


Examining corruption in biblical texts through deontological and virtue ethical codes

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Dates:

Received: 22 Nov. 2023

Accepted: 19 Mar. 2024

Published: 10 June 2024

How to cite this article:

Diko, M., 2024, 'Examining corruption in biblical texts through deontological and virtue ethical codes', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a3057. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3057>

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In contemporary contexts, the understanding of corruption is different from what is illustrated in biblical narratives. Conversely, some of the ways in which corruption is contested and addressed in biblical narratives prove to be applicable in contemporary contexts, particularly in the jurisdictions of leadership and governance, politics and community service. Therefore, this article aims to critique how corruption is (re)produced in the Bible. The objective is to underline that whereas the Bible is a primordial narrative, it mirrors some challenges that adversely affect the contemporary contexts, with special reference to corruption. To advance the aim of this article, deontological and virtue ethical codes are applied as theoretical frameworks to uncover corruption within the Bible. This article makes three notable findings. Firstly, corruption undermines public trust, while it erodes self-reliance in the rule of law. Secondly, corruption is depicted as a moral and spiritual decomposition that erodes the foundational values of morality and conformity to God. Thirdly, the Bible depicts corruption as a transgression of the commandments and moral ethos. Nevertheless, in response to corruption, there are instances in which God pronounces verdicts and imposes retribution. The conclusion underlines that the comprehension of corruption is intricately interwoven and requires scholarly dialogues to unmask any covert denotations.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article is interdisciplinary as it elicits discernments from the theological discipline and ethical codes that are interlaced in social, economic and political dimensions. The integration of perceptions from philosophy, ethics and literary critique warrants a worthy discourse that forms juxtaposition.

Keywords: biblical text; commandments; corruption; critique; ethics.

Introduction

The depiction of corruption in biblical narratives raises significant challenges and complexities that demand meticulous consideration and nuanced scholarly scrutiny. One fundamental challenge lies in the exposition and contextualisation of ancient biblical narratives within a modern ethical framework. Biblical accounts, composed of vastly different ethnological and historical contexts, introduce the challenge of unifying ancient moral sensibilities with contemporary perspectives on corruption. The evolving nature of societal ethos prompts questions about the applicability and pertinence of biblical dogmas to the current debates on ethical codes and governance. In the process, the multiplicity of literary genres in the Bible complicates its critique of corruption as a pertinent subject (Diko 2023:614). This is made clear by Punt (2006:890), who indicates that the Bible includes historical narratives, biblical poetry, prophecy, legal codes and letters among other genres. Each genre has its own conventions, purposes and rhetorical style, making it essential to consider a specific context and literary form when unmasking instances of corruption. For instance, historical narratives provide an account of episodes without explicitly stating moral judgements, thus requiring readers and critics to infer ethical implications (MacIntyre 2013). Legal codes establish rules and consequences, offering a deontological framework for understanding conscience (Masenya & Ramantswana 2015). Nevertheless, biblical poetry and prophetic literature use metaphorical language, which requires a multifaceted approach to uncover the underlying moral lessons (Jonker 1997). It is on this basis that differentiating between prescriptive legal frameworks, descriptive biblical narratives and poetic expressions is crucial, as it impacts the comprehension of purposive moral messages. The complexities of language, cultural norms and rhetorical aims of biblical authors further obscure the task of explicating passages related to corruption. For example, the Bible was constructed and assembled in ancient languages such as Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, which contain nuances, idiomatic expressions and cultural references that are challenging to expansively grasp without historical and linguistic expertise. By the same token, biblical narratives employ various rhetorical techniques, including metaphorical expressions, allegories

and symbolic language to convey moral and spiritual realities. In consideration of this fact, deciphering the rhetorical aims of biblical authors requires careful scrutinisation of literary styles, thematic patterns and theological frameworks.

Over and above this reality, the inherent tension between supernatural intervention and human agency adds another layer of intricacy. While biblical texts attribute consequences to corrupt actions, scholars and theologians face challenges in discerning a consistent pattern of supernatural responses (Kowalski 2014:223; Louw 2020). That is the reason Polka (2015) is of the view that this inherent tension raises questions about the theological implications of corruption – whether it is regarded as a manifestation of human free will, a test of faith or a reflection of divine judgement. Contradictions and varying perspectives on corruption across different biblical narratives necessitate a holistic approach to uncovering the overarching biblical stance towards this phenomenon. Nevertheless, the Bible, as a foundational narrative for various religious traditions, provides an affluent tapestry of voices and teachings that elucidate the complexities of human behaviour, morality and spirituality. One prominent subject that is interwoven throughout the biblical narrative is corruption, which is a moral and ethical deviation from what is deemed ethical and just (Kretzschmar 1999; Whittingham 2011:209). This overarching theme resonates in numerous biblical narratives, depicting instances in which individuals or societies stray from the ethical principles set forth by the supernatural kingdom. Beyond this theme, it is important to appreciate that the understanding of corruption in the Bible could potentially differ from how the term is conceptualised in contemporary contexts. As a matter of reality, in Hebrew, the term corruption, often translated as 'מחילה' [*mechilah*], is conceptualised within the context of moral decomposition, dishonesty and perversion of justice, continually associated with actions that betray conviction, misuse power or engage in unethical behaviour, whether in the arenas of government, business or personal conduct (Werner 1983). It carries significant weight within Hebrew culture, emphasising the importance of integrity, morality and accountability in both individual and societal life. This suggests that in Hebrew culture, the concept of corruption, encapsulated by the term 'מחילה' [*mechilah*], is not solely regarded through a secular perspective but is also intertwined with religious belief systems. In consideration of this assertion, corruption is not just a matter of societal or legal transgression but is also seen as a moral violation against godly principles. As such, addressing corruption involves not only repairing societal injustices but also seeking forgiveness and spiritual redemption for one's moral transgressions. This reflects the profoundly ingrained connection between ethical codes, morality and spirituality within Hebrew culture.

