

Review of: B.C. Birch et al., *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life: A New Conversation*

Dogara Ishaya Manomi

Lecturer at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN) and
Ph.D. Candidate at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany
E-Mail: manomitrust@gmail.com

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Bruce C. Birch, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, and Larry L. Rasmussen, Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life: A New Conversation, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018. XXII. 296 pages, ISBN: 978-0-8006-9761-7.

Bruce C. Birch, Dean and Professor of Biblical Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, and Larry L. Rasmussen, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary published a book entitled *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* in 1976, with a revised edition published in 1989. However, the present book is not a third revision, as might be expected, but a new book altogether, for two reasons. First, two more scholars, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Associate Professor of Old Testament and Director of the Center for Theology, Women, and Gender at Princeton Theological Seminary, and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Professor of Theological and Social Ethics at the Pacific Lutheran School of Theology, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, and the Graduate Theological Union, have joined in the authorship. Secondly, the context and reality from which the authors approach their reflections, namely, the changing planet and the shift of Christianity from its Euro-West center to the Global South, have changed significantly since 1976 and 1989, which a mere revision could not adequately represent. The “New Conversation” that flows through the book is methodological, paying attention to “method in biblical interpretation, method in ethics, and method in relating Bible to ethics” (p. xix). These three aspects of the conversation reflect and are represented in the three parts of the book.

Part I is entitled, “The Bible as Moral Witness.” Based on a consensus that Christian ethics is not synonymous with biblical ethics, yet that the Bible remains normative and formative for the Christian moral life, this section discusses and answers the questions: “What is the relationship of Scripture and ethics in contemporary community of faith, in theory and in practice? What is the range of options available

in response to this question and how may those options be assessed?” (p. 11). The book regards community—the Israelite community where the OT texts emanated, the early Christian communities where the NT text emerged, the human community today, and the entire Earth community—as a category on which the understanding of the relationship between Bible and ethics rests. Both in the OT and NT, little attention is given to morality as a distinct topic. Instead, morality is just one dimension of community life where the people of God were concerned about how to live with one another, with those outside their faith community, and with the non-human world at large (p. 18). Moreover, it is worth noting that there is no unified system of theology or ethics in the OT and NT as a canon. However, it can be deduced from all of Scripture itself that biblical texts “witness to the character and conduct of God in the experience of Israel and the early church” (p. 21, emphasis original).

A discussion on “Biblical Authority” ensues, where the authors first reflect different traditional views and their dangers. The hermeneutical challenges, for instance, imposed by liberation, feminist/womanist, and postcolonial ideas, have pointed out that biblical authority does not reside abstractly in texts. Rather, it only functions as texts are interpreted and used. “When texts are interpreted predominantly from the social locations of the powerful, the rich, the white, the colonizing (and those who benefit from past colonization), and the male culture, then biblical authority is invoked, consciously or unconsciously, to authorize and empower the reigning cultural ideology” (p. 47). In contrast, the authors argue that “the most important authority that Scripture has for us is not its normative force in telling us to do this or not to do that but in the way that it shapes us as people and communities of faith, as it forms our very being” (p. 43). In other words, “questions of biblical authority properly focus not on the Bible itself (...) but on the presence and activity of God. The scriptures themselves attest that it is the transform-

ative power of God, not the text itself, that is to be the focus of our faith” (p. 47). Nevertheless, according to the authors, “the Bible is the unique and authoritative witness to the God of Jesus Christ, who is graciously active in the world” (p. 48). Therefore, exegesis as the practiced art of interpretation should respect both the ancient context of production of the writing and the modern context of reading. Furthermore, exegesis and Christian ethics should move towards each other mutually: exegesis starts with the text within ancient contexts and leads to present contexts; Christian ethics begins with present demands but should draw on the Bible to some extent.

