Finding ethical values in the Old Testament is a difficult task to many contemporary readers. Some readers may even go to the extent of finding more unethical conducts than finding ethical principle out of it. Nevertheless, the books of the Old Testaments do contain ethical principles that may actually be useful and effective in the modern world. Though they posed more questions than answers, the books of the prophets, the Torah and the Writings of the Old Testament can give better insight to contemporary ethical issues when understood and view through the lens of the time it were written. A large portion of the Old Testament was written in a pre-philosophical world, where understanding of morals and ethics were not fully formed or shaped. The writers were still battling with ethics and how they may be imparted.

4.1 Nature and Structure of OT Ethics

In understanding the nature and structure of the Old Testament ethics, one must understand the text from their historical, literary and cultural context. The reader must put himself in their position to “understand how Israel perceived and experienced their relationship with God and how that experience affected their ethical ideals and practical living as a community.”¹ The ethical understandings of the Old Testament ethics are based upon Israel’s worldview, which was in turn influenced by the Ancient Near East.

Ethical question attempt to answer philosophical questions about the nature of man, challenge its purpose, questions what went wrong, and seek solutions. The Old

¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (OM, Authentic Media, Secunderabad, 2006), 17
Testament also provides answers to these questions but none of these answers are clear and precise. The ethical principles shaped the theology of the Old Testament, and vice-versa. Their role in the development of each other is undeniable and inevitable. Be it Old Testament or the New, theology and ethics are inseparable and the go hand in hand. Old Testament concept of ethics and morality is based on the law and nature of God. Old Testament ethics is fundamentally theological and theology is in turn often the expounding of such ethical principles. They reveal at every instances the character, will and purpose of God. The theological aspect of Old Testament ethics later shaped New Testament Christianity, and the world-view of the later Western world. In his book, “Old Testament Ethics for the People of God” author and theologian Christopher J.H. Wright contend that the Old Testament ethics should be understood from the theological angle, the social angle and the economic angle.

“God, Israel and the land – these were the three pillars of Israel’s worldview, the primary factors of their theology and ethics. We may conceptualize these as a triangle of relationships, each of which affected and interacted with both the others. So we can take each ‘corner’ of this triangle in turn and examine Old Testament ethical teaching from the theological angle (God), the social angle (Israel) and the economic angle (the land).”

Wright illustrates the three aspects of Old Testament ethics using the diagram:

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2 Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God, 19
3 Ibid.
4.1.1 The Theological Angle (God)

Biblical ethics as mentioned earlier is highly theological. The ethical understanding of Israel and the biblical writers revolves around the nature, character, will and purpose of God. God is the source of ethics and ethical principles are so because of the character and nature of God.

“Biblical ethics has a distinctive source and content, and it commands a distinctive response from all mortals. The first context in which the ethicist can define his total enterprise is found in the Old Testament ethical depiction of God.”

The foundation of the Old Testament ethics lies on the fundamental attributes of God, and it is in this “ethical conception of God, whose character and will had been made known to them, both in words and deeds of grace, they found the one grand and positive principle of all moral life.”

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5 William Stratton Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1895), 38
Bruce, in acknowledging God as the ultimate foundation of the Old Testament ethics affirm the universality and endurance of such ethical principles in a world of shifting philosophies.

“It is owing to this cause that Hebrew ethics never fell away into a powerless empiricism, or a dreamy, unpractical philosophy of virtue.”

From being a nomadic tribe to becoming a nation of great influence, the Israelites understanding of God and perception of God’s nature evolved and developed as we read the narratives of the Torah and the teachings of the Prophets. This is not to state that God is a mere development of the understanding of the Israelites but rather that God reveals himself in accordance to the situation and mental capability to the Israelites and the Prophets.

In the book of Genesis, God is the creator and source of all life. The older tradition uses the name YHWH for God, while the priestly writing uses the name Elohim. God in the pre-Exodus times walks with man, wrestles with man and even talks to man. To Moses, God is a mighty God of power and might. God is mysterious and cannot be understood by mere intellect of man. The transcendental nature of God from the time of Exodus had become the ultimate understanding of God to the Hebrews. God is a consuming fire that no man can apprehend, whose identity and face could not be seen, whose glory shakes the mountains and filled the children of Israel in fear. This ideology is constantly shared by the later prophets in the Old Testament. However, the loving and calm nature of God is also portrayed in the Torah and the Prophets. The prophet Elijah witness God in a still small voice, and Samuel heard him in the still of the night. While the Torah display God to the eternal King and Judge of the Israelites, the prophets also expressed God forgiving nature and mercy. They call on

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6 Ibid.
the people to repent and submit themselves to God, because God is loving and forgiving. Nonetheless, the rejection of God’s grace also leads to their destruction. This dualistic nature of God had become the central understanding of God, and subsequently the ethical principles of the people of Israel.

Wright understood this theological development of the ethical ideologies of the Old Testament from the identity, actions, words, purpose, ways and goodness of God. These attributes of God presented in the writings of the Old Testament impact the ethical teachings and moral prerogatives of the people of Israel.

4.1.1.1 God’s Identity

The God of the Old Testament first revealed in the book of Torah is the only God that they should worshipped. Any other forms of gods and idols are an offence. It is this revealed God that brought the children of Israel from their bondage and had made a covenant with Abraham. The identity and character of the God who had done amazing things for them in history matters greatly in their understanding of ethics because the Old Testament ethics were founded on the identity of this God. Their rejection to God’s identity would result in the Israelites running after other gods, which would result in destruction affecting both the religious and the ethical, leading to social and ethical disastrous effects.

4.1.1.2 God’s Action

In biblical understanding God acts first and then call his people to respond. This act of God, to Wright is the “starting point for the moral teaching of the Old Testament. God takes the initiative in grace and redeeming action and them makes his ethical demand in the light of it. Ethics then becomes a matter of response and gratitude within a personal relationship, not of blind obedience to rules or adherence to timeless
The Torah and the Prophets revealed that God in his mercy had acted and delivered them. They were to abide by the covenant they made through Moses at Mount Sinai and keep his laws. From the historical knowledge of what would happen if they disobey and turn away, their need for obedience of the ethics was understood. However, it was the law that saved them, but rather that the law stands to be a testament of that deliverance and covenant. The Hebrews were not saved because they kept the laws, rather God saved them first. Keeping the laws and the ethical was a part of their response to God’s saving power and mercy. In the Ten Commandments, God identify himself and his redeeming act when he states, “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

4.1.1.3 God’s Words

The obedience and acceptance towards the words of God revealed to the Israelites were their ethical response to God. At Sinai, they did not see God in any physical form that they could replicate such image; they heard the voice of God instead. What God spoke to them, most often through Moses was the law by which they abide. The voice and revelation of God through the prophets were taken seriously by the people of Israel. Such revelation was celebrated as well as feared by them, and this aspect of ethics call them to obedience since they have heard and they have no excuse whatsoever for their disobedience.

4.1.1.4 God’s Purpose

The faith of the Israelites had been rooted in their history of redemption and deliverance. This faith had generated their thinking, grounded their belief and sustained their traditions. The dynamics of the Old Testament ethics has largely been derived from this faith. God redemptive act has been seen as the purpose of the ethical life.

