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# Seeking a path of its own: Old Testament ethics in current research

## ABSTRACT

*Old Testament ethics has been a Cinderella discipline. However, since the 1980s, it has emerged as an important area of study, albeit one where certain key questions continue to be unresolved, including: Is this a discipline in its own right? Is Old Testament ethics a descriptive or normative discipline? If so, which texts does it consider? If it does contribute to contemporary practice, by what mode is that determined? This article outlines the issues involved in each of these questions, exploring a path towards understanding Old Testament ethics as a distinct discipline that draws on the whole canon with the aim of shaping contemporary practice, while accepting that fundamental differences continue.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Old Testament ethics is a discipline that has not always had a clear identity. Indeed, for a significant part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was not always clear that it was, in fact, a recognisable discipline within Old Testament studies. Rodd (2001:ix) reports that, when he wanted to pursue Old Testament ethics after being appointed to his first teaching post in 1956, he was dissuaded from doing so because there was apparently no future in it, resulting in a delay of 45 years before he converted lectures, which he had delivered over that period, into a monograph. Similarly, Wright (2004:13), perhaps the person who did more to bring Old Testament ethics back to the table, reports that he was wrestling with how he might develop a research



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dissertation on Old Testament ethics when, in 1973, he met a distinguished German professor who explained to him that the reason for his struggling was that the discipline did not really exist. But, as Wright (2004:14-15) reflected 30 years after that conversation, he could point to a discipline that had emerged from the shadows and that was in good health, as more works emerged to explore its dimensions.

We can take these reflections from Rodd and Wright as defining Old Testament ethics as a Cinderella discipline within the larger field of Old Testament studies. By this, I mean that this discipline had long struggled to be recognised and then went into decline for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before being awoken and now reaching a place of some flourishing. That point of re-emergence can largely be attributed to the work of Wright and his doctoral thesis at Cambridge in 1977, although a revised version thereof was not published for another 13 years (Wright 1990). However, prior to that, he issued a popularisation of part of the thesis in a work that laid the key foundations for his paradigmatic model, and explored its significance for social ethics (Wright 1983). Much of this work was then developed in various essays which were later gathered into a single book as an extension of his doctoral work (Wright 1995). As Wright continued to develop his thinking, he eventually revised his 1983 and 1995 volumes in one integrated work, which remains his principal study of Old Testament ethics (Wright 2004). In this, he continued to focus on social ethics rather than individual ones, judging that this was the most appropriate to the material under consideration.

However, given that its re-emergence is only comparatively recent, and as new voices have emerged alongside that of Wright, further questions of method, in particular, have also become clearer. This is to be expected. When Wright began his work, it was over 50 years since any substantial piece had been published in English, and this is indicative of the amount of scholarly attention given to it. Without scholarly reflection, we are unlikely to find either methodological reflection or advance, but as the discipline has developed, fresh reflections have occurred, although to my knowledge these are not gathered in any one place. As such, this article attempts to survey these developments, tracking some of the central methodological questions that need to be addressed if Old Testament ethics is to develop more fully.

## 2. IS OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS A DISCIPLINE IN ITS OWN RIGHT?

The range of volumes that have appeared since Wright's early work might suggest that the question of whether Old Testament ethics is a discipline in its own right has already been answered. Yet, it is not clear that this is the case, especially as ethics has often been treated simply as part of the larger discipline of Old Testament theology. Hence, it needs to be noted that works of Old Testament theology have often contributed a chapter on "ethics" or "the good life", treating Old Testament ethics as a component of Old Testament theology rather than a discrete discipline. In nearly all cases, ethics emerges as part of the closing reflections on the theology of the Old Testament, an outworking of the key theological themes developed through the work.

