This article was originally commissioned by the journal Transformation, but in the hope that it will be of interest to Themelios readers also, it is published here with kind permission of the editors of Transformation. It should be made clear that this is a personal selection of what I have found helpful and significant, and does not pretend to be an exhaustive listing of everything in the field.

There was a renewed interest in the field of biblical ethics in the 1980s after a rather barren decade which coincided with the apparent collapse of the Biblical Theology movement and the knock-on effects in biblical ethics. 1983 saw the American publication of Thomas Ogletree’s stimulating book The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics (Minneapolis: Fortress/Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). As the title suggests, Ogletree does not aim to write a comprehensive or descriptive biblical ethics, but to open up a dialogue between the biblical text and modern understandings of the moral life. He surveys consequentialist, deontological and perfectionist conceptions of ethics, and concludes that none is sufficient by itself to account for the complexity of human ethical awareness. He proposes a synthesis grounded in historical contextualizing. He finds this synthesis supported by a re-presentation of classic biblical themes from both Testaments. Following a tradition-historical approach, he confines his biblical survey to the Pentateuch and wisdom of the old Testament and the synoptic gospels and Paul in the New Testament. Without underestimating the rich diversity of the biblical materials, he finds a broad thematic unity in the Bible, a unity which resides in the unfolding identity of the people of God. This enables him to work from the particularity of their historical context to the particularity of our own, since ‘the significance of the biblical texts cannot be confined to the past, to the original intentions of their authors, or to the initial contexts of their production’ (p. 9).

The early issues of Transformation included several articles on biblical ethics, some of which have extended their shelf life by moonlighting as Grove Booklets as well. Christopher J.H. Wright, ‘The Use of the Bible in Social Ethics’, Transformation 1.1 (1984), pp. 11-20, was an overview of method in using the canonical span of the Bible in approaching ethical issues, but concentrated mainly on the OT. It is still in print as Grove Booklet on Ethics No. 51 (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1983). This was followed by Stephen Mott, ‘The Use of the New Testament’, Transformation 1.2 (1984), pp. 21-26, and 1.3 (1984), pp. 19-26, which shaped the idea that Jesus was uninterested in politics and has nothing to offer to contemporary social conflicts. This became Jesus and Social Ethics, Grove Booklet on Ethics No. 55 (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1984). A more detailed study of social ethics followed the OT, followed in Christopher J.H. Wright, ‘The Ethical Relevance of Israel as a Society’, Transformation 1.4 (1984), pp. 11-21. This took up some of the insights of the then burgeoning field of sociological study of ancient Israel, particularly by Norman Gottwald, and asked how they impacted our understanding of the social relevance of Israel itself as a community, and how that in turn affected our Christian, ecclesial, ethics. By that stage, Grove Booklets had had enough of Transformation hand-me-downs, so it has not been reprinted!

Old Testament ethics
In 1983 two books came out on OT ethics, the authors and their work at that time unknown to each other: Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Testament Ethics: A Guide for the Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), which concentrated on the Decalogue and central OT ethics around the concept and implications of holiness; and Christopher J.H. Wright, Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics (in the USA this was entitled An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today) (Leicester/Downers Grove: IVP, 1983), which provided an overview of the topic and an illustrated paradigmatic method of how the OT could be handled ethically and applied to a variety of social and economic areas.

However, such attempts to present systematized or diachronically unified accounts of the subject matter of OT ethics have been criticized on methodological grounds. John Barton, in ‘Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament’, in J. Rogerson (ed.), Beginning Old Testament Study (SPCK, 1983), pp. 113-130 (which developed ideas earlier set out in ‘Understanding Old Testament Ethics’, JOT 9 (1978), pp. 44-64), argues that, in contrast with the systematic, diachronic approach, we can only make satisfactory progress in the discipline if we take into account all the sociological, chronological and tradition-critical insights and nuances of the material. We need to distinguish between what some Israelites believed and did in various times, what certain OT authors and traditions held regarding what Israelites should believe or do, and what kinds of behaviour the OT as a whole may be said to condemn or endorse. We cannot assume that our construction of the last of these would have coincided with popular ethics in Israel — in theory or practice — at any given time. Yet neither can we reduce OT ethics merely to a descriptive history of Israel’s behaviour, any more than OT theology can be reduced to a history of Israel’s religion. We can discern an ethos or general drift of the moral world view of ancient Israel. There was a pattern of life lived in the presence of God and pleasing to him which has a number of constant factors throughout the whole period. ‘The [OT] law affords an insight into the contours of God’s own ideal will for his people and for all mankind’ (p. 128). Barton lists at least three fundamental elements in this ‘ethos’: (i) obedience to the divine will; (ii) conformity to a pattern of natural order; (iii) imitation of God. R.E. Clements, ‘Christian ethics and the Old Testament’, The Modern Churchman 26 (1984), pp. 13-26, also recognizes the historically contextual limits on the ethical material of the OT and points out how it was written in specific contexts and not for general application. Thus, for example, there is a strong case for saying that ‘there is no such thing as an OT ethic of love’ (p. 17). Clements’s approach is similar to that of Barton. The work he has completed, therefore, is that of sketching the contours of an ancient Israelite ethos, using the historical material available to him.

