

REVIEW ESSAYS

A Review of Richard B. Hays,
The Moral Vision of the New Testament

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One of the highlights of the 1997 IBR meeting in San Francisco was the Panel Discussion that centered on the theme "New Testament Foundations for Sexual Ethics." The panel was chaired by Professor Catherine Kroeger and focused on Professor Richard B. Hays's recent book, The Moral Vision of the New Testament—Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) ISBN 0-06-063796-X. Professors Douglas Moo and Judith Gundry-Volf presented reviews and Richard responded to both. The enthusiastic discussion that followed testified to the extent that the IBR membership appreciated and was stimulated by Hays's book and the issues that it has raised. All three participants kindly agreed to supply the BBR with edited versions of their reviews and response, which appear in the following pages. It is hoped that more scholarly material generated in the IBR's meetings will find its way into the pages of the Bulletin.

—The Editor

Taking the advice of marriage experts, my wife and I have occasionally sat down together for a session of honest critique. She lists my strengths and weaknesses; I note hers. And when it's all over, we solemnly swear never again to listen to a marriage expert. Why? Because no matter how much we try to affirm each other, what inevitably stands out in both of our minds is the negatives. What both of us consider to be a strong, wonderful marriage ends up sounding like a disaster headed for the divorce courts.

I worry that my critique of Richard Hays's *Moral Vision of the New Testament* might result in a similar impression. If I am to do my job, I must mention weaknesses as well as strengths. Inevitably, I will end up spending more time on the weaknesses than the strengths—for disagreement requires explanation; agreement a simple statement of affirmation. But I want to do my best to head off any impression that

I consider Dr. Hays's book a disaster. Quite the contrary: *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* is a very good book. It is certainly the best treatment of NT ethics to appear in a very long time. I agree with the vast majority of what Hays says in it. When my wife and I sit down together for our sessions of criticism, our intention is to strengthen an already excellent marriage. I hope you will view my response to Hays in a similar vein: an attempt to strengthen what is already an excellent proposal about the way we can and should use the NT to shape our thoughts and our actions.

In order to convey my very positive impressions of this book, I am going to focus on its strong points as the basic outline for this response and allow my criticisms to emerge in the form of suggested refinements to each of these points.

Exegesis. Hays builds a solid exegetical foundation for his conclusions about NT ethics. In a book as wide-ranging as this one is, he naturally does not have the space to exegete every text of significance to the discussion. The brief notes—gathered at the end of every chapter—do not generally advance the exegesis much further, but they do chronicle minor disagreements and mention representative treatments. But Hays always shows awareness of the exegetical issues and insists on letting each text have its say in the conversation. Time after time I found myself prepared to object to a conclusion because a key text had not been mentioned, only to find it fully treated later in the discussion. Missing entirely is the out-of-context proof-texting that mars many surveys of ethics. Of course, I disagree with some of the exegetical conclusions that Hays reaches. I doubt very much, for instance, that the word "Israel" in Rom 11:26 includes Gentiles or that 1 Cor 14:34–35 is an interpolation. But my disagreements with Hays at the exegetical level are minor and quite inconsequential to the larger proposal.

Canon. Hays's insistence that we listen carefully and with contextual sensitivity to every text relevant to an ethical issue is one of the most impressive features of the book. Whatever the historical background and literary process that led to the text as we now have it, Hays proposes to base NT ethics on the canon in the shape that it has been handed down to us. Thus, for instance, though he thinks the pastoral epistles and Ephesians were not written by Paul, Hays refuses to shunt their teaching aside. They are in the canon, and so we must deal with them. Nor does he follow the postmodern tendency to impose an external grid on the text and so wrest the text into a tool of some modern political or social agenda. This acceptance of canon as historical and theological fact follows in the lines laid down by a number of other prominent thinkers, some of whom are connected with Yale University, where Hays studied and taught.

Hays's commitment to canon is a great strength. But I am not sure that the commitment always works out in practice as well as it might. Let me mention three points of concern.

First, Hays, while insisting that we hear all the canonical voices, is not always convinced that these voices are speaking in harmony. On some issues, he argues, we have to choose which of the contradictory voices in the canon we will heed as finally authoritative for the Christian church. The issue surfaces most clearly in Hays's discussion of "Anti-Judaism"—one of five representative issues discussed at some length at the end of the book. Here, he argues, we must choose between John, who has permanently closed the door to Israel, and Paul who, at least in Romans 9–11, holds it open. Hays opts for Paul. Similarly, while he argues that 1 Cor 14:34–35 and the pastoral epistles, though not Pauline, should be included in our assessment of the relationship of men and women, he in fact tends to mute their contribution to the discussion by contrasting their perspectives with the "authentic" Paul and suggesting that Paul might have "declined" as a thinker.

