Chapter 1. What are Biblical Values?

In the run-up to the presidential election in 2012, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association launched a nationwide campaign with an advertisement in the Wall St. Journal:

> It is vitally important that we cast our ballots for candidates who base their decisions on biblical principles and support the nation of Israel. I urge you to vote for candidates who base their decisions on biblical principles and support the nation of Israel I urge you to vote for those who protect the sanctity of life and support the biblical definition of marriage who protect the sanctity of life and support the biblical definition of marriage between a man and a woman.[1]

Talk of biblical values is ubiquitous in American political discourse. Values are principles that offer guidance for human conduct, rather than specific laws or commandments. In practice biblical values are often boiled down to quite specific positions on a few hot-button issues, most frequently amounting to the rejection of homosexuality and abortion, and the affirmation of traditional "family values" more generally. These positions stand as symbols for a way of life in an iconic way. They are seldom accompanied by any serious reflection on what the Bible actually says about them. Rather, people who accord high symbolic value to the Bible tend to assume that it conforms to their own traditional views. If they actually read the Bible with any care, they might well be surprised by what they found.

My purpose in this book is precisely to examine what the Bible actually says, or what values the Bible actually affirms, on a number of these key

issues. Before we turn to discussion specific issues, however, there are some preliminary issues that must be addressed.

First, the Bible is a written text. As such does it actually say anything at all? Is it still possible in a postmodern age to ascribe any kind of objective meaning to the Bible?

Second, the Bible is actually a collection of texts, written over more than a thousand years. It is neither systematic nor consistent, and it often espouses contradictory positions. Is it then possible to generalize about biblical values in a way that has overarching validity?

Third, if we can speak of biblical values, as I believe we can, must we always affirm them? The Bible has traditionally provided support for many positions that we may now regard as reprehensible. Slavery is perhaps the least controversial example. Others include subordination of women, legitimization of violence, and intolerance of diversity. Any discussion of biblical values must not only consider what these values are, but also whether anyone in the modern world has any obligation to conform to them.

Does the Bible actually say anything?

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge to any attempt to speak of biblical values arises from postmodern literary criticism.[2] Postmodernism has been described as "the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and possibility of objective knowledge."[3] In postmodern perspective, "texts don't mean, people mean with texts."[4] A text doesn't actually mean anything until it is interpreted, or is construed in a particular way and interpretation depends on context, and the tradition of the

community in which it is taking place. The conventions and assumptions of the interpreting community are especially important.[5] It is not the case that we are free to interpret texts any way we wish, as Humpty-Dumpty famously claimed to do in *Through the Looking Glass*. If we want to communicate with other people, we must have commonly accepted ways of interpretation. But this, for the post-modernist, is not because words have inherent meanings, but because meaning is the product of social consensus. Texts, then, have no independent agency. A text like the Bible cannot be set over against the interpreting Christian (or Jewish) community, as the source of doctrine or ethics. Rather, it is available for instrumental use, to reinforce the doctrine and ethics we have imbibed from several different sources.[6] One might make a similar argument about the use of the US constitution in legal decision making. There too the supposedly authoritative text can be manipulated to support positions that the interpreter wishes to affirm for reasons quite independent of the constitution.

The objection to the idea that texts such as the Bible speak, independently of interpreters, is true in an obvious but superficial sense. Texts in themselves do not convey meaning without the agency of authors and readers. This does not mean that interpreters can make texts mean anything they wish. Postmodern interpreters correctly realize that readers are constrained by the communities in which they live. But the constraints on interpretation do not come only from communal tradition and social consensus. There are also constraints of philology and grammar. The biblical texts were written long ago in languages that are no longer spoken in their ancient form. A reader who wishes to read the Bible competently needs to master those languages and their ancient contexts, or rely on others who have that mastery. This is what

we call historical criticism.[7] Historical criticism takes the primary meaning of a text to be what it would have been in its original context. A text may take on new meanings in new contexts, but the meaning as determined by its original context remains an essential point of reference.[8] Meaning is a negotiation between author and reader. Readers inevitably bring new perspectives to a text and see it differently from earlier generations, a point that is readily obvious from the history of interpretation.[9] But the validity of any new interpretation must still be assessed by its ability to account for the words on the page in a way that does not do violence to their grammar and their ancient context.

