Discord or harmony: a consideration of the Old Testament ethic(s) of creation*

Discórdia ou harmonia: uma consideração da ética (das éticas) da criação no Antigo Testamento

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.**

Timothy S. Moore***

ABSTRACT
What constitutes the goal of an Old Testament ethic of creation? Is there just one goal? Are there many? And, who is asking? This initial driving question for this essay requires unpacking if we are to offer a useful answer. First, a rather banal yet significant underlying inquiry needs addressing. We need to determine what sort of question is being asked. Second, by turning critically to examine efforts made by several scholars who attempted to answer this driving question (or a version of it), clarity will be gained for potential answers while confirming the complexity of trying to supply a succinct answer. Finally, a closing effort will be made to propose a trajectory for an ethic of creation emergent from the Old Testament.

Keywords: ethic of creation; Old Testament; exegesis; theological education.

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** John 1:3, NRSV.
*** Dean of the chapel, Minister to the College, and Assistant Professor of Religious Studies Young Harris College, Georgia, USA. Email: tsmoore@yhc.edu
What sort of question?

An initial reading of this essay’s driving question might appear patent, presuming the question is inquiring as to the clear ethical goal expressed in the Old Testament, identified by scholars, and applied in practical ways to our lives. However, such a rush to answer the question assumes we understand what sort of question is being asked. Such an assumption may prove problematic. For instance, is the question principally an exegetical question, ascertaining the ethical paradigm(s) the original authors of the various Old Testament texts were expressing? Conversely, is the question principally one of Christian theology, interpreting the text in light of a larger biblical and theological narrative? In other words, are we attempting to isolate the specific creation ethic of the Old Testament, or are we wanting to articulate a broader
creation ethic informed by the Old Testament? While certainly related with overlapping subjects, interests, and investigative techniques, each question originates at significantly different points of departure, providing distinctive trajectories through the text toward possibly related yet discrete destinations, goals. Before teasing apart this distinction between exegetical and theological as the concepts relate to the formation of an Old Testament ethic of creation, a brief aside into the New Testament work by Leander Keck (1996) proves helpful.

While specifically addressing the New Testament as an source for moral mining and shaping our larger ethical enterprises, Leander Keck’s (1996) thoughts in his “Rethinking ‘New Testament Ethics’” help to define the sort of ethical project we are considering in exploring the Old Testament (BURRIDGE, 2007, p. 13).¹ To establish the context for his thoughts, Keck (1996) begins by questioning the conventional habit of many writers and readers of biblical ethics to equate New Testament ethics with Christian ethics, a habit that frequently presumes an easy and natural correspondence between the moral admonitions and intellectual moral framework of the scripture and the moral admonitions and intellectual moral framework for the church (KECK, 1996, p. 4). While certainly related, Keck (1996) maintains that the world of scripture and the church are different. Clarifying this point, Keck states, “‘New Testament ethics’ is the ethics of the New Testament texts, period.” (KECK, 1996, p. 4) Said another way, New Testament ethics encompasses discovering and reconstructing, as best as possible, the moral reasoning shaping and emerging from the New Testament scripture and is not a form of contemporary Christian ethics that is “biblical.”² Thus, Keck surmises that “[w]hat we owe the past, insofar as we can recover it accurately, is a serious effort to understand it on its own terms.” (KECK, 1996, p. 6) It is this effort to “understand [the text] on its own terms” that we hope to undertake in this essay. The distinction between exegesis and theology, while mutually informing, will help us do just that, understanding exegesis to function as a kind of first-order discourse and theology as a second-order discourse (KECK, 1996, p. 7).

First, if the question is principally exegetical, then the point of departure might be abstracted from practical concerns about the answers acquired, a point of departure more interested in historical and tech-

¹ Here and at several other occasions throughout his writing, Burr ridge (2007, pp. 21, 33, 36, 48, 207, 233 e 243) specifically alludes to the suggestions by Keck (1996) that the discipline of New Testament ethics requires reappraisal as a justification for his own project.

² The use of scripture for contemporary ethical discourse may be valid and important for Christian ethical discourse. However, such a usage of the ethical material from the New Testament should not be done uncritically but as sophisticated readers, interpreters, and practitioners, recognizing the complexities of the New Testament literature, the difficulty in interpreting what is read, and appreciating the social location for the ethical framework informing the commended morality.
nical minutia and more prone to identify and fixate on internal textual discontinuities and ethical imprecision. Moreover, such a posture of exegetical primacy might lead to an assumption that the texts exist in isolation from the communities who produced them and/or who continue to read them as scripture in concert with a larger tradition of thought and practices that shape those communities’ theological and ethical imaginations.

