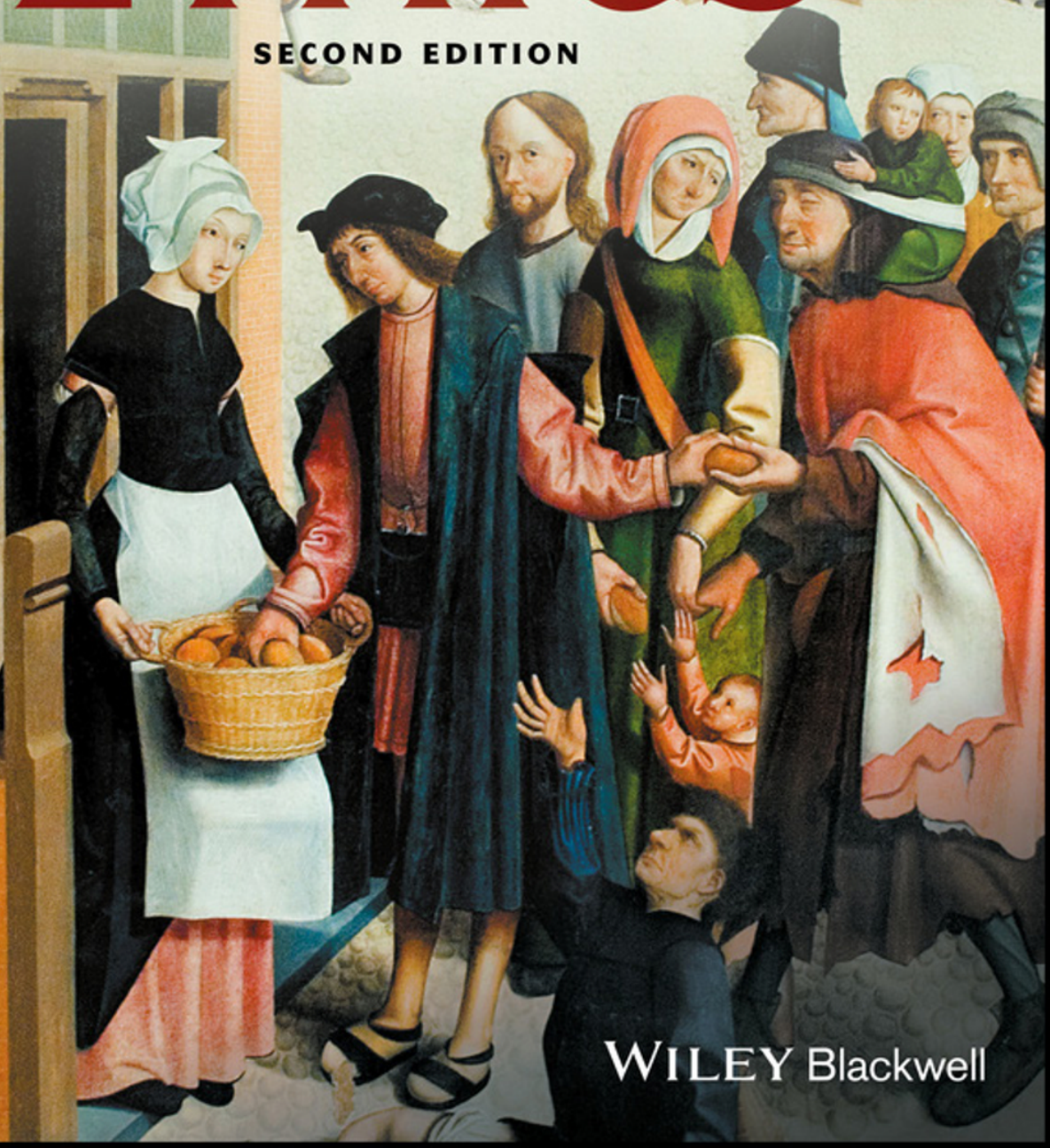


SAMUEL WELLS AND BEN QUASH WITH REBEKAH EKLUND

# INTRODUCING CHRISTIAN ETHICS

SECOND EDITION



WILEY Blackwell



## INTRODUCING CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Now in its second edition, *Introducing Christian Ethics* offers a comprehensive and engaging introduction to the field suitable for beginners as well as more advanced readers. The field is divided into three distinct approaches: universal (ethics for anyone), subversive (ethics for the excluded), and ecclesial (ethics for the church). These three approaches present a fresh understanding of the field of Christian ethics, whilst providing a structure for thoughtful insights into the complex moral challenges facing people today. The text encompasses the field of Christian ethics in its entirety, surveying its history, and mapping and exploring the differences in all the major ethical approaches.

This new edition has been thoughtfully updated. It includes additional material on Catholic perspectives, ethics and social media, further case studies and a stronger pedagogical structure, including introductions and summaries. As well as discussing ethical issues and key thinkers, *Introducing Christian Ethics 2/e* provides a significant foundation for students by setting them in a framework that explores scripture, philosophy and church history. The text is structured so that it can be used alongside a companion volume, *Christian Ethics: An Introductory Reader* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), which further illustrates and amplifies the diversity of material and arguments explored here.

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# Preface

This is a textbook for entry-level students in Christian ethics. It is designed for undergraduates and seminarians, in some cases pre-college students, and the elusive but much-coveted general reader. It is intended to be used in lay ministry courses, and a variety of educational and training courses, at diploma and informal levels. It sets out to do a number of things that are seldom done together.