While retaining the primacy of the Bible in ethics, the authors assert that the church “cannot do ethics on the basis of the Bible alone” (p. 52), nor is the Bible self-sufficient for ethical discernment (p. 58). Therefore, they propose two other sources of authority for ethical reflection in Christian ethics. The first is *tradition*, broadly stated, which includes the moral and theological traditions of the church and the history of interpretation of Scripture from its inception to now. The second is *experience*, broadly stated, which includes the knowledge of the socio-political and cultural contexts from which the church seeks to fulfill its mission to the world and shape moral character; and the knowledge of the world and scientific data that come from secular disciplines. The authors argue further that engaging these other authorities in Christian ethical reflection does not trivialize the Bible, but that the Bible itself is an example of how to engage non-biblical sources of authority in ethical reflection. The Bible must, therefore, be in constant and progressive dialogue with other sources of knowledge and insight by which God can be known.

Part one closes with eight “practical guidelines for use of Bible in moral discernment” (p. 87) which can be described as a movement from the present context of interpretation to the historical context and “otherness of the text,” including the hidden and diverse voices (“avoid false harmonization”), back to the present reading in community, being aware of what kind of authority one ascribes to the Bible. Thus, the Bible is primarily considered not as a source of concrete rules, but as testimony to God’s desire that all humanity and creation might flourish.

Part 2 examines “Elements of the moral life.” This discusses how Christians are to perceive the world and how to live in it, in view of their knowledge of God’s love for all creation and his desire to see that all flourish, as understood from the Bible, tradition, and experience. In other words, while Part 1 above is dedicated to biblical ethics, this part is dedicated to Christian ethics. Unlike many books on ethics which use the terms “ethics” and “morality” interchangeably, this book differentiates between them: morality refers to the lived (being and doing) aspects of individuals and communities, which are considered good and right, while ethics refers to

“disciplined inquiry into morality... Ethics brings self-consciousness, method, intentionality, and sensitivity to the process of discerning what is good and right for any given situation or context” (p. 91). Within a brief exposition of their ethical system, the authors explain their “moral universe” (p. 100), including character formation and responsibility for the global challenges and endangered ecosphere. Thus, Christian ethics should address both the personal aspects of morality (moral actors) and the social-structural dimensions (system).

The authors propose five tasks of ethics and their corresponding questions as follows: first, the *descriptive task*, which asks “What is it?” This task involves an honest diagnosis of what the moral problems are, such as social or structural sin and the destruction it inflicts on the planet and the suffering it causes for humans. Second, the *constructive task*, which asks “What could be?” This task involves seeking alternatives to the structures and practices that hinder other people’s flourishing. Third, the *normative task*, which asks, “What ought to be?” This task focuses on God’s vision for a flourishing and whole life. These three tasks belong to “moral discernment.” Fourth, the *formative task*, which asks, “What forms or malforms us morally?” Fifth, the *practical task*, which asks, “To what action do these questions point?” (p. 93). Towards the end of the book, they add the *transformative task*, which asks, “What disables and enables the moral-spiritual power to do and be what we discern that we ought?” (p. 258). The authors argue that the scope of ethics today should shift from its anthropocentric nature to an eco-centric and biocentric one, involving the whole Earth community as its moral scope.

In light of this, they provide practical guidelines for moral discernment, in which they warn against absolutizing or universalizing morality in Christian ethics, noting that “there is no singular Christian perspective on any moral issue” (p. 163). Other sources of moral wisdom for Christian ethics, apart from Scripture, tradition, and experience, include the Earth and other bodies of knowledge such as reason, natural, social, and behavioral sciences. Moreover, the authors warn that none of the three major ethical theories—duty ethics (deontology), virtue ethics (areteology), and consequences ethics (teleology)—alone is sufficient for ethical reflection and praxis. Instead, lived morality is mixed, pluralistic, and complex in a way that no theory or combination of theories can adequately describe.

Part 3 covers “The Bible, Ethics, and the Moral Life.” This section focuses on practical life application of what has been described as biblical moral witness and the elements of the moral life in the previous sections. Here, contemporary examples are given of how individuals and groups, both from the Global North and Global South, practically apply the Bible in ways that reflect ethical, socio-political, and cultural

shifts, and the (need for a) shift from an industrial to ecological civilization.