John Barton’s (2007) essay “Imitation of God in the Old Testament” examines several contemporary Old Testament exegetes’ efforts to extract a moral template from the Hebrew Scriptures. In that essay, he pays particular attention to the work of Cyril Rodd and Rodd’s criticism of exegetical efforts to pinpoint, with useful accuracy, such a moral template. Rodd’s criticism, as Barton (2007) presents it, appears to emerge precisely from his assumption that the Old Testament is rather mute on moral directives derived from what he sees as a key ethical principal of the text, i.e., human imitation of the divine or the *imitatio dei*. To use Barton’s (2007) summation of Rodd’s criticism, “The thesis of [Rodd’s] book is that we catch only glimpses of a strange land, and anyone who seems to be suggesting that we get either a more complete or less alien picture than [Rodd] believes is available is regularly said to be inappropriately systematizing or ineptly anachronistic.” (BARTON, 2007, p. 42)

Rodd’s interest in moral clarity and direction presumes the need for a kind of clearness in ethical instruction and internal consistency within the scriptural text that might not be achievable in any form, for any template. Presented by Barton (2007) as bit of a straw man – taking a radical stance against which Barton is able to position himself,³ – Rodd’s unease with the lack of accuracy is problematic and provides Barton (2007) and us a useful foil to consider another way forward.

Seen from different vantage, a view of a world distinct from our own – and not a direct facsimile for a moral calculus – relies upon a conceptualization of ethics more comfortable with ethics as the shaping of moral imaginations while understanding these glimpses of a strange land as part of a larger narrative terrain. This terrain is not dismissive of fuzzy renderings because such renderings are always read within a broader, more robust storied landscape. The details might be diminished, but the impression remains profound and informative.

Second, if the question is principally one of Christian theology, then the point of departure seems potentially distant from the Old Testament text themselves. It is directly connected to those texts but is viewed through a Christologically tinted hermeneutical lens. For instance, consider Richard Bauckham’s (2011/2) exegetical engagement with several Old and New Testament texts while laboring to isolate an ethic of creation. Moving fluidly between Old and New Testament

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³ Mark Elliott’s feedback, here, was very helping in clarifying Barton’s reading of Rodd.
passages, Bauckham – in his *Living with Other Creatures* – describes what he calls “the creation theology of the Hebrew Bible.” (BAUCKHAM, 2011/2, p. 138) This creation theology assumes a role played by all of scripture to shape the overall theological imagination of the reader, hearer, and practitioner of the text. In this approach, the reading of the text is less about supplying specific data as much as it is about generating a hermeneutical lens for viewing all of creation. And, in this case, the hermeneutical lens – while possessing Hebrew antecedents – is distinctively mediated through Christology via the New Testament. As Bauckham states, “It is through the lens of the creation theology of the Hebrew Bible that Jesus invites his hearers to consider the natural world.” (BAUCKHAM, 2011/2, p. 138) The Hebrew Bible shapes Jesus’ vision while our engagement, as Christian readers, with Jesus filters our reading of those Old Testament texts.

Ultimately, the driving question for this essay seems more akin to this second type of question, given the ethical mandate applied to the question and the particular hermeneutical community implied as wanting the answer. The answer to this driving question starts from the middle rather than the beginning, originating within the Christian community’s particular reading of the texts in light of the larger theological and ethical commitments of that community. These commitments influence less the exegetical investigation of the text but more the application and ordering of that investigation’s results onto the broader narrative imagination of a living faith community.

Having more securely determined the kind of question being asked and its underlying predispositions, we are better positioned to explore specific scholars’ efforts to answer this question. This exploration seems to propose that there is not just a single answer to this question but answers forming a constellation that suggest a trajectory, guiding toward a goal.

## Several attempted answers

Efforts to propose answers to this question of what constitutes the goal of an Old Testament ethic of creation are varied. Here, we will consider in detail the proposals by Ellen Davis (2009) and John Barton (2010), outlining and offering critical appraisals of their attempts. To begin, we turn to Davis’ work and her trajectory toward *shalom* as the goal of an Old Testament ethic of creation.