This is evident in Eichrodt's still pivotal *Theology*. In Part Three (God and Man), Eichrodt (1967:231-315) commences with chapters that explore the individual and the community and then the fundamental forms of human relationship with God, all of which can be viewed as a prolegomenon to ethical reflection, before a chapter on Old Testament morality (Eichrodt 1967:316-379). Although the German original predates the English by some margin (and Part Three is a separate volume), it demonstrates that, even in the period that Wright notes when no specific works on Old Testament ethics were being produced, Eichrodt could still present ethics as a significant goal of his work. Eichrodt saw morality as a key expression of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel that was explored in the two previous parts. For Eichrodt, the ethics of the Old Testament needed to be viewed within the larger framework of its theology.

Not all Old Testament theologies gave space to ethics. We struggle to find a significant discussion of ethics in von Rad's equally influential volumes. Certainly, there is material there which engages with ethical material such as his treatment of Yahweh and Israel's righteousness (von Rad 1962:370-383) and comments that are scattered through his second volume (1965), but he does not offer a substantial reflection on this topic. Nevertheless, von Rad is something of an outlier, in this instance, perhaps because his method does not allow for synthetic reflection on the vast majority of topics. As such, many more recent works on Old Testament theology have continued to include a chapter on ethics, considering this as a specific element of their theology. A few examples of this can be noted in passing. Although differing from Eichrodt in many ways, Preuss' (1995:185-208) theology also includes a chapter on ethics, exploring it as a dimension of election. Moving to the North American

context, we can observe that both Childs and Brueggemann treat ethics within their larger theologies. In Childs' earlier work (1985), discussion of ethical themes is woven through the book. In his larger work, Childs (1992:658-716) includes a chapter on ethics as part of his larger process of reflecting theologically on the whole of the Christian Bible. However, as is representative of a work that deals more with sketching the key issues, Childs' (1992:673-684) treatment of the specifics of Old Testament ethics is more concerned with outlining the methodological issues to which a canonical approach might offer a solution than with discussing the Old Testament's ethics as such. It should be noted, however, that his insistence that attention should be paid to the varying parts of the Old Testament as making a distinctive contribution to the discussion has played an important role in subsequent discussion, even though Childs' work on this point is seldom cited. Alongside Childs, Brueggemann's (1997) work is a crucial voice in North American Old Testament theology. As with Childs, Brueggemann has many discussions on ethical themes and issues spread across his writings, so we should not restrict his thinking on this area to his *Theology*. Moreover, as he develops a very particular focus on Israel's understanding of Yahweh, his work does not particularly orient itself towards ethics, even though he is clearly concerned throughout to indicate the significance of the Old Testament for contemporary practice. As such, and in this case in line with the other *Theologies* noted, he offers some reflections on "Old Testament theology and the problem of justice" in his closing sections (Brueggemann 1997:735-742). Given the nature of his work, his formal attention to ethics is brief, but given his argument that the main force of the Mosaic revolution was "to establish as the core focus of Yahweh's life in the world and Israel's life with Yahweh" (Brueggemann 1997:735), it was not something he could (or likely would) avoid. In this instance, we should note that Brueggemann's work maps quite closely onto von Rad's, since his focus at this point is chiefly on the historical elements of the Old Testament and is thus consistent with von Rad's approach to the historical traditions.

In surveying this small sample of Old Testament theologies, it is important to note that the claim made, in this instance, is not that all these authors are arguing that Old Testament ethics must be regarded as part of a larger discipline of Old Testament theology. However, it is notable that each presents ethics as an application of the theology they expounded. But this is not the only way to present ethics within the larger discipline. A distinctive approach is that of Goldingay (2009), for whom the third volume of his *Old Testament Theology* was a study of its ethics. As his study of ethics is the final part of his *Theology*, he clearly stands in the tradition where ethics can be studied within the larger theological framework. Goldingay's approach can reasonably be described as canonical, in that his first volume traced Israel's story and his second its faith as it is presented in the Old Testament. He does not claim to trace what actually happened or what was actually believed. Instead, his

