

## Biblical Narratives and Christian Decision

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“Man has always been his own most vexing problem.”<sup>1</sup> At the very core of our being we experience several uneasy tensions. One of the essential paradoxes is the tension between the physical and spiritual dimensions of our being. On the one hand, we share with animals total dependence on the physical world for food, water, air, and rest. This fact (together with the evolutionary theory of origin) has influenced scholars of many disciplines to conclude that human nature is a product of the environment. Humans belong inextricably to the physical world, to the animal kingdom, and like animals they are determined by and confined to their milieu (Marx, Darwin, Skinner).

On the other hand, unlike animals we are capable of transcending the limitations and vicissitudes of our world. We are endowed with a noetic soul (Aristotle). For that reason we constantly reach out for freedom, autonomy, and the transcendent world.<sup>2</sup> Based on this aspect of human nature, several schools of thought argue in favor of complete freedom and against any concept of a fixed nature. Humans are condemned to be free, argues Sartre. They are always in the process of making themselves. (Sartre, James, Pierce).

So how can humans belong to the physical world, subject to its laws and necessities, and yet possess a spiritual nature which belongs to the realm of freedom? Classical Greeks concluded that human nature is dualistic: the body is a prison, which keeps the soul captive to physical laws. Much of Christian theology today maintains some form of this dualistic view of human nature.

The biblical understanding of human life follows the narrow path between determinism and freedom. The doctrine of the creation of man in the image of God shields Seventh-day Adventist ethics from either extreme—and consequently from moral nihilism. If we consider humans as completely locked into

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. (New York: Charles Scribners, 1964), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 14.

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the natural world, with no significant freedom to choose their destiny and their actions, we inevitably end up saying: “Genes made me do it”; “That’s the way I am”; “I cannot help it.”

Recently reported research into the origin of homosexuality assumes that an alleged genetic link would make alternative lifestyles normal because they would be imposed by nature.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the sense of moral responsibility vanishes. If, on the contrary, we assume that our being is shapeless and in the process of being formed into whatever we want, there again we have no one to respond to, no preferences, no right or wrong alternatives. Each individual is a boat on the infinite sea of time with an engine and some fuel, but with no rudder.

According to Scripture, two fully developed, adult, mature human beings came forth out of the Creator’s hands. While Adam and Eve belonged to the natural world from their first breath onward, the environment contributed nothing in making them human. God alone determined what Adam and Eve would be like. He alone holds the patent to humanness. “It is he who made us, and not we ourselves” (Psalm 100:3).

But Scripture insists that the creation of man and woman in God’s image has serious moral implications. If we belong to this biosphere but are not its offspring, we must infer that human life and human behavior cannot be determined primarily by the environment. If the natural world or economic, social, and cultural conditions are not our essence, then they cannot dictate our lifestyle. If it is normal and healthy for a horse to act in harmony with its nature and endowments, then it is normal for humans to act in harmony with God’s definition of what is human. Godlikeness is man’s essential pedigree. God not only holds the patent, He is the pattern for humanness.

This is where Seventh-day Adventist ethics anchors its system of moral standards. Because we are neither totally locked into our physical dimension nor essentially an undefined mass of molecules in the process of self-realization, we have the unique privilege of joining our Creator in forming a pattern of conduct consonant with His ways. We are more authentically human the more we are like Christ. Christian behavior is not a life of limitation, but a life of imitation.

Without divine revelation in Scripture, we are indeed the most vexing problem to ourselves and the most dangerous menace to our environment. This is why the Bible teaches us “what sort of persons” we ought to be “in lives of holiness and godliness” (2 Peter 3:11). It teaches us both in precepts and examples, if only we knew how to grasp its lessons. The present essay attempts to suggest a way of learning moral lessons and moral ways of living from the Bible, the only reliable guide for sinful humanity.

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<sup>3</sup> W. A. Henry, “Born Gay?” *Time*, 26 July 1993, 36-41.

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### Three Levels of Moral Thinking

A careful study of God's Word will yield a wonderful discovery: human beings are not left alone on the ocean of time. God manifests His love to us by clearly indicating what are the standards of a good, just, merciful, and humble way of life in His presence (Micah 6:8). Scripture presents these standards on three levels of moral thinking (moral discourse).

