went down to Egypt, and told Pharaoh, to save his own life, that Sarah was his sister, he was justified on the ground that she was his half-sister. Justified! Only half a lie, then! But moral confusion of such a defense stirred up in the mind of the listener is worse by far than the original act of Abraham.

We have no right to require of Old Testament characters that they should be measured by the moral standards of the New Testament, and every attempt to compel them to do it results not only in a perversion of the

facts, but in a confusion of moral standards in the minds of our listeners, that can result only in harm to the cause of Christianity.

These various views and methods of explaining the so-called moral difficulties of the Old Testament, have resulted in sore confusion in the minds of some earnest students. They have led some either to shatter, or make complete shipwreck of their faith and to reject the Bible *in toto*. Others have set up their own standards of judgment, and by means of these, accept or reject the biblical books and doctrines. In fact, the chief fault found with the Bible in the past, and I might say in the present, has been not because of its moral and religious claims upon the individual, but because of its pictures of the immoral and irreligious men and women of Bible times. In other words, the Bible has been and is largely judged, not by its rules of conduct, but by its living examples or supposed embodiments of those rules. Such a standard of judgment is both natural and justifiable. We all admire the sublime and beautiful precepts and ethics of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Confucianism, even though moral conduct is not required by any of them. They are inspiring and elevating and ennobling. But our judgment of the real value of either of these faiths, is based, not on the exquisite literary form or statement of their sacred books, but on the results seen in the lives and characters of the peoples and nations where these faiths hold sway. We must grant the justness of the contention of the man who finds difficulties in the Old Testament and must seek in a helpful and rational manner to dissolve his doubts. For these questions, these moral precipitates of those times, are not insoluble.

It is not my purpose to discuss the entire moral code of the Old Testament, nor to answer the avalanche of questions that deals with its application. I shall rather confine myself to a consideration of the basis of the phases of conduct that we find scattered through the Old

Testament and shall take up a few examples by way of illustration.

1. Recent discoveries in the ancient oriental world have lifted the clouds from our sky, and let in some of the sunlight of God's day. Shining through the prism of modern scholarship this light has been broken into its different colors, so that we are enabled to distinguish between the different shades of thought and truth, and further to explain more fully their proper relations to each other.

To be more specific, the Hebrew people, as we have seen, were a part of the ancient Oriental world. They were only a small folk living in the midst of an active, aggressive body of great nations, such as the Egyptians, the Babylonians-Assyrians, the Hittites, and the Phœnicians. They were an integral part of that civilization that had its home on the East coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Its own neighbors and associates were the Canaanites, the Moabites, the Edomites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, and the Syrians or Aramæans. Recent discoveries on the soil of the territory occupied by several of these ancient peoples, and the records of the Old Testament give us a fairly true picture of the moral as well as political conditions that were prevalent among them. Their proximity to them, their substantial oneness of language, their commercial relations, their common modes of life, made them in these respects, at least, sympathetic and helpful to each other. Such points in common led to intermarriages, and all that that implies. The moral standards, and the religious obligations, of each individual people could not, under these conditions, long remain isolated. Custom and conduct are too closely intermingled and inter-related to allow of any violent or even gentle rending asunder. Israel then as a people became entangled in all that characterized the peoples on the East coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

But some one may ask, Were they not the people of Jehovah, and as such under his guidance? Certainly; and they were also people of those times. Right here we

must make an essential distinction. Doubtless, God chose Abraham, revealed himself to him, made a covenant with him, and made him the progenitor of the Hebrew peoples. To the leaders and the prophets, God spoke in diverse manners and in diverse places. The best classes of Israel knew Jehovah, and served him in their way, not in any one period, but in all periods of their history in the Old Testament. My contention carries with it the thought that Israel in its leaders knew God, and maintained the highest form of worship known to the world. Furthermore, I affirm that for all such Israelites their conception of God was the ruling idea of life. Morality for them was what God commanded, and immorality was what he forbade. To the pious Israelite, God was the basis and the sanction of moral law.

Nevertheless, the nation as a nation, and the leaders as leaders, were not immune to their environment. To make them so would be to regard them as unhuman, as demigods, and thus characters with whom we could not deal or sympathize. They were an integral part of the life of their times, and in all our discussion, this fact must be reckoned with.