concern is with what the Old Testament presents. This approach is carried over into his third volume, tracing the life the Old Testament reckons Israel could have lived (Goldingay 2009:13). In taking this approach, Goldingay is closest to Childs (1992:676, 678-679), in that he is concerned with the text rather than with a reconstructed historical reality that lies behind it. However, a notable feature of Goldingay's work is that he does not place his work on ethics into a particular theological focus as does Eichrodt, Preuss or Brueggemann. Rather, he presents Old Testament ethics mainly as its own discipline, albeit one that can be studied with the same tools he applied to his other two volumes. Perhaps more importantly, Goldingay (2009:13-14) offers a brief reflection on why he has presented his ethics as a third volume, comparing it with some recent works in systematic theology that begin with ethics. Accepting that we could indeed begin with ethics, Goldingay (2009:14) argues that it is unlikely that ethics exists separately from doctrine. As such, he believes that an overview of Israel's faith needed to come first. Yet, although there is a formal similarity to the earlier works in his decision to treat ethics as the end of his work, there is also an important distinction to note. In short, the other works noted offer comparatively brief treatments of ethics, subsuming them under their larger theological models. Goldingay, by contrast, devotes as much attention to Old Testament ethics as he does to any other area. In doing so, Goldingay continues to insist that his Old Testament ethics is part of his Old Testament theology. But the shape of his presentation, devoting a volume on ethics that is similar in length to his other discussions, demonstrates that it is not simply an outworking of a theological reading of the Old Testament, but also a subject that merits a full discussion. As such, it is no surprise to note that he subsequently released a popularisation of this larger work which treats the Old Testament's ethics without recourse to his larger theological work (Goldingay 2019).

Where Goldingay grounds his work on Old Testament ethics in his Old Testament theology, the example of Wright (2004) shows that it is possible to produce an Old Testament ethics as a distinctive work, in which ethics shapes theology rather than the other way around. One reason for this, one at least hinted at by Barton (2003:4), is that the Old Testament contains several distinct theological sources. Therefore, the process of including ethics in an Old Testament theology runs the risk of flattening these sources and not allowing their distinctive voices to be heard. This, of course, is a classic problem in Old Testament theology, for which it is not clear that any one solution has yet been found. Houston (2006) develops this issue further, arguing that the various perspectives on social justice found in the Old Testament are, in fact, themselves representative of various ideologies that contend with each other, none of which offer a clear and final ethic. Houston is thus cautious about how we can draw on these ideologies in our own approaches to justice. By

contrast, for Pleins (2001:530-532), this variety of voices allows reflection on the Old Testament's social vision, with these different modes acting as checks and balances on one another. Where Houston and Pleins, and to a lesser extent Barton, differ from the other works that we have considered is that they use ideology as the key tool for identifying and outlining Old Testament ethics. Each one of these thinkers would regard his study of Old Testament ethics as a work of theology, but where they differ from those works that began with Old Testament theology is that their work on ideology takes precedence, with ethics explored through the framework it provides rather than through the framework of Old Testament theology.

Is Old Testament ethics a discipline in its own right? The answer is that it can be, although, in fact, there are numerous methods involved in its exploration. For some, ethics is effectively the conclusion to the theology, while for others, an ideologically grounded reading of the Old Testament's ethics is, in fact, foundational to developing a theology of the Old Testament. Both approaches come with presuppositions, because it privileges the Old Testament's theology and a theory of ideology. Goldingay's work shows, however, that it is at least possible to balance both, and perhaps the most important element to note, for this part of our discussion, is that he has made the effort to begin formal reflection on this dimension. This question is not yet resolved, but reflection on it is a vital first step. Reflecting further, we can note that the distinctiveness of Old Testament ethics as a discipline can be recognised, but a fundamental divide also emerges because of different dialogue partners identified by those who engage in it.