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7 Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 25
8 Exodus 20:2 (KJV)
because all their assessments of the ethical were seen as God’s will and purpose. In narratives such as the life of Joseph, God is seen as working for good even though Joseph has the ethical freedom to do the otherwise. Wright asserts that Israel’s understanding of God’s purpose has its ethical significance in the past as well as for the future, which he termed the redemptive and eschatological dimensions of Israel’s history. “The redemptive aspect was the belief that God had acted in the past with mighty acts of deliverance for his people and of judgment on his enemies…The eschatological aspect was the belief that in those redemptive acts God has a continuing purpose for the long term future. Israel did not just emerge. They were ‘called’ into existence on the basis of God’s promise to Abraham. And that promise had, as its bottom line, God’s intention of bringing blessing to all the nations of the earth…This generates within Old Testament ethics a teleological dimension. Teleology is the study of purpose, ends or goals. Clearly, Israel believed in a God on the move. The LORD reveals himself right from the start as a purposeful God.”

4.1.1.5 God’s Way

God’s way is nothing less than the reflection of the character of God himself. The urge to walk in the way of the Lord had become a very common command among the prophets in the Old Testament. They urged the people to walk in the ways God had ordained, least they tread away from the path and be lead astrayed to their own ways. To walk in the ways of the Lord was to be closer to God and to even walk in the likeness of God. Wright believed that the phrase “the imitation of God” or imitation Dei became increasingly common in the later dimension of Old Testament ethics, though others like Rodd reject such claim on grounds that such ideology was adopted.

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9 Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God, 35
only after New Testament times. Nevertheless, the find in the Old Testament writings especially in the Torah that God demands justice and kindness because he showed them justice and kindness in the past. God delivered them from the bondage of slavery out of his love, compassion and faithfulness. And he demanded that they too should show such justice and mercy to other vulnerable people. Israel’s ethical display of kindness and mercy was thus a reflection God.

4.1.1.6 God’s Goodness

Even though the Old Testament prescribed laws after laws to obey, the major motivation for their ethical living however was the personal experience of God’s goodness. It was the personal experience of his goodness and blessings in the past and the present. Wright advocates that such experience became the motivation for their ethical behaviour. The personal motivation towards the obedience of God’s law was also highlighted in the Deuteronomic writings, when Moses asked the Israelites to love God wholeheartedly. They were to remember of God’s goodness, especially of their great deliverance least they forget they would run after other gods. The prophets often linked this forgetfulness to the moral decline and disobedience of Israel.

“But I have been the LORD your God ever since you came out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Savior except me. I cared for you in the wilderness, in the land of burning heat. When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me.”

The primary angle of Old Testament ethics is the theological angle where God is at the centre, and is worshipped reverently. This worship marked Israel’s ethical

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10 Cf. Ibid. 37
11 Hosea 13:4 – 6 (NIV)
response to God and the community. The ethical humanitarian implications and the ecological care of the world become meaningful in the light of God, who is worshipped and glorified because of his acts, power and goodness.

4.1.2 The Social Angle (Israel)

It may be said that biblical ethics is imparted from the understanding of the reality of God. However, these ethical standards were not imparted directed into the consciousness of the individuals supernaturally. The Old Testament tells us that God works out this imparting of these ethical principles through the nation of Israel. God’s redemptive act and his loving-kindness became the inspiration behind it. God did this by putting into operation a “plan of redemption that would encompass the whole of the rest of human history and would involve, as part of that history, the choosing, creating and moulding of an entire nation.”

God accomplished this plan through the nation of Israel when they entered into a covenant with him at Mount Sinai. Israel became a chosen nation through the promise made to Abraham.

The Tower of Babel, whether it is understood literally or figuratively, was the climax of human disobedience in the events leading from the fall of mankind at Eden. The effect of that was sinning at a global level, so much so that God confused the language of the whole world. With this event as a background, God calls Abraham and promised him a land and a descendant that will turn to be a great nation that will in turn be a blessing to the entire world. Wright explained that “the social angle of Old Testament ethics recognizes that the people descended from Abraham were not only to be blessed as he was, but also to be a blessing to the whole world of nations. And the key to that role and that mission would be their ethical distinctiveness. The clearest expression of this combined ethical and missional role of Israel is Genesis 18:19, where

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12 Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 49
God, speaking about Abraham, says, ‘I have chosen him so that he will direct his household and his children after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

The Israel community is characterized by the values and priorities of God, which is justice and righteousness. God demanded these values from them constantly. Wright noted that the phrase “the way of the Lord” and “doing righteousness and justice” became the most used summaries of Old Testament ethical values. Such ethical values gave Israel a distinct identity as a community and as a nation. God chose the people of Israel and that choosing entails ethical standards in the midst of the pagan world around them.

Israel’s distinct identity and uniqueness was mentioned by Moses to the people of Israel in his Deteronomic sermons before they cross over to occupy Canaan. What Israel had experienced in the past was unique because they were redeemed unlike other nations, and they receive revelation that no other nation had the privilege. God’s act was crystal clear in the narratives of the Torah when he redeemed them and established a covenant with them. God’s redemptive act resulted in a covenantal relationship between the nation of Israel and God. From their historical experiences, they were to know who God is, and how they should live, now that they come to the knowing of the reality of God.

\[13\] Ibid. 49, 50
\[14\] An example of this sense of uniqueness is Deuteronomy 4:32 – 40 when Moses asked the Israelites “whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? …Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time.” (ESV)

\[15\] Cf. Amos 3:2
\[16\] Cf. Psalm 147:19-20
Wright does not simply see the ethical principles of the Old Testament to be concerned with the Israelites only. He suggested that these ethical standards of Israel are an example how the world should be. He sees Israel as a paradigm. When understood in this light of Israel’s laws and society as a paradigm, it exhibits its potential to the best. The relevancy of Israel’s historical events and laws still stand today, as a large part of the globe traces its religious traditions from Abraham and Moses.

The theological angle of the Old Testament ethics reveals the identity of God as the source of the ethical principles. The social angle establish that if one takes to heart the reality of God, then living in a righteous manner would be in obedience and response to the will and ways of God. The unique experience of the revelation and redemption of Israel gave them the unique responsibility to live a holy life in the midst of all the nations that do not adhere to such values. This social angle of the Old Testament ethics is thus expressed in Israel’s distinctiveness and uniqueness as a nation, making Old Testament ethics not a mere philosophical thought but a whole community’s ethical response to a unique historical event.

4.1.3 The Economic Angle (the Land)

The economic angle of the Old Testament ethics, according to Wright entails the land, in particular the land the Israelites dwells. The land was of major importance to the nation of Israel; it bears theological and ethical importance. This importance is seen and expressed by the writers of the Old Testament many times. The Torah describes the promise of the land, first to Abraham and then to the children of Israel. The entire writing of the Torah, with the exception of Genesis, is basically the journey and the toil of the Israelites towards this Promised Land. Later writings describe how they entered the land and established a kingdom. The traumatic loss of the land during
their exile in Babylon is vividly expressed, and their return to the land and their resettlement after the exile became dominant themes in the Old Testament.