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R.E. Clements, ‘Christian ethics and the Old Testament’, The Modern Churchman 26 (1984), pp. 13-26, also recognizes the historically contextual limits on the ethical material of the OT and observes how even phrases which have passed into the fundamental articles of the OTethical tradition (such as ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’) come in contexts which are ‘occasional’ and sometimes syntactically incidental. It is questionable, in his view, whether the OT gives us, in its own words and by its own intention, any timeless moral principles. Nevertheless, Clements is impressed with the breadth and durability of OT moral insights. ‘Overall, the Old Testament literature appears to be feeling its way towards the formulation of universal principles of morality’ (p. 17). Certain moral priorities and demands are so repeatedly apparent that they achieve a ‘sense of primacy’ as regards importance (which) readily lends itself to a sense of “principle,” as regards universal applicability (p. 17). Clements also observes how the long history of Israel in the OT period gave ample opportunity for the fundamental insights and values of their society to be tested and refined in an amazing variety of historical situations. Since Israel had to adapt and yet preserve essentials, the norms and values they expressed through law, prophecy, narrative, worship and wisdom likewise manifest that quality of adaptability. ‘Societies of dramatically different economic, political and cultural types have found within the Old Testament a richly viable source of social and moral teaching’ (p. 22).

R.E. Clements is also the editor of a major symposium of essays on the Old Testament: The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), which, while not directly addressing ethical questions, includes plenty of raw material for the (stout-hearted) student of OT ethics. It is also a rich quarry for bibliographical resources.
Another critic of the attempt to derive absolute moral norms from the OT material is R.R. Wilson, ‘Approaches to Old Testament Ethics’, in G.M. Tucker, D.L. Petersen and R.R. Wilson (eds), Canon, Theology and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honour of Breward S. Chids (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), pp. 62-74. He shows out that the narratives of the Bible appear quite inconsistent in applying Torah norms to some of the central characters in Israel’s history. So if Pentateuchal laws did not exclusively govern the ethical evaluation even of biblical authors, why should they be considered binding on us in any direct way?

In the same Festschrift (Tucker, Petersen and Wilson), Bruce Birch, ‘Old Testament Narrative and Moral Address’ (op. cit., pp. 75-91), takes a rather more positive line. He emphasizes particularly the power of biblical narrative to shape moral identity and character. This builds on his earlier work with Larry Rasmussen, Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989). Birch’s original book was printed in a revised and expanded edition (1989). Birch, in the earlier book, argued that while the OT cannot be prescriptive or normative for Christians, it shares in the primacy of the whole Bible in functioning as a moral resource for Christian decision-making and the church’s moral response to the world. In this Festschrift article, he argues that the OT narratives and the power in exposing reality, shattering or transforming world views and challenging the reader to practical response. They therefore have to be read as wholes within their canonical context, and not just by the methods of historical criticism.