In short, interpretation does not yield meanings that are objective in the sense of being timelessly valid, but they are not simply indeterminate either. In the words of the literary critic Robert Alter: "The words of the text afford us at least a narrow strip of solid ground in the quagmire of indeterminacy, because the words a writer uses, despite the margin of ambiguity of some of them, have definite meanings, and no critic is free to invent meanings in order to sustain a reading."[10] A text, biblical or other, may have more than one meaning, but we can at least set limits to the range of acceptable interpretations.

The argument, however, is not just about literary theory but also about the ethics of reading. Those who appeal to what the Bible "says" can mask or deny their responsibility for their interpretations. This phenomenon has been called "textual foundationalism." The Bible is taken as a relatively firm foundation for certain kinds of knowledge, as nature is thought to be for scientific knowledge. Critics of biblical foundationalism argue that the Bible historically interpreted "cannot be depended on to deliver secure, ethical

interpretations of Scripture."[11] By this they mean that the Bible, historically interpreted, has provided support for unethical positions. The debate about slavery in 19th century America provides obvious examples.[12] But biblical foundationalism involves two issues that should be carefully distinguished. One, as we have already seen, is whether the Bible has a determinate meaning. The other is the issue of biblical authority. Historical criticism leaves little doubt that slavery was condoned in the Bible. The 19th century polemicists who said that the Bible does not condemn slavery were right. But to say that the Bible is a secure basis for doctrine or morals on this issue is quite another matter. The problem here lies in the kind of authority one ascribes to the Bible, regardless of how one interprets it.

We shall return to the question of biblical authority shortly. For the present, it may suffice to note that the question of authority should not be confused with that of determinate meaning. There are many issues (slavery, genocide, patriarchy, to take only the less controversial examples) on which the teaching of the Bible is quite clear, but not edifying, and problematic from a modern viewpoint. Intellectual honesty demands that we acknowledge profound contradictions between biblical and modern sensibilities on these issues. We cannot produce ethical readings by denying what the text says when it conflicts with our moral values, even when those values have long-standing support in Christian or Jewish tradition.

The diversity of the biblical material

The Bible is not a coherent, systematic treatise, but a collection of writings that grew over a thousand years or so. It contains different theologies and different emphases. The theology of Deuteronomy is quite different from that

of Leviticus, and both are called into question by the Book of Job. Similarly in the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistle of James are quite different from the theology of Paul. We cannot expect, then, to distill from the Bible one coherent set of values. As Shakespeare said, the devil can cite scripture for his purpose. Conversely, to say that a particular value has a scriptural basis is not enough to establish its validity. Scripture is not a univocal document, but often has the character of a running debate. To adopt one set of biblical values may, on occasion, require that we reject another set.

Since biblical support can be found for various conflicting values, it is necessary to establish some hierarchy of values within the biblical material. In fact, such a hierarchy was already established in antiquity. The Gospel of Mark 12:28-34 recounts an exchange between Jesus and one of the scribes. The scribe asked him "which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered: "The first is 'Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."[13] The Gospel of Matthew adds: "on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt 22:40). Here Jesus combined the Shema ("Hear O Israel") from Deut 6:4-5 and the command to love one's neighbor in Lev 19:18. In the parallel passage in Luke 10:25-28, Jesus turns the question back to the questioner, who runs the two passages from the Hebrew Bible together.

The formulation of the double love commandment in these Gospel passages is distinctive, but not without parallel in Judaism around the turn of the era.[14] The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, wrote:

> But amongst the vast number of particular truths and principles there studied, there stand out, so to speak, high above the others, two main heads: one of duty to God as shown by piety and holiness, one of duty to human beings as shown by *philanthropia* and justice, each of them splitting up into multiform branches (*Special Laws* 2.63).