In modern terms, corruption generally refers to the abuse of entrusted power for personal gain, typically involving dishonest or unethical behaviour (Lodge 1998:161; Ngcamu & Mantzaris 2023). It entails a wide range of actions and practices that undermine the principles of integrity,

transparency and fairness in various institutions and sectors of society (Averbeck 2006:11). The central features of corruption include bribery, fraud, embezzlement, nepotism, extortion and other forms of misconduct. In the process, corruption could occur at different levels, ranging from individual actions to systemic challenges within the governmental, political, business and social structures. For example, on the African continent, corruption predominantly involves government officials, private sector entities and individuals (Jungo, Madaleno & Botelho 2023:766). This suggests that corruption manifests in both the public and private sectors. It adversely affects the proper functioning of institutions and obstructs economic advancement, social justice and the rule of law. A prominent example of corruption in the South African context is the phenomenon known as state capture. State capture refers to the illicit influence exerted by individuals or groups over key state institutions for personal gain (Madonsela 2019:114). This encompasses the manipulation of government policies, appointments and decision-making processes in favour of private interests (Mlambo, Mphurpi & Makgoba 2023:40). In recent years, South Africa has grappled with allegations of state capture that have implicated high-ranking officials, including members of the executive parliamentary office, state-owned enterprise leaders and influential business figures (Madonsela 2019). These allegations have raised concerns regarding the integrity of public institutions and their ability to serve broader public interests. This is one of many examples that is indicative of the reality that corruption is unequivocally a challenge that sabotages the constitutional democracy of many states and communities, with special reference to South Africa. It is on account of this that Mlambo et al. (2023) purport that:

Corruption corrodes public trust in institutions and government. When citizens perceive that public officials are corrupt, it leads to a loss of confidence in the government's ability to address their needs and uphold the rule of law. This can contribute to a breakdown of social cohesion and stability. Furthermore, corruption has a detrimental impact on economic development. It diverts resources away from essential public services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure, hindering economic growth and exacerbating poverty. Corrupt practices, such as bribery and embezzlement distort market mechanisms and create unfair advantages for those engaged in corrupt activities. (p. 44)

Bearing this assertion in mind, modern debates on corruption emphasise its adverse impact on governance, economic growth and social cohesion. For instance, Bruce (2014) underlines that corruption erodes public credence in key institutions, distorts dynamic market forces, diverts resources away from essential services and contributes to disparity. In view of this indication, efforts to combat corruption involve implementing anti-corruption measures, promoting transparency and accountability, strengthening legal frameworks, and buttressing a culture of ethics and integrity (Bruce 2014:51). On the one hand, international organisations, governments and non-governmental entities collaboratively address corruption through initiatives such as the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), Transparency International's

Corruption Perceptions Index (TICPI) and various national anti-corruption agencies. Nonetheless, the fight against corruption is an ongoing global challenge that requires a multifaceted approach involving legal, institutional and societal efforts to create environments where corrupt practices are discouraged, detected and appropriately castigated. Unequivocally, the fight against corruption is a continuing global contest demanding a multi-layered approach integrating legal reforms, robust institutional frameworks and active societal engagement to foster environments where corrupt practices are deterred, swiftly detected and met with appropriate sanctions, thus promoting transparency, accountability and integrity across all sectors and levels of society.