It seeks to offer an overview of the whole field of Christian ethics. Some treatments offer a sequence of great authors in the history of the discipline. Others try to provide a taxonomy or typology or simply a list of the sometimes bewilderingly diverse and complex assortment of theories quoted and employed in the discourse. Others again work their way through a grab-bag of controversial issues and endeavor to present both balance and wisdom. This book has the temerity to attempt all three. Like any mapping exercise, it cannot pretend to be wholly objective; the classification and selection of issues examined, approaches explored, and authors extracted will be insightful and constructive to some, arbitrary and partial to others. Nonetheless we hope that, for those many who may disagree on some of the details, many more will enjoy and embrace the overall organization and presentation of the field.

The book rests on a broad division of Christian ethics into three approaches: universal (ethics for anyone), subversive (ethics for the excluded), and ecclesial (ethics for the church). It needs to be said that this distinction is not by any means generally accepted and adopted in the field, being simply the usage of one of the authors of this volume. This book may therefore be read as an extended road-test for the durability and comprehensiveness of this threefold distinction. But newcomers to the field who expect all subsequent interlocutors to recognize these approaches are likely to be disappointed.

The threefold distinction is designed to achieve a number of things. It is a tool for getting a handle on a huge subject, treating protagonists sympathetically but not uncritically. It is a means of distinguishing between the loudest voices in the

field today, and the audiences and interests they perceive themselves as addressing. It is a way of showing unlikely correspondences between approaches that are sometimes perceived as opposites or antagonists. It is intended to balance description and critique, construction and analysis. It is not designed as a reductionist, watertight theory that diminishes the diversity and vitality of conversation across the discipline. There are many overlaps and anomalies in the field, as becomes clear in the last section of the book.

Not only does the book set out to discuss both approaches and issues (sometimes known respectively as theoretical and applied ethics), it is structured so as to bring the respective theories to bear on each issue. Once the threefold distinction of universal, subversive, and ecclesial approaches has been set out in the second part of the book, the third part examines fifteen pressing and abiding issues under each of these three headings. This not only amplifies the respective issues, it tests the respective approaches. The first part of the book may be read, among other things, as a long explanation of why the categories of universal, subversive, and ecclesial do not apply in anything like the same way before the era of Western modernity beginning around the early eighteenth century or even later. The birth of the discipline of Christian ethics as currently understood, and the plausibility of using these three categories, broadly coincide. They are both deeply related to the way ethics came to be pursued primarily in universities and only secondarily (and derivatively) in churches.

In addition to the three conventional kinds of introductions to Christian ethics cited earlier, a fourth kind presents a series of excerpts from significant works or on salient issues in the field, either in contemporary voice or across the historical tradition. Not content simply to synthesize the three earlier kinds of introductions, this project attempts this fourth kind as well. A sister volume to this one, *Christian Ethics: An Introductory Reader*, adopts exactly the same structure (not just in chapter titles but also in subheadings) and seeks to illustrate, amplify, and develop the diversity of material, voices, and arguments explored in this book. Thus, the companion volume deals with the tradition, the variety of approaches, and the range of issues, just as much as the textbook does. As far as we are aware, the bringing together of all four of these kinds of introductions to the field is unique to this project. The two volumes are carefully designed so that, while complementary and supplementary to one another, each can serve alone as an introduction to the subject, depending on the needs, opportunities, wishes, and budget of the student and teacher.

Any book that quotes ancient texts in English translation faces the difficulty of older conventions that used masculine pronouns for God and referred to people in general as men. We have decided to retain the original quotations without alteration, even where we might today have written “humanity” instead of “man.” All Scripture quotations are New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

It may be asked whether the authors have a particular agenda in setting this project before the academy and reading public, beyond the customary humble disclaimers of hoping to be of some service and participating in the honored process of education and formation in Christian ethics. There is no doubt we have a close interest in the strand of ethics we are calling ecclesial. Some proponents of this strand have been associated with abrasive, not to say dismissive, regard for the other two strands as we are presenting them. But ecclesial ethics is not a monochrome approach, in style or in content, any more than subversive and universal ethics are. Thus aside from simply offering an accessible introduction to the field, part of the purpose of this book is to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that ecclesial ethics, when not in the mode of polemical stridency, is deeply respectful of, open to lively conversation with, and indeed profoundly indebted to, other approaches to ethics, and on many issues shares evaluations and commitments that resonate with subversive and/or universal approaches. It is not necessary to adopt the assumptions of ecclesial ethics to seek here an introduction to the dynamics and prospects of Christian ethics as a whole.

This book arises and derives from a number of friendships and collaborations. Most obviously, it has been shaped by a friendship between the two initial authors, Ben Quash and Sam Wells. We have collaborated on various projects in the past, academically and pastorally, with happy results; we have found our respective research interests complementary and stimulating, but most of all we simply enjoy one another's company, in laughter and in grief. It is a change of style, for each of us, to write a book together, but we hope it is no less a book for having two authors rather than one.

For the second edition, we have been joined by Rebekah Eklund, a third partner in scholarship, dialogue, enquiry, and friendship, and the joy of collaborating has been only increased by the greater wisdom and breadth of insight that a third heart, and mind, and soul, has brought. Among other improvements, the second edition includes a general introduction addressed to the reader, offers revised introductions to each of the three parts of the book, gives greater attention to Catholic and Orthodox ethics, revises and expands the section on the ethics of race to include more recent thinkers, and updates the section on media to incorporate the rapidly changing field of social media.

We have all been greatly enriched by the encouragement, imagination, and wit of Rebecca Harkin, whose vision for this project and depth of understanding of the issues and questions involved makes her a remarkable editor and publisher, and a rewarding creative partner. We are grateful to many wise colleagues, notably Hans Hillerbrand, Michael Goldman, Ebrahim Moosa, Kishor Trivedi, James Ong, Ellen Davis, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, John Kiess, and Fritz Bauerschmidt for guidance in waters where our judgments were unsteady. Jo Wells and Susannah Ticciati, among others, have offered perception in times of clarity and companionship in times of mystery.

