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The Bible

The Bible is clearly extremely important to Christian ethics. But there are reasons that it's not possible for the Bible to be the sole source of authority. Martin Luther's famous insistence on the principle of *sola scriptura* – which says that the Bible alone ought to guide doctrine and practice – characterizes the aspirations of many Protestant groups, but it is only an aspiration. In fact, every way of doing Christian ethics also draws on other sources of authority as well.

One such source is the *experience* of pressing issues and realities that people face in a particular time and place: a community's experiences with power, poverty and wealth, labour, violence, oppression, discrimination, marginalization, persecution and so on. These experiences can shape questions at an often pre-rational level about what is most important for a given community. If the ones asking the moral questions also hold political power, their questions may have to do with how to use power appropriately for the sake of justice, for example. But if the question-askers lack political power, their questions about power and justice will be framed differently and will therefore be likely to lead to different answers. Their notions of power will more probably be 'from below', grassroots, collective, non-sovereign, people-power.

Bible-reading works the same way: it is impossible to remove oneself from one's political, economic, ethnic, linguistic and other experience and then approach the Bible (or any text) with a clean slate. Rich and poor communities, you can imagine, will inevitably respond differently to Jesus' statement 'Blessed are the poor.' Recent trends in *hermeneutics* (the science of how we read and interpret) seek to embrace and acknowledge who we are as readers rather than attempt to bracket it. Because bracketing one's own experience will probably never be entirely successful and will involve a lot of self-deception along the way, I think we should judge the recent trends to be superior to the alternatives. That said, they do generate their own challenges for Christians to articulate how moral authority then flows from any source *other than* experience. Asked plainly, are some experiences better suited to Bible-reading than others?

The American novelist and essayist Wendell Berry (b. 1934) borrowed an idea from Henry David Thoreau to talk about the Bible as an ‘outdoor book’, a book ‘open to the sky’. To Berry, Thoreau could have been describing the Bible when he wrote about ‘a hypaethral or unroofed book, lying open under the ether and permeated by it, open to all weathers, not easy to be kept on a shelf’.¹ Berry means this both metaphorically and literally.

Christians ought to be open to the Bible since it is itself an open book, constantly gesturing beyond its words and pages to a horizon of meaning that cannot be exhaustively contained by our ‘walls’. It experiments with language and ideas, engages in internal debates, raises questions it can’t quite answer. In short, for Berry, the Bible is like the people it seeks to create in its readers: spacious, fearless, full of wonder and hope. Its language is often poetic and playful, at or beyond the bounds of the ordinary meanings of words. And the Bible wants to be read by poets who are willing to use their own words at the boundaries of language. God won’t be nailed down. This is how it is a book ‘open to the sky’.

Berry also means something rather more literal. To speak of an ‘unroofed book’ is to say that some ways of living will be more aligned with the kind of book the Bible is than will others. Outside, we are met by wonders that more naturally exceed our expectations, wonders that our controlled, indoor environments intend to keep at bay.

Of course there are many ways to become better readers of the Bible; spending time outside is only one. The point is not only that where one stands influences how one reads, but also that some places to stand are better than others. Surely poor people will respond to ‘Blessed are the poor’ better than rich people will. (We know this from the Gospels. It is a rare but not impossible thing for the rich to respond faithfully to this declaration. The poor hear it and rejoice if they believe it.) Then again, while ‘better’ may describe a closer harmony between the kind of text the Bible is and the experiences of some readers, it is also worth noting that throughout the centuries and throughout the world, many Christians have not been able to read at all. Literacy, the production of texts and the copying of manuscripts tend to be decidedly ‘indoor’ activities, while the outdoor work of peasants requires no reading. This suggests that the answer

¹ Diary of Henry David Thoreau, 29 June 1851, cited in Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Common-place: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002), 504.

to a key question explored below – who is the Bible *for*? – is not going to be simple.

Apart from the complexity of reading the Bible in the light of varied experiences, the text of the Bible itself presents its own complications. There are tensions within the Bible on important, current moral questions concerning marriage, the death penalty and war. It is seldom possible to give a single answer to any question that asks what the Bible says on any topic. This is as much the case with strictly theological topics such as God, sin, sacrifice and redemption as it is with moral themes. Furthermore, partly because it is a collection of ancient texts, the Bible is simply silent on many of the topics Christians confront today like environmental degradation, abortion and gender identity. More perilous are the times when the Bible seems at first to offer clear moral guidance, but then further study reveals a tremendous lack of clarity.

It is good to notice, though, that the kinds of problems mentioned in the preceding paragraph especially accompany a reading style that asks a moral question of the Bible and then looks for answers within its pages. This, admittedly, has a venerable history among Christians. But let it be said that the questions we bring to the Bible are not its reason for being. It is not only that modern people will ask questions not countenanced by an ancient text. It is also that the Bible often refuses to play our game of question-and-answer by reversing the process. The Bible turns around and asks questions of us: ‘Do you not believe? Do you still not understand?’ It throws us into confusion at exactly the points where we had hoped our confidence would be the highest. The Christian experience, therefore, of drawing meaning out of the Bible turns out to be much more than a scholarly one. It can be a vertigo-inducing task that demands the faith of readers but promises to save them from making idols of their own explanations and certainties. Because what I am describing is an experience and challenge of faith, it will be difficult to capture on pages of printed text; its home is in the person of the Christian and within the faith community. Even so, my goal is to return to this liminal experience of the relationship between reader and text in this section.