Having said that, in the Bible, the term 'corruption' is not always used in the same way as in modern debates about dishonest or unethical behaviour. In spite of this, the biblical narrative does address various forms of moral and spiritual corruption, as revealed in the evaluation of various pieces of biblical narrative. In the biblical context, corruption refers to a departure from God's purposive moral order or deviation from righteous living (Onongha 2014:70). The Bible frequently uses the concept of corruption to describe the moral decay or sinfulness of individuals and societies (Averbeck 2006). In addition to this claim, the biblical narrative exemplifies corruption as a result of disobedience to God's commands, turning away from righteousness, and embracing wickedness. In particular, many biblical passages associate corruption with the worship of false gods or idols. For instance, in the Old Testament, passages such as Psalm 115:4–8 and Jeremiah 2:5–13 denounce the worship of idols, linking it to idiocy, spiritual blindness and moral corruption, while emphasising the significance of fidelity to the one true God as the foundation of righteousness and moral integrity. Among other biblical concerns, engaging in idolatry is regarded as a form of spiritual corruption as it entails turning away from the worship of one true God. That being said, it is crucial to bear in mind that the phenomenon of 'one true God' remains a bone of contention for theologians and philosophers. This is because of religious pluralism, which suggests that the world is characterised by religious multiplicity, with various belief systems, deities and interpretations of the divine (Kgatle 2020). As a matter of fact, religious pluralism means that multiple paths or religions could lead to a connection with the spiritual kingdom, challenging the exclusivity implied by the concept of the 'one true God'. By the same token, theological differences between denominations and sects contribute to ongoing dialogues on the nature of God. In any event, corruption is also depicted in the Bible as manifesting social and economic injustice. The exploitation of the poor, bribery and abuse of power are (re)produced as forms of corruption that oppose the principles of justice and morality. The Bible continues to describe corruption as a result of deserting God's ways and choosing paths that lead away from morality. The consequences of such corruption are recurrently portrayed as godlike judgement or discipline. These biblical narratives serve to underscore the biblical

theme of moral accountability and the belief that corruption ultimately leads to spiritual retribution. This depiction aligns with broader biblical themes that underscore the significance of ethical conduct and warn against the dangers of moral degeneration. Thus, corruption is not just a matter of societal or legal repercussions but is also seen as a violation of heavenly principles with spiritual consequences.

With this contextual background in mind, this article aims to explore and examine instances of corruption as depicted in the Bible, elucidating the multifaceted depictions of human transgressions, the consequences of such corruption and the supernatural responses invoked within sacred scriptures. From the prelude of Noah's Ark in Genesis to the prophetic admonitions of Isaiah and Micah, biblical narratives present a compelling platform through which to critique the multifaceted nature of corruption and its implications for individuals and societies. Through a comprehensive examination of selected biblical passages, this article attempts to contribute to a profound understanding of how biblical narratives address the concept of corruption, offering perspectives on moral imperatives, divine justice and calls for repentance that resonate across the centuries. Alongside exploring subjects such as moral imperatives, spiritual justice and calls for repentance, this article also elucidates the mechanisms of corruption, interpreting the seductive allure of power and material gain and the insidious ways in which corruption corrodes individual character and societal integrity. In parallel to this view, this scholarly discourse underlines the transformative power of redemption and restoration, showcasing biblical narratives of individuals and communities who, through repentance and spiritual renewal, experience divine mercy and the possibility of moral regeneration.

The significance of this scholarly dialogue lies in the reality that exploring the biblical perspective on corruption allows for reflection on moral and ethical value systems. The Bible provides a foundation for moral dogmas and ethos, and the examination of corruption in its narratives encourages individuals to consider the consequences of unethical behaviour and the importance of living in accordance with moral standards. In fact, corruption in a biblical context has theological implications. In view of this reality, uncovering how the Bible addresses corruption potentially contributes to theological debates on the nature of God, human responsibility and divine justice. This provides perspectives into the biblical understanding of sin, repentance and redemption. Beyond this, the examination of corruption in the Bible offers a window into the ethnological and historical contexts of ancient societies. Given this fact, understanding how corruption is (re)produced in biblical narratives provides insights into the moral concerns and societal subtleties of the times in which these narratives were produced. For individuals within religious communities, scrutinising corruption in the Bible could be part of religious education, consciousness and spiritual development. It provides an opportunity for believers to engage with their sacred narratives, grapple with ethical questions and intensify their

understanding of how faith intersects with issues of morality. For this reason, the biblical exploration of corruption could potentially offer guidance for addressing contemporary challenges related to ethical codes and governance. Lessons elicited from biblical narratives could inform dialogues on the integrity, justice and responsible use of power in various societal contexts. Nevertheless, it is imperative to bear in mind that this scholarly discourse applies two perspectives as a theoretical framework to its discussions.

Theoretical framework: Deontological and virtue ethical codes

This article applies two theoretical perspectives in discussing its phenomenon of interest. Firstly, the deontological theoretical perspective is a moral philosophy that concentrates on the inherent nature of actions rather than the consequences of those actions (Kant 2017; Mandal, Ponnambath & Parija 2016). This perspective is also known as duty-based ethics (Baron & Ritov 2009; Meyers 2003). Deontology derives from the Greek word 'deon' which means 'duty' or 'obligation' (Mandal et al. 2016). In deontological ethics, certain actions are considered morally right or wrong regardless of their outcomes. Bearing this explanation in mind, this underlines the importance of fulfilling one's moral duties or obligations. Actions are judged based on whether they adhere to moral rules or principles. For this reason, deontologists continually contend that ethical principles should be applicable universally (Schurr & Moran 2023). This means that, if an action is morally correct in a particular context, it should be considered morally correct in similar contexts for everyone. In addition to this assertion, deontological ethics place strong intensity on the objectives behind an action. This suggests that, even if the consequences of an action are adversarial, it may still be considered morally correct if the intentions are good (Fink et al. 2023). This perspective – deontological ethical systems – continually involves following specific rules or commands. These rules are derived from moral principles and individuals are obligated to follow them irrespective of the consequences. The deontological perspective remains pertinent and important in contemporary contexts for several reasons. For instance, deontological ethics provides clear moral guidelines and principles that could help individuals and institutions navigate complex ethical dilemmas. In other words, focussing on duties, obligations and rights offers a candid framework for moral decision-making, especially in circumstances where consequences are uncertain or ambiguous. Similarly, deontological ethics places a robust emphasis on the protection of individual rights and autonomy. In contemporary society, where issues such as privacy, freedom of speech and autonomy are vehemently debated, a deontological perspective could serve as a bulwark against potential encroachments on these fundamental rights by governments, corporations or other entities.

