

The Place of the Bible in Medical Ethics: An Evangelical Approach

One of the major challenges for Christians seeking to engage ethical debates within medicine is to ascertain what, if anything, distinctive they bring to the table and how their perspective and approach to issues is different from that of others. One obvious distinctive feature is that any authentically Christian contribution will be shaped in some way by the Christian Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. These texts are received by the church and offered to the world not simply as wisdom from the past but also as a source of divine revelation for the present which provides insight and guidance for Christians and others.

Within my own Anglican tradition, the view of Scripture as God's Word and authoritative in the development of Christian moral theology is evident in claims within the traditional Anglican formularies (the Thirty Nine Articles, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal) such as "no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral" (Article 7) and "it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written" (Article 20). That this remains a fundamental Anglican conviction is seen in the words of the 1998 Virginia Report prepared for the Lambeth Conference:

Anglicans affirm the sovereign authority of the Holy Scriptures as the medium through which God by the Spirit communicates his word in the Church and thus enables people to respond with understanding and faith. The Scriptures are 'uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation' and 'the primary norm for Christian faith and life'.¹

The Roman Catholic Church clearly also gives Scripture a high status (as expounded in, for example, the Vatican II document, *Verbum Dei*). After centuries of relative neglect in favour of natural law based reasoning, contemporary Roman Catholic teaching has witnessed a revival in the importance of Scripture within moral theology, especially after Vatican II. This was particularly evident in the writings of Pope John Paul II whose 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* states "Sacred Scripture remains the living and fruitful source of the Church's moral doctrine"² and proceeds to describe the Church's task as preserving what the word of God teaches about moral action pleasing to God.

Within different denominations the tradition of evangelicalism is particularly identified as emphasising the authority of Scripture and its importance in Christian moral reasoning. This is evident in the bases of faith of two of the most significant pan-

¹ *The Virginia Report*, para 3.6, in Anglican Communion Office, *The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference 1998: Transformation and Renewal* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), online at <http://www.lambethconference.org/1998/documents/report-1.pdf>. The quotations in the extract are taken from resolutions of the previous 1988 Lambeth Conference.

² Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (London: Incorporated Catholic Truth Society in collaboration with Veritas Publications, Dublin, 1993), para 28, online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor_en.html

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denominational evangelical bodies in the United Kingdom, the Evangelical Alliance which declares “The divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, which are the written Word of God—fully trustworthy for faith and conduct” and the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) which affirms “The Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God. It is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behavior”.

Unfortunately, evangelical appeals to the Bible in articulation of an ethical standpoint are not always taken seriously, even by fellow Christians, let alone the wider secular world. It must be admitted that this is in some measure due to the fact that evangelicals have at times understood “being biblical” in too narrow a manner that, for example, requires citation of biblical texts (as evident historically in, for example, the Westminster Catechism) and is suspicious of any discussion that fails to conform to such a model. So, Nigel Biggar, an author shaped by evangelical Anglicanism, warns in the introduction to his important study of the ethics of suicide and euthanasia:

Evangelicals may be distressed to find here barely a single handful of direct references to the text of the Bible. As a consequence they might doubt that my discussion is 'biblical'; and if it is not biblical, then it can hardly be truly Christian. If so, I would ask them to consider that references to the surface text of the Bible are not the only – and not even the main – index of Christian authenticity....³

In the light of the importance of Scripture but also confusion over how appeal is made to Scripture, this chapter seeks to articulate an approach to the Bible that draws on the work of some recent significant contributions from biblical scholars and moral theologians (who to varying degrees identify as evangelical) in order to develop an approach that is identifiably evangelical but also more creative and widely acceptable in its appeal to Scripture than popular caricatures. It is written from the conviction that the witness of Scripture itself, Christian tradition and contemporary statements such as those quoted above from both Roman Catholic and Protestant authorities, mean that, despite the difficulties in seeing how Scripture sheds light on many new contemporary ethical challenges, Christian ethicists must not abandon the centrality of Scripture as authoritative norm, *norma normans*, for Christian ethics. As Allen Verhey says, in his *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine*, “the real problem for the Christian community is not *whether* Scripture is somehow normative but *how* it is...”.⁴ The challenge is, as *The Virginia Report* went on to note, how “Scripture is to be understood and read in the light afforded by the contexts of ‘tradition’ and ‘reason’” so that through “a constant dynamic interplay of Scripture, tradition and reason” the mind of God is discerned afresh “not only in every age, but in each and every context”.⁵

³ Nigel Biggar, *Aiming to Kill: The Ethics of Suicide and Euthanasia* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2004), xiv-xv.

⁴ Allen Verhey, *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), 40.

⁵ *The Virginia Report*, Paras 3.7, 3.11.

Reframing the appeal to Scripture

One of the difficulties in emphasizing the importance of the Bible is that appeal to it – especially but not solely by evangelicals - has often been undertaken and evaluated within an approach to ethics that is focussed on dilemmas and decisions. The ethical question is raised simply in terms of “Is it right or wrong to do X?” where X could be “have an abortion”, “clone sheep”, “destroy spare embryos in IVF”, “assist suicide” or any number of complex medical ethical issues.

