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Book Review: Understanding Old Testament Ethics

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Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations, by John Barton. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003. Pp. 212.

This book is a collection of previously published articles by John Barton, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Oxford, that spans more than twenty-five years of publication except for the introduction and conclusion, written especially for this monograph. As the title suggests, the book broadly addresses Old Testament ethics. The subtitle points toward areas of concentration: approaches and explorations. By "approaches," Barton evaluates how various individuals have dealt with the subject of Old Testament ethics, such as Walter Eichrodt, John Hemple, and his favorite, Eckart Otto, to name a few. The term "explorations," on the other hand, refers to various prophetic works through which Barton is able to contend with Old Testament ethics, such as the books of Amos, Isaiah, and Daniel.

The first five essays are grouped in part 1: "Morality and Justice in the Hebrew Bible." Of these five, the first essay, "Understanding Old Testament Ethics," was the most helpful. In this article, Barton interacts with various aspects of J. Hempel's *Das Ethos des Alten Testaments* and Eichrodt's *Theology*. Barton seeks to demonstrate the weaknesses involved in comprehensive treatments of Old Testament ethics, concludes that there is little value (or hope) in "trying to write *The Ethics of the Old Testament*" (15). Nonetheless, he does see the usefulness of treating particular areas of Old Testament morality. The remaining essays in this section, which dealt with normative concepts and systems in Old Testament theology and with the usefulness of narrative, drama, and poetry for extracting philosophical and ethical truth, were less instructive for this reviewer.

The last four essays are grouped under part 2: "Explorations in the Prophets." In this section, Barton hopes to establish the value of narrative and prophetic materials for developing and guiding one's moral progress. He does this through articles on "Amos's Oracles against the Nations," "Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem," "Ethics in the Isaianic Tradition," and "Theological Ethics in Daniel." His essay on Amos's oracles was by far the longest (fifty-three pages) and the most useful in terms of material.

Often it is difficult to pull together various essays successfully into one monograph, without the parts appearing seemingly forced and choppy. This book avoids that shortfall. Especially with the help of the introduction and conclusion, Barton effectively united the articles to address various aspects of Old Testament ethics. Also, the book interacts well with segments of critical scholarship. Nevertheless, the book has several shortcomings.

Despite Barton's attempt to interact with various segments of Old Testament scholarship, he appears completely unaware of any contributions by evangelical authors. For example, at the end of several chapters, Barton provides a short bibliography of works since his publication of the contents of a chosen essay. After chapter 1, he notes several texts on biblical ethics published since 1978 but fails to mention Walter Kaiser's *Toward Old Testament Ethics*. In Barton's defense,

he never claims to give an exhaustive bibliography, but it is difficult to imagine that such an important work in Old Testament ethics from an evangelical perspective was not worthy of citing in any part of the book.

Barton also appeared inadequately prepared to discuss Divine Command theory, the predominant view among evangelical ethicists. In an attempt to understand how God could be the source of prohibitions against murder, Barton writes: "God commands as God chooses, and the law is to be obeyed simply for that reason, not for any inherent qualities it might be thought to possess" (34). Thus, Barton fails to grasp (although most proponents of Divine Command theory do understand) that God's laws are based upon the nature and character of God Himself. What God commands reflects who God is. The law is what it is because God desires humans to be conformed to his will. Barton, on the other hand, sees that law as something completely independent of and superior to God—a "moral norm by which even God can in principle be judged" (36). Few, if any, evangelicals would buy into Barton's view of God's commands.

Lastly, Barton overly emphasizes the usefulness of natural law. This theme runs from his second essay throughout the remainder of the text. It is one of the means that Barton uses to establish a universal norm. Although his handling of the topic was interesting, and in much respect correct, it also fell short as a whole by failing to address the effects of the fall upon humanity's ability to understand and grasp God's moral revelation in nature.

In the end, this book exposes the reader to a number of approaches to Old Testament ethics and interesting explorations of certain prophetic texts. Because of the aforementioned shortcomings, however, it has only a limited value for illuminating and guiding evangelicals in Old Testament ethics.

John Tarwater