Christian ethics is done in the communion of saints, and in this context Christians learn that they have living relationships with Christians past and future, departed and yet to come. The obligations and the joys traced by ethics bind the generations, and in this bond the memory of what has been takes the form of praise, and the anticipation of what will be is called hope. Rejoicing in this communion that binds the generations, and full of hope, we dedicate this book to two nieces and a nephew who make our lives richer, deeper, and truer.

Samuel Wells  
Ben Quash  
Rebekah Eklund



# Introduction

We've written this book to give a student who is new to Christian ethics the ability to address issues and methods in the field in an informed and confident way.

To do that we believe a student needs three things:

1. a sense of what Christian ethics is, what its sources are, and how it has been practiced;
2. a framework for distinguishing between different styles of argument; and
3. discussion of the major topics that Christian ethics most frequently addresses, and an opportunity to apply the framework through exploring those topics.

These three elements constitute the three parts of the book.

The first part explores the four intertwining “stories” that contribute to the rich and complex story of Christian ethics today: the story of God as found in Christian Scripture; the story of the church from its origins in the first century through the present day; the stories of ethics in contexts outside Christianity, including in classical philosophy, in other religious traditions, and in present-day professional settings; and the historical development of Christian ethics as traced through its most influential figures.

In the second part of the book, we suggest that there are three major approaches to Christian ethics: universal, subversive, and ecclesial. (These terms, and the threefold division itself, are distinctive to this book and are not often found elsewhere in the field of Christian ethics.) The three chapters of Part Two describe in greater detail the origin and shape of these three major branches of Christian ethics. The first, universal ethics, assumes that ethics is for everybody. If it applies to one, it applies to all. Many of the conventional approaches to ethics fall into this category: deontological, consequentialist, natural law, and so on.

The second approach challenges this universal assumption by considering the role of social location in ethics, asking who is excluded from this so-called “everybody,” and focusing particular attention on questions of gender, race, and class. The branch of ethics we are describing as subversive is sometimes described as liberationist, since it is committed to the liberation of the oppressed and the empowerment of the voiceless or the dominated.

The third approach is a retrieval of the language of virtue, most associated with the classical Greek philosopher Aristotle, and also adopted in the thirteenth century by the Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas. It assumes that the primary context of Christian ethics is the church (the word “ecclesial” derives from the Greek word for church). It focuses on the shaping of character rather than on the moment of decision. Ecclesial ethics places Christian ethics into conversation with the church’s specific theological commitments and practices, including the creeds and the sacraments.

This three-part structure is intended to be illuminating and not restrictive. We believe that it offers a useful way to identify different tendencies and methods within the broad field of Christian ethics, but it does not imply that we think individual thinkers often or always fit neatly into only one category. Instead, our hope is that the reader of this book will be trained to discern the methodological underpinnings of the texts and authors with whom they interact. Thus, one might come to read a document such as a papal encyclical, a university honor code, or a newspaper editorial and recognize a mix of methods and commitments in that one document. We have a particular interest in making more widely known the claims and possibilities of ecclesial ethics, but in general we seek to present each approach as clearly and charitably as possible.

The final part devotes five chapters to exploring the key issues and challenges addressed by Christian ethics. Here we meet a conventional list of ethical trouble-spots (abortion, euthanasia, war) as well as more general questions (the role of the state, environmental crises). In each chapter, we explore how the three “branches” of Christian ethics might typically approach these central ethical questions.

To avoid cluttering the text with footnotes or references, we have included the sources used in each chapter at the end of the chapter, alongside suggestions for further reading. Links to online documents are included where they are available. A selection of primary texts paired with each chapter is also available in the companion volume *Christian Ethics: An Introductory Reader*.

People often begin the study of Christian ethics hoping to find the right answers. Our approach focuses more on asking the right questions. Sometimes there are no easy answers: if there were, perhaps we would not need the church, a company of pilgrims with whom to share in discernment and practice. We have shared innumerable good disagreements in writing this book together, from which we have, we trust, become wiser and more humble. We hope the reading of the book will be as rewarding as the writing has been.



# Part One

## The Story of Christian Ethics

Christian ethics has three key sources: the written word of Scripture, the prayer and practice of the church, and the distilled wisdom and experience of the ages.

The document that shapes the identity of Christianity is the Bible, and it is impossible to begin studying Christian ethics without an understanding of the nature and content of the Scriptures and their role in the discipline. Thus, our first chapter begins with a consideration of Scripture and the nature of its authority and place in Christian ethics. It then considers the Bible in three parts – the People of God (the Old Testament), God in Person (the four gospels), and Following Jesus (the remainder of the New Testament).

The New Testament was written by the early church, and it was likewise the early church that determined the shape of the Bible as a whole. Christian ethics does not primarily refer to a sequence of significant authors or a collection of influential texts: instead it concerns a historical series of attempts to embody the instructions of Scripture, the good news of Jesus, and the example of his first followers. This historical series of attempts is called the church. Our second chapter therefore develops the story of Christian ethics by exploring the history of the church, again in three eras – Minority Status (the era before Christianity became the norm in the Mediterranean world), Christendom (the era when Christianity was the norm, while the Mediterranean world expanded its influence across the globe), and the Church in Modernity (the era when Christianity had ceased to be the norm, at least in the Western world).