Three major promises to Abraham was a descendant, a blessing and a land. In the Pentateuch, the first two promises were fulfilled leaving the last to be fulfilled only in the Book of Joshua. In the continuing story of the Old Testament, the land became a major theme and understanding of Israel as a nation. The Old Testament narratives revolve heavily around the occupancy of the land, the division of the land, the loss of the land and the re-acquirement of the land. In Old Testament understanding, the land was closely linked to their nationalism and their God. Their identity as a nation of Israel would make sense only if they worship the God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac, and if they dwell in the land that was promised. Without their land, they felt that they lost their identity as the people of God; and they find it impossible to worship the God of their ancestors. So much so that they questioned how they could even sing praise when they were in exile in Babylon.\(^\text{17}\) The land was part of the redemption too.

The social construct of the Israelites was intimately and intricately bound up with the economic structure of the land, the division, tenure and use of the land. The amount of importance portrayed by the Old Testament writers on the land shows how their ethical standards were understood in relation to the land. The land was a divine gift from God; they live in it because God has given it to them. They were to remember that the land they were dwelling in was a provision of God through Abraham and Moses. It was a declaration of Israel’s dependency on God. What the enjoyed was not always theirs; they did not even have the desire to want it until God promised them. Despite their grumbling and murmuring, God kept his promise and set them afoot in the

\(^{17}\) Cf. Psalm 137
land of milk and honey. Moses in Deuteronomy urged the Israelites that they should never forget their dependence on God even when they enjoy the promise of Canaan.

“And you shall make response before the LORD your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.’”

The prosperity and the possession of the land stood as a proof of the relationship between God and the nation of Israel. The land is a gift from God, and God reserve the ownership of the land. It must be remembered that this divine ownership entails the Israelites to care for the land in accordance to the covenantal relationship they had established. Even though the land was gifted to them, they have no right to abuse it as it was still God’s land. The ethical relationship between the land and the spirituality of the Israelites was clear in the later narratives of the Old Testament, when Israel turn away from God, their land and their crops failed. This relation and the subsequent failure were explicitly expressed by prophets such as Elijah, Jeremiah and Hosea. The land was part of the redemptive history of the Israelites.

Though Wright take a systematic approach to understand the ethics of the Old Testament, other theologians and scholars contend that these ethical standards should be understood only from reading the entire event as a single story. Takes on understanding biblical ethics varied widely from a literal interpretation to that of a very liberal one.

18 Deuteronomy 26:5 – 10 (ESV)
Old Testament ethics does not begin with an abstract theory of virtue, neither was it imparted with a perfect standard; it bears marks of imperfection, which is very important in later Christian understanding of the Old Testament ethics since Christ is seen as the fulfillment and the completion of those ethical prerogatives. The ethics of the Old Testament is a morality designed by God for his people, whose fulfillment can be found in higher ethics. The story of Old Testament displays the expedition of the people of God into that ethical journey. Reading from the Torah to the later prophets, there is a “progress from the external to the internal, from the form to the substance, the true morality.”

Scholars such as Bruce stressed on the method of understanding the ethics of the Old Testament that it should be understood and examined not in parts but as a whole. This is the reason behind all the difficulties in understanding certain parts of Old Testament narrative which seemed go against human conscience. Partial examination yield only partial understanding, resulting in invariably mistaken views and imperfect representations.

“Critics will easily find difficulties in the Old Testament that “violate every canon of conscience” if they do not make an effort to understand the method of Revelation and the divine purpose of grace that runs like a golden thread through Hebrew history from the beginning to its end.”

One needs to understand the ethics and morality of the Old Testament in the light of Israel’s struggle and deliverance, its history and the environment they lived in. Fundamental principles of the Old Testament ethics and morality should first be understood, or attempt to be understood, then only should one attempt to provide solutions through these biblical ethics. Bruce asserted that Old Testament ethics should not be understood through speculative science because Old Testament ethics is

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19 Bruce, The Ethics of the Old Testament, 2
20 Ibid.7
historical in its origin and method.²¹ Old Testament ethics examined the revelation in biblical theology to show how Israel in its purpose and actions met the ethical standards.

Bruce further contrasts the ethics of the Old Testament with its surrounding cultures. He contended that there is a great difference in their conception of God and of man’s ethical relationship to that God. Contrasting the Greeks and the Alexandrian ideology in God, Bruce asserted that God is barely personal and a personal relationship was never realized. To the surrounding cultures that prevailed during the times of the Old Testament, from their ethical point of view, they could not even “rise beyond the morality of the state, or that morality which would realize its ideal by abstraction from all that is earthly and sensuous. But where morality is merged in politics, or where the ethical life is conceived of as deliverance from the defilements of corporeal life, or as a mystical elevation to some super sensuous sphere, it is clear that no progress in ethics is possible.”²² The relation morality between man and God supersedes that of a relation between man and man.

Waldemar Janzen in his book “Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach” however suggested 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.²³

Old Testament ethics set God as the grounds for morals and all good is seen as a product of his will. Morality revolves around God and he is the personal pattern after which the life of man ought to be shaped. Unlike other cultures that saw evil and

²¹ Cf. Ibid., 9 – 12
²² Ibid. 13
suffering as something isolated or a necessity of human guilt, the Old Testament offers a story to explain the fall of mankind, which rises out of free choice, and the need of the ethical thereafter.

### 4.2 Principles of Morality in the Old Testament

There is a great moral purpose that runs through the entire narrative and laws of the Old Testament, especially in the history of Israel; and this morality or ethics has a distinct doctrine of good and of duty. In biblical theology, man is the ultimate creation of God, and this masterpiece is given dominion over all the other creations. While most other ethical thoughts outside biblical theology sees man as a product of nature, the Old Testament portrays man as the ultimate creation of God, who has dominion over all things as oppose to him being a slave and victim of the natural world. Man is given authority and freedom to enjoy personal liberty. Nevertheless, the “ultimate goal, to which the whole Old Testament moves, is the establishment of a kingdom of righteousness, in which all shall share in the blessings promised to the faithful patriarch; and they shall be called Abraham’s children who have Abraham’s faith.”

Though Israel often lost sight of their divine calling and often proved themselves unworthy of their divine election, we see the fundamental goal of the Israelites repeated again and again in the writings of the Prophets, the Psalms and the Wisdom literature. Their existence has a continuous development throughout the Old Testament. Of all their struggles, their struggle to posses the Promised Land may have been the most strenuous effort they have made. The association of the land with the covenant is undoubtedly of great importance in their faith and in their understanding of the covenant. In relation to Wright’s theory of the economic angle of the Old

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24 Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament*, 20
Testament, Bruce rightly said that the “most strenuous moral effort of the nation is to be directed to making their land God’s land, to realize in their home in Palestine a symbol of the eternal home, a shadow of the Supreme Good.”

In the course of their ethical journey, as a mark of their obedience to the laws and the covenant, earthly goods were often spoken of as the end of moral efforts. In the Torah, the material blessings and the fruits of the land of Canaan was largely a part of the desire of man. However, this external blessing was of worth only when they were understood and coupled with the higher blessings of God revealed in his favour and presence. Later prophets urged and taught the Israelites that they should set their hearts on the laws and statues of God and not on mere temporal possessions. Prophets such as Habakkuk preached that they should rejoice in the God of their salvation even when all the fruit of the land and trees fails.

This moral development from an understanding of blessings in the form of temporal goods to seeing God as the ultimate treasure was very difficult for the children of Israel.

