

On Moralistic Interpretations of Scripture

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I. Introduction

All of us have heard Bible lessons and sermons centering on biblical characters that have suggested that those characters are examples of moral behavior, examples either for us to emulate or avoid. David did ABC, therefore you should do ABC. While this approach toward biblical narrative makes for easy to understand and immediate application of the biblical text to our lives, it is not without its problems. In essence, the moralistic approach treats the Bible as a literary collection of right and wrong behavior. When he approaches the Bible, the moralist asks: What ethical, practical lessons can I learn from it? When we treat the human characters within the story as moral examples the drama of redemption becomes little more than a collection of morality tales.

Moralism often makes its appearance at the level of *application*. After the pastor or teacher has determined the historical meaning of the text, he or she still has to apply the text to the present situation (the step of asking: What does this text mean for us?). One route teachers and pastors often take in application is to assume that the episodes within the biblical story are recorded to supply us with moral lessons or examples. Thus the story of David and Goliath teaches self-confidence. David's refusal to kill Saul when Saul fell into his hands teaches us to respect people in positions of authority. The attack of the bears on the boys at Bethel who jeered at the prophet Elisha shows us the importance of good manners.

What the moralistic approach misses is that when David took on Goliath, an important element in the story was the abuse Goliath heaped upon the name of the LORD. When David refused to kill Saul, it was because he realized that the LORD had placed Saul on Israel's throne and would remove him when David's time came. When the boys at Bethel made fun of Elisha, they were rejecting the Word of the LORD, which enjoyed little respect in Bethel, a center of idolatry.

Before we criticize moralism, it is important to recognize its positive element. Moralism rightly recognizes that each of us must be brought face to face with Scripture. It is right in saying that there is more than a history lesson contained in the Bible. Moralism seeks relevance, something you can take home with you. We also need to point out that moralism is not blatantly anti-Christian. Many of the things that moralism comes up with are good and correct, but they may not be the point of the text under discussion.

II. The problems of moralistic interpretation

A. Moralism tends toward reductionism

Reductionism is the problem of seeing all things through a single aspect of reality. For example, Marxism claims that all things reduce to the economic sphere, that is, all issues can be explained through economic relationships. Moralism is also reductionistic for it tends to limit the biblical scope of reality to that of behavioral precept. **The Bible is treated as a collection of homilies whose intention is to provide us with a neat set of do's and don'ts by way of good and bad examples. But Scripture rarely fits the pattern of exemplary behavior. Seldom do we find imperatives directed toward the reader telling him to imitate or shun a reported behavior. More often than not, the point of the story is about something other than the specific behavior of the human characters in the story.**

B. Moralism atomizes the biblical message

To atomize something is to break it down into discrete, unrelated parts. The moralistic approach fragments the drama of redemption into a series of Bible Stories, stories which highlight isolated bits or revealed truths as if they were self-contained proverbs or parables regarding life in general. The unity of the biblical story line is destroyed as the story of God's work of redemption is then broken down into a series of independent insights, abstract or general timeless truths with ready-made applications.

C. Moralism assumes a position of arrogance toward the Bible

Moralistic interpretation assumes that something is lacking in the text as it stands, thus requiring our drawing of a moral in order to make the biblical point. Thus Scripture needs us to draw its moral application. Dare to be a Daniel! Esther was courageous, so you be courageous for the faith too! Worthy sentiments, but they are not in the text.

The moralistic approach requires that an ethical judgment be passed upon the biblical characters. One must decide whether the character acted well or badly, whether the character is a good guy or a bad guy. The fact that the Bible often simply records the acts of its human characters without passing any ethical judgment upon those actions should tell us that the text intends something other than merely providing us with moral examples.

D. Moralistic applications tend toward individualism

The moralistic reader asks: What's in it for me? Moralism has little or no eye for the communal response to the Word. As such it reflects the prevailing individualistic attitude of American culture more than it conforms to the Bible's own self-understanding. Moralism exploits the Bible as a chronicle of *Heroes of the Faith* and sees their import as lying in their usefulness as moral exemplars for the reader. Since we know that as the children of God, the Scriptures are addressed to us, we naturally—but wrongly—assume that they are written about us. The source of this fallacy is the tendency toward immediate personal application by the Bible teacher. It is assumed that the purpose of Scripture is personal enrichment, and that that enrichment is both immediate and individualistic. Again, the Bible rarely conforms to the model.

E. Moralism is man-centered

Moralism makes the individual subject—rather than God and his works—the hero of the story. It is the believer rather than God and his mighty deeds who is central in the moralistic reading of Scripture. In moralism, a switch takes place from the centrality of God to the centrality of the biblical characters and their immediate relevance to the reader. But the Bible is not about me but God. Its fundamental purpose is to tell us about the great things God has done. The Scriptures are not about Joseph, Abraham, Isaiah, or Paul. They are about God's redemptive action, an action which comes to greatest focus and power in Jesus Christ. Certainly, Joseph, Abraham, Isaiah, and Paul are included within the drama of redemption, but their inclusion is always in terms of their reference to God and his works. The Bible will not surrender its theocentric (God-centered) focus. Arnold Rhodes remarks that "the Bible is not only 'the greatest story ever told'; it is the greatest drama ever enacted—and its chief Actor is God himself. The Bible centers on his mighty acts: what he has done, is doing, and will do for us...and our salvation in Jesus Christ." A theocentric approach toward the text seeks to expose in every passage the God-centered focus of the entire Bible.