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4 Again, Mark Elliot was helpful in refining this position. The implicit Christology present in Bauckham’s reading of the testamental witness is the fact that the words of the Old Testament are delivered through the person of Jesus within the scriptures about Jesus. Given this source for the readers’ engagement with the Hebrew texts on creation is via the Christian gospels, a Christological tinting of the readers’ viewing of these text seems inevitable.
In her essay “Reading the Bible through Agrarian Eyes,” Davis (2009) seeks to describe an ethical project that emerges from a comprehensive assessment of the Hebrew Scriptures rather than gaining specific directives from detailed exegesis of a single or several biblical texts or traditions. Such a project is more about the shaping of an ethical imagination than distilling a simple formula (DAVIS, 2009, p. 27). Moreover, she equally is interested in articulating how that imagination might have practical bearing on our present context (DAVIS, 2009, p. 28). In the end, she hopes to link critical biblical study with contemporary agrarian thinking (DAVIS, 2009, p. 22).

She initiates her project by describing what she identifies as two competing contemporary agricultural ethics: (1) a productionist ethic and (2) a land ethic. The productionist ethic, as she understands it, is interested in monetizing the land for short-term economic benefits (DAVIS, 2009, p. 23). Conversely, the land ethic focuses on the long-term health of the “land-community.” (DAVIS, 2009, p. 24) Blatantly critical of the productionist ethic, Davis demonstrates a sympathetic leaning toward the land ethic yet remains resistant to what she sees as tendencies by proponents of the land ethic to diminish the contributions of religious and biblical sources (DAVIS, 2009, pp. 24-25). Laboring to redeem the contributions of religion and scripture, Davis offers a rereading of the land ethic through a supportive biblical worldview (DAVIS, 2009, p. 25), a reading summarized as shalom or wholeness and peaceful coexistence with the land.

She describes her shalom ethic in four parts. First, she outlines what she terms a primacy of land. Primacy of land is not a concession to chronology but a theological commitment that “the land [is] a fellow creature that can justly expect something from us whose lives depend on it.” (DAVIS, 2009, p. 29) Drawing upon biblical imagery from the creation stories and humanity’s connection to the earth, this posture assumes a minimal yet efficient interaction with the land such that both the land and humans benefit (DAVIS, 2009, p. 32). Second, Davis advocates for wisdom and informed ignorance. Turning to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, Davis promotes an ignorance-based world view (DAVIS, 2009, pp. 33-34), a view possibly better described as one of humility rather than ignorance. Such a position is not one of despondency but hope, according to Davis, because “willingness to accept and even highlight ignorance as basic to the human condition reflects, not laziness or despair, but (...) confidence that there is a wisdom worked into the very fabric of things.” (DAVIS, 2009, p. 34)

Third, Davis proposes a modest materialism, a kind of materialism that is not interested in acquisition and consumption of goods but that recognizes that we are material and require material to exist (DAVIS,

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5 Ultimately, her proposal will supply a third alternative, what I term her shalom ethic.
2009, p. 37). This modest materialism emphasizes respectful balance in usage of goods and resources. This time, Davis employs the history of Israel as told in the biblical text to illustrate her principal, specifically drawing examples from the excessive and self-inflating practices of the builders of Babel. Finally, Davis presents the notion of value beyond price, a shifting in our thinking about land away from land as commodity to land as shared inheritance (DAVIS, 2009, p. 39). Here, Davis recalls Israel’s inheritance of the land as part of the covenant, a covenantal mindset that relies upon an appreciation of land predicated on a distinct memory of once being landless (DAVIS, 2009, pp. 39-40). Taken together, Davis’ fourfold ethic produces a single driving focus for her ethical project. She presses toward her conceptualization of shalom, a balanced way of living that embraces wholeness and peaceful coexistence with the land, comfortably merging agrarian and biblical worldviews:

What [Aldo] Leopold calls “land community,” the biblical writers call “heaven and earth.” (...) they appear in perfect harmony; the original wholeness (shalom) of creation is reestablished within the historical order (...) humans and land exist in a biotic unity before God (...). (DAVIS, 2009, pp. 25-26)

