

## Old Testament Ethics

The Old Testament, as a whole, is more concerned than the New Testament with setting forth our moral duties. The Pentateuch sets forth the Old Testament law and the Decalogue is the heart of the Pentateuch.

### I. Old Testament Worldview Issues and Ethics

#### A. Seven Differences Between the Worldview of Israel and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures.

Contrary to theories which suggest the authors of the Old Testament adapted and modified pagan mythologies, the Old Testament is actually a refutation of the pagan polytheism surrounding Israel. Bill Arnold has noted seven significant ways in which the worldview of ancient Israel differed from the surrounding ancient Near Eastern (ANE) worldview.<sup>1</sup>

1. Everything unique to ancient Israel may be traced to her express monotheism.
2. God is not **continuous** with His creation.

This difference flows naturally from Israel's monotheism. Ray Clendenen captures the significance of the fact God is not continuous with His creation when he says:

The God of Israel was not the personification of forces of nature and did not need the assistance of other gods or the participation of a king and his subjects in a divine struggle to maintain order in the universe, nor did He need to be fed in temples. He is the transcendent one who created an inanimate universe of nature out of nothing and who continually maintains and controls it for His glory.<sup>2</sup>

Bill Arnold is correct when he notes that in contrast to the prevalent ANE worldview, "Israel believed in a God who stands outside the created order. He has easy access to all of the universe's parts, since he created all that is. But He is not bound by its structures or contained by its cycles."<sup>3</sup>

3. The Old Testament does not address the issue of **theogony**.

The ANE creation myths almost always included speculation about the origin of the gods. In contrast, the Old Testament does not discuss God's origin: His existence in eternity past is simply assumed as a fact.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 48 – 51.

<sup>2</sup> Ray Clendenen, "Religious Background of the Old Testament," in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, Dockery, Matthews, Sloan, eds. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 303.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis*, 50.

4. According to the Old Testament, God is a non-sexual being.

In the cultures surrounding ancient Israel, the prevalent polytheism advocated worldviews in which the gods cavorted with one another sexually. In such a worldview, sex became a vehicle for communication with the divine and it was not uncommon for people to use temple prostitutes in “worship.” Arnold emphasizes Israel’s monotheistic contrast and says, “In Genesis, sex is a facet of God’s creation. He himself is nonsexual, though he created man and woman as sexual beings created in His image.”<sup>4</sup>

5. Israel explicitly banned magic.

For example, see Deuteronomy 18:9-14

6. Israel placed importance on history.

7. Israel believed God had revealed Himself in space and time.

## B. Holiness as the Unifying Theme of Old Testament Ethics

The Old Testament emphasizes the moral character of God, with particular emphasis on His holiness. Scott Rae comments on this theme and says, “The central concept that unifies Old Testament ethics is the idea of holiness. . . . Israel is set apart as a nation to reflect the character of God in their worship, their social relations, and their institutions.”<sup>5</sup>

## II. Continuity verses Discontinuity

### A. Discontinuity

According to the Discontinuity view, Christians are only obligated to keep the ethical demands of the Old Testament that are repeated in the New Testament.

Example: C. I. Scofield and classic dispensationalism

Classic dispensationalism contends that only the Old Testament commands repeated in the New Testament are obligatory. Furthermore, the Sermon on the Mount is a “kingdom ethic” which is not relevant to our current situation.

### B. Continuity

According to the Continuity view, almost all the commands of the Old Testament are still binding.

Example: Greg Bahnsen and Theonomy / Christian Reconstruction

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Rae, *Moral Choices*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 22.

Bahnsen summarizes the theonomic position when he says, “The Civil precepts of the Old Testament (standing ‘judicial laws’) are a model of perfect social justice for all cultures, even in the punishment of criminals.”<sup>6</sup> Typically, this view is joined with postmillennial eschatology.

### C. Instructor’s Position: Reformed Continuity

I refer to my position as “Reformed Continuity” because it builds upon insights from both Luther and Calvin. First, I contend that the burden of proof is on the discontinuity position. Jesus Himself said that not one part of the Law would disappear (Matthew 5:18). Second, Jesus assumed the Old Testament worldview as His starting point for theology. Third, I find the Theonomic-Continuity position unsatisfying. While the discontinuity position does go to an unhealthy extreme, it is also true that Jesus initiated a New Covenant. Furthermore, the Old Testament legal system required the priesthood to serve as a sort of “court of appeal.” Yet, the Old Testament priesthood is no longer necessary because of the finished work of Jesus Christ and his current intercession as our high priest. Jesus also taught that the Old Testament was inspired by God. The way a Christian properly uses the Old Testament is based upon a **Tripartite Division of the Law**.

1. Ceremonial Law: Religious and dietary codes. These were fulfilled by Christ and are no longer binding upon Christians. Hebrews 10:1 says, “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship” (NIV).
2. Civil Law: Civil codes for the theocracy. These were specific for ancient Israel and are not binding upon Christians.
3. Moral Law: Ethical standards required by God’s holiness. These ethical principles are still in force and have not changed. While the Civil and Ceremonial aspects of the Law are no longer mandatory, the Moral Law is still binding.

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<sup>6</sup> Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., xvii.

D. Uses of the Moral Law: Luther and Calvin in Comparison

**Luther**

1. Political or Civil

2. Theological or Spiritual

**Calvin**

1. Pedagogical

This is also known as the *pedagogical use* of the Law (Galatians 3:24)  
Analogy: Mirror

2. Civil

See I Timothy 1:9-10  
Analogy: Bridle

3. Normative / Didactic

See Psalm 119:105  
Analogy: Whip