The canonical approach also underlies Birch’s most recent book, Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics and the Christian Life (Louisville, Westminster: John Knox, 1991), in which he seeks to apply the broad themes of the OT, arranged in the historical pattern of the canon, to the ethical task facing the Christian and the church in the modern world. The bulk of this excellent book is devoted to surveying each major period and section of the OT, exposing the major theological themes in them, and suggesting ways in which they may be used as resources for Christian moral reflection. In the process, Birch’s ample footnotes provide a valuable Who’s Who’ of up-to-date mainline scholarship on most parts of the OT, which is helpful in itself. However, while all this is welcome (and it is very evident that Birch has a great enthusiasm for the Hebrew Scriptures and their challenging relevance), it is not finally clear what actual moral authority the OT bears for the Christian. The text has power, but not authority. Authority is not a property inherent in the Bible itself. It is the recognition of the Christ in the community that empowers the commands in Scripture in the way that Christ is a source of empowerment for its moral life in the world. . . . Often the authority of Scripture is as much in its modelling of a process as in its mediating of a content. In attending to the discernment of God’s will by the biblical communities we become sensitized to God’s will in our own time’ (p. 34). One wishes Birch had spent longer on the opening two chapters of the book which take up the question of the authority and use of the OT for Christians. It does not seem to add greatly to the position of the earlier book (Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life), where the emphasis is on the functional uniqueness of the Bible in the wake of the alleged collapse of traditional views of biblical inspiration under the impact of historical-critical method on the one hand and liberation-feminist ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ on the other.

Another helpful survey of the field is provided by John Goldingay, The Old Testament as a way of life’, in idem, Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation, pp. 38-65. This enormously wide-ranging book (1,056 pages) appeared in 1981 (Leicester: IVP) and has been reissued in an updated edition (Leicester: Apollos, 1991) which includes a survey of the last decade and fresh bibliography. Goldingay examines how biblical law functions in shaping the Christian way of life, and how we can cope with the specificity, diversity and limitations of OT commands and standards.

John Goldingay’s later book, Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), has three chapters in which, in order to model the different approaches he suggests to handling the diversity of the OT, he focuses on selected case studies, each of which offers a rich diet of insights relevant to OT ethics. Chapter 3 is ‘A Contextualizing Study of the People of God in the Old Testament’, which traces the nature of Israel through its OT history and draws out a number of ethical agendas which shine through each period and have enduring relevance for the Christian church. Chapter 5 is ‘An Evaluative Study of the Teaching of Deuteronomy’, exploring its behavioural values, theological perspective and pastoral strategy in the struggle to enable Israel to be what God wanted them to be, while having to start where they actually were in reality – a perpetual tension in any ethical programme. Chapter 7 explores the creative tension between the themes of creation and salvation in the OT, particularly focusing on how the Wisdom traditions relate to the salvation-history tradition, and how both have a part to play in our understanding of ethical responsibility in God’s created, fallen and redeemed world. Backed up with exhaustive bibliographical referencing, these chapters are immensely stimulating and rewarding.

Turning from the grand overview to concentration on a single theme, a superb example of the genre and a model of what can be done in fresh explorations of what may seem like well-worn paths is John G. Gamme, Holiness in Israel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). Gamme’s thesis is that holiness for Israel fundamentally meant ‘Leviticalism’, but he shows how that concept was interpreted and applied to Israel’s life in three distinct forms. For the priests, holiness meant the demand for separation and ritual purity (which was not lacking in ethical demand, as Gamme’s study of Leviticus shows). For the prophets, holiness meant the demand for social cleanliness, through justice and equality in human relationships. For the wisdom writers, holiness required the cleanliness of individual morality. In each category Gamme explores representative texts in depth and produces a rich and suggestive study of the faith of Israel and its interweaving of these three major strands. The book is not directly a work of biblical ethics in the sense that he does not go on to spell out how his work intersects with contemporary, the believer reader who needs to respond to the OT of the Bible to ethical issues is here provided with an invaluable resource kit, full of stimulating insights into the practical demands of holiness as Israel experienced and expressed them.

Gamme’s book is part of the Fortress series ‘Overtures to Biblical Theology’, which, under the editorship of Walter Brueggemann (author of the first in the series, his own brilliant study The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith, 1977), has produced some fine monographs that bear on biblical ethics, directly or indirectly. There is no space for reviewing all of them, but the following are particularly worth noting: Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (1978); idem, Texts of Terror (1984); Walter Harrelson, The Ten Commandments and Human Rights (1980); Terence E. Fretheim, The Suffering of God (1984); Sharon H. Ringe, Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee (1985); J.P. Walsh, The Mighty from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition (1987).