The Bible is the Scripture of Christians and its primary purpose is to form the life of worshipping communities. This is most obvious in the Psalms, although it is true of every text. The primary function of a psalm is to be sung; the other texts are equally liturgical and are given to us to be read aloud in corporate worship and to be revered and discerned as the word of God for today’s Church. Christian receptiveness to the meaning of the Bible is also liturgical, requiring preparation of the soul of the

individual believer as well as the soul of the community in order to hear the word that God will speak through it. The challenge is to prepare oneself and others corporately to receive the messages of an ‘unroofed book’. But it is important to notice that the Bible itself is also one of the instruments the Church employs to ready the people to hear its message. This means that preparing to use the Bible is not independent of the Bible, which cycles the believing community through the formation to receive it, to its proclaimed message and back again.

The approach taken here is to describe the Bible’s role in Christian ethics in a way that allows us to notice when and where it functions to form Christian thinking and living, while also allowing us to see the ways that other sources are also brought to bear on how Christians think about how they should live.

God’s story

There are good reasons to avoid the idea that the Bible is primarily a source of information on moral topics (or any other topics, for that matter). Before it is this, it is crucially a source for formation. It shapes Christian people and Christian communities according to its story, inviting us to locate our lives within it by enlisting us as participants within its narrative. Christians not only read in their Scripture the stories of their forebears in the faith; they also learn to see these stories as stories that include themselves. The Bible gives Christians examples and instructions in how to pray and sing, and it promises to form communities into praying and singing communities that, over time, will come to understand their common life in terms of these practices. Miriam’s song in Exodus 15.21 is a song for all Christians to sing:

Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

The song recalls God’s deliverance of the children of Israel from Pharaoh’s armies as Moses led them out of Egypt. But because Christians have sung the song about it throughout the ages as though it were also their own song, they have been pressed to look for God’s deliverances in their own times. Social movements for liberation of vast numbers of people (such as the abolitionist movement) have been cast in terms of God’s rescue of Israel. Singing is only one way Christians use the text of the Bible liturgically. (Martin Luther King preached a sermon titled ‘The Death of Evil upon the Seashore’ on the second anniversary of the US Supreme Court’s school

desegregation decision.) But singing is a very powerful way of accomplishing the self-involving intention of the Bible in the lives of the communities that claim it to be their Scripture.

The point here is that we will go astray from the very beginning if we neglect the rich, formative use of the Bible in real communities in favour of the much flatter, isolated enterprise of hunting for a chapter and verse from the Bible when trying to answer a question. The whole sweep of the Bible's narrative is the one that, in the wisdom of the early Christians, was taken to be the definitive story of humanity – it's in the light of this story that they made sense of their lives and also determined that those who came after them would likewise locate their existence.

The Bible was written by numerous different authors in different languages and over hundreds of years. We would do well to think about the Bible more as a *library* than a single book. Every author has his own way of writing, his own preferred themes to highlight and burning questions to ask. Depending on the time they were written, the intended purpose and audience, and the dominant theology, literary training and temperament of the authors, the various texts display an astounding range of material. Yet for all of its great variety, Christians can nevertheless still think of the Bible as a book since it tells a single story: of God and God's relationship with ancient Israel, Jesus and the early Christian Church. It is ultimately a single story about God's love for the whole world and God's desire to be with the human beings he created and his actions to bring that about. The complexity of the Bible, it must also be said – especially how it is typically laid out non-chronologically – makes it difficult for many readers to grasp the big picture.

In what follows, I couldn't hope to retell the entire story of the Bible. But I gesture toward some of its most notable contours for our purposes.

God creates the universe out of nothing and because of no compulsion. It is therefore free from needing to make up for any supposed lack in God. As Christian theology has always maintained, God is sufficiency and fullness, meaning that God relates to everything other than Godself (that is, creation) through love. The goodness of creation, including the 'very good'-ness of humanity (see Gen. 1.31), is God's declaration and celebration of this love. As with any love, the beloved is free not to love in return, but rather to exercise that freedom for separation. According to the Bible, this is the situation of humanity which claims for itself the goods of creation, including its own freedom. While the Bible tells the story of Adam (Hebrew for 'humanity') and Eve ('living one') in a way that some have unfortunately thought demanded a literal reading in order to be

responsible, one prominent Christian habit since at least the third-century theologian Origen of Alexandria has been to look for the deeper meaning:

Now what man of intelligence will believe that the first and the second and the third day, and the evening and the morning existed without the sun and moon and stars? And that the first day, if we may so call it, was even without a heaven? And who is so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, 'planted a paradise eastward in Eden' and set in it a visible and palpable 'tree of life' of such a sort that anyone who tasted its fruit with his bodily teeth would gain life; and again that one could partake of 'good and evil' by masticating the fruit taken from the tree of that name? And when God is said to 'walk in the paradise in the cool of the day' and Adam to hide himself behind a tree, I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual event.²

Origen understood Adam and Eve to be **archetypes** of all humanity. Abandoning the promises of God is a characteristic human act that explains suffering, death, violence, shame and all kinds of enmity between creatures. Adam's and Eve's sin is disobedience and lack of trust in God who had warned of death for eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In Chapter 6, we will discuss the ways the twentieth-century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer took this knowledge to be itself the creation of ethics (which hopes to know good and evil). In short, ethics only becomes necessary once humanity takes its leave of God. It replaces trust in God with knowledge of things other than God. God's intention was a world without the need of ethics, with humanity fully and completely trusting in God's provision, where human action flows from love rather than fear, and where the decisions that lead to harm (and therefore require 'ethics' to avoid) do not come to mind.

