

The Dark Side of the *Imitatio Dei*. Why Imitating the God of the Holiness Code is not Always a Good Thing

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ABSTRACT

In the past some Old Testament scholars have argued that the concept of imitatio dei has some potential to become a kernel around which an ethics of the Old Testament could be constructed. Scholars have recently questioned this proposition. This article continues that line of questioning by focusing on Leviticus 25 along with other texts in the Holiness Code. In these texts YHWH is presented as a land possessor and a slave owner. The argument is that these texts do not ask of the addressees to imitate the characteristics of YHWH as land possessor and slave owner. Imitating these characteristics of YHWH would have had a detrimental effect. Yet, there are certain cases where particular acts of YHWH could (and should) be imitated. Although one could at the most argue that the idea of imitating God is present in some texts, it constitutes by no means a foundation for an ethics of the Old Testament.

A INTRODUCTION

In 2007 two English scholars namely, Walter Houston (2007) and John Barton (2007) published two articles respectively on the imitation of God in the Old Testament, reaching more or less the same conclusion. Both argued that the imitation of God is a concept that could shed some light on certain biblical texts, but the concept is by no means the centre around which one could construct an Old Testament ethics. This article will support their point of view by focusing on a specific text (Leviticus 25) as well as some other texts in the Holiness Code.

John Barton has been engaging with this issue at least since 1978,¹ and I will briefly sum up his argument. This article will also include a very short discussion of the contributions of scholars such as Eichrodt, Hempel, Otto and Davies, who all in different degrees saw something that could be described as imitation of God in the Old Testament, with Eryl Davies probably being the most committed to the idea. It will also be necessary to engage with the severe criticism of the idea by Cyril Rodd. The middle part of this article will thus be a short overview of the debate so far, making ample use of the work of Barton.

¹ See Barton 1978, 1994 and 2003. The articles of 1978 and 1994 were republished as chapters of the book in 2003 (with minor adjustments).

Finally we will take a closer look at Leviticus 25 and some of the surrounding texts of the Holiness Code, where a few scholars have argued that there is some imitating of God proposed, or (in other words) that some kind of imitation of God was expected of the people to whom these legal texts were addressed.² The article then concludes that scholars should be more specific when they use the concept *imitatio dei* by distinguishing between God as a role model to whose image human beings should aspire and the acts of God which human beings should aspire to imitate.

B IMITATING GOD

Apparently, the first person who noticed the presence of the theme of the *imitatio dei* in the Old Testament was the Jewish scholar Martin Buber in 1926.³ According to John Barton (2007:35), this suggestion was not taken up seriously for some time until two German scholars, Walther Eichrodt and Johannes Hempel, referred to the issue. Much later another German scholar, Eckart Otto, started to engage with the issue in an article in 1991 and later in his monograph in 1994.

Walther Eichrodt (1967:373) touched only briefly on this theme, referring to Leviticus 19:2 (You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy), and argued that the Holiness Code teaches “men to understand the faultless regulation of life in accordance with God’s commandment as a *forming of human nature after the pattern of the divine* [italics in original]”.⁴ Hempel (1964:194-202), though, “gave the imitation of God some prominence within his obedience ethic” (Barton 1993:51), as was also noted by Otto (1991:19-20). Barton (2007:37) explains that for Hempel obeying God was not something understood in Israel as “blind obedience”, but resulted from the belief that YHWH himself was perceived as having a moral character. YHWH applies the same “rule and measure”⁵ to himself as to human beings. Otto (1991:20), describing the contribution of Hempel, summed it up as follows:

² It is also important to note that it is one thing to argue that what we call *imitatio dei* could be useful to describe the reasoning of the text, or even that the authors of these texts were thinking in similar categories, but it is something totally different to argue that this could be used as a guideline for present-day ethical living.

³ Barton (2007:35) quotes from Buber: “The imitation of God — not of a human image of God, but the real God, nor of a mediator in human form, but of God himself—is the central paradox of Judaism.”