2. Any detailed and full discussion of the ethics of the Old Testament will embody answers to two questions: (1) What did God command? (2) What did God prohibit? To answer these in full would be to set forth the complete provisions of the law, affirmative and negative. Furthermore, such answer would be a true presentation of the methods by which Jehovah sought to lift up, elevate, and train Israel in the paths that he desired they should walk. In other words, if such a full and complete code of laws could be made we should no longer be in doubt as to the divine programme for the separation, the elevation, and perfection of a people after his own heart.

But unfortunately, we cannot do this thing. No two schools of Bible students or scholars agree. But on one point there is harmony. All agree that God took Israel as he found her, among, and mingled with, the peoples of

her time, saturated by the social and moral ideas of those times. By gentle steps, and gradual rises, sometimes scarcely perceptible, he led her up out of the total degradation of her neighbors, to appreciate in some small degree higher and better things. He gave her laws only as she could comprehend them, and such laws as would not violently break down the most deep-seated customs of the day. Prohibitions seem to have been the most favorite form of early law, revealing the fact that the conduct of Israel was such that improvement must be made by a series of eliminations. Of the ten commandments, eight are prohibitions, one a command with an implied penalty attaching to its violation, and followed by a prohibition. Now those so-called ten commandments or words cover the moral action of Israel as required by God. Several of these prohibitions had been made prior to the giving of the law at Sinai, but are here first concisely and specifically laid down.

Soon after the flood there was established between God and Abraham covenant relations, symbolic of intercourse between them. This covenant carried with it certain obligations of obedience and loyalty to Jehovah. Such obedience implied an abandonment of certain popularly recognized local customs, and rules of conduct. Murder had been prohibited just after the flood; and the sin of Sodom had been condemned by the judgment of God. But the ten prohibitions as they should be more justly termed did not cover the whole category of sins. They required man to worship the one true God reverently, to honor the Sabbath and his parents, and to have due regard to the family and property rights of his fellow-man. Interpreted merely from an external point of view, these would strike at the heart of many of the most flagrant violations of divine and human law current among the nations who were Israel's neighbors. But the immorality and the wrongs that were permitted, aside from those which were openly and secretly violated, are to some the disturbing factors in the problems before us. We are to keep per-

petually in mind, the fact that the *morale* of every nation about Israel, and of the mass of Israel itself, was of a low, degraded order, that they were swayed by their passions as the sea is by the winds, that they had slight stability, and less resistance to outbursts of anger, violence, and bloodshed. Furthermore, the commands and pronouncements of God secured their enforcement almost entirely by the bonds of the covenant, or the fear of a penalty. Such being the case, it is plainly evident that the authority of the law alone made but slight gains until a class of men arose whose mission it was to speak for God.

Let us now look at some of the sins which were prevalent but were not prohibited by law. Polygamy appears before the flood (Lamech), and is prevalent during all of Israel's pre-exile history. We find it in the families of Abraham, Jacob, Esau, Gideon, David, Solomon, Rehoboam, and Josiah. Oriental tribal leaders, rulers, landed-proprietors, and kings, in all the nations about Israel, in Egypt, Babylon, Elam and Persia were of one mind, in the perpetuation of this ancient custom. The only limit that seems to have curbed it was the shortage of resources for the maintenance of so expensive a household.

The prevalence of polygamy led to the extension and multiplication of a whole list of horrible social evils, that threatened the very existence of some of the peoples of that day. Priests, prophets, and reformers cried out against them as the bane of civilization. The seventh commandment touches only one of these sins.