Some interpreters have pointed out something else instructive for us here. Adam and Eve do not, in fact, suffer death as punishment for their sin as they had been warned. Furthermore, the first sin is quickly followed by the first murder in which God nevertheless acts to save the murderer (Cain) from being killed by others. In these first few chapters of the Bible, God acts to *redeem* his wayward creation by mitigating punishment and ameliorating suffering and shame. God's strategy for redeeming individual humans then gives way to redeeming a whole people – first Noah's family and then (and from then on) Abraham and his descendants. God *elects* or chooses

2 Origen, *On First Principles*, ed. G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 288.

Abraham to be the ancestor of a numerous people called Israel (named after Abraham's grandson Jacob). God makes a **covenant** or promise with Abraham to bless him with a son when he and his wife Sarah were too old for children, and through their son (Isaac) to build a nation that will, in turn, be a blessing to the other nations (literally 'Gentiles').

One of the themes we have already encountered in this book is the fact that all ethics is collective. A Christian ethic is not only an ethic for individual Christians, but is the 'ethos' (from the Greek for custom, habit or character) of a whole community since it is primarily seen in its way of living as a community. Here in the story of the Old Testament, it is crucial to see that what we would call the moral expectations of Abraham and his descendants (spelled out in much detail with Moses generations later) are expectations for an entire nation. For now, the nation is being promised and established.

Yet the nation is also routinely imperilled. First, God asks Abraham to kill his son Isaac, the child of promise (and this was called off at the last minute). This threatens the very existence of the lineage. Then Isaac's son Jacob spends a considerable time away from the land that had been promised to his grandfather and his descendants. Jacob's son Joseph, the victim of his brothers' jealousy and hatred, is made to depart from the land and go to Egypt where his descendants remain for hundreds of years. The descendants of Jacob eventually re-enter the story at the point where their suffering under slavery leads God to hear their groaning and act to deliver them through the leadership of Moses, a Hebrew raised in the household of Pharaoh.

This story, the exodus ('exit') from Egypt, has been deeply meaningful for Jewish identity – God rescues his people from suffering – and for Christian communities throughout the ages. God must reconstitute Jacob's descendants, though, as a people who worship God, since it seems from the text that by this time their numbers had grown very large (as had been promised to Abraham) but they did not reside in the land and may no longer have been worshipping God (elements of the covenant to Abraham that needed to be fulfilled). God therefore acts to deliver them and also to constitute them as a worshipping community. This reconstituting process, the giving of the law to Moses for the people of Israel, delivers a hefty dose of moral content, including the Ten Commandments.

As emphasized above, the law is given to a community. It is not given to an individual (although it applies to individual Israelites due to their membership), nor is it given in a general way to all of humanity. The law comes to a particular nation which might conceivably adopt it as its way

of life with God at its head. The Israelites settle in the land of Canaan (recovering this aspect of the promise) yet are quickly discontented with having God as their king. This ushers in a period of various reigning human monarchs who range from the relatively good, yet still quite flawed (David, Solomon), to the downright evil (Ahab and Jezebel). The story is showing that the tendency to abandon God's leadership continues to be part of the human predicament, only now that God has chosen to work with one nation out of the many nations of the world, the consequences of this nation's disobedience can be seen to flow from the distinctive set of especially moral expectations that the law had set forth. The prophets remind the people of both the law and the covenant, which are closely intertwined since law is set up as part of what is entailed in being included in God's covenant. Throughout, there is tension over whether and how the covenant exceeds law. God's promises are supposed to remain in effect even when the people disobey the law, but they are also punished for their disobedience, which calls this supposition into question.

The pivotal event in the Old Testament – Judah's destruction and captivity at the hands of the Babylonians – challenges the issues of law and covenant in the most dramatic way. Hebrew prophets leading up to this great event bore messages of warning and calls to repent. When these go unheeded, the prophets turn their attention toward the welfare of the Israelite community in exile. Exile was devastating for many reasons, some of them theological. Hundreds of miles from their home, the captives grieved for their suffering and asked where God was. God could no longer be in Jerusalem, they believed, since Babylon had destroyed the Temple where God had been dwelling. Prophets and teachers in captivity comforted their fellow captives with assurances that God had left the Temple in time (see Ezekiel) and that God indeed was with them in their captivity. Israel had to modify its concepts about God to accommodate this new experience: God is not necessarily tied to land or Temple.

Many scholars believe that much of the Old Testament was written down during and in response to the exile, including the stories of creation, exodus, the giving of the law, and Israel's conquest of Canaan. One reading strategy, then, asks what special meaning these other texts take on in the light of the experience of exile. Or put differently: how does telling the earlier history of Israel in certain deliberate ways help to make sense of Israel's suffering of exile? For example, if the prophets immediately preceding the destruction of Jerusalem remind the people of God's demand for exclusive worship, their warnings are validated when Moses and Joshua issue similar warnings to Israel in an earlier period when, incidentally, Israel

was without land, east of the River Jordan. To be sure, a lot of scholarship has focused on when the early histories of the Bible were written. For our purposes, the possibility that they were written down in response to exile highlights the self-involving, liturgical character of the Bible as a whole in which members of communities appropriate these stories as their own in order to make sense of their lives.