Unlike Jesus, Philo does not speak of love, but the net effect is similar. The tendency to organize the commandments under two headings is especially typical of the Greek-speaking Jewish Diaspora, and reflects the systematizing influence of Greek philosophy and rhetoric.[15] The rabbis, too, tend to subsume some commandments under others, but they do not speak of one commandment that summarizes all the others.[16] Rabbi Akiba is said to have regarded Lev 19:18 as *a* great general rule, not necessarily *the* great general rule.[17]

Prioritizing these two commandments does not, of course, resolve all problems in biblical values. Neither love of God nor love of neighbor is unambiguous, and there are many things in the Bible that are not easily reconciled with love of God and love of the neighbor on any interpretation. We shall have to ask more closely what each of these commandments entails. But already the focus on these two commandments provides a criterion that will bring some order to the diversity of biblical values.

The question of authority

But even if we attain consensus as to which biblical values are primary, the question of their authority remains.

In popular perception, the Bible is often regarded as a source of divine commands, timeless and non-negotiable. This perception calls for several qualifications.

First, while the Bible certainly contains laws, these are the exception rather than the rule in the biblical corpus. Much of the material is narrative, hortatory, reflective or expressive of human fears and hopes.[18] This material may inform our decisions in various ways, but it is not directly prescriptive in the manner of laws.

When we find laws, mainly in the Pentateuch or Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), they are of two kinds. On the one hand, there are apodictic laws, which is to say absolute, unqualified commands or prohibitions. The ten commandments (Exod 20: 1-17; Deut 5:6-21) are the paradigmatic, but not the only, examples of apodictic laws. Other biblical laws are casuistic, which is to say that they are tailored to particular circumstances. A good example, widely paralleled in the laws of the ancient Near East, is the case of the ox that gores:

> When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. If the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not restrained it, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. If a ransom is imposed on the owner, then the owner shall pay whatever is imposed for the redemption of the victim's life . . . If the ox gores a male or female slave, the owner shall pay to the slaveowner thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned (Exod 21:28-32).

If a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner is punished. But if the slaves survives a day or two there is no punishment, "for the slave is the owner's property" (Exod 21:20-21). Examples could be multiplied. It is clear from this that the Ten Commandments formulate general principles, but the application is contingent on circumstances. As Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) would say, there is a time to kill and a time to heal. Biblical law, then is not as draconian as it is sometimes thought to be. Even the ten commandments are broad statements of principle, whose application may be qualified in light of circumstances.

Even in the case of the ten commandments, the laws are transmitted by Moses, a human agent. A strand of Jewish tradition holds that the Torah we possess is already an interpretation of the divine revelation; the words that we have are the words of Moses.[19] The Bible, even in its most foundational revelation, is part of the stream of tradition.[20] Modern scholarship goes much farther than this, and argues that the entire story of revelation is a human composition, dating several hundred years later than the time of Moses.[21] It is in fact undeniable that biblical laws are formulated in the language of their time, in light of changing circumstances. There were no goring oxen in the wilderness around Mount Sinai. The biblical laws as we have them evolved over centuries. One major formulation, that of Deuteronomy is no older than the reign of King Josiah in the late seventh century BCE. The Pentateuch as we have it was completed in the postexilic period, in the fifth or fourth century BCE, and scribes were still making changes in the biblical text down to the turn of the era. Biblical law, whatever its ultimate source, is a product of tradition, subject to change by the human beings who transmitted it, at least in some of its details. The laws as we have them are never pristine divine

revelations, but always entail human authorship and human motivations, and arose in particular historical circumstances that must be taken into account.

Moreover, what is presented as divine law in the Bible is demonstrably changeable.[22] The laws in Exodus 20-23 (the "Book of the Covenant") on such matters as the Passover and slavery are revised in Deuteronomy. Again, in the New Testament, Jesus famously tells his followers in the Sermon on the Mount: "you have heard it was said to them of old . . . but I say to you." Jesus, of course, claims special authority, but he was not the first person in the biblical tradition to presume to change laws that were ostensibly given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Hellenistic Jewish authors, such as Philo of Alexandria, had a different view of such matters, and held that divine law was unchangeable. In this they were influenced by Greek traditions. The Jewish tradition, however, has always had the character of a running argument. The changeability of divine law in the Hebrew Bible has important implications for the authority of that law in later times. If Deuteronomy could change the laws of Exodus in light of new circumstances, is it not possible to envision further changes in light of vastly changed circumstances between the biblical period and our own time.