**1. Principles.** At the deepest level of moral consciousness, where we know ourselves as moral beings, stand the fundamental notions of moral truth which we call principles. These notions remain obscured unless the light of the Word of God shines upon us and makes them evident. As we gain consciousness of these principles, our personal and interpersonal relations take form. Most Bible-believing Christians see in the Ten Commandments, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, the Gospels (especially the Sermon on the Mount), and the Epistles a sufficient quantity of moral principles to cover life's situations.

Principles can be recognized because they are a) general (ML 74, 4T 562), b) immutable (4T 312, MYP 102, CS 25), c) eternal (7T 152), d) righteous (FE 512), and the only steadfast thing our world knows (ED 183, PK 548). In addition, ethical scholarship recognizes principles as grounds for the existence of moral rules and their justification.<sup>4</sup>

**2. Rules of Action.** That the Bible gives general guidelines indicating approximately the direction of God's will is an accepted idea among Christian scholars. When it comes to more concrete situations and specific rules of behavior which Scripture enjoins and which would be binding for us today, such a proposition does not enjoy the same support. To some this would indicate a legalistic attitude,<sup>5</sup> to others a dangerous threat of causuistry.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, biblical evidence supports the opposite view. As Walter Kaiser notes,

The Decalogue has the whole of Exodus as its setting and the covenant code and subsequent laws in the Pentateuch seem to embody concretely what had been set forth in the general principles of the Decalogue. Thus, Calvin's commentaries on these books proceeded in the manner of a harmony, as if the rest of the materials after the Decalogue in Exodus 20 were only illustrations of the abstract and universal moral laws.<sup>7</sup>

These precepts, unlike principles, are specific to a situation, enjoining an action or a prohibition. However, they are not free standing and independent. If they were, human moral conduct would have no structure or coherence. The rules of moral action belong to one or more moral principles from which they

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<sup>4</sup> M. G. Singer, "Moral Rules and Principles," in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. A. I. Melden (U. of Washington P, 1958), 160.

<sup>5</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 116ff.

<sup>6</sup> D. G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 7.

<sup>7</sup> W. C. Kaiser, *Towards Old Testament Ethics*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 43.

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are derived and to which they apply. Thus, it is conceivable that rules change under the influence of different principles involved in a given moral context.<sup>8</sup>

But the relevance and usefulness of Scripture as a moral guide is not exhausted with the revelation of moral principles and specific rules of behavior. These standards are given in a living context of people who entered into a covenant with God. These men and women bound themselves to Him and pledged their faithfulness and love to Him. He, Himself, promised His love and loyalty to them. Standards of moral behavior originate not from some legislative court which stands above, detached from ordinary people. They stem from a covenantal relationship. For that reason, the Word of God is much more than just some code of law prescribing and proscribing human conduct. It describes a journey of fallen humanity, a journey from Eden lost to Eden found. Standards of behavior are part of a dynamic narration of the walk of humans in company with and alongside God. They are part of divine/human common adventures, of human escapades, and of divine patience. Therefore, when we find that God uses commandments, that He gives orders, we do not see them as harsh and arbitrary. They are simply part of our bargain with Him. He fulfills His part of the promise, of the covenant.

**3. Normative Models.** “Now these things,” the adventures and even the escapades, “happened to them as a warning” says Paul (1 Corinthians 10:11). When His people rebelled against God and put Him to the test (v. 9), or when they engaged in sexual misbehavior (v. 8), these things did not occur as they did to those who were not under a covenant. Other people and other nations misbehaved and they reaped the consequences of their acts. But when God’s people acted foolishly, He, the covenant partner, became implicated in their action. He had to fulfill His promise and make His response evident. This way, looking from the standpoint of the Israelites or the members of the New Testament church, their experience was more than just an item of gossip. It became a warning. God’s dynamic presence reverberated throughout the events of the biblical biographies.

For this very reason, “these things” have a pregnant, moral import for ages to follow. This is why they were not reported in the way journalists report. They were not written down because they were newsworthy items. No, “they were written down *for our instruction*, upon whom the end of the ages has come.” The rest of the Bible (beyond principles and rules) plays a very crucial role in moral guidance for us who are not contemporaries of the sixteen centuries when the Bible was written. The events were recorded for our instruction. The reason is pedagogical. We read them as lessons. They claim importance for our life today. They are the secure nest in which, and because of which, God and I can trust each other. Because of who God proved Himself to be in “those things,” He

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<sup>8</sup> For some of E.G.White’s statements about specific rules of behavior see GC 65, 66; CH 294; EV 117, 118; MM 180; 5T 84, 85; 4T 335-337.

