

## Reflection Paper

### God And His People: Ethics and Ethical Questions

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## **God and His people: Ethics and Ethical Question**

From the beginning of humankind, God's election of his people (Genesis 12) is not based on any human merit rather God's own divine wisdom which we can never fully comprehend. Also, just because God selects someone does not mean that the person can do whatever he wants and still receive God's blessings. There is always an agreement to obey or follow God's command in order to stay in his abundant blessings and divine coverage. We have seen that time and time again in the history of Israel and God's people. Thus faith in the almighty God, is not just an empty promise rather very similar to a contract or treaty. Our ethical standard or moral is not coming from mythical stories but instilled by God himself, even if we don't always see it play out the way God designed it to be in the lives of God's people which just tells us our brokenness and sinful humanity.

In the Old Testament time, God's covenant with Israel was seen as a Suzerain treaty. Rutledge says that relationship with God and people can not be reduced to a mechanistic system of appeasement or seeking divine favour through rituals. True faith in God must be accompanied by practical commitment that shows itself in right living. This we can see being expressed in the law in Exodus but the principal goes back to the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 18:19). We can not attempt to separate the religion from lifestyle and to focus, instead, on external ritual, is strongly condemned by the prophets in the Old Testament (Isaiah 1:11-17, Hosea 8:12-13, Amos 5:21-24).

Rutledge asserts that the True basis of ethical behaviour in the Old Testament is the nature and character of God himself. The qualities God requires of human beings in general, and of his people in particular, are the same qualities he himself displays in his relationship with them (Jeremiah 9:24). According to Christopher Wright, 'Biblical ethics' assumes the existence

of the one living personal God and sets the whole of human life in response to him. Ethics is primarily a response to God, who he is and what he has done. This is true of how we look at the ethics, it is not something that we invented but something we inherited from God. However, Wright states that there is a theological angle which emphasizes the importance of God's character in ethics. He talks about a triangle which has God on the top and Israel and Land as the bottom two corners. The social angle emphasizes that Old Testament ethics is not concerned, primarily with abstract principles, but with right living in the real world: relationship with God has implications for life in society. The land too plays an important role in Israel's understanding of herself and her relationship with God. Because the economic life of Israel cannot be separated from the land, this also has social implications, including warnings against extending property and taking land from weaker members of society, and the need to share the blessings of the land.

I do not completely agree with Wright's interpretation of the land in his theological triangle. Land has definitely been an important part of economic life of not only Israel but other nations as well. However what sets Yahweh apart from the gods of other nations, is how we use it. But this is not just with land but also with respect to other types of properties (including slaves, material wealth, livestock)<sup>1</sup> as well. Thus God's character in ethics is not just important in the land but also in the other aspects of Israel's life.

According to Rutledge, God's ethical values are revealed in mainly five ways.

1. Ethics and Law - A key function of the law was to maintain the distinctiveness of Israel and enable the nation to fulfil its mission to the world, which, as we have seen, may be seen in terms of the revelation of God's glory. The Decalogue emphasizes the dual responsibility central to Old Testament faith; a right attitude

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus chapters 20-23.

to God as the one, true God who alone is to be worshipped, and the outworking of that in right behaviour to others.

2. Ethics and narratives - Old Testament writers observed that history is an important medium of divine revelation. Through his mighty acts, especially in the events of the exodus, God has made himself known. In Exodus 23:9 the command *do not oppress an alien* is given the explanation *you yourself know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt*. In simple words, treat others how you would like to be treated. It is just so clear when Jesus tells the Pharisees one of the greatest commandments is to love your neighbor as yourself.
3. Ethics and prophecy - One of the emphases of the prophets is to call people back to the ethics of the covenant faith. God's people have been brought together into a covenant relationship with God, and so have an obligation to one another and to society as a whole. The Hebrew word *Hesed* in the context of Micah 6:8, is closely related to faithfulness, loyalty and dutiful action. It is conducted in accordance with the divinely appointed order that allows society to function.
4. Ethics and natural law - Moral and ethical norms that arise from the experience of a community, which are passed from one generation to the next to ensure the survival and well-being of that society. Ethical conduct in the Old Testament is primarily theological. Rutledge asserts that the existence of a universal moral law may be linked to the idea of 'covenant with creation' through which God has entered into a relationship with the natural order. It makes sense because God created everything and set a paradigm for everything to work with as we can see

in Genesis 1 and 2. Then God would not change the structure of his own creation thus the relationship with the natural order is obvious.