⁴ Barton (2007:36) rightly comments that there seems to be “some quality of God” that should be “shared by human beings”, but asks whether this point is aimed only at *Israel* and not at “man” (sic), as Eichrodt thinks. He adds that Leviticus 19:2 is probably too narrow a base from which to argue that “imitation of God is the typical or central model for ethical conduct in the Old Testament”.

⁵ As quoted by Barton (2007:37) from Otto (1991:19). “Rule and measure” is Barton’s translation for Otto’s “Regel und Richtschnur”.

Das Handeln Gottes mit dem Menschen kann Modell dafür sein, wie der Mensch mit dem Menschen handeln soll und darin ist dieses Zeugnis *Kern* [my italics - eem] einer alttestamentlichen Ethik.

Otto himself did make similar remarks in his work. For instance, in a discussion on solidarity with vulnerable people such as the poor, which is part of a broader chapter on the Covenant Code, Otto describes this solidarity as follows (1994:85-86):

Gott als der Barmherzige begründet ein Ethos der Solidarität und der Barmherzigkeit mit dem Schwachen in der Gesellschaft. Wie Gott mit dem Menschen umgeht, so soll sich der Mensch zum Menschen verhalten.

Thus just as God treats human beings with compassion, so human beings should act towards each other. On at least two further occasions, when he discusses the slave laws of Deuteronomy 15:12-18 and Hosea 11:1-9, Otto (1994:185 and 111 respectively) refers to God as an example (“Vorbild”) for people.⁶ The idea here is that the way in which God acts becomes an example for his people to follow.

Barton, and to a lesser extent Otto,⁷ thus (at some stage at least) thought that the *imitatio dei* had some potential to be the core (“Kern”) or even centre (“Zentrum”, see Otto 1991:20) around which one could build an ethics of the Old Testament. Barton (2007:38) concludes:

This might thus be one of the implications or meanings of being made ‘in the image of God’: that God and humankind share a common ethical perception, so that God is not only the commander but also the paradigm of all moral conduct.

For this reason, God is much more than one issuing orders who should be blindly obeyed, yet he becomes a kind of paradigm, in the sense of a Being

⁶ With regards to Deuteronomy 15:12-18, Otto says the following (1994:185): “Das heilsgeschichtliche Handeln Gottes dient als Vorbild für das ethische Handeln des Menschen.” Or see his discussion of Hosea 11:1-9 where he observes (Otto 1994:111): “Hier wird ein Handlungsmodell entworfen, das Vorbild für den Umgang des Menschen mit dem Menschen sein kann.” See also Barton’s discussion in this regard (2007:38).

⁷ In Otto’s (1991:19-20) discussion of the work of Hempel, he used terms such as “Kern” and “Zentrum” (as referred to above) to describe the role of the concept of *imitatio dei* in a possible ethics of the Old Testament. One should keep in mind that these terms were used by Otto to describe the work of Hempel and thus do not reflect his own views. Moreover, as far as I could ascertain, he never uses the term *imitatio dei* in his own work. The closest he gets to this concept is when he uses a term like *example* (“Vorbild”), as illustrated above.

that sets an example which human beings, in turn, should follow. In this way human beings could treat each other in the same way that God treats them.

This was more or less the state of the debate in the 1990s, with a further essay on the *imitatio dei* published in 1999 by Eryl W. Davies. He (Davies 1999:101-102), like Eichrodt, starts with texts such as Leviticus 19:2, but he also refers to similar clauses throughout what some would call the Holiness Code (Lev 20:7, 26 and 21:8) as well as Leviticus 11:44. For Davies (1999:102), the Israelites are commanded in Leviticus 19:2 “to imitate a particular divine *attribute* ...” [italics in original]. Davies adds to the debate some texts from Exodus⁸ and Deuteronomy.⁹ Furthermore, he (Davies 1999:107) has an interesting discussion on Psalms 111 and 112, where the “attributes of God set forth in Psalm 111 are regarded in Psalm 112 as being reflected in the life of the true believer”. When Davies (1999:109) discusses Old Testament narratives, he acknowledges his inability to point to many “concrete examples of individuals imitating God”, yet, interestingly enough, he remains of the opinion that the “basic character and identity of God were established” through these narratives. Davies (1999:114) concludes:

The moral norms encountered in the Old Testament arise out of imitation of God’s character as well as out of obedience to God’s will, for he is presented not only as the source of ethical commands, but as the pattern of ethical behaviour.