4.2.1 Objective and Subjective Principles

Morality in the Old Testament is rarely about an individual good; it has always been collective. It is not based on individual conscience but upon the collective conscience of the nation. The prophets often pointed out this ideology when they declare that Israel is the chosen one; they often spoke of as a nation and never as an individual. They were to be morally worthy as a people, not individually. Individualism was not encouraged because Israel’s morality was not based on personal conscience, neither was it a product of an individual interpretation of the law, nor was it a personal revelation. God is the source of the ethical and the morals, God is the divine law-giver,

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25 Ibid.
26 Cf. Habakkuk 3: 17, 18
and God impart them to a nation. This, to Bruce, is the objective principle of Old Testament ethics and morality.

“The objective principle of Old testament morality is just the will and character of God, as revealed to man. The basis of ethics is not found in the moral consciousness, since sin has defaced the image of God in man, and the human spirit requires to be awakened to its deepest needs. God speaks and man must obey. The will of Jehovah is the one ethically good thing for Israel, for it is the will of the covenant God, who has chosen them to be “the people of His own possession.””27

Bruce on the other hand suggested that the subjective principle of the Old Testament ethics and morality is a free and loving obedience of the will of God.28 This act of unhesitating, implicit and trustful obedience is commended as the primary virtue of the believer of the faithful. As obedience to the will of God and his commands is virtue, disobedience is sin. The morality of Israel is demonstrated in stages of progress from the Patriarch, through the times of Moses, to the period of the prophets, where we see a deepening in sin, as well as a deepening in the implications of the Old Testament ethics and morality.

4.2.2 Development of the Principles

Israel’s history is closely knitted with the development of their religious teachings. Their understanding of the laws and the ethical grew and progressed with their history. Their faith is deeply rooted in their history of deliverance and restoration. Since they stand in personal and moral relation to their personal and moral God, the ethics and morality of the Old Testament had both “a theistic and a naturalistic basis.”29 Nevertheless, the origin and the process of development of the Old Testament ethics had always been a subject of debate.

27 Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament*, 23
28 Cf. Ibid. 25
29 Ibid. 30
The late eighteenth century saw competing philosophies that were against traditional biblical thought. Philosophers such as Hegel were often seen as a threat to the fundamental beliefs of the church. The idea that the God of the Bible having sprung out of the worship of nature was a rationalistic belief in the fields of many academics. There have been many adherents to this concept even amongst theologians and scholars of history and ethics alike. Later opposition to the Hegelian thought however recognized Judaism as an intermediate stage between the old pantheistic worship and the later Christian theology. Nonetheless, the idea of the development of the biblical God from a nomadic tribal God close to nature is still a stand many theologians held. One such famous writer would be Karen Armstrong, but with a fresh outlook on the development and understanding of the history.\textsuperscript{30} With the development of understanding in their journey, their concept of holiness and ethics must have developed especially when they came in contact with other cultures of the Ancient Near East. Their time in Babylon, the time which is believed to be the complete compilation of the Torah, must also have significant influence in the development.

Biblical scholars such as Bruce however strongly condemn such ideology as it undermines the supremacy of god in the imparting of morality. Bruce even goes to the extent of rejecting Graff and Wellhausen documentary theory on ground that it represented “the religion of Israel, not as originating in divine act or acts of grace, but as springing from a purely natural source.”\textsuperscript{31} Contrast to Bruce, others have contended that the idea of God, not necessarily God himself, must have developed from the idea of tribal god or gods to an ethical monotheism. Such idea does not sit comfortable in the minds of many theologians as the concept of holiness in the Pentateuch could easily be subjected to human development. Holiness is understood as being a revelation from

\textsuperscript{31} Bruce, \textit{The Ethics of the Old Testament}, 31
God out of his nature. God appeared to the children of Israel as a moral being who demands holiness. The concept of God’s holiness is present even from the early writings of the Pentateuch, thus to many is a divine revelation, and not a development.

4.2.3 Determiner of the Principles

Biblical code of ethics and morality does not stand alone when understood and taken into cultural context. Many communities around the same time and later exhibit similar codes. The famous Hammurabi Code had always been a subject of scrutiny even in examining biblical code of ethics. However, even code such as that of Hammurabi proved the existence of ancient legal tradition going as far as the Code of Ur-nammu and before. These codes often have many similarities with covenant codes of the Torah indicating that Israel’s legal traditions developed from such similar background.

In biblical understanding of the Old Testament, God is the overseer and the source of ethics. God made his character and will known to man in words and deeds, thus generating their ethical concept of God. God is the ultimate one grand positive principle of all their moral life. To the Israelites, God himself is the holy and prototype of morality and conduct. God is immanent and transcendent in the Old Testament resulting in a very divine and mysterious understanding of God himself. Therefore, the Israelites’ understanding of ethics and morality was not a very simple one. Their religious belief was intimately connected with their ethical life; and this connection was by and through their concept of the character of God. “Here Jewish ethics joins on to theology; but the theology itself is essentially ethical.”

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33 Cf. Exodus 21 - 23
34 Dr. W.L. Davidson, *Theism and Human Nature* (Burnett Lectures), 53, as quoted by Bruce in *The Ethics of the Old Testament*, 39.
God is revealed in the Old Testament though his names. He is *Elohim*, the God of power; *El-Shaddai*, the all-powerful, all-sufficient; *Adonai*, the Lord, and so on. These names were the ways by which the Israelites understood God, which in turn affect their understanding of ethics. These names of God implied “moral attributes, and contains a strong affirmation of the self-existence of God, and consequently of His personality.” 35 These attributes find their way in the expression of the laws which molded the external life of the Israelites. Virtues such as righteousness were an ethical conduct with shallower meaning when compared to New Testament theology. Though deeper expression of the law emerged only in the prophets, the determiner of them was without a doubt God himself.

History of religion shows that the ethical and moral standards of each religion have effectively been shaped by their perception of God, and the biblical faith is no exception. “As the gods is, so are the people” and the Old Testament exhibit the nature and character of their God in their laws and ethics. Their highly ethical conception of God as found in the Old Testament has often been a testament of God’s revelation to the people of Israel rather than any naturalistic development.

4.3 Ethical Themes in the Old Testament

Major themes of ethics in the Old Testament includes ethics towards nature, communal and economical ethics concerning the Hebrew community, ethics in family and in individual life, and ethics in governance and civil laws. To the Israelites, the role of religion and its rituals cannot be separated from other spheres of the life; for this reason, religion and religious ethics are embedded in the aforementioned areas of

35 Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament*, 42
ethics. Though the Old Testament is a collection of over thirty books, the ethics and faith of the Old Testament is heavily based on the five books of Moses, or the Torah.

4.3.1 Ethics towards nature

The biblical narrative began with the creation of the world with God as the creator and the central focus of the entire narrative. When God created man in the book of Genesis, man is given the responsibility to care the natural world; he is in charge of all the naming and to be the master of it all.\(^{36}\) Man is seen as the care-taker of creation, and this concept is not taken lightly in the Torah as the story of the Israelites revolves around their quest for the Promised Land and the harshness of nature is often seen as the hand of God.