Some of this sense-making was in response to urgent, deeper questions the exiles were asking about the suffering they were made to endure. Hadn't they suffered enough for their disobedience? How could they make sense of the fact that their suffering now seemed to be much worse than they deserved? Some of the later chapters of Isaiah have this tone:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

(Isa. 40.1–2)

Here God is acknowledging what the people suspected was true of the excessiveness of their suffering; they are offered comfort and then hope:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

(Isa. 40.28–29)

Several texts recount God's active involvement in human affairs that leads to the eventual return of the exiles to the land. They are promised that they will be renewed and reconstituted, brought close within God's covenant again and set on a righteous path. But Israel's political power would never be the same. Israel existed without its own sovereignty, under the protection or thumb (depending) of various empires: Persia, Greece, Rome. Questions about God's relationship to Israel's hopes of being a sovereign nation increasingly took on a messianic quality during these years. The people yearned for a real-world saviour who would remind them of David

(the most praised Israelite king of the golden era) and free them from the oppressiveness of their Greek and then Roman captors. Assurances that God is king over all nations and that there is some kind of vicarious purpose to their excessive suffering were therefore important themes by the time of Jesus. The obviously enormous influence of the story of Jesus on Christian ethics is the subject of the next chapter.

When the Bible is silent

Sometimes the Bible is quite simply silent on pressing issues. The large-scale destruction of the environment is an example of this. Both Protestant and Catholic traditions, though, have drawn on the language of environmental stewardship to understand the human relationship to the rest of the created world. As stewards, we are not owners who have creation at our disposal, but are caretakers whose negligence or malice might lead to its destruction. In Genesis, God's description of humans exercising 'dominion' over the other animals (Gen. 1.26, 28) has sometimes been understood in the much stronger sense of understanding them to exist for human use and at human disposal. But the pressing facts of environmental disaster as well as a wider understanding of the role God wants humans to play in other areas of life, such as our use of wealth (Luke 16), leads to a more refined understanding of dominion as tending and caring for the good creation that God has made alongside ourselves.

Technology presents seemingly endless challenges to anyone striving to think morally about the ways we live. A lot of the Bible's silence on ethical topics of our day has to do with technology that is unique to our time. To use an example already mentioned, only since the late 1970s has it been possible to fertilize a human egg outside the womb. *In vitro* fertilization (IVF) has been very popular since then as a form of assisted reproduction for those who are infertile. This practice of course raises new questions that the Bible doesn't answer, at least not directly. Furthermore, an inevitable feature of the IVF procedure is the fact that many more human embryos are created than end up being used since this drastically increases the success rate. But because of this, modern societies face a new moral question that others simply haven't faced before: what should be done with these 'doomed' embryos? We treat this topic below in Chapter 12. The point for now is to recognize that many of our modern moral quandaries are recent creations and often accompany advances in science and technology.

Appealing to the story of the Bible is one way to approach issues on which the Bible is silent. Because Christian ethics asks about what is good

and how we ought to live, Christians understandably ask these questions of the Bible. As we have seen, much of the Bible doesn't seem to be telling us how to live or what to do explicitly. It is often telling the story of ancient Israel – sometimes aspects of the story are clearly instructive and carry moral weight (such as when David is punished for disobedience), sometimes not (such as the polygamist practice of the patriarchs). Historically, Christians have understood the whole of the Bible's story to have moral significance. Even the most casual Bible-reader cannot help but notice that the Bible tells a story.

On one level, the Bible tells the story of Israel in the Old Testament, and Jesus and the Church in the New Testament. On another level, this is really the cosmic story of all humanity, centred on specific events like the calling of Abraham, the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, the reigns of various Israelite kings, their defeat at the hands of enemy nations, their captivity in Babylon and so on. However, while not always diminishing the literal, historical character of these events, Christians since antiquity have looked for meaning that goes beyond them. In truth, Christians read the story of the Old Testament in particular in the light of Christ. They went back and reread in a new way the familiar narrative that it contains – as pointing to and leading up to Christ. But they only did this because they had been formed to read all of reality this way. After all, they believed Jesus Christ to be the meaning of history itself. Jesus makes plain God's love for humanity and God's determination to save us. Jesus is therefore the embodiment of God's saving acts throughout the Old Testament.

The New Testament talks about Jesus as the 'Lamb of God', a reference to the Passover in Egypt. It discusses the return of the Holy Family from Egypt (during the time Herod was killing the children in Bethlehem) in terms of Hosea's description of the exodus in which 'God's son' is both Israel (in Hosea) and Jesus (in Matthew's use of Hosea). In dozens more examples like this, the New Testament not only reads the Old Testament in the light of Christ, but also shows Christians how to do the same. When they read the Bible this way, Christians are not content to situate Jesus within the story of – and leading up to – the first century AD. They understand Jesus to be the lens through which every moment in history can be understood to be God's unique moment with the human beings and communities that he loves. So the Christian skill of reading the Old Testament has been enlarged throughout the centuries to a point where Christianity boldly attempts to read all of reality in the light of Christ.

Because of this conviction, Jesus Christ may be found at the beginning and end of the Bible's story of the whole world. The Bible begins in a

garden (the Garden of Eden in Genesis) and ends in a city (the city of God in Revelation); but in both cases, God and humans dwell together. The city at the end, though, isn't simply a return to the innocence and abundance of the garden. The story of humanity departing from God's ways and being pursued by God at great cost to Godself has actually shaped the human future. The glory of God living unmediated with people in the transformed and renewed creation includes the remembrance of death and suffering from which God promises to redeem us. In the same way that the Gospels present the risen Christ with the scars of his crucifixion, the transformed world is a hurt but healed world. The end of the story isn't simply a return to the beginning.

A recent trend in philosophy that has influenced Christian ethics focuses on some general observations about narratives. One of the main ideas is that stories (not just the biblical story or history, but all stories, including works of fiction), because they are dynamic, situate elements found within them that we might otherwise consider static. Events are not random and disconnected but make some sense once situated in their narrative context. What events led up to this? What followed on as a result? Answering these requires knowing the plot. Deeper still, was a horrible event anticipated by intentional wrongdoing or neglect? Is it made right afterwards? Who benefits? Who suffers? Whose voices are heard when people talk about it? Whose aren't heard? Does the total story 'make sense' to some people more than others? Who comes out on top in the end?

