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Sloane, Andrew

At Home in a Strange Land: Using the Old Testament in Christian Ethics

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Interest in the ethical content and relevance of the biblical texts is, happily, greater now than for many decades, and, as a result, increasing attention has been paid to the challenges that the appropriation of the Bible for ethics poses for us. Andrew Sloane highlights in this insightful study how the challenges with which the Hebrew Bible confronts people of faith, specifically evangelical Christians, are both specific and distinctive. He identifies as his motivation for writing the need to answer for them the searching question, “How do we use the OT ... in Christian Ethics without defying either the text or our context? ... how do we ... gain insight into the decisions that we need to make without imposing our own issues and questions on the Bible?” (3). This agenda highlights a number of significant aspects of the study. First, it is written fundamentally by a Christian for Christians. It is no less valuable for that, but the fact remains that Sloane sometimes addresses at length what will turn out to be complete nonissues for those who do not read the text as sacred. Second, it betrays his dual determination both to let the text speak (and as “God’s authoritative word, which is meant to govern our lives and shape our thinking” [5]) and to avoid approaching it on anything that might be considered to be our own terms. For all the Bible’s strangeness and despite its problematic content, Sloane argues that believers want (and have) to accord the biblical text a certain determinative power over their lives.

After some brief introductory observations, Sloane introduces the foundational theological concerns that are at issue in the book in his first chapter, discussing in particular the topic of the moral authority of the Old Testament, before providing a brief summary of what he considers to be some of the fundamental issues of hermeneutics, which account highlights the importance of both authorial intention and readerly engagement but lays heavy emphasis on the nature of the Bible as inspired scripture and its contribution to (and recounting of) the fulfillment of God's purpose in human history. Sloane explains that he will be operating with a paradigmatic model of the Christian appropriation of biblical ethics, somewhat similar to that adopted by Chris Wright, and concludes the chapter with some brief comments on the nature of ethical decision making. Chapter 2, by some way the largest section of the book, offers a useful summary of the ethical content of the Old Testament, reading it in both its ancient Near Eastern and contemporary contexts with brief discussions of the law code of Hammurabi and of microfinance in Bangladesh and illustrating its ethical potential through close readings of Lev 19:9–10, 2 Sam 11, Ps 24, Mic 6:6–8 and Eccl 11, which are instructive if at times a little devotional in tone.

With chapter 3, Sloane turns to the more challenging issue of the ethically contentious content and passages of the Hebrew Bible and addresses the areas of slavery, where he argues that, even though slavery is assumed as an acceptable system and never brought into dispute within the biblical traditions, still “there were moderating influences on the practice ... that sharply differentiate it” from other ancient and modern patterns of enslavement and oppression (106). He concludes that, to hear the Bible properly on this matter, we need to start “not with slavery as a tolerated institution, but rather with the creation of humanity, which affirms that all people have worth and dignity” (107). The acknowledgement of slavery as an acceptable model of human interaction within the Old Testament has to be overruled by the “liberating action of God at work” (107). Sloane admits this is not an entirely satisfactory approach to adopt (and it clearly is not, for this [evangelical Christian] reviewer at least), but ultimately he has to conclude that we, as the Israelites before us, all have to come to terms with living in an imperfect society and to see the redemptive moments such imperfections offer “as opportunities to reflect God's character and purposes for society” (110).

Having established his general approach with this straightforward example, Sloane turns to the rather more complex issues of ritual purity (adopting Gordon Wenham's anthropological perspective on the matter before broadening the discussion into a consideration of the “personal and relational holiness” that comes through “Jesus' sacrifice for us” (127). In his discussion of the immense challenges posed by the call to holy war in Joshua (and here, more particularly, in Deut 7), Sloane offers a very helpful summary of some of the different explanations for, and justifications of, this most repulsive of

episodes in Israel's historical and theological self definition. He refuses to "question or reject such texts as authoritative scripture because they contain such horribly violent teaching" (128) but instead seeks to offer at least some token explanation for it, even though he readily acknowledges his unhappiness with the theological reasoning behind his own argument. Ultimately, and in somewhat disappointing (though hardly surprising) manner, he has to argue that there can really be no ethical justification for the extirpation of the Canaanites and simply contextualizes the ban historically and theologically. For all its inevitability, that observation will induce in some readers more concern than satisfaction.

Sloane's fourth chapter comprises an insightful treatment of Gen 1-3 as a rather more positive source of material for ethical reflection, specifically on environmental and gender issues, offering a redemptionist perspective on both counts that sees the biblical text as a tool for social transformation and liberation, followed by a helpful analysis of the Decalogue that again highlights its continuing, as well as its historical, significance. A much shorter chapter 5 highlights the more unexpected aspects of biblical ethics, which Sloane illustrates by showing how the Old Testament has something to say about the many different issues in contemporary ethics that confront us today, even though the biblical authors could not have imagined them (he adopts the example of cloning), and by expounding Isaiah's teaching on the dangers of idolatry, an issue that might not be considered immediately to have ethical resonance at first sight but that is used to good effect as an analogy for modern Western living.

At Home in a Strange Land is, in the end, a popular rather than a particularly scholarly work, for all its obvious erudition: it is not always evidently sufficiently critical but works within the text's own ideologies rather more than it might; it is peppered with what became to me frustrating personal illustrations; it is largely unreferenced, and the (helpfully annotated) bibliographies are relegated to a back-of-volume "Geek Zone." I am personally very pleased to see that Sloane's book raises the issues it does, which are undoubtedly challenging for evangelical Christian audiences, and it does reflect a serious attempt to do these difficulties justice. It could certainly prove a useful and provocative book for many churchgoers, but it may prove disappointing to scholars and students seeking a more reflective and objective study. On the basis of the work delivered here, I would warmly welcome any future attempt at such a volume from the author of this one, should he ever consider it. Ultimately, however, while I can certainly acknowledge the very real difficulties Sloane describes as a massive problem for all thinking readers of the Hebrew Bible who approach it from a confessional perspective, I am not entirely convinced that he has offered in the present book as helpful a route through this minefield as at first might appear.