Israel understood that the land or the earth in God’s and that it is a gift from him. The Psalmist expressed this divine ownership when he stated that the “earth and everything it contains are the LORD’s. The world and all who live in it are his.”\(^{37}\) The earth is a divine gift from God as the Psalmist assert, “…the earth hath he given to the children of men.”\(^{38}\) This claim that the earth belongs to God and is a gift from him is the foundation of the Old Testament understanding of ethics towards nature.

However, it must be remembered that the writers of the Old Testament are not this century environmentalists, thus their writing scarcely reflects an attempt to safeguard nature. Nonetheless, they do suggest and shows pattern and examples how man could and should live in harmony with nature. Even though the idea of conserving nature had not arisen in their thought, it does not mean they do not contain ethical principles that may be useful in this contemporary world. The Old Testament,

\(^{36}\) Cf. Genesis 1:28 – 30
\(^{37}\) Psalm 24:1 (GW)
\(^{38}\) Psalm 115:16 (KJV)
especially the Torah contains ethical codes that may be useful in the present world when understood in context.

Wright explained that divine ownership of the earth is justified in the goodness of creation. When God created the world and he saw it, he acclaimed that it was good. Wright explained this goodness in three ways. Firstly, creation is good only because it was the work of a good God. Secondly, creation is good independent of the presence and observation of man. The goodness of creation is not an affirmation of man after the work, but of God himself. The goodness and beauty of creation is “theologically and chronologically prior to human observation. It is something God saw and affirmed before humanity was around to see.”39 And this certificate of goodness is understood as the seal of divine approval, thus concluding that our world and every part of creation have an intrinsic value to God. It is valued by God, who is the source of all values. The value of the earth is not placed by man, but rather that we take our value from creation. Thirdly, creation is good because of the purpose of God ordained in it. The goodness of creation is the affirmation and expression of the goodness of God.

In a world surrounded by pagan cultures and beliefs, it was also necessary for the nation of Israel to understand that nature or creation is distinct from God, that is to say nature is not God. Nature is distinct from God, but it is dependent of God. The role of God in the working of nature was apparently understood by the Israelites, because God would often work through the forces of nature. The distinction between the Creator and the created was essential in their thought. Pantheistic worldview was not and could not be accepted in biblical theology for this very reason.

The Hebrew Bible advocated the care for nature and the respect towards the land. Probably for better understanding and the expounding of the Scripture, the Old

39 Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 107
Testament writers do personify nature in a way that they spoke of it as though it was a person. The heavens and the earth are spoken of as bearing witness, declaring God’s glory, rejoicing, groaning, and so on. However, personalizing nature to attribute ontological personal status would result in the depersonalization of God and demoralization of man’s relation with God.

Man’s role in the care-taking of the natural world is part of the understanding that the earth or the land is a gift from God and that it belongs to him. Man is not equal to animals and other created beings but is made in the image of God. Mankind is seen as having a distinction from all other created being since he can commune with God. He has a special purpose and a responsibility towards other creations. However, the superiority of man should be understood in a way that he is above creation. Man should remember that he too is created and that too from the dust of the ground, to which he eventually returns in death. Man is a creature from the soil, but this creation was also a good creation created in glory exhibiting the goodness of God.

Creation is also understood as the paradigm for the eschatology. The goodness of creation as it was in the Garden of Eden had become a symbol of hope and understanding of the future world. This imagery of peace and tranquility that must have been in the Garden of Eden was expressed by the prophets of the world to come. This eschatological understanding of God’s creation was necessary due to the fall of man. The first man and woman had sinned and disobeyed God thus leading to their dispulsion from the garden and were condemned to work, toil and suffer. Man’s disobedience to God’s command leads to their sufferings and their loss of natural order.

The prophets of Israel would often spoke out of the evils in the hearts of the people and the cause it was had on the society. Their social evils were even linked to the failing and destruction of the natural world. The prophet Hosea declared,
“There is no faith, no love, and no knowledge of God in the land. There is cursing, lying, murdering, stealing, and adultery. People break my laws, and there is one murder after another. That is why the land is drying up, and everyone who lives in it is passing away. Wild animals, birds, and fish are dying.”\footnote{Hosea 4:1 – 3 (GW)}

Though man is expelled from the paradise of the garden, man’s responsibility does not cease, he still has a duty to carry out. The need of redemption in nature is also understood because the prophets see the world as falling apart because of sins. They understood that God is the source and sustainer of life and the created world, but man in sin had destroyed that order. The call for restoration is not only God’s doing but also man’s responsibility.

4.3.2 Economic Ethics in the community

With its ethical angle on the land and the theology of creation, the Old Testament laid many instructions regarding the welfare of the community, especially in its economical terms. Man’s responsibility towards nature was accompanied with his relation with man. It was impossible for the Israelites to be harmonious with nature and be religious without being in agreement with his fellow men. Israel’s experience in history, with its journey of redemption and principles of creation, forms a comprehensive system in their economical community.

The earth is a gift of God and owned by God, thus all resources are God’s and are meant to be share and should be made available to all. In biblical theology, one has no right to claim over a particular resource. The creation narrative and the following stories do not justify privatization of land, resource or property. God entrusted the created world to all mankind and the responsibility as well as the resources are to be shared. Israel’s rights on land and property were firmly grounded in the belief that the
land is God’s gift, and thus their equal distribution among the tribes of Israel. The claim to personal ownership was never accepted as final answer to the economic moral argument in the Old Testament. The land and everything in it with all its possible resources are entrusted to mankind and God holds us responsible and answerable to himself of others who may have less and in need of the possessions we own.

God’s command to be fruitful and increase was a reference to multiply in offspring and in the growth of the population. Such growth entails growth in material production and in the development and harnessing of the natural resources.

“Just as the right to access to, and use of, the resources of the earth is a shared right that sets moral limitations to the right of private ownership of resources, so too the right to consume or enjoy the end product of the economic process is limited by the needs of all. We are as responsible to God for what we do with what we produce, as we are for what God has given us ‘raw.’”\(^{41}\)

The theology of the fallen world also comes into the understanding of the economical ethics of the community. Because of man’s evil desire and selfish ambitions, natural resources had become the cause of strife and battle in the history. Instead of sharing and have equitable access to the land’s resources, mankind had polluted and abused them resulting in them being hoarded and accumulated by a few. The denial of certain resources by a stronger few had been the cause of many social evils. Since biblical times, the stronger few had often been those in power. The Old Testament often portrays such oppressive rulers with God ridiculing their assumption that they owned the land and the resources as though they have created them.\(^ {42}\) Man is to be laborious and work is seen as a necessity. The people of Israel had a fair and reasonable concept of work ethics because they are taught religiously that the fall of man had resulted in them working their sweat so that they may eat their food. Man is to

\(^{41}\) Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 149
\(^{42}\) Cf. Ezekiel 29:3
work and labour as part of the ordeal that had happened in the history. In accepting their history the Israelites accepted their command to work and labour without complaint. The human relationship in their economic work was part of the fall and was also evidently corrupted in many ways.