Now I don't want to minimize the really difficult task of theological integration that the honest exegete faces in such situations. Nor should we steamroll the diverse NT texts into a bland uniformity. But I would want to devote more energy to the work of creating underlying theological structures that might unify the witness of the NT on some of these challenging issues. It is not that Hays refuses to do this. He suggests, for instance, that Matthew's apparent pronouncement of final judgment on Israel might be seen differently in the broader canonical context (p. 434). I just wish for a little more of this kind of canonical reasoning.

A second area in which I am not sure that Hays has followed through on his commitment to canon has to do with his use of the idea of trajectory. He concludes, for instance, that we find two exceptions to the absolute prohibition of divorce and remarriage in the NT: in the case of serious sexual sin and when an unbeliever insists on the separation. But he opens the door for the church to recognize other legitimate exceptions since the NT itself adapts and modifies Jesus' original absolute prohibition. Here I am not sure that the principle of canon is taken seriously enough. I would argue that the moral deliberations and conclusions within the NT possess a privileged authoritative status that cannot simply be extended into the life of the church.

My third caveat in Hays's commendable attention to canon is my most serious, reflected as it is in the very title of the book. Limiting oneself to *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* is both defensible and understandable. And Hays by no means ignores the OT in his formulation of Christian ethics. He insists that NT texts be read in their

full canonical context “and in dialogue with the Old Testament passages that are their necessary presupposition” (p. 307). As the source of NT theological categories and images, the OT necessarily “suffuses the entire enterprise” (p. 309). Nevertheless, Hays insists that the movement of salvation history gives to the NT witness a normative status vis-à-vis the Old. I agree—but I think Hays has taken the principle a bit too far. Thus I find myself in the unusual situation of arguing that we pay more attention to the OT than Hays does in our formation of Christian ethics.

As Hays himself notes, this matter of the integration of the testaments comes to a head in the issue of violence. Hays makes this issue one of his test cases, concluding that renunciation of violence is one of the most basic moral demands of the NT. He acknowledges that such a conclusion stands in irreconcilable tension with the OT’s endorsement of violence in at least some situations. But here, he claims, is where the hermeneutical priority of the NT must be recognized. As for instance the NT changes the OT teaching on circumcision, dietary laws, and divorce, so it revokes the OT endorsement of violence as an option for the believing community. Yet I sense that we have merged two distinct categories here. Circumcision and dietary laws are (ultimately) tied to the covenant, and their practice may change or even cease with a change in covenant—as the NT itself attests. Violence does not seem to have such a covenantal context. While therefore agreeing with Hays that the NT has hermeneutical priority over the OT, I am not convinced in this case that Hays has adequately integrated OT and NT so as to maintain their canonical unity.

Narrative. It will be no surprise to anyone familiar with Hays’s writings to learn that he places considerable emphasis on narrative as a basis of NT ethics. Indeed, his proposal stands on its head the old dictum that “teaching passages must be used to interpret narrative passages.” Instead, Hays argues, hermeneutical priority in ethical reasoning should be granted to stories, in which paradigms for authentic Christian living are to be found. “[T]he narratives are more fundamental than any secondary process of abstraction that seeks to distill their ethical import” (p. 295). Christians, Hays argues, must engage in “metaphor-making” as we try to discern imaginative links between the biblical story and our own time (p. 295).

Hays’s focus on “story” is, of course, part of a larger movement that draws renewed attention to the centrality of biblical narrative in Christian life and theology. And his proposal shares both the strengths and weaknesses of the larger movement. At its most basic, a focus on the paradigmatic quality of narratives enables Christians to integrate into their ethical reasoning a significant amount of NT material that has too often been passed over. He rightly decries the tendency of many believers to confine their Christian obedience to matters on

which one can find explicit NT "rules." If Christians are to bring all their lives into obedience to Christ, it will require, as Hays recognizes, that we absorb the symbolic world created by the biblical stories.

