

Is the Bible a Reliable Moral Guide?

Source

David Lose in the huffingtonpost

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“The Bible’s value, above all, is as a guide to lives. And we mean to all of our lives, whether one is religious or not, whether one is Christian, Jewish, or from another religion or no religion.”

My reaction to what I’m sure they believed was a relatively innocuous sentence was as unexpected as it was unbidden: *Really?! Is the primary value of the Bible really as a moral guide?* My mind went immediately to the many and various offenses listed in the Bible that call for the death penalty: murder and kidnapping, which perhaps shouldn’t surprise, but also adultery, homosexual practice, cursing a parent, owning an animal that repeatedly attacks others, and being a “medium or wizard” — and all this from only two chapters (Exodus 21 and Leviticus 20). And these, of course, are just capital offenses; there are numerous others that call for losing various body parts or being expelled from the community.

To be sure, there are also many important and salutary laws that we might well heed today, including caring for the most vulnerable, loving one’s neighbour, releasing the debt of those overwhelmed by their obligations, always making provision for those who are poor, not taking vengeance on others, planting and harvesting in a manner that today we would call “sustainable,” and not lending money in a way that disadvantages the borrower — and all of those also from a small set of chapters. (Ex. 22-23, Lev. 19, 25). Think how different our debates about health care, relief for those facing foreclosure, agricultural policy and the regulation of banks would be if we consulted these passages.



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Notice, though, that the chapters from which the “good” laws come are disturbingly close to those containing the “bad” ones. And that’s just the problem: the Bible seems regularly and simultaneously to offer counsel that we deem both awful and excellent. In what way, then, can it serve as a *reliable* moral guide? One approach to this question — the one followed by a majority of progressive Jewish and Christian scholars — is to place these passages in their original context, explaining their “foreignness” so that we can either 1) understand their highly contextual nature and thereby recognize that they do not apply today or 2) re-appropriate and apply their more salutary content to our context. This approach, as Friedman and Dolansky capably demonstrate, can be tremendously productive. But at times it falls painfully short, for while it may be true that the verses calling homosexuality an abomination, for instance, should be considered temporary and contextual, one needs to question whether this law (and many others) was just at *any* time or under *any* circumstances.

What, then, are those who read the Bible to do? Shall we just pick and choose the laws and commandments that appeal to us and disregard the others? Curiously, I’m tempted to answer a qualified “yes.” I do so largely because I suspect *the Bible was never intended to serve primarily as a moral reference*. Rather, I think that the Bible comes to us as a collection of confessions of faith of the ancient Israelites and Christians about the nature and character of God and was intended to invite readers into relationship with that God. From that relationship a commitment flows to leading a certain kind of life. Theology, that is, precedes morality, as one’s view of God — angry or loving, judgmental or gracious — greatly influences how one relates to neighbour and world.

Question - “Theology precedes morality” - Discuss

Hints

David Lose argues there are contradictions within the Bible’s view of moral issues and some of the most severe injunctions against certain types of behaviour (eg. the abominations of Leviticus and the practice of stoning adulterers etc.) come alongside other moral ideas we still accept (love your neighbour as yourself -Leviticus 19:18) that none of them can be interpreted before we first have a view of the character of God and our own social context. The confession of faith – the basic beliefs about what God is like and how God acts in history, come before the moral code.