### 3. IS OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS DESCRIPTIVE OR NORMATIVE?

The fundamental divergence in answering the question of whether Old Testament ethics is a discipline then impacts on a further question: Is the Old Testament's ethics normative or not? It can be readily appreciated that those who approach the Old Testament as offering a range of social visions and ideologies do not regard them as normative, although it is common for such works to identify at least certain elements which, they believe, can be recovered for contemporary ethical practice, while also rejecting others. Houston (2006:229) is typical in this respect, asserting that some of the Old Testament's moral lessons are "clearly unacceptable" before going on to argue that the value in reflecting on the Old Testament is revealed because there are ideas that "transcend ideological framing" (Houston 2006:229). For those approaching the Old Testament from the perspective of ideology, its ethics must also stand under ideological critique, and only that which passes

this can contribute to the shaping of contemporary ethical discourse. Pleins operates similarly. Although he is interested in the visions of social justice found in the Old Testament, he argues that critical readers must also attend to the social location of those who compiled the texts as well as that of prophets such as Jeremiah, with the layers of the text needing to be separated out so that we can distinguish between Jeremiah's own social vision and those of the text's composition (which may include several layers). Pleins (2001:6-7) cautiously indicates that the theologically valid material does not have to be located at any one level in this process, but there is still a process whereby the reader determines that which is theologically, and thus ethically, constructive.

Thus far, the answer to the question as to whether the Old Testament's ethics might be normative is relatively straightforward, even predictable. The task of scholars operating from the ideology model is to describe the ethics or social vision of a particular text, and then determine that which is ethically significant. It is not necessarily the case that those who operate more from the perspective of Old Testament ethics as an expression of its theology would necessarily demur from this position, although it is certainly possible that they might. In a sense, the question about ethics from this perspective is a sub-set of the larger questions on biblical theology and whether it might be viewed as a normative or descriptive task.

For some, even when making positive theological claims about the Old Testament, limitations in its ethics are noted. Preuss (1995:207) is explicit on this point, arguing that, although the Old Testament offers "model examples" of the efforts made to address key issues, they are still shaped by the factors of their own time, and this means that readers should always note their limitations. Although issues of ideology are not directly addressed, and Preuss indicates the value of Old Testament ethics for shaping contemporary practice, they are not normative. Preuss indicates certain points where he observes limitations in the Old Testament's ethics. However, unlike Houston or Pleins, he does not indicate that ideology is key, although this is perhaps implied and his approach to the Old Testament's ethics is primarily descriptive.

By contrast, Kaiser (1983:11) treats the Old Testament's ethics, which he particularly grounds in the decalogue, as an enduring witness for Christian practice, and that it has a universal application because all nations are expected to demonstrate the same level of righteousness as Israel. Although Kaiser's own definition of the task of Old Testament ethics is multidimensional, it can primarily be regarded as text-centred in its attention to individual texts, while also tracing certain key themes through them. In following this through, Kaiser's (1983:39-56) view is that Christian readings of the Old Testament will view its ethics as in some way normative, with the key question thus being: How is this the case?

The weakness of Kaiser's position is exposed in some of Rogerson's reflections on this question. Taking especially some discussions about homosexuality in Britain in the 1990s as a case study, Rogerson demonstrates that those who operate with the idea of the Old Testament's ethics as being normative, especially when a commandment addresses the topic, tend to read that material selectively, drawing on some elements of the Old Testament, while omitting others that are not so conducive to their view. Hence, those who pointed to the Old Testament's prohibitions of homosexual activity as a sufficient basis for continuing its prohibition tended not to take up its stipulation of the death penalty as applying in such cases (Rogerson 2004:15). As Rogerson indicates, his point is not to make a case either way on the question of homosexual practice, but rather to demonstrate the limitations on how the Old Testament is used when it is assumed to be normative. It is probably truer to say that nearly all readers of the Old Testament make changes between what can be described in the Old Testament and how it might be applied to contemporary issues. As such, at the level of Old Testament study, an analysis of the Old Testament's ethics must always begin by being descriptive and only then consider how it might be significant for contemporary practice.