The question of how the OT law is to be understood and applied by Christians is one of the perennial problems of biblical ethics, and has been since NT days. Dale Patrick, Old Testament Law (Louisville: Knox, 1985/London: SCM, 1986), provides a clearly written survey of both the texts themselves and of current scholarship on them. He adopts the standard critical viewpoints on the analysis and dating of the different sections of the Pentateuch without much discussion of alternative viewpoints, but apart from that, his overview is clearly written and a useful orientation. After initial comments on source, form and tradition-critical issues in
each section of law (Decalogue, Book of the Covenant, Deuteronomy and the Holiness and Priestly Codes), he gives concise commentary on significant portions of each. He has chapters addressing the issue of how the law functioned in ancient Israel itself, and also how it can function for Christians, by seeing God’s ‘unwritten law’ behind the written word. There is also a discussion of how the NT love commandment relates to and subsumes OT law.

P.D. Millar Jr., The Place of the Decalogue in the Old Testament and Its Law, Interp. 43 (1989), pp. 229-242, reflects on the constitutional or foundational nature of the ten commandments in Israel. He sees a clear order and structure, and observes how the commandments are collectively summarized in other parts of the OT, and also individually elaborated right through into the NT. The same issue of Interpretation has an article by R.H. Fuller, The Decalogue and the New Testament, Interp. 43 (1989), pp. 243-255. Exploring both the gospels and Pauline traditions, Fuller argues that for the NT the primary part of the law was the second table of the decalogue plus the double love commandment. The importance of the decalogue in both Testaments makes Fuller wish that it could be restored to its rightful place again in Christian liturgy and catechism.

Terence E. Fretheim, The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus, Interp. 45 (1991), pp. 354-365, wishes to challenge and reverse the traditional habit of reading Genesis in the light of Exodus (i.e. on the understanding that the creation traditions in Genesis emerged in an Israel that had already experienced God through their exodus history). He argues for the canonical and theological importance of the fact that Genesis comes first in all creation and that work in the history of salvation among the nations before the emergence of Israel. This means that the intention of God’s redemptive work is not finally confined to Israel but has universal impact. The Song of Moses in Exodus 15 celebrates God’s redemption in history overcoming anti-creational forces of chaos which are historically symbolized in Egypt. He stresses the missiological integration of the Abraham and Sinai covenants. Sinai is meant to enable Israel to fulfill its vocation as the people of God in the service and restoration of creation. The law, therefore, has its roots in creation faith, not merely in the exodus, though it is obviously motivated and empowered by that historical redemption. Israel now joins God in seeking to keep right and God has created the rightness into every sphere of daily life... Sinai reiterates for those redeemed the demands of creation (pp. 362f).

Personally, I warmly welcome Fretheim’s combination of missiological and ethical understanding of the thrust of the OT which pays equal attention to the universality of the creation theme and the particularity of Israel’s election, redemption and vocation in the midst of the nations. I think it is a key that will unlock many more fresh and challenging ethical arenas of the OT in the world. The same rationale underlies Fretheim’s comments on relevant parts of the book of Exodus in his commentary in the ‘Interpretation’ series, Exodus (Louisville: Knox, 1991). At a much more popular level, my own book of adult group Bible studies operates according to the same principles; Chris Wright, Understanding Old Testament Law Today (Jigsaw Series, Swindon: Bible Society, 1990). The eight studies lead the group (though it could be used by an individual also) through eight hermeneutical steps to understanding and applying OT law, which include setting the law in the context of God’s created world, his universal mission, his redemptive grace and his concrete model of Israel, and then reflecting on the meaning of the law, the legal categories, the fundamental values and social objectives, and the means of transposing these from the ancient to the modern context.