If man attempt to take control over the weak, they are to remember their tribulation in Egypt when there were oppressed by the Egyptians. Because they suffered, they were to make sure the weaker people in their community did not suffer. Their time in Egypt and the exodus that follows stood as a reminder of God’s redemption and goodness, as that deliverance was not mere deliverance from the hands of Pharaoh but as Wright explained, their freedom was “fourfold freedom: (1) politically, from the tyranny of a foreign autocratic power; (2) socially, from intolerable interference in their family life; (3) economically, from the burden of enforced slave labour; and (4) spiritually, from the realm of foreign gods into the unhindered worship of the LORD and covenant relationship with him.”

It is noteworthy that their social and economic liberation is closely linked with their spiritual. In the Exodus, we see God’s concern and promise for deliverance is seen in the midst of his people being under economic oppression and injustice by the stronger community. The Abrahamic blessing which God had promised to them was too an economic blessing which they were to enjoy as a community.

The biblical ethics towards the community did not stop with just the people of Israel, but with also their servants and slaves. Unlike the countries and nations that surrounded them, they were to treat their slaves with care. Contemporary ideas of slavery may question the biblical instructions on slavery, but this too must be understood with context. Slaves in the Old Testament were not to be oppressed and

43 Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 156
controlled against their will. The laws demanded that they should be treated right and lay several instruction regarding their welfare. They were given an opportunity of freedom after six years of service, and clear legal laws were ordained regarding their physical treatment;\textsuperscript{44} payment of hired workers were to be made promptly and in full.\textsuperscript{45} In comply with the Ten Commandments, they were also supposed to have their servants and all workers rest on the Sabbath.

The imbalance in the economy of the community is seen as a disobedience to the command of God. If the Israelites were true to their beliefs, then their economy would show harmony without having poor and the neglected. Poverty is not viewed as evil but they understood that poverty will lead to other social evil. The writer of Proverbs asked God that he be sufficient in his need, otherwise if he is poor, he would steal and dishonor the name of God.\textsuperscript{46}

Control and limitations are made with regard to the accumulation of wealth. Regulations in the form of religious rituals were also there to control the flow of resources. Even when it comes to religious sacrifices, they were to bring prescribed animals or birds based on their economic status. Lending or loaning was also permissible to them but with strict regulated conditions. The jubilee then also functions as a safeguard and regulator against taking advantage. The jubilee enables the weaker and poorer people to have equal distribution and opportunity to start over afresh. The Old Testament writers spoke against exploitation of those who are socially, economically and ethically weak. The laws and mandates of the people revolve such that the legislation on poverty was part of their moral and ethical understanding. It was not possible to be a keeper of the law and neglect the poor and the weak. A person

\textsuperscript{44} Cf. Exodus 21:1 – 16, 20 – 21, 26 – 27
\textsuperscript{45} Cf. Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14 – 15; Isaiah 58:3; Jeremiah 22:13
\textsuperscript{46} Proverbs 30:8, 9
would be a law abiding citizen of the nation of Israel only if he care for the poor. It was a command from God that there should not be any poor among them because a poor community would mean oppression or that God was not blessing them richly.\(^{47}\) God provides and bless them abundantly, and for that reason there should be no sight of poverty and oppression amongst them.

### 4.3.4 Cultural and Individual ethics

The nation of Israel was called to be a holy nation, distinct from all the other nations around it. Balaam’s oracles in the book of Numbers also spoke of Israel’s distinction as “a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations!”\(^{48}\)

Their distinction and uniqueness was what make them stand out among the ancient civilizations of its times. Their belief in a one God was probably very unique to the understanding of the cultures then as all of their surrounding nations were polytheistic and, or pantheistic. The ancient civilizations around Nile and the Mesopotamian region was very influential and traces of their influence in religions and cultures can still be found even in modern cultures all over the world.

A large portion of the law in the Torah is dedicated to prohibitions and rejections, which, to many readers sounds very pessimistic. These prohibitions must be understood in context with the cultures they were surrounded. Israel was a new nation amongst the already existing great kingdoms and nations of civilizations such as Egypt, Canaan, and the Mesopotamian. The prohibition was very specific when God told Moses, “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes.”\(^{49}\)

Many of the prohibitions in the Torah and the Old Testament

\(^{47}\) Deuteronomy 15:4 – 5  
\(^{48}\) Numbers 23:9 (ESV)  
\(^{49}\) Leviticus 18:3 (ESV)
may not necessarily be inherently wicked on their own, but was rather prohibited or condemned because of their connection to idolatry in the Canaanite religion and cultures. Adoption of any form of these traditions and cultures was prohibited with uncompromising strictness. The execution of such laws was a necessity because Israel was to stand out amongst all these nations, and they were to set themselves apart from all such influences. The idea of a superior race must have also been part of their understanding because they believed that they were specially called and delivered by God himself. The biblical laws prohibited cultic prostitution and all kinds of sexual perversions, condemned and outlawed occult practices such as spiritism, mediums, witchcraft, necromancy and divinations. A common practice in other culture for religious matter was child sacrifice, but Israel was never to practice such rituals. Deuteronomy describes such rituals of the other nations as abomination.\textsuperscript{50} In regards to many of the practices that seem too minute and ineffective to be prohibited, Wright explained, “the rationale behind the ban on some cultural practices that seem obscure to us now lay on their connection with perverted Canaanite religious cults.”\textsuperscript{51} These practices may include prohibitions or regulations regarding the forms of cutting hairs or beards, cross-dressing, tattooing, etc. If Israel fails to stand out and absorb the cultures and influences of the surrounding cultures instead of resisting and destroying them, then Israel would forfeit the very reason for their election as a holy nation.

The household of the Israelites was a three tier structure with the tribe at the top, the clan, and then the family house or the father’s house. With the establishment of the tabernacle in the wilderness, the twelve tribes of Israel were systematically divided and settled down. This kinship grouping continues for a very long time in the history of Israel. Wright asserted that this household-land unit was central to his ethical triangle

\textsuperscript{50} Cf. Deuteronomy 12 :30 – 31
\textsuperscript{51} Wright, \textit{Old Testament Ethics for the People of God}, 329
relationship between God, Israel and the land.  

The family was vital in understanding the covenant to the Hebrew community. Circumcision was the fundamental sign of the covenant Israel enjoyed with God. The act was carried out within the family on all male children as a symbol of their faith. This act was a metaphor of the covenantal obedience, an outward representation of their circumcised heart. In celebrating Israel’s deliverance from the slavery of the Egyptians, they celebrated the Passover as a family. The annual family ritual enables them to remember their plight in Egypt, sufferings and journey to the Promised Land. An important act such as this was a family event and not of a ritual in the temple. This underlines the importance of family in the Hebrew community. Following the feast of the Passover in Exodus was the consecration of the first-born. Israel was a people of God because God had saved them from death. In claiming the first-born son of each family, God claims the succeeding generations of the Israelites. This become essential in the continuity of the covenant God made with the children of Israel.

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52 Cf. Ibid. 339  
53 Cf. Exodus 13:1 – 16
The importance of family life and the values attached to it may be said to have culminated in the Ten Commandments, also called the Decalogue. The latter half of the Ten Commandments deals with the protection of the family. The commandment demands respect of parental authority, sexual integrity and economic viability. Respect due to parents was very importance in their understanding of the ethics, so much so that disrespect to parental authority could lead to penalties ordered by the civil courts. Sexual integrity was expressed extensively in the laws in the form of offences.