The first problem here is that ethical discourse is reduced to the scenario of facing a difficult personal choice, a dilemma-focussed approach to ethics which, due to the work of writers such as Stanley Hauerwas, is increasingly questioned. The second problem is that it is the culture of which we are part which is setting the agenda, usually by encouraging or expecting us to do something specific about which we personally, or our ecclesial culture and tradition, have moral questions and an uneasy conscience. The third problem arises when the Bible is looked to in order to provide answers to these sorts of questions and it is thought that it can supply those answers by what Biggar described above as “references to the surface text of the Bible”. This is a problem for various reasons but in particular because, as John Wyatt, the leading evangelical medical ethicist, has written

When we turn from the recent advances in biology and medical technology to the Bible, we are immediately struck by the gulf between the biblical world and our own. The world of the Bible is pre-scientific, technologically primitive, predominantly rural and dominated by the realities of an agricultural existence. It reflects a society in which knowledge about the universe scarcely changed from one generation to the next. It is a world in which no-one questioned that unseen and powerful spiritual forces controlled all aspects of human life, from the weather to the mysteries of human reproduction and infertility. *How can the Bible possibly have anything relevant to say in the complexities of medical ethics in our radically different society?*⁶

In order to develop an answer to Wyatt's question the focus needs to shift from the “Is it right or wrong to do X?” form of the ethical question. This sort of question can only be answered and adequate appeals can only be made to Scripture when there is a wider context. For Scripture to guide Christians in relation to any issue in medical ethics there needs to be a theological understanding of both the Word and the world. Appealing to Scripture in relation to specific issues in medical ethics can only be of value in a wider framework. This must articulate not only the authority of Scripture but a biblically-based understanding of the authority of created order and a wider theological framework

⁶ John Wyatt, *Matters of Life and Death: Today's Healthcare Dilemmas in the Light of Christian Faith* (Leicester: IVP, 1998), 48 (italics added).

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which engages with the challenges of interpretation not only in relation to Scripture but also in relation to creation and contemporary social, biological, medical and technological realities.

The authority of God's two books

Christians acknowledge the authority of both Scripture and creation and confess this dual authority as existing under the supreme authority of God. The authority of the Word and the authority of the world are twin authorities which are both derived from God's work in special revelation and in creation. This recognition is vitally important for Christian approaches to medical ethics and the use of the Bible in this area.

At the heart of Christian faith is the conviction that the creator God made the world and placed men and women in it as his own image with the gift of reason and the call to subdue and rule the earth (Genesis 1.28).⁷ Faced with human rejection and sin, God continues to bring his divine purpose for humanity in creation to fulfillment through his work of redemption in history, supremely in and through Christ.

In relation to a Christian approach to creation and the ethical questions raised by medical and technological procedures, this understanding means that Christians do not view creation as morally neutral. The world and our human bodies are not simply matter which can be manipulated and shaped by the human will and human desires. There is a divinely granted authority to the created order which we need to discern and respect. In the words of Oliver O'Donovan, the leading contemporary evangelical ethicist who has written extensively on the significance of the created order within Christian ethics:

In speaking of the order which God the Creator and Redeemer has established in the universe, we are not speaking merely of our own capacities to impose order upon what we see there. Of course, we can and do impose order upon what we see, for we are free agents and capable of creative interpretation of the world we confront. But our ordering depends upon God's to provide the condition for its freedom. It is free because it has a given order to respond to in attention or disregard, in conformity or disconformity, with obedience or with rebellion.⁸

The significance of creation also means that any emphasis on the truth and authority of Scripture cannot be totalitarian and dismissive of other sources of truth and methods of knowledge. The Bible and religious claims based on its authority can rarely answer the

⁷ For a recent discussion of the biblical and theological significance of 'the image of God' see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2005).

⁸ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), 36-37.

technical questions raised by scientists and medics.⁹ Appeals to the authority of the Bible must therefore always be put alongside and related to what we know about the world God has made and which, as His image in the world, we are called to understand and respect. As leading Anglican scientist John Polkinghorne has written, “There are many ways in which science speaks to theology in a manner to which that subject must be prepared to pay attention”.¹⁰ In the words of evangelical philosopher Arthur F. Holmes, because ‘all truth is God’s truth’ we need to recognise that “to relate science to Scripture at the level of particulars...requires first that we be sure of what both the scientific and the Biblical facts are, rather than uncritically jumping to current conclusions on either side”.¹¹

So, for example, whatever we think we might learn about the moral significance of the early stages of human life from passages such as Psalm 139, we must recognize not only its poetic genre but the pre-scientific nature of its account. We can therefore only offer a Christian response to issues relating to the embryo if – alongside texts such as this – we draw upon the best scientific understanding of the processes of conception and embryonic development that God has built into his creation. It must not be thought that this emphasis on drawing on knowledge of the world automatically leads to a more “liberal” or “permissive” stance and away from the view that conception should be taken as the determining moment for the status of early human life. Gilbert Meilaender, in the second edition of his theological primer on bioethics, moves away from his earlier view that there are “reasons why we might fix the beginning of individual human life slightly later than conception”.¹² He does so not for biblical but for scientific and philosophical reasons as he explains:

In the first edition, without precisely committing myself to the view that a new individual human being comes into existence only after “twinning” has or has not occurred, I gave considerable weight to that possibility. I am now, *for both empirical and “metaphysical” reasons*, far less persuaded. Indeed, I think it likely that the argument that individuality is not established until approximately fourteen days of development is not going to stand the test of the embryological evidence and is likely to seem increasingly arbitrary.¹³

⁹ So, over fifty years ago, Pope Pius XII acknowledged that “It remains for the doctor, and especially the anesthesiologist, to give a clear and precise definition of ‘death’ and the ‘moment of death’ of a patient who passes away in a state of unconsciousness” (Address to an International Congress of Anesthesiologists, November 24, 1957).

¹⁰ J. C. Polkinghorne, *Serious Talk: Science and Religion in Dialogue* (London: SCM, 1995), 46.

¹¹ Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth Is God’s Truth* (Leicester: IVP, 1979), 59-60.

¹² Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 30.

¹³ ———, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), viii-ix. His revised comments are found in chapter 3 of the second edition (pp 29f). For a full discussion of this subject see David Albert Jones, *The Soul of the Embryo: An Enquiry into the Status of the Human Embryo in the Christian Tradition* (London: Continuum, 2004) and the helpful 2001 paper, *A theologians’ brief: On the place of the human embryo within the Christian tradition & the theological principles for evaluating its moral status*.

Christians therefore cannot just appeal to the Bible for that would be to deny the authority of God's created order. However, neither can they ignore the Bible or believe that a scientific understanding of nature is the only way of understanding creation.¹⁴ One means which God uses in accomplishing his work of redemption is that of divine speech through which he makes himself known and reveals his will and his work for human flourishing in creation and redemption. While God's supreme revelation of himself and his will is found in Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, that full revelation is faithfully witnessed to in the words of prophets and apostles in the Scriptures of Old and New Testaments.

The claim to be a life-giving and life-directing divine Word is made by Scripture itself in numerous places. Within the Old Testament, in addition to within the Law (texts such as Deuteronomy 28 linking obedience to the word of God with life and blessing) one of the classic expressions of this conviction and self-understanding is Psalm 119 with its constant references to the believer's need for the guiding and life-enhancing qualities of God's revealed will:

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes and I will observe it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Turn my heart to your decrees....Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Ps 119:33-36, 105)

Scripture itself bears witness to the fact that claims such as these about divine revelation are not a denial of other sources of knowledge of God's will or a rejection of other means of discovering the good we are to seek. The wisdom literature, for example, makes evident that God's purposes are able to be known in other ways than through Law and special revelation such as that given to the prophets. Nevertheless, the importance in the Old Testament of inscripturated divine revelation for determining the way of life for God's people is impossible to deny.

In the New Testament, this appeal to the Scriptures for guidance in what we would call ethical teaching is constantly reiterated. Jesus' famous summary of the Law and the Prophets in the double-love command (Matt 22:34-40 and parallels), which has been so central in Christian ethics, is simply the bringing together of texts from Deuteronomy 6 and from Leviticus 19 (an ancient book we don't generally look to as a moral guide or view as of great relevance for most contemporary ethics). Paul in 1 Corinthians is quite clear that not simply the commands but also the narratives of ancient Israel are given "as an example for us" (1 Corinthians 10:6) and "written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

The classic formulation of this perspective is found in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. This passage not only emphasizes the divine *origin* of Scripture as *theopneustos* – God-

¹⁴ For a helpful, recent discussion of questions such as these from an evangelical perspective see Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

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breathed ('inspired' is a poor and often misleading translation), it also teaches that the divine *purpose* in giving this gift is primarily ethical: all Scripture is "useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work". Without getting drawn into the complexities of debates about the exact nature of inspiration or whether being God-breathed ensures that the historical, culture-bound fully human words of Scripture are to be received as somehow 'infallible' or 'inerrant', this text succinctly highlights that, like Old Testament Israel, the body of Christ comprising Jews and Gentile is to be a creature of the Word.¹⁵ Scripture therefore must have a central place in any Christian articulation of how as humans we are to live our lives.

This understanding has been received and lived out within Christian tradition and, as noted earlier, is evident today in the main traditions of the Church. As Brian Brock has recently argued, "the great theologians who sustained and enriched Christian faith not only could and did read Scripture directly and theologically, but their thinking about contentious moral questions often took the form of biblical commentary".¹⁶

Given that God's authority is mediated through both creation and Scripture the next crucial question is how a Christian ethic faithfully engages in the task of interpreting both the world and the Word. In the following sections I outline several fundamental qualities and disciplines of Christian interpretation generally before suggesting how we interpret Scripture for ethics and how we interpret our world.