Once again Barton’s “paradigm” or Otto’s “Kern” (in describing the work of Hempel) comes to mind. God’s character is thus a kind of blueprint on which believers in the Old Testament were to model their behaviour.

Over against the trend set by Otto, Barton and Davies, the critical essay by Cyril Rodd (2001) provides one with counter-arguments. He is especially critical of Davies’s 1999-essay as well as the earlier work of John Barton (1995). Part of Rodd’s (2001:66-68) argument against the presence of the *imitatio dei* theme in the Old Testament is that it is usually more a case of using anthropomorphic language to describe what God is doing rather than asking people to imitate him. What God does then often sounds like things we as human beings could do, simply because the concepts attributed to God were taken from our world in the first place. Rodd (2001:74) also thinks that these “discoveries” of the concept in the Old Testament are simply the result of their being an attractive concept to modern readers of the Old Testament and he argues

⁸ See for instance, Davies (1999:102) on texts like Exodus 20:8-11 and 31:12-17. In these texts the Israelites are asked to rest on the Sabbath just as YHWH has rested.

⁹ Davies (1999:102-103) refers to the slave laws in Deuteronomy 15 also mentioned by Otto (1994). He (1999:103-104) sees something similar in the exhortation to “walk in the ways of the Lord” often found in Deuteronomy (i.e. 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 26:17; 28:9).

further that Davies failed to show that it was an attractive notion to the biblical writers at all. For Rodd (2001:76) there is a deeper conviction in the Old Testament “that God is other than human beings” and therefore cannot be imitated.

Barton (2007:42-43) does acknowledge that Rodd has a point. According to Barton (2007:39), Rodd’s main argument is “that the language of ‘imitation’ goes altogether too far in attempting to capture something which, though present in a rather feeble way in the Old Testament, is by no means a central concern”. In Barton’s (2007:40) words, Rodd’s point is that it is more a case of *imitatio hominis* than *imitatio dei*. Barton then continues to provide evidence that some biblical writers firmly believed in the “non-imitation of God”. He (2007:42-43) makes use of Andrew Davies’s Ph.D. thesis on the book of Isaiah in which the latter argues that “Yahweh clearly does not measure up to the standards that he himself demands of human beings”. For Barton (2007:45) this often boils down to the old saying: “Don’t do as I do; do as I tell you,” which for him is an “apt summary of what such a God has to say about human conduct”.

Barton (2007:45) concludes his essay by reaffirming that:¹⁰

there is still evidence that some people in Israel saw the goal of human ethical conduct as likeness to God, and that *imitatio dei* is a usable concept in the study of the Old Testament ethics. It is, however, very far from the whole story.

The *imitatio dei* is thus certainly not something like a model or even a paradigm on which Old Testament ethics could be built, nor is it at the core of Old Testament ethics. Barton (2007:45-46) also acknowledges, along with Rodd, that there are many passages in the Bible where the presentation of God is so vastly different from that of human beings that it is impossible to imitate him. For Barton (2007:46) “the question of which is true of any individual passage cannot be decided on general principles, but only by detailed inspection”. Such a detailed inspection is what I intend to do in the rest of this article, as I turn my attention to the Holiness Code and especially Leviticus 25.

C THE GOD OF LEVITICUS 25 AND SURROUNDING TEXTS

I have argued elsewhere (Meyer 2005) that two images could be used to describe the way in which YHWH is portrayed in Leviticus 25 and that these images are supported by other texts in what has traditionally been known as the

¹⁰ Similarly, Houston (2007:25) concludes: “The character and actions of YHWH may function more widely as models for human conduct than Rodd’s excessively sceptical analysis may suggest, but I concur entirely with Barton that *imitatio dei* is not a key to unlock all doors in the ethics of the Old Testament.”