Put like that, Rogerson's position might seem beyond critique; in fact, this discussion also taps in the bigger question of how the Old Testament's law (the points at focus in his discussion) might relate to Christian readers. Although I was unable to trace the sources he mentions, it seems likely that they were all working with the classic reformed division of the law containing moral, civil, and ceremonial laws, for which only the moral laws continue to apply. Although the death penalty is mentioned for the laws on homosexual behaviour, the judicial process would presumably fall under the classification of civil law and not apply to Christians, even if the laws on sexual practice are regarded as moral and therefore applicable. That is, wider questions of Old Testament hermeneutics also impact on the discussion, and Rogerson's "all-or-nothing" approach – though superficially attractive – does not represent the ways in which the Old Testament was being read. In my view, the threefold division has been dealt a major blow by Averbeck's (2022) recent analysis, which has shown again that this is an imposition on the law that does not emerge from its own form, and that the law's unity needs to be maintained. For Averbeck, the issue is to be resolved by asking how the new covenant impacts on a given law, although, even when a particular law is abrogated within the New Testament, there are still ethical points that can be derived.

Bringing together Rogerson and Averbeck, we can suggest that there are bigger questions of Old Testament hermeneutics which mean that the initial task must always be descriptive rather than treating the Old Testament's ethics as automatically, or perhaps better "directly", normative. Yet, even



concluding that the task is initially descriptive, we are still faced with an enormous challenge. Given the diverse range of texts in the Old Testament, texts of different genres and from different times and social settings, what are we describing? How do we identify texts that contribute to understanding the Old Testament's ethics? Might we, for instance, need to prioritise certain texts over others? Can we, ultimately, separate the process of describing the Old Testament's ethics from seeking to see how they might, in some way, be normative? This raises fundamental questions about which texts we should consider and how we read them.

One answer to this is to turn above all else to the Pentateuch, and especially to the law. Certainly, when we read Wright, we can get a sense of the primacy of the Pentateuch. As a simple test for this, we can note that the Pentateuch accounts for roughly 40 per cent of the biblical references noted in his larger work (Wright 2004:500-511). Likewise, Otto (1994) devotes his attention to the Pentateuch and the wisdom literature in his study. His reason for this is that these texts have an explicit ethical direction, as can be determined from legal commands or advice given in the wisdom literature. Likewise, although Wright clearly offers a well thought through position, his approach privileges those texts that have what might be called an explicit ethical dimension to them, although, unlike Otto, he does give significant attention to the prophets, a surprising gap in Otto's work (see Barton 2003:77-161). In general, it can be noted that the law and wisdom have been highly significant in the vast majority of explorations of Old Testament ethics (see Wenham 2012:5-7).

Carroll's (2022) recent volume took up the importance of the prophets. As a more popular work (although built on his more substantial material), Carroll focuses especially on the 8<sup>th</sup>-century prophets, although that is a limitation accepted because of the constraints of space for a book that emerged from a lecture series. At one level, focusing on the 8<sup>th</sup>-century prophets is an obvious one, building on a long tradition of seeing the concern for justice found there as pivotal. Carroll's concern, however, goes beyond this. As is clear from his subtitle, he is not only interested in the importance of these texts for ethical reflection, something long recognised, but also how they might be recovered and used nowadays. For Carroll, the key to this is understanding the prophets in their canonical setting, so that the initial process remains descriptive. Nevertheless, drawing on the work of Brueggemann, Carroll (2022:113-118) makes a crucial hermeneutical move in suggesting that the ethical task for Christians nowadays is to inhabit the prophetic imagination in their own setting. In this, Carroll moves beyond his mentor (John Rogerson) in insisting that the task is both descriptive and normative, with the challenge being the process of understanding how this might be so.