By the same token, deontologists, as determined by Molefe (2020:197), believe that certain actions have intrinsic moral

values. This means that some actions are inherently right or wrong regardless of the context or outcomes they produce. For example, murder, torture, injustice and discrimination are inherently immoral, whereas the opposite of these values is inherently right. One of the most well-known proponents of deontological ethics is Immanuel Kant, who developed the concept of the 'categorical imperative' as a foundational principle (Shorter-Bourhanou 2022). The categorical imperative states that individuals should act according to principles that could be universally applied without contradictions (Meer 2018). In other words, an action is morally permissible if its underlying principle can be willed as a universal legal framework applicable to all rational agents without generating any logical contradictions or undermining the very possibility of achieving the purposive goal. In contrast to consequentialist ethical theories such as utilitarianism, which focus on the outcomes of actions, deontological ethics provide a different perspective by underscoring the inherent morality of certain actions based on principles and duties (Meer 2018:345). In this article, the importance of this theoretical perspective lies in the fact that applying deontological ethics to corruption provides a principled and rule-based framework for critiquing the inherent moral injustice of corrupt actions, regardless of their outcomes. In the same vein, deontological ethos emphasises the duty to adhere to moral rules and obligations offering a clear standard by which to judge actions in the context of corruption. This theoretical perspective helps establish a foundation for ethical decision-making, buttressing transparency, accountability and the prioritisation of moral ethos over personal gain in efforts to combat corrupt practices.

Secondly, this article applies virtue ethics to its discussions, as outlined earlier. Virtue ethics, as a theoretical framework, concentrates on the development of virtuous character traits as the foundation of ethical behaviour, rather than emphasising rules or consequences (Becker 2004:269; MacIntyre 2013; Smit 1991:55). This critical approach to ethics places a central emphasis on the moral character of an individual and the cultivation of virtues (Smit 1991:59). On account of this view, it stands to reason to regard virtue ethics as primarily concerned with the development of virtuous character attributes within individuals (Calvin 1975). Among other crucial components, virtues are positive qualities or traits such as reliability, courage, compassion, integrity and kindness. Virtue ethicists, as outlined by Manomi (2019), recurrently connect ethical living with the concept of eudaimonia, which is translated as 'flourishing' or 'fulfilment'. The idea is that living a virtuous life leads to human flourishing and a sense of welfare. It is against this backdrop that virtue ethics evaluates moral exemplars – individuals who embody virtuous traits – as role models for ethical behaviour. This indicates that by observing and emulating these individuals, one could strive to cultivate virtuous characteristics. In other words, virtue ethics emphasises the noteworthiness of practical wisdom, or phronesis, in making ethical decisions. This encompasses the

plausibility to discern the morally right course of action in a particular situation based on one's understanding of virtue ethical codes. Unlike deontological ethics, which relies on fixed rules, and consequentialist ethics, which focusses on outcomes, virtue ethics does not provide a rigid set of rules or guidelines (Manomi 2019). Rather, it encourages individuals to develop a virtuous character and make decisions based on their understanding of virtues. Prominent ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, Socrates, Plato and Epicurus, among many others, are associated with virtue ethics (Coetzer 2013). Aristotle, for instance, argued that virtue is a habit that develops through practice and that the goal of life is to achieve eudaimonia through virtuous living (Manomi 2019). With this view in mind, virtue ethics is distinct from other ethical theories such as deontology and consequentialism, as it does not prescribe specific rules or prioritise the consequences of actions. Instead, it offers a universal approach that encourages individuals to cultivate virtuous character traits as the foundation for ethical decision-making.

In a nutshell, applying deontological ethics provides a principled approach to moral decision-making, emphasising universal duties and moral obligations irrespective of consequences, offering a structured and rule-based foundation for ethical behaviour. On the one hand, virtue ethics highlights the cultivation of virtuous character traits as the key to ethical living, promoting personal growth and flourishing within a community context. Juxtaposed, these theoretical frameworks offer complementary perspectives, addressing both the inherent nature of actions and the development of virtuous individuals, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of ethics in varied situations. In the 'Findings and discussions' section, this article applies the previously explained theoretical frameworks to address its aim as it pertains to the subject of corruption.