But I wonder whether the elevation of narrative over propositions has tipped the scales too far in the other direction. One of the weaknesses in the narrative theology movement generally is the tendency to read biblical stories as if they were *de novo* creations, in which the author had the freedom to create just about any imaginative world he or she wanted. As soon as we recognize a significant historical element in the biblical stories, certain important constraints on narrative theology follow as a matter of course. Now Hays certainly insists on a historical basis for the biblical narratives, although not quite to the degree that I would. But he does not, it seems to me, go far enough in acknowledging the restraints that the historical situation places on his paradigmatic approach.

Let me take his treatment of violence once again as an example here. More important for Hays's conclusion on this matter than the evidence of teaching passages such as Matt 5:38–48 is the pattern of Jesus' life. Matthew, by presenting Jesus as one who renounced violence in his own defense, shows that the teaching of Jesus about not resisting the evildoer is normative. Now Hays's rehabilitation and redefinition of the *imitatio Christi* theme is welcome, a necessary corrective to an overemphasis the other way. But Hays again, I think, goes too far in the other direction. Jesus' prime mission was to suffer redemptively—a unique activity, as of course Hays agrees. Jesus' actions are not, then, always to be imitated. The biblical authors will often have narrowly historical reasons for narrating certain events. We can only know what is paradigmatic and what is not by the biblical authors' commentary on these narratives. And so, it seems to me, we are back to the crucial evidence of teaching passages. Now Hays insists that Jesus' call to his disciples to follow him in taking up the cross—a call renewed, in other terms, by other biblical authors—is a call to nonviolence. But at the most the summons is to suffer persecution for the sake of the gospel willingly and submissively. The renunciation of violence in general cannot be read out the narrative of Jesus' sufferings. Moreover, it stands in conflict, I think, with Rom 13:4. Hays touches on this passage but fails to give attention to the implications of Paul's labeling the magistrate who wields the sword a "servant" (not only *diakonos* but also *leitourgos*) of God.

Community. Hays's focus is resolutely corporate. Here, as in a few other places in the book, I detect a resonance with important elements of postmodern thinking. This, of course, is not necessarily a criticism, but I think it might explain some of the overemphases that I detect here and there in an otherwise very fine book. But whatever

its derivation, the corporate emphasis of the book is clear. Hays wants to understand how the church can "become a Scripture-shaped community"; to clarify "how the church can read Scripture in a faithful and disciplined manner" (p. 3); to seek that God might "transform the community of the church" (p. 470). These statements about community, culled from the introduction and conclusion of the book, are echoed in Hays's identification of the four ethical matters at the heart of Christian discipleship: (1) the renunciation of violence; (2) the sharing of possessions; (3) the overcoming of ethnic divisions; and (4) the unity of men and women in Christ (p. 313). I must say that I find this to be an odd list. Of course, any distillation of the very complex NT witness into its essence is an extremely subjective enterprise. But I think that Hays's list crystallizes a tendency in his book to give too little attention to the transformation of the individual believer.

To be sure, each of these matters of ethical concern might indeed imply a certain attitude on the part of the individual believer. Hays might argue, for instance, that a willingness to share possessions demands first of all a heart of love. But, of course, it need not: it could be the product simply of community conformity. I am not suggesting that Hays is interested only in external behavior, unrelated to the heart attitude of the individual. But the absence of any sustained treatment of the transformation of the individual is certainly a lacuna in a treatment of NT ethics. Commenting on Rom 12:1–2 and 2 Cor 5:14–21, Hays argues that "God transforms and saves a *people*, not atomized individuals" (p. 36). I am not sure what an "atomized individual" looks like, but in any case I think this puts more stress on the corporate than is fair to these texts. God does not save people or "peoples"; he saves individuals, calling on each one, in a personal and ultimately quite private act of faith, to accept the offer of God's grace in the gospel. Similarly, I would argue, transformation into the image of Christ, while encouraged by and necessarily lived out in a community of like-minded people, is also an individual matter. The "essence" of Christian ethics, as I would see it, is the new heart created by God's Spirit in the individual believer—the "renewed mind" of the Christian.

Perhaps Hays and I are not very far apart on this point; I may be overreading him or misreading him. But further discussion on this point might be the most fruitful way forward, for one of the things I most like about *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* is its concern for the pragmatic level: "living the text." I am constantly teaching and writing about the text. But I remain unhappy about my ability to live the text the way I know I ought. Hays and I probably agree on 90% of what the text is calling on us to do. Perhaps we should think a bit more about how we go about obeying what we already know.