Looking more broadly at the canon, we can note that the narrative literature and Psalms (and other poetic texts) have not featured as significantly in the discussion. This is no doubt because, as Barton (2003:3) observed, what is being commended in this literature is not always clear. By contrast, both the law and wisdom texts specify certain behaviours as desirable and others as undesirable, although it is often the case that a specific reason for this is not expressed. But narratives seldom do this and are often full of characters and situations that are highly ambiguous. Likewise, the psalms (apart from those usually regarded as “wisdom” texts such as Psalm 37) do not offer an overt ethic. Accordingly, they have not played a significant role in the discussion.

However, Wenham argued that both narrative and poetic texts and, in his case, especially the Psalms do have an important role to play in our understanding of Old Testament ethics. Wenham (2000:3) noted that the Old Testament’s narratives are didactic, even if that didacticism is seldom made explicit, and that instilling ethical perspectives is part of that (see Goldingay 1990:39; Janzen 1994). As such, the ethical perspective of the text is simultaneously something that can be described and understood as normative, even if readers need hermeneutical care in discerning this, most notably through the observation of patterns of behaviour that are commended. Moreover, he observes that the law represents a kind of ethical minimum. By contrast, narratives allow readers to explore more complex and nuanced presentations of ethics, something he explores through narrative criticism that is also informed by historical criticism (Wenham 2000:4-15). Wenham subsequently extended his work on narratives to include the Psalms (2012). Drawing on a parallel from Christian liturgy, he draws on speech-act theory to note how the Psalms are self-involving language which instruct through use (Wenham 2012:57-76). Wenham views the ethics of the text as something that can be described and that is normative for Christian practice.

Wenham’s insights for both narrative and poetry have been developed through particular case studies. Indeed, Parry’s study of the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34 is expressly characterised as a case study that explores a challenging text, although Parry (2004:3-46) also engages with the work of Paul Ricoeur to a significant extent, demonstrating through this that storytelling transforms the ethics of the proto-narrative world and that readers are, to some extent, transformed by reading them. For the Psalms, and alongside the volume edited by Human (2012), we can note that Mongé-Greer (2023) likewise chose a challenging text, in her case Psalm 82. She extends Wenham’s work to explore its ethical significance by adapting Zimmerman’s *organon* to the particulars of the Old Testament, and Psalms in particular, showing that the psalm is encouraging practical concern for the powerless. In passing, we can note that Zimmerman’s (2016) work, with its concern for the implicit ethics in biblical texts, offers great potential for exploring texts that have so far proved

problematic. It will be interesting to see how the adaptation of his work might prove fruitful for further explorations. What unites both Parry and Mongé-Greer is their conviction that the descriptive work and the normative exploration of the ethics described are part of an integrated process. But (and it is especially clear in Mongé-Greer's work), there is a complex hermeneutical process involved in this such that the ethics cannot be simply "read off" from the text. We might also note at this point the work of James (2017) who integrates the ethics of the psalms with that of narrative, although one important limitation is that he limits his investigation to first-person narratives.

Drawing this together, we can observe that the choice of dialogue partner (with Old Testament theology or ideology critique as the main options now) impacts on how we might explore the relevance of the Old Testament's ethics. Along with this, the texts we believe are important for shaping ethics will likewise impact on this process since different types of texts raise different questions for readers. It seems clear that we cannot assume that the Old Testament's ethics can be applied in an unmediated manner to the modern world. Likewise, nearly all those who study the Old Testament's ethics integrate their descriptive work with an attempt to demonstrate that at least some of it is in some way significant for contemporary ethics. This then raises the question of how we might do this (see Davies 2010:1-2).