The story of the patriarchs in the Old Testament speaks of human flaws. The narratives gave a realistic portrait of these characters and their families even of their negative sides. Stories of deception, lies, abuse, favouritism, jealousy, failures and competiveness have filled the books of the Old Testament, from patriarchs to kings. These stories stand as a testament of human faults and weakness. The Old Testament tried not to portray the figures of faith as super-humans but present them in all their faults and glory. These short-comings were included to expound and explain the grace and goodness of their God in spite of their leader’s weaknesses.

The ethics and values placed on family did not end with the laws of the Torah alone, but can be found in the Wisdom Literature and in the preaching of the prophets. Family is seen and advocated as the source and pinnacle of strong moral support in the community. The Psalmist pronounce blessings on family life and marriage, the book of Proverbs advised of family relationships and warns of adultery and disgrace, and the Song of Solomon is an idyllic portrayal of sexual love in marriage. The book of Ecclesiastes describes the joy of marriage but suggest of greater importance in life than just happiness.

It may not be appropriate to distinguish between social and personal ethics when it comes to Old Testament ethics because the ethical principles and values of the
Israelites are shaped by the structure of the community. However, we see personal virtues often mentioned in the Old Testament that had become examples or paradigm for good individual ethics. The Old Testament displays what kind of community God desires and through this model of society individual plays an important role. Contemporary understanding may demand individual goodness first and that in turn shaping the society. In the Old Testament however, the individual ethics are shaped by the society or the community because the community comes first. Ethical codes and laws were laid first for the community, and individuals were to adjust and obey accordingly. In the writings and the prophets we find obligations and call for individuals living a upright life before the sight of God and men.

Janzen speaks of patterns or paradigm of ideal behaviours which he believes governed the ethical decision making of the nation of Israel, and these patterns and paradigm are shaped by the narratives of the Old Testament. They are patterns of the ideal family, priests, kings and prophets. Characters such as Job, Samuel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and others had become a symbol of personal ethics in the realm of the Old Testament. Job’s ethical life includes his disciplined life against lust and adultery, his honesty in trade, his kindness and justice towards his slaves, his compassion to the poor, his rejection of idolatry and materialism, and his praise-worthy treatment towards his land and labourers. Job controlled his thoughts and tongue and had shown a great amount of hospitality; he became a symbol of a good ethical man. The prophet Samuel asked his listeners at the near end of his life if he had ever extorted or bribed anyone during his lifetime. Individual accountability became a matter of great importance in the understanding of an ethical individual life. Personal scrutiny into their lives was

\[54\] Cf. Waldermar Jenzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach*
essential in order establish a family and community that was holy and distinct as the
God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac demanded.

4.3.5 Justice, Righteousness and Ethics in governance

A substantial portion of the Old Testament, particularly the Torah is dedicated
to governmental issues. Few narratives and the laws dealt with the internal political
struggles of Israel, and fewer of those with its neighbour. Like the Israel’s covenantal
relationship with God, Israel was also taking part in making treaties with individuals
and nations involving commitments and obligations both parties has to fulfill. The
covenantal relation they had with God may be said was used as a blueprint and
understanding of making accord with other parties, be it a nation or a king. This type of
accord or agreement was by the Israelites within themselves in the realms of commerce
or family, and as a nation amongst other tribes and kingdoms. This was necessary
because the world, as God created it, is a world of ethnic diversity with a “kaleidoscope
of national, cultural and political variations.”

Man is a social being and lives in a
society or a community; and this social nature with all its socio-political structure is
part of God’s creative purpose. This need or craving to live in a community is
theologically understood as a result of man being created in God’s image. Especially in
Christian theology, this is understood in the communion of the holy Trinity.

Biblical understanding of governance may actually begin with the expulsion of
Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after their disobedience; disobedience has
consequence and penalties must be met. Legal order however may have appeared only
in the story of Cain when penalties were established for Cain’s murder of Abel.
Marshall stated that the story of Cain “shows us that just as ploughing, hunting, city
building and music-making appeared on the earth in the earliest generations, so also

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55 Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God, 214
appeared a judicial, a legal order, what we would call now some sort of political order, separate from anarchy. Humankind has been given responsibility to maintain the just relations that God decrees."56

With the birth of the nation of Israel after their exodus from Egypt, Moses was their leader having the role of both leader and priest. Theocracy was part of the governance of the Israelites, with human obligations and control at the same time. After the death of Moses, judges govern the people in matters of national affairs. Later, like their surrounding nations, the children of Israel too wanted a king, and Saul was appointed under the prophet Samuel. In the development of Israel’s history since their exodus, they have gone through structural changes in their governance. Nevertheless, this may be seen as Israel’s desire for good leadership and good governance among themselves. With Moses as their prime example of excellence in leadership and governance, the leaders, kings and judges of the land were expected to be as righteous and kind as Moses was. This ethical perspective of governance was part of their understanding of the law and the covenant. The kings and rulers of the land were appointed by God through the prophets.

The greatest theme in the legal and governance system of Israel was probably justice and righteousness. The call for justice in the welfare of the people had been a central theme in many narratives of the Old Testament. The call for righteousness too had been the greatest factor for individual ethical life, which will in turn bring goodness and welfare to the community. This concern and call for justice and righteousness can be seen repeatedly in the books of the Old Testament in varying themes of history, economic and prophecy.

“The concern for justice pervades the entire Old Testament. It is found in the historical, legal, prophetic, and wisdom literature, and in the Psalms as well. It is found throughout the entire history of the Old Testament literature... The evidence shows that the concern for justice was one, if not the central, factor by which ancient Israel’s multifaceted societal life was united throughout its historical changes... No sphere of Israel’s life was exempt from concern for justice, and the LORD was known to be at work in all its spheres.”

The importance of justice is emphatically stressed by the writers of the Old Testament because God himself commanded them in the Torah, “Justice, and only justice, you shall follow...” In the Prophets, God reminded them again, “For the LORD love justice...” It was clear in the Old Testament understanding that if justice was discarded and not practiced, the society will fall apart. The stability of the cosmic order was also understood to have been founded in justice because God, the sustainer and creator of the universe is a God of justice, and justice and righteousness are part of God’s fundamental nature. The Psalmist expressed this fundamental belief when he says that “righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne.” The Old Testament celebrates and declares God as the God of justice.

Justice in the Hebrew מִשְׁפָּט mishpat is a reference to the process of litigation, legal ordinance and of one’s personal legal rights. The word appeared 421 times in the Old Testament signifying its immense importance in the theology and philosophy of the Old Testament. Justice in the Old Testament is rarely of equality but of equity. The poor and the widows are taken care of in accordance to their need. The oppression of the weak was condemned and seen as an act of injustice. The act of justice was part

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58 Deuteronomy 16:20 (ESV)
59 Isaiah 61:8 (ESV)
60 Psalm 97:2 (GW)
of the individual response to the call for righteousness. Two Hebrew words, צֶ֫דֶק tsedeq and שפט sapat are usually used in the translation and understanding of righteousness, with the former suggesting a norm by which other things are measured or a standard while the latter deals with judicial activity of putting things right. \(^6^2\) Jewish understanding of righteousness is rooted in the ethical standard that is fixed and fully what it should be, especially in reference to a straight path. Righteousness could be understood as ‘rightness’ applied in human actions and relationship, not in abstract or absolute broad way, but in accordance to the demand and nature of the relationship. The prevalence of righteousness and justice was a demand of the biblical covenant and the children of Israel see to it that it is carried out. The laws and the governance of the land revolve around this cry for justice and righteousness. The amount of narratives and laws dedicated to justice and righteousness is because God displayed his justice to them, God demanded it from them, and God had delivered justice to them many times.

