INTRODUCTION

The ‘other hand’: A position within the debate on ethics/ethos and the biblical sciences in South Africa

The recent history in South Africa of the relationship between the disciplines of the biblical sciences and that of theological ethics has not been an altogether uneventful one. When the dogmatician/ethicist Dirkie Smit was asked to write an evaluative conclusion (Smit 1992:303–325) to a collection of essays on biblical ethics by New Testament scholars (Breitenbach & Letterg 1992), they had not expected to hear what Smit had to say. His harshest criticism related to the methodological presuppositions of the Bible scholars – that they had failed to acknowledge the fundamental distinction between ethos and ethics, that is: between the way things are done, habitually, socio-culturally, reflexively, and the way things ought to be done, evaluated principally and appraised reflectively (Smit 1992:303–317; Smit 1994:287). In addition, a distinction that has been poorly adhered to in the history of South African political readings of the Bible is that between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to and from the Scriptures respectively. Is it, on the one hand, at all possible to read ‘lessons for today’ or, more directly, ‘instructions for today’ from biblical texts? On the other hand, would it even be worth the effort of analysing the moral sensitivities within these ancient holy texts without seeking in some way to apply insights from such an exegetical exercise to our day?

My choice falls in favour of the second question, the approach sketched as the ‘other hand’, and in answer to the first question: No, not in any direct manner (what Smit [1992:316] terms deontological and teleological ways, seeking, respectively, norms or laws and purposes or ideals; cf. Bosman 1994:262–265); but then also, yes: in an analogical, situationally sensitive way (cf. Otto 2004:183–184, and contra e.g. McQuilkin 1989; cf. Smit 1994:297–292), and in open acknowledgement of a host of influences, we may well gain some religious perspectives from biblical texts on/form modern times. Put differently: I opt for a phenomenologically descriptive reading of ethos and, more circumspectly, ethics in the Bible texts (Otto 1994:10); I however (still – cf. Lombaard 2001a:85–86; 2009a) do not think it possible validly to draw directly on such analyses to sustain any current sense of justice or moral outrage.

Cul de sac: The conservative ethical path à la South Africa

The above is not a popular choice in South Africa, neither in ecclesial nor in political circles (Lombaard 2001b:17–24). Keeping to the former circle. Perhaps the most prominent example in South Africa of using the Bible on political ethics, and doing so directly, was the 1947 volume by Cronjé, Nicol and Groenewald (1947), in which Old and New Testament texts were influentially read as directly affirming the ideology later known as apartheid. This method of the direct appropriation of ‘findings’ in the Bible to the South African socio-political context was followed in books that supported apartheid (e.g. Du Preez 1959), by church publications that in time sought carefully to distance themselves from this political programme (Kerk en samelewing 1986), and in volumes directly opposing apartheid, such as the Statement by the Institute for Contextual Theology (1991:266–268) and the Kairois Document (1986:18–20) (cf. Mbiti 1986:55; Mosothoane 1978:29; Molthabi 1987:9–11; Mpmulwana 1993:8). In all cases, the Bible was mined for what was thought it ought to say in favour of ‘our cause’ – whichever political project that was (cf. Le Roux 1992). However, when one indicates the extreme difficulties, up to the point of impossibility, of ‘applying’ Bible texts to our time (as I did in Lombaard 2006b:144–155), the immediate assumption is made that criticism of Bible usage amounts to rejection of the imperatives/correctnesses of our time.1

Within the current South African political climate, with the earlier (± 1990–2005) sense of threat from political leadership on the position of churches and faculties of Theology at universities (cf. Lombaard 2001b:17–19) having subsided, the assumption is now often made that the role of the churches and faculties of Theology is primarily to provide ethical guidance within society. Such moral leadership, it is supposed from the political side, would fall neatly in line with the needs of the current ruling

1. Such an automatic assumption, of course, lays bare the underlying reason for the Bible texts often being drawn upon: in order to provide a utilitarian legitimising tool to modern norms. Such a utilitarianism regarding the Bible bears only ventriloquism (a metaphor I first employed in Lombaard 2001a:71). The Bible becomes the puppet on its master’s knee: The interpreter draws the strings, like the Fates of ancient Greek and Roman fables, leaving the Bible a victim of those who hold it in their power: “To have and to hold” – a marriage of extreme convenience for such an interpreter, who has the position of power, and hubs. The Scriptures become domesticated (cf. Lombaard 2001a:84–85). Not God, and not the Scriptures, are therefore served; rather, we are.
class, namely social stability, by helping to solve the problems of crime, violence, health epidemics and matters related to poverty. Not criticizing, debating, questioning analyses or duly-minded contributions, but simple adherence to the socio-political programme, is assumed. In this respect, the present South African government is no different from any of its predecessors. Theology, in this line of thinking, is about doing what is right, and Theology is told what the right thing is.