One feature of thinking in a narrative mode is that it gets us thinking about the total sweep of things. For example, it's significant that stories have ends. True, some stories intentionally trail off in order to try to make the opposite point, that things always carry on and we shouldn't look to ends to make sense of it all. Then again, endlessness is also a kind of end in its refusal to offer closure; it is constantly postponing what will never come.

It's a question relevant to Christian ethics, then, when we ask whether the story of God with creation has an end at all. The Bible itself ends with an extraordinary vision of new heavens and a new earth in which all things are made new. The end is a new beginning, with the wrongs of history made right. Hebrew prophets concerned with God setting things right often spoke about the great and terrible day of the Lord in which God's judgement would be dished out on enemy nations and corrupt leaders. In this sense, the Bible's story has an end that has not fully come yet.

On the other hand, some of what parts of the Bible talk about as the end is treated by other parts of the Bible as being fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

For example, New Testament writers conceive of Jesus playing the role of Isaiah's 'suffering servant', probably originally a personification of Israel itself whose suffering at the exile seemed so excessive that a prophetic account needed to be offered. This became important for making sense of Jesus' Passion. Likewise, Jesus' own predictions about the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple were not only fulfilled in history when the Romans destroyed the literal Temple; the narrative of the gospel also took on a deeper literary and theological effect once the description of Jesus' death was mapped on to the prediction: his body replaces the Temple. 'End' in the Bible is often a matter of what is being fulfilled, which is something that must be discerned.

Let's look, then, at an example of a concrete moral issue that is in the Bible but that the Bible doesn't treat as a moral issue: polygamy. Some males in the Old Testament had multiple wives, and the law outlines some instructions regarding this custom (Exod. 21.10–11; Deut. 21.15–17). But polygamy is never spoken of approvingly, while its practice was sometimes tied to one wife's inability to bear children (e.g. Sarah) and the stories that involve polygamy often highlight the problems this causes.³ By the time of Jesus, polygamy in Israel is believed to have become rare. In Hebrew, Genesis 2.24 ('and they become one flesh') doesn't specify 'two', although there was a tradition of inserting that word, which the Gospels and Paul both do. The first-century Qumran community at the Dead Sea, known for its rigorous moral practice, prohibited polygamy, partly based on how its members read Leviticus 18.18 ('And you shall not take a woman as a rival to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive'). Rabbinic Judaism critiqued polygamy until the eleventh century when it was finally prohibited altogether.

Christian tradition has sometimes followed St Augustine who, in the fifth century, defended the practice of polygamy for the patriarchs in the Bible but not for Christian practice. In general, Augustine argued that an act may be contrary to nature, custom or law. The reason the patriarchs had multiple wives was for the purpose of procreation, he said, which does not violate nature. But he condemned the pagan polygamist practices since he understood them to be motivated by lust. By Augustine's own day, polygamy was not only out of custom but also against civil law, so polygamy would be wrong then for being in violation of these two, even though, since it can't be said always and everywhere to violate nature, it

³ See David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), ch. 4.

can't be morally condemned in all cases. At the same time, monogamy from early on was being held up as the ideal and was theologically understood to be analogous with God's exclusive faithfulness to his people. When the tradition has taken a dim view of human sexuality, the elevation of celibacy has contributed to negative attitudes toward all marriage. Polygamy can therefore serve for us as a good example of a practice or custom found in the Bible but without any teaching that ought to make it morally normative for today. In this sense, the Bible is silent on the *moral-ity* of polygamy (except for some possible interpretations of passages such as Leviticus 18) even while it recounts polygamy as an ancient practice.

Today's Catholic Church, however, differs from Augustine. It teaches that polygamy is always a violation of the dignity of marriage as a 'unique and exclusive' relationship between one man and one woman, regardless of the norms of one's culture. The *Catechism* goes so far as to give instructions for polygamist converts to annul all but one marriage:

The predicament of a man who, desiring to convert to the Gospel, is obliged to repudiate one or more wives with whom he has shared years of conjugal life, is understandable. However polygamy is not in accord with the moral law. '[Conjugal] communion is radically contradicted by polygamy; this, in fact, directly negates the plan of God which was revealed from the beginning, because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive.' The Christian who has previously lived in polygamy has a grave duty in justice to honor the obligations contracted in regard to his former wives and his children.⁴

While Catholicism would have those in polygamist marriages break up their marriages upon conversion, and the Anglican Church Lambeth Conference of 1888 decided not to allow polygamists into the Church, others have advocated a different approach. Anglican priest and theologian John Pobee has mostly worked in Ghana where polygamy is sometimes practised for reasons of childlessness tied to economic concerns. While this is not the Christian practice, Pobee thinks it is important to acknowledge that these are not frivolous, but respectable, reasons. His suggestion is for no new polygamist marriages while the existing ones remain in order not to abandon the women and children in them.⁵

4 *Catholic Catechism* (New York: Image Doubleday, 1995), 2387; internal quote is from Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 1981.

5 John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

The point here is that prevailing cultural practices partly help to shape the ways Christians think about moral matters. This cannot always be either good or bad. Sometimes it may be right to look for God's providential work in culture for ways of enriching Christian practice. Other times Christians will want to resist cultural trends. We can also imagine variations and combinations of these two as they will be worked out differently in different moments in history and at different locations geographically and demographically.