Essentials for Christian interpretation

In relation to biblical hermeneutics, the ethics of interpretation, in particular the virtues of a faithful reader, have received much attention in recent writings.¹⁷ What follows draws on two rules for the use of Scripture proposed by Allen Verhey but proposes these rules must be extended to shape our interpretation of the world as well as of Scripture.

Among the most significant works on Scripture and ethics in recent years have been two from Allen Verhey, the leading medical ethicist who (along with Stephen Lammers) co-edited the two editions of the reader *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*.¹⁸ First in *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community*,

¹⁵ For a range of different evangelical views on the nature and authority of Scripture see John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Challenging Evangelical Perspectives* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007); Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2009).

¹⁶ Brian Brock, "Rethinking the Role of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Precipit of *Singing the Ethos of God*," *Catalyst* March (2008), online at <http://www.catalystresources.org/issues/343Brock.html>.

¹⁷ See, for example, works such as A. K. M. Adam, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion* (London: SPCK, 1991) and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998)

¹⁸ Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey, *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), ———, *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998).

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Scripture and the Moral Life (2002) and then lightly revised in *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine* (2003), he presents a proposal for the use of Scripture, the first two rules of which articulate principles that relate more widely to developing a biblical medical ethic through the dual interpretation of both Word and world.¹⁹

Verhey's first rule is that "we must read and use Scripture humbly".²⁰ The necessity of this stance should be obvious to anyone reading such statements in Scripture as " 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways', declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (Is 55:8-9) or setting the call for ethical discernment in Romans 12:1-2 in the context of Paul's doxology at the end of Romans 11. It is, sadly, not always the way in which Scripture is used in ethical debate. Christians sometimes dogmatically assert that a particular ethical judgment in a contentious area is unquestionably "biblical" and that those who suggest otherwise are therefore "unbiblical" and their reading of Scripture unreliable and best discounted. Verhey is clear that we need to beware of "interpretative arrogance" and of readings which defend our own interests or make Scripture into a weapon to attack others. Here it is important to heed Richard Burridge's call (in his recent study of New Testament ethics) for awareness of how excluding certain people from the task of biblical interpretation can in turn lead to distorted and even dangerous understandings of what is "biblical".²¹ As Verhey writes, "We read Scripture humbly when we read it in community with those who are different from us".²²

Although Verhey's rule is given for interpretation of Scripture, the same virtue of humility must also mark the interpretation of reality and the situations which medical ethics seeks to address. It should do so, firstly, because that is the appropriate attitude of humans before the wonder of God's creation. This is witnessed to in biblical texts such as Psalm 8 and Psalm 19 (the structure of which reflects the two-fold distinction and also relatedness between world and Word). It should do so also, however, because so many of the issues raised in medical ethics require us to understand and respond to situations of human pain, fragility, weakness and suffering. These are situations where interpretation is not a simple task and discernment of truth can only be faithfully accomplished through a humble attitude of attentive, loving care. Although clearly not sufficient to guarantee faithful discernment, interpretation and response within a situation (as illustrated in the case of Job's comforters), silent presence is a necessary prerequisite for understanding and possibly speaking God's word into any situation of suffering for 'suffering is not a question that demands an answer; it is not a problem that demands a solution; it is a mystery that demands a presence'.²³

¹⁹ See Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), especially chpt 3 and Verhey, *Reading*, especially chpt 2.

²⁰ Verhey, *Remembering Jesus*, 55 (also Verhey, *Reading*, 43).

²¹ Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007).

²² Verhey, *Remembering Jesus*, 56.

²³ Quoted in Wyatt, *Matters*, 71.

Verhey's second rule is that "we must read and use Scripture in Christian community".²⁴ This means, as he goes on to argue, that Scripture must be read canonically and according to the Rule of Faith, with exegetical care and skill, and prayerfully. Clearly here biblical and theological scholarship play a vital role in enabling a biblical response but the interpretation of the Scripture must be a genuinely and fully ecclesial task and not left solely to scholars and clerics. At times evangelical approaches to Scripture – particularly at a popular level - have wrongly privileged the individual believer illuminated by the indwelling Spirit and this has led to a privatizing of ethical deliberation and a loss of a proper ecclesial context for all biblical interpretation.

This same principle of interpretation within Christian community must also be applied to the interpretation of the worldly reality. This means that in pronouncing on debates in medical ethics, Christian leaders need to pay particular attention to those Christians who have medical and scientific expertise, who are researchers in the fields under scrutiny, and who have direct experience of the specific situations being considered (for example, infertility, or suffering a painful terminal illness). An emphasis on the authority of Scripture and the importance of its interpretation does not mean biblical scholars, theologians and ethicists are competent on their own to determine a Christian response apart from the wider discernment of the body of Christ.

Scripture and seeing the bigger picture

In the light of the above, reframing any appeal to Scripture requires a richer and deeper appreciation of the authority of both created reality and special revelation and an approach to interpreting both world and word that is humble and corporate. It also requires getting beyond the simple question of asking "what does the Bible say about X?" where X is the ethical challenge.

