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SPEECH ETHICS IN THE HEBREW PSALTER

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
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December 2012

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To my beloved family,

Gladys,

Moraa, Caleb

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <i>AJS</i>     | <i>American Journal of Sociology</i>   |
| <i>BDB</i>     | F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> |
| <i>BHS</i>     | <i>Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia</i>  |
| <i>BI</i>      | <i>Biblical Interpretation</i>   |
| <i>BR</i>      | <i>Biblical Research</i>   |
| <i>BS</i>      | <i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>   |
| <i>BZAW</i>    | Beihefte zur ZAW   |
| <i>CBQ</i>     | <i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>   |
| <i>EncJud</i>  | <i>Encyclopaedia judaica</i> (1972)  |
| <i>EvQ</i>     | <i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>   |
| <i>ExpTim</i>  | <i>Expository Times</i>  |
| <i>HTR</i>     | <i>Harvard Theological Review</i>  |
| <i>JAAR</i>    | <i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>   |
| <i>JBL</i>     | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>  |
| <i>JBR</i>     | <i>Journal of Bible and Religion</i>   |
| <i>JETS</i>    | <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>  |
| <i>JRC</i>     | <i>Journal of Religion and Culture</i>   |
| <i>JSOT</i>    | <i>Journal for the Study of Old Testament</i>  |
| <i>JSOTSup</i> | Journal for the Study of Old Testament – Supplement Series                                       |
| <i>JSS</i>     | <i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>  |
| <i>JTS</i>     | <i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>  |

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| LXX          | Septuagint  |
| MT           | Masoretic Text  |
| <i>NICOT</i> | <i>New International Commentary on the Old Testament</i>                                    |
| NIV          | New International Version   |
| NKJV         | New King James Version  |
| NT           | New Testament   |
| OT           | Old Testament   |
| OTL          | Old Testament Library   |
| <i>PC</i>    | <i>Philosophia Christi</i>  |
| <i>PRS</i>   | <i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>  |
| <i>SBET</i>  | <i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>  |
| <i>SJOT</i>  | Scandinavian Journal of Old Testament   |
| <i>SJT</i>   | <i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>   |
| <i>TDOT</i>  | G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> |
| <i>VT</i>    | <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>  |
| VTSup        | Vetus Testamentum, Supplements  |
| WBC          | Word Biblical Commentary  |
| <i>WTJ</i>   | <i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>  |
| ZAW          | <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>                                   |



## PREFACE

The desire to do my research on a topic from the Hebrew Psalter began in the spring of 2007 during lectures by Dr. Patrick Miller at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on the subject of the Ten Commandments. When dealing with the ninth commandment, he remarked that words are probably used as weapons of oppression in the book of Psalms. I spent the summer of that year reading the book of Psalms and discovered frequent use of speech terminology. This discovery raised some curiosity and I wanted to find out why. As a result, this project was born.

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous contribution of a number of people who made the completion of the dissertation possible. I would like to thank Dr. Duane Garrett, my supervising professor, who provided much needed guidance and encouragement in the process of framing my topic, doing research, and writing. Also, thanks to Drs. Russell T. Fuller and Terry J. Betts, members of my committee, who helped push the process to the finishing line. I will not forget Dr. Steven Guest, who spent many hours from his busy schedule to read and edit this work. His friendship will always be remembered.

Finally, no words of thanks could adequately express my gratitude to my beloved wife, Gladys, and our children, Moraa and Caleb, for their love, patience, and support during the period of writing this dissertation. They sacrificed substantially in order for me to pursue doctoral studies at the seminary, and for that I am deeply grateful.

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Louisville, Kentucky

December 2012

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Speech is an essential element in human relationship because it is a primary medium through which thoughts of one person are communicated to another. Depending on the kind of thoughts being communicated and the kind of person doing the communication, speech has the potential for good and evil. Speech can begin and maintain relationships thereby promoting stability in society. Sadly, however, it can also destroy such relationships. The possibility of using speech for good and evil might explain why the Bible has a lot to say about speech ethics.<sup>1</sup> This study explores what the Hebrew Psalter teaches about speech ethics.

#### **The Statement of the Problem**

One of the strange phenomena in the Hebrew Psalter is its pervasive use of speech terminology. By “speech terminology” here is meant those words and/or phrases that refer to the use and abuse of speech as well as the organs of speech (mouth, lips and tongue). In the Psalter, the psalmists frequently criticize the wicked for misusing speech.

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<sup>1</sup>The term “ethics” as used in this study refers to rules, regulations, and principles that prescribe or forbid a certain type of action. It is not dealing with the abstract conception of ethics that characterizes the work of Greek and Latin philosophers. The reason is that, to the Hebrews, ethics was practical; it was a way of life (see André Neher, “Ethics,” *EncJud* [Jerusalem: Keter, 1972], 6: 531; John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* [London: SCM Press, 1998], 14-16; I. Howard Marshall, “Using the Bible in Ethics,” in *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics*, ed. David F. Wright [Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1979], 41; James Muilenburgh, *The Way of Israel* [New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965], 15). Also, no distinction is made between “ethics” and “morality” because the former is a Greek word and the latter is a Latin word translating the Greek (see Stanley J. Grenz, *The Morality Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997], 23; for a contrary view, see Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993], 4-5; Shubert Spero, *Morality, Halakha and the Jewish Tradition*, The Library of Jewish Law and Ethics, vol. 9 [New York: Ktav, 1983], xiii-xiv).

Other times, they are heard talking about the kind of speech that the Lord requires and making resolutions on how they will use their speech. This phenomenon raises a number of questions. Why does the Psalter frequently use speech terminology more than any other book in the Old Testament? What does the use of the terminology say about speech ethics in the Psalter? How does speech ethics in the Psalter compare with the speech ethics in the other books of the Old Testament? What contribution does speech ethics in the Psalter make to the study of Old Testament ethics in general?

### **The Purpose of the Study**

This study will examine the use of speech terminology in the Hebrew Psalter with a view to finding out why the Psalter makes frequent reference to the use and abuse of speech, in order to help the reader understand the teaching of the Psalter on speech ethics and the contribution it makes to the study of Old Testament ethics in general.

### **Thesis**

The thesis of this study is threefold. First, the Hebrew Psalter emphasizes strongly the need to speak the truth and warns against using one's speech to the detriment of other people. The Psalter suggests that falsehood defiles a person thereby depriving him access to a holy God for worship. Second, speech terminology appears frequently in the Psalter because words are primarily used as weapons of oppression by powerful members of the community (the wicked) against the weak and the needy (righteous). This situation reflects a time in the history of ancient Israel when justice had failed. And since the weak and the needy did not have any human authority to protect them, they appealed to the Lord to do justice by delivering them from their oppressors. They are confident that the Lord will hear their appeal not only because they are innocent, but also because he is a just King and Judge who exercises his steadfast love (חסד) and justice (משפט) in favor of the oppressed. Third, speech in the Psalter is a distinguishing mark between the

righteous and the wicked, in the sense that it reveals their respective character and behavior.

### Methodology

This study will apply the synchronic method,<sup>2</sup> which reads the text in its final form<sup>3</sup> in light of the historical, literary and theological contexts to which the text refers. The historical context will be considered because “the bible is a product of a specific time in a particular culture, so that if we do not understand the sense of the words in that period and what concepts and institutions they refer to we shall never grasp the message the work was written to convey.”<sup>4</sup>

One may object that the Psalter is written in the form of poetry and, as such, it does not provide any historical context. However, one should bear in mind that poetry whether ancient or modern is never written in a vacuum. Rather, it is written in and often reflects the context of the culture and experiences of the poet. The poetry in the Psalter is not any different as it reflects the historical and religious experiences of ancient Israel. When reading the Psalter one should, therefore, take into account the historical context

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<sup>2</sup>For an excellent discussion on the difference between Synchronic and Diachronic methods and their application to specific texts, see Johannes C. De Moor, ed., *Synchronic or Diachronic? A Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis* (New York: Brill, 1995), 1-244; Joel S. Burnett, W. H. Bellinger, Jr., and W. Dennis Tucker, Jr., *Diachronic and Synchronic: Reading the Psalms in Real Time* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007); Magne Sæbø. *On the Way to Canon: Creative Tradition History in the Old Testament*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement series\_191 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 21-23.

<sup>3</sup>Ellen J. van Wolde, “Telling and Retelling: The Words of the Servant in Genesis 24,” in *Synchronic or Diachronic? A Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis*, ed. Johannes C. De Moor (New York: Brill, 1995), 227-44; Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of A Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), 4: The “only valid approach is to look long and seriously at the Old Testament as it is”; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); idem, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 55-94. See a critique of this approach in John Barton, *The Old Testament: Canon, Literature and Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 181-91.

<sup>4</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 3; Wolde calls this approach “chronistic synchronic” (see van Wolde, “Telling and Retelling,” 244).

for a proper understanding of its message.

The study will also take into consideration the literary context because the bible is a form of literature. The writers and/or redactors of the Psalter used the language and literary conventions of their time to convey a specific message to their readers. And since values and ethical norms are embodied in words, it is necessary to do word study and analysis of syntactical constructions and rhetorical features in the Hebrew Psalter in order to find out what message the psalmists and/redactors were conveying when they used speech terminology.

Finally, the study will take into account the theological context because the bible is a theological document. This is an element that has either received less emphasis or been totally ignored in the recent discussion on Old Testament ethics. One needs to take seriously Wilson's suggestion that the way of resolving some of the problems in the field of biblical ethics is for biblical scholars to cooperate with scholars from the fields of theology and ethics because "biblical ethics is not solely the province of biblical scholars."<sup>5</sup>

The diachronic method will not be used for two important reasons. The first one is that it is difficult to reach behind the text to reconstruct its historical development considering that the material for making such reconstruction is not available.<sup>6</sup> The second reason is that the application of diachronic method is prone to subjectivity, conjecture and

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<sup>5</sup>Robert R. Wilson, "Sources and Methods in the Study of Ancient Israelite Ethics," *Semeia* 66, no. 1 (1994): 62.

<sup>6</sup>This study neither denies that there might have been sources behind the final form of the text nor suggests that one should not seek to understand the development in the composition of the text. The point being asserted, however, is that the ethical view of the final text is the main thing, as it reveals the intention of the redactors.

unnecessary fragmentation of the text such that it is difficult to find coherence and unity in the message the writer is trying to communicate.

### **Basic Assumptions and Limitations**

There are two basic assumptions taken in this study. First, the individual psalms are a product of real human beings experiencing real circumstances. For these psalms to have been included in the final text, they must have appeared to the redactors to be still relevant in terms of the circumstances they reflect. Second, although the psalms are in the form of poetry, they reflect the historical and religious experience of ancient Israel. To the extent that these experiences are discernible from the language of the text, they will be taken into account when trying to determine its meaning.

This study has some limitations. First, it focuses on the content of the psalms themselves and not the historical data contained in the superscription. Second, the study is concerned with rules and principles presented by the Hebrew Psalter regarding the use of speech and not their application to the modern context. Third, the way individual psalms are read or applied in the New Testament is not taken into account in this study. Rather, the psalms are read on their own terms as ancient documents that were written and preserved for the benefit of the people of faith in the Old Testament period. Finally, speech ethics in the book of Psalms is a virgin territory in the sense that there is no known work that has been done specifically on this area. This study will, therefore, be like opening up a new forest.

### **Summary of Chapters**

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the problem, purpose, thesis, and the methodology of the study. Chapter 2 briefly looks at the study of

Old Testament ethics during the modern era beginning from nineteenth century to the present, paying special attention to how it developed into an independent discipline and the key issues that have dominated scholarly discussion along with the underlying philosophical ideas that inform that discussion.

Chapter 3 examines the occurrence of speech terminology outside the Hebrew Psalter, using select passages from the Pentateuch, prophetic and wisdom literature in order to find out what these passages teach about speech ethics. An attempt is also made to determine if there is an underlying rationale that might unite the speech ethics of this diverse material. The result of the examination provides the foundation for the study of speech ethics in the Hebrew Psalter.

Chapter 4 briefly discusses whether or not the Psalter contains ethical instruction. In answering the question, it takes into consideration the approaches taken by pre-critical interpreters and form and canonical critics. Chapter 5 examines the use of speech terminology in the Hebrew Psalter with a view to finding out why it is used frequently and what the Psalter teaches about speech ethics.

Chapter 6 summarizes the findings of the study and tries to answer the question as to why the Psalter has more references to the use of speech than any other book in the Old Testament. Also, it tries to determine the contribution, if any, the Psalter makes to the study of Old Testament ethics. Finally, proposals are made on areas for further research.

CHAPTER 2  
THE HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF  
OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS

**Introduction**

The study of the Old Testament as a resource for rules, principles and norms of moral behavior is as old as the text itself. The historian inquiring into the history of the study of Old Testament ethics, therefore, has to decide what period his inquiry will cover. Wilson suggests that in order for one to gain a better understanding of the ethics of Israel, he should not limit his inquiry to the time when the text gained its canonical status, but should go back to biblical times in the early period of ancient Israel.<sup>1</sup> During this period, he sees the Israelites in possession of legal codes, a developing canon of traditions, which they recognized as an authoritative guide for moral behavior (Exod 20-24; Deut 17:18-19; 31:9-13, 24-26).

One of these legal codes, the “book of the law,” seems to have occupied a central place in the religious life of ancient Israel.<sup>2</sup> The king is commanded to have his own copy which he is to “read all the days of his life in order that he might learn to fear the Lord his God and to keep all the words of this law and these decrees and to do them” (Deut 17:19). Likewise, the priests are to have a regular public reading of the law before

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<sup>1</sup>Robert R. Wilson, “Ethics in Conflict: Sociological Aspects of Ancient Israelite Ethics,” in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, ed. Susan Niditch (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>Barnabas Lindars, “Torah in Deuteronomy,” in *Words and Meanings: Essays Presented to David Winton Thomas on His Retirement from the Regius Professorship of Hebrew in the University of Cambridge*, ed. Peter R. Ackroyd and Barnabas Lindars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 117-38; Jean-Pierre Sonnet, *The Book within the Book: Writing in Deuteronomy* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 259-62; Jonathan Ben-Dov, “Writing as Oracle and as Law: New Contexts for the Book-Find of King Josiah,” *JBL* 127, no. 2 (2008): 223-39.



the Israelites on a specified occasion so that they can learn to fear the Lord and obey his law (Deut 31:12).<sup>3</sup> How the Israelites understood the “book of the law” must have provided a template in the way they read the Old Testament during its development until it reached its final form. Indeed, the biblical period is important when studying Old Testament ethics.

The goal of this survey, however, is modest. It briefly looks at the study of Old Testament ethics during the modern era beginning from the nineteenth century to the present, paying special attention to how it developed into an independent discipline and the key issues that have dominated scholarly discussion along with the underlying philosophical ideas informing the discussion.<sup>4</sup>

### **Biblical Ethics as an Independent Discipline**

Scholars have traditionally studied biblical ethics under the general umbrella of theology because they felt that ethics was the “practical application of theological truths.”<sup>5</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century, however, it slowly started drifting away from its theological moorings into becoming an independent discipline within biblical studies.<sup>6</sup> Why this drift took place is not entirely clear. However, Knight suggests three factors that may have contributed to this development.<sup>7</sup> First, ethicists started applying methods and models from social sciences, which are non-theological in nature, because they believed that moral action needed to be understood in the “total context of

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<sup>3</sup>See also Josh 1:8; 2 Kgs 22:1-20; Neh 8:1-18; Ps 1:1-3

<sup>4</sup>For a survey on the study of Old Testament ethics during other periods and the bibliography, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004): 387-440.

<sup>5</sup>Douglas A. Knight, “Old Testament Ethics,” *Christian Century* 99, no. 2 (1982): 56.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

human existence, that is, in light of all the individual, social and environmental factors affecting it.”<sup>8</sup>

Second, there was increasing willingness to deal with new moral questions, for example, in medicine, public policy and ecology, areas which are normally handled at the “institutional context where theological warrants for a specific ethical issue may not be honored.”<sup>9</sup> In discussing ethics, therefore, theological questions were avoided in order to be in line with the public mood especially in the West where there is emphasis on separation of religion and state. Third, there was a shift in self-understanding of the field of ethics. The task of an ethicist was seen as not merely describing what people ought to do and why but to include a philosophical analysis and description of how and why people actually act.

Regardless of the reasons biblical ethics drifted away from theology, there is now a general consensus that it “deserves to be treated as a distinct discipline within biblical studies, and that the subject should be studied on its own right and not subsumed under the broader category of “biblical theology.”<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding this consensus, the study of Old Testament ethics has proved to be a complex enterprise primarily due to methodological difficulties.<sup>11</sup>

### **Criteria for Old Testament Ethics**

The Old Testament is “neither an ethical treatise nor a handbook of morals”

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Eryl W. Davies, “The Bible in Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. J. W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 733; see also Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 659.

<sup>11</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 1; R. E. Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 107; Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 673-74; B. C. Birch and L. L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976); C. J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

that one can consult to find direction on how to deal with moral questions.<sup>12</sup> While ethics are observable in the text, relatively very few passages primarily focus on ethics.<sup>13</sup> The challenge that confronts an interpreter, then, is determining the criteria upon which a given passage can be understood to be providing ethical instruction.

This problem is less severe when working with legal codes, wisdom, and prophetic literature because they contain passages that explicitly or implicitly deal with ethical issues by way of prescription, comment or criticism. However, when it comes to narrative, which forms the bulk of the Old Testament, the situation becomes extremely difficult. The difficulty is mainly in connection with one important question. Does Old Testament narrative provide ethical teaching? If yes, in what way?

### **Pre-Critical Approach**

The pre-critical interpreters of the Old Testament answered the question in the affirmative. They treated the characters in the stories as heroes and heroines whose lives provided a model for behavior. There was, however, a problem. Although these men and women were inspiring because of their acts of courage, quality of character, and faith in God, they were at the same time found to be embarrassingly flawed. The gross “immoralities” attributed to them, for example, lying, murder, prostitution, adultery, slavery, polygamy and wars, left one wondering whether these characters were really intended to serve as role models. Worse still, the biblical text indicates that some of these actions, especially wars (Josh 1-11), were sanctioned by God. How was the interpreter to deal with the negative aspects of the characters in the narrative while at the same time continuing to hold that they were models of godly behavior?

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<sup>12</sup>Knight, “Old Testament Ethics,” 55; see also idem, “Introduction: Ethics, Ancient Israel, and the Hebrew Bible,” *Semeia* 66 (1994): 2; Wilson, “Sources and Methods in the Study of Ancient Israelite Ethics,” 56; John Barton, “Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament,” in *Beginning Old Testament Study*, ed. John Rogerson (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 124; Walter C. Kaiser, “New Approaches to Old Testament Ethics,” *JETS* 35, no. 3 (1992): 290.

<sup>13</sup>Knight, “Old Testament Ethics,” 56.

Some solutions were proposed.<sup>14</sup> First, Marcion and his followers avoided the problem by proposing that the Old Testament be done away with because its material did not have any value for the New Testament Church. Second, interpreters like Origen used the method of allegorical interpretation to find a deeper spiritual meaning in the text rather than the one that was apparent on the surface. This way, they were able to clean up the offensive behavior in the story. Third, ways were developed to defend biblical characters arguing that their conduct was sanctioned by God for a limited time and not something that was universally applicable. These explanations did not solve the problem because the interpreter either imposed his own meaning on the text or just explained away the embarrassing material. The obstacle to finding a workable solution was that the interpreter was not willing to abandon the old idea of seeing biblical characters as models of behavior to be emulated.

### **Historical-Critical Approach**

With the rise of historical-criticism, the discussion moved a different direction. “Israel’s morality was seen as historically conditioned, and the Hebrew Bible was interpreted as bearing witness to a gradual refining and modification of the people’s ethical understanding.”<sup>15</sup> The offensive material in the narrative was thought to represent a primitive form of morality which evolved into a more advanced and cultured form during the period of the classical prophets in ancient Israel. The primitive morality reflected in the narrative was, therefore, jettisoned in favor of the “advanced and cultured” one. The problem, however, is that it is not certain whether or not such evolution of morality took place considering that it is not described in the Old Testament.

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<sup>14</sup>This section depends on the review of Roland H. Bainton, “The Immoralities of the Patriarchs According to the Exegesis of the Late Middle Ages and of the Reformation,” *HTR* 23 (1930): 39-49; see also Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 212-14.

<sup>15</sup>Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 22.

The view of evolutionary development of Old Testament ethics lost influence with the decline of historical-criticism. In the recent past, new approaches for dealing with the problem of narrative as a resource for ethics have emerged.

### **Author-Centered Approach**

This approach is based on the assumption that the writer or redactor of each biblical book had a message he was communicating to his readers; the role of the interpreter is to discover it. Wenham, for example, uses historical, literary and rhetorical criticism to investigate the ethical teaching that the original author was communicating to his first readers.<sup>16</sup> Thus, he states the problem of narrative as follows:

In narrative it is often unclear whether the writer is making an ethical comment at all: he may be describing an action because it happened, or it was a link in a chain of events, which led to something significant. Furthermore, in those cases where narrative appear more than descriptive and seem to be offering ethical advice, it is often very difficult to be sure where the writer and his 'implied reader' stand ethically. We have difficulty determining their moral standpoint, so we often cannot be sure whether deeds recounted are meant to serve as examples to imitate or mistakes to avoid.<sup>17</sup>

As far as he is concerned, one must distinguish between the ethical stance of the writer and that of the characters within the story because the writer is not necessarily approving everything he is describing. The question then becomes, how can one determine the ethical standpoint of the writer? Barton says that biblical narrative does not provide sufficient information in order for one to determine the ethical views of the writer, his characters or even why he is telling the story.<sup>18</sup>

Wenham, however, thinks otherwise. He believes that one can discover the ethical teaching of a particular story, if he takes the outlook of the implied author as the

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<sup>16</sup>Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 2-3.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 1-2; see also John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Exploration* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 23-27.

<sup>18</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 25-26.

point of reference for interpreting the text. To this end, he proposes three criteria.<sup>19</sup> Before one concludes that the writer is treating the behavior pattern in a story as a virtue, he must make sure that the behavior is, first, repeated in a number of different contexts. Second, the behavior should be cast in a positive light within the context in which it appears. Third, the behavior must have support from the exhortations and comments in legal codes, psalms and wisdom books which often “shed light on the Old Testament attitude toward different virtues and vices.”<sup>20</sup>

The strength of Wenham’s approach is that it gives the writer a central place in the process of interpretation by seeking to discover his intent using conventional methods of interpreting literature, something that is lacking in some of the other recent studies of biblical ethics. Furthermore, he must be commended for breaking new ground. In the English-speaking world, he might be the first one who has seriously attempted to develop criteria for studying ethics in biblical narrative. However, the solution he offers is not satisfactory.

As he correctly cautions, the reader must be careful of the danger of generalization when using his criteria. The fact that a behavior is repeated in different contexts or is presented in a positive light does not necessarily mean that the writer is treating it as a virtue. Besides, the question still remains whether the purpose of biblical narrative is to offer ethical instruction.

### **Identity Formation Approach**

Another approach that is gaining popularity utilizes Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical theory on the role stories play in the shaping of individual and communal identity. According to this theory, human identity is made up of stories, that is, when

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<sup>19</sup>Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 88-89.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

someone thinks of himself he does so in story form. For this reason, identity seems to have a natural attraction to being shaped and molded by interaction with other stories, which can come in both oral and written form. So the very act of reading or listening to stories shapes one's personal identity by developing his moral capacities, that is, the ability to discern and make judgments about circumstances.

This theory has been popularized in the Old Testament especially by Bruce C. Birch.<sup>21</sup> Birch begins from the premise that the ethical life of a human being, as a moral agent, should be understood in terms of both "character and conduct, that is, identity and action." This way, the meaning of ethics is expanded to include the "ethics of being and the ethics of doing." The "ethics of being" relate to those traits of personal character and value that influence taking the right action. The expanded meaning of ethics, therefore, turns the entire canon into a resource for ethics, with narrative addressing the area of the ethics of being (identity).

Birch suggests three ways in which narrative texts function as moral resource.<sup>22</sup> First, stories capture the moral complexity of human life in its failure and triumph. The writers "often capture that complexity in ways that allow a reader, even centuries removed, to experience his or her own story intersected by the biblical story."<sup>23</sup> In other words, the reader can identify with the moral triumph and failure of the characters in these stories.

Second, the stories indicate that the Israelites were not living their moral life alone. God was in their midst, challenging them to live up to his defined standard and

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<sup>21</sup>Bruce C. Birch, "Ethical Approaches: The Story of David as Moral Tale," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009); for a more detailed treatment of this issue and bibliography, see idem, "Ethics in the OT," *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 2:338-48.

<sup>22</sup>Birch, "Ethical Approaches, 380-81.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 380.

holding them accountable while at the same time offering them renewal and redemption. “Some texts show leaders and people rising to the challenge to be God’s people in ways that are inspiring and encouraging to our best effort to be moral agents in the world.”<sup>24</sup> Third, narrative transforms and calls members of a faith community to a standard that is beyond the minimum requirement defined by the legal codes and wise teaching. Readers of these stories then begin to see new areas of moral requirement.

The identity formation approach has serious problems. First, it “promises more than it delivers.”<sup>25</sup> One needs to examine the few articles and books that have attempted to apply the approach to specific biblical texts and realize that the argument is not only convoluted, but nothing much is said in terms of ethics. In fact, it is not easy to tell whether what is being discussed is Old Testament ethics/theology, the history of Israelite religion or introduction to the literature of the Old Testament.

Second, the proponents of this approach seem to suggest that biblical stories have inherent power that can bring about transformation akin to salvation in the life of a reader, making him an obedient moral agent. If this were the case, one should be able to see some evidence of transformation in the Church considering the existence of abundant knowledge of biblical stories. Childs is correct when he says that one is not “saved by a text or a narrative, but by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in time and space.”<sup>26</sup>

Third, the approach ignores biblical evidence on how moral training was done in ancient Israel. The Old Testament teaches that moral training was conducted mainly within the family. For example, God chose Abraham so that he might “direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just,

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>J. W. Rogerson, “Old Testament Ethics,” in *Text in Context*, ed. A. D. H. Mayes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124.

<sup>26</sup>Childs, *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments*, 665.



so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen 18:19).

Also, Moses commands the Israelites,

These words which I am commanding you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deut 6:6-9)

Deuteronomy 6:6-9, in particular, indicates that the Israelites were to base moral training, not on stories, but on the Mosaic commandments.<sup>27</sup> However, it does not mean that stories were not important. Like any other society, the Israelites must have shared stories, especially those relating to the patriarchs and the exodus from Egypt. But the stories served the function of helping the Israelites to reflect on God’s wonderful works and deeds of salvation on their behalf.

Although Barton does not necessarily support the identity formation approach, he looks to biblical narrative as a resource for ethics. He argues that the “stories in the Hebrew bible do not exactly teach duties or virtues, yet do engage us existentially and can deeply inform our moral life.”<sup>28</sup> Following Nussbaum’s insight into Greek tragedy and modern novels,<sup>29</sup> he says that these stories are powerful tools for presenting moral truths, not through ethical injunctions, but rather, through giving “existential force” to those truths.<sup>30</sup> What he means by this is that biblical stories provide examples of how people lived in biblical times and, in doing so, provide the modern reader with warnings and encouragement on how he should order his moral life.

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<sup>27</sup>Wise sayings may also have played a role (Prov 1:1-7).

<sup>28</sup>John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 34.

<sup>29</sup>Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); idem, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>30</sup>Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 32.

## Theological Approach

Childs does not agree with those who find moral instruction in the narrative because “biblical narratives are not a collection of teachings on virtue, character and morality.”<sup>31</sup> He believes that biblical stories have two theological functions. First, the canonical process has given Old Testament biblical narrative a theological interpretation to illustrate God’s faithfulness to the patriarchs in fulfilling his promise to give them land and descendants. In fact, the theme of “promise and fulfillment” built into the narrative has glued together the stories from Abraham to Joshua thereby refocusing the role of the patriarchs as bearers of Israel’s hopes. Details about the embarrassing conduct of biblical characters have been pushed to the background.

This point is further supported by how these stories have been interpreted in the rest of the Old Testament.<sup>32</sup> Speaking of Abraham’s history, for example, the psalmist says in Psalm 105:12-15, “When they were few in numbers, of little account, and sojourners in it, wandering from nation to nation ... he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, ‘touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm.’” This passage, which most likely alludes to Abraham passing off his wife to Abimelech as his sister in Genesis 20, gives the story a theocentric interpretation and completely ignores the ethical difficulty that often troubles the modern mind. Childs says, “Everything that happened ... has been encompassed within the rubric of God’s wonderful works and his mighty deeds of salvation.”<sup>33</sup>

The second way biblical narrative plays a theological function is related to Genesis 15:6. Childs believes that this passage provides a programmatic interpretation for both the Old and New Testaments, in that, it indicates the basis upon which an individual

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<sup>31</sup>Childs, *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments*, 679; see also Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 28-50.

<sup>32</sup>See for example Pss 105-106; Neh 6; Dan 9.

<sup>33</sup>Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, 214.

is declared righteous (Gal 3:6). Abraham, for instance, is righteous on the basis of his faith in the promise of God and not because of any accomplishment either by way of sacrifice or acts of obedience.<sup>34</sup> According to Childs, therefore, the biblical record neither presents the biblical figures as models of ethical behavior nor offers any apologetic to mitigate their moral inadequacy.

### **Realistic Approach**

Wright takes a realistic approach.<sup>35</sup> He argues that Old Testament figures are sinners like everyone else. When they are presented as heroes and heroines in Hebrews 11, for example, what is being commended is their faith in the promises and power of God and not every aspect of their conduct. The accounts about these individuals “describe what simply happened, not necessarily what was approved by the writers or by God. We easily make the mistake of thinking that just because a story is in the Bible, it must ‘somehow be what God wanted.’”<sup>36</sup>

Wright does not treat the characters in biblical narrative as models of ethical behavior. However, he suggests that their conduct should be measured against the explicit ethical teaching of the rest of the Old Testament. He says that biblical stories are meant to “challenge us to wonder at the amazing grace and patience of the God who continues to work out his purpose through such morally compromised people, and to be discerning as we evaluate their conduct ethically according to the standards that Old Testament itself provides.”<sup>37</sup> One should, therefore, avoid the temptation to sanitize them by excusing or defending their morally outrageous conduct.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 218-20; idem, *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments*, 679-80.

<sup>35</sup>C. J. H. Wright, “Ethics,” in *Dictionary of Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 259-68.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 267.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

Looking at the proposed approaches, none of them can adequately explain the relationship of narrative and ethics. However, a combination of the “author-centered,” “theological,” and “realistic” approaches might be a reasonable beginning point in searching for a solution. But one should still heed Bruckner’s warning against moralizing “narrative without reference to God’s deeds. The focus of the narrative is on God’s actions, and moralizing them may miss the point altogether.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Diversity and Unity**

For a long time, biblical ethicists have struggled with the problem of diversity in the Old Testament.<sup>39</sup> One of the issues on which they do not agree is the definition of “diversity.” Wilson says that for some “diversity” refers to the “diverse sorts of biblical material that play a role in ethical discussion.”<sup>40</sup> For others, however, it refers not just to the different biblical materials but to the “diverse even conflicting ethical views and beliefs contained in the text.”

According to the latter view, the Old Testament does not contain a common ethical orthodoxy that is binding on the entire nation of ancient Israel. What one finds is a plurality of ethical beliefs that include every form of conduct whether it is commended, condemned or merely described. Moreover, the ethical views espoused by the biblical writers are contradictory. Because of this diversity and contradiction, treating Old Testament ethics systematically as a unified whole is impossible.

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<sup>38</sup>J. K. Bruckner, “Ethics,” in *The Dictionary of Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 233; see also C. Westerman, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

<sup>39</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 15-16; 162-63; idem, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 5-6; For a discussion of the problem in Old Testament Theology, see D. A. Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology,” in *Collected Writings on Scripture*, comp. Andrew David Naselli (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 111-50; J. Goldingay, “Diversity and Unity in Old Testament Theology,” *VT* 34 (1984): 153-68; idem, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); J.G. McConville, “Using Scripture for Theology: Unity and Diversity in Old Testament Theology,” *SBET* 5 (1987): 39-57.

<sup>40</sup>Wilson, “Sources and Methods in the Study of Ancient Israelite Ethics,” 61.

This understanding of diversity in the biblical text can be traced back to the Enlightenment when historical criticism emerged as a method of biblical interpretation.<sup>41</sup> Although the method has provided biblical studies with great benefits, it has limitations. Its application in biblical interpretation has tended to fragment the text such that the exegete is more concerned with the meaning of the pieces rather than the whole.<sup>42</sup>

Talking about historical criticism, Hoffmeier says,

Scholarly investigation of the past century has been preoccupied with identifying literary threads or strands (that is, sources), thus missing the design of the fabric, which was there all along. To use another metaphor, scholars were so bent on looking at the trees that they missed the forest.<sup>43</sup>

This approach explains why some find a plurality of views and/or contradiction in the biblical text even where none exists. For example, Barton believes that the instruction concerning the issue of intermarriage between the Israelites and foreigners is contradictory.<sup>44</sup> He says that whereas in Nehemiah 13:23-27, the Israelites are strongly condemned for intermarrying with foreigners, in the book of Ruth, a Moabite woman is praised for marrying an Israelite and becoming an ancestor of King David. He then says, “Anyone who wants to treat the biblical text as an absolute authority will have problems in deciding which line of thought is to be followed in this matter.”<sup>45</sup>

Barton is clearly wrong because he ignores the reason why the Israelites were prohibited from marrying foreigners. The Israelites had been commanded in Deuteronomy 7:3-4: “Do not intermarry with them [nations]. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from

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<sup>41</sup>Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,” 112.

<sup>42</sup>Birch, “Old Testament Narrative and Moral Address,” 84-85.

<sup>43</sup>James Karl Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), 14.

<sup>44</sup>Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 6.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you." The emphasis here is not on the issue of ethnicity per se, for the Old Testament teaches that the "nations" were ultimately going to experience God's blessings (Gen 12:3). Rather, the prohibition is based on the danger of idolatry these marriages would pose to the relationship between Israel and God.

In Nehemiah 13:23-27 the post-exilic community is trying at all cost to make sure that it does not repeat the mistakes that led to the exile in the first place. Intermarrying with foreigners whose allegiance is owed to other gods poses a danger of drawing away the hearts of the Israelites from the living God as it had happened in the case of Solomon. However, in the book of Ruth there is a woman who, by her own confession, seems either to have already converted to the Israelite faith or was strongly considering it. She tells her mother-in-law, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Here, the danger behind prohibiting the Israelites from intermarrying with foreigners does not exist.

The above discussion demonstrates that there is no contradiction between these two passages and that Barton's is the kind of superficial reading of the text that produces contradictions even where none exists. If one does a "proper exegesis" of the canonical document, as Kaiser advises, he will discover that the problem of diversity and contradiction is not as serious as it is supposed.<sup>46</sup>

Another issue that should be considered is whether Old Testament ethics with its diverse features has a central theme or key concept by which it can be understood as a single entity or by which it can be organized systematically.<sup>47</sup> The answer to this question

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<sup>46</sup>Kaiser, "New Approaches to Old Testament Ethics," 292: "Much of the problem of diversity ... is not a problem of internal contradiction of the text or the divine mind. It is instead a matter of proper exegesis and sorting out the descriptive sections of poor human responses to the lofty claims and challenges of the divine."

<sup>47</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 16: "In many ways the problems raised by an 'Ethics of the Old Testament' are the same as those raised by a 'Theology of the Old Testament': the title itself will tend to beg the question how much of a unity of approach is to be found in the Old Testament – whether it has a 'core' or a unifying principle"; see also Kaiser, "New Approaches to Old Testament Ethics," 289-97.

largely depends on the perspective the scholar brings to biblical interpretation. Those who believe that the Old Testament contains conflicting and incoherent views on ethics do not expect to find any such unity. For example, Barton says that any presentation of Old Testament ethics as a unified whole is an “artificial construct, which purchases coherence and system at the price of historical objectivity and verifiability.”<sup>48</sup>

However, there are some, especially those from the conservative wing, who believe that there is a unity to Old Testament ethics<sup>49</sup> and, therefore, seek to find a central theme that unites it. Some of the proposed themes include “covenant”<sup>50</sup> and “the character, will, word, and work of God.”<sup>51</sup> While these are important themes, Birch correctly says that none of them is broad enough to encompass “the wide range of moral witness in the Old Testament.”<sup>52</sup> However, his own proposal, namely, “will, activity and character of God”<sup>53</sup> does not advance the search for a solution because it merely rephrases Kaiser’s.

In view of the foregoing, one wonders whether struggling to search for a single word or a phrase as a central theme around which one can organize the ethical teaching of the Old Testament might be a worthwhile exercise or is even possible. This conclusion, however, does not support those who claim that the Bible is contradictory or its ethical teachings do not have any unity. The minimum that can be said is that Old Testament

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<sup>48</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 15-16; 162-63.

<sup>49</sup>Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 676-77; Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 29-38; idem, “New Approaches to Old Testament Ethics,” 292; Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 41-42.