Holiness Code.¹¹ These two images consist of YHWH as being a great land-owner and of YHWH as being a slave owner.

YHWH as landowner is found often enough in the Holiness Code. YHWH the landowner is introduced for the first time in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18:2 with an “I am YHWH”-clause. In the next three verses the Israelites are warned against doing what people do in Egypt and in Canaan. Moreover, they are reminded that YHWH is about to bring them to the land of Canaan. It is expected of them to obey YHWH’s commands. This section is then nicely concluded with another “I am YHWH your God”-clause in verse 5. The rest of Leviticus 18 is concerned with different sexual taboos and later in the chapter (vv. 24-25) the addressees are warned that the land threw up the previous inhabitants because they did all the things that have just been prohibited. The same warning appears again at the end of chapter 20 (vv. 22-27), another parenetic text threatening the addressees with being spitted out by the land, if they do not comply with the regulations previously mentioned in the chapter. The text presumes that YHWH has power over the land and that the land will spew out non-complying inhabitants at his bidding.

In Leviticus 20:22 we find the first mention of the fact that YHWH will give (נָתַן) the land to the addressees (previously in 18:3 he promised to “bring them to the land”). The promise that YHWH will give the land is repeated in 23:10 and in 25:2, where the root נָתַן is used as a participle expressing imminent action (see Van der Merwe, Naudé & Kroese 1999:162). The land is thus YHWH’s to give, he is the owner of the land, but one (or rather the addressees) should read the proverbial fine print.

When we read chapter 25, it is clear that this chapter focuses much more on land than do the previous chapters in the Holiness Code. Verse 23, which functions as a kind of hinge in this chapter, explains why the land may never be sold: the land belongs to YHWH (בְּיָד הָאֱלֹהִים). The verse then states that the addressees of this text are mere strangers and sojourners with YHWH. I understand this to mean that the relationship between YHWH and the land is much more permanent than the relationship between YHWH and the addressees. Klaus Grünwaldt (1999:339) put it well when he said:

In dem Beziehungsdreieck Gott – Volk – Land sind sie [“they” meaning the people] die Variable, während Gott und das Land die Konstanten sind.

In my understanding, YHWH’s granting of the land in the Holiness Code does not mean that they have what modern people would regard as legal ownership of the land. Leviticus 26 is, for instance, very clear on how quickly things can change for the inhabitants of the land, if they do not obey. There the

¹¹ See especially Meyer 2005:266-270.

land changes from a place of sustenance to a place of rejection (see especially vv. 18-22). YHWH is presented (again) as the one who has the power to make the land turn on its inhabitants. He also has the power to make the land a desolate place (vv. 34-35). Eventually in 26:42 YHWH remembers the covenant and the land, and the image of a landlord who has to find suitable tenants for his property comes to mind.

I thus argue that one image of YHWH that is fairly salient in the Holiness Code is the one of YHWH as the great land possessor. If this presentation of YHWH thus served as some kind of paradigm according to which ethical behaviour should be cultivated, it would be obvious that this kind of imitation would not have liberating consequences – neither for ancient Israelites, nor for us today. Imitating this YHWH would indeed expose the dark side of the *imitatio dei*. It is one aspect of the character of YHWH in the Holiness Code whose imitation would create severe problems. The text never asks of Israelites to own as much land as possible. The point is rather that they do not and cannot own the land. YHWH's landownership can never be imitated.

Apart from the image of YHWH as the landowner he is also presented as a slave owner. In Leviticus 19:36 YHWH is presented as the Liberator from Egypt (I am YHWH your God who brought you from the land of Egypt). This sentence is repeated in 22:33; 23:43; 25:38, 42, 55; 26:13 and 45 in more or less similar fashion. In the last two examples from chapter 25 (vv. 42 and 55) it is also stated that the Israelites are the slaves of YHWH. It seems then that he liberated them from slavery in Egypt to become his slaves in Canaan. Thus stated, it does not sound much like liberation. However, in Leviticus 25 it is meant to be a positive liberating image. It is better to be a slave of YHWH than of the Egyptians.