The consensus of contemporary scholarship is that neither the great Mesopotamian law "codes," such as that of Hammurabi nor the biblical law codes functioned as statutory law, or were binding on judges.[23] Judges relied on their sense of the mores of a community rather than on written law. Written laws are never cited as decisive in trial scenes, and sometimes cases are decided in contradiction of what is written. Law collections were descriptive rather than prescriptive. Accordingly, some scholars refer to the laws of Exodus as "wisdom laws," with the implication that they functioned in

a way similar to Proverbs: the helped inform the wise person, but did not determine right conduct automatically.[24] This view of biblical law may also be of service in the modern world

No one actually regards all the laws of the Bible as applicable in the modern world. Think for example of the laws pertaining to slavery in the Old Testament. Who, except perhaps the ultra-Orthodox, now worries about whether a garment is made of two different materials (Lev 19:19).[25] The sacrificial laws of the Old Testament became moot when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed. St. Paul dispensed Christians from most of the ritual law. There is, of course, still much in the Bible that is easily applicable to the modern world, but it is well to remember that it was not written with our situation in mind. Some process of translation, adaptation and application by analogy is necessary.

For many Christians and Jews, it is important that values and principles be grounded in the Bible, but no one can live by Scripture alone. Rather, to quote the moral theologian James Gustafson, "there is a dialectic between more intuitive moral judgments and both scriptural and nonscriptural principles and values."[26] This dialectic is necessary for several reasons. One is the diversity of the biblical material and the need to choose between conflicting positions. Another is the fact that we are heirs to a long tradition of reflection on moral issues since the time of the Bible, and we cannot simply expunge this material from our consciousness. Another lies in the demands of our own experience and intuitions, which may themselves be formed to some degree by the biblical material but are never fully determined by it.[27] It is not that we should trust our modern instincts completely. Human nature has not changed since the time of the Flood, when God saw "that the wickedness of humankind

was great on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). We need the restraining influence of traditional wisdom. But the Bible too needs to be placed in dialogue with everything we know about ethical living from other sources.

It is possible, moreover, to construe the Bible in ways other than prescriptive law. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur has spoken of the appeal of the Bible as a "nonviolent appeal," that asks not so much for a submission of will as for an opening of imagination. [28] We should also remember that we can learn from the Bible in ways other than conformity.

Many Jews and Christians worry that a critical approach to the Bible simple subordinates it to modern values. That is not our intention here. The Bible deserves a hearing, but in order to give it a hearing we must respect the fact that it was written long ago and in another culture. Its values are often at odds with our own. We have much to learn from it, but the dialogue is not a one-way street. It must be appreciated in its complexity, with the recognition that it also often at odds with itself. A critique of the Bible can be conducted on inner-biblical grounds as well as on the grounds of modern sensibilities. But we must begin by striving for clarity on what the actual evidence is on supposed biblical values, and we will find that that is much more complicated than many people assume.

Prospect

The chapters that follow are mostly devoted to specific issues and will probe biblical attitudes to such topics as right to life, gender, family values, and justice. It is also necessary, however, to consider the broader frameworks within which these topics are discussed in the biblical texts.

There are in fact two broad frameworks for ethical issues in the Bible.

The first is supplied first by the idea of creation, which determines matters that concern human nature and the place of humanity in the environment. Consideration of creation, however, also requires a discussion of eschatology, and the possibility that creation as we know it will come to an end. The expectation of an ending arises in the later books of the Hebrew Bible, first in the prophets and then more elaborately in the Book of Daniel, which provides the only example in the Hebrew Bible of a new genre, apocalypse. The genre apocalypse blossomed in Judaism in the period around the turn of the era, roughly 200 BCE to 100 CE, but it takes its name from a New Testament book, the Book of Revelation or Apocalypse of John. Apocalyptic eschatology, or the ideas about the end of the world that are characteristic of the apocalyptic literature, shapes the world view of the New Testament to a great degree, but puts the idea of creation in a new perspective.