While ambitious in attempting to craft an ethical project from the breadth of the Hebrew Scriptures, Davis’ work, in her chapter, generates a goal for Old Testament ethics that might prove more eisegetical than exegetical. In drawing critical biblical study together with contemporary agrarian thinking, she appears, at best, to have rendered biblical claims and agrarian ethics indistinguishable rather than complementary and, at worst, to have allowed her agrarian commitments to govern her exegetical efforts. For instance, consider Davis’ reading of Psalm 85. There, Davis identifies in the psalm a link between God, Israel, the land, and shalom (DAVIS, 2009, p. 25). However, this psalm appears to be describing the covenantal benefits for Israel by virtue of its connection to YHWH rather than the achievement of “biotic unity” and assurance of the land’s status as “fellow creature” that Davis hopes this psalm illustrates and her shalom ethic achieves. While laudable, ultimately, her exegetical works seems to be serving her primary commitment to agrarian ethics.

If Davis’ (2009) Old Testament ethical goal may be characterized by the term shalom or wholeness and peaceful coexistence with the land, then Barton’s goal, in his “Reading the Prophets from an Environmental Perspective,” might be summarized with the term “cosmic,” suggesting a breadth and depth to his ethic that seeks to circumvent overly particularistic forms and his concern that ethics is not principally behavior regulation between humans. To find this ethic, Barton turns to the Hebrew prophets, laboring to detect a notion of covenant that predates and preempts later conceptualizations of covenant that pertain
to a particular people and their interactions rather than to a universal vision with all-encompassing implications. Summarizing his cosmic assertion, Barton avers:

Within the Old Testament, and especially in the prophetic corpus, we find speculations about a covenant older and more all-embracing than any of the covenants Old Testament scholars have traditionally studied (...) Those covenants are to do with people or peoples. (...) But alongside these covenants (...) there is another covenant, in which God develops a particular relationship with the created world and its fruitfulness. (BARTON, 2010, pp. 48-49. Grifo nosso)

Having identified “another covenant,” Barton continues by locating that covenant in the writings of Israel’s prophets, writings that echo their wider cultural context. He concludes that this other covenant’s “origins are probably in fact older than those of the other covenants, being part of the set of ideas Israel shared with many other ancient Near Eastern nations.” (BARTON, 2010, p. 49)

For Barton (2010), these older ethical mandates represent a covenant with two distinct features. One, those mandates are primary, evidencing a conceptualization of covenantal connectedness between God and humanity that predates – and implicitly serves as a foundation – for the more familiar claims bound up in the specific, later covenants of Israel. Two, and related, those mandates are not simply specific to Israel but part of a larger, more common claim shared by and informing ancient Near Eastern traditions. In other words, Barton’s cosmic ethic is both primal and universal. This cosmic character grants his ethic a privileged status, a status he assumes naturally may be, first, extrapolated to persons of other ages and other places and, second, serviceably foundational for a contemporary ecological ethic.

Drawing heavily on the work of Jonathan Morgan, Barton teases out this cosmic character, outlining a three-part cosmically-derived ecological ethic. First, Barton describes an eschatological or forward thinking character to this ethic. Rather than a concern for the past or an effort to restore, Barton’s ethic envisions a direct connection between human action, divine blessing/retribution, and ecological harmony (BARTON, 2010, p. 52). In linking human actions to divine outcomes, Barton concludes that “we can see a clear conviction that there is an ideal state of harmony between humankind and the universe, expressed in a fraternal relationship with the physical and animal world as well as in good relations between people and peoples, that will dispose God to give blessing rather than curse in the physical environment.” (BARTON, 2010, p. 52)

Second, this cosmic covenant is maintained, according to Barton’s deciphering, through rehearsal of religious ritual (BARTON, 2010, p.
53). Less convinced of these practices’ relevance to modern contexts, Barton, nevertheless, identifies ritual and the connection between right habits and a balanced cosmos as essential partners in the prophets’ cosmic ethic (BARTON, 2010, p. 53-54). Third, Barton notes that harmony between humanity, the physical world, and the divine assumes mandates for balanced and ordered living within human society, as expressed in the paired Hebrew concept of mishpat (justice) and sedaqah (righteousness) (BARTON, 2010, p. 54). In other words, there is a direct correlation in maintaining the orders of creation and maintaining an ordered society, between valuing supernatural and natural relations and valuing human ones.