In the second half of Leviticus 25 we find four different occurrences of case law describing four different scenarios of the impoverishment of a brother (i.e. fellow Israelite). In the first case (vv. 25-34) the question is what should happen to the land (referred to as the **נֶגֶד**) of the brother. This property should be redeemed (**רָאשָׁה**) by a close relative and may not end up as the possession of somebody else who is unrelated. The second case (vv. 35-38 - the shortest of the four texts) forbids the asking of interest when you have to help your brother who is in financial difficulty. In the third case (vv. 39-46) a scenario is described where “your brother” ends up being sold to you, a fellow Israelite. In this example (v. 42) it is clearly stated that such a person may never be treated like a slave. In fact, the Israelites are reminded that they are the slaves of YHWH, who brought them out of Egypt. It is thus clearly a liberating image. It is obviously much better to be the slave of YHWH than that of a fellow Israelite, just as it is better to have YHWH as your master instead of Pharaoh.

The same is true of the fourth case (vv. 47-55), where the fellow Israelite becomes impoverished to the effect of being sold to a נָגֵד. In this event a close relative is supposed to redeem (again נָגֵד) the fellow Israelite. If there is no one forthcoming, the impoverished man thus being sold, has to wait for the Jubilee. The text specifically states that such persons may not be treated harshly. Instead they should rather be treated like a day labourer (נִבְשָׁע). The latter command is once again explained in verse 55 where it is stated that the “Israelites are the slaves of YHWH your God who brought them out of Egypt”. Thus we again find the image of YHWH as a slave master, but again it is a liberating image. The Israelites are spoken for; they have their Master and thus may not be treated as slaves by anyone else.

We thus have these two images of YHWH, one of him as a landowner who controls the land of Canaan and one as a slave owner who liberated the Israelites from Egypt, but who is their master or owner.¹² In the light of this, it should be clear we cannot mean by *imitatio dei* that YHWH is a kind of role model or paradigm (as Barton put it), since that would mean that the Israelites should imitate YHWH and own as much land and as many slaves as possible. Landownership as well as slave-ownership are actually portrayals of YHWH that should not and cannot be imitated, because if they were these two images that are supposed to suggest liberation would then rather indicate oppressiveness.

Despite this conclusion, there are scholars who have argued with regard to this last case from Leviticus 25 (vv. 47-55) that there is indeed some imitation of God going on. Grünwaldt (1999:343), for instance, argues that the root נָגֵד is taken from Exodus terminology.¹³

[S]o handelt der den Verwandten loskaufende Israelit in Entsprechung zum Handeln YHWHs an den in Ägypten versklavten Israeliten. Aus dem hier herrschende Geist einer Ethik der Nachahmung YHWHs erklärt es sich auch, daß für die beim Schutzbürger arbeitenden Israeliten Auslösung erlaubt, ja geboten ist, für die beim 'Bruder' in Schuld geraten aber nicht: Die Knechtschaft, aus der YHWH befreit hat, war ja die Knechtschaft bei einem fremden Volk.

In other words, just as YHWH liberated the Israelites from Egypt and in that sense replaced a bad master with a better one, so the Israelites have to liberate those who have non-Israelite masters. Does this mean that the liberation

¹² See also Grünwaldt's (1997:345) discussion on verse 55, where he puts it as follows: “Land und Volk werden durch die Eigentumsdeklarationen gleichermaßen als JHWH's Eigentum gekennzeichnet.”

¹³ For Grünwaldt (1997:343) the root נָגֵד is a *terminus technicus* in P and Second Isaiah for the delivery from Egypt.

for the Israelite in poverty means getting a new Israelite master instead of a רָאֵשׁ as master? It seems so, keeping in mind that verses 39-46 are very clear that when your poor brother ends up with you, he is not to be treated as a slave but as a בָּנֵי שָׁפֵךְ. In an article by Walter Houston (2001:44-45) he also described this phenomenon, which he called “patronage”:

The metaphor is God as patron, who stands in the same relation to the people of Israel as they, or their better-off representatives, may from time to time stand towards their own impoverished brethren, except that this relationship is permanent. ... As YHWH has graciously delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and enabled them to live before him, so they are required to deliver their own kin from slavery to live with them.