<sup>50</sup>Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, Old Testament Library, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

<sup>51</sup>Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 38; he, however, organizes a large section of his book around the theme of the holiness of God.

<sup>52</sup>Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 37.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 37-43. In fact, Bruce may have been one of the earliest to make the proposal (W. S. Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909]).

ethics finds its unity in God who has given instructions on how the Israelites should behave in the various areas of life. The study of Old Testament ethics, therefore, should seek to find out what the Bible says about a given area of conduct.

### **Methodology**

One of the important questions that scholars continue to grapple with relates to methodology. How should Old Testament ethics be understood? Is it about how the Israelites actually behaved or how they should have behaved? How does one conduct the inquiry? Is it by studying the biblical text or the social world of the bible? Scholars have answered these questions in two ways.<sup>54</sup> One way was to limit the ethical inquiry to the Hebrew Bible. Since the Enlightenment to the 1970s, ethicists used the historical-critical exegesis to uncover Old Testament ethical teaching. This approach took the biblical text as the point of departure and interpreted it in terms of its prehistory, especially its literary development, the intentions of its authors and redactors and the historical world to which it referred.

Scholars often followed Wellhausen's prevailing evolutionary model for understanding the religion and literature of ancient Israel.<sup>55</sup> The Old Testament ethics was studied as a history of ancient Israel's ethical advancement from primitive to more enlightened ethical values.<sup>56</sup> The picture that emerged was that "early Israel shared at first a rather low sense of morality akin to its Canaanite neighbors, which was greatly refined

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<sup>54</sup>Knight, "Introduction: Ethics, Ancient Israel, and the Hebrew Bible," 1-5.

<sup>55</sup>Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black (Edinburgh: A & C Black, 1885).

<sup>56</sup>J. B. Mozley, *Ruling Ideas in Early Ages* (London: Longmans Press, 1900); H. G. Mitchell, *The Ethics of the Old Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1912); J. M. P. Smith, *The Moral Life of the Hebrews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923); Johannes Hempel, *Das Ethos des Alten Testaments*, BZAW 67 (Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1938). See a summary of Hempel's work in "Ethics in the Old Testament," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 153-61; Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, Old Testament Library, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).



by the ethical ‘monotheism’ of the classical prophets, only to be severely eroded during the post-exilic period by the encroaching legalism of Judaism.”<sup>57</sup>

Some of the most influential scholars during this period were Hempel and Eichrodt.<sup>58</sup> According to Hempel, Old Testament ethics developed from the moral traditions of different social groups (e.g., nomads, peasants, and urban dwellers) that comprised the society of ancient Israel. The intermingling of these traditions with influences from pre-Israelite and extra-Israelite (Canaanite) traditions along with their covenant faith in Yahweh, resulted in the formation of Old Testament ethics.<sup>59</sup> For his part, Eichrodt traces the development of Old Testament ethics back to a time when early Israel had popular morality consisting of the “rules of conduct which proceeded from the natural impulse of community and self-preservation.”<sup>60</sup>

This early moral consciousness was transformed by two factors. The first one was the Sinaitic covenant which introduced ethical norms that greatly diminished the influence of “popular morality.” The rules of conduct were, now, not seen as based on “natural impulse,” but on the revealed will of Yahweh. Second, the emergence of the classical prophets brought the development of Israel’s morality to the climax. Arising out of their experience of God, the prophets portrayed the sovereign divine will as authority for good, to which a person should willingly submit without fear. Also, they expanded the obedience to the ethical norms to include a person’s internal attitudes. With time, this ethic suffered erosion from the remnant of an earlier “popular morality” and post-exilic

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<sup>57</sup>Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 674; see also Davies, “The Bible in Ethics,” 732; see also Magne Sæbø, *On the Way to Canon: Creative Tradition History in the Old Testament*. JSOTSup 191 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 162-81; Rogerson, “Old Testament Ethics,” 120.

<sup>58</sup>Hempel, *Das Ethos des Alten Testaments*, 153-61; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2: 316-79.

<sup>59</sup>Hempel, “Ethics in the Old Testament,” 157.

<sup>60</sup>Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 319.

legalism.<sup>61</sup> Although Hempel and Eichdrot approached their work from different angles, they were united by two things; that Old Testament ethics followed a linear historical development and that it constituted a single ethic that applied normatively to the whole society of ancient Israel.

As the influence of the historical-criticism in biblical studies began to wane in the 1970s, new methods emerged. Some biblical scholars started insisting on reading the canonical text in its finished form thereby moving away from emphasis on the questions of its “prehistory.” The main interest now was to find out what the Old Testament, as a book forming part of Christian Scripture, had to say about ethical issues. This approach is represented by the works of Childs, Kaiser, Birch, and Wright.<sup>62</sup>

There was a sea change in the study of Old Testament ethics in 1978 when John Barton published his seminal article, “Understanding Old Testament Ethics,”<sup>63</sup> in which he radically shifted the focus of study from primarily the biblical text to the social world behind the text.<sup>64</sup> He mounted a strong attack against the works of Hempel and Eichrodt on two fronts. First, he thought they were mistaken for suggesting that the Old

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<sup>61</sup>Note that this linear development view is also represented in a recent work by Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994).

<sup>62</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); idem, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*; idem, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*; Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*; Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*; Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*; C. J. Wright, *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1983); idem, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Leicester: Appolos, 1995); idem, *Old Testament for the People of God*.

<sup>63</sup>John Barton, “Understanding the Old Testament Ethics,” *JSOT* 9 (1978): 44-64; reproduced in his book *Understanding the Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003): 15-31. Hereinafter, any citation in connection with this article will be based on the book.

<sup>64</sup>Barton, *Understanding the Old Testament Ethics*, 23. He begins from the premise that the “morality of any reasonably complex nation can only be reconstructed by attending to differences of social groups.” For further discussion on the sociological approach, see Knight, “Introduction: Ethics, Ancient Israel, and the Hebrew Bible,” 4-5; Wilson, “Sources and Methods in the Study of Ancient Israelite Ethics,” 55-57. It is important to note that the Sociological approach is an offshoot from the Historical-Critical Method.

Testament had a single ethic that was recognized by the entire society of ancient Israel. He wondered what was meant by “Israel” or whether the ethic they were talking about was adhered to by all or most ancient Israelites or by the Old Testament writers or supported by the Old Testament taken as a canonical text.<sup>65</sup>

As far as Barton was concerned, the Old Testament indicates that the Israelites were not a monolithic group that held to a uniform system of ethical beliefs. For example, the prophetic literature indicates that some Israelites appear to have held to “popular morality” which was sometimes in agreement with the views of the prophets and other times it was in conflict with them. He says, “The Old Testament is evidence for, not conterminous with, the life and thought of ancient Israel; Old Testament writers may at times state or imply positions which were the common currency of ancient Israelites, but they may also propound novel, or controversial or minority positions.”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, it was wrong to assume that the ethical views expressed by the writers of the Old Testament were always typical of the entire society of ancient Israel.

The second problem Barton found with the works of Hempel and Eichrodt was that they lacked “sociological depth.”<sup>67</sup> He questioned Hempel, in particular, for attempting to trace the diachronic development of Israelite morality due to the intermingling of the traditions of different groups thereby ignoring the reality of the “*contemporaneous* existence of different social groups in any society” (emphasis is original). Moreover, Hempel was wrong in asking the question as to what ethical norms the Old Testament imposed upon these groups rather than asking what each social group thought was incumbent upon itself. Barton, then, proposed a pluralistic approach to the study of Old Testament ethics that focuses on the social world of ancient Israel by taking

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<sup>65</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 16.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

into account the existence of different social groups at different periods, each “potentially capable of holding to a somewhat different set of moral norms.”<sup>68</sup>

This proposal has serious implications for understanding Israel’s society, literature and morality. First, it introduces the idea that the society of Israel was pluralistic like Western societies in terms of the diversity of social groups and ethical viewpoints. And since biblical writers formed one of the social groups, their ethical viewpoints should not be taken as either orthodoxy or as representative of the morality of the entire society.<sup>69</sup> Second, ethical truth was relative because each social group freely determined its moral norm independent of external influence and, as such, no social group could claim to possess superior morality that should be observed by the others. Third, morality of the individual social groups was not a static or timeless truth, for it changed from time to time. So in this one article, Barton introduced into the study of Old Testament ethics a radical view, namely, that the morality of ancient Israel was characterized by pluralism and relativism which was always in a state of flux.<sup>70</sup>

To understand the thinking of Barton, one needs to bear in mind two important developments in the West in 1970s that had a great impact on the field of biblical studies. The first one was the emergence of postmodernism as a dominant force both in academic circles and mainstream culture. Postmodernism strongly challenged modernity’s belief in reason as a means of gaining knowledge, along with the possibility of discovering objective meaning in a literary text. This challenge shook the very foundation of the historical-criticism that had controlled biblical studies for a period of over two hundred years.

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>69</sup>On this point, he confesses that his ideas have been influenced by Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 13-18.

<sup>70</sup>Childs disagrees: “There is a unity within the divine will and a continuity within the tradition. Nowhere does the Old Testament itself ever suggest that God demanded one thing at one period which was repudiated in another” (Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 676-77).

The ensuing turbulence led to the emergence of a multiplicity of methods for interpreting a text, and each was considered to be valid as long as one was able to sell it. With regard to culture, postmodernism suggested that society was centerless because it consisted of many distinct social groups each having its own religious and ethical beliefs. So postmodernism introduced into the Western societies the twin aspects of pluralism and relativism.

The other development that took place in the 1970s was the increasing use of the theories and models of social sciences in biblical interpretation. Although findings from social sciences were previously used by biblical scholars, they were only used to provide the background to the text. This was probably the first time when the theories and models used in these disciplines were applied to biblical interpretation leading to the rise of social-scientific criticism as a distinct method.

In view of the foregoing, postmodern worldview and the sociological theories and models seem to have greatly influenced Barton's views of the social organization and morality of ancient Israel. Indeed, he was as much a product of his time as were Hempel and Eichrodt whom he was criticizing. What is surprising, however, is how quickly his views became influential and virtually uncontested orthodoxy within the study of Old Testament ethics considering how they are reflected in all the works that apply the social-scientific approach. Considering the current dominance of the socio-scientific approach, one should ask whether it is appropriate for the study of Old Testament ethics. The answer to this question is negative because the approach is fatally flawed.<sup>71</sup>

First, it relies heavily on the theories and models of social sciences which,

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<sup>71</sup>For further discussion on the weaknesses of the sociological approach to biblical interpretation, see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 175-79; Robert R. Wilson, "Reflections on Social-Scientific Criticism," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 515-17; Rainer Albertz, "Social History of Ancient Israel," in *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel*, ed. H. G. M. Williamson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 347-68.

when applied to a comparative study of two or more societies, produces inappropriate generalization. Generalization in social sciences arises mainly from the basic assumption in the sociological theory which states that, in given circumstances, certain developments tend to occur, other things being equal.<sup>72</sup> In other words, when societies are exposed to certain circumstances, they undergo similar sociological developments thereby exhibiting common general characteristics.<sup>73</sup> The implication from this assumption is that societies are the same. And a sociological model developed on the basis of evidence from one society can be applied to another society, say ancient Israel, without serious problems. Is this assumption correct?

Martin, a sociologist, does not think so. He says that “other things are never equal” in societies because universal processes operate differently according to the complex in which they operate.<sup>74</sup> These universal processes are normally influenced by historical and geographical factors which give each society its own unique character.<sup>75</sup> That this is the correct view is not difficult to demonstrate. If a comparison is conducted between two contemporary societies, one from the Western hemisphere and the other one from Africa,<sup>76</sup> it would show that the two societies are different both in terms of social organization and worldview. Although those societies may share certain basic human

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<sup>72</sup>Cyril S. Rodd, “On Applying A Sociological Theory to Biblical Studies,” in *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism: A Sheffield Reader*, ed. David J. Chalcraft, The Biblical Seminar 47 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 33. Rodd has borrowed this idea from David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 2-3: “The general theory states that in circumstances X this or that  $\gamma$  development tends to occur, or ... in the complex of historical circumstances  $a, b, c$ , a development  $p, q, r$  tends to occur ... other things being equal.”

<sup>73</sup>This might explain why sociologists test their hypotheses by ignoring the unique features of the object of study and instead concentrate on general characteristics. For a fuller discussion on this issue and bibliography, see Robert R. Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1948), 12-16, 28; see also Cyril S. Rodd, “Max Weber and Ancient Judaism,” *SJT* 32 (1979): 466-69.

<sup>74</sup>David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization*, 2-3; see also Rodd, “On Applying A Sociological Theory to Biblical Studies,” 33.

<sup>75</sup>Rodd, “On Applying a Sociological Theory to Biblical Studies,” 33.

<sup>76</sup>I have had the opportunity to live in both societies.

characteristics, they are not the same. If contemporary societies are not the same, it is difficult to see how a modern society can be the same as ancient Israel. Rodd is correct when he says that there is a gulf separating an ancient from a modern society and, as such, it would be “inappropriate to apply the broader generalization of sociological theory to the Old Testament record.”<sup>77</sup>

Another point often ignored is that sociological theories and models have been developed based on the scholars’ understanding of the nature and functioning of society. And since these scholars are mostly from the Western hemisphere, their understanding is obviously colored by Western thought and experiences. Unfortunately, they erroneously assume that “Western experience is typical of all societies, including ancient Near Eastern and village-based societies.”<sup>78</sup> Barton and his followers make a serious mistake when they take a model based on a Western pluralistic society and impose it on ancient Israel.

To be able to develop an appropriate model for understanding the social organization and morality of ancient Israel, one should look elsewhere and not to the West. Mojola suggests that a good example should be Africa because an African society represents “a simple agrarian, peasant, [and] traditional”<sup>79</sup> lifestyle which is closer to the social world of the Bible. For his part, Paris suggests a model based on ancient Greek society. He advises that in order to gain a proper understanding of the morality of ancient

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<sup>77</sup>Rodd, *Max Weber and Ancient Judaism*, 466-67.

<sup>78</sup>Herion, “The Impact of Modern and Social Science Assumptions on the Reconstruction of Israelite History,” 79-80; Rogerson, “Old Testament Ethics,” 120; Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament*, 5-6; Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as Way of Life,” *AJS* 44 (1938): 23; Mojola, “The Social Sciences and the Study of the Old Testament in Africa,” 90; Mark Daniel Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos: Prophetic Poetics in Latin American Perspectives*, JSOTSup 132 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 34-35; J. M. Sasson, “On Choosing Models for Recreating Israelite Pre-Monarchic History,” *JSOT* 21 (1981): 8-17; J. A. Dearman, “Hebrew Prophecy and Social Criticism,” *PRS* 9 (1982): 131-43.

<sup>79</sup>Aloo Osotsi Mojola, “The Social Sciences and the Study of the Old Testament in Africa: Some Methodological Considerations,” in *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa*, Bible and Theology in Africa, vol. 2, ed. Mary Getui, Knut Holter and Victor Zinkurature (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 97.

Israel, one should ask pre-industrial questions.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, he cites Aristotle's reflection on morality as a good example on how to go about it. Although the Greeks are not similar to the Hebrews in terms of culture, they are at least closer in terms of time-frame. However, he quickly warns that "categories and questions stemming from another society of the pre-industrial world, even if it is a society that existed in a chronological and spatial proximity to ancient Israel, can be as foreign to Israel"<sup>81</sup> as the modern way of thinking.

Being aware of this danger, some Western scholars claim to have developed a "body of theory and methods for studying pre-industrial societies and groups foreign to the cultures of the modern researcher."<sup>82</sup> This effort has, however, not yielded positive results because they often end up mischaracterizing contemporary non-Western societies. The reason for this mischaracterization is that they are approaching their research through Western worldview. Mojola wonders how these scholars can confidently claim that they are able to properly represent the social world of ancient Israel when the result from their own research has rendered inaccurate judgment of a contemporary society.<sup>83</sup> Paris' advice is worth noting:

It seems axiomatic to me that explanatory categories of a people's moral life should be developed wholly from within their own world view. Consequently, the importation of categories from other cultures or disciplines should be strictly avoided so as to minimize the likelihood of either distortion or neglect.<sup>84</sup>

The second problem with the socio-scientific approach is that it is difficult to

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<sup>80</sup>Peter J. Paris, "An Ethicist's Concerns about Biblical Ethics," *Semeia* 66 (1994): 173-79.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 176-77.

<sup>82</sup>Elliot, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 15.

<sup>83</sup>Mojola, "The Social Sciences and the Study of the Old Testament in Africa, 95: "If the western academy can be so wrong in its understanding, appraisal, and judgment of non-western societies and peoples which or who are synchronic with it, is it possible for them to be so correct in their understanding of the social world of ancient Israel which is not only non-western and non-European but also so distantly removed from it in time, i.e. diachronically, the use of social-scientific tools notwithstanding?"

<sup>84</sup>Paris, "An Ethicist's Concerns about Biblical Ethics," 174.



apply the methodology of social sciences to the study of a society that no longer exists. The reason is that whereas it is possible to study a contemporary society by testing hypothesis using data collected by observing and interviewing people first hand, it is not possible in the case of an ancient society for which the scholar has to rely on “only fossilized evidence that has been preserved by chance or for purposes very different from that of the sociologist.”<sup>85</sup> This fact makes it difficult not only to confirm the veracity of the findings from such a study but it also puts into question the very idea that the study is scientific. Rodd is probably correct when he says that “historical sociology is impossible.”<sup>86</sup>

Third, the Bible which is the main, if not the only, source on the society of ancient Israel does not provide sufficient information to help in reconstructing its sociology.<sup>87</sup> Those who use the social-scientific approach never stop to ask why this is the case. Even a casual examination of the Old Testament would reveal that biblical writers and/or redactors are primarily interested in religion rather than sociology. Rodd says, “The Old Testament consists solely of religious texts, even though a number of them are also historical narrative and many contain allusions to society. Not merely is it a selection from a much larger literature, which once existed, but at no point does it specifically describe the institutions of Israel.”<sup>88</sup> Along the same lines, Childs says that the “canonical process very often blurs the original context [and] removes the evidence of specific historical groupings originally involved.”<sup>89</sup> Albertz sums it up as follows:

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<sup>85</sup>Rodd, “On Applying a Sociological Theory to Biblical Studies,” 33.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>Wilson, “Ethics: Sociological Aspects of Ancient Israelite Ethics,” 195-96; see also Rogerson, “Old Testament Ethics,” 119; Richard Coggins, “The Old Testament and the Poor,” *ExpTim* 99 (1987-88): 11-14; Carrol, *Contexts for Amos*, 162.

<sup>88</sup>Rodd, “Max Weber and Ancient Judaism,” 467-68; see also Davies, “The Bible in Ethics,” 733.

<sup>89</sup>Childs, *Biblical Theology in the Old and New Testaments*, 678.

Being aware that there is currently no empirical data of statistical significance available from the society of ancient Israel (nor will there ever be), we cannot use a sociological model for the purpose of predicting certain events. A sociological model employed in an historical context can only have heuristic value for a better understanding of events, social relations, and behaviour, which are otherwise verified by historical sources. On its basis alone, one can never postulate that a specific event or development must have taken place because it should have happened according to the sociological theory .... Thus, any endeavour to reconstruct a societal development according to a sociological or anthropological model without using as much historical data as possible, be it from textual, iconographic or archaeological sources, is very risky.<sup>90</sup>

Barton is aware of this fact and acknowledges that even Weber and de Vaux, two eminent scholars who have written extensively on ancient Israel, have not described the sociology of Israel.<sup>91</sup> If this is the case, one wonders on what basis he is confident that ancient Israel was a pluralistic society with relative moralities? Care should be taken not to expect or force the Bible to say what it was not written to say.

Fourth, due to the fragmentary nature of biblical sources, the scholar is forced to engage in the exercise of reconstruction in order to come up with the character and the morality of each individual social group. The problem is that more often than not the result is speculative and not what the canonical text says.<sup>92</sup> Wright says that the “further such reconstruction takes us away from the narrative of the canonical text itself, the more we have to ask whether we are observing the ethics of the reconstructors or the reconstructed and whether either truly reflects the ethics of the actual Israelites.”<sup>93</sup>

Fifth, the social-scientific approach bases the study of Old Testament ethics on the actual behavior of ancient Israelites so that every form of conduct is included even though it is condemned by the text. McKeating, however, warns against confusing the ethics of ancient Israelite society with Old Testament ethics, a theological construction,

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<sup>90</sup>Albertz, “Social History of Ancient Israel,” 352.

<sup>91</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 23.

<sup>92</sup>Pleins, who uses the social-scientific approach in his massive work, admits twice that this approach is speculative (see J. David Pleins, *Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], 6, 10).

<sup>93</sup>Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 443.

which should be pursued based on the biblical text:

The ethics of the Old Testament and the ethics of ancient Israelite society do not necessarily coincide, and the latter may not be represented altogether accurately by the former. Old Testament ethics is a theological construction, a set of rules, ideals and principles theologically motivated. Throughout and in large part religiously sanctioned .... There are grounds for separating the two projects.<sup>94</sup>

Sixth, the social-scientific approach minimizes or totally ignores the theological dimension of a biblical text. This is demonstrated by the work of Wayne A. Meeks<sup>95</sup> in New Testament scholarship, which is normally cited by Old Testament scholars<sup>96</sup> as the best model on the application of this approach. However, when one examines Meeks' work, it is clear that his explanation of the moral world of early Christians is purely naturalistic. In his analysis of 1 Thessalonians, for example, he attributes the Christian conversion to "re-socialization" whereas Paul attributes it to the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>97</sup> It would be a big mistake to separate Old Testament ethics

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<sup>94</sup>Henry McKeating, "Sanctions Against Adultery in Ancient Israelite Society, With some Reflection on Methodology in the Study of Old Testament Ethics," *JSOT* 11 (1979): 70-71. Of course, the study of the actual behavior of ancient Israelite may be fascinating and should certainly be pursued in order to add to the stock of human knowledge. But the findings should not be treated as Old Testament ethics.

<sup>95</sup>Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); idem, "The Hermeneutics of Social," *HTR* 79 (1986): 176-86; idem *The Moral World of Early Christians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986); idem, "Understanding Early Christian Ethics," *JBL* 105 (1986): 3-11; idem, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>96</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 174: "It is important that Old Testament scholars take account of the style of ethical study pioneered by Wayne Meeks in New Testament scholarship and ask about the 'moral world' of the Israelite thinkers and writers to whom we owe the Old Testament as well as the moral world of those on whose moral standards and achievements they were commenting." On p. 195, Barton cites A. Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) as an example of how Meeks' approach could be implemented in the Old Testament studies; see also Wilson, "Ethics in Conflict: Sociological Aspects of Ancient Israelites Ethics," 195. Wilson, however, sees difficulties in applying Meeks' approach to the investigation of the moral world of ancient Israel (see his reasons on pp. 195-96).

<sup>97</sup>For a strong criticism against Meeks' work, see Childs. *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 676. Regarding the Old Testament ethics he says, "The task of the Old Testament ethics is to acknowledge this canonical corpus as theological construct which is only indirectly related to an historical and empirical Israel, and to pursue rigorously the theological witness of this biblical witness as the privileged sacred writings of Israel, the people of God." see also Rodd, "On Applying A Sociological Theory to Biblical Studies," 32: "One does not need to adopt a thoroughgoing canonical criticism approach to see that what we possess are documents written from faith to faith and preserved within the circle of believers."

from theology because theology both validates and provides content to the moral teachings.<sup>98</sup>

Elliot is aware of the charge that the sociological approach does not entertain theology in its analysis of data. But he says that the problem is not with the approach itself, but with the hermeneutical presuppositions that the interpreter brings to the exegetical process.<sup>99</sup> As far as he is concerned, theology and social sciences should play complementary roles in the interpretation of the bible. What Elliot is suggesting is an ideal, but in reality it rarely works. Herion says that although the interdisciplinary activity is supposed to work like a ‘two-way street,’ the desire to be scientific leads to a situation where the ‘two-way street’ carries mainly ‘one-way traffic’ from the social sciences into historical studies, but not vice versa. As a result, biblical studies sometimes witnesses uncritical ... use of social-sciences models and theories.”<sup>100</sup>

In view of the foregoing reasons, Otto is correct when he says that “a social-scientific and deconstructionist approach cannot suffice to write an ethics of the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>101</sup> This conclusion does not mean that social sciences are not important. They can be used in biblical interpretation, but in a way which allows the text’s own words and meanings to be in control of the exegetical process.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup>James M. Gustafson, “The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study,” *Interpretation* 24, no. 4 (1970): 431: “For the people of the bible, morality was not separated from religion in the way that it has been both in theory and in practice in later developments; ethics was not separated from theology. God and his relations to men and the world were conceived in moral terms, as well as in other terms, and this makes theology an integral part of biblical ethics”; see also Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 676; Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments*, 10.

<sup>99</sup>Elliot, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?*, 88-91; see also Robin Scroggs, “Sociology and the New Testament,” *JRC* 21 (1986), 140.

<sup>100</sup>Herion, “The Impact of Modern and Social Science Assumptions on the Reconstruction of Israelite History,” 83.

<sup>101</sup>Otto, “Of Aims and Methods in Hebrew Bible Ethics,” 165-66.

<sup>102</sup>Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament*, 29.

## Relevance of Old Testament Ethics

By far, the most controversial issue in the study of Old Testament ethics is whether these ancient biblical documents are relevant today. If yes, in what way? What puts a modern reader off is when he finds in the bible actions, customs and perspectives that are morally offensive and objectionable by modern standards. For example, the Old Testament contains many cases of slavery, polygamy, genocide and denigration of women that are presented in a way suggesting that they are a normal part of society. Is one to understand that the writers of the biblical texts are in favor of or promoting these practices? Or what is one to do with the situations in which the Old Testament allows for a death penalty not only when homicide has been committed but also in cases of homosexuality, adultery, cursing of parents and blasphemy? In short, to what extent, if any, is the morality of the Old Testament applicable to the contemporary moral and social issues?

Some see the Old Testament as “time-bound,”<sup>103</sup> applying only to the culture in which it was produced. While others find in it timeless ethical rules, principles and paradigms that are applicable to every age.<sup>104</sup> In the middle are those who take a “progressive” approach in which, while recognizing the fact that the Hebrew bible is a document produced by an ancient society, they try to look for ways its message can be adjusted to conform to modern beliefs and perspectives.

Knight begins by noting that the Bible has often been exploited to support slavery and denigration of women or to provide simple answers to such issues as homosexuality, abortion and capital punishment. To avoid this kind of manipulation whereby texts are selectively used on a particular moral issue and to respect the cultural differences between the modern age and antiquity, he suggests that the “accent in

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<sup>103</sup>Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 1-18.

<sup>104</sup>Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*.

appropriation should perhaps fall much more on the fundamental values in biblical ethics than on the specific moral norms and directives that we meet on the surface level of the text.”<sup>105</sup> Such values as affirmation of life, human fulfillment, good relationships, and prudent living should be applied in new and creative ways in every generation. How these values are translated into norms for today’s moral issues will depend on the “particular historical exigencies and social possibilities in our age,” such that, the resulting moral norms might differ from one historical situation to another.

While Knight is right on his assessment that the Bible has been manipulated in the past to support exploitation and oppression, it is dubious to draw a distinction between the explicit moral teaching of a text and its underlying moral value, and to try to create a new moral norm from the latter which is then applied to a contemporary moral issue. One wonders if he himself is not guilty of manipulating the biblical text, a mistake of which he is accusing others. To have a proper understanding of the moral teaching of a particular text one must take into account both what appears on the surface level and the underlying moral value.

Rogerson rejects what he calls, a “legalistic” use of the Old Testament by conservative scholars based on the assumption that the Bible contains a revelation of God’s moral ideal for his creation, serving both as a standard by which a sinful behavior is judged and a moral guide for Christians life and society in general.<sup>106</sup> He maintains that this approach cannot work because it makes a selective use of Old Testament texts when addressing specific moral problems. For example, those who cite Gen. 9:6 in support of capital punishment for homicide, ignore the other Old Testament passages that

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<sup>105</sup>Knight, “Old Testament Ethics,” 58.

<sup>106</sup>John W. Rogerson, *Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. JSOTSup 405 (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 15; he cites O. Barclay, “The Nature of Christian Morality,” in *Law, Morality and the Bible*, ed. B. N. Kaye and G. J. Wenham (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 125-50; Michael Green et al., *The Church and the Homosexual: A Positive Answer to the Current Debate* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980).

provide for death penalty in cases of cursing parents, blasphemy, adultery and homosexuality. He suggests that if those who commit homicide have to face the death penalty, the same fate should be extended to the other cases, something conservative scholars are not willing to accept.<sup>107</sup> As an alternative, he proposes a different way of understanding Old Testament ethics based on the ideas of “natural morality and the imperative of redemption.”

As his point of departure, he argues that many of the laws in the Old Testament were not unique to ancient Israel. According to the archaeological discovery and decipherment of Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform texts, these laws were common in ancient Near East not only in terms of content but also in the belief that they had a divine origin. This leads him to conclude that these laws were natural morality - “a moral consensus common to sensitive and thoughtful people, religious and non-religious alike ... [about] what was self-evidently just and right.”<sup>108</sup>

He draws three implications from understanding the laws and moral attitudes in the Old Testaments as natural morality.<sup>109</sup> First, seeing the laws as “expressions of human moral sensitivity rather than as expressions of an unalterable divine will” helps in distinguishing between what is culturally no longer acceptable and what is morally important. Second, believers in God “should observe natural morality because it is natural morality; that is to say, God commands it because it is good.” Third, natural morality is flexible because as “it changes in accordance with the deepening sensitivity in moral matters, so the obligation upon believers changes.” For example, throughout the history of mankind, there has been an increasing sensitivity to justice and the needs and rights of

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<sup>107</sup> Rogerson, *Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics*, 15.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16. He borrows this idea of natural morality from N. H. G. Robinson, *Groundwork of Christian Ethics* (London: Collins, 1971), 31-54, 193-205.

<sup>109</sup> Rogerson, *Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics*, 17.

minority groups leading to the abolition of slavery.<sup>110</sup>

Rogerson's second idea to understanding the Old Testament ethics is the imperative of redemption. This idea is based on those passages that mention God's deliverance of Israel from slavery as the motivating factor for obeying the stated command or instruction (Deut 5:13; 24:17-22). The imperative of redemption requires that the strong must not only protect and support the weak, but the quest to identify the weak must also be never-ending. The advantage of the imperative of redemption is that it will exert pressure on natural morality forcing it into a deeper sensitivity such that the composition of the "weak" will continue to expand in order to incorporate more groups. Rogerson summarizes his views as follows:

The Old Testament does not lay down timeless laws or principles that express God's blueprint for creation. It teaches us that God approves what moral sensitivity at its best holds to be right. A dynamic model is introduced by the idea of natural morality altering in accordance with deepening moral sensitivity.<sup>111</sup>

The Old Testament cannot be used like a law book ... the Old Testament material about command and instruction is the natural morality of Old Testament times. This is often illuminating in its principles but often superseded in its details, because natural morality alters in response to new moral insights.<sup>112</sup>

Pleins proposes that the nature and application of Old Testament ethics should be understood in the context of ancient Israel as a pluralistic society with various voices in dialogue and debate. These voices have produced diverse "biblical blocks of material—from the prophets, the wise, the legal writers, the historians, and the hymnists— all vying for our attention, offering different and at times radically conflicting approaches on the social questions of the day."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 16. The sources of this increasing sensitivity include "religious convictions, philosophical reflection and cultural conditioning backed by legislation."

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>113</sup>Pleins, *Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible*, 522.



He suggests that the diversity within each individual block is due to the fact that the Hebrew bible is a “tradition under construction.” By this phrase he means that the biblical tradition is undergoing a continual process of elaboration and expansion through “commentary” or “inner-biblical exegesis,”<sup>114</sup> as past and present generations engage in constant conversation. This process goes on along the following lines. As the succeeding generation tries to appropriate the received tradition, it makes its own contribution by sifting and reworking it to suit changing circumstances. During this process every generation is at liberty to interpret the tradition in a way that is either in agreement or in conflict with it.

This idea of “commentary or inner-biblical exegesis” which, according to Pleins, is reflected in the rabbinic Mishnah and Talmud, should serve as a model for how one might appropriate ethical material of the Hebrew Bible when trying to deal with modern moral questions.<sup>115</sup> The advantage of this approach will help one to avoid seeing the Hebrew bible as a book of fixed morality. He says,

The very openness of scripture in this regard will militate against an effort to freeze the tradition under the assumption that a contemporary ethical system need only mimic some particular movement of the biblical past as a moral golden age or turn to a particular text or set of texts as ethical blueprint for our times ..... This openness of scripture demands a contemporary theological ethics that is aggressively informed by all sides of the tradition, though not one that is a slave to this tradition.<sup>116</sup>

There are three fundamental problems with the approaches proposed by Knight, Rogerson, and Pleins. First, whereas the Old Testament gives its ethics a theocentric interpretation, in the sense that God was the one who prescribed how human beings should behave and made them accountable, these proposals either attribute Old Testament ethics to human beings or give them the freedom to determine what part of it

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 528.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 21, 530.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 529.

is or is not acceptable and how it should be applied today. According to Rogerson's "natural morality" view, for example, human beings decide what is just and right in keeping with the developing moral sensitivity, thereby reducing God's role to that of a rubber stamp. Not only is this not supported by biblical evidence, it takes away man's responsibility to obey God. One may ask, if man is not accountable to God, why should he even bother to understand how Old Testament ethics apply today?

The second problem is that the proposals are based on a false notion that Scripture is 'open' and as such, it is subject to elaboration, addition, and reduction as the new generation tries to appropriate its ethical teaching. However, this is contrary to the teaching of the Old Testament which views itself as a prophetic word from God. The reader is free to search for the meaning of the text, but he does not have the prerogative of adding to or reducing from its content (Deut 4:2; 12:32; cf. Rev 22:18-19). Furthermore, trying to reduce, add to or expand the content and meaning of the text ends up with a morality which is very different from the one taught by the text.

Third, the proposals of Knight, Rogerson, and Pleins are general and open-ended such that one can manipulate the text to allow anything depending on the spirit of the age in which one lives. Clearly, their views represent a section of scholars who are searching for a flexible approach to biblical ethics that would accommodate the Western liberal agenda and worldview.<sup>117</sup>

The foregoing discussion demonstrates the fact that there are serious methodological problems related to the application of Old Testament ethical teaching to today's moral questions and no consensus has emerged on how to go about it. However, if progress is to be made, one must bear in mind certain basic things. As Knight says, one should first "take the pains to describe and understand the ethics of the ancient document

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<sup>117</sup>See Rodd's criticism of Rogerson in Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 2001), 30: "The imperative of redemption is so general that it is open to a wide range of interpretations when the attempt is made to apply it to a concrete modern situation."

and the people who produced it, before trying to appropriate moral norms and directives of the Bible today.”<sup>118</sup> This process will require reading the document on its own terms and not as if it was written in the twenty-first century.

Once a biblical norm or directive that should be applied has been determined, one should seek appropriate ways of transferring it to the modern context while at the time remaining faithful to the text. This means that the modern reader should allow the text to judge his behavior and not the other way round.

Finally, the application of Old Testament ethical material should be informed by the New Testament’s apostolic witness about the impact the coming of Jesus Christ had on the interpretation of the Old Testament. This proposal is not using the New Testament as an “interpretive tool to unpack the meaning of the OT”<sup>119</sup> nor is it trying to advance the old classification of the law into moral, civil and ceremonial categories.<sup>120</sup> Rather, what is being proposed is that the Old Testament should be “interpreted in light of His [Jesus] coming and in light of the profound changes introduced by the New Covenant.”<sup>121</sup> The New Testament believer would be making a mistake if he was to move directly from the Old Testament text to the present circumstances and assume that nothing happened in the interim.

### **The Basis of Old Testament Ethics**

The traditional approach to the study of Old Testament ethics was to find out

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<sup>118</sup>Knight, “Old Testament Ethics,” 56.

<sup>119</sup>Kaiser, “New Approaches to Old Testament Ethics,” 292.

<sup>120</sup>See a criticism of this approach in J. Daniel Hays, “Applying the Old Testament Law Today,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158, no. 629 (2001): 21-35; in defense see Willem A. VanGemeren, “The Law is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” in *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian*, ed. Wayne C. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 13-58.

<sup>121</sup>Hays, “Applying the Old Testament Law Today,” 30; see also Paul Copan, “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics,” *PC* 10, no.1 (2008): 7-37; D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 142-44; R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 194-95; Donald Wagner, *Matthew 1-13*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1993), 104-06.

the kind of conduct that was considered right or wrong. Rarely was it asked why a particular action was right or wrong, or why moral obligations were necessary. Although these are questions normally dealt with in the area of moral philosophy, they now form part of the discussion in the study of Old Testament ethics, thanks to the work of Barton.<sup>122</sup> Barton proposes three models for understanding the basis of Old Testament ethics: obedience to God's declared will, natural law and the imitation of God.

