Barton, John

*Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations*


William P. Brown
Union–PSCE
Richmond, VA 23227

An important addition to a growing body of literature on the topic, this collection features Barton’s previously published essays (1978–2001) and includes a fresh introduction and conclusion. Some of the older essays are supplemented with a selective, updated bibliography. Equipped with scriptural and author indexes, this volume focuses primarily on biblical narrative and prophetic literature, with only scant attention devoted to the Law and the Writings.

There is reason for such selectivity: the introductory and concluding chapters draw significantly from Eckart Otto’s *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (1994), which “says almost nothing about the Prophets . . . or about narrative” (2). Barton’s collection addresses this gap. His introductory chapter makes an initial foray into the moral dimensions of biblical narrative, identifying specific challenges and pitfalls. For inspiration on method, Barton draws from literary critic Martha Nussbaum, whose works explore how narrative texts serve as vehicles for elucidating moral issues that are otherwise difficult to convey in other discursive genres. Barton takes up three biblical narratives: (1) Nathan’s speech to David in 2 Sam 12:1–6, which communicates a moral vision in which “ties of affection” are respected; (2) David’s encounter with the wise woman of Tekoa in 2 Sam 14, which acknowledges the importance of familial love and “family continuity”; and (3) the story of Joseph at the end of Genesis, which promotes
forgiveness. These and other pre-Deuteronomistic texts, Barton observes, stress the moral agency of human beings and the dignity of human action, which can produce “an unreadable and complex web of good and evil” (8). Hence, the Old Testament’s moral vision is “more complicated than it might appear.” Biblical narrative represents an “oblique style” of moral reflection, not “moral exempla” (10).

Important for Barton, as well as for Otto, is the distinction between ethic and ethos, the latter of which suggests a “particular moral atmosphere” (7). The point is well taken, and indeed much has been written about ethos in the Bible since Otto’s work. Nevertheless, Barton’s discussions tend to focus on the former.

The following essays highlight some common themes. His earliest essay (“Understanding Old Testament Ethics”) warns against treating Old Testament ethics in a monolithic and developmental fashion. Barton accuses Hempel and Eichrodt of ignoring the sociological complexity and depth of the task: “not all Israelites [could] have thought the same about at least some ethical issues” (16). Calling for more rigorous criteria, Barton makes a vigorous appeal for a synchronic approach that identifies different social groups and their values. However, as Barton acknowledges, our knowledge of Israelite society is severely limited. In biblical narrative and Deuteronomy, Barton admits that it is too difficult to distinguish “what is commonplace from what forms [the author’s] own contribution” (27). The speeches of the prophets, however, provide some evidence of “popular morality” in distinction from the prophet’s message. In addition, Barton identifies the need to explore the rationale of Old Testament ethics, beyond simply that of “obedience to God’s revealed will,” and suggests additional rationales: “conformity to a pattern of natural order” and “imitation of God” (29).

The latter two themes are developed in subsequent essays. “Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament” (1979) surveys prescriptive texts outside the wisdom literature that assume or appeal to universal consensus (e.g., Gen 9:6; Isa 1:3; Amos 1–2; 6:12). Refining Klaus Koch’s argument for a schicksalswirkende Tatsphäre, Barton examines prophetic texts that give evidence of “poetic justice,” whereby the punishment fits the sin, implying that God’s judgment is rationally consistent (e.g., Isa 5:8–9) and coheres with a “human consensus about what sort of acts are just and unjust” (43). Ezekiel 18 suggests that God acts “according to human standards of justice” (43).

“The Basis of Ethics in the Hebrew Bible” (1995) gives the fullest treatment of the three “basic models in the Hebrew Bible—obedience to God’s declared will, ‘natural law’, and imitation of God” (47)—and selectively engages scholars who have written since 1978, particularly James Barr and Eckart Otto. Noting the proliferation of motive clauses in various genres, Barton observes the strongly teleological (as opposed to deontological)
foundations of biblical morality. Barton suggests that “imitation of God” is most central to what the Bible says about human morality; it implies that the “human is capax dei” (43).

In the suggestive essay “Reading for Life: The Use of the Bible in Ethics” (1996), Barton addresses the moral dimensions of narrative and makes extensive use of Nussbaum’s work on Greek tragedy. Barton implicitly suggests that narrative is the genre best suited for ethical reflection because human lives are invariably cast narratively. The characters in the narrative educate the reader in discriminating perception (62). Barton finds Nussbaum’s work particularly helpful in bridging the divide between historical and literary criticism. Admittedly, Barton’s essay is more about Nussbaum than about the biblical narrative.

