

THE Geneva Review

No. 10

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May, 1984

OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS

by Ames B. Jordan

Those of us involved in Christian Reconstruction are so used to thinking of the Old Testament law as relevant to our times, that we forget how ignorant the evangelical and catholic world at large is on the subject. Times, however, are changing. In March, I attended a oneday seminar sponsored by the Institute for Basic Youth Conflicts. Speaker Bill Gothard said at one point that the Christian Churches today are coming out of a period of extreme ignorance and weakness, because for generations we have ignored the laws God gave to His people Israel. Gothard has literally millions of supporters in the United States, and he has interested them in studying and applying Old Testament law. This, in itself, is a very positive phenomenon.

Recently a number of English theologians have also begun to study the laws God gave to Israel, seeking to make them relevant to modern times. Prominent among these is Gordon Wenham, whose valuable commentaries on Leviticus (Eerdmans), Numbers (Intervarsity), and Genesis (Word, forthcoming) have received favorable mention in this newsletter previously. The English school (if we may call it that) is willing to entertain the proposition that the social laws given by God to Israel should form the model for the laws of all nations.

My own study of *The Law of the Covenant* will be available this summer, and it will reflect interaction with both Reconstructionist (Rushdoony, Bahnsen, North) and English (Wenham, etc.) writers. Meanwhile, two introductory works have recently been published, which are worth looking into.

The first comes, as I see it, basically out of the English school: Christopher J. H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (published in England under the title, *Living as the Peep/e of God*) (InterVarsity Press, 1983; 224 pp., paperback, \$5.95). This is a very basic book, but still a useful one, particularly for young Christians. Wright begins by discussing the three spheres of ethics in the Bible: man and God, man and man, and man and the earth. He moves on to take up in a cursory fashion certain basic issues, such as economics, politics, law, and the like, out of the Old Testament. I have to say "cursory," because he does not go very far into these questions.

As a Reconstructionist I am, naturally, unhappy with some aspects of this work. The only Reconstructionist writer Wright seems familiar with is Bahnsen, which leaves him ignorant of about 95% of the work which the Reconstructionist school has done. Even so, reading Bahnsen's *Theonomy* should have prevented such a simplistic statement as this (p. 168): "[The crime of the rebellious youth (Dt. 21:18-21)] was a covenant crime, an offence against the Fifth Commandment, and therefore against God himself. It therefore threatened to bring judgment on the whole theocratic community and so had to be purged away. Now *that can no longer be the rationale for any punishment in a secular state,*

so the demand for the death penalty no longer applies. Nevertheless, it remains as a reminder of the seriousness of the nature of the offence described, and suggests that there are grounds for supporting a degree of strictness and severity in the law's response to serious juvenile criminality."

I have emphasized the question-begging sentence. Just because we happen to live in a pagan state (let's call it what it is, please), does that mean that God's "demand for the death penalty no longer applies"? That's the whole issue here, is it not? Are we supposed just to ignore the fact that our present social order is pagan? If we work to institute a God-honoring state (a "theocracy"), then what about this law? This issue needs to be faced squarely, but so far, only Reconstructionists have done so.

All the same, there is much of value in Wright's work. I recommend you get it, and give it a read. Wright wants to take the Old Testament law as a *paradigm*, or model, without being bound too closely to particulars. I sympathize with his arguments, but I do not think his way of resolving the issue gets us as far as we need to go. Again, I have spent a great deal of time in my own book on this. All the same, because Wright is willing to use the law as a model for the nations, he does come up with good ideas and suggestions.

The second recent work is Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Zondervan, 1983; 356 pp., hardcover, \$11.95). Kaiser's is more of a textbook summary of the Old Testament law and ethics. Four introductory chapters discuss method, and there is much to agree with here. The next four chapters give brief summaries of the four principal law codes (the Ten Commandments, the Book of the Covenant, the Holiness Code, and Deuteronomy). I found this to be too brief, but then I am comparing it with my own more detailed work. As an introduction and survey, it is quite valuable. Chapters 9-15 deal with holiness and family, life, marriage and sex, wealth and possessions, truth, and so forth. The last three chapters deal with "moral difficulties in the Old Testament."