Before Christians began to try to translate the heritage of Israel and Jesus into the habits and norms of personal and communal life, there had already long been a tradition, stretching back to ancient Greece, of reflecting on how human beings should live. Christian ethics has always been developed in relation to a conversation about what a person should do, and who a person should be, that went beyond the culture of the church. In fact it is only in relation to such conversation partners that the discipline of “Christian ethics” emerges at all. Christian ethics becomes the place where

the heritage of Israel and Jesus, the practice and expectations of the church, and the disciplines and vocabulary of philosophical ethics, all meet. Hence our third chapter considers the emergence of “ethics” as a discipline in several key “non-Christian” contexts: in classical philosophy, in other religions, and in particular professional contexts.

Finally, these three strands – Scripture, history, and philosophy – come together to form the contemporary discipline of Christian ethics. Yet this discipline itself tends to trace its lineage less to the stories told in the first three chapters, and more to a story that emerges in relation to all three: that is, the sequence of great authors whose works form the canon of writings in this field. This fourth story is not so much the story of Christian ethics as a history of Christian ethicists. Many, perhaps most, of these figures did not explicitly think of themselves as ethicists (as distinct from theologians or philosophers), but it is in their tradition that most of those publishing work in the field of Christian ethics believe themselves to stand, as will become clear in the second and third parts of this volume.

# Chapter One

## The Story of God

Christians sometimes talk as if the Bible has all the answers to life's questions and problems. But a thorough reading of the Bible reveals various complexities. There are some ethical issues that the Bible does not specifically address. There are others where either the Bible seems to offer instruction (such as stoning wrongdoers) that is unpalatable to the contemporary world, or where the Scriptures seem to hold a worldview (such as ancient cosmology) that has since been largely abandoned. Finally, there are other issues where different verses or injunctions or stories seem to offer contradictory counsel.

For example, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in the American South, both abolitionists and slaveholders appealed to Christian Scripture to support their respective positions. According to the latter, Scripture clearly upholds the right of masters to own and discipline slaves; for the former, the Bible's trajectory of liberation and love categorically rules out any person owning another human being. The Bible continues to be invoked as a witness on both sides of many ethical debates, including same-sex marriage and war. What's seldom in question is the centrality of Scripture to Christian ethics; what's more complex is how that relationship plays out in practice.

The question of the relationship between Scripture and ethics necessarily involves one's understanding of what Scripture is in the first place. Christians, in fact, do not completely agree on what constitutes sacred Scripture. Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican Christians include slightly different versions of the collection of books known as the Apocrypha in their Old Testament canons, whereas Protestant Bibles exclude the Apocrypha altogether. And then there is the nature of the text. Is the Bible a prescriptive code of conduct, a rulebook, a source of moral law? Is it a window into the heart of God, or a conduit through which the Holy Spirit shapes the moral imagination? Does it provide

patterns for emulation or a clarion call to mend our ways? Is it a love song designed to woo humanity closer to God or a dash of icewater meant to awaken a sleepy conscience?

When it comes to describing the place of Scripture in Christian ethics, therefore, challenges abound; we will describe two of the most pressing here.

1. *Historical and cultural distance.* Reading the Bible is sometimes described as reading someone else's mail: these texts were written to and for other people in other times and places, often radically different from ours. The Bible does not explicitly address pressing contemporary issues like stem cell research or climate change. "The world of Leviticus is not the world of I Corinthians, and neither of these is our world" (Joel Green).
2. *The multivocality of Scripture.* While it is commonplace to talk about the Bible as if it were one book, it is instead a collection of books written by multiple authors and compiled by various editors over the course of thousands of years. It encompasses a wide variety of genres, some of which relate less obviously to ethics: in what sense is a poetic text an ethical one? Thus, describing the ethics contained within Scripture is itself fraught with tensions. New Testament scholar Richard Hays notes that careful, critical exegesis only heightens the problem by sharpening "our awareness of the ideological diversity within Scripture and of our historical distances from the original communities." He cites Oliver O'Donovan, who writes, wryly, "interpreters who think that they can determine the proper ethical application of the Bible solely through more sophisticated exegesis are like people who believe that they can fly if they only flap their arms hard enough."

And yet Christian ethics generally operates under the conviction that the ancient texts of Scripture nonetheless have enduring relevance and even binding authority over the lives of Christians in the present. (Some exceptions to this rule are taken up in Chapter Six.) But in what way are these texts authoritative? That is, where does authority reside when it comes to applying the Bible to ethical matters? There are three primary options.

- Authority resides in the events *behind* the text of Scripture. That is, authority resides in God and in God's creating, saving, and liberating actions as narrated by the biblical books. For some, this has meant seeking to recreate as closely as possible the worlds and events described by the text, or to insist on the historicity of every event in the text (thus leading to long, heated battles over the historical character of the creation or the great flood in Genesis). For others, it has meant noting, more pragmatically, that Scripture is the best (or only) witness that we have to the Triune God. This leads to the next view.
- Authority is inherent *within* the text itself, a position often associated with belief in the inspiration of Scripture. In this view, the Holy Spirit inspired each author (and perhaps editor) of the sacred books, and therefore the recorded

words themselves are holy. In this sense the text has a kind of derivative authority, since its authority comes from its divine author; but critics worry that this position makes the Bible itself a focus of worship, rather than a book that directs people to the worship of God.

A subset of this view focuses on the “final form” of the biblical books as we now have them, rather than on a reconstruction of the “original” text or the events described by the text, as the proper object of study. This approach is sometimes known as canonical criticism, which is a method that seeks to read all the books of the canon, Old and New Testaments, in relation to one another. Canonical reading reflects Augustine of Hippo’s (354–430 CE) principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. Thus, the four gospels are to be read not only alongside one another, but in the context of Israel’s story in the Old Testament and the early church’s story in the rest of the New Testament as well.

