



Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*

IVP Downers Grove, Illinois, 2004.

Extract from Chapter 12, "A Survey of Historical Approaches"
pp. 408-411

The Jubilee Centre

In terms of theological and social influence, theonomism is predominantly a North American phenomenon. It has not made significant inroads in Britain. However, that is not to say that Britain lacks Christians committed to a biblical social agenda with strong Old Testament roots. The Jubilee Centre in Cambridge has been active for more than two decades in bringing a biblical perspective to the public arena of social policy, legislation and reform. Its work has been recognized both in Parliament and the secular media. While it shares some of the hermeneutical foundations that theonomists espouse, the Jubilee Centre is not theonomist in its fundamental theology nor in the way it seeks to influence public policy. It certainly does not follow a 'reconstructionist' or 'dominion' agenda or advocate Old Testament penalties in contemporary legislation. The director, Michael Schluter, originally in collaboration with Roy Clements and later with the backing of a wider team, has provided the theological and biblical basis for the Centre's various programmes aimed at social reform in Britain.ⁱ

Prominent in their theological position is their use of the Old Testament as a normative authority for Christian social ethics. On the basis of New Testament texts such as Matthew 5:17-20 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17, they argue that Christians are obliged to search the Old Testament scriptures for ethical guidance and that to confine the relevance of Old Testament law to Israel BC is fundamentally misguided. However, they are dissatisfied with the proposal that the only way to move from Old Testament text to modern context is by way of a miscellaneous list of derived intermediate principles. The problems they perceive regarding such a 'list of principles' approach include the following: How does one determine the 'right' principle when different interpreters derive different principles from the same text or texts? Deriving principles involves a process of abstraction and generalization, the so-called ladder of abstraction. How far 'up the ladder' should one go, and what steps are appropriate for coming back down again into concrete proposals in our own modern context? How do we organize or prioritize our derived principles if they come into conflict with each other in a complex moral situation? How can we avoid our selection of derived principles being nothing more than a subjective statement of our own biases tangentially linked to the biblical text?

Schluter and Clements argue that the only way to avoid these difficulties (or at least to mitigate them) is the holistic approach, which regards the whole social system of Israel as a normative model.ⁱⁱ That is, rather than take isolated laws and attempt to derive moral principles from them, we need to see how individual laws and whole categories of law, as well as the many social, economic and political institutions of Israel, *functioned* together. God did

not just give arbitrary laws to an otherwise 'neutral' community; God *created* that community, moulding them out of an unpromising crowd of escaped slaves into a people with distinctive structures of social life in relation to the historical and cultural context in which they lived. It is this total community that was to serve as God's model for the nations. Therefore, any principles we derive from different parts of the model must be integrated and be consistent with the whole. So, for example, the law banning interest will not be generalized merely into an abstract principle about curtailing greed, but will be understood in relation to Israel's system of land tenure and economic objectives, which in turn are bound up with the importance and role of the extended families which in turn relates to other features of Israel's judicial and social life. Since so much of Israel's law has to do with creating or restoring a community of justice and compassion in family and societal life, the Jubilee Centre team use the term 'Relationism' to describe the social ethical system they wish to build from this biblical base.ⁱⁱⁱ

By advocating this method, they claim to avoid some of the problems inherent in taking as a starting point for Christian social ethics either a creation mandate approach or a kingdom of God approach, while preserving the essential truths of both.^{iv} In their work they endorse and carry further the concept, which I developed in the first edition of the present book, of Israel and its law as a 'paradigm'. It is this overall paradigm, the social shape of Israel in all its dimensions, that acts as a guiding, organizing and prioritizing control on our expression and application of derived principles. Thus, while they share the theologians' insistence on the relevance and normativity of the Old Testament and its law, they do not share the reconstructionist agenda of enforcing Old Testament laws and penalties through modern legislation. Nevertheless, they are prepared to step out of the world of biblical research into the complex world of actual social policy and legislation. They are prepared, that is, not only to go up the ladder of abstraction, but to come down again with concrete proposals in the public arena. Not everyone will agree with the specifics of all their agenda. Nor do they expect everyone to, still less do they wish to compel them to. The point is that there comes a time to move from principles to practice, from questions to answers, from debate to action, and the Jubilee Centre at least seeks to do these things from a clearly stated hermeneutical approach to the biblical text.



ⁱ Some of their published theological work is referred to below. Much of it still exists as unpublished papers, or as biblical/theological sections in specific, issue-related publications available from 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge, CB1 2NZ, UK.

ⁱⁱ The fullest statement of their position is set out in Michael Schluter and Roy Clements, *Reactivating the Extended Family*. In this they give a concise survey of Israel's kinship system and the political and economic structures that went along with it. Then they set out their hermeneutical method of moving from that descriptive work into normative ethics. Finally, they move on to concrete proposals for social reform in Britain that would, in their view, be a starting point for bringing society more into line with the objectives and priorities of the biblical paradigm. I reviewed this work in Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Kin Deep', *Third Way* 10.1 (January 1987), pp. 29-32.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Jubilee Centre has launched a campaign under the banner of 'Relationism' to bring relational concerns much more into focus in the course of public, political, economic and social policy-making. Their proposals are set out in Michael Schluter and David Lee, *R Factor*. The biblical and hermeneutical foundations of the whole project are set out in C. Townsend and J. Ashcroft, *Political Christians in a Plural Society*.

^{iv} See Michael Schluter and Roy Clements, 'Jubilee Institutional Norms'.