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can ask us to do or not to do what He dare not ask of others, those who are foreigners to the covenant.

We call “these things” *normative models*. We see them as normative because they are “a warning for us, not to desire evil as they did” (v. 6). They are also models, that is, they are intended for imitation. Webster defines a model as “a person or thing considered as a standard of excellence to be imitated.” Normative models are moral standards. If principles are the fundamental notions of moral truth, and if rules of action are concrete injunctions telling us what is a good, just, merciful, and humble way of being in a given situation, then normative models are the connecting links between principles and rules. They are the context in which God and I can interact.

Ethical theories of all kinds search for such a mediating element. For Aristotle it was the golden mean, for Aquinas the practical reason, for J. A. T. Robinson the situation, and for Paul Lehman the *koinonia*. However, biblical normative models provide a surprisingly coherent, catalytic function. In these narratives we find the multifaceted dimensions of love fully involved in healing the rebellious human soul. All other alternative middle axioms trust human beings (human reason, intuition, wisdom of a community) whose sinful hearts cannot be trusted. For this reason we opt for the reading of Scripture as a guide to God’s will as we move from principles to rules of action during the decision-making process. We also recommend the Bible and the narratives contained therein when we sense a need to justify or evaluate our choices.

The question which repeatedly emerges whenever someone claims that biblical narratives hold any normative value is: how do we know which event is normative and which is not? Should we choose King David’s example in his affair with Bathsheba or should we follow Joseph’s example with his slave owner’s wife? Both events are biblical. Should we imitate Rahab when we harbor refugees in order to save life and thus transgress a clear moral principle, or should we learn the lesson from Ananias and Sapphira, or Gehazi, the servant of Elisha? Are not the men and women in the Bible just as human, just as sinful and weak as you and I are, and therefore unfit to be models for us today? How can we learn from them?

### **The Relationship of Moral Standards**

An illustration may be in order to clarify the relationship among biblical moral standards. The seventh commandment is a moral principle. It states “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). Extramarital sexual intimacy is prohibited for everyone, everywhere, and for all times. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus clarifies the spirit of this moral principle by saying that adultery is not limited to the physical act. In the human spirit, mind, and heart is where adultery occurs first (Matthew 5:28).

To help understand the application of this principle in daily life and relations among men and women, God gave Moses an impressive number of con-

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crete rules (Leviticus 20:10-21, Deuteronomy 22:22-30). To do things mentioned in these passages means transgression of the seventh commandment. But are there some exceptions to this rule? What about a slave who has no rights, no autonomy, no control over his/her life? What about adultery as a civil service for the good of a country? What about a king whose subjects belong to him?

Obviously, Joseph demonstrates how a slave under the most deprived conditions resisted his master's wife and remained faithful to moral principle. For centuries since, Joseph has served as a brilliant example, a model for young people in all times. King David's case stands as a most striking contrast to Joseph's. Joseph was young, David was not; Joseph was a slave, David a king; Joseph was harassed, David imposed himself; Joseph had the opportunity when no servants were in the house (Genesis 39:11), David crafted the conditions as only a king can do in order to have Bathsheba. How can David's sin become a normative model?

When scholars argue that biblical stories reflect the local culture and sinful practices of their time and for that reason these narratives cannot have a normative function, they are at least partially correct. The lies of Abraham, Rahab, and Ananias, the adulteries of David and Solomon, Cain's murder, Peter's two-facedness in Antioch and his denial of Jesus, or Judas' betrayal are not models to imitate. But these, too, are written for our instruction. So what can we learn from the positive as well as the negative stories?

**Morals in Context.** Biblical narratives stage a moral context, an ethos in which moral principles were upheld or denied by the actions of men and women in the Bible. To us they can serve as a laboratory experiment in which students learn by observing a chemical reaction. To see what actually happens when sulphuric acid and sugar mix is far more instructive than to hear about it in a lecture. As we read God's Word we can "see" Joseph, we can feel the internal unrest, the struggle between youthful urges and his commitment to God. We can identify with Joseph's experience far easier than with the moral principle of the seventh commandment or any of the rules of moral action.

Normative models contained in biblical narratives demonstrate the consequences of moral choices. There can be little confusion as to the rightness of a course of action when we compare the consequences of Joseph's decision with those of David's choice. We can learn lessons without actually experiencing sin for ourselves. Normative models help us learn by proxy.