- A third view locates authority *in front of* the text – that is, in the reader and the reading community. This view sometimes draws on postmodern literary theory, which proposes that texts themselves have no meaning until they are read and interpreted. Related to this is the view that sacred texts have no authority apart from the communities that interpret and adhere to them. Thus, authority resides in various interpreting communities: for Roman Catholics, this means the magisterium, or the apostolic teaching authority exercised by the bishops and the Pope; for some Protestants, authority is located in the local pastor or the local congregation. The approach sometimes known as liberationist ethics – described in this book as subversive ethics – tends to locate authority rather in the daily experience of the common people, especially the oppressed (more on this in Chapter Six).

One recent subset of this third view proposes that authority lies finally not in the reading of the text but in its communal embodiment – i.e., in faithfully “performing” or living out the Scriptures as members of a worshipping community. (This position is closely associated with ecclesial ethics, which will be taken up in Chapter Seven.)

Scripture also bears authority alongside what is typically called tradition, which includes summaries of Christian beliefs like the Nicene Creed and the ongoing teaching authority of the apostolic church. For Orthodox and Catholic Christians, Scripture itself is often viewed as an element of the church’s tradition and therefore not finally distinguishable from a separate body of writings called “tradition.” For example, in the Catholic Church, Scripture and tradition “flow from the same divine well-spring” and as such they both preserve and transmit the Word of God. For this reason Scripture and tradition are “accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence” (*Dei Verbum*). By contrast Anglicanism is associated with reading Scripture in creative tension with tradition and reason.

While most Protestants adhere to some version of the Reformation principle *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), almost every Protestant group uses written traditions such as the Augsburg Confession (the central statement of faith for the

Lutheran tradition), or unwritten traditions such as the perspicuity of Scripture (the idea that Scripture has a single, plain meaning), as important but less authoritative guides to interpreting Scripture. In practice any view that looks to Scripture for moral guidance must decide how to adjudicate differences in the interpretation of that Scripture – for example, when the slaveholder and abolitionist both appeal to the biblical text.

The diversity of the biblical material in relation to ethics can be a significant challenge. Yet it can also enliven the ethical imagination, if this diversity is taken as a gift rather than a problem – as a prompt to creative faithfulness in new situations. This depends on discerning an underlying unity threading through the complexity of the scriptural texts – a coherent story about God. We now turn to a brief account of that story, in all its diversity.

## The People of God

What Christians call the Old Testament is a collection of books that record the faith and the experience and the insights of God's people Israel from earliest times until around 300 years before the birth of Jesus. The Old Testament is made up of three largely distinct kinds of literature. The first is Law, in Hebrew *Torah*, which refers to the first five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Law is not simply a series of injunctions, although there are thought to be 613 positive and negative rules spread across these books; instead the Law offers a foundational narrative that provides a context for the covenant made between God and Israel, of which these laws are an expression and symbol – rather as a wedding ring is an expression and symbol of a marriage covenant. The *Torah*, sometimes also known as the Pentateuch, begins with the stories of creation and fall, of flood and of Babel. It then introduces Abraham as the patriarch of Israel and bearer of God's promise that through his descendants many peoples will find a blessing. Abraham enters the Promised Land, but famine takes his descendants to Egypt, where God has already sent Abraham's great-grandson Joseph to protect them. Generations later, however, they fall into slavery, and God calls Moses to lead them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. They come to Mt. Sinai, where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and many other instructions. They wander in the wilderness for forty years. The Pentateuch ends with the death of Moses, just as the Israelites are on the brink of entering the Promised Land.

The second major collection of literature in the Old Testament is the Prophets. Just as the Law does not simply contain laws, so the Prophets does not simply contain prophecies. The Prophets includes all the books that take the story of Israel from the entry into the Promised Land under Joshua to the exile in Babylon. Many of these are in narrative form – notably the so-called “Deuteronomistic history.” The Deuteronomistic history traces how Joshua took the Israelites into the land, how a series of ad hoc rulers known as judges galvanized the twelve tribes at

moments of crisis, and how eventually the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king. Saul was followed by David, and David by Solomon, during a period that marked the zenith of Israel's power and prestige. The kingdom split after Solomon's death, with the ten tribes of the northern kingdom (Israel) ruled separately from the two southern tribes (Judah). The northern kingdom was overrun by the Assyrians (ca. 722 BCE), and finally the southern kingdom was invaded by the Chaldeans, the empire known in the Old Testament as Babylon, around 300 years after Solomon (586 BCE). The history concludes with a great number of people being taken into exile in Babylon. This long history is "prophecy" because it identifies the action of God as a living influence in the present as in the past; God is an active participant in the story. The books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, together with the twelve shorter prophetic books, interweave pronouncements and declarations of God's role and purpose in these events, particularly the later ones, while generally presupposing the broad outline of the narrative.

The third main part of the Old Testament is the Writings. These include most notably the Psalms, which mix narrative incantation with praise and lamentation, and Proverbs, a distillation of the wisdom of sages. But they also incorporate several narrative books such as Ruth and Chronicles. The narrative books affirm that there is a future for Israel after the catastrophe of exile – a future that lies in the reconstruction of Jerusalem (Ezra and Nehemiah), the wit and imagination to live under foreign rule (Esther), and the cosmic future plans of God (Daniel).

## Approaches

Given that the central figure in Christianity is Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ does not appear in the flesh in the first 77 percent of the Bible known by Christians as the Old Testament, the ethical and theological significance of the Old Testament is always going to be a controversial question for the Christian tradition. There are three broad approaches to the Old Testament from the point of view of Christian ethics.