The question of how the OT law applies to Christians or to society at large is given the most starkly contrasting answers by dispensationalist and theologian (also known as reconstructionist and dominion theology) groups respectively. The arguments on both sides are complex and the writings (particularly of the latter group) are prolific. In very simple terms, the summarized thus: dispensationalists hold that none of the OT law applies to the Christian (or to any society in the present era) unless specifically re-endorsed by a NT imperative; theologians hold that the whole OT law continues to be valid both for Christians and as God’s law for all human society, unless specifically abrogated in the NT. To seek to explore the different categories of law, the summarized thus: dispensationalists hold that none of the OT law applies to the Christian (or to any society in the present era) unless specifically re-endorsed by a NT imperative; theologians hold that the whole OT law continues to be valid both for Christians and as God’s law for all human society, unless specifically abrogated in the NT. To seek to explore the different categories of law, the historical dispensations of God’s redemptive work, of Israel from the church, of law from grace and of the present age from a coming millennium. It thus stresses radical discontinuity between the Testaments and is also strongly post-millenialist. Theonomist position is linked to a brand of covenant theology which stresses the unity and continuity between the Testaments and is equally strongly post-millenialist. Transformation rendered a useful service by publishing a representative article from each camp. Greg Bahnsen, one of the earliest and leading lights of the movement, sets out the theonomist stall in ‘Christ and the Role of Civil Government: The Theonomic Perspective’ Part I, Transformation 5.2 (1988), pp. 24-31; Part II, 5.3 (1988), pp. 24-28. This is a useful starting block for wider exploration of theonomist literature, some of which is much more extreme in its prescriptiveness than Bahnsen, at least the Bahnsen of this article. This was followed by a dispensationalist perspective from Norman L. Geisler, ‘Dispensationalism and Ethics’, Transformation 6.1 (1989), pp. 7-14.

I find myself unconvinced by either wing of the argument, and note that neither is wholly consistent in working out the implications of how the OT laws do or do not apply. Theonomists, for example, often seek to assign the weight of the economic laws of the OT, saying that they do not fall within the remit of the civil authorities—a view which may have rather more than a little to do with the generally free-market, right-wing political stance of the movement. Geisler, on the other hand, while saying that no OT laws are binding on contemporary Christian ethics, makes quite extensive and sometimes fairly prescriptive use of OT material in his survey of ethical issues, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues (Baker: 1989/Leicester: IVP, 1990).

This is not the place for a full analysis and critique of these two influential movements. I have tried to give a slightly fuller assessment in a longer article surveying the ethical use of the OT at different major periods of the church, in Christoher J.H. Wright, The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament: A Survey of Approaches, Part I, Tyndale Bulletin 43.1 (1992), pp. 101-120; Part II, 43.2 (1992). This article samples the approaches to the OT in the early church, the Reformation period (comparing Luther, Calvin and the Anabaptists), and in recent years. An earlier and very thorough study of both dispensational and covenant theology, which is not directly about the ethical systems of dispensational or covenantism but explores some of the roots of both, is Daniel P. Fuller, Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuity? The Hermeneutics of Dispensational and Covenant Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

Two very useful critiques of the theonomist movement have recently emerged from very different stables. H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse? (Portland: Multnomah, 1988), is from the pre-millenialist dispensational camp and so is in head-on opposition to the whole theonomist, reconstructionist agenda. A subsidiary benefit of the book is that it provides a comprehensive classifying system for the vast annotated bibliography of theonomist writings and of some other works that are critical of theonomy. A more substantial, and in my own view more theologically satisfying, critique is provided by the multi-authored work, William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (eds), Theonomy: A Reformed Critique (Grand Rapids: Apologetics Institute Press, 1990). While not a book on biblical reformation, this is a critique of theonomy as more of an attack on theonomy from the wings than from the front. The contributors are all members of Westminster Theological Seminary, flagship of Reformed theology. They therefore have much in common theologically with theologians, which undoubtedly claims to be a legitimate heir of the Reformed tradition. Nevertheless, the critique is strong and at some points devastating. In 16 well-argued chapters it ranges through issues of biblical exegesis, especially of course the question of OT law, of biblical and systematic theology, of contemporary concerns, and historical connections — especially the question of whether theonomy is right to claim Calvin as a founding father (the answer is negative).

The theonomist/reconstructionist debate does not feature so prominently on the British scene, though there is a British counterpart. Recently a new and quite influential journal, Themelios, directed by Stephen Perks in Whitby, North Yorkshire, which publishes occasional papers and critiques from a moderately theonomic position. More influential is the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge, whose work in bringing a biblical perspective in the public arena of social policy and reform has been recognized even by adherents of Marxist theory. Moreover, I have several times devoted an issue to a paradigmatic understanding of the relevance of OT socio-economic laws and institutions to subsequent cultures and societies, including our own. In 1990, The Evangelical Quarterly devoted an issue to the question of biblical social ethics and in it