This is an inherently conservative approach to ethics, not to mention the role of both church and university (cf. Lombard 2006a:71–84) within society. All these social problems listed are, of course, to be judged negatively (within most ethical systems) and, hence, solutions ought to be sought. Certainly that is the case too now that hardly any Christian theologian of the Western (sect) academy does not subscribe in principle to the theologies of freedom (even if this is done without direct reference to its initiators). However, an approach to ethics that leaves no room for difference, competition, opposition or rejection, does itself not serve freedom: Such an approach to ethics is illiberal; repressive, even. The moral trajectory is prescribed. We all must do the good that is expected of us. Ethics rules ethics.

The implication is that doing one’s expected duty is good, and developing a supporting philosophy of obedience is almost all that remains. The greater good for the greatest possible number of people, and to achieve it, has already been decided upon. Now, theology must become practical, and implement the good. Faiths, churches and faculties of Theology are simply cogs in the wheel of a society already politically decided upon. Ethics becomes ethos operationalised; morality is utilitarian only; thinking is simply functional, not critical, solely implementing accepted truth. Such a scenario is just another ‘brave new world’ (Huxley [1932] 1994).

It is, however, within precisely such a scenario that analyses of the ethos/ethics we encounter in the Bible done from the ‘other’ sake of comparison from within the post-exilic period, are the two Old Testament textual bodies. My two texts, chosen for the purposes of ideals or principles for modern behaviour from the biblical passages, that is, in the Decalogue and theologies of freedom (even if this is done without direct reference to its initiators). This late text, certainly post-exilic (possibly early 3rd century BCE), had the effect, as is the case with all such framing,textualising texts, that it cast a pall over the rest of the Moses texts, effectively rendering the whole of the Pentateuch – in the by now familiar metaphor – his epitaph. Although an older kernel of Deuteronomy 34:1–12 may well still reflect earlier folk tales that tried to explain the absence of knowledge of this legendary figure’s grave, the implication of appending this epilogue to the Pentateuch, of Moses’ divinely orchestrated death and burial (Dt 34:5–6) had direct implications for those in the promised land (Dt 34:1b–4) who held him in such high esteem (Dt 34:8 (& 12)). The laws of Moses, with which he was most directly associated, were to be kept. Irrespective of the tradition history behind the text (e.g. Coats 1988:148–153 versus Noth 1981:156, 174), now, in the shadow of Moses’ death, life – with the clear insinuation: continued life – inside Israel-Juda meant life under holy law. The prosaic Mosaic death in Deuteronomy 34 therefore indicates the way of life as constituted in יִשְׂרָאֵל, that is, in the Decalogue and other laws with which the Moses figure had become increasingly identified – to the point that in Deuteronomy 34 direct mention would not be required: The mutual association between Moses and Torah would be strong enough (Britt 2004:167–176).

As an earlier icon (projection, or literary [r]econstruction) of the religio-political ethos of the 7th century Jerusalem-based authors, the Moses figure had had a dissident character, namely as guarantor (because of his close encounters with יִשְׂרָאֵל) of a subtly subversive anti-Assyrian Judean reception of imperial laws (Otto 2000b:43–83, summarised in Otto 2006:35–42). However, during and after the exile, with the Deuteronomistic interpretation of history becoming the dominant theological line of thinking, laws grew to be of prime importance, socially and theologically. To prevent a recurrence of the history of fall from יִשְׂרָאֵל, which could result in another tragic cataclysm for Judah/Jerusalem, law became the essence of life. Extra legem nulla salus est. The Moses figure, already associated with laws, and by now a strongly developed unifying figure in the Pentateuch-in-development, therefore remained after the exile an icon representing the Jerusalem ethos – which was however now changed. No longer was Moses a figure of intellectual revolt against Assyria, in favour of יִשְׂרָאֵל; now, Moses has become a mediator of sorts between the new, smaller Israel and יִשְׂרָאֵל, with the latter at that time being the party who was feared (an implication of Deuteronomistic theology). Mosaic law should now guarantee life ‘forever’ (יחי כל ימי חייו in different configurations, and particularly in Deuteronomy). This ‘forever’, though, has wholly immanent implications, allowing no eschatological or other-/above-worldly expectations. The here and now, as all that life is and can be, par excellence the וּלְיָשָׂרָאֵל is found in words of law.

Though, certainly, the pleasures of the body – food, drink, companionship – are acknowledged, even celebrated (also in Nehemiah-Ezra), the dominant force of law is to draw boundaries of appropriateness (e.g. Lv 17–26), for the sake of God’s blessing (Ps 1, 19, 94, 119), lest again the wrath of God be incurred.

This is the kind of life the deceased Moses of Deuteronomy 34 bequeaths the followers of his God; formulated from the opposite angle: the kind of ethos of which he had become the icon, post- Nehemiah-Ezra, the dominant force of law is to draw boundaries of appropriateness (e.g. Lv 17–26), for the sake of God’s blessing (Ps 1, 19, 94, 119), lest again the wrath of God be incurred.