F. Moralism is legalistic

As moralism treats the Bible as a series of case studies in moral problems and behaviors, the Good News often becomes a new law. The description of past people is transformed into prescription for people today. Joseph was upright, so you be upright too. Peter denied the LORD. Don't you do that. Rachel hid the household gods. Make sure you don't do that. Joseph was gracious toward his brothers, so you too must show hospitality. A Christianized form of works righteousness begins to emerge in the moralistic approach toward Scripture.

Certainly, there are ethical norms in Scripture.

And there are modes of conduct that are to be shunned and denounced. But we need to take those norms from those portions of Scripture which intend to teach ethical norms. In other words, we are to do what we are told to do. The law (e.g., the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount) tells us to do or not to do. Obey we must. But we do not need to make more law than the Bible already has. When we seek ethical norms we need to go to the imperatives of Scripture. Where those imperatives are not present, we should not moralize the text into new law.

G. Reducing the biblical stories to moral exemplars dehistoricizes Scripture

Moralism produces either one or both of the following anachronisms: (1) a kind of abstract generalizing that seeks to abstract the biblical characters out from their historical contexts so that their lives and experiences can be relevant to the modern life of faith, or (2) a transposition in which the believer puts himself into the Bible's historical setting so that those moral examples will apply.

Either way, the specific historical and cultural setting of the texts is overlooked. For a moralistic reading, it makes little difference whether a biblical example is taken from Genesis or the book of Acts. But for a truly historical-redemptive reading of the Bible, the character's placement in the drama of redemption is crucial to understanding the text.

Moralistic readings fail to appreciate historical progression in the biblical text. Abraham is treated not as a late bronze age man called out of Ur of the Chaldees by God, but rather like a modern evangelical who carries a red letter New Testament. Moralism looks at the text not in terms of its historical-redemptive relatedness to us, but in terms of a universalized moral-ethical relatedness. But what needs to be transferred from the text to the modern situation is not the biblical characters to our life situation but God's message to us.

H. Moralism carries the vexing problem of making promises it cannot fulfill

The promise of moralism runs something like this: the biblical character did X and was blessed in some way. If you do X, you too will be blessed. But if the text does not say "do X," there is no reason to expect that God promises to bless you if you do X.

I. Conclusion

Moralism too often misses the purpose of Scripture. When faced with moralistic interpretations or applications we must ask: Is this indeed the intention of the text? Was this the author's purpose for his original audience?

The Bible is not a collection of edifying stories whose purpose is the reproduction of moral examples

for us to follow. Rather, the purpose of Scripture is to confront us with the biblical perspective upon life in God's creation, and its redemptive message in Jesus Christ. If moral lessons were the primary point of Scripture, we could just as easily preach and teach on moral legends and proverbial myths from all over the world.

The problems of moralism have not gone unnoticed within the Reformed tradition. For example, Edmund Clowney writes:

Those who find collected moral tales in the Bible are constantly embarrassed by the good deeds of patriarchs, judges, and kings. Surely we cannot pattern our daily conduct on that of Samuel as he hews Agag to pieces, or Samson as he commits suicide, or Jeremiah as he preaches treason... Dreadful consequences have ensued when blindness to the history of redemption was coupled with the courage to follow misunderstood examples.

Sid Greidanus applies the same criticism to moralistic approaches to the New Testament:

In the New Testament, preachers face similar complications. On the basis of Jesus' remarks about the poor widow who put her last pennies into the temple treasury (Luke 21), should we preach that the poor give their last pennies to the church? On the basis of Acts 4:32, should we recommend that Christians today hold their possessions in common? On the basis of Paul's conversion experience, should we preach that all Christians should have such a blinding conversion experience?

III. Identification: the Reader and the Story

Different biblical texts call for different responses. God speaks more than one kind of word in Scripture. Some of his words call for pious submission, others for moral obedience, others for intellectual assent, and still others for our cultural faithfulness. Richard Mouw observes: "To know when the Lord is speaking one kind of word rather than another is not always an easy matter, but the difficulty is lessened somewhat by the recognition that he has refused to allow his words to be easily categorized." We cannot limit God or the kind of word he can speak to us by way of a pre-commitment that the Bible speaks only one kind of word or elicits one kind of response.