### **Obedience to God's Declared Will**

According to this model, Old Testament ethics is based on God's revealed will that the Israelites believed human beings, and especially Israel, should obey. Barton says that this is not 'blind obedience' to divine whim as Hempel and Eichrodt seem to suggest. Following Otto, he says that "Yahweh's own action towards Israel is not arbitrary but manifests the same moral character that God demands of them."<sup>123</sup>

This explanation is certainly correct, but not adequate. If one is to remain true to the teaching of the Old Testament, one has to develop a model of obedience that avoids two extremes: portraying Yahweh as a despot who issues arbitrary commands and expects obedience or seeing him as a fickle God who is equal to human beings with whom he shares a common ethical standard.

To begin with, it should be noted that central to the Israelites' understanding of biblical ethics was the belief that Yahweh was the creator and king of the whole earth, especially of Israel, and that he had issued commands which must be obeyed. And yet Yahweh was not unpredictable. He not only communicated his commands, but also

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<sup>122</sup>Barton, "Understanding Old Testament Ethics," 44-64; idem, "The Basis of Ethics in the Hebrew Bible," in *Ethics and Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. D. A. Knight, Semeia 66 (1995): 11-22; idem, "Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament," in *Beginning Old Testament Study*, ed. John Rogerson et al (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998): 114-131; idem, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 58-97; idem, *Amos' Oracles against the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); idem, "Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament," *JTS* 30 (1979): 1-14; idem, "Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem," *JTS* 30 (1981): 1-18.

<sup>123</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 47-48.

provided various incentives for obedience. Barton has identified three incentives that should have prompted the Israelites to obey God: past, present, and future.<sup>124</sup>

The *past* incentive relates to God's expectation that the Israelites would live an obedient life as a way of showing appreciation for what he had done for them.<sup>125</sup> The preamble to the Ten Commandments says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exod 20:2). Also, Deuteronomy 10:22-11:1 says, "Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as multitudes as the stars of heaven; you shall therefore love the Lord your God, and keep his charge, his statutes, and ordinances." This gracious act of the Lord should produce a reciprocal response from the Israelites in terms of obedience to his law.

The *present* incentive is based on the Old Testament passages that "insist on the inherent moral beauty of God's law as reason enough to keep them."<sup>126</sup> For example, Deuteronomy 4:8 says, "What great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?" As Barton correctly points out, this passage stresses not only that the law is good, but also that the God who has given such law is good and reasonable. He knows what is best for his people; and this in itself is an incentive to obey his commands.<sup>127</sup>

The *future* incentive is what he calls, "sticks and carrots ... incentives to act well and threats of consequences for acting badly."<sup>128</sup> A classic example is found in Deuteronomy 28 where Moses pronounces various blessings for obeying and curses for

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<sup>124</sup>For a detailed discussion on these incentives, see Barton, "Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament," 122-23; see also Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 365-79.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid.*, 122; see also Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 126.

<sup>126</sup>Barton, "Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament," 123.

<sup>127</sup>*Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

disobeying God's law. This is seen playing out throughout the history of ancient Israel especially in the event of Babylonian exile. When the writers of the books of Kings and Daniel reflect on the reason for the exile, it is very clear to them that it was because Israel disobeyed God (2 Kgs 24:2-4, 18-20; Dan 9:4-14).

## Natural Law

The second model proposed by Barton is that Old Testament ethics is based on "natural law." This idea is gaining traction from a number of biblical scholars and ethicists who maintain that there are places in the Old Testament where there is an expectation for one to observe a certain ethical behavior, not because it is a divine command, but because it is the right thing to do based on natural moral law woven into the fabric of the created order and, therefore, accessible to everyone.<sup>129</sup> Natural law is a standard of morality that is assumed to be generally known and acknowledged by all peoples.

One example often cited is Genesis 18:25. After the Lord tells Abraham that he is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness, Abraham says, "Far be it from you to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice (משפט)?"

Abraham's question has been understood to mean that there was another standard based on natural law by which he is judging God's action. For, example, Rodd

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<sup>129</sup>James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991 delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); idem, "Biblical Law and the Question of Natural Theology," in *The Law in the Bible and in its Environment*, ed. T. Veijola, Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 51 (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 1990): 1-22; Barton, "Natural Law and Poetics of Justice in the Old Testament," 1-14; idem, "The Basis of Ethics in the Hebrew Bible," 11-22; H. S. Gehman, "Natural Law and the Old Testament," in *Biblical Studies in Memory of H. C. Alleman*, ed. J. M. Myers et al (Locust Valley, NY: Augustin, 1960): 109-22; E. W. Davis, "Ethics of the Hebrew Bible: The Problem of Methodology," in *Ethics and Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, Semeia 66 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995): 43-53; Allan F. Johnson, "Is there a Biblical Warrant for natural-law Theories?" *JETS* 25, no. 2 (1982): 185-99.

suggests that Abraham is here setting his own moral standard against God's action.<sup>130</sup> This suggestion is, however, problematic because it depends on the interpretation of a single phrase in isolation from the context in which it is used. To begin with, the word *משפט* used here is also used in verse 19: "For I have chosen him [Abraham], in order that he might command (*צוה*) his children and his household after him, that they might keep (*שמר*) the way (*דרך*) of the Lord, to do righteousness (*צדקה*) and justice (*משפט*), that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him."

Righteousness (*צדקה*) and justice (*משפט*) are in apposition with the "way of the Lord" and explains what is meant by that phrase. For this reason, it is reasonable to assume that when God called Abraham, he must have communicated to him directly or indirectly some form of ethical standard of behavior that he was supposed follow and also teach his children.<sup>131</sup> The question in verse 25, therefore, relates to God's moral standard and not that of Abraham. Abraham can confidently appeal to God's mercy because he knows that God is righteous and just.<sup>132</sup>

### **Imitation of God**

The third basis of Old Testament ethics is the "imitation of God." The Israelites are commanded to model their lives after God's character and deeds,

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. (Lev 19:2)

The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribes, who executes justice for the orphans and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.

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<sup>130</sup>C. S. Rodd, "Shall not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Just?" *ExpTim* 83 (1971/72): 137-39.

<sup>131</sup>Commenting on v. 19, Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 19, says that Abraham was to play the role of a prophet, "for the message of Abraham to his children is the same as the message of the prophets to their contemporaries"; Sirach 44:19-21 suggests that Abraham lived by God's law.

<sup>132</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

You shall also love the stranger. (Deut 10:17-19)

The Israelites are commanded to act in a particular way not only because it is right but it is also consistent with God's character. Of course, the application of the model of the "imitation of God" has limitations. There are things that God alone has the prerogative to do because he is God.

### **Philosophical Issues**

In his article, "Sources and Methods in the Study of Ancient Israelite Ethics,"<sup>133</sup> Wilson points out that when examining the various approaches employed in the study of Old Testament ethics one must also take into account the "interpretive processes involved when a particular scholar uses the bible to do ethics" because biblical interpretation does not take place in a vacuum. Bartholomew says that underlying what is happening on the surface is a philosophical ideology that affects the outcome.<sup>134</sup>

One of the key issues that inform the scholar's ideology is how he understands the nature and authority of the Bible. On one extreme end of the spectrum, there is the traditional conservative view that sees the bible as a closed canon of divinely inspired books that are inerrant and authoritative on matters of faith and behavior. On the other end, are the atheists or those without any religious affiliation like Philip Davies,<sup>135</sup> who believe the bible is merely a book which, along with its god, if there is such a thing as god, does not possess any authority over one's moral life.

In the middle are those with liberal views. In his influential book, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*,<sup>136</sup> Kelsey rejects the idea of revelation or inspiration as the

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<sup>133</sup>Wilson, "Sources and Methods in the Study of Ancient Israelite Ethics," 60; see also Herion, "The Impact of Modern and Social Science Assumptions on the Reconstruction of Israelite History," 78-108.

<sup>134</sup>Craig G. Bartholomew, "Postmodernity and Biblical Interpretation," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 604-06.

<sup>135</sup>Philip R. Davies, "Ethics and the Old Testament," in *The Bible in Ethics*, ed. John W. Rogerson et al. JSOTSup 207 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 164-73.

<sup>136</sup>David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).



basis of biblical authority. His approach to biblical authority is to draw a sharp distinction between the bible as ‘text’ and the Bible as ‘Scripture.’ The Bible as ‘Scripture’ relates to its recognition and normative use in the common life of the church to shape its form of life and speech. Understood this way, the authority of the Bible does not lie in any inherent property such as being inerrant or inspired, but in how it functions in the experience of members of the Christian Community. In other words, the Bible can only be authoritative to the extent that the Christian community recognizes it to be so.

Haas who is from the Jewish community says that Judaism treats the Hebrew Bible in a more complex and dynamic way.<sup>137</sup> Judaism recognizes the bible as a revelation from God, but it does not consider it as a “closed” canon. The written Torah which in its broader sense includes the entire Hebrew Bible is just a “small portion of the Sinaitic revelation, the bulk being made up of the Oral Torah.” The Oral Torah does not just explain and apply the written Torah; it is equally authoritative. This process of appropriating the Sinaitic revelation did not stop suddenly with Malachi; it continued in unbroken succession down through the Second Commonwealth (530 BCE – 70CE) and into the rabbinic period and beyond to the present. Haas says,

These writings have not by any means exhausted the content of the revelation, and the process of writing down the revelation continues to this day, constantly adding to the canonical literature. In short, there is no closed “biblical” canon in Judaism. The Tanakh or Hebrew Bible, as one small and embryonic part of the available canon, cannot be isolated, excised, and treated as an independent self-standing statement.<sup>138</sup>

While liberal scholars might be prepared to entertain the idea that the bible has something to contribute to modern discussion on moral and social issues, they do not think it should be treated as a “closed canon” or law-book with a fixed message that is directly applicable to the modern society. These scholars, therefore, prefer a flexible and

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<sup>137</sup>Peter J. Haas, “The Quest for Hebrew Bible Ethics: A Jewish Response,” *Semeia* 66, no. 1 (1994): 151-59.

<sup>138</sup>*Ibid.*, 152.

dynamic approach that appropriates the ethical message of the bible by taking into consideration the changing times, so that if a particular teaching is not popular in the contemporary culture, it will be adjusted to go with the times or be rejected altogether.

The second philosophical issue is how one understands a written text.

Bartholomew says that until recently, the “classical-humanistic” view of a written text had dominated the history of biblical interpretation. “According to this tradition, texts are stretches of language that express the thoughts of their authors, and they refer to the extra-linguistic world. Texts were seen as mediating interpersonal communication.”<sup>139</sup> For this reason, it is possible for one to have a determinate and true reading of a text that can help in uncovering its meaning.

This understanding has been put to serious question by a critical theory which challenges the “privileged position of the work of art and seeks to undermine its priority and authority not only by displacing the work of art from the center and substituting the reader in its place but by putting in doubt the autonomy of the work and in certain cases, even causing the work to ‘vanish’ altogether.”<sup>140</sup> According to this theory, the author is dead, and as such, the meaning of text is in the hands of the reader. One does not, therefore, need to study the text to find out what the author is communicating because there is no such a thing as objective meaning. This reasoning is the basis of Reader-Response criticism as a method for biblical interpretation.<sup>141</sup>

The third philosophical issue has to do with the ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ whose roots can be traced back to the Enlightenment period. According to this principle,

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<sup>139</sup>Bartholomew, “Postmodernity and Biblical Interpretation,” 604.

<sup>140</sup>E. Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 2; see also D. J. A. Clines, “Possibilities and priorities of Biblical Interpretation in an International Perspective,” *BI* 1, no. 1 (1991): 67-87 for a proposal advancing a model of interpretation that accepts the reality of pluralist context.

<sup>141</sup>For a brief discussion on this method, see David J. A Clines, “Methods in Old Testament Study,” in *Beginning Old Testament Study*, ed. John Rogerson et al (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 41-42.

the Bible is not taken on face value but, rather, treated as a tool that was produced by the priests to advance the ideology of the ruling class against the poor in ancient Israel.<sup>142</sup> For this reason, the scholars ignore the words and meaning of the text and, instead, engage in the process of deconstruction in order to arrive at the real ethics of the Old Testament.<sup>143</sup> These three philosophical issues, then, are the main reason behind lack of consensus on almost every area within the discipline of Old Testament ethics. Unless the biblical text is treated on its own terms, it will be nearly impossible to make any progress.

### Scope

The final issue that needs to be touched on briefly is the scope of material that has been covered so far in the study of the Old Testament ethics. In the past, scholars who worked in the area of Old Testament ethics focused their research mainly on wisdom literature and the legal portion in the Pentateuch.<sup>144</sup> The reason may be because Sapiential and legal material explicitly deal with rules for ethical behavior. In recent years, however, the situation has begun changing with the publication of works in the areas of narrative and prophetic literature.<sup>145</sup> The area that is clearly neglected is the book of Psalms. In his article, “The Ethics of the Psalms,”<sup>146</sup> Wenham says,

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<sup>142</sup>Douglas A. Knight, “Political Rights and Powers in Monarchic Israel,” in *Ethics and Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. D. A. Knight, Semeia 66 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 98-9.

<sup>143</sup>Otto, “Of Aims and Methods in Hebrew Bible Ethics,” 165-66.

<sup>144</sup>W. Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); J. Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kolhammer, 1994).

<sup>145</sup>Wenham, *Story As Torah*; Barton, “Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem,” 1-18; idem, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel After the Exile*; Eryl Wynn Davies, *Prophecy and Ethics: Isaiah and the Ethical Traditions of Israel*, JSOTSup 16 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1981); Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>146</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, “The Ethics of the Psalms,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005). For a similar view, see idem, “Prayer and Practice in the Psalms,” in *Psalms and Prayers*, ed. Bob Becking and Eric Peels (Leiden: Brill, 2007): 279-95.

This paper seeks to start to remedy this neglect by drawing out the pervasiveness of the ethical concerns in the Psalter and making a preliminary evaluation of its potential for Old Testament ethics .... But it should be stressed that this seems to be a virgin scholarly territory. Not only is the topic rarely touched on in works on Old Testament ethics, but I have been able to find very few articles that discuss our topic.<sup>147</sup>

Since Wenham made this statement about six years ago, the area continues to be a “virgin scholarly territory” that needs attention. This situation is what called forth this project. However, as it was nearing completion, Wenham published his new book, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically*,<sup>148</sup> which he says “is an attempt to begin to deal with a blind spot in current biblical and theological thinking.”<sup>149</sup> The book has made an important contribution; but it is only a beginning. The next step should be to conduct studies on specific themes to find out what the Psalter, which is believed to have been the hymnal during worship in the temple in ancient Israel, teaches about ethics.

### Conclusion

Since Childs’ famous lament about the scholarly neglect of Old Testament ethics in his *Biblical Theology in Crisis*,<sup>150</sup> a lot of progress has been made considering the many works that have been produced. This is certainly a reason to celebrate. However, going by the brief survey done in the preceding pages, it is very clear that instead of clarifying issues, these works have produced more confusion. This situation has led Kaiser to declare the discipline of Old Testament ethics as being “either in a state of total disarray or on the brink of total eclipse and collapse.”<sup>151</sup>

The reason for this sorry state is that the study of Old Testament ethics as it

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<sup>147</sup>Wenham, “The Ethics of the Psalms,” 178.

<sup>148</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

<sup>149</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>150</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 124.

<sup>151</sup>Kaiser, “New Approaches to Old Testament Ethics,” 296.

stands now has less to do with the Bible but more to do with modern experience especially that of the Western liberal culture. If any meaningful progress is to be made, the discipline must be freed from the shackles of modernity.

The way this can be achieved is by first bearing in mind that Old Testament ethics relate to an ancient society and literary documents. An effort should, therefore, be made to understand that society and its documents on their own terms and not through the prism of the modern experience prevailing in the West. Second, an interpreter of these documents should employ a methodology that is text-centered and respects the authorial intention of the canonical texts as much as it can be determined. Third, one should determine and describe the ethics in their own context, first, before attempting to apply them to the contemporary situation. Finally, the application of Old Testament ethics to the modern context has to take into account the introduction of the New Covenant and the changes it brought to the way the Old Testament should be understood.

## CHAPTER 3

### SPEECH ETHICS OUTSIDE THE HEBREW PSALTER

#### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the occurrence of speech terminology outside the Hebrew Psalter using select passages from the Pentateuch, prophetic and wisdom literature with a view to finding out what the terminology teaches about speech ethics. An attempt is also made to determine if there is an underlying rationale that might unite the speech ethics of this diverse material. The result of the examination will provide the foundation for the study of speech ethics in the Hebrew Psalter.

#### **Speech Ethics in the Pentateuch**

The Pentateuch consists of predominantly narrative material. Within this narrative, there are legal codes given by God to govern the Israelites once they settle in the Promised Land. For this reason, one might naturally be tempted to begin the study of speech ethics with the legal codes which definitely deal with the use of speech. To ignore the narrative material, however, would be a mistake not only because it uses speech terminology in a number of places but also because it contains many accounts of abuse of speech.

The first speech terminology used in the Hebrew Bible in connection with abuse of speech is **אָשָׁא** (Gen 3: 13). After Adam and Eve eat from the tree forbidden by divine command, God asks Eve, “What is this you have done,” and she responds, “The serpent deceived (**אָשָׁא**) me and I ate” (v. 13). The verb **אָשָׁא** means “to deceive, beguile.” It is also used, for example, when the Assyrian commander says to the people of

Jerusalem, “Do not let Hezekiah deceive (אָשִׁיב) you, for he will not be able to deliver you out of my hand” (2 Kgs 18:29 [= Isa 36:14]); when the king of Assyria tells Hezekiah: “Do not let your God deceive (אָשִׁיב) you” (2 Kgs 19:10 [= Isa 37:10]) and when Jeremiah challenges the people of Judah not to let false prophets deceive (אָשִׁיב) them into believing that the exile would be short-lived (Jer 29:8).<sup>1</sup>

At the center of אָשִׁיב “lies the idea of deception, passing for reality that which is, in fact, not the case”<sup>2</sup> and almost always involves trickery. In Genesis 3, the serpent speaks falsehood by twisting what God had said with the intention of luring Eve and her husband into disobeying God’s command. The serpent’s deceptive activity is viewed negatively considering the curse that is pronounced against him (vv. 14-15).<sup>3</sup> This first act of deception is significant in a number of ways.

First, it marred the perfect life in the Garden of Eden and, as a result, affected subsequent human societies. Second, although the text does not provide the identity of the serpent,<sup>4</sup> human beings inherited his deceptive character in that deceit “infected even the line of promise, for it is the characteristic sin of Genesis, appearing in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his sons.”<sup>5</sup> Third, it is significant that the misuse of speech

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<sup>1</sup>Holladay says that Jeremiah’s decision to use the “verb associated with the serpent in Genesis 3 and with Yahweh only in the mocking mouth of the king of Assyria shows the depth” of his emotion (see William L. Holladay, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 1-25*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986, 155]); see also Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 194. Commenting on the use of this verb, Hamilton says, “Jeremiah’s attribution of such activity [deception] to God is electrifying (Jer. 4:10).”

<sup>2</sup>Eugene Carpenter and Michael A. Grisanti, “אָשִׁיב,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:183.

<sup>3</sup>Michael James Williams, *Deception in Genesis: An Investigation into the Morality of a Unique Biblical Phenomenon*, Studies in Biblical Literature 32 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 15.

<sup>4</sup>The first time the serpent is identified as Satan is in the intertestamental period (see Wisdom 2:24; James McKeown, *Genesis*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 34); The New Testament clearly identifies the serpent of Genesis 3 as Satan or the devil and mentions falsehood as the basic element of his character (John 8:42-47; Rev 12:9; 20:2, 10).

<sup>5</sup>Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 329.

appears in the opening chapters of the Bible (Gen 1-3), a section containing foundational material for understanding biblical ethics.<sup>6</sup>

After Genesis 3, there is no more record of serpents speaking and deceiving people, but the phenomenon of deception is pervasive in the Pentateuch. Sometimes the text uses speech terminology to refer to an act of deception, but other times it merely describes the act as part of the narrative.

### **Does Narrative Teach Speech Ethics?**

Most of speech terminology is found in Genesis.<sup>7</sup> And since the material in Genesis is almost exclusively narrative one wonders whether its use of speech terminology teaches speech ethics. This question will be considered after examining the speech terminology.

רמה. The verb רמה means “to beguile, deceive or deal treacherously with.” When Laban gives Jacob his daughter Leah for marriage instead of Rachel (Gen 29:25), Jacob asks, “Why have you deceived (רמה) me?” The same verb is used when Joshua accuses the Gibeonites of deception by pretending that they had come from a distant country (Josh 9:22). Derived from the verb רמה is the noun מרמה which means “deceit or trickery.” Kartveit says that מרמה “refers to situations in which reality differs from appearance. Such situations involve interpersonal transactions in which someone acts or speaks consciously and deliberately to conceal or cover up certain facts. The purpose is often ‘to gain personal advantage.’”<sup>8</sup> The term appears twice in Genesis.

The first time is when Isaac tells Esau about how Jacob came and took his

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<sup>6</sup>G. J. Wenham, “The Gap between Law and Ethics in the Bible,” *JJS* 48, no. 1 (1997): 28.

<sup>7</sup>For a full discussion and list of Hebrew terms relating to deception in Genesis, see Williams, *Deception in Genesis*.

<sup>8</sup>Stavanger M. Kartveit, “רמה,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 13:501.



blessing: “Your brother came with trickery (מרמה) and took your blessing” (Gen 27:35). The other one is used in Genesis 34. After Shechem “rapes” Dinah and proposes to marry her, Jacob’s sons agree on condition that all the Shechemite males are circumcised. But this is a trick (מרמה) because they have already decided in their hearts to take revenge on them for violating their sister (v. 13).

יעקב. Esau uses the term יעקב when complaining about Jacob taking his blessing: “Isn’t he rightly called Jacob? He has deceived (יעקב) me these two times” (27:36). Although the term יעקב literally means “he grasps the heel,” it is here used as a figure of speech that conveys the idea of “deceive.”

The ironic thing about most of the acts of deception in the book of Genesis is that they are perpetrated by venerated patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, which raises a number of questions. Why is a sacred text valued for its spiritual and moral teaching replete with deception and trickery by its protagonists? Why are these stories preserved in the canonical text? Is the conduct of the characters offered as something to emulate or to avoid? In short, do these stories have ethical instruction on the use of speech?

Many traditional exegetes have wrestled with this problem but explained it away using allegorical explanation of the text or by suggesting some mitigating circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Williams does a good job in describing the occurrence of deception and its evaluation in Genesis but he avoids dealing with the “possible motivation(s) behind its preservation in the text.”<sup>10</sup> On his part, Nicholas begins from the premise that deception in the Pentateuch leads to success or raise in status on the part of the deceiver.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, he conjectures that the stories of deception are preserved in the text to give the

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<sup>9</sup>See the discussion on these questions and the bibliography in Dean Andrew Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited: Deception as a Motif in the Pentateuch*, Studies in Biblical Literature, vol. 117 (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 1-8.

<sup>10</sup>Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 224.

<sup>11</sup>Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited*, 81.

post-exilic community hope that the low state of Israel is only a temporary experience. Like the deceivers in the Pentateuch, Israel is about to rise in status to the great kingdom of David and Solomon, predicted by the prophets.<sup>12</sup>

One of the weaknesses with the solutions being offered is that they are speculative. Unless the writer clearly indicates that the story or an aspect of it is preserved to teach some moral value or to serve some other discernible purpose, it is important to avoid giving explanations that are not supported by the text. The view taken in this study is that the stories of deception in the Pentateuch constitute a realistic description of human beings in their sinfulness and frailty. Although the patriarchs and matriarchs are venerated because they play an important role in salvation history, they are like any other human being with sin, struggle and failure. Therefore, they should not be taken as models of the kind of conduct to emulate or avoid.

### **Speech Ethics in the Legal Codes**

A better understanding of Old Testament ethics in general and speech ethics in particular, has to begin with the Sinaitic Covenant which constitutes the Israelites into a nation and establishes a relationship between them and Yahweh. After the Israelites arrive on Mount Sinai, the Lord reminds them of how he had graciously delivered them from Egypt and then says, “And now if you shall surely listen to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall become my treasured possession from among all the peoples, although the whole earth is mine. And you shall become to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:5-6a). And the Israelites commit themselves to “do everything the Lord has said” (Exod 19:8).

Exodus 19:5-6 implies that the nation of Israel has a special relationship with Yahweh (“my treasured possession”) which the other nations do not enjoy. However, this

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 100.

relationship is based on a specific mission it is supposed to fulfill. The nation of Israel is to function as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” by mediating God’s word and holiness to all other nations.<sup>13</sup> According to Meyers, this mission is analogous to the “concept of Israel as a witness and ‘light to the nations’ in Second Isaiah.”<sup>14</sup>

At this early stage, the mission of Israel is not to be carried out through going to the nations to preach, something found in the New Testament (Matt 28:19-20). Rather, it is by becoming a society in which members live a life of obedience to Yahweh’s decrees and laws. God’s expectation is that the Israelites might become what the New Testament calls a “city on a hill” (Matt 5:14-16) for the pagan nations to see. In terms of lifestyle, they were to be different from these nations. Moses tells the Israelites:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may do them in the midst of the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:5-8)

There are three important things to note. First, Moses’ directive in this passage anticipates the settlement of the Israelites as a nation in the Promise Land where they would dwell in the midst of other nations. Second, the Israelites will be governed by divine “decrees and laws”<sup>15</sup> which Moses has taught them. That these “decrees and laws” were important in the life of Israel is demonstrated by how Moses emphasizes the necessity of obeying them (“observe them carefully”). Third, obedience to Yahweh’s

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<sup>13</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 214: “Once Israel became the covenant people, the imperative for obedience followed, and the covenantal ... blessings were conditional upon a faithful response. Israel was set apart from all as God’s ‘own possession a holy nation’ (Ex. 19:5f).”

<sup>14</sup>Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 147 n. 35.

<sup>15</sup>While the immediate context suggests that this phrase refers to the regulations in the book of Deuteronomy, it probably extends to include the “decrees and laws” given on Mount Sinai.

“decrees and laws” will be a witness to the nations (“show ... to the nations”) regarding the kind of lifestyle he requires. Oswalt correctly says, “One of the purposes of the covenant was to promote a society in which the ethics of the creator were lived out in human relations.”<sup>16</sup> These ethics were contained, not in stories but, in specific “decrees and laws” touching on the key facets of life including the use of speech. In fact, the Israelites are later condemned by the prophets because they failed to live according to the “decrees and laws” governing the covenant. In view of the foregoing, the investigation on speech ethics in the Pentateuch will focus on the legal material. The following pages will look at the various aspects of the use of speech taught in the Pentateuch.

אמח. The Pentateuch takes the issues of truth-telling and lying, especially in the law courts, seriously. This fact is clear right from the time the foundations of the judicial system in ancient Israel are laid in Exodus 18.<sup>17</sup> While the Israelites are camping in the desert near Mount Sinai, Moses is seen acting as a lone judge trying to settle disputes between the Israelites from morning till evening. This situation does not please Jethro, his father-in-law, who advises him to appoint some men to whom he should delegate part of the responsibility. These men are to deal with simple cases and whenever they encounter a difficult one, they should submit it to Moses as a kind of court of appeal.<sup>18</sup>

Verse 21 prescribes four qualities that these men should possess: “Now choose (lit.: “see”) from among all the people men of strength, fearers of God, men of truth,

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<sup>16</sup>John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 630.

<sup>17</sup>Calum M. Carmichael, “Joseph, Moses, and the Institution of the Israelite Judicature,” in *Go to the Land I will Show You: Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young*, ed. Joseph E. Coleson and Victor H. Matthews (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 21.

<sup>18</sup>This advice provided a framework on how Israel’s legal system would later function (see Deut 17:8-13).

haters of unjust gain and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.” The first quality is that these people should be “men of strength” (אנשי־חיל). In this context, this phrase probably refers to “men of strong character”<sup>19</sup> because the qualities listed are social, spiritual, and moral in nature and not intellectual or physical.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the MT suggests that the first quality, “men of strength,” is clarified by the rest of the qualities.

Second, the men must be יראי אלהים (“fearers of God”). These are people who have a strong sense of reverence for and accountability to God as reflected in their obedience to his law. Third, they must be characterized by the truth (אנשי אמת). Fourth, the men must be שנאי בצע (“haters of unjust gain”) such that they will grant justice equally to all and not to the highest bidder. One can see why the quality of אנשי־חיל is put at the beginning of the list. The judicial system often exposes the judge to the temptation to practice favoritism or twist justice for unjust gain (bribery). Strength of character will enable him to withstand the pressure.

What is important for the purpose of this study is that the quality of אמת in the administration of justice is emphasized at this early stage when the nation of Israel is about to be formed. But what does the term mean? It is difficult to accurately translate the word אמת into English. Jepsen says,

*'meth* was used of things that had to be proved to be reliable; of a word that is really true, on which a person can rely; of a man who is really trustworthy, and thus to whom an office can be entrusted; of judgment that is righteous; and in general, of the innermost nature of man, that which determines his character and his actions .... *'meth* is the prerequisite for justice and order .... It denotes the nature of the man who is said to be faithful to his neighbor, true in his speech, and reliable and constant in his actions .... It always involves one's relationship with his fellow men, and pertains to his speech and action: *'meth* is that on which others can rely.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> George Bush, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 229; cf. “strong personalities,” in Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus*, trans. Sierd Woudstra, vol. 2 (Kampen: Kok, 1996), 418.

<sup>20</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 101.

<sup>21</sup> Jepsen, “אמן,” 1:313.

The quality of אמת was a necessary prerequisite before these men were appointed as judges in Israel. They had to be reliable in speech and action so that they might seek and apply the truth in their judicial function. Jepsen is correct when he says that the quality of אמת is a “prerequisite for justice and order.”

**False oath.** The Old Testament allows the Israelites to use vows or oaths in the name of the Lord (Deut 6:13) to guarantee the fulfillment of a promise to do something or speak the truth. Breaking a vow (Num 30:2; 23:21-23) or swearing falsely (Exod 20:7; Lev 19:12) is prohibited. Leviticus 19:12 commands: לֹא-תִשָּׁבַע בְּשֵׁמי לַשֶּׁקֶר (“Do not swear falsely in my name”). While the context for this command is not provided, the court sitting at the gate or an inquiry being conducted in the temple might provide an occasion to swear falsely (e.g., Exod 22:11).

The other passage that probably deals with making a false oath is Exodus 20:7: “Do not lift up the name of the Lord your God emptily (שוא); for the Lord will not hold guiltless the one who lifts up his name emptily (שוא).” The same commandment is repeated in Deuteronomy 5:11. But what is this commandment forbidding?

The phrase “lift up the name” appears two other times in the Old Testament (Exod 28:23, 29; Ps 16:4b). Of these two, Psalm 16:4b is probably the closest to the third commandment. Making reference to other gods, the psalmist says, “I will not lift up their name on my lips.” This statement suggests that the phrase “lift up the name” means “to name something, to pronounce or say the name.”<sup>22</sup> But what kind of speaking or saying is being prohibited? The answer to this question would depend on the meaning of the term שוא. The Deuteronomic form of the ninth commandment (Deut 5:20) which clearly has to do with falsehood uses שוא in place of שקר (Exod 20:16) thereby suggesting that שוא

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<sup>22</sup>Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 68.

refers “to something that is false, to lying and deception.”<sup>23</sup>

Two other passages that refer to using the Lord’s name may throw further light. Deuteronomy 6:13 says, “Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.” Since this passage allows taking of oaths, the third commandment cannot be prohibiting the taking of oaths per se. It must mean “swearing in a deceptive way, not living up to one’s oath.”<sup>24</sup> The other passage is Leviticus 19:12: “Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God.” While the phrase “lift the name of the Lord שׁוּא” might mean profanity in the sense of mentioning the name of the Lord irreverently in ordinary conversation, the passages discussed above suggest that it probably means swearing falsely using the Lord’s name. The phrase refers to a situation where a person swears in the name of the Lord promising to speak the truth or do something but ends up speaking falsehood or failing to do what he promised.<sup>25</sup> The situation that offered the opportunity for one to swear falsely in the Lord’s name was during legal proceedings.

The person who swore falsely was guilty not only because he had broken his promise to speak the truth, which was a serious offense in itself, but also because he had profaned the name of the Lord (Lev 19:12) by using it irreverently and making him an accomplice to falsehood. The Old Testament teaches that, by nature, God speaks the truth and fulfills what he says (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29); he cannot be party to falsehood.

**False witness.** Related to the third commandment is the ninth commandment that warns against giving false testimony. Exodus 20:16 says: לֹא־תַעֲנֶה בִרְעֵךְ עַד שִׁקֵּר (“Do

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 69; see also Bruce Wells, “Exodus,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 1:232; C. Meyers, *Exodus*, New Century Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 172-73; Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 487.

not answer against your neighbor a witness of falsehood”).<sup>26</sup> Some suggest that this commandment prohibits lying in general.<sup>27</sup> However, the language used indicates that what is being prohibited is giving false evidence during legal proceedings.<sup>28</sup> The verb ענה means “to answer” in response to interrogation.<sup>29</sup> When it is used together with the phrase עד שקר it points to a legal context. Talmon observes that when ענה is followed by the preposition ב (1 Sam 12:3; 2 Sam 1:16; Hos 5:5; Mic 6:3), the evidence to be given is damning.<sup>30</sup> An Israelite is, therefore, prohibited from giving false evidence in a court of law that might put a fellow member (רע) of the covenant community in mortal danger.

The Pentateuch shows that it takes the issue of bearing false witness seriously in three ways: the placement of the prohibition within the legal codes in the Pentateuch, the strict measures designed to prevent it and the way it is described. The prohibition against bearing false testimony is part of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20) which occupy a central place in the religious life of ancient Israel. According to the canonical text, these commandments are unique because they are a direct revelation from God; the very words he spoke on Mount Sinai when he appeared in a theophany and made a covenant with the Israelites (Exod 19:1-20:17; 24:1-18). Furthermore, God himself is said to have inscribed them on both sides of the tablets of stone (Exod 24:12; 32:15-16; Deut 4:13) and commanded that they may be deposited in the Ark of the Covenant (Exod

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<sup>26</sup>The parallel passage in Deut 5:20 uses the phrase עד שוא (“witness of emptiness”) but the idea is the same. The עד שוא is one who gives evidence which is useless for the purpose of administering justice (see Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003], 109-10, 115; Ora H. Prouser, “The Phenomenology of the Lie in Biblical Narrative” [Ph.D. diss., Jewish Theological Seminary, 1991], 58-61).

<sup>27</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Exodus*, in vol. 1 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 483.

<sup>28</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Exodus*, in vol. 1 of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 851-52; Meyers, *Exodus*, 177.

<sup>29</sup>William C. Propp, *Exodus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 2A (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 179; Houtman, *Exodus*, 387: “In administration of justice ענה is used in 20:16 (+ב) and 23:2 (+על).”

<sup>30</sup>S. Talmon, *King, Cult and Calendar in Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), 84; see also Deut 31:28 and 1 Sam 8:9.



25:16, 21; 40:20).<sup>31</sup>

The commandments are also unique because they are placed in a clearly marked out position at the beginning of the account of the revelation of God and the extensive collection of a great variety of laws. Childs thinks that this position makes them function as a “comprehensive summary of the Torah to which the succeeding stipulations serve as expansion and commentary.”<sup>32</sup> Miller thinks that the Ten Commandments played a role in Israel akin to a modern constitution.<sup>33</sup> He might be correct because these commandments are referred to as “covenant” (Deut 4:13; 9:9) and described as “binding rules” (Exod 24:12).

Miller also observes that the foundational character of the commandments in ancient Israel is further emphasized by the very fact that they are presented twice at critical moments in her history. “Exodus 20 tells of their initial transmission to Israel, and in Deuteronomy 5 Moses restates them to the people, reminding them, at the boundary of the Promised Land, that these words are the basic charter of their life together in the land that the Lord is giving [them].”<sup>34</sup> The fact that the prohibition against false testimony is included in this foundational legal framework emphasizes the importance attached to the establishment of a credible judicial system in the covenant community.

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<sup>31</sup>Meyers, *Exodus*, 177: “Making lying in court one of the prohibitions of the Decalogue gives it, in the breach, the status of a sin against God as well as against another human. In that way settling disputes with integrity and preventing the conviction of someone who is innocent might be readily achieved.”

<sup>32</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 134: see also Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 3, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Kampen, The Netherlands: Peeters-Leuven, 2000), 9: “The decalogue ... is placed at the beginning of YHWH’S revelation at Sinai and occupies a clearly marked off position relative to the context, makes for the fact that the decalogue has *its own unique place* [emphasis is his]. The presentation of the decalogue as having come straight from YHWH himself, along with the salient position in the text, highlights its extraordinary character relative to the other stipulations in the Pentateuch and enhances its importance. Standing at the beginning of extensive collections of a great variety of laws, the decalogue has a ‘governing’ affect. It provides the framework for reading and understanding the great variety of laws.”

<sup>33</sup>Miller, “The Place of the Decalogue in the Old Testament and Its Law,” 230-32.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 230.