While in some areas we are able to identify specific texts which address – or at least appear on initial reading to address - our own specific concerns, often we will find, especially in medical ethics, that the Bible says little or nothing directly and explicitly about X. This may be because we face new phenomena that were unknown in the biblical world but it is important to realise that is not always the reason we face this challenge. So, as Richard Hays notes as he begins to apply his four tasks (descriptive, synthetic, hermeneutic and pragmatic) for appealing to Scripture in ethics to the subject, "The Bible contains no texts about abortion...Here the Bible offers us no direct word at all".²⁵ And yet abortion was known in the ancient world and other ancient texts contemporaneous with both the Old Testament (eg the Assyrian Code) and the New Testament address it as a moral and legal issue.

The silence of Scripture here and elsewhere does not of course mean that the Bible is never appealed to by Christians in ethical debates on the subject. Verhey also

²⁴ Verhey *Remembering Jesus*, 57.

²⁵ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, a Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 446. Similarly, J.W. Rogerson's chapter "Using the Bible in the Debate about Abortion" in J. H. Channer and E. L. Mascall, *Abortion and the Sanctity of Human Life* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1985) states, "The Bible does not directly mention abortion anywhere" (77).

acknowledges that “Scripture never explicitly takes up the issue of induced or deliberate abortion” but only after noting that “The Bible is often invoked to address the issue of abortion in the churches, but when it is, it is too frequently used as a weapon in this controversy...”²⁶ On what basis, then, can one appeal to Scripture when Scripture is to all appearances silent? There are, I suggest, *four* particular forms of “seeing the bigger picture” that help in understanding how the Bible might enable us both to interpret our world and to shape a biblically-informed Christian response to ethical challenges.

First, the Scriptures must not be abstracted out of their social, historical and ecclesial context but they must rather be set within and interpreted in the light of the context of the practice and understanding of God's people and wider culture at the time. While any “argument from silence” in relation to Scripture is obviously much weaker than an “argument from speech”, awareness of the wider context can sometimes be of help in understanding what significance if any can be drawn from the lack of explicit discussion about a phenomenon that we know existed.

To return to the example of abortion, Michael Gorman, author of *Abortion and the Early Church*,²⁷ has written “Why is the New Testament Silent About Abortion?”²⁸ in which he is clear that “The 27 books of the New Testament are indisputably silent on the subject of abortion”. However, he then proceeds to set those silent books in the context of both first-century Jewish understandings and teachings and the instruction and practice found in other early Christian writings in the centuries during which the canon was formed. As a result he concludes that:

When the New Testament is understood in its historical, developmental context as a fourth-century Christian collection of first-century Jewish-Christian documents, its silence on abortion testifies to the antiabortion stance of its original Jewish-Christian writers, its later compilers, and its earliest hearers and readers. In a very real sense, then, the New Testament canon did indeed speak, and still does speak, against abortion.

Second, even when there is textual silence on a specific issue, Scripture sometimes addresses clearly related issues once we place the issue that concerns us within a wider framework. So, in relation to abortion, while not providing any clear and definitive answer, a text such as Exodus 21.22-24, relating as it does to pregnancy, miscarriage and possibly harm to an unborn child *in utero*,²⁹ may help provide some biblical insights for addressing questions not directly addressed by Scripture. Similarly, biblical references to life prior to birth (classically Psalm 139, but also the call of Jeremiah and parts of the birth narratives of Christ and John the Baptist), while unable to provide a

²⁶ Verhey, *Reading*, 197, 196.

²⁷ Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion & the Early Church: Christian, Jewish & Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982).

²⁸ ———, “Why Is the New Testament Silent About Abortion?,” *Christianity Today* January 11 (1993), online at <http://www.goodnewsmag.org/library/articles/gorman-mj93.htm>

²⁹ For discussions see for example Jones, *Soul of the Embryo*, chpt 4; Verhey, *Reading*, 198-201; Hays, *Moral Vision*, 446-7; Brendan McCarthy, *Fertility and Faith: The Ethics of Human Fertilization* (Leicester: IVP, 1997), 85-7.

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definitive proof-text answer about whether and when abortion is justifiable and when it is wrong, certainly give signposts and rule out certain approaches to the question which may be acceptable within other non-biblical approaches.³⁰

Third, we can address ethical challenges which were wholly unknown within the biblical world not only by identifying related issues which the Bible does address (as in the abortion example) but by recognising the Bible's concerns about deeper issues of our humanity which can help us see a bigger picture in relation to our culture and contemporary ideologies as we face new challenges today. This reminds us that in addition to making concrete decisions about particular medical developments or procedures, Christians have to understand the deeper material, spiritual and intellectual forces that are at work (what writers such as Jacques Ellul, William Stringfellow and Walter Wink have understood in relation to the biblical language of "principalities and powers"). These shape the practice of medicine, our understandings of health and the development of various technologies and need to be subject to biblically illuminated theological evaluation and critique. So, for example, in relation to human genetics, Robert Song's recent study notes that