Lying was recognized as a legitimate method of acquiring the ends sought after—the end justified the means—and was indulged in by king and peasant. Deception, a lie's half-sister, not simply in war, but in peace, and everywhere was regarded as both right and honorable, provided one was not caught in the act. Abraham and Jacob succeeded in winning their cases, and hence by Oriental codes of ethics were in the right—nor, indeed, by their interpretation did they break any of the prohibitions

of the ten commandments. "Thou shalt not kill," was doubtless intended to be a curb on the prevalence of blood-revenge. If a man intentionally or accidentally killed another, it was the duty of the nearest kinsman or of the tribe of the slain to slay the murderer. This custom became so destructive, that often almost entire tribes were, as they are to-day, in the Orient, wiped off the map. The statement of the sixth commandment is explicit, but was not effective in checking the scourge of blood revenge. The selection of six cities of refuge located in different parts of the land, was intended as an appendix to the sixth commandment. To these the unintentional slayer could flee and after trial and proof of his accidental murder, could remain in security until after the death of the high-priest.

But the violations of this law, with few exceptions, were almost as common in Israel as among their neighbors. Human life was of little account, as we see in the many bloody conflicts both of individuals and of nations. Wars of extermination both of families and of peoples were the order of the day, and some of them, too, for trivial offenses. Such was the unwritten law of the nations, *against which the written law of Jehovah was almost powerless. To say that the sixth commandment meant, "Thou shalt not kill without good reason," does not explain the constant violations of it that fill the pages of the Old Testament.*

Besides the decalogue Israel had laws touching assaults, treatment of slaves, relations of parents and children, idol-worship and magic, property lost, strayed, or stolen, the poor, unjust judges, etc. These provisions put checks on the current customs of the times, and thus gradually set Israel apart as a people of God's own choice.

While all this may be truly said, it is, at the same time, a fact, that quite all of these regulations just noted were codified and enforced 1,000 years before Moses' day by that master warrior and ruler, Hammurabi, in the valley



of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. The common law of the great nations was also being enforced among the smaller and less completely organized governments.

The specifications against uncleanness in person and in foods, the provisions for sins of ignorance and other delinquencies point to a system of sacrifices that did much to maintain the moral tone of the law. Beneath and permeating every sacrificial provision, and every ritual requirement, is the holiness of Jehovah.

The legal provisions of Deuteronomy emphasize some things hitherto implied. Justice between man and man, through the medium of impartial and God-fearing judges, attains new importance. The moral character of Jehovah is brought out into a new light, thus impressing upon Israel the desirability of remaining true to one who is so faithful and long suffering toward his own people, and the stranger. The whole book looks at the religious progress of the nation, rather than at the observances of the ritual.

The historical books are marvelously lacking in references to the law or to its enforcement. They show us a people who were gradually rising through a tribal to a unified national existence. Many examples might be cited of the moral obliquity of the actors, to show that Israel was as yet barely rising above the environment of her neighbors. Jael's treachery within the confines of her own tent, and the poet's praise of her, underscore all that has been said of Israel's *morale* in the early years of her history.

As we pass now to the prophetic and poetic utterances, we encounter a new force. The prophet supplemented the ten commandments; he wrought for the ethical evolution of Israel. Ritual and sacrifice became to him of secondary importance. The nation and man should come into direct relation with God. Mere sacrifices were valueless. Their efficacy was positively conditional on the attitude of the offerer. The moral law must be kept in all

its details, and violation of it would be followed by condign punishment.

The strongest representation of Israel's relation to Jehovah is that of a wife to her husband. In each of the great prophets, and particularly in Hosea, this relationship is set forth with tenderness and pathos. The prophet was the moral arbiter of the times. He condemned the numberless and nameless evils that were sapping the nation's power. So far as we can measure, he introduced few new moral ideas, but rather gave his strength to the widest application of the those already current in Israel.

The underlying idea of law, the holiness of Jehovah, became his fundamental text. Purity of life, of worship, and of ritual, and in this order, were his cry. Only such as embodied these virtues were immune from the judgments of Jehovah. Such a doctrine repeatedly and persistently emphasized, passed from the nation to the individual as the one and only one directly responsible for his own acts. But the righteous person's righteousness could not be imparted to another, nor could it be efficient in averting any punishment of which another was guilty. Actual things done were the measure of a man's responsibility. Nevertheless, man's responsibility reached beyond himself, and his good or his evil acts were far-reaching.