1. *Separation*. This view assumes the Old Testament should be considered independently of the New Testament. It comes in two quite distinct forms, resting on either the hearty embrace of Judaism or its outright rejection.
  - a. One view regards the "Old Testament" as something of a Christian construction. It tends rather to use the term "Hebrew Bible" to refer to the books of the Law, Prophets, and Writings. It notes that for most Jews, this collection of thirty-nine books has never had a fixed or settled character. The Law has a unique status for most Jews. But the Hebrew Bible as a whole comprises a relatively small part of what Jews today might regard as their sacred canon. It would also include the *Mishnah*, compiled around 200 CE, the *Tosephta*, recorded 100 or more years later, and the *Gemara*, which were found in Jerusalem and Babylon and were completed by

around 850 CE. The whole corpus, known as the *Talmud*, is a significant part of Jewish tradition largely untouched by Christians. There is a huge body of moral instruction found in *Halakhah*, or classical Jewish religious law. The argument goes that if the point of consulting the Old Testament is to be listening to what God has said to Israel, then that listening has to include what God has said to Israel since Jesus, not just before Jesus. It follows that the Old Testament should be read not so much as part of the Christian Bible, in the context of the New Testament, but as part of the accumulation of Jewish tradition, in the context of the Talmud and Halakhah.

- b. The second view is a much less subtle and much older view. It is that the God of the New Testament is fundamentally different from the God of the Old Testament. It is often supposed, for example, that the God of the Old Testament is a God of war, whereas the God of the New Testament is a God of peace; or that the Old Testament God is obsessed with law, whereas the New Testament God is full of love; or again that the Old Testament is largely concerned with rituals through which one can attain purity, whereas the New Testament is concerned with grace through which one can receive life. Likewise it is sometimes suggested that the Old Testament offers a host of laws but no fundamental change of heart, whereas with the New Testament comes the Holy Spirit and genuine repentance and conversion. The earliest name associated with this view is Marcion of Sinope (ca. 110–ca. 160 CE). Marcion argued in the early second century that the creator God of the Old Testament was chiefly concerned with the law. Jesus came to displace the God of the Old Testament and inaugurate an era of love. Marcion's Bible had none of the eventual Old Testament and only parts of Luke and Paul in it. By rejecting Marcion's proposal (he was excommunicated in 144 CE) and agreeing on a canon of sixty-six books, including thirty-nine that Christians call the Old Testament, the early church made a decisive move against the rejection of Israel's God.

Nonetheless the tendency to assume the New Testament replaces the Old has never gone away. It often focuses on “wrathful” passages such as the dashing of babies' heads against rocks (Ps 137:9) or the ethnic cleansing of the settlement period (Joshua 6:21). It can be seen not too far from the surface in the work of Martin Luther (1483–1546), the great sixteenth-century Reformer. Luther describes Judaism in stark terms, identifying it with justification by works; the gospel, as he sees it, is utterly different, seeing justification as only by grace through faith. Here already we see one particular hesitation that Protestantism has often had with the whole notion of Christian ethics: it looks too much like letting law back in by the side door. When a person claims that they have no need for Christian ethics because “Jesus has always been enough for me,” they are expressing an antinomian view – a conviction that faith abolishes the law.



2. *Seamlessness*. This view takes the opposite stance from the “separation” approach. It sees overwhelming continuity between the Old Testament and the New. Perhaps the theologian most associated with this view is another great sixteenth-century Reformer, John Calvin (1509–64). It has two broad dimensions.
  - a. The Old Testament offers a series of anticipations, prefigurements, and prophecies of the revelation to come in the New Testament. The relation of Old to New Testament is thus one of promise and fulfillment. This construal of the more widely held conviction that God does not change led proponents of the seamlessness view to argue that the great figures of the Old Testament may not have had a clear notion of what lay in store, but God did. The laws, the priests, the sacrifices, the temple, the kings, and the prophets of the Old Testament were all fulfilled in Jesus. The “anticipation” view is often accompanied by an assumption that the Hebrew ethic was earthy and tangible, whereas the Christian ethic was spiritual: for example, the Old Testament looks on the Promised Land as the New Testament looks on heaven.
  - b. When it comes to the more troubling passages, the Spanish Jewish scholar Maimonides (1138–1204) offered in his work *The Guide of the Perplexed* (ca. 1190 CE) what became a very influential distinction. He argued that the Torah laws were centrally about preserving Israel from its two main enemies: idolatry and ill health. The Italian Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) took up Maimonides’ argument and distinguished between the moral laws and the ceremonial (and civil) ones. The moral laws were part of natural law, and thus remained binding. The ceremonial laws applied specifically to ancient Israel and had no abiding authority. Thus, circumcision ceased to be binding on Christians, and many of the severe punishments could be softened; the Ten Commandments remain in place. This view dominated Reformation discussions, and is often quoted today. However, it is not always clear where the line between moral and ceremonial lies: for example, is the Sabbath law moral or ceremonial – is it still binding or not?
  
3. *Creative tension*. This third view is inclined to take a more generous view of Judaism in general and the Old Testament in particular. It rejects false polarities such as law–gospel or material–spiritual. It sees significant continuities between the character of God revealed in the Old Testament – abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*), faithfulness (*emunah*), justice (*mishpat*), and compassion (*rah-mim*) – and the God of Jesus Christ. This approach covers a spectrum from the cautious to the more sanguine.
  - a. The more cautious approach is to distinguish between precept and example. It is suggested that the Old Testament is of limited use as precept, or instruction. One can subdivide precepts between rules, such as the Ten Commandments, which apply in every situation, and principles, such as “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8), which

provide general moral frameworks. But the primary value of the Old Testament in Christian ethics is as a collection of salutary stories, challenging prophecies, and distilled wisdom. These are sometimes called paradigms (narratives of exemplary or reprehensible conduct) or symbolic worlds (broad parameters for understanding the action of God or the human condition). This does not mean the stories merely illustrate truths found elsewhere: the Old Testament is still regarded as revelation. The real task involves taking the rich store of engagements with such issues as freedom for the oppressed, justice for the poor, compassion for the outcast, and regard for the whole earth, and interpreting them in a society that looks very different from ancient Israel.