Of course, the Bible does not speak explicitly about DNA transcription or linkage studies, pre-implantation genetic diagnosis or germ cell genetic engineering. But it would be naïve and complacent to imagine that we have nothing to learn from it for our own explorations of the issues raised by such developments. Even if the Bible does not share our preoccupations, we need to learn how it thinks about its own preoccupations so that our thinking can be illuminated. And doing this well involves allowing the Bible to shed its light on the underlying questions behind our own concerns.³¹

Song proceeds to explore biblical understandings of healing, the desire for cure and its potential to become idolatrous, and the limits of bodiliness. He thereby shows that rather than simply asking "What does the Bible say about X?" and getting upset or discarding the Bible if it seems not to answer our question, "we need to let our questions be questioned by its questions; and in letting our answers be answered by its answers, we may in the event find ourselves transformed and healed as well".³²

Similarly, in relation to such issues as artificial reproductive technologies, there are the many biblical narratives relating to infertility that address the underlying phenomenon to which ART is a contemporary response. These confirm the depth of human pain and of the desire for a solution that can bring conception, speaking powerful words of both comfort and challenge to us given our own perceptions and

³⁰ For discussion of these in relation to the status of embryo see for example McCarthy, *Fertility*, chpt 3 and J. A. Bryant and John D. Searle, *Life in Our Hands: A Christian Perspective on Genetics and Cloning* (Nottingham: IVP, 2004), chpt 3.

³¹ Robert Song, "The Bible and Human Genetics," in *God, Ethics and the Human Genome: Theological, Legal and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Mark Bratton (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), 33.

³² Song, "The Bible", 45. See also Verhey, *Reading*, 145-93 on "Mapping the Human Genome...Biblically".

responses. There is also the wider biblical witness to how we are to understand and value new human life and familial relationships as important for its nurture. This, expressed in various forms of writing (histories, genealogies, poetry) can provide us with new and illuminating perspectives, enable development of a biblically shaped framework to critique such concepts as procreative liberty, and warn against such developments as the commodification of children. Although not giving a simple answer to the “Is it right to use IVF?” question, in ways such as these the Bible does speak to the challenges of contemporary bioethics.³³

These two examples from human genetics and ART point towards the *fourth* and final way in which Scripture can and should shape Christian contributions in bioethics which merits a fuller discussion. Here the focus moves further away from specific texts to the witness of the canon of Scripture as a whole and to its overall structure as a drama or story or metanarrative. This structure can, of course, be summarised in a variety of ways. Much traditional Reformed theology has worked with the framework of Creation-Fall-Redemption, with Consummation sometimes added as a separate fourth category. More recently, Tom Wright's “Five Act” model has gained wide currency though with some important variants and critiques. Paying more attention to the full range and content of the biblical text than the simple 3-fold Reformed model, this interprets Scripture as a drama which begins with God's creation of all that is, including humans in his image (Act 1). However, Scripture also reveals that creation is disrupted and distorted by the Fall and human sin (Act 2). What the Reformed theological structure then condensed into “Redemption” is unpacked into three distinct acts of Israel (Act 3), Christ (Act 4) and the Church (Act 5).³⁴ This has been most fully developed by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen whose book develops Wright both by breaking Act 3 up into distinct scenes and, more significantly, by adding the sixth Act marked by Christ's return and the completion of redemption (which Wright sometimes refers to as the final scene of Act Five).³⁵

Probably the fullest adaptation and elaboration of this approach to Scripture in relation to Christian ethics is Samuel Wells' book “Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics”. He proposes four amendments to Wright's five acts. First, that the church must not be the end of the story. Second, and related, the church must be distinguished from the eschaton. Third, Christ must be the centre of the story. Fourth, the separation of creation and fall into two separate opening acts needs to be re-thought so as to see the fall as “human misconstrual of God's created gift of freedom, and thus to see it as part of Act One”.³⁶ He thus has an alternative structure for the five-act play with Creation

³³ See for example Verhey's, “ART, Ethics and the Bible” (in *Reading*, 253-303). Other work drawing on Scripture to shed light on this includes Brent Waters, *Reproductive Technology: Towards a Theology of Procreative Stewardship* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2001) and Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

³⁴ For Wright's articulation see for example N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005).

³⁵ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004). They have also developed <http://www.biblicalthology.ca/> with helpful resources.

³⁶ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London: SPCK, 2004), 53.

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(now including Wright's "Fall") as Act One, Israel as Act Two, Jesus as the central Act Three, the Church as Act Four and the eschaton as Act Five.