There are, of course, many moral issues about which the Bible is simply silent in the stronger sense of their not being mentioned whatsoever. In these cases, the standard strategy is to appeal to some of the other sources of Christian ethics: **tradition** (what have others taught?), **reason** (what does thinking logically and with wisdom tell us?) and **experience** (how does our encounter with these issues in real life affect how we approach them?). All three of these locate us as moral agents within the world in which serious moral questions arise that threaten to set us both adrift and at odds with others. We should therefore add to these three sources a fourth: **faith**, which doesn't so much ask questions but hopes beyond what can reasonably be thought or said.

Recall the earlier discussion about the Bible being a story, or rather two stories: of Israel and of all humanity. God journeys with humanity rather than stands at a distance issuing commands. This active, dynamic picture of God and humanity provides us with a framework for the task of working out what to do by trying to be faithful to God in the moment. The Bible's two stories are meant to converge into one. Israel's election by God has the purpose of Israel becoming a blessing to all the nations of the earth (all humanity) so that all people eventually become children of Abraham. As Gentiles are included into God's family, it is by the giving of the Holy Spirit rather than the passing on of the law.

Likewise, one becomes Christlike by doing what Christ does and by obeying his commands. But the goal of obedience isn't pleasing God, but becoming like God, sharing in the divine life by going through this life exhibiting God's own qualities: compassion, forgiveness, integrity, truthfulness, inclusivity, justice and so on. This means that a short answer to what to do when the Bible is silent is to employ these qualities for new topics and in new situations. A longer answer, though, will eventually be necessary since it's not always clear what it would mean, for example, to be compassionate in every situation. Often we are in situations where we need to choose between compassion to one person and compassion to another. These kinds of scenarios can't usually be solved in advance of

encountering them, but that doesn't prevent us from having something to say about them, which we will have plenty of occasion to do in Part 3.

When the Bible is hard to interpret

In many ways, this section is just a variation on the last. There are matters on which some Christians consider the Bible to be silent while others consider it not altogether silent, but still difficult to interpret. For example, it is generally agreed that the Bible is silent on one of the most contentious issues of our day, abortion (which we take up in more detail in Chapter 12). Yet sometimes hard-to-interpret Bible passages are brought into the debate. Depending on how they are interpreted, they may or may not be relevant to abortion. Is the Bible simply silent on abortion or are there some relevant texts that are just hard to interpret? To answer this question, we will consider one of the very curious passages in the Bible that may or may not be of use in the abortion debate. Before that, however, we need to look more generally at some of the difficulties of using the Bible in general.

Such difficulties fall into two broad categories. First is the question of what overall lens or set of lenses is most appropriate to bring to the text. This is the question of **hermeneutics** and applies to the Bible as a whole (for example, should readers approach the Old and New Testaments differently?) and to individual parts of the Bible (for example, is the Garden of Eden story in Genesis in any sense literal history?). The main tools to employ for this are the study of history and literary theory. Second is the question of odd-sounding, mysterious or opaque passages. This is the question of **exegesis**, which is an activity literally meant to 'draw out' meaning from the text. The main tool for this is the study of language.

These two tasks belong to the work of any serious scholar of the Bible. Beyond these, though, are problems specifically related to our purposes in this book: how to use the Bible as a source for Christian ethics. According to Christian ethicist Robin Gill, there are seven 'serious problems' posed by using the Bible in this way:⁶

- 1 Many very important Bible passages can be interpreted multiple ways. When Jesus teaches 'Turn the other cheek' when struck (see Matt. 5.39), is the text promoting a pacifistic ethic including an ethic against fighting in all war (as Tertullian believed)? Or is the text speaking figuratively

⁶ Robin Gill, *A Textbook of Christian Ethics*, 4th edn (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 10–13.

about an internal attitude of the heart (as Augustine believed)? We will look at this specific text in Chapter 9.

- 2 When it comes to ethics, what role should the authority of the Bible play alongside other sources such as reason, experience and tradition? Christian history reveals a variety of views on this. Martin Luther's insistence on *sola scriptura* in which the Bible is the *only* authority is a view held by many in the Reformed traditions. Anglican and Catholic traditions tend also to look for God's hand outside the Bible, in human reason and conscience and in the natural order of creation. These are sometimes characterized as **general revelation** as opposed to the **specific revelation** of the Bible, since all people have access to it and not just those with access to the Bible.
- 3 Even those who want to abide by Luther and use the Bible as the sole source of moral guidance usually can't help but operate with a **canon within the canon**. In practice, they go to some parts of the Bible more than others for actual guidance. Among those who claim to be utilizing only the Bible for their authority, some gravitate more to Paul's writings or to the Gospels or to the teachings of Jesus; others emphasize some biblical themes (the kingdom of God or 'the gospel', perhaps) over others.
- 4 How important is the Old Testament relative to the New Testament? We will encounter this again in Chapter 9 in our discussion of warfare: there are many wars in the Old Testament, often fought without commentary or condemnation and sometimes with God's explicit approval; an ethic of pacifism comes much more plausibly from the New Testament. If one hopes to find a consistent ethic of war across both testaments, some account of this shift is necessary. It is possible to cite many other examples of similar shifts, such as with capital punishment.
- 5 Is Jesus in any sense a higher authority than the rest of the Bible? This seems to be implied in a relatively recent Bible-publishing custom of setting Jesus' words in red type. Theologically, some have argued that the 'Word of God' refers both to Jesus Christ and the Bible itself with the Bible pointing to Jesus – this makes Jesus the point of the Bible and not vice versa, hence elevating Jesus' authority. This can become useful if there is a contradiction. Gill gives the example of divorce and remarriage which, in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 and 19, is only allowed in cases of 'unchastity'. At the same time, there is great variety among the different Christian traditions on this topic. Eastern Orthodoxy allows up to three divorces and remarriages for a person but not a fourth. Scholarship on Jesus in the past century has often looked for layers within the text of the

Gospels, arguing that some of Jesus' sayings are more authentic than others.