In “Virtue in the Bible” (1999), Barton critiques, yet ultimately confirms, the perspective of virtue ethics vis-à-vis the biblical literature. Whereas the Bible does not have much to say about virtue on the explicit level, it implicitly has much that is useful. On the one hand, the wisdom literature profiles moral character as fixed and unchanging and thus eschews moral progress (67). Moral conversion, Barton argues, better captures the intent of the biblical material. More broadly, the overall style of Old Testament ethics is obedience to “divine decree” (69; this statement, however, seems to compromise Barton’s earlier observations!). On the other hand, Barton admits that the Bible can be used constructively for moral formation. But for whom? Clearly, for modern readers but not for ancient or implied readers, as his argument suggests? Much of what Barton finds only implicit in the wisdom material, for example, I find quite explicit. The prevalent metaphor of “path” and the many admonitions that constitute sapiential instruction explicitly assume that human character is changeable, if not progressive: “The path of righteousness is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day” (Prov 4:18). Implying some sense of advancement in the pursuit of wisdom, reverence of YHWH is marked as the point of departure of sapiential appropriation (Prov 1:7; 9:10; Sir 1:14; Wis 6:17). Wisdom’s addresses, moreover, are not just for the wise. To the contrary, she invites the “simple” to partake of her feast (Prov 9:5; the metaphor of the banquet implies sustenance and growth). Indeed, Ben Sira describes the journey toward wisdom as difficult at first and joyous only later (Sir 4:17–18). Conversion plays a role, perhaps, but it is recognized as only a starting point. In short, I am unsure what is gained by Barton’s distinction between “explicit” and “implicit.” His treatment invites further nuance and fails to engage important studies that were published even prior to his.

The second part of the volume focuses on the prophets, and the first entry is Barton’s SOTS monograph (1980), reproduced in toto, on Amos’s oracles against the nations. Its argument is well known and need not be repeated here, except to note that his thesis (i.e.,
Amos’s oracles presuppose, at least from the prophet’s viewpoint, international customary law) is effectively presented but splits hairs when it comes to arguing that God enforces but does not enact such law (113). How does Barton know this, particularly in light of the prophet’s assertion that God has enacted exoduses for other peoples (Amos 9:7)? The issue remains open.

The two essays that follow, “Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem” (1981) and “Ethics in the Isaianic Tradition” (1997), argue for the presence of natural law in the Isaianic corpus. The first identifies the basis of the prophet’s moral demands. Isaiah assumes (rather than asserts) a hierarchically ordered universe whose moral pattern “ought to be apparent to all whose reason is not hopelessly clouded” (139). Pride is rebuked because it places the agent, including mountains and trees, outside its proper place (e.g., Isa 2:13–15 [136]).

Pointing out references to natural law and conventional wisdom in First Isaiah is not difficult, but relating them to other forms and assumptions of moral conduct in Isaiah, such as forensic law and religious practice, requires further work.

Barton expands his scope in the second essay. Drawing from redactional- and canonical-critical work, Barton identifies three “levels” that contribute to the book’s distinctive approach to ethics as a whole: (1) a more concentrated focus on social justice and political issues; (2) interest in the attitudes of his audience, including human pride (which leads to idolatry); and (3) folly. All three levels are tied to the theological conviction that God reigns supreme and demands complete allegiance (148).

In the final essay, Barton sets his sights on Daniel (2001) and observes that the book’s ethical themes have no share in apocalyptically inspired sectarian values, such as an interim ethic. Rather, pure submission to the divine will and the observance of prayer and food laws— the common property of Israelite tradition—prevail in the book. This is an important, though obvious, point, but it is the theme of submission to God that proves most significant. It is a disinterested submission that, Barton admits, makes Daniel somewhat distinctive. In addition, God’s control of history means that “everything should be done to stand out of God’s way and to allow his purposes to prevail” (159), a “quietistic” form of conduct that Barton also observes in Isaiah (147). What, then, is the force of the seemingly more activistic stance espoused in Dan 11:32 (“stand firm and take action”)? More broadly, what kind of moral imagination mediates fantastic visions that at once polarize and relativize all earthly powers yet cosmically vindicate those in the know? (Clearly, international conventions do not apply in Daniel!) Daniel’s visions do more than underline traditional values; they reshape them. Without addressing this side of Daniel’s ethic, Barton’s task remains unfinished.
Barton’s “Conclusion” offers helpful directions for future studies of Old Testament ethics. Barton returns to Otto’s work and repeats his reservations and praises. Helpful is Otto’s distinction between Recht and Ethos, and it is the latter that Barton wants to develop further, the implicit ethics (170, 173). He finds Gordon Wenham’s language of “moral ideals” an important move. Barton seeks, essentially, a sequel to Otto’s work that covers the prophetic and narrative literature, one that balances historical work with synchronic analysis.

As a whole, this volume is a useful primer. Barton lays out certain issues well; others get shortchanged, such as those of worldview, perception, moral imagination and vision, and communal character. Even ethos remains underdeveloped. It is unfortunate that Barton does not engage more fully with the recent literature in his introduction or conclusion. Had he done so, the volume would have been more serviceable, particularly for students. Nevertheless, the collection brings together important essays in a more accessible form and documents the development of Barton’s thinking about biblical ethics. As it is, the collection comprises a series of provisional soundings that underline the need for fuller treatments. At his best, Barton takes the reader on an exciting, albeit partial, journey through the ethical pluralism of the Hebrew Scriptures. I only wish he had lingered a bit longer at certain spots. As his preface suggests, a new tour may be in the works.