A discussion on the five practical roles of the church in the moral life of individuals and the community follows. These are that the church serves: as the community for moral formation and identity; as a carrier of moral tradition; as a place for moral discernment and deliberation; as an agent for moral action; and as a moral haven.

The book concludes with a reaffirmation of the five-fold tasks of ethics as the old but renewed conversation. By restating the two changing landscapes that shape the “new conversation,” the conclusion reconnects with the introduction and ties up the book effectively. The book concludes with a challenge to the faith community to *act* towards flourishing of the entire Earth community. A bibliography, index of names and subjects, and index of Scripture occupy the final pages of the book.

While the book is lucid, thorough, and deep in its content and argument, some critical and structural observations and remarks can be made. First, in comparison to many books on biblical ethics or Christian ethics, this book has a broader, deeper, and all-encompassing perspective that is consistent with the diverse and pluralistic nature of biblical ethics, Christian ethics, and ethics in general. While most books on ethics are anthropocentric in scope and focus, a growing number of others are focusing now on ecological ethics as a distinct category. This book, however, succeeds in integrating and configuring an *earth ethics*—an ethical scope that encompasses the entire earth community with equal emphasis. The scope of ethics projected in this book envisions the flourishing of both human and other-than-human creatures as the drumbeat of Scripture and the ultimate purpose of God. However, the authors do not precisely enunciate what exactly “flourishing” is and how it would be variously understood in different contexts. In a book of this nature that avoids absolutizing and universalizing concepts, it would be helpful to describe, with practical examples, what flourishing looks like in different contexts, and anticipate quandaries and clashes that could arise from pursuing flourishing. Is there a universal understanding of “flourishing” or is it culturally and locally determined? Does the idea of flourishing encapsulate the ideology of development and growth, or is there space for diminishing and suffering (including dying, a major topic of the Bible) which may be part of Christian ethics as well? Less could be more, as reflected in an ethic of relinquishing.

What does that imply for reading the entire biblical text and doing Christian ethics as a means towards (enjoying or enduring) life in creation?

Secondly, the book reads smoothly, with brief introductions and conclusions to each section, thereby linking the different sections of the book well. However, the flow of thought in Part 1, specifically the chapter on “Foundations of the Biblical Text in Community Witness” (pp. 14–37) is interrupted by the frequent back and forth movement between the OT and the NT. The text would flow better if the discussions were separated into OT and NT as sub-sections. Beyond hindering the flow of thought, merging the OT and NT moral witnesses into paragraphs, back and forth, downplays the distinctive contours of the nature of the moral witness in the communities that represent each of the testaments respectively, thereby forcing a sort of “pan-harmonization” of their moral witnesses, which contradicts the principle of a sustained diversity.

Thirdly, one of the major strengths of this book, nevertheless, is its consideration of every aspect of the biblical text as morally relevant, far beyond the indicative-imperative approach to ethics. It recognizes, for example, stories, narratives, and hymns as no less ethically relevant than explicit ethical texts such as the Decalogue, Beatitudes, or the lists of virtues and vices. Similarly, the book is rich in its recognition of every aspect of life as not only morally relevant, but morally determined. It is also noteworthy that the book pursues its agenda with generous theoretical and practical concerns. Moreover, this book, written by two biblical scholars and two Christian ethicists, is a vivid example of the benefits of interdisciplinary interaction between biblical studies and Christian ethics.

Fourthly, the authors need to be commended for how they courageously and objectively expose and challenge the structural sin that even “privileges” their socio-political context, in solidarity with those who suffer from such socially unjust structures.

Birch, Lapsley, Moe-Lobeda, and Rasmussen have provided the academic world, the church, and the entire earth community with a solid book that helps us redefine and understand who we are and how we ought to live in the light of our present realities. We remain, therefore, indebted to these highly respected scholars, and look forward to reading more from them.