The second reason prohibition against false testimony is important is that the Pentateuch has put in place strict measures designed to prevent it (Deut 19:15-21). These measures serve the purpose of avoiding a situation where a false testimony, if believed, might expose an innocent person to the danger of being wrongfully convicted and deprived of his life.<sup>35</sup> The law, therefore, provides that before an Israelite is convicted of an offence, the charge must be supported by the evidence of at least two witnesses (19:15; see also Num 35:30; Deut 17:2-6). According to Biddle, the Hebrew bible tends to lean toward the presumption of innocence and the protection of the innocent.<sup>36</sup> It is better to free the guilty than to convict the innocent on the basis of unreliable evidence.

Deuteronomy 19:16-19 warns the judicial authority always to be aware of the possibility that the person offering to give evidence might be a witness of violence (עֵד־חָמָס). This is a witness who intentionally plots (זָמַם) to do harm to the accused (v. 19) by bearing false testimony. In view of this danger, the judicial authority is urged to carry out a thorough investigation, especially in capital cases, in order to establish the reliability of a witness (vv. 17-18). Since the intents and purposes of the human heart are hidden from view, judges and priests, along with the parties involved must appear in the sanctuary before the Lord to establish the matter (v. 17).

If it is established that a person gave a false testimony, he must suffer the same punishment that the accused would have suffered if the case had been established. The Israelites are commanded to “show no pity” (v. 21) to such a person. This procedure is taken in order to discourage others who might be tempted to misuse the court process to destroy the innocent (vv. 20). However, if the accused is properly convicted of the offence, the witnesses whose testimony led to the conviction must throw the first stone that executes the criminal (Deut 17:7). When a witness is aware of this procedure, he is

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<sup>35</sup>Biddle, *Deuteronomy*, 306.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 306-07.

likely to take the matter seriously.

The third way the seriousness of bearing false testimony is emphasized is how it is described. Deuteronomy 19:19-20 refer to it as הרע הזה (“this evil”), the same phrase that is used in 17:7 to describe the sin of worshipping idols. According to the writer of Deuteronomy, the sin of perjury is as serious as idolatry. It affects not only the person against whom the evidence is given but it also defiles the whole land. Millar says, “Perjury threatens the whole legal process. It promotes evil ... defiles the land and jeopardizes Israel’s relationship with Yahweh.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the evil of false testimony must be purged from the midst of the covenant community by eliminating the offending member and warning the remaining ones. The law provided an elaborate process and severe penalty against false testimony in order to protect the vulnerable and promote justice in the nation of ancient Israel.

**False accusation.** The Pentateuch also prohibits a person from falsely accusing a fellow Israelite in a court of law. Exodus 23:1 warns, “Do not lift up a false report (לא תשא שמע שוא); do not join hands (collude) with the wicked to become a witness of violence (עד חמס).” What does it mean “to lift up a false report”? The answer to this question depends on the connection between 23:1a and 1b. Some have thought that 23:1a generally refers to slander that takes place outside the court. This interpretation has led some English versions to translate 23:1a: “Do not spread false reports/rumors” (NIV; NKJV). However, a number of factors make this view less likely.

First, the context (vv. 1-3, 6-8) which deals with ethics in court procedures suggests that “שמע שוא” is presented in the law court. One should bear in mind that in

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<sup>37</sup> J. Gary Millar, *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), 131.

ancient Israel, a person who had knowledge of wrongdoing by a neighbor was obligated to press charges and act as a witness against that person (Lev 5:1; Prov 29:24).<sup>38</sup>

Second, verse 23:1b warns an Israelite against colluding with the wicked to become a witness of violence (עֵד חַמָּס). A witness of violence is one who gives false evidence in court with the intention of causing harm against the accused. In this case, 23:1b should be understood as playing an explicatory function to 23:1a. It suggests that the “false report” is made in court in form of a false accusation.

Third, the phrase “lift up an empty/false report (שֹׁמֵעַ שׁוֹא)” in verse 23:1a echoes the Third Commandment (Exod 20:7/Deut 5:11) which prohibits making a false (שֹׁא) oath in the name of the Lord and the Ninth Commandment (Deut 5:20) which prohibits a witness of emptiness/falsehood (שׁוֹא). As has been argued before, both of these commandments apply to a legal context.<sup>39</sup>

Fourth, the prohibition of verse 23:1 is repeated in verse 7 where an Israelite is commanded to keep far away from a false report or charge because it might lead to the death of an innocent person. In view of the foregoing, it is reasonable to take Exodus 23:1 as prohibiting an Israelite from pressing a false legal charge in collusion with the wicked for the purpose of causing harm to a fellow member of the community.

**Perversion of justice.** Exodus 23:2-3, 6-8 provides stipulations that warn against various acts that may lead to the pervasion of justice. Verse 2 says: “Do not follow the crowd to [do] evil; Do not answer (עֲנֵה) in a legal dispute turning aside after the crowd to pervert [justice].” The type of evil is not specified. However, the use of רְבִים and לְהַטֵּא in vv. 2a and 2b suggests that the evil being forbidden in v. 2a is giving false

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<sup>38</sup>Houtman, *Exodus*, 65, 238.

<sup>39</sup>Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 348.

evidence in a legal dispute (ריב) in support of crowds (majority) which ends up perverting justice (v. 2b).

Verse 3 prohibits siding with the poor when he brings a suit to court. This requirement is rather unusual considering that the poor is normally the one who is vulnerable to exploitation by the rich and therefore needing special protection. Although the text says that the poor should not be denied justice (v. 6), at no time should he receive special treatment. Everyone is supposed to come to court expecting fair and equal treatment (Deut 1:16-17; 16:18-19).

Verse 7 commands a righteous person to distance himself מדבר־שקר (“from a false charge”). Although the term דבר can mean “word, thing, matter,” here, it probably refers to an accusation in court. The command is warning a litigant against pressing a false charge or in the case of a judge not to allow a false charge. One may succeed in destroying the innocent in a court of law, but there is a higher court where God is the judge. He declares, “I will not acquit the wicked.” Finally, verse 8 prohibits a judge from accepting bribes as it would cause him to ignore the truth and pervert the cause of the righteous in a dispute.

**Stealing by lying.** The Pentateuch insists on absolute honesty when an Israelite is dealing with the property or possession of a fellow Israelite. This may explain why stealing and lying are sometimes connected (Lev 5:20-26; 19:11-13; cf. Zech 5:3-4).<sup>40</sup> For instance, Leviticus 5:20-24 says,

When a person sins and acts unfaithfully to the Lord by deceiving (כחש) his neighbor in a matter of a deposit or a pledge, or by robbery, or if he has defrauded his neighbor, or found something lost and lies about it and swears upon falsehood (שבע על־שקר) regarding any such sin that people may commit - when he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by robbery or what was deposited with him, or the lost property he found or whatever he swore about. He must make restitution in full and add a fifth of its value to it and give it all to the

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<sup>40</sup>For further discussion on this issue, see Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 362-69.

owner on the day he presents his reparation offering.

The term כחש means to lie by keeping silent or by concealing or denying the truth.<sup>41</sup> The same term is used in Genesis 18:15. When the Angel of the Lord asks why Sarah laughed after she heard that she would have a son, the text says, “Sarah was afraid, so she denied (כחש) and said, ‘I did not laugh.’” Leviticus 5:20-24 envisages a situation where a person might come into contact with the property of his neighbor by way of deposit for safekeeping, a pledge to secure payment of a loan, unpaid wages, something he finds or steals and when he is asked about it he denies on oath.

The background to Leviticus 5:20-24 is probably Exodus 22:7-11 which deal with cases of disputed ownership and custodial care. There, the dispute is settled by the person who had custody appearing “before God to determine whether he has laid his hands on the other man’s property” (v. 8) or “by the taking of an oath before the Lord that the neighbor did not lay his hand on the other person’s property” (v. 11). If these passages are connected, then the denial here is most likely made before a judge where the offender swears falsely.

This offense is serious because he has first and foremost sinned and acted unfaithfully against the Lord. It is also serious because he is not trustworthy considering that he intended to deprive another man of his property using falsehood. For this reason, when the offender feels guilty, he must make things right through restitution of the property plus a fine of twenty per cent of its value to the rightful owner. In addition, he must come to the temple in order to perform the required sacrifice so that he may be forgiven of the offense.

**Slander.** The Israelites attach great value to one’s reputation not only because a bad name leads to social stigma but also because it might endanger the life of a person

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<sup>41</sup>M. A. Klopfenstein, “כחש,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 2:607.

especially where the court is involved. The Pentateuch, therefore, makes provision for the protection of the reputation of individual members of the community. Leviticus 19:16 warns against slander: לא-תלך רכיל (“Do not go about as a slanderer against your neighbor”). The noun רכיל (“slanderer”) used here is probably derived from the verb רכל which means to go from place to place as a trader going about peddling his goods (Ezek 17:4; 27:3).<sup>42</sup> It normally occurs with הלך, “to go” (Prov 11:13; 20:19; Jer 6:28; 9:3) to emphasize the point that the person is aggressively going from place to place spreading false information about another person.<sup>43</sup> O’Connell observes that in view of the context where there is a possibility of bloodshed, this person is not merely spreading the false information among the people, but he is deliberately and aggressively working against his neighbor.<sup>44</sup>

A good example of slander is provided in Deuteronomy 22:13-19. This is a situation of what has been called by some, a “case of a slandered bride.”<sup>45</sup> The passage deals with a situation in which a man marries a virgin and, after sexual intercourse on the first night, he hates (שנאה) her and wants a divorce. He then makes עלילת דברים (“baseless charge”) against her claiming that he did not find proof of her virginity. Verses 13 and 19 say that such a false claim gives her a bad reputation (lit.: “evil name”).

In ancient Israel, sex outside marriage was discouraged both before and after marriage (Deut 22:20-30). However, “Israel defined adultery not as a sin against the

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<sup>42</sup>John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC, vol. 4 (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 316.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.; see also Holladay, *A Commentary on the Prophet Jeremiah*, 230.

<sup>44</sup>Robert O’Connell, “רכיל,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGeremen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1115: “Given the possibility of bloodshed described in the context and the syntagm rgl + b- (cf. 2 Sam 19:27[28]), the preposition b- here may be adversative (against) and not just locative (among).”

<sup>45</sup>William W. Hallo, “The Slandered Bride,” in *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1964), 95-105, esp. 101-02; see also Bruce Wells, “Sex, Lies, and Virginal Rape: The Slandered Bride and False Accusation in Deuteronomy,” *JBL* 124, no. 1 (2005): 41-72.

marriage itself, but as a crime against the reproductive and economic rights of the key male figures in a woman's life: her father and her (either potential or actual) husband. At issue is the question of whether her husband can be assured that her children are his offspring.<sup>46</sup>

The problem with this understanding is that a man was likely to take advantage of the woman particularly in the patriarchal society where there was power inequality between the sexes. The provision in Deuteronomy 22:13-19 is intended to protect the woman and the interests of the father. Biddle thinks that because a man had a right to divorce his wife under the Mosaic Law (24:1), the real reason he is making the claim is that he does not want to repay the dowry.<sup>47</sup>

Regardless of the motive, the consequences of his false claim, if believed, are serious. Apart from the possibility of putting the girl in danger considering that this kind of behavior is treated as a capital offense (22:20-21), her reputation will be damaged thus depriving her of the opportunity of getting married again. Also, the parents' reputation and financial well-being is at stake. They risk becoming known as parents who permitted wanton behavior, lost a daughter, and a substantial sum of money. The law, therefore, provides a way of redress.

The father of the girl has a right to challenge the claim of the man before the elders at the gate by producing the necessary evidence to prove the virginity of his daughter. And if it is established that the man's claim is false, he will be flogged, fined a hundred shekels of silver and forced to live with the girl for life. The text condemns the man's behavior because "he has given an Israelite virgin a bad name" (v.19). This is not a behavior that is expected of an Israelite virgin. To falsely attribute such a behavior to her is a serious offense.

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<sup>46</sup>Biddle, *Deuteronomy*, 337.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 338.



**Lying in general.** The Hebrew term for general lying is כזב. Although the term may be used in other contexts, it normally refers to lying during ordinary conversation between people. Klopfenstein says that כזב relates to the “daily intercourse of people one with another, in everyday life, which always offers an abundance of tempting opportunities for the misuse of speech.”<sup>48</sup>

In the Pentateuch כזב is used only once in relation to God. When Balak requests Balaam to curse the Israelites, Balaam declines on the grounds that God has already blessed them. He then says, “God is not a man that he should lie (כזב), nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” (Numb 23:19). The point here is that כזב is not a characteristic of God, but man. God is trustworthy; when he says something he does it (see also 1 Sam 15:29). The implication of this passage for an Israelite who wants to please God is that he should not allow “lies” to be part of his lifestyle.

### **Speech Ethics in Prophetic Literature**

Speech terminology in prophetic literature is mainly used by the “latter prophets.” These are prophets who emerged and spoke to Israel when it was going through historical and moral crisis.<sup>49</sup> Although sometimes they proclaimed a message of comfort, they mostly condemned the nation of Israel for deviating from the covenant faith. One issue for which the Israelites are condemned is the misuse of speech. Prophetic literature deals with speech ethics in the judicial, social, and cultic contexts.

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<sup>48</sup>Klopfenstein, “כזב,” 2:607.

<sup>49</sup>C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 11.

## Perversion of justice

Prophetic literature teaches that the Lord is just and that he requires justice from his people. Amos declares, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24). Micah puts it in form of a question and an answer: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8). The Israelites, especially the clever and the powerful, are condemned for manipulating the judicial system to advance selfish interests. One of the ways justice is perverted is when the guilty is acquitted and the innocent is punished or denied justice (Isa 5:22-23; cf. 1:23; Amos 2:6-7; 5:7, 12, 15).

The classic case of the perversion of justice is found in Isaiah 59.<sup>50</sup> Here, Isaiah is responding to the people who are wondering why they have prayed for rescue and God has failed to answer their prayer. Isaiah tells them that God is not unable or unwilling to respond to the plea of his people, but sin has become a separation between him and them so that he refuses to answer (vv. 1-2). The description of their sin (vv. 3-15) revolves around injustice and violence which they commit against each other:

For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips speak lies (שקר) and your tongue mutters wicked things. No-one enters suit justly; no-one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies (שוא), they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity .... Their deeds are evil deeds, and acts of violence are in their hands. Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths .... Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth (אמת) stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth (אמת) is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled (vv. 3-4, 6b-8a, 14-15a).

The passage presents a sad situation in which the nation has become extremely wicked. The people are anxious to commit sin. They love to speak lies. And the word

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<sup>50</sup>This chapter is often associated with “Trito-Isaiah” of postexilic period. However, many commentators see many links to earlier parts of the book of Isaiah such that it can be placed in the pre-exilic period (see Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Isaiah*, in vol. 6 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 23; A. S. Herbert, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975]).

“justice” is foreign to them. The use of phrases like “acts of violence,” “shed innocent blood,” and “truth stumbles in the public square” (v.14) implies that these sins are probably being committed in public institutions, especially the law courts. If this is the case, then “lying” and “empty pleas” in verse 4 probably refer to the manipulation of the judicial system using falsehood leading to the shedding of innocent blood.<sup>51</sup> The root cause of their wicked actions can be traced back to their internal disposition. Verse 7 says that “their thoughts are evil thoughts” (v. 7; cf. Rom 1:21; Eph 4:17) which automatically will lead to evil actions.

The other important thing to note is the universal condemnation of the people (“no-one”). Sin had eaten into the very soul of the nation and began to spread everywhere. Hanson says: “Reference to lying, wickedness, shedding innocent blood, and running to do evil are not empty generalities. They describe the disintegration of social order as people embrace deceit and brutality to promote their own power and wealth at the expense of others.”<sup>52</sup> The frequent use of the term “justice” in this passage indicates that justice had failed in the land.

### **False oath**

Like Isaiah before him, Jeremiah condemns the Israelites for committing injustice. In 5:1-2, he summons the people to search in the streets and marketplaces of Jerusalem to see if they can find at least one person who acts justly and seeks after faithfulness. The term אֱמוּנָה means “trustworthiness, integrity; it is the trait that enables

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<sup>51</sup>John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 514; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 487-88; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-6*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 282; J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 485.

<sup>52</sup>Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 210; see also Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 514-28; idem, *Isaiah*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 630; Watts, *Isaiah*, 282-84.

one to keep his word, to be counted on.”<sup>53</sup> The qualities of *משפט* and *אמונה* are required in the life of a man who is faithful to the covenant.<sup>54</sup> Jeremiah says that if such a man is found, God will forgive Jerusalem (cf. Gen 18:23-32). Although the language suggests that there is hope, the tone implies that no honest person will be found because the city is extremely corrupt.<sup>55</sup>

The corruption of the people is particularly demonstrated by false oaths: “As surely as the Lord lives, still they are swearing falsely” (v. 3; see also 4:2; 7:9). The phrase, “As surely as the Lord lives,” is an oath formula. The use of the formula in the streets of Jerusalem would have been taken as evidence of sincerity and honesty. But that is not the case. Although they make an oath in the name of the Lord, they are speaking falsehood (“שקר”). This practice is in violation of the covenant stipulation which prohibits swearing falsely (Lev 19:12).

Swearing falsely continues to be condemned in the post-exilic period (Zech 5:3-4; 8:16-17; Mal 3:5), but the tone changes from that of condemnation to exhortation. In Zechariah 8:3-4, the Lord promises to return and dwell in Jerusalem and, at that time, Jerusalem will be called the “City of Truth” (8:3). The use of “truth” here is not only conditioned by its appearance in 8:16,<sup>56</sup> but it is also pointing to the fact that falsehood was a major problem in the pre-exilic period.

Zechariah tells the people that although the Lord had purposed to bring “disaster” upon the nation for the wickedness of “your fathers,” he had now purposed to

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<sup>53</sup>Holladay, *A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah*, 176. Holladay says that the parallel of *משפט* and *אמונה* is also appears in Deut 32:4 which might be the background for Jeremiah’s words.

<sup>54</sup>Thompson says that in prophetic literature, these qualities govern the relations between God and man and between man and his fellow man (see J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 236).

<sup>55</sup>Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*. OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 73; Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley and Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-26*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 87.

<sup>56</sup>David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1-8*, OTL (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 299.

“to do good” (8:14-15). However, they had to fulfill certain ethical demands in order to experience the blessings of restoration (vv. 16-17):

These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the Lord.

The context of this passage lies in the “court system ... made clear by the use of the phrase ‘in your gates’ ... the location where justice was carried out in ancient Israel (cf. Deut 21:19; Ruth 4).”<sup>57</sup> It addresses those who use and those who administer the judicial system. Those who seek justice from the court must speak the truth and not swear falsely. They must not use the court system as tool to destroy others. The “plot” the prophet is warning against here is probably carried out using the court system and almost certainly involves giving false evidence.<sup>58</sup> On their part, the administrators of justice must render true and just decisions in court (cf. 7:9-10). The reason they should not practice “these things” is because the Lord “hates” them (cf. Prov 6:16-19). In spite of this exhortation, the remnant community did not experience any significant change because Malachi is heard condemning them for practicing false oaths and social injustice (3:9-10).

### **Speaking the truth**

Zechariah 8:16 admonishes, “Speak truthfully to each other.” Although this admonition is placed in a legal context and, as such, can easily be construed to have the same effect as the Ninth Commandment that prohibits false witness (Exod 20:16), the use of the formula of reciprocity (“to each other”) probably gives it a general application to

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<sup>57</sup>Mark J. Boda, *Haggai, Zechariah*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 395; see a nuanced view in Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1-8*, 310.

<sup>58</sup>Boda, *Haggai, Zechariah*, 295: “When ‘swearing’ and ‘falsely’ appear together, one also finds references to someone cheating and/or oppressing another (Gen 21:23; Lev 5:22, 24; 19:12; Jer 5:2; 7:9; Mal 3:5).”

situations where a person may be tempted to speak lies during a general conversation between two or more people (cf. Jer 9:4; Ps 15:2-3).<sup>59</sup>

### General Misuse of Speech

There are other places in the prophetic literature where there is a general condemnation of the misuse of speech without making any specific reference to the context. A good example is found in Jeremiah 9:1-8. The chapter begins with Jeremiah's uncontrollable grief over his people's impending judgment (vv. 1-2). He knows the judgment is deserved because all of them are described as people who "commit adultery, an assembly of treacherous (בגדים) people" (v. 2b). Here, "adultery" is probably spiritual because the metaphor of a marital relationship is often used in the prophetic literature to describe the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. In this particular case, Judah has become unfaithful by breaking the requirements of the covenant. בגד means to "act or deal treacherously, faithlessly or deceitfully in a marriage relation, on matters of property or right, in covenants, word or general conduct."<sup>60</sup> Verses 2-7 provide the specifics of the unfaithfulness:

And they make ready their tongue, like a bow, to shoot falsehood (שקר). It is not by faithfulness (אמונה) that they triumph on the land, for they go out from evil to evil. They do not know me," declares the Lord. "Let everyone beware of his neighbor and put no trust in any brother, for every brother surely deceives (עקוב יעקב), and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer (רכיל). Everyone deceives (ללת) his neighbor, and no one speaks the truth (אמת); they have taught their tongue to speak lies (שקר); they tire themselves committing iniquity. Your dwelling is in the midst of deceit and in deceit (מרמה במרמה) they refuse to know me," declare the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: "Behold, I will refine them and try them; for how shall I deal with the daughter of my people? Their tongue is an arrow of slaughter; it speaks deceit (מרמה); with his mouth each speaks peace to his neighbor, but in his heart he has set an ambush for him." "Should I not punish them for this?" declares the Lord. "Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?"

It is important to note the concentration of speech terminology in the passage.

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<sup>59</sup>Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1-8*, 310-11.

<sup>60</sup>BDB, 93.

Holladay notes this phenomenon and suggests that the reason there is a strong emphasis on the use of speech is because “the OT tradition held that one’s speech is an extension of oneself and that one’s speech betrays one’s basic character.”<sup>61</sup> Abundant use of speech terminology here may be Jeremiah’s literary device used for the purpose of effect. He wants the people to understand that the misuse of speech is not only rampant, but it is also an indicator of a much deeper problem, namely, unfaithfulness to the covenant.

Furthermore, the quality of truth which is the foundation of justice and order is non-existent leading to societal breakdown. Everyone uses falsehood, deceit or slander to achieve his goals (vv. 2-5, 7). The tongue is taught to lie (v. 4) and used as a deadly weapon (v. 7) against other people. Everyone is a hypocrite because they do not mean what they say: “With his mouth each [person] speaks peace to his neighbor, but in his heart he has set an ambush for him” (v. 7). Verse 7 emphasizes that the general environment in the community is polluted by deception (v. 5) because almost everyone practices the vice. The situation prompts Jeremiah to advise that no-one should trust his brother or neighbor (v. 3).

Another thing to note is how, like Hosea before him (Hosea 12:3-5), Jeremiah uses the phraseology of Genesis. Verse 3 suggests that “everyone is now living up to the heritage embodied in the name ‘Jacob’ (יעקב), who according to the word-play in Genesis 25:26 and 27:36 ‘deceived’ (עקב) his brother Esau.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, ללח (“deceive”) in verse 4 reminds the reader of Laban deceiving Jacob (Gen 31:7), מרמה of Genesis 27:35 where Isaac reports to Esau that Jacob had taken his blessing deceitfully (במרמה) and the sons of Jacob answering Shechem deceitfully (במרמה) in order to take revenge because he had defiled their sister Dinah (Gen 34:13). In short, the way the Israelites use speech

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<sup>61</sup>Holladay, *A Commentary on the Prophet Jeremiah*, 300; see also Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 167-68; Aubrey R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1949), 47-48.

<sup>62</sup>Holladay, *A Commentary on the Prophet Jeremiah*, 300.

reveals that not only are they extremely wicked, but society has broken down to the point that Jeremiah can only see the impending doom.

### **False Prophecy**

The largest use of speech terminology in prophetic literature is in connection with false prophets. Jeremiah in particular frequently uses שקר when condemning the ministry and influence of false prophets upon the Israelite society. It is not clear why he uses it more than the other prophets. However, its frequent occurrence suggests that the issue of lying or deception had become extremely important during his time.<sup>63</sup> Overholt has identified three ways in which Jeremiah uses the term.<sup>64</sup>

First, שקר is used in chapter 7 to confront the false sense of security that prevents the people from returning back to God: “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord” (7:4). These words are either from the false prophets or represent an idea that was generally acknowledged. The people believed that under no circumstances could Yahweh allow the temple, which was his dwelling place, to be destroyed. Jeremiah informs them that these are דברי השקר (“words of falsehood”) that will not profit them (vv. 4, 8). The only way they and their temple could be spared is if they repented and lived a life that was characterized by justice and mercy (vv. 5-11). If not, the temple would become like Shiloh which was destroyed because of the wickedness of Israel (vv. 12-15; cf. 26:4-6).

Second, he uses שקר when he prophesies against prophetic opponents. In 23:9-40, he particularly focuses on the character of these prophets and their influence on society at large. Both prophets and priests are defiled and their wickedness is found in the

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<sup>63</sup>Richard A. Freund, “Lying and Deception in the Biblical and Post-Biblical Judaic Tradition,” *SJOT* 1 (1991): 54-55.

<sup>64</sup>Thomas W. Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood: A Study in the Theology of the book of Jeremiah*, Studies in Biblical Theology 16 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1979).



Lord's house (v. 11). The condition of the prophets of Judah is worse than that of the prophets of Samaria (vv. 13-14). While the prophets in Samaria worship idols and prophesy by Baal, the ones in Jerusalem have committed physical adultery, והלך בשקר ("walked in falsehood") and encourage the public to continue in their evil ways.

Some scholars think the phrase הלך בשקר means that these prophets were committing idolatry.<sup>65</sup> However, Allen is right when he says that the ethical context for this passage suggests that the false prophets were used to speaking falsehood, a lifestyle that they shared with the general public (9:3, 5). "So neither in word nor in deed did they set a good example."<sup>66</sup>

Jeremiah warns the people of Judah not to listen to the message of these prophets because it is not divinely inspired. The source of their message is their own hearts and not the Lord's mouth (vv. 16-18, 21-22, 26). Second, they give the wicked a false sense of security by pronouncing "peace" instead of warning the people of the impending judgment (v. 17). They prophesy falsehood (שקר) in the name of the Lord (vv. 25-26; see also 5:31; 14:4; 20:6; 27:10, 14-16, 29:9, 21, 23; Isa 9:15) and see false (שקר) visions or dreams. Their message is variously described as false visions or dreams, lying divinations, delusions of their own minds (Jer 14:14; 23:26, 32; Ezek 13:6-9; 21:34[29]; Zech 10:2). They lead people astray by encouraging them to trust in lies (Jer 23:32; 28:15; 29:8, 31).

Whereas Jeremiah uses שקר when he confronts false prophets, Ezekiel uses כזב for the words they speak and שוא for the visions they claim to have seen. Why is this so? Klopfenstein says that because שקר has the meaning of aggressive deceit intended to harm others, it conforms to Jeremiah's "hot breath" while the cooler כזב and שוא are

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<sup>65</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 495; Holladay, *A Commentary on the Prophet Jeremiah*, 632.

<sup>66</sup>Allen, *Jeremiah*, 265.

appropriate for “Ezekiel’s theological reflection.”<sup>67</sup>

### **A Vision of a Golden Age**

The prophets envisioned a golden future in which there will be no misuse of speech. The Messiah, the servant of the Lord, will be characterized by honesty as no deceit will be found on his mouth (Isa 53:9). The Lord will “purify the lips of the peoples” (Zeph 3:9) so that they might worship him. Jerusalem, the holy city, will be purified as the wicked will be removed from it. “The remnant of Israel will do no evil; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths” (Zeph 3:13). Robertson says that this vision of a golden future will partly be fulfilled in the new covenant when God’s ancient people of Israel join the gentile converts to worship God with clean lips purified by the Holy Spirit.<sup>68</sup>

However, its ultimate fulfillment will take place in the future when there will be full restoration of things. The writer of the book of Revelation says that the New Jerusalem, the eternal city of God will be dwelt by people who are pure. Chapters 21 and 22 provide lists of those who will be excluded from entering the New Jerusalem: “all liars” (21:8) and “everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” (22:15)

### **Speech Ethics in Wisdom Literature**

Wisdom books (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job) are mainly concerned with instruction, in that, they inculcate right principles of living and thinking.<sup>69</sup> This section

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<sup>67</sup>Klopfenstein, “שקר,” 3:1403; see also Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood*, 101. The term שקר “implies the operation of destructive power, and is thus peculiarly applicable to the social, political, and religious situation in which the prophet worked.”

<sup>68</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 332-33.

<sup>69</sup>Barry L. Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Wadsworth, 1995), 425; R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 1011.

will mainly focus on the book of Proverbs where the use of speech is extensively addressed.<sup>70</sup> Reference will be made to the other books whenever necessary.

### **Geometric View of Ethics**

One of the unique features in the book of Proverbs is its geometric view of ethics.<sup>71</sup> Living an ethical life is referred to as מִישְׁרִים (“uprightness”) in 8:6. The term מִישְׁרִים is derived from the root יֶשֶׁר which conveys the geometric notion of being straight (horizontally or vertically) or flat. Waltke says that the figurative use of the term “assumes a fixed order to which something can be compared... an order by which action can be judged as straight, upright, and level. The root denotes metaphorically conduct that does not go astray or out of the bounds of this morally fixed order.”<sup>72</sup>

In 2:12-15, a cluster of terms with a geometrical notion is used to exhort the son to embrace wisdom because it will save him from the evil behavior (“way”) of the wicked:

[Wisdom] will snatch you away from the way of evil, from men who speak perversity (תִּהְפֹּכֹת); the ones who abandon straight (יֶשֶׁר) paths to walk in the ways of darkness; the ones who do evil and rejoice in the perverseness (תִּהְפֹּכֹת) of evil; whose paths are crooked (עֲקָשִׁים) and who are devious (וְנִלְוִים) in their ways.

The lifestyle of the wicked is described in a number of ways. First, they use “perverse” (תִּהְפֹּכֹת) speech (v. 12). The term תִּהְפֹּכֹת means “to turn over; to be upside down.” Outside of the book of Proverbs, it only occurs in Deuteronomy 32:20 where it refers to Israel as a generation that turns away from the requirements of the covenant. In Proverbs it often “denotes wickedness in general, but particularly with regard to the use

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<sup>70</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of the Proverbs: Chapter 1-15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 101-02; see also Berend Gemser, *Sprüche Salomos*, Handbuch zum Alten Testament 16 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1963).

<sup>71</sup>Waltke, *The Book of the Proverbs*, 98.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

of speech to achieve evil ends.”<sup>73</sup>

Second, the wicked abandon the divinely established morals (“straight paths”) and walk in darkness (v. 13) which figuratively means to embrace evil behavior. Waltke thinks that because the word עזב (“abandon”) is often used in the law and prophets for Israel’s apostasy from the Lord and his covenant (Deut 28:20; 29:24 [23]; 31:16; Jer 1:16; 9:12 [11]), the wicked here are apostates who have abandoned “true Israel’s piety and morality.”<sup>74</sup> In contrast, Troy says that “abandon” here does not “imply that they had once followed right paths, but only that they have chosen other paths.”<sup>75</sup>

Third, they not only choose evil ways but they find pleasure in them (v. 14). The words “delight” and “rejoice” heighten “abandon” in verse 13 by showing how far the wicked are from the right way. Verse 15 uses עקש and לוז to sum up their general lifestyle. The word עקש means that which is “crooked,” the opposite of “straight paths.” Isaiah uses it to denote rough and crooked places as opposed to smooth plains (42:16). “The word combines the moral pervasiveness of what they say and do (8:8; 19:1; 28:6).”<sup>76</sup> לוז means to “turn aside or depart.” עקש and לוז are functional synonyms to תהפכות in verse 12.

By using geometrical terms to present the righteous lifestyle that a learner should embrace, the book of Proverbs assumes that there is a divinely established moral order from which the wicked deviate. This “moral order” is presented in its various facets by way of admonitions, prohibitions, associations, and contrasts with a view to encouraging the righteous to choose it. One of the areas that this “moral order” deals with

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<sup>73</sup>R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*. New Century Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 53; see also Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 110; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 76.

<sup>74</sup>Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 229.

<sup>75</sup>C. H. Troy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 43.

<sup>76</sup>Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 230.

is how to use speech. The following pages will deal with the various speech terms and ethical issues found in the book of Proverbs.

### **False Witness**

Proverbs use עֵד שֶׁקֶר (“witness of falsehood”) to condemn false testimony (6:19; 12:17; 19:5, 9, 28; 21:28; 24:28; 25:18) and עֵד אֱמֶת (“witness of truth”) to promote truth in legal proceedings (14:5, 25). Like the Pentateuch, it predominantly uses עֵד שֶׁקֶר (“witness of falsehood”) to describe the person who gives false witness (19:5) and כֹּזֵב to refer to the act of lying during legal proceedings. The exception is in 19:28 where the phrase עֵד בְּלִיעַל is used probably to emphasize the destructive intent of this witness similar to that of the “sons of בְּלִיעַל” who maliciously gave false testimony in order to destroy Naboth (1 Kgs 21:10).<sup>77</sup> A false witness is compared to lethal weapons – club, sword and sharp arrow – because of the potential he has to destroy a person’s life and reputation (25:18).<sup>78</sup> However, a truthful witness (“עֵד אֱמֶת”) saves lives (14:25) by providing truthful information that prevents a person who has been falsely accused from being condemned to death.<sup>79</sup>

False testimony is condemned for a number of reasons. First, it is one of the seven things that the Lord hates strongly (“abomination”) in 6:19. Second, the consequences for bearing false testimony are serious. The sages emphasize that a false witness will not go unpunished (19:5); he will perish (19:9; 21:28). It is not clear whether the punishment will come from the legal system or in the form of divine judgment from Yahweh. The latter may be in view considering that the term אָבַד (“to destroy/perish)

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<sup>77</sup>Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC, vol. 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 146; see also William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 529.

<sup>78</sup>McKane, *Proverbs*, 583-84.

<sup>79</sup>Allen P. Ross, *Proverbs*, in vol. 6 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 135.

more often than not speaks of the devastating divine judgment.<sup>80</sup> Wisdom literature takes false testimony as seriously as the Pentateuch.

### **False Accusation**

The judicial system is provided in order to resolve genuine disputes between members of the community. However, sometimes people use the system as tool to advance selfish interests by destroying others. The book of Proverbs, therefore, prohibits a person from plotting to harm his trusting and unsuspecting neighbor: “Do not plot harm against your neighbor, who lives trustfully near you. Do not accuse (תריב) a man without cause (חנם)” (3:29-30). McKane says because תריב is a legal term the implication is that the accusation is made in court.<sup>81</sup> “Such a person will engage in legal proceedings on the flimsiest of pretexts or no pretext at all.”<sup>82</sup>

Proverbs also prohibits one from misusing the court process by being a עד־חנם (“witness without cause”) who testifies to incriminate his neighbor as way of paying off an old grudge (24:28-29): “Do not testify against your neighbor without cause, or use your lips to deceive. Do not say, ‘I’ll do to him as he has done to me; I’ll pay that man back for what he did.’” Since his motive is to get even with his enemy, it is assumed that he will twist the facts or speak falsehood.<sup>83</sup> It is not clear whether the verse envisages the plaintiff or the witness. It may be both because there was no firm distinction between the plaintiff and witness in Israel’s judicial process.

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<sup>80</sup>Cornelis Van Dam, “אבד,” in *The New International Dictionary of Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem Vangemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:224; E. Jenni, “אבד,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1:14.

<sup>81</sup>McKane, *Proverbs*, 300.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 296.

## **Perversion of justice**

Proverbs condemns partiality in the administration of justice: “To show partiality in judging is not good. Whoever says to the guilty, ‘You are innocent,’ peoples will curse him and nations denounce him” (24:23-24). The nature of the perversion of justice here is where the guilty is acquitted and the innocent is condemned probably as result of bribery (see also 17:15, 26; 18:5; 28:21a; cf. Deut 1:17; 6:19).

According to 24:23-24, judicial partiality merits universal condemnation because “confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary can be destroyed [by it], and the basis of common life in equality before the law is called into question.”<sup>84</sup> However, those who administer justice without fear or favor will experience generous blessings - prosperity and honor (24:25). Clifford suggests that this idea of blessing and cursing, in a sense, makes the law court a sacred place.<sup>85</sup>

## **Lying in General**

Proverbs frequently uses לשון שקר (“tongue of falsehood”), שוא (“falsehood”), and כזב (“lies”) to condemn general lying (6:17; 12:19, 22; 19:22; 26:28; 30:8); דבה (10:18) and רָכִיל (11:13; 20:19) to condemn slander; רמיה (19:15), רמה (26:19) and מרמה (12:20) to condemn deceit. Other times, however, terms such as “mouth,” “tongue,” and lips” (e.g. 10:11, 13-14, 18, 20-21 and 31-32) as metonymy for speech are used to condemn and/or offer instruction on the use of speech.

## **General Instruction on Speech**

While speech ethics in Proverbs normally appear in short sayings scattered throughout the book, there are blocks of larger material that deal with the subject.

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<sup>84</sup>MacKane, *Proverbs*, 573.

<sup>85</sup>Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 217.