Wells' schema has the advantage that each Act is marked by divine initiative and there is a clear separation between Church and New Creation. It runs, however, the risk of underplaying the significance of sin and the Fall within the whole drama. This may be overcome if each Act is understood and expressed in terms of the covenantal relationship initiated by God which entails a certain human response. Act One thus sets the context for the whole human story and the Fall is humanity's failure to respond with lives worthy of creation and being creatures made in and called to be the image of the Creator God. This failure is decisive for the rest of the drama and for all attempts to understand humanity. Act Two begins with Abraham and is God's elective covenant of redemption. This again should yield a certain response (the shape of which is given expression in the Law and in the prophets) but again humans – in this case the chosen people, Israel – fail to respond appropriately and live out their calling faithfully. The central Act is therefore God entering the drama in Christ both to reveal himself fully and to embody a faithful human life that fulfills both the calling of all humans in Creation and the calling of God's people Israel. This is followed by the outpouring of the Spirit and the renewal of God's people in Christ though again, as with Israel, this is – both within Scripture and in subsequent church history - a story which reveals both forms of faithfulness and also much ignorance and failure to follow the leading of the Spirit. It is therefore only with the fifth and final Act, the denouement of God's final judgment and recreation, that God's purposes in creation and redemption are fully and securely accomplished.

Whichever way one divides up and labels the different acts, these various approaches are all advocating a similar discernment of the biblical drama as a whole. At both the macro-level of the separate acts and the more detailed outworking of those, this presents a way of interpreting the world and the calling of humans within it that stands in contrast to (and provides a critique of) other conceptions of what it means to be human and of the pattern and purpose of human history.

What might this mean in relation to a biblical approach within medical ethics? Clearly such a question merits a whole chapter or even whole book in its own right.³⁷ What follows can only sketch how this biblical drama may help provide a framework that shapes a biblical response in one area, that relating to genetic manipulation and enhancement.

Act One, the creation covenant and its breach in the Fall, points to the significance and uniqueness of human beings as creatures made in the image of God. While clearly the non-human creation shares our creaturely status and so also cannot be manipulated however we wish, the biblical drama confirms the widely shared presumption that we cannot simply apply techniques developed and utilised in relation to animals to human beings. It reminds us too that we are not to understand or define ourselves or others simply in biological and material terms but to understand that

³⁷ For a helpful basic guide based on such an approach see Sean Doherty, *Foundations for Medical Ethics* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2007).

aspect of our being in the context of the wider and deeper reality of our relationship with our Creator and his call to image him in, for and to the rest of the world.

This biblical understanding of ourselves as creatures also provides a framework (though not, of course, the only one) for the sort of cautionary arguments against current and future developments which have been advanced by (among others) Michael Sandel who writes:

The main problem with enhancement and genetic engineering is...that they represent a kind of hyperagency—a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires. The problem is not the drift to mechanism but the drive to mastery. And what the drive to mastery misses and may even destroy is an appreciation of the gifted character of human powers and achievements. To acknowledge the giftedness of life is to recognize that our talents and powers are not wholly our own doing, despite the effort we expend to develop and to exercise them. It is also to recognize that not everything in the world is open to whatever use we may desire or devise. Appreciating the gifted quality of life constrains the Promethean project and conduces to a certain humility. It is in part a religious sensibility. But its resonance reaches beyond religion.³⁸

What Sandel here describes as “the Promethean project” that can drive these developments is, in the language of the biblical drama, the Babel project³⁹ which seeks to disregard created limits in order to “make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11.4). As developed further below, this mindset may amount to the human temptation not only to deny creation as a gift but to deny the universal reality of suffering and death that can only be overcome by the work of God in Christ and by the Spirit.

The second act of the biblical drama – God's covenant with Abraham and Israel including his gift of the law – offers two further main biblical insights that must feature in Christian responses to genetic manipulation and enhancement. Firstly, the biblical witness to the calling of humans to participate in God's work of redemption and healing is the context in which to commend, interpret and evaluate all medical and biotechnological developments. As this is set in the context of the first act, this redemption is not to be driven by human desires and imagination but to be undertaken more as a work of restoration which respects and seeks to repair God's good but damaged creation.⁴⁰

³⁸ Michael J. Sandel, "The Case against Perfection," *The Atlantic* April (2004), online at www.theatlantic.com/doc/200404/sandel. See, more fully, ———, *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007).

³⁹ For a study of this area engaging with such a perspective see Pete Moore, *Babel's Shadow: Genetic Technologies in a Fracturing Society* (Oxford: Lion, 2000).

⁴⁰ Wyatt, *Matters* contrasts what he calls the “Lego-kit view of humanity” that can shape some views of healing and biotechnology - “The Mark I human model is not the only one in town. We can improve things; we have the technology...There is nothing 'natural' about a Lego kit. There is no right or wrong way to put the pieces together. There is no masterplan from the designers. There is no ethical basis of Lego

Secondly, God's work of redemption shows his concern for, even bias towards, the weak and the powerless. His choice of Israel was not because of their qualities and he consistently and determinedly defends those who are otherwise defenceless and left behind in society. This not only questions some of the rationale for projects of genetic manipulation, enhancement and selection but also shows that a primary concern of Christians faced with such developments must be with the status and support of those unable to secure the benefits and advantages that such technologies may provide to some. If we are shaped by Scripture, issues of justice cannot simply be classed as matters of social or political ethics and ignored by those concerned with medical ethics.

