

Olivet Nazarene University

## Digital Commons @ Olivet

---

Faculty Scholarship – Biblical Literature

Biblical Literature

---

2020

### Biblical Ethics

Kevin Twain Lowery

*Olivet Nazarene University*, [klowery@olivet.edu](mailto:klowery@olivet.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/blit\\_facp](https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/blit_facp)



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Lowery, Kevin Twain, "Biblical Ethics" (2020). *Faculty Scholarship – Biblical Literature*. 3.  
[https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/blit\\_facp/3](https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/blit_facp/3)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Biblical Literature at Digital Commons @ Olivet. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship – Biblical Literature by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Olivet. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@olivet.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@olivet.edu).

## **BIBLICAL ETHICS**

Ethical issues are addressed in Scripture in several ways. There are discourses that provide broad principles that everyone should follow (e.g., **Sermon on the Mount**), statements made in specific contexts (e.g., Pauline admonishments), and narratives that illustrate both what to do and what not to do.

### **Functions of Biblical Ethics**

Biblical ethics served several purposes for its authors and original readers. The overarching goal was to build relationships with God and others. Since God desires the best for his creatures, helpful actions are consistent with God's moral character and harmful actions run contrary to it. Consequently, our attitudes and actions can bring us closer to God (and others) or they can separate us.

Biblical ethics stresses character formation to solidify helpful attitudes and actions into patterns. The concept of the **image of God** reflects this. Humanity was created with the capacity to reflect the character of God (Gen. 1:26-27; II Pet. 1:4). Consequently, biblical ethics has both relational and ontological aspects that are interrelated.

Another notable function of biblical ethics is group identity. Particular practices and behaviors (e.g.,

circumcision, Nazarite vows) were intended to make group members identifiable. The theological rationale for this was to present a positive witness of the group's shared faith. Having a shared identity is endemic to all groups. It creates a bond between group members, increasing cohesion and morale, but it can also engender negative attitudes like exclusivism, judgmentalism, arrogance, and hatred. Group identity is thus one of the more controversial aspects of religion. Misplaced zeal is a fertile breeding ground for legalism, violence and pettiness, especially when it is rooted in something considered to be authoritative, like Scripture or tradition.

Consequently, we must distinguish between ethics and social taboos, even in biblical ethics. Some actions and attitudes are helpful or harmful, while others merely reflect group identity. Consider Jesus's keeping of the Sabbath (e.g., Mark 2:23-3:12) and the **Jerusalem** council over circumcision (Acts 15).

### **Gradual Shift in Emphases over Time**

Several emphases of biblical ethics changed over time, especially in the OT, which spans a large time period. These were, at least in part, adaptations to the culture's more general move away from fatalism. The biblical authors

increasingly attributed the state of affairs in the world to human control. This affected their ethics in several respects.

First, there was a shift from corporate to personal responsibility. After all, if humans have greater control than what had been previously thought, they have greater ethical responsibility. In the earlier biblical writings, especially the Decalogue, God promised to reward and punish the group for the behavior of individuals (e.g., Exod. 20:5-6; 34:7; Num. 14:18). This included families, tribes, cities, and entire nations. Families were destined to reap the rewards and pay the penalties for up to four generations. Sometimes the group itself was sufficiently corrupt to justify destroying it completely, as in the flood of Noah (Gen. 6-9) and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18-19). In other instances God punished the group for the disobedience of one, e.g., Achan keeping some of the Jericho plunder (Josh. 7) and David taking a census (II Sam. 24).

Compare these with passages like Ezekiel 18. Here, group accountability is no longer the prevailing standard. Instead, children and parents are both responsible for their individual behavior. Likewise, it could no longer be assumed that success is a reward from God or that woe and

trials are a sign of God's punishment. This point is poignantly made in the book of Job (see ch. 21). Later, Jesus' healing of the man born blind reinforced this point (John 9).

Second, biblical ethics gradually replaced its earlier emphasis on corporate rules with an emphasis on personal **conscience**. The biblical authors began to see the state of the world as more contingent on human behavior, and this required individuals to develop moral discernment. Mere group conformity was no longer sufficient. Prescribing one-size-fits-all rules would no longer be adequate. The biblical authors realized that the complexity of matters cannot be adequately addressed in a simple list of rules. A good illustration of this is the gradual refinement of their views concerning marriage and divorce. Note the nuance that Jesus adds to their understanding (Matt. 5:27-32; 19:3-12), his unwillingness to punish the Samaritan woman (John 4) or the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Paul continues this, e.g. his expansion of the grounds for divorce (e.g., I Cor. 7).

As the biblical authors began to ascribe less to fatalism, they began to be more optimistic about influencing, even reforming, the attitudes and behavior of individuals. This resulted in a movement from punishment to

**forgiveness.** Compare the stories of Abraham (Gen. 18) and Moses (Ex. 32) pleading for God to show **mercy** to others with the much later story of Jonah, in which God wants to forgive, but Jonah does not. The stress on forgiveness continued to increase throughout the Gospels (e.g. Matt. 5-7; 18:21-22) and the NT.

These shifts reflect the reality that ethics is more complex than a simple choice to obey or disobey. In this way, the story of Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen. 2-3) illustrates the state of innocence that was lost as human beings began to understand that matters of right and wrong are as complex as the situations we judge, particularly in light of the many causes that shape them. The biblical authors still held firm beliefs about God's ultimate control over everything (e.g., Isa. 45:7). However, it no longer seemed satisfactory to quietly accept **evil** without question. Instead, they began to wonder why God allowed bad things to happen in order to better understand what God wanted them to do about it. (e.g., Job; James 1)

### **Applying Biblical Ethics Today**

For the biblical authors, ethics was a dynamic enterprise, not a static one. This is why Judaism developed a multi-faceted Rabbinic tradition for ethical and

theological reflection. It is also why Christianity has historically relied on ecumenically developed creeds and on the writings of the early church fathers as resources for scriptural interpretation. Even within the NT itself, there are extended conversations over the relationship between **law** and **grace**, because those authors knew that the core values of Christianity need to be continually adapted and applied to new contexts.

The Wesleyan tradition recognizes the dynamic nature of Scriptural interpretation, so it emphasizes tradition, reason, and experience as resources for that task. Along with Scripture itself, these elements together provide a holistic and balanced biblical hermeneutic that is well suited for applying biblical ethics to contemporary situations.

We can only do **justice** to biblical ethics when we view it within its historical and cultural development and approach it in a manner consistent with the biblical authors themselves. The core values of the biblical authors are still relevant today, and yet our context is continually changing. Fortunately, the Bible doesn't stop at merely offering rigid prescriptions. Instead, it provides us with trajectories developed within a dynamic tradition of ethical reflection.

KEVIN TWAIN LOWERY, PHD