

THE CULTURE OF ISRAEL IS SO FAR REMOVED FROM OUR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CULTURE THAT IT HAS NOTHING TO SAY TO US IN THE REALM OF CHRISTIAN CONDUCT. HOW WOULD YOU ARGUE FOR AND AGAINST SUCH A STATEMENT?

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Introduction

We can define culture as “the institutions, technology, art, customs and social patterns that a society evolves, the context in which daily life is lived” (Atkinson et al 1995). The Bible was written more than 1900 years ago, and large sections as much as three millennia in the past. Clearly, the context of daily life has changed considerably over this time. This has led some commentators – usually agnostics or atheists, but also some liberal Christians – to argue that due to its context, scripture has become irrelevant to ethical issues of today. In this essay we present arguments on both sides of the case.

1 Is scripture ethically irrelevant, owing to its cultural context?...

To commence with arguments for the ethical irrelevance of scripture, there are many examples in the Bible which are no longer directly relevant since the practices are moribund. Temple worship is the best example (Eze 40-48), but one could also mention the conduct of siege warfare (Deut 20:19) or borrowing animals from neighbours (Ex 22:14). It can be argued that the details on these matters tell us little about how to conduct contemporary church worship, a peacekeeping campaign in Iraq or even to resolve a neighbourhood dispute. Second, the Bible seems to condone some practices that we would nowadays see as immoral, such as killing everything alive in a captured city (Deut 20:16), stoning adulterers (Lev 20:10) and homosexuals (Lev 20:13), or even the institution of slavery (Eph 6:5). Again, it appears culturally irrelevant. Third, partly because it is based on the culture of ancient Israel, the Bible provides an incomplete list of moral issues. Some issues have emerged, such as those relating to genetics, that are not covered. Passages that relate to attitudes to the state, such as Romans 13:1, do not refer to the form of democracy we have today. Fourth, there are contradictions e.g. between the willingness in the Law of Moses to permit divorce (Deut 24:1) and prophets' hatred of it (Mal 2:16). One might consider these also show how culturally relative the law is.

It can be argued that all of these problems are to be expected if the biblical writers are seen as writing in a particular historical context and hence their attitudes, outlooks and beliefs are irrelevant to us today. On this general view, the Bible is no more than a piece of historical documentation that helps us understand the mind of man in the ancient world. As discussed in Holmes (1984), anthropologists argue that moral practices vary with and depend on human needs and social conditions (the diversity thesis) and/or are wholly dependent on cultural context (the dependency thesis). Hence according to “diversity” no moral beliefs such as those expressed in the Bible can be universally true, and furthermore according to “dependency” the issue of the truth or falsity of moral beliefs is irrelevant (the “ought” cannot be separated from the “is”). If the premises are accepted, “cultural relativism” suggests that it is unlikely that biblical morality will have any relevance to present-day conditions.

Alternatively, if the Bible is taken as a rule book (the historical or literal approach), fitting each ethical issue precisely, then there will inevitably be problems from cultural differences. As a *reductio ad absurdum*, it would even prevent us from wearing clothes made of a mixture of materials (Deut 22:11). It would also require continual addition of interpretations and modifications to suit evolving circumstances, as undertaken by the Pharisees and criticised by Jesus (Mt 23:4).

The rejection of the Bible as irrelevant may be seen as unproblematic if there are workable “Christian” approaches using other means than examples in scripture to arrive at good actions. Robinson argues that “modern men and women have long since rejected the outmoded morality of a bygone age which leads to legalism and Pharisaism”. They have “come of age” morally and hence need a morality that is based solely on the ultimate good of love. Actions

are good if they express the love Jesus commanded in the situation (hence “situationism”). Other alternatives are suggested by proponents of the sole use of conscience as a guide to action, or natural law focused on reason as a sole basis for morality. We note that these suggestions have partly arisen from the perceived cultural irrelevance of the scriptural material.

2 ...Or does it retain moral authority?

We can also adduce arguments against cultural irrelevance. The most general point is to see it as a revelation of God’s unchanging, loving nature that we as created beings made in his image are called on to emulate. God is not captive within history and changing culture and hence his word is true for all times and cultures. For example, Calvin sees three unchanging moral purposes of God in Scripture, to make us aware of sin and God’s mercy; to restrain evil for fear of the penalty; and to instruct us in righteousness. The Law tells us to love God and our neighbour.

Developing from this, a fruitful way of using the Bible which helps to avoid cultural irrelevance is to distinguish the meaning of a text, (what the author intended to be understood in the original context in which he wrote), and the significance of the text, viewed in the light of God’s nature and purposes as outlined above. The latter relates to the direction that the text gives to a reader in the context of his present day background. The background for such an interpretation is given by careful study of the whole teaching of the Bible and not taking individual passages out of context. Seeking significance in this way does not mean that the detailed moral examples are irrelevant. A biblical example of the use of significance in respect of details is Paul’s application of the injunction to allow the ox to profit from its toil (Deut 25:4) to payment of a preacher (1 Cor 9:6-11). Another is that the direction to destroy the Canaanites (Deut 20:16) could be seen as an expression of God’s wrath at sin and the need for us to eradicate it from our lives, rather than giving a reason to attack others. This is wholly consistent with the emphasis of Jesus on inner thoughts and dispositions.