Because the Bible is primarily a declaration about the great things God has done to redeem a sin-sick world, the fundamental question of Scripture will always be: **What is God doing in this text?** Yet we should note that this question best suits historical narrative. **The object of the narratives of Scripture is to declare how God leads, redeems, judges, defends, warns, loves, disciplines, and instructs his covenant people, rather than supplying us with moral guides to religious experience and behavior.** While historical

narrative is the most common genre within Scripture, and the Bible as a whole is best understood as a narrative story, we must yet recognize that Scripture also includes literary genres which elicit other questions and other responses from us. The book of **Romans is doctrinal in its very nature (yet still possessing a narrative presupposition or substructure). Thus we ought to be asking: What does it teach? Similarly the law codes of Scripture bring us face to face with moral imperatives and restrictions. And some biblical texts seek a response that is primarily emotive. Many of the Psalms fall into this latter category as they seek to move us to heart-felt praise and adoration.**

If moralistic application is an inappropriate approach toward narrative, then how are we to relate to the biblical characters? Surely there is more to it all than their acting as historical foils for the progressive revelation of redemption. Part of the reality of any story is the reader's empathy for and identification with the characters. We cannot identify with God in the story, as that would be foolish and presumptuous to the point of blasphemy. We identify with the human characters. They are our point of contact to the events. If we cannot identify, see ourselves as some-how represented by the responses, responsibilities, and allegiances of the human characters, the text will lack bite and existential relevance for us.

Pietistic approaches toward the Bible reduce our response to our subjective feelings, and extreme doctrinalism tends to limit the faith to rationalistic categories. The pietist lives in his own heart, while the rationalist lives in his head. The Word of God never makes it to the feet of either. One thing to be said for moralism is that it is concerned with the reader's real-world response to Scripture. While we must contend that the biblical narrative is meant to reveal the mighty deeds of God rather than provide us with normative models for morality, we need to identify with the human characters of the text in order to see that God's mighty deeds are for us as well as the characters of the story. Without such identification we will not hear Amos' judgment upon the spiritual poverty and social injustices of Israel in the eighth century B.C. If we cannot see Amos as written to us as well as the Israel of Jeroboam II, his prophecy will remain merely a historical document, and our reading of it will provide us little more than a lesson in history, a recitation of a drama from long ago which we merely witness in the same way that one might overhear the conversation of two strangers on a city street.

We need to remember that biblical thought is typological and analogical. That the story of Abraham is recorded in Scripture is more than mere history. Abraham is also a representative of the people of God. Thus there is a divinely intended analogy between Abraham and the modern Christian. Sid Greidanus has suggested that identification with biblical characters is not only good but essential for an obedient reading of the text. But that identification needs some controls put upon it. We need to keep the biblical author's original intent firmly in mind as we read, and thus it will act as a

control upon identification. Greidanus explains:

One question to ask, therefore, is whether the author intended his original hearers to identify with a certain character. While this question will drastically reduce the number of identifications, it will leave the way open for discerning intended models for self-recognition. It is clear, I think, that in the Old Testament the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are presented as figures in which Israel was to recognize itself; these fathers represented Israel. As the ancient Israelites heard the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they were completely involved because this was *their* story; what God did for the patriarchs, he did for *them*; if God had not given Abraham and Sarah a child in their old age, Israel would never have come into existence. As the ancient Israelites listened to these stories, however, I cannot imagine that they were learning lessons on resolving interpersonal conflict or on lying about your wife, or any other such lessons which Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob might have learned. The object was rather that the Israelites should learn their identity and their obligation: who they were in relation to the covenanting God, who God was, and what they owed the God who had created and redeemed them. Since God's people today are one covenant people with ancient Israel, these narratives may be used today for learning our identity and our obligation—provided, of course, we take into account that today we live after the coming of Christ.

There is no easy answer to the question: Which biblical characters are intended to serve as models for our identification? In which do we find self-recognition, a mirror of ourselves and our responses to God and his Word? Some principles which should guide our identification with biblical characters would be:

1. We need to remember that the Scripture is addressed to the people of God as the covenant community, not isolated individuals. Where identification is intended, it is the identification of the covenant people, not the individual believer which is in view.
2. God is still the hero of the story. Moses is not the hero at Mount Sinai. If there is a point of identification in the story (and I think there is), it is with the covenant community which received the mosaic law.
3. We still need to beware of moralism. All the problems we identified as belonging to moralism still hold. Do not turn narrative into new law.
4. The story is meant as identification for the purpose of self-recognition, not moralistic application. Hence the biblical stories do not provide us with sure-fire models of financial or marital success.
5. The difference between moralism and

identification comes down to this: a moralistic reading takes the text as a key to normative behavior. Identification with the biblical characters shows us that we too are the people of God, and thus we hear the same Word, the same judgment, the same warning, and we claim the same promise. As Ted Plantinga writes:

Christ's redemptive work, together with the many events that preceded it and paved the way for it, serves as an assurance for us. The episodes that make up redemptive history point ahead to what awaits us. At the same time, the actualization of the new life within the covenant community gives us a foretaste of the complete fulfillment of all God's promises. Thus we must learn to read the Bible's redemptive history as a source of assurance.

For an insightful treatment of the relationship between biblical narrative and ethics, and something of a rehabilitation of narrative texts as moral guidance see Gordon Wenham's *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Baker, 2000)