**Proverbs 10:11, 13-14, 18-21, 31-32.** These verses emphasize the contribution words make either to the wholeness and disintegration of the community. The sage compares the speech (“mouth”) of the righteous to a fountain of life (v. 11). The metaphor of “fountain of life” (see also 13:14; 14:27; 16:22; Ps 36:10) is powerful especially in hot and dry Palestine, where life is impossible without water. Just as a fountain refreshes and sustains physical life, the speech of the righteous brings social health and life through instruction, encouragement, or correction.

In contrast, the speech of the wicked produces destruction or violence (טמח). Proverbs teaches that speech has the potential to destroy and the wicked often uses it as a tool of violence against his enemy. For this reason, lying words are compared to a lethal weapon (25:18; 26:18; cf. Deut19:16; 23:1; Pss 57:4; 120:3-4). Verse 11 encourages one to use words to promote the well-being of the community and not to destroy it.<sup>86</sup>

Verse 13a points out that “wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning” which implies that “the source of masterful speech is the character of the person himself who considers and understands a situation and its outcome”<sup>87</sup> before he speaks. The righteous is constantly increasing or storing his knowledge (v. 14a) and when he speaks, his words are full of wisdom. But the speech of the wicked (fool) indicates that he lacks judgment (v. 13b) and, as such, he can only be directed by physical force using a rod. In fact, his speech brings “ruin” both on himself and others (v. 14b).

Verse 18 emphasizes the importance of being open and honest with words: “He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever brings out injurious report or slander (דבה) is a fool.” Such a person hides hostile feelings against another person under friendly words. Verse 19 warns against the danger of too much talking as it is likely to lead to transgression. The solution is self-control which is a sign of prudence (see also

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<sup>86</sup>Van Leeuwen, “The Book of Proverbs,” 5:111.

<sup>87</sup>Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 462.



12:16; 13:3, 16; 15:11, 23, 28; 17:27-28).<sup>88</sup> The “multitude of words” here refers to the effusive words of the wicked (13:13). Although the words of the righteous are supposed to be few, verse 20 says that they are invaluable like “purified silver” compared to those of the wicked which are of little worth. Indeed, the words of the righteous nourish many (v. 21).

Verse 31 says that the mouth of the righteous “brings out” wise speech while the tongue of the wicked brings out perversity. “Bring out” has the picture of a tree that bears fruit and points to the fact that what a person is from the inside will determine the kind of words he will use (cf. 13). The penalty the wicked will suffer for misusing speech is that his tongue will be “cut out” (v. 32b). Garrett suggests that the idea of “cutting out” is a metaphor that “describes either the community’s rejection of the perverse speaker or divine punishment.”<sup>89</sup> Waltke sees the Lord as the agent of the punishment:

The perverse speech of wicked people ... seeks to overthrow ... [the] ethical order upheld by the LORD and expressed by his revealed wisdom (see 2:12; 8:12). Such speech since it does not conform to Ultimate Reality, is a lie (see 6:24). The LORD is the Agent who cuts their tongue out .... He will uphold his government by purging the subversive speech that defiles his good earth, damage the community, and defies his sovereignty.<sup>90</sup>

The righteous knows the words that are acceptable (v. 32) both to God and man and, therefore, chooses words that fit every occasion. The wicked, however, knows only that which is perverse (false). The way the righteous and the wicked use speech reveals their respective character.

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<sup>88</sup>W. H. Schmidt, “דָּבָר,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis, Geoffrey W. Bromley and David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 3:109: “The Wisdom Literature contains warnings against effusive, rash, flattering, or false speech, and therewith also unwarranted confidence in a person’s words (Prov. 10:19; 14:15, 23; 18:8, 13; 22:12; 26:22; 29:12, 19f.; 30:8; cf. 23:8; Eccl. 5:2f., 7 [1f., 6]; 6:11; 7:8, 21; 10:12ff., 20).”

<sup>89</sup>Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 123.

<sup>90</sup>Waltke, *Proverbs*, 480.

**Proverbs 12:5-6, 12-22.** Verses 5-6 say, “The thoughts of the righteous are just; but the counsels of the wicked are deceitful (מרמה). The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the mouth of the upright delivers them.” The righteous desires to do things that are right and fair. The wicked, however, uses his words like a trap to ensnare and destroy others (“wait for blood”). The second colon suggests that the words of the wicked probably include “slandorous talk, accusations by great men, false testimony in courts of justice, and the like”<sup>91</sup> against which the victim is not able to defend himself. But the righteous uses his words to deliver those who are victims of the schemes of the wicked.

Verses 13-14 point out that every man must face the consequences for his words and actions (see also 14:14). The wicked gets in trouble because of his malicious speech while the righteous is rewarded for his wise, kind, and righteous speech. Verse 17 goes back to the issue of legal testimony. A truthful witness declares words that best serve the interest of justice and the community because the judge can count on them to arrive at the right verdict. But a witness of falsehood perverts justice by lying. Troy says that the prominence given to the crime of perjury indicates that it was a common problem.<sup>92</sup>

Verse 18 warns against thoughtless speech. Words that are spoken without considering the effect are like a lethal sword that wounds, but the words of the wise (righteous) bring healing. Verse 19 contrasts how long a truth and lie in speech will last. Truth endures but a lie lasts for a moment because it will be found out. Verse 20 points out that those who plan evil are driven by a heart that is full of deceit (מרמה) as they do not care about the truth. Verse 22 warns that the Lord detests (תועבת) lying lips (שפת־שקר). תועבת is a term that expresses a strong hatred the Lord has against those

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<sup>91</sup>Troy, *Proverbs*, 244.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 253.

who speak lies. However, he delights in truthful people.

**Proverbs 15:1-2, 4, 28.** The content and method of delivering speech are important because words have the potential for good or for evil. Verse 1 says: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh (“hard”) word stirs up anger.” A “soft” response calms anger in a heated situation, but “harsh” words provoke it (see also 14:17, 29; 16:14; 25:15). McKane suggests that this proverb is characteristic of old wisdom in the ancient Near East which saw speech as an instrument of understanding and reconciliation. For this reason, they looked down upon polemics and passion in personal conversation and insisted on calm and studied appraisal of a situation before a person responded. He says,

The function of speech is to provide a cement for society (cf. Gen. 11) and to resolve or lessen the conflicts between persons which inevitably arise in the social context. It should be an instrument for the calm discussion of differences, and its usefulness is in connection with negotiation and settlement, i.e., with political solutions in the broadest sense. To use it by design in order to create heat and produce alienation solves nothing, and indeed makes the possibility of solution more remote.”<sup>93</sup>

Verse 2 says that a wise (righteous) person is careful in the way he presents his knowledge. The word תיטיב which means to “make good” implies that he presents his information in a way that makes it “acceptable or pleasant to others.”<sup>94</sup> However, when people listen to a fool (wicked), they only hear stupid things.

Verse 4 deals with the effect of speech. The tongue that speaks healing words is a tree of life, but a tongue of סלף crushes the spirit. The word סלף which occurs in the Old Testament only here and in 11:3 means that which is “twisted, perverted or crooked.” Such words crush or wound the spirit of person to whom or about whom they are spoken. Verse 28 says that the righteous thinks before he speaks: “The heart of the righteous

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<sup>93</sup>McKane, *Proverbs*, 477.

<sup>94</sup>Whybray, *Proverbs*, 225.

weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes out evil.” The wicked doesn’t care about the consequences of his words.

**Proverbs 26:18-28.** Verses 18-19 draw a comparison between a “reckless” man who shoots firebrands or deadly arrows and the one who deceives (רמה) his neighbor and claims that he was joking. The point of the comparison is to show that a lying speech is as dangerous as deadly weapons.<sup>95</sup> As the man in v. 18 should know that shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is likely to cause harm to someone so should the one who is involved in deception (v. 19; see also 25:18). A good example is that of the נרגן (“whisperer”) mentioned in verses 20 and 22.

The נרגן comes from the verb רגן which means to “murmur or whisper.” It is the word used when the Israelites grumble against the Lord (Deut 1:27) and in 26:28 נרגן has a negative effect on social relations, in that, he separates close friend. Van Leeuwen suggests that the meaning of the word נרגן “includes malicious gossip, but goes beyond it. It suggests a wrongful verbal attempt to damage the rights, reputation, or authority of another in order to achieve one’s own ends (see 16:28; 18:8; Deut 1:27; Ps 106:25; Isa 29:24).”<sup>96</sup>

Verses 20-21 warn that the words of נרגן fuel interpersonal conflict - quarrels and disputes (ריב) just as wood and charcoal are fuel for fire. Even though his words are harmful, people find them irresistible (v. 22).<sup>97</sup> A listener is warned not to take his words on face value (vv. 23-25). The metaphor of earthenware brings the point home. The covering of the ware with silver dross may give the appearance that it is made of silver, when it is actually all clay. The smooth words of the whisperer cover the evil in his heart.

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<sup>95</sup>Van Leeuwen, *Proverbs*, 225.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 225-26.

<sup>97</sup>Longman, *Proverbs*, 356.

He hates other people (v. 24) in the sense that he disguises himself with good words but harbors deceit (מרמה) in his heart. Therefore, he should not be trusted because the seven abominations fill his heart (v. 25; cf. 6:16-19).

Verses 26-28 indicate that such a man may conceal his intentions, but his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly (publicly). The chapter ends with a warning that the tongue of falsehood hates its victims and the smooth mouth works ruins (v. 28).

### **Two Models of Use of Speech**

The book of Proverbs paints pictures of people who provide two different models of the use of speech. The first one is a good model represented by Woman Wisdom in chapter 8.<sup>98</sup> Woman Wisdom is heard in public places (vv. 1-3) especially at the city gate where people would “congregate to buy and sell, to settle disputes and to transact politics.”<sup>99</sup> She is calling out to her audience to embrace her so that they might gain prudence (vv. 4-5).

Verses 6-11 describe the content of her speech. First, it is flawless (vv. 6-9). All the words of her mouth/lips are “upright,” “true,” and “just” and none of them is “crooked or perverse.” She has a godly characteristic because falsehood is an abomination to her (v. 7; cf. 6:16-19). Second, her teaching is invaluable, in that, it cannot be compared with precious things like gold, silver and rubies (vv. 10-11).

Verses 12-13 say that her character exemplifies the “fear of God” because she hates what is evil including pride, arrogance, evil behavior, and a perverse (תהפכות) speech. The text emphasizes her honest speech “in view of the abuse of speech on the part of the wicked”<sup>100</sup> and draws a “stark contrast with the scoundrel in 6:12.”<sup>101</sup> While

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<sup>98</sup>The editors may have intentionally placed this material here probably to draw a contrast between her and the prostitute in chapter 7.

<sup>99</sup>Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 395.

<sup>100</sup>Murphy, *Proverbs*, 50.

the description of her use of speech is probably preparing the reader to receive her words in the rest of the chapter and indeed the whole book, Longman makes a very important observation: “Many proverbs to follow in chaps. 10-31 will concern speech, and we will see that the wise persons emulate Woman Wisdom in this regard.”<sup>102</sup>

In contrast with the model of Woman Wisdom, Proverbs provides a bad model of the use of speech represented by אדם בליעל (“scoundrel”) whose character is described in 6:12-19 and 16:27-30. The etymology of בליעל is uncertain and debated.<sup>103</sup> The word is probably a compound noun that comes from בלי (“not, without”) and the verb יעל (“to be useful, beneficial”)<sup>104</sup> which may suggest that בליעל means “useless,” or “worthless.” However, the way it is used in the Bible (Deut 13:14; Judges 19:22; 1 Sam 1:16; 2:12; 25:25; 2 Sam 16:7; 1 Kgs 21:13; 2 Chr 13:7) conveys the idea of a person that is not just “useless” but “deeply depraved and wicked”;<sup>105</sup> “malicious and destructive.”<sup>106</sup> It is interesting to note that later Jewish literature and Paul use the same word when making reference to the devil (2 Cor 6:15).<sup>107</sup>

Clifford says that 6:12-15 describes this person in his “essence (v. 12a), demeanor (vv. 12b-13), inner life (v. 14a), effect upon society (v. 14b), and destiny (v. 15).”<sup>108</sup> Verse 12a refers to him as אדם בליעל (see also 16:27). His character is presented in a number of ways (vv. 12b-14). First, he walks about with a פה עקשית (“crooked

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<sup>101</sup>Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 234.

<sup>102</sup>Longman, *Proverbs*, 200.

<sup>103</sup>Otzen, “בליעל,” 2:131-33.

<sup>104</sup>Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 342.

<sup>105</sup>Ross, “Proverbs,” 6:151; Toy, *The Book of Proverbs*, 125-26; Andrew E. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 169.

<sup>106</sup>Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 169.

<sup>107</sup>Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 343; see also Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 220; Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 169.

<sup>108</sup>R. J. Clifford, *Proverbs*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 76.

mouth”). “Crooked mouth” is an idiomatic expression that refers to the general misuse of speech especially falsehood.<sup>109</sup> The same expression is used in 4:24 to warn against embracing the lifestyle of the wicked: “Keep away from you, a crooked mouth ( עקשוֹת פה); [keep] devious lips far from you.” In 16:27 the speech of בליעל is described as “scorching fire” because of the harm it inflicts on his victims. In 19:28 he is a malicious witness who mocks at justice by giving false evidence.

Second, he “winks with his eyes, signals with his feet, and motions with his fingers” (v. 13). The meaning of this signs is not clear from the text. McKane thinks that this body language has to do with some kind of magical acts that are intended to harm one’s neighbor.<sup>110</sup> However, it is better to see it as non-verbal communication intended for “malevolent purposes.”<sup>111</sup> That this is the case is supported by 16:30 which states that a person who uses such signals is “plotting perversity” and is “bent on evil.” In 6:14, the scoundrel plots and executes his evil plans with deceit (תהפכוֹת) in his heart (v. 14a). The effect is that he causes bitter conflicts in the community (v. 14b; see also 16:28). Verses 12-14 suggest that בליעל uses speech to execute his evil plans. “Whether by persuasion (mouth) or by innuendo(the body language of his eyes, feet, and fingers), he spreads conflict by the message he sends, seeking to destroy others by harming their reputation and by playing on the willingness of people to listen to disparaging things about others.”<sup>112</sup>

Verse 15 declares that the scoundrel will meet a sudden and definite destruction. The agent of the destruction is not stated. Waltke thinks that the destruction is due to the divine wrath for two reasons.<sup>113</sup> First, according to the wisdom thought,

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<sup>109</sup>Murphy, *Proverbs*, 38.

<sup>110</sup>McKane, *Proverbs*, 325.

<sup>111</sup>Van Leeuwen, “The Book of Proverbs,” 5:76.

<sup>112</sup>Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 170.

<sup>113</sup>Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 345; see also Toy, *The Book of Proverbs*, 127.

there is a connection between a person's deeds and his destiny. Yahweh's punishment is an inevitable consequence for all who have committed wickedness (Job 21:19; 31:3). The second reason is related to the close contextual, verbal and conceptual connection between vv. 12-15 and vv. 16-19.<sup>114</sup> Verses 16-19, catalogues seven vices which the Lord "hates" and are an "abomination" (תועבת) to him (v. 16): pride, lying, murder, evil plots, swiftness to do evil, false witness, and causing dissension among brothers. The term תועבת frequently occurs in proverbs (3:32; 11:1, 20; 12:22; 15:8-9; 16:5; 17:15; 20:10) and indicates intense divine hatred against something because it is incompatible with Yahweh's holiness and moral order.<sup>115</sup> Waltke says: "The first verse of the catalogue implicitly identifies the Lord as the Agent (v. 16) of the punishment predicted in the last verse of the first stanza (v. 15)."<sup>116</sup>

There are other short passages that touch on the use of speech. It is said that a person who guards his lips guards his life (13:3) and he will keep himself from calamity (21:23). Good and honest words are compared to a "kiss in the mouth" (24:26); "honeycomb" (16:24). Proverbs maintain that it is better to be a truthful person than to possess wealth (19:1, 22). And wealth made by a "lying tongue" is temporary and a deadly snare (21:6). All these sayings emphasize the importance of speaking the truth.

### Conclusion

The Pentateuch, prophetic and wisdom literature address speech ethics from different angles but converge on one point; the purpose of speech ethics is to create and

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 341-42.

<sup>115</sup>Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 280; see also M. A. Grisanti, "תעב," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:314; J. Klein and Y. Sefati, "The concept of 'Abomination' in Mesopotamian Literature and the Bible," *Beer-Sheva* 3 (1988): 131-48; Longman, "Proverbs," 5:485; Ronald E. Clements, "The Concept of Abomination in Proverbs," in *Texts Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Mendham Haran*, ed. M. V. Fox et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 211-40; Whybray, *Proverbs*, 100.

<sup>116</sup>Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 341.



maintain a just, fair, and stable society. The Pentateuch is almost exclusively prescriptive. It contains laws and regulations which were issued during the formation of the Israelites into a covenant community on Mount Sinai and reissued on the plains of Moab, to prescribe how the members of the community were to behave when they settled in the Promised Land.

The laws and regulations dealing with the use of speech are intended to create the kind of community where everyone is protected and/or treated fairly. One way of achieving this objective is by establishing a legal system that functions properly. For this reason, false accusation, false testimony, false oaths are strongly prohibited. The judge is admonished to be impartial in the administration of justice. The other way justice is promoted in the community is through the laws and regulations that protect personal property and reputation.

Speech terminology in the prophetic literature is similar to the one in the Pentateuch. The difference is that, while the Pentateuch uses the terminology when prescribing the way the Israelites should use speech as part of the covenant stipulations, the prophets use the terminology in the context of castigating the Israelites for violating those stipulations.

As it was pointed out above, the purpose of the requirements on the proper use of speech was to create a just society in which everyone, especially the weak, is treated fairly. The prophetic literature reveals that at the time the prophets were conducting their ministry, the society had completely broken down going by the absence of honesty, justice and fairness, the ethical qualities of society that were envisaged by the covenant. At that time, people misused the court as a means of advancing personal interest through false accusations and testimony. The judges perverted justice after being compromised with bribery. The end result was that violence and/or shedding of innocent blood were common. The guilty was acquitted and the innocent was condemned. Dishonesty was so

rampant that Jeremiah advises the people of Judah not to trust his close relative or friend. The prophets who should have been the conscience of the society misguided the Israelites, through falsehood, to continue with a life of sin. However, the prophets envision a golden age when there will be no more falsehood as the Lord will purge Jerusalem his holy city.

Wisdom literature, especially Proverbs presents speech ethics as a product of the reflection of the wise which they pass on to the youth so that they might live a God-fearing life. Like the Pentateuch and prophetic literature, the book of Proverbs condemns false accusation, false testimony, false oaths and slander and promotes truthful speech in legal and social contexts. However, it contains three additional things.

First, it has a geometric view of ethics, in that, God has established a moral order and anyone who deviates from it is “crooked” or has strayed from the “straight” path. Second, it emphasizes the necessity of one controlling his speech. In other words, one should think before speaking. Third, it stresses the relationship between one's speech and his character. Speech reflects what is inside of a person (cf. Matt 12: 33-34; Luke 6:45).

## CHAPTER 4

### DOES THE HEBREW PSALTER PROVIDE ETHICAL INSTRUCTION?

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 3 has shown that the rest of the books of the Old Testament have a strong emphasis on speech ethics. Before looking at what the Hebrew Psalter says about the subject, it is necessary, first, to find out whether the book provides any instruction, ethical or otherwise. This question is significant for two important reasons. First, it is generally agreed that the Hebrew Psalter served as a hymnal, in that, the psalms were prayed and/or sung in the first and second temples and, later on, in the Jewish synagogue and Christian Church. In what way, then, can the words of the Psalter that were addressed to God be said to be providing ethical instruction? Second, the Hebrew Psalter now forms part of Scripture. What change, if any, does this canonical status bring to its traditional function? Biblical interpreters have approached these questions in different ways.

#### **Pre-Critical Approach**

Prior to the rise of Historical-Critical Method in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the question as to whether the Psalter provided ethical instruction would have been answered in the affirmative. Although the psalms continued to be sung in worship services, their contents were also used for personal edification in private meditation and for instruction during preaching and teaching. McCann says, “the so-called pre-critical interpreters (that is, biblical interpreters before the rise of historical

criticism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) regularly gave attention to the question of how the psalms instruct the faithful; it would never have occurred to them not to ask questions of content and theology.”<sup>1</sup>

Calvin, who comes from that period, says, “Psalms are replete with all the precepts which serve to frame our life to every part of holiness, piety, and righteousness.”<sup>2</sup> The pre-critical interpreters, therefore, sought to understand the meaning of the individual psalms because they believed that the psalms served both liturgical and didactic purposes.

### **Form-Critical Approach**

With the rise of the historical-critical method, the study of the book of Psalms underwent a transformation especially in the scholarly circles. According to the historical-critics, the individual psalms were the work of pious people composed primarily for private devotion or in response to some historical event. For that reason, the scholar sought to determine the authors, circumstances and date of composition of the individual psalms. Herman Gunkel felt that this approach to the study of psalms was unsatisfactory.<sup>3</sup> He suggested that the main task of interpretation should be to categorize each psalm according to its literary form and to identify the life situation (*sitz im leben*) in which it arose and/or was used.<sup>4</sup> With regard to function, he said that the earliest psalms

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<sup>1</sup>J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>2</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), xxxviii-xxxix.

<sup>3</sup>Hermann Gunkel, *Psalms*, trans. Thomas Horner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 10; see also Jerome F. D. Creach, “The Psalms and the Cult,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 121.

served a liturgical purpose in a cultic setting. However, beginning from eighth century onwards, a large number of non-liturgical (“spiritual”) psalms were developed, modeled after the liturgical psalms, to be used by the pious in their private meditation. These psalms gained popularity in the post-exilic period leading to their incorporation into the temple worship alongside the liturgical psalms.<sup>5</sup>

Mowinckel took issue with Gunkel on this point.<sup>6</sup> He maintained that psalms were composed primarily for use in the public worship of ancient Israel.<sup>7</sup> He, however, recognized ‘wisdom psalms’ as a distinct category. These psalms, which he called “learned psalmography,” were produced by the ‘wise men’ of Israel to serve as a resource for instruction in wisdom schools that were attached to the temple. The liturgical and ‘wisdom’ psalms were joined together to form the Psalter in the post-exilic period. Since Mowinckel, form critics have argued that “the psalms were always human words to God, and as such their teaching function was limited to the wisdom psalms, and the more important questions were really to do with the access that they gave to the cult.”<sup>8</sup>

Whybray thinks that the idea of drawing a firm distinction between liturgical and ‘wisdom psalms’ in terms of function is not only mistaken but also represents a narrow view of worship for three reasons.<sup>9</sup> First, there was a close connection between

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<sup>5</sup>Gunkel, *Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, 26-29.

<sup>6</sup>Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas, vol. 2 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>8</sup>David G. Firth, “The Teaching of the Psalms,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 160.

<sup>9</sup>R. N. Whybray, “The Wisdom Psalms,” in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 154.

“religious observance and instruction” in ancient Israel. For instance, in Exodus 12:25-27, the Israelites are commanded,

When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony [Passover]. And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’

The observance of Passover was a worship activity that involved sacrifice.

Whenever they observed it, the Israelites were commanded to give an explanation to their children concerning its meaning. Here, religious observance and instruction are seen taking place simultaneously in the same worship activity.<sup>10</sup> Second, “all liturgical texts have a didactic function in that the confessions of faith which they make are also a kind of self-instruction in which worshippers remind themselves of the articles of that faith.”<sup>11</sup>

Third, if wisdom schools were attached to the temple, as suggested by Mowinckel, and that the temple staff (e.g., priests, singers, and scribes) acted as instructors, then ‘wisdom psalms’ were most likely recited during worship in addition to being a resource for instruction. “This would account for the fact, often felt to be difficult to account for, that these psalms came to be incorporated into a Psalter consisting mainly psalms of a liturgical character.” According to Whybray, therefore, all the psalms can serve both liturgical and didactic functions.

Although form criticism became dominant for almost a century, some scholars began pointing out its limitations and calling for a new approach. Muilenburg had problems with “its occasional exaggerations, and especially its tendency to be too

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<sup>10</sup>Anthony R. Ceresko, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 162. Ceresko says that the idea of having instruction during worship is not new as it was generally practiced in ancient shrines and temples: “Undoubtedly there were moments [during worship] when some instruction took place. The people were reminded of their covenant obligations and encouraged to faithful observance.” He cites Ps 112 as one of the psalms that may have been sung by the choir or recited by a Levite to instruct the assembly. Using vv. 5 and 9, he argues that the psalm “focuses on the covenant stipulations and provides a motivation for faithful obedience.”

<sup>11</sup>R. N. Whybray, “The Wisdom Psalms,” 154.

exclusive in its application of the method.”<sup>12</sup> He proposed, therefore, that it should be supplemented with ‘rhetorical criticism’ that takes seriously the rhetorical or literary features of each psalm so that one may gain a better understanding of its meaning.<sup>13</sup>

Childs went a step further by declaring that form criticism seemed “now to be offering diminishing returns.”<sup>14</sup> The reason for this assessment is that because form criticism was focused mainly on the form of the text and the circumstances in which it was used, and not on its content, it did not provide a theologically relevant interpretation that would benefit the community of faith. The other reason is that more often than not the *Sitz im Leben* that it developed rested on an “extremely fragile and hypothetical base.”<sup>15</sup> He suggested that a new approach to the study of Psalms be developed that would look at the text in its finished form in order to capture the message of the psalms for the instruction of the faithful. The weaknesses of form criticism prompted Childs to introduce Canonical Criticism as an alternative method of studying the bible especially the Psalter.<sup>16</sup>

### **Canonical Approach**

Childs proposed that when interpreting the Psalter, a scholar should attend to the final form of the text as scripture that is meant to instruct the community of faith. He argued that during the process of final redaction, a “hermeneutical shift” took place within ancient Israel that “loosened the psalms from a given cultic context”<sup>17</sup> which

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<sup>12</sup>James Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *JBL* 88 (1969): 4.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 7-9.

<sup>14</sup> Brevard Childs, “Reflections on the Modern Study of the Psalms,” in *Magnalia Dei, The Mighty Acts of God: Essays in Honor of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. F. M. Cross, W. E. Lemke, and P. D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 378.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1979). Although Canonical Criticism has not attracted general consensus, its lasting impact has been felt in the study of Psalms.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 515.

transformed the words of men (prayers) initially addressed to God into God's word to men for the purpose of instruction.

This process of transformation took place through the selection and placement of the individual psalms in the final text. Of particular importance to Childs' method is the placement of Psalm 1 at the present position which, he argued, was meant to serve as an introduction to the Psalter and to provide clues on how the Psalter is to be understood.<sup>18</sup> He identified two terms in verse 1 that provided those clues. The first one is *torah*. Because of the parallels between Deuteronomy 30, Joshua 1, and Psalm 1, Childs thought that the meaning of *torah* as used here includes the Psalter. The other term is הַגָּה. Although this term is normally translated "meditate," it refers "primarily to the practice common among the ancients generally of reading to oneself aloud or half aloud – it was evidently a private, personal activity, and there can be no doubt that it was a prayerful one."<sup>19</sup>

The use of these two terms in chapter 1 led Childs to conclude that the Psalter is now to be

... read, studied and meditated upon .... Indeed, as a heading to the whole Psalter the blessing now includes the meditation on the sacred writings which follow. The introduction points to these prayers as the medium through which Israel now responds to the divine word. Because Israel continues to hear God's word through the voice of the psalmist's response, these prayers now function as the divine word

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<sup>18</sup>There is a general consensus on this point. See W. Brueggemann, "Bounded by Obedience and Praise," *JSOT* 50 (1991): 63-93; J. L. Mays, "The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter," *JBL* 106 (1987): 3-12; A. R. Ceresko, "The Sage in the Psalms," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. G. Gammie and L. G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990): 217-30; J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Shape of Book I of the Psalter and the Shape of Human Happiness," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 341; idem, "The Psalms as Instruction," *Interpretation* 46 (1992): 117-28; Whybray, "The Wisdom Psalms," 155-57; idem, *Reading the Psalms as a Book*. JSOTSup 222 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 38; Phil J. Botha, "Intertextuality and the Interpretation of Psalm 1," in *Psalms and Mythology*, ed. Dirk J. Human (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007), 58; G. H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. The Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); idem, "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Interpretation* 46 (1992): 129-42.

<sup>19</sup>Whybray, "The Wisdom Psalms," 154. See also J. L. Mays, "The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter," *JBL* 106 (1987): 3-12; A. R. Ceresko, "The Sage in the Psalms," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. G. Gammie and L. G. Perdue, 217-30 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).



itself. The original cultic role of the psalms has been subsumed under a larger category of the canon. In an analogy to Israel's wisdom collection the study of the Psalter serves as a guidebook along the path of blessing.<sup>20</sup>

Childs' student, Gerald Wilson, agreed with his master and went a step further by making a systematic effort to show that the Psalter in its final form contains evidence of being a single, purposefully arranged work.<sup>21</sup> According to Wilson, "torah" in 1:2 refers to the Psalter itself and, as such, its primary function is to offer instruction just like the Pentateuch.<sup>22</sup>

Miller agrees with Childs and Wilson when he says,

The placing of this Psalm [1] as the introduction to the Psalter serves to lift up the role of the whole collection of Psalms as a book of instruction for true piety and ethics and not just a book of liturgy for worship of the community of faith.<sup>23</sup>

Grant summarizes the implications of the canonical view of the Psalter as a book for instruction.<sup>24</sup> First, the book of Psalms is to be treated as torah itself. "The reader is to meditate on all that follows as instruction from God and to seek to live by its

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<sup>20</sup>Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 513.

<sup>21</sup>Gerhard H. Wilson, "Evidence of Editorial Divisions in the Hebrew Psalter," *VT* 34 (1984): 337-52; idem, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, The Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); idem, "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *JSOT* 35 (1986): 85-94; idem, "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Interpretation* 46 (1992): 129-42; On his caution against pressing this conclusion too far without concrete evidence and argumentation, see Gerhard H. Wilson, "A Consideration of Editorial Linkages in the Book of Psalms," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, 72-82, ed. J. C. MacCann, Jr., *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 159 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); idem, "Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter: Pitfalls and Promise," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, 42-45.

<sup>22</sup>See also James L. Mays, *The Lords Reigns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 121-22; Klaus Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms*, trans. R. G. Dumpy (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), 24; J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Book of Psalms," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 665-66. Although the term torah is derived from a Hebrew verb which means "to teach or instruct" and might, therefore, lead one to conclude that "torah" in 1:2 generally means "instruction," it is not a sufficient reason to conclude that in using this term, the redactors had in mind the Psalter. While this is a possibility, it is better to understand it as referring primarily to the Law of Moses. See Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 318: "Even though the term *tôrâ* in the introductory Psalm 1 may have had the general sense of "instruction" for the ultimate redactor, so that the term "Law" is used of the Psalter even in the NT, notably by Jesus in the Gospel of John (John 10:34; 15:25), we can be sure the reader of the Psalter would be reminded particularly of Sinai by that word, and a specific Sinai reference was almost certainly in the mind of the Psalmist himself. Pondering life in light of both of Mosaic Law and of the Psalter is the true path to wisdom."

<sup>23</sup>Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 86.

<sup>24</sup>Jamie A. Grant, *The King As Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Psalms* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

teaching as much as the teaching of the Pentateuch.”<sup>25</sup> Second, the Psalter has been removed from a cultic setting and placed “firmly into a didactic context.”<sup>26</sup> Third, the Psalter’s “presentation of life and spirituality is to be understood from the perspective of a Deuteronomic world – and – life view.”<sup>27</sup> That the canonical process has elevated the Psalter into a book of instruction (*torah*) is further supported by its five divisions in order to correspond to the Pentateuch. The idea that the Psalter provides instruction, however, is not new as Mowinckel had already arrived at the same conclusion. After considering the purpose for compiling the Psalter, he says,

From the standpoint of the wise the psalms as inspired poetry would also contain instruction – exhortation, admonition, chastisement, comfort – for the religious life, and also give expression to the hope for, and the promise of restoration of Israel. It could and ought to teach a pious and righteous man the ‘way of life’, so that he might become wise and lead a godly life, but it also ought to point the kind of destiny that would befall the ungodly and unrighteous, ‘who walketh in the counsel of the ungodly and sitteth in the seat of the scornful’. It would help a man to fear Yahweh, ‘to delight in the law of Yahweh and meditate in his law’ – theoretically and practically – ‘day and night’, as it is expressed in the prefatory psalm.<sup>28</sup>

In view of the foregoing, there is general consensus among scholars that the Psalter could provide instruction. The question is, by what means? Mays has identified a number of “strategies of composition” that he believes were used to implement the purpose of instruction.<sup>29</sup> First, sentences where the psalmist is exhorting, warning and/or

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 54. While Whybray agrees that the book of Psalms took on a didactic function soon after its compilation, he does not see much evidence that it was compiled for that purpose. See Norman Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 222 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>28</sup>Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2: 205. Note that Mowinckel believes the redactors of the Psalter were the learned – “scribes”/ “wise” – who were interested in collecting, preserving and transmitting ancient sacred traditions of authoritative character.

<sup>29</sup>James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 28-29.

resolving to embrace or avoid a certain way of conduct (Pss 25:8-10; 37; 33:16-17) clearly contain some kind of ethical instruction. Second, the acrostic feature that organizes some psalms on the basis of the Hebrew alphabet (Pss 9-10; 25; 33; 37; 111-112; 119; 145) suggest that the psalms were most likely used for instruction because the acrostic feature served the purpose of memorization. Third, the psalms with beatitudes (*ʿashre* sayings) that commend a certain way of life are offering instruction to the reader (e.g., 1:1; 119:1). Fourth, the narration of a personal (Ps 34) or national experience (Ps 78) which invites the reader or listener to experience the same or warns against repeating the same mistake is intended to instill certain principles of life. Fifth, some psalms contain prophetic speech (e.g., Ps 50). This type of psalms not only point out the sins that the faithful have committed but also calls them back to God. Finally, emphasis on specific topics like the torah as the means by which the relationship with God is maintained or which contrast the way of life and destiny of the wicked and the righteous (Pss 1, 19, 119) is didactic.

On his part, Firth sees two ways in which the Psalter provides instruction.<sup>30</sup>

First, by the mere fact of canonization the Psalter has become a book of instruction to the faithful. He says,

Even a minimalist approach which does not detect overarching structural themes, can still recognize the importance of understanding the instructional function of the psalms as a book. This is because the very process of canonical collection means that the 150 psalms now gathered together are seen as playing a special role within the life of Israel. Their place within the canon also means that they have a further role beyond the issues studied by the form-critical approach. That is, their very status as scripture means that they now have a teaching role. Even if it is not possible to recover the editorial process in full, it can still be argued that the psalms are indeed intended to teach.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Firth, "The Teaching of the Psalms," 161-74.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 162.

Second, he sees various teaching strategies employed at the level of individual psalms and the whole book. At the individual level, he identifies three of them: testimony, admonition and observation. Testimony is the act of reciting past experiences using the first person verbs to provide the community with a new insight into a situation. While the testimony does not guarantee that the listener's problem will be resolved in a similar way, it challenges him to work towards the same insight in their experience.<sup>32</sup>

Psalm 34 is a good example of testimony.<sup>33</sup> Verses 1-3 contain the psalmist's promise to glorify the Lord always and an invitation for others to join him. Verses 4-7 present the actual testimony in which the psalmist narrates how the Lord delivered him from trouble when he prayed. However, he insists that his prayer was answered because he fears the Lord. In verses 8-10, he invites his audience to experience the saving goodness of the Lord. But he reminds them that they can only experience his salvation if their lives are characterized by the fear of the Lord. What is meant by the "fear of the Lord" is defined in verses 11-14 in ethical terms. He then concludes the psalm by reemphasizing that the Lord hears the prayers of the righteous and delivers them from trouble. This psalm is not only a comfort to the person experiencing trouble, but also instructs him on what it means to live a life that pleases the Lord and the results that flow from it.

The second teaching strategy at the level of the individual psalms is in the form of admonition. An admonition is an appeal made in the second person when an urgent

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 165. For further discussion on this issue, see David G. Firth, "Testimony as Instruction: Psalms that Share the Experience of Violence with the Community," *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology* 7 (1998): 12-22; idem, "Psalms of Testimony," *Old Testament Essays* 12 (1999): 440-54; I. G. P. Gous, "Reason to Believe: Cognitive Strategy in the Acrostic Psalm 34," *Old Testament Essays* 12 (1999): 455-67.

<sup>33</sup>The other psalms are 18; 32; 40; 73; 116; 124; 138.

action is required.<sup>34</sup> Firth says that admonition is more concerned with the change of behavior rather than merely conveying information to the listener or reader.<sup>35</sup>

Psalm 136, for example, summons Israel to give thanks to the Lord: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good” (v. 1). The immediate action that needs to take place is “giving thanks to the Lord.” And the motivation is the Lord’s goodness and eternal love (vv. 4-25) as demonstrated in his powerful creative activity and deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and in the wilderness and in settling them in the Promised Land. The Lord is not only good to Israel, but also to all creatures in the sense that he provides them with what they need continually.