If true, what effect might this have on ascribing authority to Jesus?

- 6 With specific regard to the New Testament, how far is it possible to make the Gospels and the writings of Paul agree? In practice, this is an example of number 3 above – a canon within the canon – since some Christian traditions clearly give precedence to one over another. Reformed Christians tend to go to Paul while Catholics go to the Gospels. Is a certain amount of tension between Paul and the Gospels acceptable?
- 7 Many of the issues faced by today's Christians are not mentioned in the Bible at all. This difficulty was the focus of the previous section.

With these specific problems in mind, let's now return to the issue of possible biblical texts relating to abortion. Surely a most curious example comes from Numbers 5 in which a woman accused of unfaithfulness to her husband is brought before a priest to perform a kind of test or 'trial by ordeal':

[The priest shall say to the woman] 'But if you have gone astray while under your husband's authority, if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has had intercourse with you' – let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse and say to the woman – 'the LORD make you an execration and an oath among your people, when the LORD makes your uterus drop, your womb discharge; now may this water that brings the curse enter your bowels and make your womb discharge, your uterus drop!' And the woman shall say, 'Amen. Amen.' (Num. 5.20–22)

This ordeal strikes modern people as very bizarre and the text raises a lot of questions. Is this a cryptic reference to induced abortion in response to infidelity? Certainly it underscores the seriousness of infidelity by presenting a test (rather than just a punishment), failure of which at least results in barrenness if not the actual loss of a child, depending on whether or not the woman was pregnant. Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages in fact debated whether the procedure should be carried out immediately if the suspected woman was pregnant or whether it could be deferred in order not to enact a loss for the husband. The contemporary Bible commentator Baruch Levine notes that whether a scholar agrees or disagrees with administering the ordeal during a pregnancy 'depended on whether the religious authorities supported or opposed abortion.'⁷ But because the text is unclear about whether or not there is a pregnancy as well as whether or not the potion of water and dust destroys the womb or implies also

7 Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20: The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 203.

destruction of a foetus, we are left with questions that cannot be answered on the basis of the text alone. Levine, for one, concludes that an unstated policy of 'pro-choice' was at work in this portion of the law, partly because of the implication that the community was making clear that it would not care for children of infidelity.⁸

We know that from very early on, Christian literature outside the New Testament condemns abortion, although the reasoning behind it is less clear. But what, if anything, does this text from Numbers contribute to attempts by modern Christians to think biblically about abortion? There are some questions about how much the Old Testament law is meant to be observed by (Gentile or non-Jewish) Christians. At any rate, Jewish tradition abolished the ordeal in the third century, but it was probably not practised after the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in AD 70. What is being described seems to be an ancient practice with parallels in other ancient societies (there are similarities in Hammurabi's Code, for example), but one that bears very little relationship to the subject of abortion as we have come to know it today. For one thing, the contemporary debate is mostly over *elective* rather than *compulsory* abortion.

Even if Numbers 5 does have something to say to pressing issues of today, it seems to be on the opposite side from Christian tradition that has generally disapproved of abortion, even in cases of infidelity. Because surely no mixture of water and dust actually acts as an abortifacient, the text probably understands God to be acting as the judge, producing the appropriate effect through miracle. How does the traditional Christian belief in the sanctity of human life fare then? Is it better or worse if God is the one doing the work?

A text like this that is bizarre and frankly offensive to many modern people also prompts questions *against* the text. How should we take the patriarchal, even sexist, subordinate role that a woman plays here in which a test and punishment destroy her sex organs? One wonders what a woman suspecting her husband of infidelity was supposed to do. There is no equivalent text that relates to a man in a similar situation. It's true that modern ideas about male and female equality cannot be expected of ancient texts. At the same time, other biblical texts are often brought in to support such ideas. How then do those texts sit alongside this one? More troubling is the violence and violation of the ordeal, which few modern Christians would argue should be part of any sexual ethic. Is it acceptable to ignore texts like this one that, on this level at least, seem to go in such a terrible direction?

⁸ Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, 212.

We won't go further to try to answer these questions here. But the case of this text highlights the fact that there can be a fine line between the judgement that on a given topic the Bible is silent and that the Bible is unclear. The distinctions we bring to the text will contribute to what we find there. Does the Bible address abortion or not? Is Numbers part of a 'pro-choice' priestly law tradition, as Levine understands it? Or are we all like the Jewish interpreters who read differently based on beliefs about abortion that they already held apart from this particular text? When all is said and done, are interpreters still likely to side with interpretations that align with beliefs they have already formed based on other reasons?

Maybe the last question is worded too cynically. At the least, it is certainly very difficult to step outside one's moral convictions that come from many different sources. We are almost certainly better able to see this in the history of interpretation than in our own interpretations. One of the tasks of Christian ethics is to allow the Bible – as well as other sources of moral authority, but especially the Bible – to stand over us, our times and our cultures, and to hear its authentic guidance. True to our existence as embodied in particular times and places, though, at least part of the ways Christians will have already been formed, sometimes substantially, is itself Christian. Christian ethicists are, as we have said, in a circular hermeneutical relationship with our existence in the world and the Christian moral sources to which we look. This is our context, and it is a complicated one.

Reading and interpreting responsibly means attending to not only our own various contexts, but also the contexts that produced, shaped, interpreted and delivered the Bible to us. There is quite a range among Christians regarding the question of how much the study of history – the history of the Bible itself, the history the Bible recounts within its pages and the history of its interpretation – ought to help determine its meaning. To some, the Bible should be thought of as the unchangeable word of God for all time and all places. This is a conservative approach in which a word spoken to the ancient Israelites is the same word God is speaking through it today. This view has the appearance of rigour, but is difficult to hold on to in practice.

