CHAPTER – 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Introduction

Ethics and morals of modern society had been derived and developed over thousands of years with the advent of thinkers, philosophers, and theologians. Amongst those sources and history of the development of moral philosophy, the book of Torah (also known widely in theological fields as the Pentateuch) is of immense importance. The principles and philosophies behind the book of Torah had been the source of ethics and morality for many centuries and continue to be so even in the modern world. Western culture of morality and ethical standards of individuals, society, religion and government had been shaped by the story, laws and ethics of the Torah. Nevertheless, the Torah may also be considered as the most misunderstood, questioned and yet important writings in the development and understanding of ethics.

Regardless of its practical benefits, the study of ethics and morals deepens our “reflection on the ultimate questions of life.”¹ It helps in the making of moral judgments in day to day activities. When current law and order, theorists and those in authority debates on issues such as abortion, gay rights, capital punishments, economic inequality, racial segregation, reproductive technologies and environmental issues, revisiting the laws and principals of the Torah is of immense importance.

Even though the five books of Moses may be regarded by some as a useless and antiquated book which do not require much attention in the twenty first century, the influence it continues to exert in the modern world cannot be dismissed. The age-old book that was written even before the birth of the great nations of the West is still the

source of ethics and morals, including the legislation and laws of the country. From the condemnation of the Nazi regime to the approving of characters such as Gandhi and Mandela, these evaluations are based on standard and principles that continues to have its hold on the mind of the masses despite its interpretations and applications in the past. Studying ethics and morals, its development in history, especially in relation to the Torah is of great importance and a need in the contemporary world of new scientific discoveries and inventions where individual expression is encouraged and economic growth is aimed.

1.2 Objectives

1.2.1 Primary Objective

The research aims to bring to light the collective works and philosophical thoughts, as well as theological insights on the subject of ethics with reference to the Torah in a manner that will highlight the various ethics and morals of the Torah in a cohesive way. It attempts to identify the development of the ethical and moral principles of the Torah in light of its history, its context and the philosophy of those who are not directly connected to it. The standards and principles of the Torah had influenced philosophers and theologians alike, but in their own fields. This research may bring to light the relations of these ethics and morals from philosophical and theological minds. Biblical commentaries and research can bring to light the origin, history and sources in the compilation of Torah as it simultaneously rendered the cultural setting of the writings. Philosophical history and treaties may reveal the extent of impact the Torah had in the development of philosophy in the West and how it had shaped the modern world. The research will also attempt to exhibit how philosophers
and reformers of the past had understood and interpreted their situations in the light of their understanding of the Torah.

1.2.2 Sources

The book of Torah of the Old Testament is the primary material for research. The Christian Bible of various translations and the Hebrew Tanakh, with the Torah in particular, are the basis of the text for which the research is based.

The research is chiefly based on secondary data which are in the form of books and articles published by various authors. Writings of theologians are the main sources for the understanding, history, development and interpretations of the book of Torah. Philosophical textbooks and writings of philosophers are consulted in order to provide an in-depth and yet brief understanding of moral philosophy. The ethics of the Old Testament had always been understood from a theological perspective, with few secular philosophies only to support the given theological view. Comparisons and correlation between the ethics of the philosophers and the theologians may further enhance the understanding of the ethics of the Torah. It will also attempt to show how the ethics and morals of an age-old book continue and will continue to have its influence on the current issues and that of the generations to come.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Descriptive Method

The method involves textual criticism, survey of literature, hermeneutics and analysis of the relevant text. Works of researchers from both fields of study, namely theological and philosophical fields are analyzed on the attempt to answer the question of relevance of the Torah in an analytic manner. Commentaries, research works, books
relating to the subject at hand are critically examined to explain its effect in social, economic, political and religious fields.

1.3.2 Book Review

Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A history of moral philosophy from the Homeric Age to the twentieth century* (Routledge Classics, Abignin, Oxon, 2002), deals with the history and development of ethics from a philosophical point of view. From the pre-philosophical era to Kierkegaard and Marx are presented in a systematic and comprehensive approach. The ethics of each philosophers and history behind the development of those principles are explained as possible. The book largely deals with the history of ethics in the western world.


Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (OM, Authentic Media, Secunderabad, 2006), surveyed the ethics of the Old Testament from different angles, constituting God, man and the land. The theological angle presents the ethical principles from God, those that derived from the very nature of God himself. The social angle of Old Testament ethics is that of the relationship between the people of Israel as a chosen nation. The economic angle deals with the land they possessed and the caring of the land. It also comprises of the ethics of the land affix in the celebration of the jubilee year and the care concerning debts and the economically challenged. Ethics of the Old Testament is presented in a systematic way with selective themes.


Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, Trans. John McHugh (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. & Dove Booksellers, Michigan, 1961), understands and presents the life and history of ancient Israel in a comprehensive manner. The historical development and the historicity of the Israelites are not questioned, rather explained in an anthropological and historical perspective. Explanations and traditions of the culture, customs, rituals and practices are also presented with scientific understanding.

Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1995), presented the development of ethics in history and in biblical understanding, and approach these ethics with comparisons and analyzing them
through secular and theological philosophers, and also deals with a case study of each views.

Sebastian Kizhakkeyil, *The Pentateuch: An Exegetical Commentary* (The Bombay Saint Paul Society, Mumbai, 2009), comprehensively explains and traces the development of the Pentateuch providing the history and background of the criticisms pertaining to the Pentateuch. Wellhausen’s Documentary Hypothesis seems to be the underlying approach in the exegetical explanation of the Pentateuch.

T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (OM Authentic Books, Secunderabad, India, 2007), is an inclusive and lengthy explanations of themes related to the Pentateuch. Articles and commentaries are used to explain themes and topics related to the Pentateuch. Theological, philosophical and ethical topics related to the Pentateuch are also presented.

Waldemar Jenzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Westminster/John Knox Press, Kentucky, 1994), presented the Old Testament ethics in a more wider and liberal perspective asserting that the will of God and the ethical principles thereof was imparted not only to the Hebrews but to the Ancient Near East civilizations as well, which in turn influenced the writers of the Old Testament to incorporate certain ethics and moralities from them.

Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1991), believed that the principles and purpose of ethics, especially that of the Old Testament lies in the depiction of God. The ethical principle of the Old Testament, especially of the Torah is understood to be understood as a whole and not in a systematic manner. The Torah is believed to have an umbrella of a particular principle that is to be understood only under that umbrella and not by pulling the situations and themes apart for selective systematic interpretations.
William Straton Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1895), is that of a theological background with God at the centre of the purpose and interpretations of the ethics and moral principles of the Old Testament. The transition of ethics and morals from the Torah to the prophets is understood as a development or progress from the external to the internal, from the form to the substance; this development is stated as a form of true morality.

### 1.4 Need for Study

The need for a proper understanding of ethics grows with the ever developing and advancing scientific and technological world. With scientific advancements in the field of biotechnology to that of the need for environmental care, “ethics” had become a word that is often mentioned but barely understood. When issues that violate principal ethics and morals of life are raised and discussed, the source of that ethics is the subject that is ultimately questioned. Amongst the many sources and history of ethics, we are often encountered with the writings and tradition of the Bible, specifically the Torah – the first five books of the Old Testament. Despite the rejection of the book as an age-old pre-philosophical tradition considered with little relevance in the contemporary world, the book of Torah had a profound impact on the development of all our understanding of right and wrong.

Held in reverence by the Jews, Christians and Muslims, the Torah is needed to be understood and perhaps interpreted in the light of modern advancements without diluting the core principles of the book. With the challenging themes and events recorded in the book, one cannot easily draw a conclusion of the underlying principles behind the book. Many philosophers and theologians had pondered and wrote on this subject but often with a singular view-point; which are often used to assert a particular
interpretation. A collective and comprehensive study of these interpretations may perhaps generate an overall and wider perspective of the Pentateuch. The research could even lead to the finding of a better and comprehensive understanding of the Torah, especially in the field of ethics. Ever remembering the immense impact the Torah had on the development of thought and in the shaping of nations and societies, it may be safe to assert that it will continue to have its hold and influence on current ethical questions, from environmental issues to individual rights, in the years to come.

1.5. Limitations and Scope of the Study

Views on the understanding of the narratives, writings and historicity of the book of Torah vary and differed as many as can be. Christian Fundamentalist strongly believed that the Torah should be understood as literal as possible and any deviation or dilutions from such interpretations are regarded as dangerous as atheism itself. To many conservatives and fundamentalists, Jewish, Islamic or Christian, a rejection of the literal interpretation and to question the historicity of the book of Torah equates to the denunciation of the faith itself. On the other hand, there are theologians whose views are the pinnacle of liberalism that questioned and doubt even the narratives, and even suggested that the entire Torah as a mere fabrication.

Taking a proper stand in the understanding of the principles and narratives of the Torah is as difficult as the book itself. In an advanced scientific world, biblical scholars and theologians are at a crossroads on the interpretation and the expounding of the creation narratives and everything that follows. While the literal explanation of the world in six days is a necessity to uphold the dogma for some churches, there are those who do not mind having the theory of evolution as an explanation for the narrative. Then there are those who seem oblivious to the necessity of having a particular
theological standpoint on such subjects. In explaining the development of the creation narrative of the Old Testament, the Second Vatican Council states that “the truth of God’s creativity is not put forward as an abstract philosophical principle, but gains entry into the minds of the Israelites with the help of the notion of the unity of God, as a proclamation of Yahweh’s power and victory, as demonstration that God always stands by his people.”

Though not possible to collect primary data and perform investigations on research as this, the collective understanding of many writers and researchers from the past may yield an improved approach to the acceptance and understanding of the Torah.

With the ever controversial issues within the book of Torah and their relations with modern-day issues such as abortion, gay-right, etc., it will not be possible to draw a particular view to sort the problems, but the research may provide a better understanding and perspective of these issues. Though often attacked by atheist and new-age philosophers, the content and the narratives of the Torah may be understood philosophically and theologically in a healthier insight in the light of the research.

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