Findings and discussions

This section critically assesses how corruption is depicted in biblical narratives. It is important to note that the passages that have been used herein are not from a specific Bible version as this scholarly discourse is not concerned with the versioning of different Bible narratives. It must be underlined that to advance the discussions of this article, the already explained theoretical frameworks are applied to uncover covert meanings of corruption. The rationale for selecting these biblical pieces of textual evidence to discuss deontological ethical codes and virtue ethical codes lies in their thematic pertinence to moral dilemmas and ethical considerations that are central to both ethical frameworks. In other words, these biblical passages are chosen for their depiction of pervasive corruption, whether preceding supernatural intervention, within societal structures or among leaders, offering opulent contexts to explore the application of deontological and virtue ethical codes. As revealed in this section, Genesis 6:5–13 represents a world engulfed in corruption, prompting reflection on the violation of moral duties and the cultivation of virtuous character

qualities amid societal decay. Isaiah 1:4–6 and Micah 3:1–3 underscore the ethical obligations of individuals and leaders, inviting examination of both the breach of moral principles and the cultivation of virtuous dispositions as remedies for systemic corruption and injustice.

Corruption before the flood: Genesis 6:5–13

The narrative of Noah and the Ark in Genesis depicts a world that has become corrupt and violent. Genesis 6:5 states that 'The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time'. This piece of biblical evidence mirrors corruption in the context of moral and ethical degradation within human society. It describes a world that has detoured from moral principles, leading to widespread atrocity and violence. The use of the term 'corrupt' in this context does not necessarily refer to financial or political corruption but rather to moral corruption where human behaviour is characterised by evil actions and intentions. This biblical excerpt elucidates a pervasive moral decomposition and departure from ethical values, prompting the necessity for spiritual intervention through the story of Noah and the Ark to restore godliness. From a deontological perspective, this biblical passage underlines the moral duty and obligation to follow spiritual commandments. The statement, 'The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become' implies a subversion from moral rules and a breach of ethical codes. The deontological perspective additionally asserts that certain actions, driven by evil inclinations, are inherently unprincipled and go against divine commands. In this context, the wickedness described suggests a defilement of moral duties, illuminating the significance of adhering to God's ethical standards. With this in mind, I contend that in contemporary contexts, corruption is understood as the abuse of assigned power for personal gain or the subversion of institutions for unethical purposes, leading to societal destruction and injustice. In contrast to this reality, in biblical contexts, corruption is depicted as a moral failing entrenched in insubordination to supernatural principles, manifesting as a departure from morality and justice, and resulting in a supernatural judgement or societal upheaval. While contemporary understandings of corruption emphasise legal and institutional frameworks, biblical perspectives emphasise spiritual and moral dimensions, underscoring the necessity for both individual integrity and collective accountability in combating corruption. In fact, the aforementioned piece of textual evidence underlines what Woody (2019) posits as follows:

Deviation from divine commandments poses profound dangers, risking moral disorientation and spiritual estrangement. Departing from prescribed ethical guidelines can lead to societal decay, fostering injustice and eroding communal values. Individually, it jeopardises spiritual welfare, fracturing one's connection to a higher moral framework. The consequences may encompass ethical relativism, moral confusion, and a loss of transcendent purpose, plausibly fostering self-centred behaviour.

Deviation from divine commandments not only undermines personal virtue but also threatens the moral fabric of communities, eroding the shared foundation that upholds notions of goodness, justice, and compassion. (p. 11)

In other words, travesty from spiritual commandments signifies the peril of moral degeneration, societal erosion and spiritual disconnection, with implications for ethical relativism and misplacement of collective value systems. By the same token, in a virtue ethical framework, the focus is on the development of virtuous character intricacies. Bearing this in mind, I argue that the aforementioned piece of textual evidence underlines a dearth of virtue in human behaviour, depicting a world where 'every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time'. From a virtue ethical perspective, this underscores a deficiency in virtue ethical codes such as humanity, kindness and justice. Ordinarily, when there is a defect in virtues such as humanity, kindness and justice, it indicates that individuals need to focus on developing these virtues within themselves (Tobin 1986). This involves self-reflection, sometimes known as soul-searching, the intentional practice of virtuous behaviours and a commitment to personal growth. Apart from this claim, virtue ethics encourage individuals to cultivate moral virtue codes and strive towards a congenial balance of character, emphasising that the overall moral health of a community depends on the virtue codes exemplified by its individuals. As a matter of fact, when we use leadership and governance as an example, in contexts where deficiencies in virtues are observed, it raises questions about the ethical conduct of leaders and the effectiveness of governance structures. This suggests that leaders, whether in political, business or other contexts, are expected to exemplify virtues such as justice and consideration. Beyond this view, a lack of these virtues in leadership could lead to a distortion or erasure of trust and legitimacy. That is the reason Tobin (1986:202) cautions that virtue ethics guides individuals to make ethical decisions based on their virtuous character. When virtues such as affinity and justice are lacking, this may indicate that decision-making processes, among other central tenets, need to be re-assessed. This could involve assimilating ethical considerations into decision-making frameworks and encouraging individuals to prioritise virtues in their choices. Conclusively, it is important to note that corruption, as (re) produced in Genesis 6:5–13, leads to God's decision to bring a flood to cleanse the earth. In the Bible, cleansing holds significant symbolic and spiritual meaning, representing purification and absolution. It signifies the removal of sin or impurity, both ceremonially and metaphorically, and serves as a transformative process aligning individuals with divine righteousness (Lee 2023).