Biblical studies gained a lot of energy in the nineteenth century around certain *critical* tasks. It began to ask in earnest: what is the history of the main versions of the biblical texts that we have? How old, reliable and consistent are they across the manuscripts? Who wrote the Bible, especially the Pentateuch (the first five books)? What was going on when the texts were written? How do these events and cultural beliefs and practices affect the meaning of the text?

When the Bible condemns practices such as getting tattoos (Lev. 19.28), do we need to know what was going on in the culture at the time? What did tattoos signify? Does this matter? In fact, it does. An ancient custom practised by Israel's neighbours and enemies (like the Egyptians) involved making permanent marks or brands on captives of a god or of a ruler like Pharaoh.⁹ The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria noted that a brand of the name of a god meant permanent allegiance, implying that what is forbidden isn't tattoos per se but marking the name of a god other than the Lord. The standard Hebrew way of signalling allegiance to God, on the other hand, was through phylacteries worn on the arm or forehead. There may be internal disagreement within the Bible as to whether a slave could be marked for life (and thus made a slave for life). Other texts (Exod. 21.6; Deut. 15.17) involve marking slaves by piercing the ear.

Without a doubt, knowing some historical context for the prohibition in Leviticus shows it to have little to do with reasons people in our day get tattoos. But it can teach us something about how the Bible is addressing idolatry and slavery, and possibly even engaging in some internal disagreement with other biblical texts.

Here we have considered briefly two Old Testament texts – Numbers 5 and Leviticus 19 – in order to raise some additional questions about interpretation. When Christians read Old Testament texts, especially ones with moral content, there is always a question about how that content functions within the total context of the Bible. This is called the **canonical context**. The terminology 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament' is unique to Christianity. Judaism considers what Christians call the Old Testament to be part of its collection of sacred texts, but not all of it. The Talmud is a collection of later writings considered sacred in Judaism but which hold no authority in Christianity. Christians have tended to emphasize the ways the 'Old' and 'New' covenants or promises to which the two testaments bear witness are promise and fulfilment. This is avowedly a way of reading both parts of the Bible in the light of Jesus Christ who is anticipated in the Old Testament and disclosed in the New.

In making this crucial point, some have taken the novelty of the gospel too far and have ended up overemphasizing its differences from the Jewish scriptures and religion. Marcion of Pontus, a second-century heretic, so strongly stressed what is new about the Christian message that he even taught that the Jews and Christians worship different gods: the Jewish God is the creator who values law and judgement; the Christian God is the

⁹ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1694–5.

saviour who values love and forgiveness. Even though Marcion was condemned as a heretic, he had many followers and even established churches. Marcion's way of reading the Scriptures reflected this disjunctive approach to looking at Judaism and Christianity. Rather than try to identify ways of uniting them such as through prophecy and fulfilment, he took both at face value and judged that the Jewish scriptures were too obsessed with law and not sufficiently concerned with grace.

Throughout the ages, Christianity has always found the need to give an account of how these two testaments relate to each other. Marcion's extremism showed how urgent it was for Christians to be very clear that the Jewish story was in fact their own as well, and this most certainly included the Jewish Tanakh (or Christian Old Testament). Some have suggested that Marcion even prompted the Church to begin the process of identifying a precise New Testament canon. What Marcion failed to do was to read the Old Testament in the light of Christ. Doing this often means offering figurative readings and looking for prophecy (in the Old Testament) and fulfilment (in the New Testament). There are other strategies as well.

In our own day, versions of these debates are still visible. Especially since the Holocaust and in recognition of centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, it is now common for scholars to warn of the dangers of **supersessionism** (also called replacement theology) or the view in which the Church has simply replaced Israel. Promises God made to Israel (such as through Abraham, David or the prophets) are thought by some to apply only to the Church now. Gentile and Jewish believers in Christ now constitute the 'new Israel', 'children of Abraham' and 'the people of God' based on conversion rather than biological lineage. While this language has some support in the New Testament, it becomes a serious problem when it edges out Israel, which is something Paul completely rejected in Romans: 'I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew' (Rom. 11.1–2).

It's true that Paul was led to this point through an elaborate argument both for why the gospel is available to Gentiles apart from needing to keep the Jewish law and also for what might be interpreted as God's rejection of the Jews for their disobedience. Yet he goes on to argue that in being made recipients of the gospel, Gentile Christians are 'grafted into' the olive tree of Israel. Paul uses an image that is at once organic and biological while also being somewhat artificial in the sense that someone must do the work of grafting the branches in. Paul's challenge was to account for several facts: that God's promises to Israel have been fulfilled in Christ;

that both Jews and Gentiles are now claiming Christ; that God's covenant with Israel still has its own integrity; and that many Jews of his time were rejecting Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Paul's theology on this question is notoriously difficult and perhaps it's understandable that some read him as supporting supersessionism. But most modern scholars strongly caution against this.

A much milder contemporary impulse is to approach the Hebrew scriptures on their own, without imposing Christian readings back on to them. In some Christian settings, one will find an aversion to the term 'Old Testament' in favour of 'Hebrew Bible' for this reason. At one level, the reason for this is very good: to allow the texts to speak for themselves and to value the ways that Jewish thought and practice read and have read them. At another level, though, what is at risk of being left out are the ancient Christian reading practices (such as allegory) that actually worked to hold the two testaments together and so, ideally, also hold Israel and the Church together.