Walter Kaiser continues his work on OT ethics with two recent articles which are polemical in two opposite directions. In ‘God’s Promise Plan and His Gracious Law’, JETS 33 (1990), pp. 289-302, his target is mainly the theologian/reconstructionist camp and their use (in Kaiser’s view, distortion) of the OT law. He argues for a careful reinterpretation of the classic, but in modern times much maligneed, threefold distinction between moral, civil and ceremonial categories in the law. Only thus can we avoid the ‘all-or-nothing’ dilemma that we are faced with if we must follow either theonomy or dispensationalism. In ‘New Approaches to Old Testament Ethics’, JETS 34 (1991), Kaiser surveys the wider field of OT ethics and laments the erosion of any sense of biblical authority in recent writing — much of which can be appreciated for other reasons. He lays some of the blame on the lingering effects of critical method, some on the newer hermeneutics of suspicion practised in certain kinds of feminist and liberation stances, and some on the new literary criticism with its emphasis on reader-response hermeneutics. He hopes that the efforts of himself will work harder at finding ways through these fields to consolidate a more fruitful approach that enables the church and the world to hear again the ethically authoritative voice of God through the Hebrew scriptures. Amen to that, but it is an enormous task and challenge.

To finish this OT section on a fitting eschatological note, I may be allowed to include a forthcoming article of my own, ‘Ethical Decisions in the Old Testament’, European Journal of Theology 1 (forthcoming). It explores different dimensions of ethics in ancient Israel under three headings: (1) ‘Living in the created order’, ‘Responding to the God of covenant purpose’ and ‘Responding to the God of redemptive action’. Among other things, it touches on the balance between consequentialism and deontological in the OT, and points out the eschatological and missiological nature of Israel’s ethical challenge.

New Testament ethics

In 1984 two books on NT ethics appeared. Allen Verhey, The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), begins with a concise but comprehensive survey of the ethical material in the NT, and then goes on to detail the ethical authority of the NT within what he calls a ‘Chalcedonian’ view of the Bible, i.e. that it is fully Word of God and also words of men and women. He seeks to avoid both fundamentalism and liberalism, arguing that God’s Word is neither identified nor contrasted with the human words of Scripture. One is left wondering, then, exactly what and where is it? Verhey proposes a more functional kind of ethical authority, which is becoming increasingly popular as a way of understanding biblical authority and has a lot to offer, but can be very flawed if it is not related to some ontological understanding of the nature of Scripture as the Word of God. Nevertheless, Verhey rightly warns us against seeking answers to the wrong questions of ethics (as in science) and then rejecting it because it doesn’t give us the answers we want. The ultimate agenda of the NT is to engender loyal obedience to the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Given that centre, ‘God’s word is no less purposeful and intentional than human words, and God’s intention is to transform and sanctify human identity, not to command it and the whole creation into coherence with its reign’ (p. 181).

Richard Longenecker, New Testament Social Ethics for Today (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), begins with a survey of different ways of using the NT for ethics, and concludes that the right approach is to discern and apply those prescriptive principles which can be seen to flow from the heart of the gospel itself. Rather than deal with the NT comprehensively, he focuses on what he regards as a definitive statement of NT social ethics, namely Galatians 3:28. Here he finds a cultural mandate (‘neither jew nor Greek’), a social mandate (‘neither slave nor free’) and a sexual mandate (‘neither male nor female’). These must not be spiritualized but must be worked out in terms of their social implications. The tensions involved in such outworking are clear in the rest of Paul’s own writings, particularly as regards the gender issues, which Longenecker explores at length.

The most significant monograph of the decade on NT ethics, however, had already appeared in German in 1982, and was available in English in 1988. Wolfgang Schrage, Das Jesus’che Ethos (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988). Schrage undertakes to examine ‘the question of how life was lived in the earliest Christian communities: what were the foundations, the support for, the criteria and principles for this way of acting and living’ (p. 1). He goes on comprehensively to survey Jesus’ eschatological ethics, Paul’s ethical thought, the ethical ethics of the early church and the epistle. It is a very detailed resource text, helpfully subdivided, rich in scriptural insight, and filled out with thorough bibliographies for each section. It is relatively middle-of-the-road as regards the contentious issues of NT interpretation, although it lacks significant interaction with the latest paradigm shifts in studies of Jesus’ and Paul’s relation to Judaism and thus has a rather dated feel.