We know that Moses did not write the Pentateuch. What we are less sure about is precisely how Moses did not write the Pentateuch. The centuries’, but most particularly, the recent decades’ competing theories on Pentateuch authorship have proven both these points (Houtman 1994:421–423). The irony should not escape us, though, that it was the death of Moses in Deuteronomy 34 that put the first historical-critical nail in the coffin of uncritical acceptance of Mosaic authorship (Otto 2006b:9–13; cf. e.g. Deist 1988 and Houtman 1994 for historical overviews). This late text, certainly post-exilic (possibly early 3rd century BCE), had the effect, as is the case with all such framing, textualising texts, that it cast a pall over the rest of the Moses texts, effectively rendering the whole of the Pentateuch – in the by now familiar metaphor – his epitaph. Although an older kernel of Deuteronomy 34:1–12 may well still reflect earlier folk tales that tried to explain the absence of knowledge of this legendary figure’s grave, the implication of appending this epilogue to the Pentateuch, of Moses’ divinely orchestrated death and burial (Dt 34:5–6) had direct implications for those in the promised land (Dt 34:1b–4) who held him in such high esteem (Dt 34:8 (& 12)). The laws of Moses, with which he was most directly associated, were to be kept. Irrespective of the tradition history behind the text (e.g. Coats 1988:148–153 versus Noth 1981:156, 174), now, in the shadow of Moses’ death, life – with the clear insinuation: continued life – inside Israel-Juda meant life under holy law. The prosaic Mosaic death in Deuteronomy 34 therefore indicates the way of life as constituted in יִשְׂרָאֵל, that is, in the Decalogue and other laws with which the Moses figure had become increasingly identified – to the point that in Deuteronomy 34 direct mention would not be required: The mutual association between Moses and Torah would be strong enough (Britt 2004:167–176).
Living life in the face of death: Qohelet’s ‘theology’


This exact point has found an interesting turn in a recent philosophy book in South Africa (Goosen 2007), which – as an unintended latter-day analogous work to that of Qohelet – rejects modernist and postmodernist nihilism in favour of sheer happiness (cf. here too Schoeman 2004). Life, for Goosen (2007:43), is both, and not either, its ‘radikale ufründlichkeit’ (radical preciptuosity) and its ‘eineindigessessential’ (unending, abundance). Taking pleasure in the latter moderates the stark finality of the former: Each joyful meal is a sacrament for life, against death. Every delight in food, drink and companionship is an instantaneous eternity (cf. Versfeld 2004), albeit temporary, affiming this ethos – the ethic of ‘living and acting’ (Lohfink 2003:114) – that there is life before death: an existential question of at least equal importance to its more popular corollary, on life after death. There is too little of life and too much in it, for us not to have our fill of it. – This forms an apt summary too of the ethos reflected by Qohelet.

Concluding comparatively: Moses versus Qohelet, adversus South Africa’s mono-ethicism


The latter we briefly looked at in the form of the co-temporaneous, late Second Temple period texts of Qohelet and on Moses’ death. The differences between these two are stark:

4. Keeping the opening pages of this paper in mind, I would here substitute ‘Ethos’ for ‘Ethik’.

5. The point made by Barton (1998:14–15) should be well taken: ‘Our first impression, that the Old Testament presents its morality [I would prefer: moralities] unsystematically...is misleading if it encourages us to think that it is just a muddle’.

• Moses’ death affirms the importance of the law for those who want to remain living in the land of promise. Life ought to be sought in obedience; pleasure is strictly circumscribed. Not keeping to the Torah carries inherently the Deuteronomistic threat of death, like Moses’, outside the homeland.

• For Qohelet, death is a given, inescapable for all. It cannot be fled from, and that would equally be the case in exile or in Juda. Even great kingdoms that come, go too... Hence, God gives the bodily pleasures of life – food, drink, sex, companionship – as the sensuous affirmation of being, over and against ceasing to be. Pleading God entails not a life of abiding by laws, but of exploring joys. God’s benevolence works not through obedience, but through experience.

The value of acknowledging these two competing ways of life within the same 3rd century BCE Jewish faith is that naïve assumptions on there being only one possible ‘right’ way of living are undermined. Even if done in a very brief (further investigations into these texts soon show more differences) and limited (many more texts, each reflecting an own ethos, could be studied) manner, such as the case is here, the idea of only one ethic (system of thinking) and only one ethos (manner of living) is shown to be flawed.

However, South African society and its theological leaders like to call on the Bible in socio-political debate, often based on the assumption that their viewpoints on a just society would be found there, exclusively (Lombaard 2001a:69–87; cf. Lombaard 2001b:89–93). All such an approach does, illiberally, is to ignore the diversity that does exist in society, in favour of uncritical power play. Even though it can be said in very broad terms that ‘[d]as AT von Gott sagt, ist vom Anfang bis zum Ende vom Handeln und Reden Gottes bestimmt’ (Westermann 1997:393), the implications this had for the faithful of Israel, for the church through the ages and still for those in our day draw on the ‘Good Book’, is by no means unilinear (Westermann 1997:399–400).

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