The third teaching strategy is observation. It is normally presented in the third person and is more descriptive rather than prescriptive:

It involves psalms pointing towards either certain types of behavior and their outcomes or key theological concepts as a means of guiding toward appropriate behaviour. As a teaching method, it refrains from actually appealing for this behaviour. Rather, it describes certain realities and then leaves it to the reader to decide how to respond.”<sup>36</sup>

In Psalm 1, the respective character and destiny of the righteous and the wicked are described and presented as two ways of life. The description points to observable phenomena with the purpose of encouraging the reader or listener to make a choice. From the perspective of the psalmist, it is clear that he would prefer the choice of the righteous way. The method of observation, therefore, “seeks to shape the character of the reader through the recognition of what is described, but not through directive instruction.”<sup>37</sup>

At the level of the whole book, Firth suggests that the redactors utilize two

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<sup>34</sup>The other psalms using this method are 37; 49; 115; 130; 136.

<sup>35</sup>Firth, “The Teaching of the Psalms,” 167.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 169.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 170. The other psalms that utilize the method include 8; 14; 19; 24; 46; 103; 105.

ways to achieve their instructional goals. The first way is “thematic modeling.” This idea of modeling is a phenomenon in the Psalter where the redactors have selected several psalms with common themes and placed them together or spread them throughout the entire book. When a reader is repeatedly exposed to these themes, for example, prayer or the threat of violence and response to it, he will learn something about how to pray and behave. “Teaching under this model occurs through repeated exposure to patterns of prayer and behaviour, so that the instruction is inculcated indirectly through repetition.”<sup>38</sup>

The other way the redactors have employed for instruction at the level of the whole book is “intratextual dialogue.” The Psalter “sets up a dialogue within itself such that the various psalms can provide both commentary on and specification of the application of other psalms.”<sup>39</sup> Take, for instance, the theme of suffering. Psalm 1 seems to suggest that suffering does not come to the righteous. However, this is contrary to the experience of the psalmist who is facing a threat of violence in Psalm 3. How does one deal with what seems to be a contradiction? Firth says that Psalm 18 provides a solution by insisting that “the threat of violence is not the end, and Yahweh does act on behalf of his people and deliver them from such threats. This then provides a context for both Pss. 1 and 3 – blessing is not the absence of struggle, but neither does the presence of struggle mean the failure of the observation of Ps. 1.”<sup>40</sup>

The other theme is that of kingship. The fact that Psalm 89 and other so-called royal psalm were retained or included in the post-exilic setting when the Psalter was finally edited suggest that, in spite of the current experience, the Israelite community was looking forward with hope expecting Messiah to come from the lineage of David and establish his eternal kingdom as God promised. Firth says that this idea of “intratextual

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 171.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 172-73.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 173.

dialogue” might be the reason for “reading through the Psalter in sequence.”<sup>41</sup>

The person who has really brought to the forefront the issue of the ethics of the Psalms is Wenham.<sup>42</sup> In his article, “The Ethics of the Psalms,” he sounded an alarm that the ethics of Psalms is an “area that seems to have been largely overlooked by recent biblical scholarship.”<sup>43</sup> He has led the way in addressing the problem through his recent publication, *Psalms as Torah*.<sup>44</sup> As the title suggests, Wenham is of the view that Psalms provide instruction (*torah*), and as such, they have something to say about ethics.<sup>45</sup> This view is based on a number of reasons. First, “the Psalms have much to say about behavior, about what actions please God and what he hates, so that anyone praying them is simultaneously being taught an ethic.”<sup>46</sup>

Second, the psalms offer a unique mode of teaching ethics in the Old Testament. As prayers or songs, the psalms are powerful and effective tools for imparting ethical values more than even the law, wisdom or story. The ethics in the law, wisdom or story (narrative) may be learned passively, in that, when people are taught or read for themselves they may give assent but there is no way of knowing if they have committed themselves to doing what they have learned. However, when they pray the psalms ethically, they are not only involved in “giving assent to the standards of life implied in the psalms” but they also commit themselves to a “path of action.”<sup>47</sup> This exercise is a

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 174.

<sup>42</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, “The Ethics of the Psalms,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnson (Downers Grove, IL : IVP Academic, 2005), 175-94; idem, “Prayer and Practice in the Psalms,” in *Psalms and prayers* (Leiden: Brill, 2007): 279-95

<sup>43</sup>Wenham, “The Ethics of the Psalms,” 194.

<sup>44</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Songs Ethically*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 57, 64.

solemn affair. “When you pray a psalm, you are describing what actions you will take and what you will avoid. It is more like taking an oath or making a vow.”<sup>48</sup>

Wenham supports his arguments by applying insights from the works of Dorothea Erbele-Küster<sup>49</sup> and Donald Evans.<sup>50</sup> Erbele-Küster says that the Psalter contains instructional devices that would influence the reader’s perspective on ethical issues. The first one is the sequencing of the psalms during the process of redaction. For example, reference to the Davidic house followed by several psalms with the title “By David” would cause a reader to value them because they represent the “words and experiences of the Israel’s greatest king.”<sup>51</sup> The Davidic titles “give the psalms a paradigmatic quality and encourage the later reader to identify with their sentiments.”<sup>52</sup>

Second, the Psalter pronounces the lifestyle of the person that is “blessed” (1:12:12; 84:12; 119:1). These pronouncements present the kind of lifestyle that the reader or worshipper should embrace. The third device is the use of the first person. When the psalmist resolves to do something or testifies about his personal experience or shares about general lessons he has learned (e.g., Ps 34:1, 8, 11-14, 19) and invites his audience to do the same, he is offering instruction to his audience.<sup>53</sup> This device is similar to what Firth calls “testimony” in the preceding pages. Fourth, sometimes the psalmists present the behavior and destiny of the wicked. This device is meant to act as deterrence

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>49</sup>Dorothea Erbele-Küster, *Lesen als Akt des Betens: Eine Rezeptions-ästhetik der Psalmen*, WMANT 87 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001).

<sup>50</sup>Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement: A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator*, Library of Philosophy and Theology (London: SCM Press, 1963).

<sup>51</sup>Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 59.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Erbele-Küster, *Lesen als Akt des Betens*, 112: “The experience of the I of the psalm embodies a religious ideal whose reality is open to the reader to experience,” quoted in Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 60.



to the reader of the psalms from imitating the behavior of the wicked (e.g., 10:4, 6, 11, 17-18). The last device is the use of “gaps.” A gap in narrative or poetry is where the writer as not provided enough information. The reader, therefore, has to use personal imagination to fill in the details in order to make sense of the text. According to Wenham, then, the work of Erbele-Küster “illuminates many of the devices whereby those who pray the psalms are led to identify with the righteous psalmist and make his prayers theirs, to identify with his outlook, and make his aspirations their own.”<sup>54</sup>

The other insight that Wenham applies to the ethics of the Psalms is the “speech-act theory.” The theory which was developed by the philosophers of language like J. L. Austin<sup>55</sup> and J. R. Searle<sup>56</sup> states that the utterance of words is more than a statement about fact, either true/false.<sup>57</sup> The situation is more complicated because in one utterance a person can

... make requests, ask questions, give orders, make promises, give thanks, offer apologies, and so on. Moreover, almost any speech act is really the performance of several acts at once, distinguished by different aspects of the speaker's intention: there is the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, such as requesting or promising, and how one is trying to affect one's audience.<sup>58</sup>

The categories of speech-act include directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. Directive utterance asks another person either God or a fellow human being to do something (62:8; 69:1). In a commissive utterance, the speaker promises to do something: “I said, ‘I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth with a muzzle, so long as the wicked are in my presence’” (39:1). Expressive

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<sup>54</sup>Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 61.

<sup>55</sup>J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

<sup>56</sup>J. R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>57</sup>Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 65.

<sup>58</sup>Kent Bach, “Speech Acts,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 9:81.

utterance expresses the emotions the speaker feels: “O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart pounds; my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes” (38:9). Declarative utterances are intended to effect a change (2:8). Wenham says that, of these categories, “commissive” speech-act is commonly used in the psalms.<sup>59</sup>

The earliest scholar to apply the speech-act theory into the field of theology especially the language of worship is Donald Evans.<sup>60</sup> He suggests that theological statements in the mouth of a worshipper are commissive in nature because the worshipper is self-involving in the sense that he is making a commitment to put what he is saying into practice. The same way with God; when he says something he is making a commitment.<sup>61</sup>

Another type of speech-act that Evans talks about is “behabitive.” This is a form of utterance in which the speaker expresses an attitude.<sup>62</sup> Most statements about God especially the ones made in the first person are either Commissive or behabitive and therefore self-involving. They commit the worshipper to the pattern of behavior to which he is referring.<sup>63</sup> And when the words are uttered in the present tense, the speaker commits himself to take action in the future. Wenham finds “commissive” and “behabitive” statements in the psalms attributed both to God (e.g. 12:5; 75:2-3; 91:14) and man (5:7; 7:17; 11:1).

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<sup>59</sup>Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 67.

<sup>60</sup>Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement*.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 70. Evans says, “Where I report my attitude in the present tense, my utterance is rarely a mere report, equivalent to your report of my attitude. It tends to commit me to the pattern of behaviour to which I am referring; it has a forward reference to behaviour for which I am the responsible agent, not merely an observer”; see also Andreas Wagner, *Sprechakte und Sprechaktanalyse im Alt Testament: Untersuchungen im biblischen Hebräisch an der Nahtstelle zwischen Handlungsebene und Gramatik* BZAW 253 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 215. Wagner argues that in the Old Testament, “every confession of faith in Yahweh carries with it obligations .... In the act of confession are embedded obligations, which one, in and through confessing, accepts for oneself. Confessing faith in Yahweh means loving him and doing all that which is according to his will.”

Karl Möller has applied speech-act theory to Psalm 101, a royal Psalm in which the king declares how he will act and the kind of people he wants to serve in his administration.<sup>64</sup> He understands the first-person statements in the psalm Ps 101 as having a commissive sense because the king is committing himself to a certain type of future behaviour.<sup>65</sup> Although Möller believes that the psalm teaches ethics, he is more concerned about how it applies to the Christian belief and living in today's world. For this reason, he says,

The king does commit himself to a certain kind of future behaviour. But so does anyone who sings or prays Psalm 101 – yet this is routinely missed by modern interpreters .... In singing or praying this psalm, we, its modern readers, are ourselves making a pledge; we are committing ourselves to the behaviour the ancient psalmist thought was appropriate for a king .... We, today, follow the lead of Israel's ancient kings and psalmist in pledging ourselves, again and again ... to the kind of ethical behaviour that is the subject of Psalm 101.<sup>66</sup>

The canonical critics have helped put the study of the book of Psalms on stable footing by insisting on basing the study on the final form of the text. This way, the interpreter is able to understand the spiritual message the redactors were trying to communicate. This point is important because the text was preserved for religious purposes. The weaknesses of form-criticism did not allow the interpreter to focus on the message of the psalms.

The other thing which must be emphasized is that a person studying the ethics of the psalms must draw a distinction between content, that is, the ethical principles contained in the psalms and the application of those principles in the modern context. One has to deal with the “what” before talking about the “how” of ethics. Möller's application of speech-act theory to the study of the ethics of psalms, for example, does

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<sup>64</sup>Karl Möller, “Reading, Singing and Praying the Law: An Exploration of the Performative, Self-involving and Commissive Language of Psalm 101,” in *Reading the Law: Studies in Honor of Gordon J. Wenham*, ed. J. G. McConville and Karl Möller, LHNOTS 461 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2007): 111-37; see a bibliography on the other works that have applied speech-act theory to the psalms on pp. 130-31.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 135, 137.

not have this distinction. The next chapter will be concerned about the ethical principles that the Hebrew Psalter teaches about how one should use speech.

### **Conclusion**

The preceding discussion has given a positive answer to the question as to whether the Psalter provides ethical instruction. It has revealed that during the pre-critical period, the faithful understood the Psalter as a resource for comfort and instruction on how to live and relate with God. However, form-criticism which emerged as the dominant method in the study of Psalms moved away from this understanding because of its emphasis on the form of the text and the situation of life in which it was used. It saw the psalms as mainly prayers directed to God and not God's word to men. This situation started changing with the introduction of canonical criticism. The Psalter in its final form is now read as Scriptures, and as such, it offers instruction to the faithful.

## CHAPTER 5

### SPEECH ETHICS IN THE HEBREW PSALTER

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 3 focused on the use of speech terminology outside the Hebrew Psalter using select passages from the Pentateuch, prophetic and wisdom literature. The study revealed that the rest of the Old Testament has a strong emphasis on the need for one to use truthful and controlled speech in legal, economic and social contexts. The study also revealed that the reason the Israelites are instructed and/or criticized concerning the use of speech is to promote a just, fair, and stable society in ancient Israel.

Chapter 4 established that the Hebrew Psalter contains ethical instruction whether at the level of individual psalms or the whole book. This chapter will explore the ethical instruction in the Psalter by focusing on one of its themes, namely, speech ethics. The study will particularly investigate the occurrence of speech terminology in the Psalter with the aim of finding out why the terminology is frequently used and what it teaches about speech ethics. Also, the study will find out how speech ethics in the Psalter compares with speech ethics in the other Old Testament books.

The argument in this chapter is that the use of speech terminology in the Psalter is similar to the way it is used in the other books of the Old Testament in the sense that the Psalter seeks to promote a just, fair, and stable society through its emphasis on truthful and controlled speech in various spheres of life. There is, however, a slight difference. Speech terminology occurs more frequently in the Psalter than in those books because, in the Psalter, words are primarily used by powerful people as weapons of oppression against the weak and needy. To achieve this goal, they device and execute

wicked schemes using false accusation, false testimony, boasting, cursing, slander, and humiliation.

The weak and the needy (e.g., widows, orphans, and the poor), often portrayed as righteous, are suffering unjust treatment without any human being or institution to protect them. The so-called “royal psalms” suggest that at the time the individual psalms were composed or the Psalter was compiled into its final form, the Israelites were yearning for a king characterized by honesty and justice who would protect the weak and the needy against oppression from the powerful. Because such a person is lacking (cf. Isa 59:15-16), the oppressed are petitioning God for justice and deliverance. They are confident that God will grant their request not only because he is more powerful than human oppressors, but also because he is a just king and judge who exercises his steadfast love (דסח) in favor of the righteous who cry out to him. The Psalter plays an important role in that it opens the curtain for one to see clearly something hinted in the other books about the relationship between the use of speech and justice (e.g., Deut 19:16-15-21; Isa 59:3-16).

Also, it will be argued that speech terminology is significant in the Hebrew Psalter because the psalmists see the use of speech as one of the distinguishing marks between the wicked and the righteous. In other words, speech in the Psalter acts as a revealer of the true character of the wicked and the righteous. Bruggemann says,

Speaking is not a mere verbal activity; it is an expression of the totality of man; his purposes and values. The tongue is the agent through which what is in man is effectively released into the world .... The tongue is the means of expressing the total character of the person.<sup>1</sup>

For the purpose of convenience, the investigation in this chapter will proceed under the traditional classification of the psalms: Psalms of lament, Wisdom and Torah Psalms, Royal Psalms, and Psalms of praise.

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<sup>1</sup>W. Bruggemann, “Tongue,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 4:670.

## Speech Ethics in Psalms of Lament

The Psalms of lament are prayers of an individual or community during a period of severe distress because of some form of crisis or trouble from which they appeal to the Lord for deliverance. This category of psalms is the largest in the Hebrew Psalter. Sometimes the term “complaint” is used instead of “lament” especially in cases where the Lord is perceived to be indifferent to the plight of the Psalmist. Miller thinks, however, that the term is confusing because the psalmists’ prayers do not always have an element of complaint.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it does not exhaust the content and purpose of the prayers. He thinks, therefore, that the terms “plea” or “petition” might better suit the purpose of the prayers.

The main elements in the psalms of lament include the plea, reason and basis upon which the psalmist is seeking deliverance from the Lord against oppression from his enemies. The identity of the “enemies” who oppress the righteous in the psalms of lament has been a subject of debate for a long time.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes these enemies are non-Israelites who are opposed to Israel and her God. But in many cases, they are powerful Israelites who, among other things, take advantage of Israel’s social institutions (e.g., the court system) to oppress the psalmists by instituting baseless legal proceedings in which they use false accusation and testimony against them. “The situation is akin to Jezebel’s exploitation of the Israelite’s legal system through false testimony that condemned Naboth to death and cleared the way for Ahab’s acquisition of Naboth’s vineyard.”<sup>4</sup>

The other ways the wicked uses his speech to oppress the psalmist are

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<sup>2</sup>Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 55-56.

<sup>3</sup>For a helpful discussion and bibliography on the identity and character of the “enemies” in the Hebrew Psalter, see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 95-99; idem, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 129-34.

<sup>4</sup>Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms, The NIV Application Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 148.

humiliation and defamation through boasting, cursing, slander, and shaming. In the following psalms, the forms of verbal oppression in the Psalter will be examined along with the positive ways the psalmists believe speech should be used. To be examined, also, is the impact speech ethics has on worship.

### **False Testimony**

**Psalm 27.** The psalmist begins his prayer by expressing strong confidence that the Lord will protect him against his enemies (vv. 2-3, 6, 11) whom he describes as “evil men” and “oppressors.” He makes four pleas each starting with אֵל to show that he is in a desperate situation (vv. 9, 12): “Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger .... Do not reject me or forsake me .... Do not hand me over to the desire of my foes.” The danger that gives rise to these pleas is that these enemies are either personally or through other people giving false testimony against him in court for the purpose of destroying his life. Verse 12 says, “For witnesses of falsehood (עֲדֵי־שֶׁקֶר) rise against me, breathing out violence (חֲמָס).”

The “witnesses of falsehood” referred to here are probably the “evil men,” “enemies,” and “oppressors” of verses 2, 6, and 12.<sup>5</sup> While Weiser recognizes that the context for the phrase “witnesses of falsehood” is in the law courts where the Psalmist might be a defendant, he sees the possibility of interpreting it as general slander.<sup>6</sup> Considering the context, however, this view is less likely. The threat the Psalmist is confronting is from the law courts where his enemies are employing false testimony with the aim of destroying him. The reason for this view is that the phrase עֲדֵי־שֶׁקֶר (“witnesses of falsehood”) which also appears in the ninth commandment (Exod 20:16) is often used to refer to a witness who gives false evidence during legal proceedings.

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<sup>5</sup>Wilson, *Psalms*, 486-87.

<sup>6</sup>Weiser, *The Psalms*, OTL (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 254.



The other reason is that the use of עדי־שקר in the same context with חמס (“violence”) in verse 12 conveys the same idea as עד־חמס (“witness of violence”) in Exodus 23: 1 and Deuteronomy 19:16. There, the phrase עד־חמס has to do with a malicious witness who brings a false accusation and/or tenders false testimony in court for the sole purpose of securing the capital punishment against his victim.

Here, the use of “witnesses of falsehood” and “violence” together indicates that these are men misusing the court system through false accusation and testimony in order to secure the death of the psalmist. Wilson correctly says that the term חמס connotes “violence that results in bloodshed.”<sup>7</sup> That the threat against the Psalmist is capital punishment is further supported by his confidence that he “will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (v. 13). “The land of the living” is the opposite of *Sheol* the place for the dead which implies that he expects the Lord to deliver him from the death penalty being pursued by his enemies.

One should also note that “violence” (חמס) against the righteous is a serious problem underlying the psalms of lament as can be seen from the beginning of the Psalter. The psalmists are heard saying that the violence (חמס) of the wicked “comes down on his head” (7:17). There is an appeal to the Lord who “avenges blood” in 9:13. The soul of the Lord hates the wicked and those who love violence (11:5). There are other passages where the word “violence” does not occur but the same idea is conveyed. For instance, in a number of places the psalmists make reference to “bloodthirsty men”

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<sup>7</sup>Wilson, *Psalms*, 581: “This kind of testimony is explicitly forbidden in Ex. 23:1, and in Deut. 19:16-19 provision is made that when such a ‘violent, ruthless, malicious’ witness is found out, the penalty that would have been imposed on the innocent party is to be carried out on the witness instead. For this kind of ‘violence’ God brought the great Flood to cleanse the earth (Gen. 6:11, 13), which is understood to have been ‘filled’ and ‘polluted’ by human blood letting. The prophets also regularly condemn *hamas*. Cf. Ps. 27:12, where ‘false witnesses’ (*‘ed šeqer*) are described as ‘breathing out violence’ (*wipeah hamas*)”; see also Robert Louis Hubbard, Jr., “Dynamistic and Legal Language in the Complaint Psalms” (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1980), 252; Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), 307-08; Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 430; Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary, vol. 4 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 280.

(5:7) or schemes of the wicked to destroy or take the life of the righteous (31:14).

**Psalm 35.** The Psalmist is confronting powerful enemies (v. 10) who are seeking his death; for the enemies “seek my life,” and “plot my ruin” (v.4) without cause (vv. 7, 19). The text poses the challenge of determining the source of this threat especially considering that the language used in verses 1-3 is both legal and military. On one hand, the psalmist uses רִיב in a way that suggests he is asking the Lord to act as his attorney and argue his case (v. 1a; see also v. 23 where רִיב and מִשְׁפֵּט appear). On the other, he is asking the Lord to take up military weapons and fight for him against his enemies (vv. 1b-3, 15, 17, 23). The question then becomes, is the threat arising from the court or from some kind of military assault? The answer to this question depends on whether or not these verses are taken metaphorically or literally.

Taking Psalm 35 to be about the time David was fleeing from Saul, Wilcock treats the military language literally and the law court language metaphorically.<sup>8</sup> Wilson takes both literally.<sup>9</sup> Hubbard has persuasively argued that the whole of Psalm 35 deals with a legal and not military conflict: “Behind the battle cries of vss. 1ff. lie a legal conflict initiated by the false legal testimony (vs. 11) from which the speaker seeks vindication in an oracle (vs. 3b, 24).”<sup>10</sup> He gives several reasons for this view.

First, while the term רִיב in vv. 1a and 23 is sometimes used to refer to quarrels or battles in general (Exod 21:18; Deut 33:7; Judg 11:25), in this particular context, it refers to a legal dispute considering the psalmist’s statement that his problems arise from

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<sup>8</sup>M. Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 1-72: Songs for the People of God*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leister: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 118-24.

<sup>9</sup>Wilson, *Psalms*, 579-80; see also Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, WBC, vol. 19 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 286: “The king faces the threat of war from foreign enemies, who in turn are using as an excuse for war certain purported violation of a treaty agreement . . . . The word “strive” (רִיב) is commonly used as a legal term; here, the parallelism with *fight* (לָחַם) suggests a military nuance, but the psalm as a whole suggest that the military conflict in turn has legal ramifications, namely those associated with an international treaty.”

<sup>10</sup>Hubbard, “Dynamistic and Legal Language in the Complaint Psalms,” 240-41.

עֲדֵי-חַמָּס (“witnesses of violence”): “Witnesses of violence rise up; they ask (שאל) me of things that I do not know” (v. 11; cf. v. 20). It seems these people are acting both as witnesses and plaintiffs because they are said to be interrogating the psalmist.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the appeal in verse 24 has legal overtones: שִׁפְטֵנִי כַצְדִּיקַךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי (“Judge me according to your righteousness O Lord my God”). The term שִׁפֵּט has to do with making judicial decisions (cf. 7:9b; 26:1). Since powerful individuals are manipulating the judicial process to put the psalmist to death, he appeals to the Sovereign judge in the heavenly court to decide his case.<sup>12</sup>

Psalms 27 and 35, therefore, indicate that the Psalter strongly condemns the act of not only giving false testimony in court, but also using the testimony as a weapon of oppression. The background for the speech terminology in these psalms seems to be in the Pentateuch where the act of bearing false testimony to destroy a fellow member of the community is forbidden (Exod 20:16; 23:1; Deut 19:15-21).

### **False Accusation**

**Psalm 31.** The Psalmist makes an urgent call to the Lord for rescue from his enemies who have entrapped him (vv. 1-8). He commits himself to the Lord (v. 6; cf. v. 16) because he is the אֱלֹהֵי אֱמֶת (“God of truth”); a God that is reliable both in word and deed. The term אֱמֶת is probably mentioned at this point in anticipation of the statement about the nature of his oppression:

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 251: שאל “alludes specifically to interrogation during trial”; see also Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 287; John Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 49: “They are people giving testimony against the suppliant, and as (lit.) ‘witnesses of violence’ they are doing so in an outrageous, lawless way that aims to end in bloodshed. ‘Arise’ is a verb that can describe witnesses standing to speak (e.g., 27:12, which also speaks of testimony that issues in bloodshed). The second colon details what happens when they arise: they proceed by means of a cross-questioning concerning events that the suppliant knows nothing about”; see also Hubbard, “Dynamistic and Legal Language in the Complaint Psalms,” 252-53.

<sup>12</sup>Hubbard, “Dynamistic and Legal Language in the Complaint Psalms,” 253-55; see also J. Clinton MacCann, Jr., *The Psalm: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections*, in vol. 4 of *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 820: “The appeal is to God’s character as Sovereign Judge – that is, to God’s righteousness (see 7:17; 9:8; 96:13; 97:2), to which the Psalmist promises to be a witness (v. 28).”

For I hear the slander (דבת) of many; there is terror on every side; they conspire against me and plot to take my life .... Let their lying lips (שפתי שקר) be silenced, for with pride and contempt they speak arrogantly against the righteous (vv. 14, 19).

These enemies are not only putting the Psalmist to public shame by spreading false rumors (דבת) about him, but they are also aggressively pursuing a plot to destroy his life. They execute their plot by making false accusations against the psalmist: “In the shelter of your presence you hide them from the intrigues of men; in your dwelling you keep them safe from accusing tongues (מריב לשנות)” (v. 21). The term ריב, in this particular context, most likely refers to a legal dispute. His enemies are falsely accusing him in a court of law with the aim of putting him to death. But he is confident that the Lord will deliver him for the “sake of his name” (v. 4) and because of his steadfast love ([חסד]; v. 17).

**Psalm 109.** Hossfeld and Zenger have called psalm 109 a “psalm of justice.”<sup>13</sup> Verse 1 begins abruptly with the psalmist’s plea that God should not remain silent (v. 1) but come and rescue him from danger. Verses 2-5 state the reason and the source of the danger:

For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of deceit (כי פי רשע ופי־מרמה) are open against me; with a tongue of falsehood (לשון שקר) they speak against me. / With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause. / In return for my love they accuse (שטן) me .... They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my love.

It is clear from these verses that the psalmist is being persecuted by the wicked using speech. The issue that is not explicitly stated is where the persecution is taking place? The key to understanding what is happening and where is the verb שטן in verses 4, 20 and 29. The verb generally means “to be hostile, have a hostile attitude, be

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<sup>13</sup>Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia, vol 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 128: “Since the language and imagery of the psalm have judicial imprint ... and since the petition as a whole asks for the rescue of the person praying it in the face of or from condemnation to death obtained through false testimony, we can call this a ‘justice psalm.’ The petitioner presents his legal case before YHWH as the highest judicial instance and as a God of justice (vv. 2-20) and prays to him as ‘his Lord’ and as ‘the God who protects the poor’ for public proof of the lies of the accusers as well as of his own innocence (vv. 21-29) – and thus for the rescue of his or her life (“his soul”: vv. 30-31).”

an enemy against.” However, in a legal context like this one, the most likely meaning is “to accuse” (cf. Pss 38:21; 71:13). Also, the noun form אָשָׁם in verse 6 is frequently used in the Old Testament with the meaning of “trial of opponent, accuser, witness for the prosecution” (cf. 2 Sam 19:23; Zech 3:1-2; Job 1:6-9, 12; 2:1-4, 6-7). The verb אָשָׁם and its noun form אָשָׁם indicate that the psalmist is being falsely accused in court.

The other important legal term is אָשָׁם (v. 31) which refers to the process of making a judicial decision. In verse 31, the psalmist expresses confidence that the Lord will save his life from those who would condemn him. He is “reflecting upon the fate that awaits him ... if the false accusations of his enemies are accepted in court.”<sup>14</sup> What makes the persecution even more painful is not the false accusation itself but the fact that he has expressed love and goodness to his persecutors, but they repay him with hatred.

The psalmist seeks deliverance on the basis of the Lord’s אָשָׁם which the wicked have failed to show (vv. 6-19, 20-21b, and 26) and for sake of the glory of God (vv. 21a, 27). In verses 6-19, the psalmist is not seeking for revenge per se but he is asking the Lord to bring to pass what law of evidence says concerning the consequences for a “witness of falsehood.”<sup>15</sup> When the Lord intervenes, the psalmist expects two different reactions. On his part, he will rejoice and praise the Lord, but the wicked who love to curse and accuse falsely will know that it is the Lord who has done it and be covered with shame (vv. 27-30). The psalmist praises the Lord because “he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save his life from those who condemn him (אָשָׁם נִפְשׁוֹ)” (v. 31). Psalms 31 and 109 indicate that the Hebrew Psalter condemns false accusation.

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<sup>14</sup>J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 101-150*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 60.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 59: “Verses 6-19 are words of the psalmist against his enemies, but they are occasioned by the false accusation brought by the enemies. The Old Testament law of evidence required that those found guilty of giving false evidence should suffer the same penalty that the accused should have suffered had he been found guilty (Deut 19:16-21).”

## General Misuse of Court System

Apart from psalms 27, 31, 35, and 109 that explicitly deal with false testimony and false accusation, the following psalms also use a language that points to a legal context in which the wicked are misusing the legal system to oppress the psalmists.<sup>16</sup>

**Psalm 10.** The Psalmist is wondering why the Lord seems to be indifferent to the plight of the weak when he is suffering oppression in the hands of the wicked (v. 1). The wicked not only pursues his evil schemes with impunity, but he in fact continues to prosper (vv. 2-6). The wicked person is described as powerful, proud, and self-confident (vv. 2-6, 8-11). He uses his power to spread terror to the weak and needy especially the fatherless and the oppressed (v. 18). In his mind, God does not exist (v. 4). In fact, he abuses God and despises his enemies. He devises evil schemes and hunts the weak down in order to destroy them. The impact on the weak is reflected in the language used: “His victims are crushed, they collapse; they fall under his strength” (v. 10).

He uses his speech to crush the weak: “His mouth is full of cursing (אִלָּה) and deceits (וּמְרֻמוֹת) and oppression; under his tongue are mischief and iniquity” (v. 7). The term “deceits” (וּמְרֻמוֹת) implies that the wicked is using all forms of falsehood to achieve his goal. Craigie says that “in both speech and action, the wicked person was a source of trials to others. His speech was deceitful; his words created oppression and endless trouble.”<sup>17</sup>

This person comforts himself by thinking that “God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees” (v. 11) and that God will not call him to account (v. 13). The Psalmist takes the vocabulary of this powerful individual and reverses it in appealing to God to intervene and rescue the helpless: “Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand;

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<sup>16</sup>For an extensive discussion on some of the psalms with a legal language, see Hubbard, “Dynamistic and Legal Language in the Complaint Psalms.”

<sup>17</sup>Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 124.

*forget* not the afflicted . . . . But you, O God, do *see* trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand” (vv. 12, 14; emphasis is mine).<sup>18</sup> His appeal is based on God’s character (vv. 12, 14-18). God is the eternal king who sees oppression, hears the cry of the oppressed and defends them.

The description of the wicked in this psalm reflects either a leader who misuses power with impunity or an individual who has great influence over the state institutions. As a result, justice has completely failed. One can imagine the person using the court system to advance his selfish interests by making false accusation and bearing testimony against an innocent person. Alternatively, as a man of great influence, he could be employing falsehood to deprive the weak and the needy their rights. The Psalmist asks God to judge the wicked so that he may not “terrify” anymore (v. 18). And in v. 15, he asks the Lord to break the “arm” of the wicked and evil man (v. 15). The term “arm” stands for power. The psalmist is asking that “the powerful ‘hand’ of God would break the seemingly powerful ‘arm’ of the wicked.”<sup>19</sup>

**Psalm 12.** This psalm is thought to be either a prayer of an individual or that of the community.<sup>20</sup> LXX has “Save me, Lord” while the Hebrew has “Save, O Lord” (v. 2a). Because of the pronoun “us” in v. 8, Eaton suggests that this is probably the prayer of the Psalmist being voiced on behalf of the community.<sup>21</sup> The abrupt cry “Save, O Lord” is an urgent call for deliverance from a person who is confronting an imminent

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<sup>18</sup>Rolf A. Jacobson, *Many are Saying’: The Function of Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Psalter* (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2004), 29. He says that this is a rhetorical device that appears frequently in the psalms in which enemy quotation occurs.

<sup>19</sup>Craigie, *Psalm 1-50*, 125-26.

<sup>20</sup>Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 1: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 80.

<sup>21</sup>John Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation* (New York: T. & T. International, 2003), 89.

danger. The reason for the call is that there are no more trustworthy people in the land: “for the godly one (חסיד) is no more; the honest ones (אמונים) have vanished from the land” (v. 2b).<sup>22</sup> The “faithfulness and loving kindness which were of the very essence of the covenant relationship and life”<sup>23</sup> in ancient Israel were nonexistent (cf. Isa 59:3-9; Jer 5:1-2; 9:4-9).

Verses 3-5 provide details of the situation to which the psalmist is referring in terms of the way the wicked misuse speech. The Psalmist uses a chiasmic structure to draw a contrast between the speech of the wicked (vv. 3-5) and the speech of God (vv. 7-9):

A – The plea for deliverance from the Lord (v. 2)

B – The deceptive speech of the wicked (v. 3)

C – The plea for the Lord to eliminate liars and the proud (v. 4-5)

C’ – The Lord promises to deliver the oppressed (v. 6)

B’ - The truthful and pure speech of the Lord (v. 7)

A’ - The confidence of deliverance from the Lord (vv. 8-9).<sup>24</sup>

The speech of the wicked is described in verses 3-5: “Everyone utters lies (שוא) to his neighbor; with smooth (חלקות) lips and a double heart they speak. May the Lord cut off all smooth (חלקות) lips, the tongue that makes great boasts, those who say, ‘With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is master over us?’” שוא (“emptiness, nothingness”), used also in Exodus 20:7 and Leviticus 23:1, refers to speech that is empty because it is devoid of truth. חלקות is from a Hebrew root that means “to make smooth.” The phrase “smooth lips” in this context has to do with speech that is

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<sup>22</sup>This language is hyperbole conveying the idea that lack of concern for others and dishonesty are rampant. The experience of the Psalmist is like that of Elijah when he felt like he was the only upright person in Israel (1 Kgs 19:10).

<sup>23</sup>Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 138.

<sup>24</sup>Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reayburn, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 115; McCann, *The Book of Psalms*, 724; Jacobson, ‘*Many are Saying*,’ 30.



good to listen to but does not have any substance. To speak from a “double heart” “indicates a double standard, and hence implies lies and deceitfulness. They [the wicked] knew one thing, but said another; they would not speak truth, though they knew it, when a lie would accomplish their goal.”<sup>25</sup> In short, the wicked could not be trusted with their words.

Furthermore, the wicked use speech as a dangerous instrument of power and deadly weapon of oppression (v. 5): “With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is master over us?” They see themselves as most powerful with no “master” over them.

Verse 5 raises an important question; in what context might the wicked be using their tongues this way? One has to be careful not to read too much into a poetic text. However, the use of the word “prevail” suggests some kind of contest in which the wicked are a party. Jacobson thinks that the wicked are falsely accusing the weak and the needy in court.<sup>26</sup> Grogan says, “Verse 5 may suggest a law court, with a strong, boastful oppressor and his weak, needy victim. The former flatters and deceives the judge and, although vile, is honored by him, while the latter groans under continued oppression.”<sup>27</sup> Grogan may be correct considering the use of the phrase “destruction of the weak and groaning of the needy” in v. 6 which implies that the weak and the needy are confronting powerful forces. Wilson says,

The wicked believe their mastery of deceptive language gives them power and lead them to victory. That personal power comes at the cost of the truth and the exploitation of the defenseless is of no concern to them. Their trust in their ability to twist language to their advantage is akin to some of the worst practices of lawyers to exploit the loopholes in legal statutes or to hide important conditions in the endless

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<sup>25</sup>Peter C Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. with supplement by Marvin E. Tate, WBC, vol. 19 (Nashville: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 2004), 138.

<sup>26</sup>Jacobson, ‘*Many are Saying*,’ 121.

<sup>27</sup>Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 57-58.

stilted and wilting officious prose and grammar in the “fine print” of contracts. The wicked described here are so confident in their mastery that they feel invincible – completely in control and without limit.<sup>28</sup>

The Psalmist representing the community of the righteous cries out for deliverance (v. 4) and the Lord resolves to “arise” and defend them. In a number of psalms, God is referred to as “‘arising’ in connection with acts of judgment (3:7; 7:6; 44:26; 68:1).”<sup>29</sup> Here, the Lord is coming in his role as king and judge to defend those who are suffering by destroying their oppressors.

In contrast to the evil speech of the wicked, verse 7 describes the speech of the Lord: “The utterances of the Lord are pure utterances, like silver refined in a furnace, purified seven times” (cf. 19:7-11). This description suggests two things. First, that the Lord is characterized by purity and truth in his speech. For this reason, he can be trusted to fulfill what he says especially his promise to deliver his faithful ones who cry out to him (v. 8). Second, the description of the words of the Lord indirectly critiques the way the wicked use words and suggests that those who are loyal to the Lord must strive to use pure and honest words.