Since Schrage’s book is primarily a work of theological ethics — that is, exploring the ethical teaching of the different strands of the Bible — it is the light of the historical and cultural context of the discussion of the social, economic and political and cultural dimensions of the historical context of the NT. Yet these must be considered if we are to appreciate the full flavour of the ethical distinctiveness of the early Christian communities. Fortunately, this need is met by Wayne Meeks, The Moral World of the First Christians (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). In this fascinating and enlightening book, Meeks explores not the internal ethics of the NT (i.e. he has no sections on ‘the ethics of Jesus’, or ‘what the NT teaches about specific ethical issues’), but the external influences and contexts of early Christianity. He introduces the reader to the world of Roman, Greek and Jewish history and culture — ‘the context of a world in which the biblical words were spoken and helping us to understand the symbolic and social world that early Christians shared with other people in their villages and cities. He is concerned with the ethos that helped to shape and define the ethics, and to understand the identity of the early Christian churches as self-conscious communities of moral discourse in constant interaction with the world around them.

The increased understanding of ethics as a community matter, both in biblical times and in modern outworking, is the focus also of L.S. Cahill, ‘The New Testament and Ethics: Communities of Social Change’, Interv. 44 (1990), pp. 383-395. There is a consensus that Cahill argues, taking his cue from the work of Birch and Rasmussen, ‘that moral norms are justified not as transcriptions of biblical rules, or even as references to key narrative themes, but as coherent social embodiments of a community formed by Scripture’ (p. 393). Accordingly, we need a socially conscious understanding at both ends of the ethical task — in biblical exegesis and in application to our own situation. Cahill advocates the value of recent historical, sociological, economic and political research on the biblical world for our understanding of biblical ethics. I would agree on this, but with the caveat that it calls for a lot of hard thinking on the part of the reader who wants to move from these primary resources to more direct applicability to contemporary ethics. It’s not the task of the Bible to fill you up like filling your tank at the gas station. I have already referred above to the survey of such work in the OT field in the Clements symposium, with its bibliographical resources for this growing section of biblical study. Cahill mentions two books in the NT area: Halvor Moenxø, The Economy of the Kingdom; Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); and Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988). I have not yet seen these two myself, but would add a couple that I have read and found very illuminating in understanding the economic and political context in which the ethical stance and agenda of Jesus comes into sharper focus: M. Borge, Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus (New York: Edwin Mellin, 1984); and D.E. Oakman, Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day (New York: Edwin Mellin, 1986). I found them particularly informative for the last chapter of my own recent book, Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament (London: Marshall-Pickering, 1992), ‘Jesus and his Old Testament Values’, in which I endeavour to see the ethical challenge of Jesus as a
recapturing of the authentic thrust of the Hebrew scriptures in the midst of the conflicts and struggles of contemporary Jewish life.

The same issue of Interpretation that carried Cahill's article has another by R.B. Mays, 'Scripture-shaped Community: the Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics', Interp. 44 (1990), pp. 42-55. The major 'problem' that Mays defines is the fact of divergent Christian moral stances derived from the same texts. He offers 'a preliminary list of normative methodological proposals for a church that seeks to be a Scripture-shaped community'. These give an encouragingly high priority to the Bible itself as the norm that relativizes all else, though I would question his too-ready acceptance that tensions in the text have to be left as simply irreconcilable contradictions. The article is, however, a sensible essay in practical hermeneutics for morally concerned Christians and churches.

Turning to the ethics of Jesus himself, Bruce Chilton and J.I.H. McDonald have produced a scholarly survey of the relationship between Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God and his ethical challenge, in Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom (London: SPCK, 1987). They focus especially on the parables, helpfully setting Jesus in the context of the literary and symbolic world of early Judaism and exploring how such modes of communication actually worked in fostering ethical response by sharpening the hearers' images of God and providing new models of behaviour.

At a more popular, but still demanding, level, A.E. Harvey, Strenuous Commands: The Ethics of Jesus (London: SCM, 1990), laments the fact that so much Christian ethical reflection and prescription down through the centuries has actually neglected the sharpness of Jesus' moral challenge, domesticating it as literally impractical and opting for a bland dependence on natural law. Harvey argues that Jesus radically challenged 'normal' life with a bold project of moral persuasion that quite deliberately used exaggeration, paradox, extremes and forms of address reminiscent even of ecclesiastes. In the course of his book he compares Jesus with roughly contemporary Greek and Jewish moralists, discussing, for example, their varied responses to the problem of property and wealth. Jesus challenges us, says Harvey, to take the risk of 'living as if . . .', in the light of the inbreaking kingdom of God.

