Whoever expects under this title an ethics of the Old Testament will be disappointed, because the author delivers already-published collected essays mostly of the 1970s and 1980s. This book was an opportunity for the author to republish his 1980 SOTSMS 6, Amos’s Oracles against the Nations, which was an expanded form of one chapter of his 1974 dissertation. This monograph is the key section of four contributions to a prophetical ethics of Amos, Isaiah, and Daniel as second part of the book. The first part collects articles related to methodological and principal problems of an Old Testament ethics that were published between 1978 and 1999. Not yet published are only the chapters of introduction, an Ethel Wood Lecture for 2000 at the University of London, and a conclusion—the only piece that is entirely new and the most important and decisive part of the book. It is throughout a critical discussion of the reviewer’s ethics of the Old Testament (see Eckart Otto, Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994]). The points of agreement are less important here than those of critical disagreement. Barton asks if the category of moral failure (“Scheitern”), which he thinks has n prominent function in my ethics, is a Protestant interpretatio moderna: “The theme of the Scheitern of human efforts at self-improvement through law and wisdom looks familiar to me from Protestant systematics, and one might wonder whether the Old Testament really recognizes it as centrally as Otto implies.” No author can deny his cultural background, also not a northern German Lutheran. But all the same I suppose
Barton misread my text. If I am looking for an authority in this case, it is not Martin Luther but Max Weber, who showed that the failure of an ultimate solution of the theodicy-question is one of the important impulses to universalize and rationalize ethics and law, which is what also happened in the literature of the Hebrew Bible. But different from Mesopotamia in Israel, this rationalization did not lead to a negative anthropology. Another point of disagreement is more important. Barton takes up my definition of ethics beginning beyond the limits of law, where acting according to the rules is based on ethical insight and not on legal force or constraint. He derives from this definition that not so much the legal section of Torah but of the Prophets and narratives should be the topics of an ethics of the Old Testament. Whereas I was studying the system of explicit ethics growing out of the legal material within the Torah, Barton is looking for a more implicit ethics “that lies beneath the surface” of the text. Barton agrees at this point with Gordon J. Wenham (“The Gap between Law and Ethics in the Bible,” *JJS* 48 [1997]: 17–29; see also idem, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001]). But Wenham connects the idea of an implicit ethics in the narratives within an implicit author different from any historical author, that is, methodologically reading the text of the Old Testament synchronically (cf. E. Otto, “Recht und Ethos im Alten Testament: Neue Studien zur Ethik des Alten Testaments,” *ZABR* 9 [2003]). This Barton rejects and pleads for an consequently historical interpretation of the Old Testament texts also in ethical matters. But he cannot have both a historical interpretation of the Old Testament narratives and the construction of ethical paradigms for our days. The trickery of Jacob, for example, is valued negatively in the last layers of the Old Testament but positively in earlier ones, as Barton argues against Wenham. But what shall be the ethical paradigm for us: the older or the younger ethical valuation of Jacob? If one accepts a historical approach to the Bible, as Barton does, an ethics of the Old Testament becomes necessarily descriptive instead of prescriptive: *tertium non datur*.

What is Barton’s view of the future of Old Testament ethics?

I hope that it will follow Otto’s lead in aiming primarily to present a descriptive historical account of ethical beliefs and practices in ancient Israel as evidenced in the Old Testament. . . . From my last comment, on [Otto’s] lack of interest in prophecy and narrative, it is obvious that I would like to see those two great blocks of material (approximately two-thirds of the Old Testament) more strongly represented in an “Old Testament Ethics.” Indeed what I should like to see is a kind of second volume of Otto’s work. What he has given us is an excellent first volume on what may be called explicit or overt ethical teaching in the Old Testament in its historical development. There is room for a volume on implicit ethics, the ethical norms that are implied by the prophet’s criticism of contemporary
society and by the way narratives are constructed about the deeds of Israelite and pre-Israelite characters from the past.

I am skeptical as for the ethical narratives. The tensions in Barton’s own statements show the problems, and it may be not by chance that this volume of collected articles does not include a single piece of an ethical interpretation of biblical narratives. However, I am very convinced that Barton is right with regard to the prophets. I did not put my accent on them but on the Torah because I was opposed to Wellhausen and his school, for whom inspired by T. Carlyle prophetic heroism was the cradle of Old Testament ethics: a fateful misunderstanding of Israelite and Judean history of religion. So there should be this “second volume” on the ethics of the prophets even if it means to put again an accent on the category of “Scheitern.” This collection of essays by John Barton with several articles on prophetic ethics show that he could be a very good author for this second book.