Barton’s (2010) efforts at extrapolating a contemporary ecological ethic from Hebrew prophetic writings is intriguing if only for the fact that he sources his ethical material from the prophets rather than the more predictable creation accounts. Yet, simply beginning at an unexpected place is not sufficient to produce a viable ethic. Ethics, according to Stanley Hauerwas (1983), must always be rooted in a narrative community that renders intelligible the claims, expectations, and practices of an ethical enterprise (HAUERWAS, 1983, p. 17). Wanting to avoid “Barthianism,” as Barton terms it, Barton diminishes the particular in favor of the general. In so doing, he risks losing sight of the prophets’ particularized commonalities that seem to supply much of the substance for the prophets’ assertions he finds so attractive.

This diminishment might account for his reticence to embrace and understand the role and function of ritual practice as a stabilizing and maintaining force. Barton recognizes the enduring place of ritual while simultaneously being suspicious of it and “hard to engage with” because such practices in Barton’s estimation are too particular and not universal, seemingly superfluous to a cosmic ethical enterprise (BARTON, 2010, p. 53). However, it seems the very role that such practices play is not so much that of cosmic-controller as that of practitioner-shaper, ordering the ethical imagination of the worshipper so as to recalibrate the hermeneutical dispositions of the faithful to be more like that of the Creator. In this way, particularity is not a problem but the necessary process for the forming of a specific, prophetic kind of ecological imagination.

Davis’ (2009) goal of shalom and Barton’s (2010) cosmic ethic provide a useful glimpse into contemporary efforts to frame an Old Testament ethic of creation. Both demonstrate the breadth of possibilities found in the text and the distinctive sources there that may supply the goal of such an ethic. Yet, Davis (2009) and Barton (2010) are not alone. Others continue to analyze the text, looking for direction and substance for their own ethical projects.

Consider Bauckham’s (2010) goal of place, emergent from his six-part ethical synthesis that focuses on a recognition of humanity’s
proper position within creation and a balancing between use and care, responsibility for and conformity within (BAUCKHAM, 2010, p. 33). Read Jonathan Morgan’s (2010) goal of interdependence, creating an imaginative landscape where such sacrifice is understood as part of a larger ethical system where the object sacrificed is of superior value and status and an integral part of the balanced whole (MORGAN, 2010, p. 43). Finally, explore Katharine Dell (2010) ecological ethics grounded in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, particularly noting the dialogical character inherent in that literary motif. This is a motif that quickly moves beyond the limits of any literature toward a more natural, universal type of knowing and a dialogue defined as a three-way conversation between divine/human/non-human interlocutors. Such a dialogue evidences all the traits inherent to a conversation between co-participants, e.g., an openness to revision, elaboration, and change (DELL, 2010, p. 56).

**An imaginative trajectory**

In the above summations of the five scholars’ efforts to distill an ethic of creation from the Old Testament, several points became clear. First, the text does not speak with one voice but is multivocal, attesting as a chorus more than a single performer. Such a multivocal performance suggests the possibility of a cacophony while, also, providing the possibility for disparate speakers to coalesce into a useful harmony.

Second, our driving question seems to lead to this latter conclusion. If the driving question sought to locate a single statement spoken in abstract isolation from one type of scriptural literature or from one part of the religious tradition, then the divergent offerings evidenced in the scholarship above that draw from the many types of literature and religious traditions might become discordant competitors, confusing our efforts. However, since the driving question, as this essay conceives it, is a question more akin to a kind of ethical forming within a larger narrative context of a community of performers using overlapping and complementary scores, then the narrative context of the community seems well suited to rearrange the individual and disparate voices into a more melodious work. In other words, the question asked needs a second-order answer. It needs a larger system into which to arrange the disparate voices.

That new arrangement is conducted through a Christological reworking, ordering, and performance of the individual and potentially discordant portions. This Christological reading, interpreting, and ordering of the text evaluates the texts and their concomitant goals for creation in light of the larger Gospel narrative. This is a narrative that has both the facility to render intelligible the balancing of a *shalom* ethic,
the universality of a cosmic ethic, the importance of shared location in a place ethic, the co-existence of an interdependence ethic, and the innovative improvisation of a mutuality ethic within the linguistic and conceptual framework of an imagination-shaping account. This account includes such pivotal notions like divine incarnation and triune perichoresis, producing what might be termed a theology of ecology or an ethic emergent from the corporeal and corporate character of existence evidenced in the person of Jesus. Such a Christological narrative appears comfortable with potentially discordant complexity and suggests that the texts of the Old Testament produce more a narrative trajectory than a single or specific goal.

References


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