More popular still as a survey and guide, which, in spite of its title, ranges through most of the NT, is David Cook, Living in the Kingdom: The Ethics of Jesus (London, etc.: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992). Intended for the general reader, in a broad agenda it expounds the Sermon on the Mount, offers guidance on how to understand and apply biblical texts, critiques moral relativism and tackles common questions and objections.

The impact of the so-called 'Third Quest' in Jesus research is to be felt in Ben Wiebe, 'Messianic Ethics: Response to the Kingdom of God', Interp. 45 (1991), pp. 29-42. He surveys the work of scholars such as Ben Meyer and E.P. Sanders on the aims of Jesus, agreeing with them that Jesus' strongest sense of self-identity and purpose came from his mission in relation to the restoration of Israel. His ethics were therefore not merely individual, but fundamentally aimed at creating a community of response to the new work of God in establishing his reign in a repentant and restored Israel. He also points to recent scholarship on the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over their basic paradigms of holiness. In this light, Jesus' teaching on the law was not so much negative as transcending. Wiebe also contests the idea that the eschatological dimension of Jesus' ethics makes them either failed or irrelevant.

Alister McGrath asks the question 'In What Way Can Jesus Be a Moral Example for Christians?', JETS 34 (1991), pp. 289-298, and answers by denying the inadequacy of the liberal moral example theory. This deficient view of the imitation of Christ accorded moral authority to Jesus only because he was a witness to higher moral universals which were established by other rational criteria. Rather, argues McGrath, we must start with the doctrinal truth of the incarnation in order to realize that the moral authority and exemplarity of Jesus derive from who he is. Imitation of Christ is therefore not the essence of the gospel itself but rather the fruit of faith and a saving experience of Christ. He would prefer to use the term 'being conformed to Christ'.

Pauline studies are still in the throes of adjusting to the post-Sanders revolution. One recent work on the ethics of Paul which interacts fully with the new approaches is John Barclay, Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988). This is primarily an exegetical study of Galatians 5:13-6:10 — the ethical exhortations which to some traditional exegetes had seemed embarrassingly contradictory to Paul's assertions earlier in the epistle that Christians were free from such apparent moral burdens. Barclay carefully shows how Paul's ethics in this section flow naturally (both logically and theologically) from his previous argument, and in the process he illuminates other areas of Paul's ethical thinking, particularly concerning the status of Gentile believers in relation to Judaism and the moral obedience required of all believers — Jew or Gentile — in Christ.

A more broad-ranging essay on Paul's ethics is J.F. Kilner, 'A Pauline Approach to Ethical Decision-Making', Interp. 43 (1989), pp. 366-379, in which he summarizes Paul's approach as 'God-centred, reality-bounded and love-impelled'.

Since most studies of NT ethics are dominated by Jesus and Paul, it is refreshing to read an article on the ethics of I Peter which, equally refreshingly, examines its OT roots — Gene L. Green, 'The Use of the Old Testament for Christian Ethics in I Peter', Tyndale Bulletin 41.2 (1990), pp. 276-289. Green observes how the author has sought to match the situation and needs of his readers to a text of the OT which arose in a similar context (Ps. 34) and then draw words of both encouragement and moral exhortation from it. The author thus assumes that the teaching of the OT has normative value for the Christian community which stands in organic continuity with the OT people of God. This is an interesting case study. It would be fascinating to apply a similar method to other sections of NT moral teaching where appeal is made to OT texts.

Finally, with editor's privilege, I conclude with two Themelios articles, one OT and one NT, which explore the ethical relevance of the Bible for Christian political understanding and relating to 'secular' authorities. Christopher J.H. Wright, 'The People of God and the State in the Old Testament', Themelios 16.1 (1990), pp. 4-10 (which has also managed the metamorphosis into a Grove Ethical Study, No. 77, Nottingham, 1990); and my nameake (but no relation!), N.T. Wright, 'The New Testament and the "State"', Themelios 16.1 (1990), pp. 11-17.