- b. The more sanguine approach is to regard the New Testament as like a drama, and the Old Testament as providing the stage and setting for the drama. Here the difference between the two remains significant, but the Old Testament is regarded as indispensable in explicit ways: the New Testament is incomprehensible without the Old. A similar view employs a term such as “people of God” to underline the continuities between Israel and the church. This is always at risk of supersessionism, the assumption that the church has simply replaced Israel; nonetheless it focuses on the efforts of God’s people to imitate the faithfulness of God as the single unchanging strand across both testaments, while still acknowledging the genuine newness of Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection.

### Characteristics

The Old Testament presents a polyphony of voices, and it is a little dangerous to generalize too swiftly about its contents. We may, however, identify three characteristics that cover the corpus as a whole, each of which has a significant bearing on Christian ethics.

1. The Old Testament is about *God*. There are books that notoriously keep God largely or wholly invisible (Esther and Ecclesiastes). However, the most striking thing about the Old Testament is that it is always centrally about God. It is essentially a theological history of Israel, with God as the initiator, hidden hand, or engaged observer. God chooses Israel, not because Israel is great, but because God is gracious. The significance for Christian ethics is that an ethic that addresses the Old Testament must always be theological – that it must always see human flourishing in relation to the nature, purpose, and revelation of God. God is never to be regarded as a neutral observer, mere creator, or passionless demiurge. God is passionate, jealous, and often angry – totally involved in creation.
2. The Old Testament is about God’s *people*. From Genesis 12 onwards, the Old Testament is a long conversation about Israel’s freedom and flourishing, how it was attained, how it should be enjoyed, how it could be (and was) lost,

how deeply God is involved in its achievement, shaping, maintenance, loss, and restoration, and how significant it is for the whole world. The key word here is holiness, because holiness names the unique character of God, which God bestows on Israel (Ex 19:6) and which is to be a blessing for the other nations. Holiness requires a certain separation between Israel and the nations, but this is for the sake of the nations, not just for the sake of Israel. The heart of the Old Testament is the covenant between God and Israel, definitively expressed at Mt. Sinai, and the events of liberation and law that precede and follow – and are inseparable from – that covenant.

3. The Old Testament is about the *story* of God's people. In recent decades there has been increasing focus on the fact that, despite the idiosyncrasies of the Old Testament and the diversity of its literature, it does tell a broad, coherent story in relation to which the rest of the material finds its context. Some have argued that this shows that the category of narrative has always been vital for understanding ethics. Others see the term narrative in a narrower sense, as an integral part of a single, particular narrative incorporating Jesus and the church, around which everything in Christian ethics must circle. Both of these views are kinds of narrative ethics, a term that is much in use in recent years and will be explored in Chapter Seven.

## Themes

Because the Old Testament is such a rich and diverse collection of literature, the elucidation of themes is itself a significant act of interpretation. Relatively few writers in Christian ethics have shaped their models and theories from Old Testament foundations, wholly or even largely; thus, the Old Testament has more often been used to illustrate, exemplify, or underwrite convictions formed on other grounds. In other words, ethicists tend to find in the Old Testament what they go looking for.

1. *Kingship and law.* For those writers assuming or aspiring to a settled hierarchical social model, the tendency has been to see David as the central figure in the Old Testament. All that precedes him leads up to him: Moses, Joshua, and Saul. All that follows him is decline: the kingdom's split, the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylon. Despite all the turmoil described in the Old Testament, those interested in building or sustaining some kind of godly commonwealth have invariably seen the period of the kingdom in the united Israel as some kind of template. The ruler is seen as the key (anointed) instrument of God's rule, and the ideal is for a godly people to live holy lives subject to that rule. The degree to which Jesus and the New Testament might challenge conventional structures of authority is seldom discussed. Instead, Jesus is seen as the true King of Israel and the fulfillment of God's covenant with David. Alongside this focus on the kingdom comes an emphasis on law. The Ten

Commandments emerge as the epitome of Old Testament instruction: simple, transferable, and an explicit statement of what is required of lay Christians. Amongst the myriad of Old Testament laws, those concerning human sexuality and the family often come to prominence in these treatments.

2. *Liberation and prophecy.* For those writers seeking to challenge settled hierarchical models of society, the focus has invariably been upon God's action in bringing Israel out of slavery and offering freedom through covenant. Liberation is the paradigm for all such readings of the Old Testament. The exodus shows not just God's power but God's purpose. It is not just a moment in time: it comes alive whenever it is recalled, especially at Passover, but also in the agony of exile.

The key question for the rest of the Old Testament is therefore, "Can Israel keep the freedom it has been so graciously given?" The Deuteronomistic history rests on this question. The prophets become highly significant, particularly Isaiah, Amos, and Micah, for they call Israel's attention to the way care for the poor, the alien, the orphan, and the widow embodies Israel's faithfulness to the covenant God made with Moses (for Israel was once a slave itself). The denunciations of the rich and the oppressors have a contemporary ring when placed in a context of extreme wealth differentials today.

3. *Worship and community.* Those who see ethics as primarily about forming faithful communities, rather than shaping stable society or liberating the oppressed, tend to identify most quickly those parts of the Old Testament that are concerned with liturgy and common life. The Psalms are an important dimension of the Old Testament, for here law and history and reflection are turned into song and prayer and worship. The Psalms do not describe a society that has fixed boundaries between government and law and worship and private life. Those who see worship and ethics as integrally linked would begin here.