**Psalm 17.** The Psalmist is asking the Lord to deliver him from the oppression of his enemies (vv. 1, 6-15). He is confident that his prayer will be heard because of his righteousness (צדק). The use of צדק in verse 1 is probably in anticipation of the declaration in 18:21, 25: “The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness (כצדקי).”<sup>30</sup> Just like in Psalms 15 and 24, it is righteousness that brings one into the presence of Yahweh and makes it possible to experience answered prayers.

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<sup>28</sup>Wilson, *Psalms*, 268-69; see also D. Miller, “yāpīah in Psalm XII 6,” *VT* 29 (1979): 499: “The turning point in the psalm as it announces Yahweh’s decision to intervene in the situation . . . . Yahweh will act because of the violence done to the poor and in response to their groaning under this oppression. The detailed description in verses 3-5 of the violence entirely in terms of what and how people speak leads quite naturally to the divine promise to protect the one who speaks truly and with integrity for the poor and the afflicted, the one who is a witness in his or her behalf over against any [false witness].”

<sup>29</sup>Grogan, *Psalms*, 58.

<sup>30</sup>Patrick D. Miller, ed., “Kingship, Torah Obedience, and Prayer: The Theology of Psalms 15-24,” in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 267 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 289.

The psalmist presents his righteousness in terms of “torah obedience, which... identifies the activity of the mouth or lips as a principal manifestation of righteousness.”<sup>31</sup> His claim that his prayer does not spring from שפתי מרמה (“lips of deceit”) means that he does not use his lips for speaking falsehood in contrast to the wicked. He is aware that a person is bound to sin in what he says and, therefore, expresses a determination that his “mouth will not transgress” (v. 3b).

This statement is not an empty resolution. He is confident that he will make it because in the past “by the word of your lips I have kept from the paths of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped” (vv. 4-5). The phrase “the words of your lips” (v. 4) probably refers to the Mosaic Law (“torah”) considering that the torah strongly warns against the misuse of speech (e.g. Exod 20:16; 23:1; Lev 19:11-12, 16; Deut 19:13-21).<sup>32</sup>

Verse 3 expresses a conviction that he has nothing to fear even if Yahweh, who knows everything, examines his acts and disposition: “Though you probe my heart and examine me at night, though you test me, you will find nothing” (v. 3a).<sup>33</sup> However, it should be noted that the Psalmist is not claiming sinlessness. Rather, he is convinced of his innocence in the face of unwarranted accusation. His prayer is that Yahweh may act on his behalf so that he may be vindicated (משפט). Here, Yahweh is seen as a judge who

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 289-90: “The psalmist speaks of being guided by the ‘the word of your lips.’ This is surely Yahweh’s instructions as embodied in the torah. Deuteronomy... is explicit about equating the divine torah with the word or words of Yahweh”; see also Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 163: “In poetic language, the psalmist avoided ‘robbers’ roads’, and similar language continues in v. 5 with a contrast: his feet have held firmly to God’s ‘track’, which suggests a walk of life entirely different from that of wicked persons. Thus the poet is utilizing with striking effect a modification of the metaphor of the *two ways* which are employed in Ps. 1; because his feet held firmly to the tracks of God, avoiding the way of the wicked, he could assume the privilege of the righteous and pray for vindication.”

<sup>33</sup>Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 180: “The detailed protestation of innocence is not to be understood as the expression of naïve self-righteousness, let alone as the affirmation of the worshipper’s sinlessness, but as an effort... to justify himself in the face of unwarranted accusations”; see also a good discussion on the possible meaning of being examined at night (לילה) in Gert Kwakkel, *According to my Righteousness: Upright Behaviour as Grounds for Deliverance in Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26, and 44* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 84.

ought to decide the conflict between the psalmist and his enemies by establishing his innocence and righteousness.

In contrast to how the psalmist uses his speech, his enemies use their mouth to speak arrogantly (v. 10). The psalmist describes them as “hard-hearted,” “violent,” “brutal,” “greedy,” and “insidious” (vv. 10-12). The question is, in what way were the enemies oppressing the Psalmist? Some words and phrases might provide a clue. First, the Psalmist’s claim of innocence on the basis of his use of speech seems to be cast against the background of the misuse of speech by his enemies. Second, in his appeal to the Lord, he is seeking vindication in the face of false accusation (v.2): מלפניך משפטי יצא (“May my justice come out from before you). The meaning of משפט in this context should be sought in the legal setting (cf. 7:6-9).<sup>34</sup> Also, in terms of content and phraseology, Psalm 17 is similar to 7:1-14. With regard to 7:6-9, Craigie says,

Certain false charges have been laid against the psalmist which, if substantiated, could undo his good name and his position in society. In this sense, he is pursued or hounded by enemies; they are out to get him, not with swords in the first instance, but with the more powerful weapon of words.<sup>35</sup>

Third, the term פריץ (“violent one”) in verse 4 literally means to “break out.” It is used in 2 Samuel 6:8 where the Lord’s wrath broke out against Uzzah who had touched the ark without authorization. He was struck down and died. It is a word that is used for brutal force that results in death. This is supported by verses 8-11:

Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings, from the wicked that do me violence, my deadly enemies who surround me. / They close up their callous hearts, and their mouths speak with arrogance. / They track me down; now they surround me; they set their eyes to cast me to the ground.

The language in these verses, the use of פריץ in verse 4, and the urgency with which the Psalmist appeals for deliverance, strongly suggests a situation where he facing mortal danger. His enemies are not merely after his reputation but his very life. The ideal

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<sup>34</sup>Wilson, *Psalms*, 191, 319.

<sup>35</sup>Craigie, *Psalms*, 100.

institution through which these enemies could have secured capital punishment against the psalmist is the court. And because the Psalmist does not have confidence in the human courts, which are subject to manipulation, he appeals for justice to the heavenly court where Yahweh sits as a fair and true judge (cf. 7:6-9).

**Psalm 26.** This psalm is similar to Psalms 7 and 17. The Psalmist appeals to God for “justice” on the basis of his integrity and innocence (vv. 1-8, 11-12; cf. 7:6-9; 17:2-5). He gives a number of reasons (כִּי) why he is confident that God will grant his request. First, *כי־חסדךָ לנגד עיני והתהלכתי באמתך* (“For your steadfast love is before me and I walk continually in your truth” [v. 3]). His life is characterized by steadfast love and faithfulness, the two covenant qualities that were lacking in the society in Psalm 12:2. Not only are his words reliable, he also treats other people fairly and with understanding.

Second, he hates the company of the wicked (vv. 4-5, 9-10) which he describes as “deceitful men (*מת־שוא*),” “hypocrites,” “evildoers,” “bloodthirsty,” and “sinners” in “whose hands are wicked schemes, whose right hands are full of bribes.” The fact that he hates the company of such people means he has not adopted its lifestyle.<sup>36</sup> Third, his “hands are innocent” and, as such, he does not expect the Lord to judge him the same way he judges such men (vv. 9-10). The phrase “innocent hands” may mean hands that have not shed innocent blood or not given a bribe to pervert justice. Fourth, he loves worshipping the Lord.

Because of his innocence, the Psalmist appeals to the Lord to “redeem” him (v. 11) from his oppressors. The danger he is confronting is not mentioned. However, as in Psalms 7:9 and 17:3, the term “justice” in v. 1 has a legal meaning.<sup>37</sup> Considering that

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<sup>36</sup>Kwakkel, *According to my Righteousness*, 122.

<sup>37</sup>Grogan, *Psalms*, 79.

the term is used in the same context with “deceitful men [of violence],”<sup>38</sup> “bloodthirsty,” and “bribery” in verses 9-11, it is reasonable to assume that the danger is coming from the court where powerful and wicked men are oppressing the psalmist by pressing false charges and manipulating the judge to rule in their favor to his detriment.<sup>39</sup> He appeals to God as a just judge to grant him justice.

**Psalm 52.** This psalm is a denunciation of the wicked with a “forceful and prophetic authority.”<sup>40</sup> The wicked is described as boastful, self-sufficient, wealthy, and powerful (vv. 1, 9). He has gained his power through destroying others. As in the psalms considered above, speech is again being used as a weapon:

Your tongue plots destruction; it is like a sharpened razor, you who practice deceit (רַמְיָה). / You love evil rather than good, falsehood (שִׁקְרָה) rather than speaking righteousness (צִדְקָה). / You love every harmful word, O you deceitful (מִרְמָה) tongue (vv. 4-6).

The first thing to note here is the “piling” up of speech terminology similar to Jeremiah 9: 3-9 which is a literary device probably intended to emphasize the fact that the misuse of speech is a serious problem.<sup>41</sup> Eaton says that behavior of the wicked is “specified almost entirely as deceitful, harmful words, so injurious that the tongue is compared to a freshly sharpened razor; the psalmist seems to evoke all the power of God’s justice to counter the deadly words.”<sup>42</sup> The text emphasizes that the wicked loves (אֱהַב) falsehood but does not state where the falsehood is being used. It is possible that

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.; see also a discussion on the meaning of מַתִּי־שׂוֹא in Kwakkel, *According to my Righteousness*, 123.

<sup>39</sup>See a contrary view in Kwakkel, *According to my Righteousness*, 124: “Verses 4-5 do not present any indication that they [enemies of the psalmist] are actually posing any threat to him, for instance by attacking him physically or by bringing false charges against him. If similar hostilities are a background to the prayer and its statements about the psalmist’s behaviour, evidence for that must be found elsewhere in the psalm.” However, he entertains the possibility that lawsuits might be involved in verse 10 (see p. 128).

<sup>40</sup>Eaton, *The Psalms*, 209.

<sup>41</sup>Grogan, *Psalms*, 108.

<sup>42</sup>Eaton, *The Psalms*, 210; see also Wilson, *Psalms*, 786.

the wicked is spreading false rumors to damage the reputation of his victims. However, considering the powerful language used to describe his activity and the judgment pronounced against him suggests that there is more to his activities. The wicked is probably using false allegations, false evidence, and bribery in order to destroy the psalmist.

He is warned that God will bring judgment upon him by exterminating his life: “Indeed God will pull you down forever; he will snatch and tear you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living” (v. 7). The righteous will be filled with awe-struck reverence as they see God’s righteous judgment (vv. 8-9). They will also laugh because the wicked man trusted in his wealth rather than making God his protection (“stronghold”). However, as opposed to the extermination of the wicked, the psalmist who trusts in God’s steadfast love will be established forever (vv. 10-11).

**Psalm 55.** The psalmist prays to be delivered from the “terror of death” perpetrated by his enemies (v. 5). What is interesting to note is that these enemies are Israelite friends of the psalmist who at one time had a close fellowship with him as they worshipped in the temple (vv. 14-15, 21). However, they have embraced evil behavior such that he now refers to them as “wicked” (vv. 4, 10, 24), “destructive forces” (v. 12), “people who lodge with evil” (v. 16), “men who never change their ways and have no fear of God” (v. 20), and “bloodthirsty and deceitful men [אנשי דמים ומרמה] (v. 24).

Right from the beginning, it is hinted that these enemies are attacking the psalmist with words. The enemies are said to “revile” (שטמ) him (v. 4). He prays that the Lord may “divide their tongues” (v. 10). To “divide tongues” means to cause the enemies to contradict each other in what they are saying against the psalmist (cf. Mark 14:56). The Lord should intervene because “violence and dispute (חמס וריב) exist in the city and destructive forces are involved in oppression and deceit [תך ומרמה]” (vv. 10-11) and if the Lord does not stop them, the psalmist will be destroyed.

The psalmist appears to be having a specific person in mind that represents the other enemies: “My companion attacks his friends; he violates his covenant. His mouth (פִּי) is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words (דְּבַר) are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords” (vv. 21-22; cf. vv. 14-15). Covenant here is probably in relation to friendship. The companion turned enemy hides his harmful intentions behind nice sounding words. The psalmist prays that the Lord may destroy such enemies because they have allowed “evil” to lodge with them (vv. 16, 24). The image is that of a person who has welcomed a guest to lodge in his dwelling place. To lodge with evil, therefore, conveys the idea of the wicked not only practicing evil but also doing it deliberately. The psalmist ends with an expression of confidence that the Lord will destroy “bloodthirsty and deceitful men” (v. 24) who plot to destroy the lives of the weak. As it has already been observed, this goal would normally have been achieved through the court system.

**Psalm 58.** The psalm begins by rhetorically questioning the character of those who have a judicial function (v. 1): “Do you decree righteously? Do you judge the sons of men uprightly?” The psalmist knows that the answer to these questions is in the negative because from the heart these men devise to do injustice and their hands mete out violence (v. 2). The way the psalmist describes their problem is similar to what theologians call the “original sin.” He says, “The wicked are estranged; from birth they err; from the womb they speak lies” (v. 3; cf. 51:5). Here, he hints at the complaint he has against them. These wicked people use lies (כִּזְב) to oppress their victims. The words they use are compared to the venom of a snake that cannot be controlled (v. 5) and, indirectly, to an arrow (v. 7b).

The psalmist asks the Lord to avenge for him (vv. 6-8). First, he prays that the Lord may make the schemes of the wicked ineffective. The reason for breaking the “teeth in their mouth” (v. 6) is that they will be unable to use injurious words anymore. Second, he asks that the words which are like arrows be made “blunt” (v. 7b) so that they do not



have the desired effect. Third, he asks the Lord to destroy the living liars and to prevent the unborn from being born (vv. 8-10). The ultimate purpose for God's intervention is that it will be a witness to mankind so that they may say, "Surely the righteous are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth" (v. 11).

**Psalm 59.** The psalmist is seeking deliverance from those who "rise up against me," "evil doers," and "bloodthirsty men" (vv. 1-3) who apparently are national enemies (vv. 5, 8, 13). He describes them as hunting dogs waiting to attack him for no reason at all (vv. 6-7, 14-15). They are using words to attack: "See what they spew from their mouths; they spew out swords from their lips, and they say, 'Who can hear us'" (v. 7). The words they are using are like swords that have the potential to wound someone. In their pride, they think that non-one can hear them. However, God laughs/scoffs (v.8) at them because he can not only hear them he is able to intervene.

In verses 12-13, the psalmist prays that his enemies be punished because of the "sins of their mouths, for the words of their lips, let them be caught in their pride. For the curses and lies they utter." He does not want the Lord to kill them. Rather, they should be brought down and made to become wanderers as a lesson both to Israel and the whole world (vv. 11, 13). What the Israelites are supposed to learn is not stated. However, the world will know that God is the ruler in Israel. When the psalmist has been delivered, he is confident that the Lord will lead him before his enemies so that he may gloat over them (v. 10c).

**Psalm 64.** Here, the psalmist presents his enemies as a "noisy crowd of evil doers" (v. 2) that devises evil plans to take his life (vv. 3-6). These enemies have "sharpened their tongues like swords and aimed their bitter words like arrows. They shoot from their hiding-place at the innocent (םת) man; they shoot at him suddenly, without fear" (vv. 3-5). "Swords" and "arrows" are instruments of hunting or war. The psalmist

uses them here to emphasize the fact that “words proceeding from the mouth, especially the aimed word . . . , is an effective weapon, and the enemies make good use of it.”<sup>43</sup> The Psalter teaches that words have the capacity to inflict wounds or even kill. Elsewhere, words are likened to a “sword and arrow” (7:12; 57:4; 59:7; cf. Prov 25:10; 26:18); “venom” (58:4; 140:3); “sharpened razor” (52:2) and “scorching fire” (Prov 16:27).

Here, the psalmist’s enemies plan to attack and destroy him secretly thinking that nobody will see them (vv. 5-6). However, the Lord can see. The Lord will defeat them by the very weapons which they use against the righteous: “But God will shoot them with arrows; suddenly they will be struck down. He will turn their own tongues against them and bring them to ruin; all who see them will shake their heads in scorn.” (vv. 7-8). The purpose of this punishment is so that “all mankind” may shudder and glorify the Lord (v. 9). The psalm ends with an exhortation to the righteous to rejoice and take refuge in the Lord (v. 10).

**Psalm 140.** The psalmist asks the Lord to rescue him from his oppressors. He describes them as “evil men,” “men of violence,” “wicked,” and “proud men” (vv. 1, 4-5, 11) who “devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war everyday” (v. 2) against the weak and the needy. The imagery used in verse 5 shows that these oppressors are hunting him down to destroy him. In fact, the use of the term “violence” three times suggests that they are after his life.

The oppressors again use speech as their weapon. Verses 10 and 12 say that their “lips” have caused “trouble” and they have “slandered.” They particularly, “make their tongues as sharp as a serpent’s; the poison of their vipers is on their lips” (v. 3; cf. 57: 4; 58:4-5; 64:3-4). The comparison between the tongues of his opponents and that of a poisonous snake is indicative of the effective nature of words and their potential to

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<sup>43</sup>Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg), 24.

cause great harm.

The psalmist asks the Lord to take vengeance for him by not just preventing the schemes of his oppressors from succeeding but turning those schemes against them (vv. 6-11). The psalmist's prayer is not merely motivated by self-preservation. His desire is that the "slanderers" should not be in Israel. But even more importantly is that if they succeed in their schemes, they will become arrogant (v. 8) and, that way, God will not receive the glory. He is, however, confident that the Lord will intervene and deliver him: "I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy. Surely the righteous will praise your name and the upright will live before you" (v. 12-13).<sup>44</sup>

In the preceding psalms, the psalmists are criticizing powerful individuals in society for using falsehood as a means to destroy the weak and the needy. The best institutional structure they could have used to have the psalmist killed without an appearance of impropriety is the court system. That may be the reason the psalmists are crying to the Lord to preserve their lives.

## **Slander**

**Psalm 50.** In terms of tone and content, this psalm is similar to the message of the classical prophets.<sup>45</sup> It presents the Lord as a judge summoning the heavens and the earth to come and witness as he judges his people Israel (vv. 1-7). He accuses the Israelites for being hypocritical because they are committed to formal religion at the expense of ethical behavior. He acknowledges that their burnt offerings are "ever before me" (v. 8) and they recite his laws and refer to the covenant (v. 16). However, they are disobedient to his word.

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<sup>44</sup>This psalm is similar to Ps 120.

<sup>45</sup>James Luther Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 29.

God particularly rebukes the wicked: “What right do you have to recount my decrees or take my covenant on your mouth? You hate my correction and cast my word (דבר) behind you” (vv. 16-17). Here, “decrees and word” probably include the Mosaic Law and subsequent prophetic word. The Israelites are being accused of neglecting obedience to God’s word and settling for empty ritual. The psalmist insists that God is more interested in ethical behavior than ritual, a view that is also emphasized elsewhere in the Old Testament. For example, when Prophet Samuel confronts Saul, he asks him: “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22; cf. Isa 1:10-17). Here, the Israelites are neglecting obedience to the Lord’s word. Verses 19-21 provide the specifics of the accusation:

When you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you associate with adulterers. / You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit (מרמה). / You sit and speak against your brother; you place slander (דפי) upon your own mother's son. / These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was like you. / But now I will rebuke you and lay the charge before you.

While the sins they are being accused of touch on the seventh, eighth, and the ninth commandments, the one that occupies a central place is the ninth commandment.<sup>46</sup> The wicked love using their speech for evil purposes especially in slandering (דפי) one’s brother. In the Old Testament, the word דפי occurs only here. It is a noun that literally means “blemish, stain or fault.” The context indicates that it has a metaphorical meaning. To use speech in such a way that it leaves “blemish, stain, or fault” upon one’s brother means to “slander” or “defame” him. The text specifically mentions slander as one of the reasons God is about to pass judgment against the Israelites (v. 22).

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<sup>46</sup>Grogan, *Psalms*, 105-06; McCann, *The Book of Psalms*, 882; While Wilson admits that Ps 50 “envisions failure to maintain relationships of honesty and respect,” he does not see an explicit reference to the ninth commandment (Wilson, *Psalms*, 763-64).

## Cursing

The other speech terminology that appears in the Psalter relates to cursing. Cursing was “the use of certain words which, it was believed, had the power, to bring disaster, illness, or death.”<sup>47</sup> The practice of invoking curses is utilized by both God and man in various ways in the Old Testament.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes a curse was invoked for the purpose of ratifying and guaranteeing loyalty to a treaty or covenant. The parties (or only the weaker) took an oath in which they pronounced a curse on the party who would not remain loyal to the stipulations of a treaty or covenant into which they had entered. In other cases, a curse served the purpose of protecting personal property (Judg 17:2); forcing subjects to observe a command (1 Sam 14:12). God pronounced a curse as a denunciation of or judgment on sin (Num 5:21; Deut 29:19-20). A person could also utter a curse intended to hurt his enemy (Job 31:30; Gen 12:3).

The last category is in view in the psalms of lament. Cursing was taken seriously because “for the Hebrew, just as a word was not a mere sound on the lips but an agent sent forth, so the spoken curse was an active agent for hurt.”<sup>49</sup> Along the same lines, Anderson says, “Evil words and curses (irrespective of the ‘theology’ behind them) were always potentially dangerous.”<sup>50</sup> The Hebrew Psalter uses two main terms for curses. The first one is אֱלֵה:

His mouth is filled with cursing (אֱלֵה) and deceit and oppression; under his tongue are mischief and iniquity (10:7).

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<sup>47</sup>VanGemeren, “Psalms,” 5:694; see also Bratcher and Reyburn, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms*, 101, 543.

<sup>48</sup>For further discussion on “cursing” see Josef Scharbert, “אֱלֵה,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:262-66.

<sup>49</sup>J. A. Motyer, “Curse,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall et al., 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 248.

<sup>50</sup>A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, New Century Bible, vol. 1 (Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1977), 432.

For the sins of their mouths, for the words of their lips, let them be caught in their pride. / For the curses (אֵלֶּה) and lies (בַּחַשׁ) they utter (59:12).

In these verses, the term is used in the same context with falsehood, which suggests that the cursing referred to is probably being done in the course of falsely accusing the psalmists in court.<sup>51</sup> The accusers proceed on the assumption that the psalmist is guilty and pronounce a curse in order to force divine judgment. The other curse term is קָלַל. Goldingay says that קָלַל is different from אֵלֶּה: “*qālal* (piel) means ‘curse’ in the sense of disparage or treat with dishonor or treat as contemptible (e.g., 37:22; Gen. 12:3; Lev. 20:9).”<sup>52</sup> However, when one looks at the words in the context in which they are used, the meaning seems to be the same.

In 62:4b, the psalmist accuses his enemies of hypocrisy: “With their mouths they bless, but in their hearts they curse (קָלַל).” When they speak in his presence they are wishing him good but in their hearts they wish him evil. The question is, how did he know what was in their hearts? He may have known that these people were not for his good because of the evil they were doing against him; their words did not match their actions.

In 109:17-18, 28, the psalmist speaks about his opponent:

He loved to curse (קָלַל); let it come on him. / He did not like blessing; may it [blessing] be far from him. / He clothed himself with cursing (קָלַל) as his coat, may it [cursing] soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones .... Let them curse (קָלַל), but you will bless. / They arise and are put to shame, but your servant will be glad.

Here, he portrays his opponent as one who has a habit of cursing (“he loves (אָהַב) to curse”). This point is heightened by the use of the imagery of clothing. Cursing is like a coat his opponent is wearing which means that he is cursing constantly. The psalmist is not afraid of the curse *per se* considering that he has confidence in the Lord to

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<sup>51</sup>Scharbert, “אֵלֶּה,” 263.

<sup>52</sup>John Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 248.

protect him. His main concern is that the procedure of cursing, which has its proper function in the religious and social life of Israel, is being misused to promote injustice by falsely accusing and condemning him for things he has not done. His comfort is in the fact that the Lord is just. He is confident that even if his opponents curse, the Lord will bless him. In view of the foregoing, psalms 10, 59, 62 and 109 teach that the Psalter is against the use of cursing to attack and terrify innocent people.

## **Shame**

Extensive literature on “honor and shame” has appeared in the recent past because scholars have recognized the importance of the subject in the ancient and contemporary eastern cultures including the cultures in biblical times. DeSilva defines honor as an experience of “being esteemed” while shame as being “devalued and belittled.”<sup>53</sup> He says,

Concern for one’s honor, and for the honor of one’s nation, is well attested in the wisdom and poetic texts of OT and is evidenced in a variety of ways. Individual characters engage in the push and pull of challenges and counterchallenges, trying to gain precedence over one another. The desirability of honor and the undesirability of social disapproval are assumed as a ‘given’ in ethical advice and liturgical petition.... The book of Psalms is especially rich in the language and conceptual framework of honor and shame.<sup>54</sup>

The book of Psalms teaches on the need not only to perform virtuous acts as truthful speech but also avoiding slandering or reproaching one’s neighbor. The idea of shaming is prominent especially in the psalms of lament where the wicked are accused of shaming the righteous.

**Psalm 22.** The psalmist expresses his feeling of total abandonment (vv. 1-2)

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<sup>53</sup>D. A. deSilva, “Honor and Shame,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 287: “Honor refers to the experience of being esteemed by one’s group or other social entities on the basis of embodying that which is deemed desirable, virtuous and socially productive. Shame refers, generally, to the opposite experience of being devalued and belittled on the basis of failing to measure up to or transgressing the same.” Contrary to deSilva’s definition, sometimes a virtuous person is shamed out of pride, jealousy or motivation to get even on the part of the perpetrator.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 287-88.

because he has cried out for deliverance from his affliction (vv. 11-21) but the Lord seems to be distant and absent. This situation is contrary to the “theology and experience”<sup>55</sup> of Israel. First, the Israelites have always believed that Yahweh is able to deliver. This belief particularly comes out in verse 3 where he refers to Yahweh as the “holy one,” a phrase that is a “reminder that Yhwh is the powerful, transcendent, divine God. It underlines the fact that Yhwh has the power to deliver the suppliant.”<sup>56</sup> In spite of this believe, the Lord has not delivered him. Second, whenever his ancestors trusted in Yahweh, they were “not put to shame” (v. 5) because he delivered them. The psalmist, however, has trusted in Yahweh but he has not yet been delivered (vv. 6-8).

The exact affliction that the psalmist is experiencing is not specified. He may be dealing with a personal problem of which some people have taken advantage and began to humiliate him. Alternatively, the psalmist may not have done any wrong but his enemies are using shaming as one of the methods of persecution. Regardless of the exact situation, the psalmist has been humiliated to the point that he has developed a very poor self-esteem: “I am a worm, and not human; the scorn (חרפת) of men, and despised (בְּזוּה) by the people. All who see me mock (לְעַג) me; they make lips (פְּטִירוֹ בְּשִׁפָּה) at me, they shake their heads; “He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!” (vv. 6-8).

The concentration of many terms that have to do with shaming in this short passage stresses the seriousness of the problem. DeSilva says that the term חרף “expresses verbal degradation.”<sup>57</sup> Because the psalmist has been degraded, he sees himself not as a human being but an animal. The term “worm” conveys his feeling of

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<sup>55</sup>Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 199.

<sup>56</sup>Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 328.

<sup>57</sup>D.A deSilva, “Honor and Shame,” In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 432.



insignificance (Isa 41:14; Job 25:6).<sup>58</sup> Also, the expression “my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth” (v. 15) means that he is so humiliated that he is not able to speak in public. The problem with shaming is that the words of the opponents not only challenge the worth of the psalmist, but they also challenge the power of the Lord whom he trusts. The opponents are indirectly saying that the Lord is not able or even willing to save him.<sup>59</sup>

The psalmist turns the words of his opponents and uses them to cry out for help from the Lord: “Deliver (נצל) my life from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs” (v. 20). The psalmist is confident that the Lord will deliver him so that he might prove his opponents wrong. The reason for this confidence is expressed in negative and positive terms. With regard to the negative, the Lord has “not despised (בוזה) nor abhorred the suffering of the afflicted one, and he has not hidden his face from him,” (v. 24). “Thus Yhwh’s declining to despise reverses the despising of other human beings (v. 6).”<sup>60</sup> The positive reason is that the Lord has heard his cry for help.

There are two other passages dealing with shaming in which the worth of the psalmist and the power of his God are also challenged. The first one is in Psalm 44:

You have made us the taunt (חרפה) of our neighbors, the derision (לעג) and scorn (קלס) of those around us. / You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples. / All day long my disgrace (כלמתי) is before me, and shame has covered my face at the words of the one who taunts (חרף) and reviles (גדף) me, at the sight of the enemy and the avenger (vv. 13-16).

The psalmist is complaining that the Lord had abandoned (vv. 9-13) his people in spite of their faithfulness to him (vv. 17-22). For this reason, the other nations have taken advantage to humiliate them. He prays that the Lord may save the nation from her misery and oppression (vv. 23-26). The second passage is in Psalm 69 which deals with shaming probably in a social context:

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 329.

<sup>59</sup>Jacobson, ‘*Many are Saying*,’ 33.

<sup>60</sup>Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 336.

For I have borne scorn (חרפה) for your sake, and shame (כלמה) covers my face... and the insults of those who insult you (וחרפות חורפיד) fall on me. / When I weep and fast, I must endure scorn (חרפה) for doing so (vv. 7, 9-10).

You know how I am scorned (חרפה), disgraced (בשת) and shamed (כלמה); all my enemies are before you. / Scorn (חרפה) has broken my heart and has left me in despair (vv. 19-20).

The psalmist seems to be suffering humiliation partly because of his devotion to the Lord considering that insult meant for the Lord is directed toward him. He uses strong language to express his feelings of shame and despair. The humiliating words and actions are intended to devalue and belittled the victim and his God hence showing their powerlessness. Miller says,

The experience of being taunted and the shaming that comes from it are seen to be in some sense challenges or complaints to God not only because ... the taunts received by the psalmists are explicitly said to be directed toward God but also because the shame of the faithful sufferer suggests God's indifference or powerlessness in the situation. The one who prays complains that the reproach of God has fallen upon him or her (Ps 69:9). The character of the taunt as a challenge to God by the mockers that becomes an implicit complaint by the praying one is further clarified with the realization that the term *herpâ*, "reproach," "taunt," "insult," and its related verbal forms regularly refer to a challenge of the power of the one being taunted or of his or her god. The characteristic of the insult is, "Where is your God."<sup>61</sup>

The Psalter condemns the act of shaming another Israelite or a fellow human being. The fact that passages dealing with shaming are included in the canonical text means that this was a common problem and the issue was important to the communities that produced and preserved it.<sup>62</sup>

### **Speech Ethics in Wisdom and Torah Psalms**

Although scholars agree that there is an element of wisdom teaching in the Hebrew Psalter akin to the one in wisdom literature, they do not agree as to which psalms should be classified as "wisdom psalms." Murphy is of the view that instead of talking about wisdom psalms, it is better to speak of "wisdom influence upon the psalms. Rather

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<sup>61</sup>Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 78-79.

<sup>62</sup>DeSilva, "Honor and Shame," 289.

than being a particular classification, wisdom psalms designate those various genres (hymns, thanksgiving, etc.) which have been shaped by wisdom influence, and incorporated typical wisdom teaching.”<sup>63</sup>

The Torah Psalms (Pss 1, 19, 119) are those psalms that praise and/or encourage the worshipper or reader to delight in the *torah* (“law or instruction”) of the Lord. They draw a contrast between the righteous and the wicked and the two ways of life and death so that the righteous can choose the way of life. This section will look at speech terminology in select wisdom and torah psalms.

### **Psalm 34**

In verses 1-2a, the psalmist vows to praise the Lord always because the Lord has rescued him from his trouble (vv. 4-6).<sup>64</sup> He praises the Lord in the presence of the oppressed and invites them to join him (vv. 2b-3). He confesses that his deliverance is consistent with God’s character because he protects and delivers those who fear him: “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them” (v. 7).

In verses 8-10, he exhorts those undergoing oppression to do two things. First, they should “taste and see” for themselves the saving goodness of the Lord (v. 8). Second, they should “fear the Lord” (v. 9) because those who fear the Lord lack no good thing (vv. 9-10). The psalmist then assumes the role of a wise man in order to offer instruction as to what it means to fear the Lord:

Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. / What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good things? / Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies (מרמה). / Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” (vv. 11-14)

The question he asks in verse 12 has to do with a desire to live a long life

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<sup>63</sup>Roland E. Murphy, *The Psalms, Job, Proclamation Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 34.

<sup>64</sup>Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 384.

full of the enjoyment of “good things” that are hinted in verses 8-10. The good things he has in mind probably include the necessities of life and deliverance in times of trouble. A person who has this desire has to exhibit the “fear of the Lord” (יראת יהוה) through carrying out his will. Specifically, he has to be a man that speaks the truth and seeks peace with his fellow man. Why does he single out the issue of speaking the truth? First, because v.13 describes lying as “evil” (רע) and the Lord hates evil (v. 16).<sup>65</sup> Second, considering that he makes reference to “seeking and pursuing peace” (v. 14) as an ingredient of the fear of the Lord and “foes” in verse 21, it is reasonable to assume that the misuse of speech was probably behind his trouble and that of the “oppressed” (v. 2).

The benefits for those who fear the Lord is the experience of his presence, protection and attention (vv. 15, 17-20, 22). However, the Lord is against the wicked and as a result, he will judge them by terminating their lives (vv. 16, 21).

## **Psalm 119**

Scholars generally understand Psalm 119 as a classic *torah* psalm. Like Psalm 1, it pronounces blessedness (אשרי) for the person whose life exemplifies total devotion to the Lord by obeying his *torah* (vv. 1-8). The psalmist expresses, throughout the psalm, his love for and endeavors to keep the torah. His devotion to the torah is, however, not being expressed in the abstract. Eaton correctly points out that Psalm 119 is a “supplication from a situation of distress, the prayer being supported by constant reference to the Lord’s teaching [*torah*].”<sup>66</sup> One can also hear in the background of the supplication, a contrast drawn between the psalmist as a representative of the righteous who live according to the Lord’s *torah* and his oppressors (vv. 86, 95, 110, 121, 134, 150), the wicked, who are “far from your law” (v. 150).

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<sup>65</sup>The same term is used to describe bearing false witness in Deut 19:19-20.

<sup>66</sup>Eaton, *Psalms*, 415.

**Shame.** He describes the oppressors as arrogant (vv. 21, 51, 69, 78, 85, 122); people who do not keep the torah (vv. 21, 150); influential and powerful (vv. 23, 161).<sup>67</sup> They oppress the psalmist using their speech in three ways. First, they use the method of humiliation. The psalmist prays, “Take away reproach (חרפה) and contempt (בוז) from me, for I observe your testimonies. Even though princes sit *and* talk against me [slander], your servant meditates on your statutes.” (vv. 22-23).

Leupold suggests the reason behind the “reproach and contempt” may have been his devotion to God’s word. It “emanated chiefly from prominent personages, ‘princes,’ who deliberately sat down and held sessions to discuss”<sup>68</sup> his case (v. 23). The psalmist also says that the arrogant, probably referring to princes in v. 23, mock (ליצ) him without restraint” (v. 51). He feels “lowly and despised (בוזה)”. He prays, therefore, that the Lord may “take away the disgrace (חרפה)” he dreads (v. 39) and save him so that he may answer the ones who taunt (חרף) him (v. 42). It is interesting to note that all the Hebrew terms for reproach or taunt are also used in psalm 22:6-7, a psalm that contains the description of the worst situation of humiliation in the book of psalms.

**Slander.** The second way the oppressor use their speech to oppress the psalmist is by damaging his reputation in the community: “Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies (שקר), I keep your precepts with my whole heart” (v. 69). The image here is that of a builder plastering the walls of a house thereby covering whatever was there before. The idea is that the opponents have damaged the reputation of the psalmist with falsehood such that wherever he goes people remember only the negative things said about him.

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<sup>67</sup>The princes in v. 23 are “evidently influential and powerful people of the ‘upper class.’” Hossfeld and Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 268.

<sup>68</sup>H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1981), 827.

**False accusation.** Finally, the oppressors use false accusations in a court of law: “Contend for my cause (רִיבָה רִיבִי) and redeem me” (v. 154). The phrase “contend for my cause” has to do with a legal dispute in which a party feels that he is being falsely accused or he is being denied justice. Commenting on this verse, Goldingay says, “The suppliant is on trial; indeed, the accusers have already turned in a ‘guilty’ verdict and are behaving accordingly.”<sup>69</sup> The psalmist pleads to Yahweh as a righteous judge to step in and rule in his favor. In contrast with his oppressors, the psalmist confesses that he “hates and abhors (שִׂנְאָתִי וְאִתְעֵבָה) falsehood” (v. 163). The same terms are used when the sages refer to God’s hatred of falsehood (Prov 6:16).

### Speech Ethics in Royal Psalms

#### Psalm 101

This psalm is generally recognized as a royal psalm in which either David or some other righteous king of Israel is speaking. The entire psalm consists of what the psalmist resolves to do. First, in verse 1 he resolves to sing about the “steadfast love and justice” (חֶסֶד־וּמִשְׁפָּט),<sup>70</sup> the two “divine attributes, especially characteristic of God’s administration of government, and his requirements of mankind.”<sup>71</sup> Here, it is not clear if he is thinking about his or the Lord’s “steadfast love and justice.” The parallelism suggests that he is thinking, first and foremost, about the Lord’s “steadfast love and justice.”<sup>72</sup> However, in the context of the rest of the psalm, he wants to make these qualities guiding principles in his personal life and royal function.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>John Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 437; see also Kraus, *Psalms*, 419.