In view of this deliberation, one could contend that God's decision to bring a flood indicates punishment. This is on account that punishment from God is recurrently perceived as a supernatural response to human transgressions, reflecting a theological belief in a moral order (Smit 1991). It signifies a consequence for violating prescribed moral or

religious principles, serving as a form of correction, retribution or a means to bring individuals or communities back into alignment with a perceived divine will. This concept of punishment varies among religious traditions, encompassing notions of justice, divine mercy and the notion that such punishment ultimately serves a purpose in the spiritual or moral development of individuals and societies (Meer 2018). Over and above this, it is prudent to bear in mind that in some religious perspectives, punishment from God is regarded as a test of faith or a means of purification, challenging individuals to reflect on their actions and pursue redemption (cf. Graybill 2004; Super 2020). This is often interwoven with notions of spiritual wisdom and ultimate justice, reinforcing the idea that the consequences meted out are part of a larger cosmic plan that transcends human understanding. In contemporary contexts, the biblical narrative of corruption before the flood in Genesis 6:5–13 serves as a cautionary tale about the destructive consequences of pervasive moral dwindling and societal corruption. It underlines the shattering effects of pervasive transgression, including violence, injustice and the breakdown of social order. Beyond this view, it underscores the importance of upholding moral values, fostering accountability and striving for decency in order to avert parallel patterns of corruption emerging in contemporary society. In doing so, it emboldens individuals and communities to learn from history and prioritise integrity and justice as essential safeguards against societal decay. In other words, it underscores the interconnectedness between individual moral conduct and the security of society, underlining the collective responsibility to maintain ethical standards and prevent the erosion of social order.

Corruption in Israel: Isaiah 1:4–6

The book of Isaiah comprises passages that censure the corruption and moral decomposition within the nation of Israel. Isaiah 1:4–6 speaks of a sinful and rebellious nation, likening it to a body covered in wounds and bruises: 'Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him'. This piece of textual evidence vividly denounces and castigates the corruption and moral decomposition within the nation of Israel, using powerful imagery to depict the spiritual and moral state of the people. From a deontological perspective, this passage emphasises the violation of moral duties and spiritual commands. The language of 'Woe to the sinful nation' denotes a moral imperative, underscoring the enormity of the transgressions. The people are accused of deserting the Lord and turning away from the Holy One of Israel, buttressing a breach of ethical principles and a departure from their moral assignments. The deontological inquiry herein underscores the inherent immorality of their actions based on the divine commandments. In contrast to this assertion, in a virtue ethical framework, the emphasis is on the cultivation of virtuous character qualities. In fact, the description of the nation as a 'brood of evildoers' and 'children given to

corruption' illuminates a deficiency in virtues such as morality, adhesion and conformity. Virtue ethics embolden individuals to reflect on the state of their character and the virtues they lack, highlighting the importance of a moral transformation to restore the nation's ethical health. Owing to this reality, integrating both theoretical perspectives, this biblical excerpt in Isaiah denounces not only specific actions but also the overall moral and spiritual condition of the nation. The deontological emphasis on spiritual commandments aligns with the virtue ethical concern for cultivating virtues, suggesting that restoration of ethical integrity requires both conformity to moral rules and the development of a virtuous identity. In addition to this fact, it underscores the interplay between individual moral agency and societal welfare, indicating that the cultivation of virtues not only impacts personal character but also contributes to the overall ethical health of the community.

Over and above this claim, this passage mirrors a nation covered in wounds and bruises due to its sinful and rebellious nature. From a deontological standpoint, the consequences are a result of violating moral duties and deserting spiritual ethical codes. In the process of this, it is crucial to observe that virtue ethics highlights the absence of virtues such as devotion and deference, contributing to moral mould. The consequences, in this case, go beyond immediate retribution to reflect a profound spiritual and moral malaise within the community. In view of this fact, it stands to reason to contend that both deontological and virtue ethical perspectives underscore a path to redemption. This is based on the premise that, deontologically, the nation is called to repentance and a return to the Lord's commandments. Having said that, virtue ethics underscore the necessity for a transformation of character, cultivating virtue ethical codes such as integrity and devotion. The call to redemption involves both a change in behaviour and a renewal of the nation's moral character. It is also prudent to bear in mind that, deontologically, individuals are called to uphold their ethical responsibilities and follow divine commands. In parallel to this, virtue ethics stress the significance of individual character development, with each person contributing to the collective virtue of the nation. Bearing this in mind, I argue that in the context of societal corruption, the call to redemption involves not only a change in individual behaviour but also a regeneration of the nation's moral character as a whole. This aligns with the principles of virtue ethics, which emphasise the significance of individual character development in contributing to the collective virtue of the nation. This implies an obligation to act in accordance with moral principles and duties, even in the face of communal corruption. In other words, by fulfilling their ethical duties and following supernatural commands, individuals contribute to the restoration of moral order and the promotion of justice within society. Consequently, both virtue ethical and deontological ethical codes underscore the significance of personal moral honour and ethical responsibility in addressing societal corruption. While virtue ethics focusses on character development and the cultivation of virtues, deontological ethics emphasises adherence to moral duties and spiritual commands. Together, these ethical

frameworks provide harmonising approaches to the call for redemption and the transformation of moral character in the face of societal setbacks.

