3 Lessons You Can Learn from Old Testament Ethics

The Bible is not an easy book to read.

Christians tend to select the passages that are positive, encouraging, reassuring. Some Psalms, parts of Isaiah and of course the New Testament (except for Revelation).

But what about the Old Testament parts that contain lists of laws and regulations, and what about the stories of wars and seemingly ruthless battles when Israel entered the Promised Land?

In recent years, the Old Testament has more and more come under criticism. It has been portrayed as a “violent” book, and the connection between religion and violence has been made by opponents of any religion whatsoever.

For the last 33 years, I have been teaching the Old Testament to a large variety of students. Questions about the meaning of the laws for us kept coming up as well as questions about warfare and violence in the Old Testament.

This inspired me to do more research in this area. The outcome was a book, which was published in 2004, called “Celebrating the Law? Rethinking Old Testament Ethics.”

An updated version of the book was published in 2016. I added a part about the issue of the Canaanites and the command to kill them because this seems to have grown into an urgent issue for many Christians.

On the whole I think that we can learn much from the Old Testament, even from the laws. They teach us what is important to God, and we can take them as a paradigm, a model of how God intended his people to live.

This means that we should ask questions like: “What does this particular law tell me about God, about his relationship with us and our relations among each other?” I will give a few examples.

1. Concern for the vulnerable.
When we read the regulation to leave part of the harvest for poor people to collect food (Leviticus 19:9-10), most people cannot do this literally because they do not own land.

Yet this rule does teach us about God’s care for the poor and makes us think about ways to involve them in gaining a living. They are enabled to participate in finding food and this prevents them from being just “victims.”

The law also makes clear that God cares for the vulnerable in society, who in other laws are often referred to as “the orphan, the widows and the alien.” No “fear of foreigners” there!

2. Human sin and sacrifice.

The many laws about sacrifices show us that human sin is a serious problem in the eyes of the holy God, which profoundly disturbs our relationship with him. Reconciliation is needed, and sin needs to be dealt with seriously: It costs an animal its life.

When we then look at the New Testament, we can see better how important Jesus’ death on the cross was: God takes our sins “deadly serious.”

On the other hand, Jesus’ death also means that no more sacrifices are needed; Christ’s sacrifice was once for all (see the letter to the Hebrews).

3. Warfare in context.

The law on warfare in Deuteronomy 20 is unique. Other nations did not have a similar law; warfare was just a part of ordinary life. Kings were expected to defend their territories, and many tried to expand them as far as possible.

Not so in Israel: Kings play a modest role (see Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

They are not supposed to have many (war) horses, nor many riches, nor many wives, but they should read the law of the Lord every day of their lives! Israel was meant to be a righteous people, ruled by a righteous king who served God wholeheartedly.

The king was not expected to lead wars to “conquer the world.” In Deuteronomy 20, the king is not even mentioned.
In this chapter, the size of the army is in fact reduced: Those who have built a new house, planted a vineyard, are about to get married – let them go home and enjoy. Those who are afraid better follow them. The small army that is left will be very motivated (see the story of Gideon).

But the emphasis is on what God will do for his people and not on the bravery of human beings. This law shows a modest view of warfare; the Old Testament is certainly not “full of wars,” unlike many royal documents in the Ancient Near East.

The verses on the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 20:16-18) only applied to that particular period, but can in no way be seen as the proof of the Old Testament’s violent character.

Studying the biblical laws in the context of Israel as a paradigm leads us to reflection on the position of the church in the world: Are we God’s “paradigm”? Are people around us attracted by our way of living?

Ethics is not just about things one should not do or just about following rules. Ethics points to a way of living in which we keep asking ourselves: What would Jesus do?

The Old Testament (and the New Testament) can help us to define more precisely what it means to be the people of God in a secularized world.

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