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Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics. By John Rogerson. JSOTS 405. New York: T & T Clark International, 2004, 153 pp., \$94.00 paper.

John Rogerson, a scholar of distinguished renown in OT ethics, is one for whom “biblical ethics is not just an academic exercise; it is a call to a certain kind of lifestyle and to concrete social and political commitment,” says M. Daniel Carroll R., editor of the volume and one of Rogerson’s students, colleagues, and long-time friends (p. vii). Carroll also has acquired some level of professional accomplishment of his own. He is more than qualified to edit, interpret, and contribute to this compelling volume of Rogerson’s ethics, praxis, scholarship, and personal journey. A brief summary of the work states:

This volume brings together for the first time many of John Rogerson’s contributions—both published and unpublished—to Old Testament and social ethics. The essays collected here cover a wide range of modern social issues, . . . [from] the debate about abortion and the Old Testament . . . [to] nuclear disarmament. Rogerson also offers a brief account of his pilgrimage in Old Testament ethics and outlines the basic framework for his perspective . . . (back cover).

The word “compelling” is employed somewhat guardedly. What makes the tone of Rogerson’s work compelling is his personal honesty. He demonstrates all the acumen of scholarly inquiry, and couples this with a personal deportment of a genuine follower of Jesus Christ, one who is concerned to “love your neighbor as yourself.” This tension is refreshing in today’s academic world. Throughout his various essays, Rogerson does not seek to engage in ethical study as an end in itself. He desires to bring personal questions, findings, and scholarship to bear on the ethical praxis of today’s church. He also seeks to make sense of complex issues and to develop applications for dilemmas facing societies today from the rich, varied, and sometimes convoluted interpretations of OT thought.

A most impressive issue is Rogerson’s “methodological clarity” (p. 9). Here, he employs three separate but equal means for his ethical project. The first of these is this: “Moral absolutes do exist, but these are always historically situated” (p. 9). These moral absolutes or mores are embedded into different cultural and historical contexts. Second, Rogerson concerns himself with “the motivation and strategy of Christian ethics in any given context” (p. 9) and “imperatives of redemption” (p. 9) ethic, which he uses to interpret those things that commend a particular practice because it is “based on the gracious acts of God” (p. 9). His third ethical methodology is his “structures of grace” (p. 10). By this Rogerson means “those social arrangements that are designed to work out this divine graciousness in practical and concrete ways” (p. 10). For Rogerson, “The Old

Testament can best contribute to Christian ethics by its examples of moral reasoning and efforts rather than by direct, literal imitation” (p. 10).

Moral absolutes are there in Rogerson’s OT construct. However, these must not be a point of “literal imitation” for contemporary ethics. He incorporates the social science’s methods equally to Scripture itself for his ethical construct, and allows social science methodology to equate with that of the biblical record. This can best be observed where he uses contemporary communication theory as one of his many points of departure from the “literal imitation” grid.

Rogerson turns to Jürgen Habermas, using “the discourse or communicative ethics of . . . Habermas” (p. 37). He senses that Habermas and his followers “can shed new light on moral discourse in the Old Testament” (p. 37). For him, Habermas’s communicative ethics is “an attempt to define the conditions under which ethical norms could be agreed [upon] by all those who had a legitimate interest in a matter, without coercion” (p. 38). Rogerson adopts Habermas’s approach because it “is directed especially against ethical relativism” and “lays particular stress upon [those who have a] willingness to be persuaded by the force of the better argument” (p. 38).

Rogerson’s third ethical method, coupled with his use of Habermas’s discourse ethics, shows how he accords equal credence to Scripture and to the social sciences. Those who hold to the ETS doctrinal statement will find this a very interesting read. How far should one go to apply recent social thought to social ethics and biblical interpretation? Rogerson shows he is willing to put both on the same level. And more times than not, Scripture does not remain the standard for social interpretation.

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