<sup>70</sup>On the combination of חֶסֶד־וּמִשְׁפָּט, see Hos 12:7; Mic 6:8

<sup>71</sup>Charles Augustus Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 2: 314.

<sup>72</sup>Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 278.

<sup>73</sup>Heaton, *The Psalms*, 352.

Second, he determines to live a life of integrity to the Lord (v. 2). תמים does not imply sinlessness but “a course of life which is in complete and entire accord with the divine will”<sup>74</sup> in terms of outward behavior and inner disposition (לבב). The sphere in which he resolves to display his integrity is in the “midst of my house.” The term “house” has a range of meanings. It may mean “family and household to the royal court, or the temple or the community at large.”<sup>75</sup> In this passage, it is probably referring to the “royal court, the members of the Privy Council ... who advise the king.”<sup>76</sup> The king promises to set a personal example of integrity before these people.

Verses 3-8 identify the lifestyle he strongly hates and will not allow to be near him: the “affairs of the scoundrel” (דבר-בליעל) and “the deeds of those who turn aside” (עשה-סטים) from God’s will. The term בליעל is frequently used in the bible for the wicked or depraved people who embody evil (1 Kgs 21:9-14; Prov 6:12-19; 16:27-30). The parallelism in these verses indicates that these people deviate from the requirements of the Lord. Their problem is clearly in the heart. As opposed to the psalmist who describes himself as having a “whole/complete heart” (תם-לבב), these ones are “men of perverse [twisted] hearts” (לבב עקש). The specific elements of the lifestyle of the wicked are falsehood and pride:

Whoever secretly slanders (מלושני) his neighbor, him I will exterminate; No one who has a haughty look and an arrogant heart will I endure.... No one who practices deceit (רמיה) will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely (שקר) will stand in my presence (vv. 5, 7).<sup>77</sup>

Not only will the king not participate in these vices, he will not allow any person who practices them to be in his presence or part of his administration. In fact, he

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<sup>74</sup>Briggs and Briggs, *The Book of Psalms*, 314; see also Grogan, *Psalms*, 78.

<sup>75</sup>Robert David, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 330; see also Hossfeld and Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 14.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>The language used here is also used of בליעל in the wisdom literature (see Prov 6:12-19; 16:27-30).

takes these vices seriously that in vv. 5, 8 he promises to “exterminate” (צמח) or “cut off” (כרת) those who engage in them from his presence, Jerusalem and the entire nation of Israel. Considering that these terms have the idea of putting someone to death, one wonders if they are supposed to be taken literally or metaphorically. The text does not provide enough information to help the interpreter decide one way or another. However, at the very least, the use of these terms should be taken as hyperbole intended to emphasize how much the king hates wickedness especially falsehood and pride. The king resolves to be guided by principles that promote חסד-ומשפט (v. 1) in Israel. And because he does not govern alone, he desires to have servants who embrace the same principles (v.7). Heaton says,

These verses therefore concentrate on the need for a just king to govern through honest servants. Those of crooked heart, those who use slander to advance themselves, the arrogant and those intent on gathering wealth and power for themselves, all such corrupt characters who in fact gravitate towards the opportunities of government, and might have the means to ingratiate themselves and even to make themselves seem indispensable - all such the just king must exclude from his service.<sup>78</sup>

The lifestyle and administration of the king in psalm 101 provide an example of what life in the theocratic nations of ancient Israel is supposed to look like. “The king receives ‘justice and judgment’ from Yahweh .... [and as] the representative and enforcer of Yahweh’s system of justice and judgment .... the king bans evil from his sight.”<sup>79</sup>

## **Psalm 72**

While Psalm 72 does not contain any speech terminology, it is important for two reasons. The first one is the editorial comment in verse 20 that bringing to an end two sections that are full of lamenting prayers in which the weak and needy are crying to God for justice and deliverance from oppression by powerful people. As noted in the

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<sup>78</sup>Heaton, *The Psalms*, 352.

<sup>79</sup>Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 279.



preceding pages, those with power manipulate the court system and use words as weapons of oppression. The fact that the weak and the needy are appealing to God suggests that the human king is either part of the problem or he is unable or unwilling to help.

The second reason psalm 72 is important is because the psalmist is praying that God may make him the kind of king that will protect and grant justice to the weak and needy. The editors may have deliberately placed this psalm here because its contents represented the Israelite aspiration for a king that would deal with the problem of injustice and oppression part of which is seen in the psalms of lament.

In verses 1, the king asks God to grant him the qualities of justice and righteousness. According to the Israelite faith, “justice belongs to God” (Deut 1:17). Psalm 36:6 says, “Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep.” The king seeks this quality so that he might dispense justice, protect the weak and the needy and ensure that righteousness prevails in the land. The king prays for the qualities of just and righteousness so that

He [the king] will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice (v. 2).

He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor” (v. 4).

In his days the righteous will flourish (v. 7a).

He will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted ones who have no-one to help. / He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. / He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight (vv. 12-14).

As noted in this study, oppression and violence against the weak were some of the main problems facing the nation of Israel (see Ps 140:1-14; Isa 59:1-16). And since it was God’s requirement that the weak and the needy be protected, the king is asking for God’s help so that he may carry out his will in the kingdom.

The principles of the just king contained in psalm 72 and 101, if practiced, will

ensure a just society in which the powerful members of society are prevented from misusing their power to oppress or deny justice to the weak and the needy. The king himself will not only imitate the character of a just God, but he will also set a good example to the nation. A stark contrast is drawn between the just king and the powerful people who are misusing speech to oppress others in the Hebrew Psalter.

### **Speech Ethics and Worship**

The Psalter indicates that one's behavior impacts the effectiveness of his worship. A wicked person will not only be prevented from getting into the presence of the Lord, but his prayers will not be answered. Misuse of speech is specifically mentioned as one of the ways the worship of Yahweh will be hindered.

### **Psalm 5**

The Psalmist is appealing to the Lord for deliverance (vv. 1-3) from his enemies (vv. 8-10). The appeal is made on the basis of the Lord's character: "For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; with you evil cannot sojourn. The boastful shall not stand before you; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man (vv. 4-6)."<sup>80</sup> The term "sojourn" conveys the idea of welcoming a guest on a temporary basis. The psalmist is saying that the wicked cannot be allowed into the presence of the Lord.

These verses represent Israel's basic belief that God cannot co-exist with evil because he is holy.<sup>81</sup> Weiser says that what is at stake in verses 4-6 is "the nature of God, more particularly, his unapproachable holiness which is opposed to any thing evil."<sup>82</sup> The

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<sup>80</sup>Eunny P. Lee, "Psalm 5," in *Psalm for Preaching and Worship*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 62.

<sup>81</sup>Willem A. VanGemeran, *Psalms*, in vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 5:116.

<sup>82</sup>Weiser, *The Psalms*, 126; see also VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 116: "The Psalmist shows a clear conviction that God hates in the most radical way any form of evil and denies lawless persons any (present or future) right to his presence (v. 4[5]);" Goldingay, *Psalms 1-4*, 129-30.

verbal phrases “you are not a God who delights” (v. 4), “you hate” (v. 5), “the Lord abhors” (v. 6) affirms three times God’s absolute hatred of evil. The people who would be disqualified from his presence are described as “boastful ... speaks lies ... bloodthirsty and deceitful.” They use their speech not only to draw attention to themselves, but also to destroy others. “‘Bloodthirsty ... men’ may either be murderers, or more likely unscrupulous persons who use falsehood and deceitfulness to create trouble for the weak and innocent, and in certain cases result in the death of the innocent (e.g. through testimony in court).”<sup>83</sup>

That these people use speech to achieve their wicked schemes is further described in verses 9: “For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self [heart] is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they are slippery [flatter] with their tongue.” There are two important things to note. First, the imagery indicates the destructive potential of speech. Second, the destructive speech springs from a malicious heart. The enemies of the Psalmist are “evil through and through.”<sup>84</sup> The wicked are not only excluded from the presence of the Lord, but the Lord will destroy them for speaking lies (v. 6). In contrast, the Psalmist will enter the house of God (v. 7) and yet not because he is perfect, but because of the “abundance of God’s steadfast love.”

## **Psalm 15**

Since Gunkel’s classification of the various psalms in the Hebrew Psalter, the forms of psalms 15 and 24 have generally been understood as “entrance liturgies” which were used by the worshippers and the priests at the entrance to the sanctuary.<sup>85</sup> The

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<sup>83</sup>Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 87.

<sup>84</sup>Goldingay, *Psalms 1-4*, 130; see also McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” 4:701-02; James L. Mays, *Psalms*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 58; Lee, “Psalm 5,” 63.

<sup>85</sup>Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms*, trans. Thomas M. Horner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 22; see also S. Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, trans. D. Ap-Thomas, vol.1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 177-80; J. H. Hayes, *Understanding the Psalms* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1976), 44-46.

worshippers as individuals or as a group inquired from the priest about the requirement for entry into the sanctuary (15:1; 24:3). The priests then provided a list of ethical requirements to be fulfilled before one could be allowed to enter the sanctuary (15:2-5; 24:4-5) to worship. The liturgy ended with a promise of blessing to the person that meets these requirements (15:5; 24:6). Willis has questioned this understanding on the ground that “there is no way that the priests could know whether pilgrims or worshippers kept some of the conditions specified in Pss. 15:2-5 and 24:4-5, and thus there was no legitimate reason for them to keep them from entering the temple grounds for worship.”<sup>86</sup>

Clements has persuasively argued that the question and answer formula used in Psalm 15 is not “entrance liturgy,” but rather, a rhetorical device that provided a context for the religious and ethical instruction during worship.<sup>87</sup> He says,

Worship provided a medium of instruction and moral sanction, as did education within the family circles and the threat of legal punishment and redress. It is not surprising therefore that the priesthood and the commonplace patterns of worship were called upon to help discourage and prevent abuses of behavior that would have undermined the quality of life experienced within a community.<sup>88</sup>

Regardless of the setting and the manner in which these psalms were used, the questions posed in 15:1 concerning the kind of person the Lord might welcome into his presence as his guest is significant: “Lord, who may sojourn in your tent? Who may live on your holy mountain?” “Tent” refers to the tabernacle, the place of worship for the Israelites in the wilderness while the “Holy Mountain” refers to the place in Jerusalem on which the temple stood. Eaton says that this question (cf. 24:4) is prompted by the “awe

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<sup>86</sup>J. T. Willis, “Ethics in a Cultic Setting,” in *Old Testament Ethics*, ed. J. L. Crenshaw and J. T. Willis (New York: Ktav, 1974): 157; see also James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 158-59.

<sup>87</sup>R. E. Clements, “Worship and Ethics: A. Re-examination of Psalm 15,” in *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of John T. Willis*, ed. M. Patrick Graham et al., *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 284 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 87, 90.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 81.

of the holy realm.”<sup>89</sup> This “awe” can be traced back to the encounter between Yahweh and the Israelites on Mount Sinai (Exod 9-25; cf. 24:1-2; 34:2-3).<sup>90</sup> While the Israelites are encamped at the foot of the mountain, God informs Moses that he is going to descend upon the mountain and talk to him in the hearing of the people. But before the people can approach the mountain, they must undergo some ritual cleansing. Furthermore, a boundary is set beyond which they must not go.

These instructions communicate to the Israelites that God is holy and where he is, the place becomes holy.<sup>91</sup> For this reason, anyone who desires to approach Him must be holy as he is holy (Lev 19:2). This thought is carried on to the worship in the tabernacle Exodus 40. Childs says,

The role of the tabernacle as portrayed in ch. 40 was to extend the Sinai experience by means of a permanent, cultic institution. Exodus 24:16f. describe the ‘glory of Yahweh’ settling on Mount Sinai with the appearance of a devouring fire on the top of the mountain. In 40:34 the same imagery is picked up and transferred from the mountain to the tabernacle. The presence of God which had once dwelt on Sinai now accompanies Israel in the tabernacle on her desert journey. Once the glory of God had filled the temple [sic], Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, (40:35) .... The tent of meeting has become the centre of Israel’s worship.<sup>92</sup>

Ultimately, the imagery is transferred to the temple in Jerusalem, the main place of worship in the Promised Land. After the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the

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<sup>89</sup>Eaton, *The Psalms*, 126; see also Crenshaw, *The Psalms*, 159: “The idea of standing in Yahweh’s presence carried with it pronounced sense of awe.... The paradigmatic experience, Isaiah’s call to the prophetic office in Isa 6:1-13, brings a sense of dread owing to his sinful condition and a desire to give himself wholly despite the real danger. The suffering Job notes that he will obtain personal vindication if he can enter God’s presence, for he is convinced that a sinner cannot do so (Job 13:16)”; see also Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

<sup>90</sup>Sarna thinks that the Sinaitic “experience constitutes the essential foundation on which all future developments are built”[but] “the holiness of God does not persist beyond the event” (Nahum M. Sarna, *Songs of the Heart: An Introduction to the Book of Psalms* [New York: Schocken Books, 1993], 109).

<sup>91</sup>John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987): 272-73.

<sup>92</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testaments as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 175.

holy of holies, “the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple” (1 Kgs 8:10-11). These events were engrained in the minds of the Israelites that before they could approach a holy God, they must examine themselves to make sure they are pure (cf. Isa 33:14-16). So the question in 15:1 is a reminder to the worshipper that God is holy and if he is to approach his presence for worship, he too must be holy.

Verses 2-5 provide an answer to the questions in verse 1 by describing the ethical quality of the person who has access to the Lord’s presence. The description moves from general to specific terms:

He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth in his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no evil and casts no slur on his fellowman, who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the Lord, who keeps his oath even when it hurts, who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. / He who does these things will never be shaken.

The person the Lord welcomes into his presence is one who lives a blameless and righteous life (v. 2). “Blameless” means “whole, entire; free of blemish.” Being “blameless” does not imply sinless perfection, but “wholehearted” dedication to God’s requirement for a righteous person. This is a foundational character quality that underlies the rest of the qualities in verses 3-5.

Specifically, the characteristics of a blameless and righteous person are “expounded largely in terms of the tongue’s use, as often in the Psalms.”<sup>93</sup> First, he speaks the truth in his heart (v. 3a). “To speak the truth in the heart is to be so integrated that inner thoughts and audible speech agree – creating a sort of transparency of being and purpose that allows others to know that ‘what they see is what they get.’”<sup>94</sup> Second, he has no slander on his tongue (v. 3a). The Hebrew phrase לא-רגל על-לשנו translated “no

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<sup>93</sup>Grogan, *Psalms*, 61.

<sup>94</sup>Wilson, *Psalms*, 298-99.

slander on his tongue” is literally “not go about on his tongue.” What is envisaged here is not clear. However, considering the fact that the command is negative, it probably means moving from place to place spreading false information thereby causing damage to another’s reputation (cf. רכיל in Lev 19:16).<sup>95</sup>

Third, the person who is allowed into the presence of God does not do evil against his fellowman (v. 3b). Specifically, he does not take up “reproach,” “taunt,” and “insult” that might shame or damage the reputation or even threaten the life of his neighbor (v. 3c). Goldingay argues that the term חרפה is more than insult. “It suggests making accusations against other members of the community and thus seeking to defraud them or even threaten their lives.”<sup>96</sup>

Fourth, he reflects God’s attitude towards evil (5:4), in that, he rejects the wicked man, but honors those who fear the Lord (v. 4). Fifth, he is a man of his word. When he makes an oath, he does it even if it will work against him by bringing personal hurt or loss. Sixth, he is a man of integrity because he does not seek to gain financial advantage over the needy by loaning money on interest (v. 5a). The law prohibited someone from taking interest from a fellow Israelite (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:35-38; Deut 23:19-20). Seventh, the person who would appear before God does not give or accept a bribe in order to influence legal judgment against the innocent (v. 5b). The practice of perverting justice is strongly condemned by the prophets (Isa 1:23; Mic 5:23) and Wisdom literature (Prov 17:8; 21:14).<sup>97</sup>

Note that the questions and answer in Psalm 15 reflects a transformation in the biblical conception of worship in Israel. While ceremonial purity and sacrifice are important, ethical behavior takes the pre-eminence. The psalm emphasizes that the person

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<sup>95</sup>Sarna, *Songs of the Hear*, 113.

<sup>96</sup>Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 221.

<sup>97</sup>Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship*, 57.

whom God admits into his presence is one who is ethically pure. Sarna says,

It must be stressed that the mere posing of the question as to who may worship in the Temple is of great significance. Presence in the sacred place and worship of God are not to be mechanical observance or routine formalities, not even simple conformity with religious requirement. The unstated assumption is that no one who went to the religious center would fail to bring an offering. The questions about worthiness, therefore, go to the very heart of the biblical conception of worship. Although the elaborate sacrificial rituals constituted the dominant feature of the Temple service, the psalmist knows that the offerings are not of the primary importance in the Israelite hierarchy of religious values. They are subordinate to the demands of morality, and they lose all meaning unless those imperatives are obeyed.<sup>98</sup>

The other point is that the acceptable worshipper must reflect a lifestyle that promotes truth and justice in the community. “The particular value which the psalm has for all generations is to be found in the realization that truth and justice are the foundation-pillars on which rest the social ethics that govern community life, the administration of justice and man’s behaviour in the economic sphere.”<sup>99</sup> Both of these points are emphasized elsewhere in the book of Psalms (51:17-19), wisdom literature (Prov 15:8; 21:3, 27), and the prophets (1 Sam 15:22; Isa 1:11-17; Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8).

## **Psalm 24**

Psalm 24:3 poses a question similar to the one in 15:1: “Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?” Here, “ascending” and “standing in the holy place” refer to entering the “temple on Mount Zion, symbolic of God’s earthly dwelling place (see Isa 2:3; 30:29; Mic 4:2).”<sup>100</sup> The question is about the kind of person who can enter the temple to worship the Lord. Verses 4-6 provide an answer:

He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear deceitfully. He will receive a blessing from the Lord and vindication from

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<sup>98</sup>Sarna, *Songs of the Heart*, 103; Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship*, 56.

<sup>99</sup>Weiser, *The Psalms*, 170.

<sup>100</sup>McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” 772; see also Briggs and Briggs, *The Book of Psalms*, 215.



God his Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face,  
O God of Jacob.

God's place is holy (see Pss. 2:6; 3:4; 15:1; 43:3; 48:1), and the person entering God's presence must be holy as well. Verses 4-6 provide several characteristics of such a person. First, he must have "clean and pure hands" (v. 4a). Because the phrase does not designate ritual holiness or preparation that is measurable, McCann think that it refers to all aspects of the relationship with God and neighbor.<sup>101</sup> However, the phrase may be referring to a more specific form of external behavior and internal disposition.

The term "clean" appears frequently in the phrase "innocent blood," which refers to people killed without a just cause. "Clean hands" might, therefore, mean "those whose palms are 'free' from the blood of such innocent victims."<sup>102</sup> The phrase "clean hands" is the opposite of "hands full of blood" (Isa 1:15) or "hands stained with blood" which refers to one who has either killed or contributed to the killing of an innocent man.<sup>103</sup> A good examples is a "witness of violence" (Deut 19:16; Exod 23:1) who presses false charges or gives false testimony in a court of law that leads to the capital punishment of an innocent person. When "pure heart" is used together with "clean hands," as here, it means a heart that is not plotting to cause harm to an innocent person.

Second, the person who would appear before God in the temple is one who has "not lifted up his soul to emptiness" (v. 4b).<sup>104</sup> To "lift up one's soul" is to offer one's deepest commitment to another, which is the equivalent of worship and praise (cf. Pss 28:2; 63:4; 134:2; Lam 2:19; 3:41). The term אֵשׁ ("emptiness") in this context probably

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<sup>101</sup>McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 773.

<sup>102</sup>Wilson, *Psalms*, 451.

<sup>103</sup>VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 260.

<sup>104</sup>Although BHS literally reads "has not lifted up *my soul* to emptiness," most Hebrew manuscripts (e.g., MSS of the Cairo Geniza) read "*his soul*" which seems to make more sense. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:411-12.

has the sense of an “idol” (Ps 31:7; Jer 18:5). What is being prohibited here is idol worship. Third, he must not swear deceitfully (v. 4c). He is a man of integrity in that he can be taken at his word. When he swears to do something, he does it. There is a promise of blessings upon the person who exhibits these characteristics (vv. 5-6).

Psalms 5, 15, and 24 suggest that falsehood, among other forms of misuse of speech, defiles a person thereby depriving him access to a holy God for the purpose of worship. The prophet Isaiah makes the same point in Isaiah 33:14-16:

The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless: “Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with eternal burnings?” He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly, who despises the gain of oppressions, who shakes his hands, lest they hold a bribe, who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed and shuts his eyes from looking on evil, he will dwell on the heights; his place of defense will be the fortresses of rocks; his bread will be given him; his water will be sure.

Verse 14 refers to the Lord as a “consuming fire,” an imagery that presents him as separate from human beings in terms of essence and character (cf. Deut 4:24; 9:3) and, as such, he can’t stand evil. The Israelites recognized this truth when they had an encounter with the Lord on Mount Sinai (Exod 19 and 24) while Isaiah had a similar experience in his “personal Sinai” (Isa 6).<sup>105</sup> Isaiah declares that sinners tremble before the awesomeness and judgment of God. He then asks: “Who among us can sojourn with the consuming fire? Who among us can sojourn with eternal burnings?” The term “sojourn” which is also used in Psalms 5:5 and 15:1 means being a guest. The question then is, what kind of person can be a guest of the Lord. The answer given in vv. 15-16 requires a change of character in order to be in the presence of the Lord. “If we are to dwell with God as his guests, we must share his character.”<sup>106</sup>

This character consists of a number of elements. First, the person who can be

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<sup>105</sup>John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapter 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 600.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

God's guest is one who lives a righteous life and whose speech is upright (v. 15a; cf. Prov 8:6). מִישְׁרִים is a geometrical term that refers to something that is straight. Upright speech is the one that conforms to divinely set standard. Such a speech does not include falsehood or is not used to hurt other people. Second, he should not have financial gain through extortion and bribery (v. 15b). Third, he must not be part of conspiracy to harm or kill someone (v. 15c). Such a person is guaranteed not only access to God's presence, but also assured that he will enjoy God's blessings.

### **Positive Use of Speech**

The Hebrew Psalter teaches positive ways of using speech. The psalmists are presented as being conscious of the fact that the mouth/tongue can be out of control like a wild animal or be deliberately used as an instrument of sin (e.g. 36:3; 50: 19; 59:12) as seen in the psalms of lament. The psalmists are, therefore, constantly making an effort not to use their mouth as an instrument of sin. Psalm 19:14 expresses the desire of the psalmist, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."

Elsewhere, the psalmist is heard resolving to control his tongue/mouth, "I will watch my ways from sinning with my tongue; I will put a muzzle on my mouth" (39:1). The "muzzle" here is a bit that is put on the mouth of a horse to control it (cf. Jas 1:26; 3:3). The psalmist is determined to keep his mouth under control. However, like the Epistle of James in the New Testament (see 3:8), the Hebrew Psalter indicates that it is difficult for a human being to control the tongue/mouth without the help of the Lord. Therefore, the psalmist prays, "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers; let me not eat of their delicacies" (141:3-4). Apart from speaking the truth, the Hebrew Psalter identifies other positive ways in which the righteous can use his mouth/tongue.

## **To Praise God**

The first one is to praise or bless the Lord. The Israelites understood that as part of their commitment to the Lord, they were to declare his power, deeds and uniqueness. Therefore, instead of using the mouth to do evil, the psalmists resolve to praise the Lord with it:

I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.... my lips will praise you. / I will praise you as long as I live .... with singing lips my mouth will praise you (63:2-5).

I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth (34:1).

My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long.... But as for me, I will hope continually, and will praise thee yet more and more. / My mouth will tell of your righteousness, of your salvation all day long (71:8, 14-15).

The psalmists do not just praise the Lord for his past deeds on their behalf. They believe that the Lord is present among his people and he continues to do acts of deliverance as they call out to him. It is, therefore, incumbent upon them to proclaim his mighty deeds with their mouth.

## **To Pray to God**

The second positive way of using the mouth/tongue is to pray: “Hear my prayer, O God; listen to the words of my mouth.” (54:2); “I cried out to him with my mouth (66:17a). This use of the mouth/tongue is evident especially in the psalms of lament where the psalmists are crying to God for deliverance.

## **To Teach Wisdom**

Finally, the mouth/tongue of the righteous is to be used to teach wisdom: “The mouth of the righteous man utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks what is just” (37:30). Rather than speaking what is hurtful to other people as the wicked do, the righteous will speak words that offer instruction. Psalm 49:1-3 states, “Hear this, all you peoples; listen, all who live in the world, low and high, rich and poor alike: My mouth will speak words

of wisdom; the utterance from my heart will give understanding.” Here, the psalmist will speak words of wisdom that give listeners insight to the deceitfulness of wealth. Verse 3 connects the wisdom with the heart which suggests that the speech of a person reveals the condition of his heart (cf. Luke 6:45).

Psalm 78:1-3 makes a call: “Give ear, O my people, to my instruction (תורה); incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter hidden sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.” The psalmist here offers wisdom-style instruction (תורה) for life. In the rest of the psalm, he recites and interprets the history of the Lord’s dealing with Israel so that his audience might learn from the mistakes of past generations.

### **Conclusion**

The study in this chapter has revealed that the nature and purpose of speech ethics in the Hebrew Psalter is similar to the other books of the Old Testament. The Psalter strongly condemns false speech especially the one aimed at destroying other people. Speech terminology frequently occurs in the Hebrew Psalter because words are used as a weapon to oppress the weaker members of society. The way the terminology is used reflects a situation in ancient Israel in which justice has failed. The powerful members of society seem to be involved in a struggle to gain, maintain, and exercise power. They project their power through boasting and constant plots to achieve their interests at the expense of others. They device wicked schemes against the weak and the needy and carry them out using speech in a number of ways.

First, they use the court system where they press false charges, give false testimony, and use bribery with the goal of securing capital punishment against the innocent or depriving them of their rights. Second, they use falsehood to damage the reputation of the weak. Third, they use “taunting, mockery, insult” to shame the righteous and his God.

The weak and the needy do not have any human being or institution to protect them. This conclusion is supported by the inclusion of some royal psalms in the Psalter which suggest that the Israelites desire a king characterized by honesty and justice who would be able to defend the weak and the needy against oppression. In the absence of such a king, the oppressed are petitioning God to intervene and deliver them. The petition is based on three factors. First, God is the just king and judge over the whole earth. He is able to call men to account and put right that which has been twisted by human form of justice. Second, God can be trusted to intervene because of his steadfast love for the weak and needy. Third, the righteous expect him to act for his own glory.

The way speech terminology is used in the Hebrew Psalter lifts the veil for one to see what was hinted in the other books of the Old Testament concerning the relationship between speech ethics and a just society. During the formative stages of the nation of ancient Israel, the laws concerning the use of speech were issued to establish a just, fair, and stable society in which everyone, especially the weak and the needy, was protected. The condemnation of the Israelites in the prophetic literature for practicing injustice and violence using falsehood indicates that the nation had deviated from covenant requirements (Exod 20:16; Deut 19: 15-21). Nowhere is the condemnation of injustice and violence against the weak as pronounced as the Psalter. While the condemnation by the prophets is directed at the people, the condemnation in the Psalter is voiced to God so that he may intervene.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The journey to investigate the use of speech terminology in the Hebrew Psalter has come to an end and it is now time to summarize what has been discovered. Chapter 1 introduced the problem, purpose, thesis, and the methodology of the study. Chapter 2 briefly surveyed the study of Old Testament ethics during the modern era beginning from nineteenth century to the present, paying special attention to how it developed into an independent discipline and the key issues that have dominated scholarly discussion along with the underlying philosophical ideas that inform that discussion.

It was discovered that the modern study of Old Testament ethics is primarily under the control of Western ideas and perspectives. Since 1970, the research in the field has predominantly employed the sociological approach which argues that the Old Testament contains diverse and conflicting ethical viewpoints held by social groups at different times in the history of ancient Israel. For this reason, it is difficult to find a central issue by which to organize its ethical teaching. Further, there is lack of consensus on how to use the Old Testament to address contemporary moral questions. Some scholars are almost resigned to the idea of the possibility of studying Old Testament ethics.

This study argued that the problem with the discipline has not been the Bible but modern perspectives which are imposed on the text such that it cannot say what it was written to say. It was suggested that to avoid the problem, the text should be read on its own terms as an ancient document. When the text is approached this way, the study of

Old Testament ethics will not only be possible, but the problem of diversity and contradiction will not be as serious as supposed.

Chapter 3 examined the occurrence of speech terminology outside the Hebrew Psalter, using select passages from the Pentateuch, prophetic and wisdom literature in order to find out what these passages teach about speech ethics. It was discovered that the Pentateuch, prophetic and wisdom literature strongly insist on truthful speech. Furthermore, when one looks at the ethical teaching of these diverse books on speech ethics, a picture emerges. Although they address the subject from different angles, they converge on one point, namely, that speech ethics in these books is intended to promote a just, fair, and stable society.

The Pentateuch is almost exclusively prescriptive. It contains laws and regulations which were issued during the formation of the Israelites into a covenant community on Mount Sinai and reissued on the plains of Moab, to prescribe how the members of the community were to behave when they settled in the Promised Land. The laws and regulations dealing with the use of speech are intended to create a just and stable community where everyone is protected and/or treated fairly. One way of achieving this objective is by establishing a legal system that functions properly. For this reason, pressing a false charge and bearing false testimony are strongly prohibited and the judge is admonished to be impartial in the administration of justice. The other way justice is promoted in the community is through the laws and regulations that protect personal property and reputation. God intended Israel to be a nation based on honesty, justice and fairness.

Speech terminology in the prophetic literature is similar to the one in the Pentateuch. The difference is that, while the Pentateuch uses the terminology when prescribing the way the Israelites should use speech as part of the covenant stipulations, the prophets use the terminology in the context of castigating the Israelites for violating



those stipulations.

During the ministry of the classical prophets in the pre-exilic period, the society of ancient Israel had completely broken down. Cases of dishonesty and injustice were rampant. On one hand, people employed the court as a tool to advance their selfish interest by pressing false charges and supporting them with false evidence. On the other, judges perverted justice for unjust gain. The end result was that violence and/or shedding of innocent blood was common. The guilty was acquitted and the innocent was condemned. False prophets made matters worse by using falsehood to encourage the Israelites to continue with a life of sin. This situation causes Jeremiah to advise the people of Judah not to trust anyone, not even a friend or close relative. The Israelites continue to struggle with the problem of dishonesty in the post-exilic period. However, the prophets of Yahweh envision a golden age when there will be no more falsehood as the Lord will purge Jerusalem his holy city.

Wisdom literature, especially Proverbs presents speech ethics as a product of the reflection of the wise which they pass on to the youth so that they might live a God-fearing life. Proverbs views ethics in geometric terms. God has established a moral order to which human beings must conform. And anyone who deviates from it is described as “crooked” or has strayed from the “straight” path. Like the Pentateuch and prophetic literature, speech ethics in the book of Proverbs is intended to promote a just and stable society. Falsehood is referred to as an “abomination”; something that the Lord hates strongly.

Chapter 4 briefly discussed whether or not the Psalter contains ethical instruction. In answering the question, the approaches taken by pre-critical interpreters and form and canonical critics were examined. The pre-critical interpreters believed that the psalms offered ethical instruction. For this reason, they studied their content for edification and instruction on godly living. However, form critics moved away from this

approach and began to focus on the form of the text and the circumstances in which the psalms arose and/or were used. This approach was found inadequate particularly because the result did not benefit the Church as a community of faith. The situation led to the emergence of canonical criticism that looks at the Psalter as Scripture and studies it for instruction based on the final form of the text.

The canonical critics believe that the Psalter offers instruction in a number of ways. First, the fact that it was canonized as Scripture means that it is supposed to be read for instruction. Second, the Psalter contains means of instruction at levels of the individual psalms and the whole book. For example, the passages containing pronouncement of blessedness (1:1; 119:1), warnings, testimonies, resolution, and description of the respective character and destiny of the righteous and the wicked indicate that they are meant to offer instruction.

Chapter 5 examined the use of speech terminology in the Hebrew Psalter in order to find out why it frequently appears and what it teaches about speech ethics. The study discovered that speech terminology frequently appears in the Psalter for three reasons. First, it strongly emphasizes truthful speech through the resolution of the psalmists to speak the truth and by condemning the wicked for speaking falsehood. The Psalter suggests that falsehood defiles a person thereby depriving him access to a holy God for worship.

Second, speech terminology is pervasive in the Hebrew Psalter because words are used by powerful members of society as a weapon of oppression against the weak and the needy. The Psalter lifts a curtain for one to see a full picture of oppression that is hinted in the other books of the Old Testament. The powerful members of society seem to be involved in a struggle to gain, maintain, and exercise power. They project power through boasting and constant scheming in order to destroy others. Using words as weapons of destruction, they plot injustice and/or violence against the weak and needy.

They seek to achieve their goal in a number of ways. First, they use false accusation, false testimony, and bribery in order to secure capital punishment against their innocent victims. Second, they use falsehood to damage the reputation of the weak. Third, they use “taunting, mockery, insult” to shame the righteous and his God.

It appears that at the time the individual psalms were written and/or the Psalter was redacted into the final form, the weak and the needy did not have any human being or institution to protect them. The royal psalms suggest that the Israelites desired a king characterized by honesty and justice who would be able to defend the weak and the needy against oppression. In the absence of such a king, the oppressed are petitioning God to intervene and deliver them. The petition is based on three factors. First, God is the just king and judge over the whole earth. He is able to call men to account and put right that which has been twisted by human form of justice. Second, God can be trusted to intervene because of his steadfast love for the weak and needy. Third, the righteous expect him to act for his own glory.

The final reason speech terminology frequently appears in the Psalter is that the use of speech in the Psalter is a distinguishing mark between the righteous and the wicked, in the sense that it reveals their respective character and behavior.

The rationale for speech ethics in the Psalter is not different from the one in the Pentateuch, the prophetic and wisdom literature as they are all dealing with justice and stability in Israel. While speech ethics in those books is in the form of prescriptive, condemnatory, and reflective statements directed at human beings, the speech ethics in Psalter is in the form of petitions voiced to God because of the injustice and violence perpetrated by the powerful class against innocent victims through the misuse of speech.

This study makes a contribution to the study of Old Testament ethics in three ways. First, unless mistaken, no study has been conducted exclusively in the area of speech ethics in the Hebrew Psalter. Second, by studying speech terminology both within

and outside the Psalter and seeing the unity in Old Testament teaching on the use of speech demonstrates that the biblical viewpoint on individual ethical issues is not as diverse and contradictory as often thought. This point is especially important considering that the psalms cover a period from Moses to the post-exilic period. Third, it demonstrates that it is still possible to do Old Testament study.

In view of the fact that this study was covering an area in the book of Psalms, a book that is neglected in the study of Old Testament ethics, there is room for further reflection and clarification of speech ethics. In particular, one needs to do further research on the relationship between speech ethics in the Hebrew Psalter, legal material in the Pentateuch and the prophetic literature.

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## ABSTRACT

### SPEECH ETHICS IN THE HEBREW PSALTER

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This dissertation examines the use of speech terminology in the Hebrew Psalter in order to find out why the terminology is used frequently and what it teaches about speech ethics. Also, it seeks to determine the Psalter's contribution to the study of Old Testament ethics in general.

Chapter 1 discusses the problem, purpose, thesis, and the methodology of the study. Chapter 2 briefly looks at the history of the study of Old Testament ethics during the modern era beginning from the nineteenth century to the present, paying special attention to how it developed into an independent discipline and the key issues that have dominated scholarly discussion along with the underlying philosophical ideas that inform that discussion.

Chapter 3 examines the occurrence of speech terminology outside the Hebrew Psalter, using select passages from the Pentateuch, prophetic and wisdom literature in order to determine what these passages teach about the proper use of speech.

Chapter 4 discusses briefly whether or not the Psalter contains ethical instruction. In answering the question, it takes into consideration the approaches taken by pre-critical interpreters and form and canonical critics. Chapter 5 examines the use of

speech terminology in the Hebrew Psalter with the aim of finding out why it is used frequently and what the Psalter teaches about speech ethics.

Chapter 6 summarizes the findings of the study and proposes an answer to the question as to why the Psalter has more references to the use of speech than any other book in the Old Testament. It suggests the contribution the Psalter makes to the study of Old Testament ethics. Finally, proposals are made regarding areas for further research.

This work contends that speech terminology features prominently in the Psalter not only because the Psalter places strong emphasis on truthful speech but also because speech is used by the wicked as a weapon of oppression. The powerful members of society devise evil schemes and put them into effect using false accusation, false testimony, false oaths, slander, and humiliation against the weak. Since the weak do not have any human being or institution to protect them, they appeal for justice from God as the righteous king and judge.

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