#### 4. HOW MIGHT THE OLD TESTAMENT CONTRIBUTE TO CONTEMPORARY ETHICS?

The simplest approach to this question is to assume that the Old Testament is directly applicable. In this instance, we can exclude theonomy, which assumes the permanent applicability of the law, as an outlier in Christian thinking which, in any case, tends to follow the threefold pattern common to Reformed thinking (see Averbeck 2022:10-11) and, therefore, faces the same problems as any attempt to divide the law. Its approach also tends to stay with the law rather than engaging the wider canon, even though we have noted that scholars have increasingly looked to engage with the whole canon. Kaiser (1983:57-78) would come closest to this simple option, but he does insist on the importance of understanding each text in its historical setting, while noting the effect of different literary forms. As such, although his view of biblical authority has some sympathy with direct applicability, his approach is sufficiently nuanced to prevent this from developing. The Old Testament poses hermeneutical questions that always require consideration before reflection on its ethical significance. It should be noted that this discussion is inevitably linked to the wider question of how Christians should read the Old Testament, but it will at least attempt to restrict our focus to reflections on its ethical significance.

One preliminary question to note is the audience for whom, we believe, the Old Testament's ethics are significant. Wright (2004:19) is clear that he is writing for Christian readers who are looking to integrate the Old Testament into their ethics, whereas Otto's (1994) work attempts to demonstrate the significance of the Old Testament's ethics for a wider readership. Both positions are viable, but there is the key difference that, for many Christians, especially Protestants, the Old Testament will be understood as authoritative, even if what is meant by that will clearly differ. For our purposes, we will restrict our attention to the significance of the Old Testament's ethics for Christian readers, mainly because I believe that we can only demonstrate its significance for those with no theological commitment to it after we understand how it is applicable for Christians. Once again, those who approach the Old Testament from the perspective of ideological criticism differ from those more shaped by viewing ethics as an expression of Old Testament theology, but the difference is not absolute.

If we start with Houston's (2006:229) goal of identifying those features that transcend "ideological framing", then we start with the question of how we are to do this. The challenge, in this instance, emerges because those aspects that transcend ideological framing seem to change over time, and we are, therefore, faced with the risk of pointing only to those aspects that are currently viewed as good anyway.

Davies (2010) provides the most extensive reflection on this issue. In his work, he takes the treatment of the Canaanites in Joshua 6-11 as a core text, evaluating different approaches to Old Testament ethics in light of how these approaches respond to this. Since this is perhaps the most notoriously difficult text in the Old Testament, it is certainly a reasonable choice for his case studies. It should be noted that, as Davies evaluates a range of approaches, his own unstated starting point is that of an ideological critic, and this distinguishes him from Wright (2004:14-15) who clearly states that there is a difference between identifying texts which we find problematic and an analysis of the Old Testament's ethics. However, as Davies is expressly concerned with how the Old Testament's ethics might contribute to contemporary ethics, it seems reasonable that he might start from this point. In my view, there are points where his exegesis of Joshua 6-11 is open to question, as these chapters are more open to foreigners than he suggests (see Firth 2019:13-52). Nevertheless, although accepting that this might change aspects of his argument, the overall pattern would remain the same. It is intriguing, therefore, to note that, although Davies ultimately argues for a plurality of approaches, his preference is still for what he labels a "reader-response" model. Accepting that there are many reader-response models, Davies (2010:120-21) opts for the position of a "resistant" reader, one who is prepared to read against

the grain of a text rather than passively receiving it. While it is not clear that this avoids the problem of circularity, in that the resistant reader has already determined that certain perspectives are unacceptable, Davies still suggests that there is a place for a diverse range of models, and this diversity is perhaps the best guard against complete circularity. We might also place the work of Rodd in this instance, although he sees less value in the Old Testament than does Davies. For Rodd (2001:328), it is essential that we give up on any form of propositional authority residing in the Old Testament, so that in the end the abiding value of the Old Testament for contemporary ethics is found simply in accepting how different it is from our own time and place. Only then can we see that our own views on ethics are closely shaped by our own internalised values. It is not clear that Rodd's approach differentiates the Old Testament's ethics from those of any other community, although perhaps he would not wish to.