In the context of contemporary ethical challenges, the principle of repentance could be applied to societal acknowledgement and rectification of systemic and institutional challenges. This includes acknowledging historical injustices, addressing ongoing disparities and actively working towards transformative change. Considering this fact, I argue that the call to repentance becomes a call to recognise collective responsibility and commit to dismantling structures that perpetuate injustice. With respect to this, virtue cultivation, as emphasised in the aforementioned biblical passage, holds pertinence for addressing contemporary ethical challenges through the development of ethical leadership. Leaders in various empires, whether in politics, business or civil society, could potentially benefit from a focus on virtues such as integrity, empathy and justice. This means that the cultivation of these virtue ethical codes contributes to more ethical decision-making and governance. Beyond this, the balance of justice and mercy is a central consideration in the context of criminal justice reform. For these reasons, applying deontological principles, there is a call for just consequences for transgression, but virtue ethical codes encourage a compassionate approach that pursues rehabilitation and restoration. For this reason, I contend that striking a balance entails addressing systemic and institutional challenges in the criminal justice system while acknowledging the importance of accountability and rehabilitation for individuals. In particular, the integration of deontological and virtue ethical perspectives is pertinent in the arena of global governance. This indicates that, deontologically, there is a necessity for adherence to international legal frameworks and ethical standards. By the same token, virtue ethical codes inform the cultivation of principles such as global cooperation, affinity and honour for human rights. In a nutshell, the multifaceted exploration of ethical principles is crucial for addressing complex global challenges such as poverty, conflict and public health crises.

Corruption among leaders: Micah 3:1–3

The prophet Micah addresses the corruption among the leaders of Israel. Micah 3:1–3 castigates leaders who 'hate good and love evil' and who exploit their positions for personal expansion, stating:

You who hate good and love evil; who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones; who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces; who chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot.

In this biblical passage, the leaders are implicated in having a perverse moral orientation – they hate what is good and love what is evil. This piece of biblical evidence implies a philosophical moral catastrophe among the leaders, where their values are inverted, leading them to despise what is virtuous and embrace what is immoral. This indictment suggests a corruption of moral character, where those

entrusted with authority and responsibility exhibit a depraved moral orientation, prioritising self-interest and immorality over rectitude and justice. Such a portrayal underscores the gravity of ethical lapses among leaders and the detrimental impact of their perverse moral orientation on society as a whole, highlighting the urgent prerequisite for moral regeneration and ethical leadership. In addition to this exposition, by contrasting the leaders' contempt for goodness with their embrace of evil, this biblical excerpt underscores the profound moral responsibility that complements positions of leadership. It serves as a stark reminder of the potential for power to corrupt and the imperative for leaders to prioritise ethical principles and integrity in their decision-making, lest their moral shortcomings lead to widespread impairment and injustice. As a matter of fact, it is clear from this passage that debating leadership challenges is crucial as it advances critical thinking enhances decision-making skills and encourages the exploration of varied perspectives on complex issues. In the process, it promotes innovation, resilience and adaptability in addressing contemporary and future leadership dilemmas, ultimately contributing to effective leadership practices and sustainable organisational success.

It is further crucial to bear in mind that this biblical excerpt sets the stage for comprehending the intensity of their (leaders) corruption and moral mould. The imagery used in this biblical passage is evocative and metaphorical. Phrases such as 'tear the skin from my people' and 'eat my people's flesh' paint a gruesome picture of the leaders' actions. This could be understood metaphorically as the leaders exploit and oppress the vulnerable members of society, taking advantage of their positions for personal gain. This metaphorical exposition underlines the insidious nature of corruption, unmasking how it propagates systemic injustices and exacerbates social imbalances. It emphasises the necessity for ethical leadership and the protection of the subjugated, urging society to confront and address the underlying causes of corruption to ensure justice and equality for all members of society. In the same vein, the imagery of tearing skin, breaking bones and chopping people up like meat for cooking serves to underscore the dehumanising nature of the leaders' actions. This underlines a complete disregard for the welfare and nobility of the people they (leaders) are meant to lead. As a matter of fact, the comparison of the people to meat for the pan and flesh for the pot metaphorically describes how the leaders view and treat the citizens – as commodities to be consumed for their own benefit. This is symbolic of the economic exploitation and social injustice perpetrated by corrupt leaders. Inevitably, this biblical excerpt underscores the social and ethical responsibility of leaders. Rather than protecting and caring for their people, these leaders are (re) produced as actively causing harm and agony. This highlights a profound failure in their role as guardians of justice and promoters of the common good.