5. Ethics and wisdom - Wisdom literature contains practical advice on personal morality and relationships. It points to the importance of the family, warning against the dangers of, and damage caused by, adultery (e.g. Prov. 2:16, 5:3-4, 6:26) and emphasizing the blessings of good family relationships (5:18-19, 12:4, 18:22). It emphasizes the importance of good friendship (Prov. 17:17, 18:24) and gives advice on social relationships in general (Prov. 3:27-29, 6:16-19). There is also a significant emphasis on social justice, including condemnation of unjust business practices (Prov. 11:1, 16:11) etc.

One of the major questions we face is the reconciliation of wicked prospering or wrong getting rewarded in life. We all at times look at our neighbors and think why God is not punishing him for all the wickedness and wrong things he has done. This is not the recent phenomenon or the world has completely changed from the Biblical time. We see this struggling question being asked over and over again by prophets, kings and other God's people. Prophet Jeremiah asks the same question in 12:1:

*Why does the way of the wicked prosper?*

*Why do all the faithless live at ease?*

Even Psalmist has a similar concern in 73:12-14:

*This is what the wicked are like-*

*Always carefree, they increase in wealth.*

*Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;*

*In vain have I kept my hands in innocence...*

One explanation, which seeks to preserve the integrity of God's character, is that this is a temporary state of affairs. Thus our eyes should not be fixed on things on earth but on the heaven above where we will spend all our eternity.<sup>2</sup> God satisfies his people and gives them hope and strength through all circumstances (Ps. 73:24-28). We can never fully comprehend some of the questions.

In fact, sometimes it feels like people of God suffer more than the wicked. The best example we see is in the book of Job who asks God, why are these things happening to one who is innocent and upright? As a general rule, God judges sin and rewards the righteous; those who live unwisely will suffer the consequences. However, the book of Job confuses this ideology as we try to find a black and white answers for some of these questions in our life. Our belief that God is sovereign as well as loving and compassionate leads us to believe that suffering is not purposeless.

The question in our mind never disappears that “will not the judge of all the earth do right?” Rutledge states that in presenting God as ultimately responsible for evil as well as good, the Old Testament writers emphasize his sovereignty. When they suggest that God allows evil, they are making a statement not about his ethical character, but about his ultimate authority in the affairs of the world. Even in the events where God himself modifies one's heart (as seen with Pharaoh in Exodus), the final decision of how to respond to such divine prompting, however, still lies with Pharaoh.

The idea of God bringing good out of evil, not as a by-product but, as a part of his intention in allowing the suffering in the first place, is clearly seen in the cross: ‘in [Christ] the greatest evils, the betrayal and crucifixion of the son of God, become, and now are the greatest good for all mankind.

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<sup>2</sup> As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:18.

At the end, we may not understand God's actions, but we trust him. With all these unanswered questions, we must recognize the fact that we cannot or may not know the mind of God. This does not mean that we should not ask questions, however we need to recognize that God is greater than us. When Abraham expresses his concern about God's apparent injustice, God debates with him and demonstrates the justice of his case (Gen. 18:23-33). In the book of Job we are made aware that God's purposes may be hidden, and that they encompass far more than any one person's life and experience. There is also a rebuke for those who presume to challenge the ultimate justice of God. Abraham's question becomes the answer when he said: *Will not the judge of all the earth do right?* We can only hope and trust knowing that God loved us so much that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.