The prophets penetrated the shams of their day with divine insight and wisdom. They openly condemned kings, princes, and priests for their commercializing methods of worship. Sacrifices should not be perverted for private gain (Saul), nor the moral law violated for purely personal and selfish ends (Ahab and Manasseh). One who could not appreciate Jehovah directly, could not reach him through a sacrifice, for it was the heart, and not the act that determined the man's character in the presence of God.

The Psalms are the moralist's treasure-house. Underneath the poet's exuberant and buoyant faith in God we discover the highest respect for divine law, and its

application in his daily life. Every event of his day, every fact of history is based on his supreme regard for law, and the transcendent moral character of the law-giver. With fiery wrath and burning indignation, he heaps his imprecations upon the wicked, and can find no punishment for them too cruel, or too well-deserved. His humanity, his enmity for the enemies of God, combine to give us writings that are but a natural outburst of his sense of justice.

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of ethical precepts. It is built on the desirability of living a moral life. Its motive seems to have been wholly utilitarian. "Be" and "do right" for that is the road to success. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." "Honor Jehovah with thy substance, and with the first-fruits of thy increase; so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy vats shall overflow with new wine" (3: 9, 10). "Fear Jehovah and depart from evil: It will be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones" (3: 7, 8). The two ever-present characters of Proverbs are the Wise Man and the Fool, compared and contrasted until we can faithfully sketch each one of them. They are the personifications respectively of a law-abiding, and of a reprobate life.

"Why do the righteous suffer?" is the question of the book of Job, unanswered and still unanswerable.

The pessimist of Ecclesiastes, having exhausted all the means at hand for the gratification of his desires falls back on the simple truth, "fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole of man" (Eccl. 12:13).

Having now briefly scanned some of the main features of Old Testament morality, let us take a general view of the case.

We have seen that the Hebrews were steeped in the customs and manners of their times; that they were so wedded to the traditions and the life of their day, that it needed more than man-power to lift them. God's choice of one man and his immediate descendants as the vehicles

of his truth, put the first check on a headlong rush towards destruction and extinction. A code of ten prohibitions, enjoined on his covenant people, formed the nucleus of a new ethical code. This nucleus, by a process of elimination, prohibited many of those acts of men that had been for centuries the cause of the degradation of worship and the disintegration of social life. Besides reverence for Jehovah as the *one* God, and regard for the property of their fellow men, there were special laws on the duties of man to himself, to his fellow-man, to the animal creation, to the soil, and to nature itself. Every such restriction on conduct was a step in advance, and gradually widened and enlarged the moral horizon of the man who was obedient to the God who was the basis of all moral law.

The coming of the prophets introduces to us a class of men whose life-work was the condemnation of every violation of high ethical standards, and the enforcement of the just claims of the moral law. Their conception of right was grounded in the holiness of Jehovah, and no sacrifice was adequate to secure his approval that did not carry with it a penitent heart. The poets of Israel built their productions on moral standards that far eclipse anything found in the literatures of their antecedents or contemporaries. In short, the ethical standards of Israel were based on the moral character of Jehovah as revealed in the successive laws, prohibitions, commands, and regulations entrusted to the prophets, priests and reformers through a long period of years, as over against those of contemporary peoples, which were based either on the caprice of the gods or the decisions of a ruler.

3. With this bird's-eye view of the ethical character of the Old Testament what can be said of its so-called moral difficulties? We have seen that the method of revelation was gradual and disciplinary, and that the purpose of the law was pedagogical; that it was enjoined and enforced only as fast and as far as the elementary minds of the age could apprehend and appreciate it. Such a

method of procedure permitted, rather did not prohibit, at first many things that do violence to our ideas of right. The so-called moral difficulties, rather immoral acts, of the Old Testament, where they are neither prohibited nor rebuked, are simply to be regarded as moral defects of the age, requiring neither justification nor vindication on our part. Our New Testament standards tell us what those sins were, but do not ask that we palliate or excuse them, or attempt to explain them on any artificial hypothesis of the inviolability of Holy Scriptures.

When Jehovah commanded the extinction of the Canaanites, or Saul's slaughter of the Amalekites, he was doing nothing more than to allow the natural hatred and the blood revenge of the peoples of that day to have full sway. There was no cold blooded, unprovoked move on God's part. In the same spirit, he uses the Assyrian as the rod of his anger to punish wayward Judah (Isa. 10:5), and the Babylonians to punish all the earth.