Furthermore, as noted by Weeks (1988), the law is deliberately not comprehensive but gives general laws with restricted examples where there is a possibility of doubt or ambiguity. And the restricted examples often give more precision to the principles; the principle in the “ox” texts above not explicitly stated in the law, and still true today is that the “labourer is worthy of his wages” (Luke 10:7).

The idea of development (in redemption and salvation) is inherent in the Bible and is wholly consistent with its use in today’s circumstances. But as noted by Weeks (1988) development is only valid when driven by God himself as his redemption unfolds and not by changing culture: “there is only one law giver and judge”, Jas 4:12. Single passages then are seen in the light of the overall process. This conditions our attitude to much of the Old Testament law, we can see it as relating to an earlier stage of redemption, although it remains essential as the basis of Jesus’ “perfect law that brings freedom” (Jas 1:25). One example is Jesus’ development regarding divorce to be only permissible for infidelity (Matt 19:8). Another example of development is from the destructive form of warfare in Canaan to the concept of a limited and justifiable “just war”. Note that the latter, developed largely by Augustine, teaches that scriptural interpretation may benefit from “all the saints” (Eph 3:8) who have applied themselves to the task.

The concept of significance also provides a basis for choice in difficult cases, where two Biblical principles come into conflict in the fallen world, (“lesser of two evils”). We may note that the Bible is itself helpful, as Rahab is commended for protecting the Israelite spies,

despite the fact she lies in doing so (Jas 2:25). Applying this revealed principle in occupied Europe would justify lying to protect Jews hiding from Nazis.

Principles extracted from actions, as opposed to commands, may also be usable in any cultural context. Often, the historical example actually helps rather than hindering understanding. It is a question of finding the underlying theological and ethical principles, as in the case of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. This, rather than being seen literally as a moral command to wash feet is better seen, as he intended, as an injunction to humble and loving service. However, merely stating that such service is commanded would have been much less powerful than the Lord's concrete example. Equally, injunctions for slaves to "serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men" Eph 6:7 is applicable to any employment situation.

Unchanging and universal human nature as created by God in his image is a further argument against the ethical irrelevance of scripture, and indeed against cultural relativism. We are still the same species and our behaviour patterns have not changed. Indeed, I note that there are many rather "modern" aspects of scripture, such as the exhaustion from overwork in Ecclesiastes 2:23 and the money making individuals highlighted in James 4:13. Following on from this point, a particularly modern aspect of scripture is its focus on finance. There are 500 passages in the Bible on faith, 500 on prayer and 2350 on money. Jesus' parables cover investment (Matthew 13:44-5), savings (Matthew 13:52), debt (Matthew 18:23-25) and other key economic aspects relevant today.

A response to cultural relativism is to note that a culture is not morally neutral but its morality is conditioned by acceptance or rejection of the truth of God (Weeks 1988). Much of the Bible is a polemic against current norms (such as Canaanite child sacrifice), and the Christian is called to be a prophet, standing outside the current culture and criticising it from God's point of view. This also gives a warning against contextualisation – completely changing the meaning of a text to give a contemporary feel (e.g. reinterpreting the crucifixion as a form of "peace negotiation" and not a "sacrifice" since the latter is not a familiar concept today).

The various alternatives presented above to use of scriptural material are unsatisfactory for various reasons. For example, while the "situationist" critique sounds attractive, it has a number of drawbacks, in that for example it is entirely subjective and lacking in divine guidance. It does not provide a prior set of criteria for right and wrong, as may be vital in an emergency. It fails to define what is meant by love – and it assumes Jesus said love was the only criterion for a good action, when in fact he emphasised that he had not come to abolish the law (Mt 5:17), and that God remained a God of justice. Equally, conscience is fallible as emphasised by the Bible - it can be corrupted by sin (1 Tim 4:2) or may say more than God wants it to do (1 John 3:20). It is also affected by upbringing and community standards in a way that is not desirable for ethical choices. Natural law assumes people are reasonable and disinterested in making choices in a way that is not realistic given we live in a fallen world. What is "natural" is also culturally relative in a way that is not desirable in a moral code.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue that the case against the irrelevance of ancient scripture is far stronger than that which argues for it. Viewed as a revelation of God's unchanging nature and purposes, and viewed with Christ's example in mind, the Bible can remain the rock of our moral choices. We must employ our God-given ability to reason on the text, interpreting the ancient stories in their own cultural context and thereby gaining God's will regarding moral as well as spiritual aspects of life, that we can then apply to our own situations.

References

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