From a deontological theoretical standpoint, the leaders' exploitation of their positions for personal gain is a clear violation of moral principles. This is because they have a

duty to use their authority for the security of the people, and not for personal enrichment. Having said that, deontology emphasises the inherent value and dignity of individuals. This denotes that individuals possess intrinsic worth and are entitled to deference and moral consideration simply by virtue of being human. This emphasis on the inherent value of individuals underscores the importance of treating others with dignity, objectivity and respect, regardless of their status or circumstances. Deontological ethics thus provides a robust framework for recognising and upholding the rights and autonomy of individuals, emphasising the moral domineering to act in ways that honour and protect their inherent worth and dignity. Conversely, the dehumanising actions described in this biblical excerpt, tearing the skin and breaking bones, directly contradict the duty to treat others with respect and protect their welfare. Leaders, according to the deontological perspective, have a duty to uphold justice and protect the vulnerable, such as women, young girls and children. The leaders in this biblical passage are (re)produced as dwindling in their duty to advance the common good, instead propagating social injustice. On the other hand, from a virtue ethical perspective, leaders should strive to cultivate virtues that corroborate with their roles. This encompasses personal growth and the purposive development of virtuous character traits. Given this context, virtue ethical codes recurrently regard leaders as moral exemplars. The leaders in this biblical passage, however, are depicted as setting a negative example, failing to exemplify the virtues that should epitomise their leadership. One would recall that virtue ethics is concerned not only with individual character but also with the security of the society. On account of this fact, I contend that the corruption depicted in this excerpt disrupts social harmony and goes against the idea of leaders contributing to the flourishing of society. In addition to this claim, the interference of social harmony due to corruption leads to widespread distrust in institutions, weakening the fabric of societal cohesion and undermining the foundation of effective governance. Over and above this, by betraying the confidence placed in them to uphold the common good, corrupt leaders not only fail in their duty to serve the interests of society but also set a harmful precedent that erodes public confidence in leadership and perpetuates a cycle of unethical behaviour.

Therefore, it stands to reason to contend that this disruption of social congruence not only undermines the stability and prosperity of the community but also represents an infidelity of the ethical responsibility entrusted to leaders to govern with integrity and promote the welfare of all members of society. As such, the corruption pronounced in this biblical excerpt stands in direct opposition to the ideals of ethical leadership and the collective flourishing of society, highlighting the profound moral and societal implications of leadership misconduct. In fact, ethical leadership serves as a guiding beacon for future generations, forming societal ethical codes and values by exemplifying integrity, accountability and compassion. During the course, by propagating a culture of corruption, leaders not only sabotage the present welfare of society but also jeopardise its future sustainability and resilience, as trust and cooperation are essential components

for addressing collective challenges and nurturing long-term prosperity. In a nutshell, these ethical perspectives illuminate the profound moral implications of the leaders' corruption in the context of Micah 3:1–3, offering different viewpoints to critique the actions of these leaders and the consequences of their ethical shortcomings and failings. The 'Conclusion' section includes important concluding remarks based on this scholarly exposition.

Conclusion

The (re)production of corruption in the Bible transcends mere instances of bribery or fraudulent conduct; it encompasses a far-reaching moral and spiritual facet. In biblical terms, corruption signifies a nonconformity from the supernatural hierarchy and ethical principles established by God. Instances of corruption in the biblical narratives range from moral shortcomings and deceit to systemic injustice and exploitation, all established in a departure from moral living. The concept of corruption is interwoven with the biblical understanding of sin and disobedience, emphasising the profound consequences of human actions that deviate from God's purposive moral order. With this in mind, I conclude that understanding corruption in the Bible requires a meticulous examination of the moral complexities entrenched in its ideals and ideologies. The stories of individuals succumbing to greed, deceit and exploitation serve as cautionary tales, illustrating the enduring consequences of moral transgressions. Biblical pieces of textual evidence, such as the narrative of Noah and the flood, among others, depict spiritual responses to corruption, underscoring the gravity of moral deviation and the necessity for contrition.

In contemporary contexts, the biblical understanding of corruption holds relevance for ethical and moral reflections. Beyond legal frameworks, it invites individuals and societies to consider the broader implications of their actions on justice, integrity and compassion. In view of this reality, the biblical narratives serve as a moral compass, encouraging individuals to navigate the complex web of modern setbacks with a commitment to morality and ethical conduct. In addition to this view, the biblical perspectives on corruption offer a foundation for dialogues on social justice and the responsible utilisation of power. It calls for an examination of institutional structures, policies and individual behaviours in light of ethical principles. In closing, in a world grappling with corruption in various forms, the Bible provides timeless discernments into the nature of moral choices, the consequences of corruption, and the enduring call to pursue justice and righteousness. Ultimately, the biblical comprehension of corruption challenges individuals and societies to aspire to higher ethical standards and seek redemptive paths towards a more just and virtuous existence.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

M.D. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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