In the act of delivering a fellow Israelite from a stranger, the redeemer is acting as YHWH once did towards the Israelites in Egypt and one could say that a certain *act* of YHWH is imitated. Milgrom (2001:2234) has argued similarly. He extended the imitation of an act of YHWH even to the first case (vv. 25-34) which is concerned with keeping the נָזָר in the family, incidentally another text where the root נָזַר dominates: ¹⁴

Thus the example of divine intervention whenever any part of his land is lost (i.e. the jubilee) is to be duplicated whenever any of his people are lost (i.e. enslaved). Just as the nearest relative is obligated to redeem the land of his kinsperson sold (or forfeited) to another, so is he obligated to redeem the person of his kinsperson sold to (i.e. enslaved by) a non-Israelite.

Later Milgrom (2001: 2234) specifically uses the term *imitatio dei* to describe what is happening here and for him it is the underlying theology of this text. All three these scholars have noticed that a specific *act* of YHWH should be imitated when fellow-Israelites become poor and either have to sell land, or even worse, have to sell themselves. What then is the difference between imitating certain acts of YHWH and using him as a paradigm or role model to whom human beings, or more specifically Israelites, should aspire to?

D CONCLUSION

Barton, at some stage in response to the criticism of Rodd, points to the fact that much of what Old Testament scholars do depends on the terminology they use (2007:39):

I suppose I think that Davies and I are on to something, as were Eichrodt and Hempel and, now, Otto, even if the language of *imitatio dei* may with hindsight not be the happiest way of expressing it. In all Old Testament theology one is groping around for suitable

¹⁴ The same root occurs frequently in verses 47-55.

terms, and not much hangs on exactly what terms one finally decides to employ: one is trying to point the reader in a certain direction rather than offering tight definitions.

In the light of this, I am still struggling to find the right terminology to describe what I see in Leviticus 25 and surrounding texts. On the one hand, YHWH is portrayed as a landowner and a slave owner, but the text does not for one moment ask of the addressees to imitate these characteristics of YHWH. YHWH is not exactly a role model whom people can imitate in the sense of becoming like YHWH. The point of the text is that only YHWH can play this role, and no human being. This is part of the character of YHWH that cannot be imitated. Imitating YHWH would lead to the kind of oppression the text is trying to prevent. Thus, it would be inappropriate to use the concept of *imitatio dei* as a foundation on which to build an Old Testament ethics. On the other hand, some scholars have rightly pointed out that a certain *act* of YHWH should be imitated, namely the act of YHWH redeeming people from Egypt. In similar fashion the addressees are asked to redeem land when it falls into the hands of somebody outside the family and they have to redeem fellow-Israelites when they become the slaves of strangers. Certainly, there are beneficial liberating deeds that YHWH has done in the past which can be imitated.

Does *imitatio dei* then lie at the heart of Old Testament ethics, or the core or centre as Hempel (in Otto's words) said? I do not think so.¹⁵ Barton has already indicated as much when he claimed that this is not the whole story. It is definitely also not accurate to say that God is either some kind of paradigm of all moral conduct or a kind of blueprint for humans to follow. There are certain roles that only God can play in the Bible and which no human being can imitate. However, the most one can say is that there are texts in the Old Testament which encourage the Israelites to imitate some of God's *acts* and Leviticus 25 is one of these.

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¹⁵ Neither does Barton (2007:42) as the following comment shows: "While continuing at least for the time being to think that the Old Testament does contain evidence of the imitation of God as an important style of ethical system, I have certainly never believed that it was the only or even the main one, and I suspect that Eckhart Otto may have gone too far in seeking to make it as central as he does."

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