The moral character of Jehovah, here as elsewhere, in the Old Testament, was displayed in its disciplinary, pedagogical acts, based on a high motive in the training of the race.

When Gideon had routed the Midianites, he captured two of the leaders, Zebah and Zalmunna. On learning that they had slain his own brethren at some earlier time, he, in accordance with the requirements of blood-revenge, slew them, his own captives, in cold blood.

Samuel took a sword and hewed Agag to pieces in the presence of Saul and the people—from our point of view a bloody, inexcusable crime. But Agag was the Amalekite king whom Saul had brought home as a trophy of victory, when he had been commanded to destroy the entire tribe. Samuel was simply concluding with his own hand the orders that had been given to Saul to slay all the devoted or banned living beings.

In David's last charge to Solomon, he includes the slaying of Joab and Shimei. This has been called a cowardly, savage order, that greatly discredits the great

king's character. But regard for the safety of an Oriental monarch and his throne required that all rivals and dangerous men in authority should be dispatched. This fact, with some purely human and thoroughly Oriental spirit of revenge, sufficiently account for David's orders.

These are some of the illustrations, of the scores found in the Old Testament, of difficulties that practically vanish when put under the light of ancient Oriental ethical codes.

Before I conclude I wish to revert to one fact mentioned in the beginning of this lecture. From choice, I should pass it over in silence but loyalty to my theme and to the Bible requires that I speak plainly. The immodest and immoral facts described in the Old Testament are merely a shadow of what we find in the literatures of the times of the ancient Hebrews. Perhaps we may not be aware of it, but many of our Latin and Greek text-books in use in our schools to-day are expurgated editions. The *morale* of Old Testament literature even as we find it has given ground for valid objections to the public use of certain portions of it. I am sure that a judicious and careful up-to-date translation could tone down and practically nullify the bold statements of some of these passages—which the Authorized Version and even the American Standard Revised Version render inexcusably objectionable.

But we must remember that the records of the Old Testament were written by, and for peoples, who lived from 3000 to 2000 years ago; and that for them and in their times, the bold and crass statements of the evils of social life were entirely admissible and proper, and, doubtless, in their methods of presentation, served to emphasize with telling power, certain phases of truth. But happily that age has gone by, and we stand on higher levels, with our standards of propriety based on New Testament models, and the evolution from these models of the best that modern Christianity and Christian society demands.

What shall we say then of these old records that em-

body such objectionable material? They are wholly archaic; they represent an age long ago left in the rear, no longer to be condoned, excused, or to be used, except as relics of a *morale* that should be forgotten, and forgotten, the sooner, the better.

I have sincere sympathy for the man or woman, who, with a high and noble sense of moral purity of thought, and principle, objects to the promiscuous reading of the Old Testament by the children of the family. But ought we to retain in our Bible things that not only raise violent objection to it on moral grounds, but actually militate against the best interests of the growth of the Christian religion? Who can answer? Should we expurgate every such moral taint and thus put them all beyond the reach of doing harm? Or, can we from now on, positively, absolutely and everywhere emphasize the truth that every such chapter, verse, or figure is but a relic of a degraded *morale* of a far-off age, that deserves perpetual oblivion?

In this rapid survey of my theme I have endeavored to set forth three points. (1) That Israel was one of the peoples of the ancient Oriental world, possessing almost every element of character in common with her neighbors; (2) That laws of prohibition and command were issued by Jehovah gradually, only as they could be apprehended and applied; and (3) That the moral obliquities of the Israelites, which stand out so conspicuously in the Old Testament, are to be regarded simply as relics of the emergence of a people from comparative barbarism to the better moral standards laid down in the laws of Jehovah, and later in the New Testament.

With infinite wisdom, skill, patience, long suffering, and tenderness, Jehovah selected, trained, disciplined, and refined as in a furnace, an ancient race, a degraded race, a stubborn and recalcitrant race, that thereby he might have a vehicle for his truth, a nation for his name, and a people who could preserve and perpetuate his revelations for future generations and for time immemorial.