The second broad framework for biblical ethics is supplied by the covenant which is primarily a covenant with Israel but which has paradigmatic significance for any society. The covenant entails a law, and for Christians that law is modified in the New Testament, but the "new covenant" is not entirely different from the old one and it cannot be understood apart from the tradition from which it arose.

The discussion that follows is divided into two parts, one introduced by a consideration of creation and its implications, and the second introduced by a consideration of the covenant and law.

There can be no pretense here to comprehensiveness. The number of biblical values that might in principle be discussed is vast. We will focus on issues that have been controversial in contemporary life: right to life, gender,

family values and the environment in the first half of the book, and justice, freedom, violence and love in the second.

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[1] Wall St. Journal, October 18, 2012.
[2] For a fuller discussion see my book, *The Bible After Babel. Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 1-25.
[3] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) 13. Especially influential for Martin is the work of Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1980).
[4] Dale B. Martin, *The Pedagogy of the Bible. An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); 31; idem, *Sex and the Single Savior. Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 1. See now his *Biblical Truths. The Meaning of Scripture in the Twenty-First Century* (New Haven: Yale, 2017) 95, on the problem of speaking of the Bible as an agent.
[5] See especially Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1980).
[6] Martin, *The Pedagogy of the Bible*, 70.
[7] See further my essay, "Historical-critical Methods," in Stephen B. Chapman and Marvin A. Sweeney, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 129-46.
[8] Even the authors of *The Postmodern Bible* allow that "deconstructive reading relies necessarily on traditional historical criticism as 'an indispensable guardrail' or 'safeguard' for reading. If it were not so, Derrida cautions, 'one could say just anything at all.'" George Aichele et al. (The Bible and Culture

Collective), *The Postmodern Bible*, 64, with reference to Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 141.
[9] See e.g. Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[10] Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1989) 224.
[11] Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 16.
[12] See Claudia Setzer and David A. Shefferman, eds., *The Bible and American Culture. A Source Book* (London: Routledge, 2011) 101-9.
[13] Compare Matt 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-28.
[14] The degree of continuity is disputed. See the thorough discussion by John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. IV. Law and Love* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2009) 499-522,
[15] Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Reception of the Torah in Mark: The Question about the Greatest Commandment," in Akio Moriya and Gohei Hata, ed., *Pentateuchal Traditions in the Late Second Temple Period* (JSJSup 158; Leiden: Brill, 2012)237
[16] Meier, *A Marginal Jew*. *IV*, 513.
[17] Sifra, *Qedoshim*, 4. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. IV*, 514.
[18] See the sensitive discussion of John Barton, Ethics in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[19] Benjamin D. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority. Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (AYBRL; New Haven: Yale, 2015) 146.
[20] Ibid., 147-87.
[21] See e.g. David P. Wright, *Inventing God's Law. How the Covenant Code of the Bible Used and Revised the Laws of Hammurabi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[22] Christine Hayes, *What's Divine about Divine Law? Early Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
[23] Joshua Berman, "The History of Legal Theory and the Study of Biblical Law," *CBQ* 76(2014) 19-39; Michael LeFebvre, *Collections, Codes and Torah. The Re-characterization of Israel's Written Law* (New York and London: Clark, 2006) 1-54.
[24] Bernard S. Jackson, *Wisdom-Laws. A Study of the Mishpatim of Exodus 21:1-22:16* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[25] For a humorous treatment of the difficulties of "living biblically" in a modern city see A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).
[26] James M. Gustafson, "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics," *Interpretation* 24(1970) 141.

[27] Margaret Farley, *Just Love. A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006) 194.

[28] Paul Ricoeur, *Essays in Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 95. See Farley*, Just Love*, 195.