Kaiser shows considerable familiarity with Rushdoony's *Institutes*, and this makes his book more up to date than Wright's. There are places where I differ with him, but that is to be expected. I am not really satisfied with his explanation of why God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (I don't think he does justice to the position of Geerhardus Vos). I disagree with him on the issue of the propriety of lying to tyrants (as I have discussed this in depth in my essay in *Tactics of Christian Resistance*, GDS Press, \$14.95).

Also, I think Kaiser slightly sidesteps the real question concerning the imprecatory psalms and the death penalty. Unlike most, he does squarely confront the fact that a good and righteous God has given us these things, and we dare not insult Him by pretending that they involved an inferior ethics. (In fact, that's one of the best things about this book: Kaiser squarely faces the issues, most of the time.) All the same, once we have admitted that the imprecatory psalms and the death penalties do not conflict with the gospel, what are we to do? What do we say, practically, into the marketplace today? I believe we need to sing the imprecatory psalms (along with the rest), and use them to curse the particular enemies of the Church (such as certain people in Nebraska, for instance); and I believe we need to work for legal reform, so that our laws conform to God's. Kaiser does not quite get down to the street level, and that's regrettable. All the same, everything he says points in the direction Reconstructionism has advocated.

This book (Kaiser's) is a gold mine of information. You should get it without delay.

IF YOU WANT TO ORDER THESE TWO BOOKS DIRECTLY FROM GENEVA MINISTRIES, SEE THE ENCLOSED ORDER FORM.

Short Notes

An **amateur** is a lover, not a nincompoop. The true amateur has a real interest in a subject, though not a professional one. Lots of us are music lovers. A couple of good books which I have found valuable, and which I can wholeheartedly recommend, are Jane Stuart Smith and Betty Carlson, *A Gift of Music* (Crossway Books, 1979), available in Christian bookstores (and from Geneva Ministries); and Leopold G. Ratner, *The Musics/Experience* (W. H. Freeman and Co., 1983), available in secular bookstores. Smith and Carlson work at Francis Schaeffer's L'Abri organization. They provide vignettes on the lives and works of the great composers, discussing Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Mendelssohn, etc., from a Christian viewpoint. I think that this is one of the most helpful books ever to come out of L'Abri. Those of you who appreciate fine music, or want to learn how, should get this book.

Ratner's book discusses the basic building blocks of music, and teaches you how to listen intelligently. The book comes with two plastic phonodisks bound in, which provide examples to listen to. Ratner discusses music as the flow of sound in time: sound, movement, and arrival (purpose, goal). This is a very helpful way to look at music. He then builds on this to discuss rhythm, melody, harmony, texture, and style; and then finally larger overall forms of great music. This brief book contains just about everything you need to know to be able to listen to music, and experience it intelligently. I highly recommend it.

Not all amateurs will want Joseph Szoeverffy, *Religious Lyrics of the Middle Ages: Hymnological Studies and Collected Essays* (Berlin: Classical Folia Editions; carried by E. J. Brill; paperback, 590 pages, price 132 guilders). This is a

collection of essays on medieval hymnody, and much of the information is very interesting. **Some** (a minority) of the essays are in German, and **all** the texts discussed are in Latin, though the amateur can follow the discussion. For instance, on pp. 64ff., there is an essay dealing with a group of Spanish hymns which centered on St. **Peter's** liberation from prison by the angel in the book of Acts. Why such an interest in this topic? Apparently they grew out of the recapture of Huesca by Christian forces. One song "presents **Peter's** liberation as a great spiritual encouragement for the faithful who, after his liberation, are animated to fight against idolatry and for the victory of Christianity" (p. 65). This is the kind of thing Szoeverffy gives us in this book. There is much of interest to the amateur, if he has the money to afford this book!

Finally, amateurs will be interested in Daniel Polish and Eugene Fisher's *Liturgical Foundations of Social Policy in the Catholic and Jewish Traditions* (U. of Notre Dame, 1983; 180 pages; \$16.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper). How does liturgy affect social thought? The liturgy before the throne of God is the concentration point of all of life, which proceeds outward from that center. How does our liturgy orient us? As we attempt to reconstruct the Church in our day, some of these observations on Jewish and Catholic liturgical-social orientations will be of value. Essays concern the problem of the environment (God's use of bread and wine); health care (the healing effects of the sacraments); justice; and so forth. Recommended for amateurs interested in the issues involved.

— James B. Jordan, Reviewer

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