Just as it is possible to see the Old Testament as centrally about government and legislation, or centrally about freedom and social critique, so it is possible to see the Old Testament as a lengthy meditation on how to live as a faithful community under God. It is sometimes pointed out that individual salvation was not the obsession for Israel that it has been for many Christians: the salvation that Israel sought was inherently one that had to be shared. It is also noted that the Old Testament is based on a covenant, rather than a contract or rights in the way that many contemporary relationships assume.

Other ethical lenses could also be highlighted – for example, the overarching themes of creation (thus focusing on God's sovereignty over and care for all nations) and covenant (thus tracing the mutual obligations of God and Israel in their covenant relationship). Some ethical thinkers approach the text more critically, noting that the Old Testament poses a particular set of challenges for Christian ethics regarding violence, broadly conceived. First is the apparent sanctioning of violence by certain Old Testament texts, including the narratives

that describe the conquest of Canaan (the “Promised Land”) by the Israelites. Similarly, Christians have debated whether and under what conditions they ought to pray the imprecatory psalms, or the psalms that curse and wish violent retribution upon the enemy, in light of Christ’s commands to love and bless the enemy and the persecutor. Finally, and most specifically, feminist scholars like Phyllis Trible (b. 1932) point to the “texts of terror” in the Old Testament that describe violence against women – such as the rape of Dinah or the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter. All these cases highlight further the apparent tensions between the two testaments. (The question of violence is discussed in relation to ecclesial ethics in Chapter Seven and in relation to war in Chapter Eight.)

## God in Person

Jesus of Nazareth was a controversial figure in late Second Temple Judaism, who was crucified on a charge of insurrection by the Roman governor in Judea around 30 CE. This is practically all the hard historical evidence available: the rest is largely dependent on sources within the New Testament, whose reliability it is not possible to assess conclusively by modern standards. Nevertheless we can summarize Jesus’ context, ministry, death, and resurrection as a preliminary to identifying his significance for Christian ethics.

Jesus’ context was dominated by the occupation of the land of Israel by the Romans. It had been 600 years since the Jews had run their own affairs in Jerusalem. While the Persian king Cyrus had ended the exile in Babylon, the Jews had remained under first Persian, then Greek, then eventually Roman rule, minus a brief period of independence after the successful Maccabean revolt (142–63 BCE). Various parties within Israel took different approaches to these circumstances: some, such as the Sadducees, largely cooperated with the status quo; others, such as the Pharisees, saw renewal primarily in the common people keeping the Jewish law; others again, such as the group that later coalesced as the Zealots, sought the violent overthrow of the Romans; and yet another group, the Essenes, withdrew to seek holiness in secluded community. There were outspoken prophets, such as John the Baptist, and some level of anticipation that the world might soon end. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are largely concerned to locate Jesus within this context of exile and expectation.

The ministry of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, begins with his baptism by John and his calling of twelve disciples, representing a renewed Israel (since Israel in the Old Testament had twelve tribes). While teaching his disciples in story and discourse, he also attracted and engaged with a second segment of society, a crowd of outcasts – rich tax-collectors, unclean lepers, shunned prostitutes, and those made poor by sickness, subjection, or circumstance. His teaching and his ministry of healing and miracle brought him into controversial interaction with the Jewish leadership of the time, and these conversations make up a third dimension of his career. Jesus announced that the kingdom (or reign) of God was at hand. God’s inrushing justice

would reverse the current assumptions about holiness and power, with the humble and faithful exalted and the regnant and rich laid low. Like the prophets before him, he pointed to God's deeper purposes and criticized those who were content with superficial appearances. His loyalty to the temple was strained when he saw activities in the temple directing the energies of the people away from God.

Two factors led to Jesus' crucifixion. One was his relentless criticism of the Jerusalem leadership, by action and word, through cleansing the temple and through healing on the Sabbath, through claiming to forgive sins and through comparing authorities to unfaithful keepers of the vineyard. The other was his refusal to take up armed struggle. His presence in Jerusalem at the Passover festival and his overturning of the merchants' tables in the temple was a provocation the Jerusalem leadership could not ignore and an opportunity they could not miss. Meanwhile his talk of the kingdom and dramatic miracles quite naturally led many to consider him as one who sought to be king. And when arrested, he refused either to fight or to proclaim his innocence.

And, the gospels tell us, God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus appeared, mysteriously but tangibly, to his dispirited disciples. He forgave, recommissioned, and inspired them. He prefigured the new creation at the end of time, and the judgment and resurrection of all people. Very soon after his death, a vibrant movement known as the church began to spread with the conviction of his message and the power of his defeat of death.

### Is Jesus Normative for Christian Ethics?

The gospels present narratives of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. What is the relationship between the life that Jesus lived and the life that the Christian is to live? Is Jesus the *definitive* human, such that he is a model for human action and, if so, in what precise respect? Is Jesus the *exemplary* human, illustrative of all that human values might seek? Or is Jesus the *divine* human, unique in every way, such that the details of his ministry and passion are unrepeatable and significant largely or wholly for the new world they make possible? This is one of the most important questions in Christian ethics. There are broadly four answers to this question, depending on which aspect of Jesus one regards as most significant: his incarnation and birth, his ministry and teaching, his passion and death, or his resurrection and ascension.

Each answer can be seen in two ways. Jesus can be understood as illustrating truths also available elsewhere, such as the worthiness of equality, kindness, and justice. Or Jesus can be portrayed as establishing norms that could not and cannot be perceived without his unique person and/or work. For those who take the former, *illustrative* view, Jesus is an example of things that would have been right and good and true even if he had not come. For those who take the latter, *normative* view, all knowledge is subject to that which is only accessible in the new reality brought about in and by Jesus.