At times we wonder whether God would really want us to suffer for His sake. Is God that kind of person? How far is far enough in our commitment and endurance? Normative models show us how far men and women, just like us, went in their faithfulness. They set a norm for obedience. After enumerating a gallery of normative models in Hebrews, chapter 11, Paul challenges us, his readers, to run the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the supreme normative model. Consider him, says Paul. Observe his behavior. "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not

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grow weary” (Hebrew 12:3). Jesus could have cut short his suffering or tempered it by choosing a compromise. Paul then drives home the ultimate challenge: “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood” (v. 4).

Whether a Christian faces daily decisions or extraordinary dilemmas, biblical principles should come to mind first. A child of God has a good sense of what would be the Father’s preference in a given situation. Even in the case where two principles conflict, a search for biblical examples (normative models) will often provide a solution to the conflict.

Once the principle of action becomes clear, the actual application of the principle demands a more concrete, focused rule of action. But which rule is the right one? On what basis do I choose one course of action rather than another? Normative models serve to tip the scale.

**Rahab as Model?** One more concern remains in answering the question about actions recorded in the Bible which go directly against a well-known principle. Do we imitate Rahab in our dilemmas of life? How can we reconcile her action with the statement that those who lie will not enter the kingdom of God (Revelation 21:8)? What can we say in her defense?

1. Normative models provide only a context, an ethos. They are events from which the observer can make a decision about which action is to be preferred. Rahab and Peter are not our models. It is not what David did that a good Christian should imitate. It is how God reacts in a given biblical event to a particular course of action. God’s response, not human frailty, is our safeguard in moral choices. Because we are involved in a journey together with Him, because He is omnipresent, no word or action can take place outside of His presence. Scripture often records God’s pleasure or displeasure with human activities and human choices, and this information is the most important source of moral guidance.

2. But what can we do when such divine assessment is not available? Rahab’s lie receives no apparent attention. In Hebrews 11:31 she is recognized not because of her duplicity but because she—the Gentile—took a risk of faith to hide the spies coming from an invading army. If a lie were to be commended, Paul would have known how to say so. The situation in which Rahab found herself does not necessarily mandate a lie. I know a good number of people who refused to lie in similar situations, and at the same time they refused to entrust information to those who were not worthy of it.

Additionally, to take Rahab as a model for lying when this is not what gave her recognition in the Bible begs the question. Why not legitimize prostitution as well? This courageous woman belonged to a nation where the knowledge of divine moral principles was absent. It is important that we choose carefully who and what serves as a model, even in the Bible. God’s judgment is normative, not the fact that a certain course of action is recorded in the Bible.

In cases like Rahab’s where no notice of her lie can be discerned, the better side of prudence would be to search for other models where God did intervene.

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If saving life is more important than lying, then Abraham, too, should be recommended for his lies (Genesis 12:10-13). However, here God did intervene (vs 17), just as He intervened in the case of Gehazi and Ananias and Sapphira.

**The Conclusion of the Whole Matter**

In my classes students often preface their question with: “What would you do if . . . ?” These are dangerous questions. While I want to be a good Christian, I cannot assume that my gut feeling should be normative. Intuition can be used in exceptional cases. Hypothetical as well as real situations should be prefaced with, “What would Christ do if . . . ?” My brief experience with extreme tests of faith has taught me that God gives His grace, exceptional grace for exceptional situations. I do not know what I would do if . . . . I do know that I do not want to transgress any of God’s moral principles. I want to remain committed to that. I also pray that in times of hard choices, God will manifest Himself in my weakness and in spite of my unworthiness. I also want to be faithful to Him until death (Revelation 2:10). That means that my loyalty to God should not be sacrificed to save life. Ponder these words of inspiration:

Even life itself should not be purchased with the price of falsehood. By a word or a nod the martyrs might have denied the truth and saved their lives. By consenting to cast a single grain of incense upon the idol altar they might have been saved from the rack, the scaffold, or the cross. But they refused to be false in word or deed, though life was the boon they would receive by so doing. Imprisonment, torture and death, with a clear conscience, were welcomed by them, rather than deliverance on condition of deception, falsehood, and apostasy. By fidelity and faith in Christ they earned spotless robes and jeweled crowns. Their lives were ennobled and elevated in the sight of God because they stood firmly for the truth under the most aggravated circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

Biblical narratives bring to us the stories of a cloud of witnesses, who met God at the end of their rope. This is the biblical norm, and this is the biblical model. This is the life of Jesus, our Master. “Consider Him” (Hebrews 12:3).

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<sup>9</sup> E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948), 336.