It is not the case that those coming from the perspective of Old Testament theology would reject Davies' approach. We have already noted Preuss' comments on the limitations of the Old Testament's ethics. However, there is also a strong body of scholars who are committed to what Wright (2004:17-19) called a "paradigmatic" approach. In this model, itself drawn from grammar and the recognition that certain patterns can be repeated, the Old Testament is viewed as providing paradigms that can be replicated, provided attention is paid to the variant conditions between the Old Testament's own setting and that of the contemporary reader. Wright's own model is based on his ethical triangle, which integrates a theological, social, and economic angle. Janzen (1994) also adopts a paradigmatic model, although he differs from Wright in that he focuses more on narrative texts, so that stories shape the paradigms (Janzen 1994:20). Nevertheless, their approaches share the idea that there are patterns within the Old Testament which can provide an ethical shape for readers, an approach continued in Goldingay's (2009; 2019) work, which seems to develop from both. It is often said that paradigmatic readers look for principles that can apply, although it should be said that the paradigms are generally looking more widely at a range of texts, whereas the principles are usually tied to a specific text. Looking for the effect of a range of texts is undoubtedly a strength in that it forces readers to look for more than a single passage, and it also enables reflection on issues that are not addressed directly by the Old Testament. But this is also its potential weakness in that it can be difficult to discern exactly when we have a paradigm. If we are reflecting on an issue not directly addressed by the Old Testament, at what point can we believe that we have identified the paradigm? Moreover, the ways in which Wright and Janzen develop their paradigms are quite distinct. So, it is perhaps a model that sounds better in theory than practice.

A final model emerges from Wenham's (2012) approach to the psalms, and even though James (2017) was apparently aware only of an earlier exploratory essay of his (Wenham 2005), his approach develops Wenham's in that the self-involving language of the Psalms is itself formative through time for those who use them. This was, to some extent, already present in my work on the imprecatory psalms (Firth 2005a; 2005b), although the form whereby this might be developed was not explored. Arguably, although Wenham's approach focuses on Psalms, it is something that overlaps with Janzen's approach to narrative, since those stories also form those who read them and Carroll's (2022) approach to the prophets. In fact, the Old Testament forms the ethics of those who read it, although again we are left with the question as to how we resolve ambiguities about the presentation of characters and actions in narratives, whether certain types of prayers are in any way exemplary, and if so, how we reflect ethically on prophetic texts that do not address the typical areas addressed in ethics.

Apart from Rodd's rather minimalist approach, there is general agreement among those who work with the Old Testament's ethics that they should in some way inform our own ethics. Nevertheless, how we are to do that remains unclear. To some extent, this may depend on the model whereby we approach the task of Old Testament ethics, but it is not restricted to this one factor, because those who look for paradigms or formation in the text might also employ some form of ideological criticism. In practice, it is probably true to say that awareness of the range of options is the most important factor, and that awareness of the different literary forms of the Old Testament will remain crucial, as the different types of texts will generate different ethical impacts. That is, only as we accept the Old Testament's diversity will we be able to appreciate the ways in which it will shape our ethics. In this instance, it is possible that Mongé-Greer's (2023) development of Zimmermann's (2016) *organon* might provide an important step forward, in that it offers a disciplined approach to each of these issues, although further explorations will be necessary.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Old Testament ethics has seen a significant revival over the past fifty years, and a discipline that had almost disappeared is now well represented by scholarly discussion which has also provided important resources for more popular discussion. Through that period, it has become clear that the Old Testament's contribution can go beyond the law and wisdom literature that was the focus of the earlier research and can now engage with the whole of the Old Testament canon, something about which Barton (2003:3-4) only comparatively recently was uncertain. This is a point on which there can now be general agreement.

Likewise, there is general agreement that the point of studying Old Testament ethics is because it should be significant for contemporary ethics, and that the starting point for this is to describe the Old Testament's witness. However, much remains unresolved and, perhaps, unresolvable. The divide in starting point – the text or ideological criticism – means that we have two different modes of working in the one field. These do overlap to some extent, but not absolutely. It is only when we recognise this that we might continue to reflect on the task of Old Testament ethics and develop it further.

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