Unsurprisingly, many of these themes are reaffirmed in the central third act of the Incarnation. Perhaps of particular importance here are the reminders that redemption is gained not by escape from human suffering and limitation but rather by God himself embracing these characteristics of human life. We need, therefore, to beware that techniques, particularly when they offer healing and enhancement, do not become idols around which we create an alternative salvation-history and drama of redemption to that revealed in Scripture with technologists and medics taking on the aura of saviours in the public consciousness. As Robert Song has argued, one of the key questions that needs to be asked of any proposed development is therefore not so much "Does this intervention count as treatment or enhancement?" but "Does this show forth our common human need, or is it a kind of false salvation? Is this an effort to show what God is like, or an effort to be like God?"⁴¹

With Christ's resurrection and ascension, the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh ushers us into the fourth act in which we are now living. God here makes known that all of us find our identity ultimately in Christ, not in any feature that may be genetically determined or shaped, and he overturns the earlier genetic/ethnic definition of his people so that membership is through baptism and faith. As Bratton notes in his helpful guide to the Human Genome Project,

All material (including genetic) criteria of eligibility are removed; it is Abraham-type faith rather than genetic descent from Abraham which constitutes the believer 'in Christ' (Luke 3.8; Gal 3.6-9). Baptismal identity is the primary identity of the believer, rendering all other markers – genetic, ethnic, physical and social – secondary. This biblical and liturgical perspective provides a powerful corrective to forms of genetic reductionism and determinism which seek to assimilate the 'whole' human person to material elements (genes), purportedly the true source of his or her humanity, or to gauge human worth in terms of race, tribe, ethnicity or other material terms.⁴²

construction. You can do what you like...." (31) – with what he describes as the "flawed masterpiece" and art restorationist view (described p 55, applied pp86ff and pp117ff to various technologies)

⁴¹ Robert Song, *Human Genetics: Fabricating the Future* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2002), 76-7. More fully on some of these issues in relation to Incarnation and Christology see Brent Waters, *This Mortal Flesh: Incarnation and Bioethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2009).

⁴² Mark Bratton, *The Human Genome Project* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008), 11. For reflection on baptism and cloning see M. Therese Lysaught, "Becoming One Body: Health Care and Cloning," in

Finally, the biblical vision of the gift of a new heaven and new earth and of resurrection bodies generates a hope for humanity that must qualify and limit, though not destroy, hopes related to medical advance. The promise of resurrected bodies certainly stands as a rejection of any quasi-gnostic denial of the significance of our bodiliness but it also again reminds us that the limitations and frailties that arise in part out of our genetic inheritance will not be overcome within human history and by human insight and ingenuity but only eschatologically by divine grace and gift. As Song says,

The Bible does talk about the radical modification of bodies. The language it adopts is that of the resurrection body, the transformation of all our bodies”...Whatever the resurrection body is, it cannot be the end product of human manipulation....the New Testament emphasis is on the transformation of our bodies into bodies that will be fit for the life of the new heaven and the new earth, and that this transformation will be the work of God.⁴³

Conclusion

In a short chapter primarily addressing methodological questions, the practical outworkings of this proposed approach to the authority and interpretation of Scripture are going to require much more careful elaboration and, like any appeal to Scripture in ethics, also must be related to other sources of truth when addressing any particular issue. It is clear that simply asking to be shown biblical texts that will answer specific questions about the rightness or wrongness of particular actions will often provide little of value and this, in turn, may lead some to disregard the Bible's value in relation to the many new and challenging questions that we face in medical ethics and especially in relation to biotechnology. This chapter has argued against drawing such a conclusion and attempted to show that there is value in turning to the Bible as the evangelical tradition particularly emphasizes.

It is not that Scripture alone can provide us with answers (always a misunderstanding of the Reformation's *sola Scriptura* claim). Scripture points beyond itself to the importance of the witness of the created order and offers guidance as to how we are to interpret our world, relating to it as a work of God through the study of which we can discern truth. That approach to the world – including towards humans within the world - requires both humility and a corporate engagement in the scientific and technological quest and it is those same keys for interpretation which also open up the text of Scripture itself to yield fresh insights.

Drawing on various biblical scholars and moral theologians, many of them from within the evangelical tradition, we have seen that even when Scripture is silent on a specific, narrowly defined issue, it can still shed light on the challenges we face. It can sometimes do so when its silence is set in the original social and historical context of the

Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

⁴³ Song, *Human Genetics*, 73, 74.

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text and thus proves significant. More often it is when we widen our questions and look for biblical teaching on related issues and especially when we look at the deeper issues of Scripture's account of what it means to be human that we find that indeed God has yet more light to shine forth from his Word. Perhaps most fruitful of all is when we look at the canon of Scripture as a whole and, in seeing the big picture, discover that theological reflection on the significance of God's actions and human responses in the different acts of the biblical drama of God's covenant with humanity from creation to new creation provide us with fresh perspectives that challenge other frameworks and can shape a distinctively Christian contribution to ethical debates.

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