In understanding the ethical relevance of Old Testament laws, criminal laws, case laws, family laws, religious laws or cultic laws such as sacrificial laws, and others are the constituents of the understanding. As mentioned, the legal system and the principles of governance of the nation of Israel were justice and righteousness, and the details of law thereof were simply an attempt to execute that desired justice and righteousness. The perspectives of the Israelites were diverted from a legalistic mindset to a thought of encouragement in the later writings of the Old Testament. The Psalmist is one example that encouraged the keeping of God’s law because his delight is in the observing of the laws. The Psalmist praises God for the laws as they are perfect, trustworthy, pure, and priceless; he delights in them and loves them. The eternal relevance of the law was also expressed by the writers.

\(^6^2\) Cf. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 255, 256
4.4 The Development of Ethics in the Prophets & the Writings

Expounding on the principles and values of the Torah, Old Testament writers, prophets and teachers interpreted and developed the ethics of the people. The Prophets and the Writings need not be considered a set of new ethics and value, rather the interpretation and the application of the principles in the Torah. In the Jewish tradition, the Torah is of great importance “to which the other major divisions of their Scriptures – Prophets and the Writings – were subordinate.” Nevertheless, in understanding the ethics of the Torah and the interpretation thereafter, it is necessary to understand the expression on the Torah made in the Prophets and the Writings in order to have a better perspective of the ethics in the Torah. From these writings, it can be understood how the Jewish community in the past understood their Scripture and how they must have applied it in their everyday life. From it, it may be understood how the prophets, kings and teachers were motivated and influenced.

4.4.1 The Prophets

There is a close relation between the Torah and the Prophets because the Prophets admonished the laws of the Torah and expound them vehemently in their teachings. There is an essential unity in teachings and understanding of the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament. They share similar perspective and purpose. The Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant of the Torah is primarily that unifying factor. The prophets of the Old Testament preached against the sins of the nation as it were a violation of the covenant towards God and the community with whom the covenant was made.

“The content of the messages of the prophets was derived largely from their understanding of the character of the God of the covenant. It was this God who had

63 T.B. Maston, Biblical Ethics (Mercer University Press, Georgia, 1967), 1
called them and sought to speak through them to the people. They spelled out God’s expectations of His people more specifically than the Law in certain areas, such as the political and the economic. There was a sense, however, in which the main burden of their preaching was an effort to call the people back to a proper understanding of and obedience to the Law.”

The relation of the Torah and the Prophets is evident in the themes and exposition of the prophets. The birth and development of this ethical principles through the Torah and the Prophets was explained by Rowley, “The seeds of ethical religion were planted at Sinai, and were later watered by prophetic teaching.” Though the Torah being the source of Old Testament ethics, the ethical teachings and its implications were more central in the writings of the Prophets. Unlike the Torah, the Prophets placed the ethical above the rituals of the law.

In Old Testament understanding, the concept of prophet goes as far as Abraham, Moses and even Gideon. Miriam, Deborah and others were also referred as prophetess. In the book of Exodus, Aaron is revealed as the prophet of Moses. Prophets in the Old Testament speaks on behalf of the person they represent and deliver the message. They were not philosophers or even a theologian; they were messengers in times of crisis to the people of God. They interpret of God’s word, but in relation to the world around them. They admonished the society and the people with moral insights and bring warnings to their follies. Even though the prophets showed great concern for the well being of the society, they were not social reformers. The passion for their concern towards the society lies in their concern for God’s will rather than the welfare of the community or the nation as a whole.

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64 Ibid. 35, 37
66 Cf. Exodus 7:1
For ease in understanding the principles and development of ethics among the prophets, the writings of the Prophets of the Old Testament may be classified as early prophets, eighth-century prophets, transitional prophets and other prophets.67

4.4.1.1 Early Prophets

The life and teachings of these prophets are accounted in I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings, along with Joshua and Judges. This classification is actually that of the Jewish system, classified as “The Early Prophets.” These books functioned a historical books, but they do not functioned as mere historical recordings as they were concerned with the will and purpose of God in regard to the people and nation of Israel. They were understood to have moral and ethical connotations behind the accounts. This ethical and moral connotation was understood in terms of justice, righteousness, mercy and holiness. Obedience was essential in putting these implications into practice, which was specifically spelled out in the latter chapters of the book of Joshua. In the book of Joshua, the people were called to love God, walk in his ways, keep his commandments and served him wholeheartedly. The expression of walking on his ways became a common instruction in the Old Testament in understanding obedience to the law of God.

In Judges, the writers revealed a pattern that Israel repeated over the years. They sinned by turning to other gods with their evil practices. God’s punishment and judgment came upon them and the people repented and cried unto God for mercy. God hears them and delivered them. After a while, they sinned again and the whole pattern is repeated again. God would deliver them in distinctive ways, through agents such as Samson, whose life too ended in a tragic manner.

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67 This categorization is based on the classifications and explanations of Maston’s *Biblical Ethics* (Mercer University Press, Georgia, 1967)
In the books of Samuel and Kings, God is the central figure of the account. Upon the demand of the nation for a king, God appointed Saul as the king of Israel through the prophet Samuel. It is the prophet Samuel that announced to Israel the ethical and religious conditions under which God may bless the king and the nation. In the book/ books of Kings both the people are called to keep God’s commandments and to walk in his ways. God is presented as a moral being and was therefore required to be worshipped with not only clean hands but with a pure heart. Though emphasis is not stressed on the ethical, God strongly condemns injustice. Such condemnation was very prevalent in the story of prophet such as Elijah.

Prophetic movement in the Old Testament flourished with the prophet Samuel whose statement “to obey is better than sacrifice” became the theme and guiding principles of all the prophets that followed after him. Nathan and Elijah revealed that God demanded justice, even from the king. When the prophet Nathan confronted King David of this adultery and the murder of Uriah, he asked David why he despised the word of God and did evil in God’s sight. Old Testament ethics here assert that the evil was done against God or in his sight. David recognized the nature of his sin when he said to Nathan that he sinned against the Lord. The sin committed is definitely against Uriah and his wife, but the sin was a sin because it violates the law of God. The evil was against the God who gave the law. The will of God was understood to be above the rights of man, which ultimately became the ethical principle in the expounding of the law by the prophets. “They were not standing for the rights of man, but for the will of

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68 Jewish Bible canonized I and II Kings as one book, though recent publication such as that of the JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh maintain the divisions.
69 I Samuel 15:22 (ESV)
70 Cf. II Samuel 12:1-13
God, for in their view man’s rights were sacred because they rested on the will of God.\textsuperscript{71}

The prophets defended the rights of the people, especially those of the weak and the oppressed, but it was done so because they considered such defense to be in harmony with nature and most importantly the will of God. Any sin or evil against man was basically a sin against God himself because it sin was a violation of God’s will for his people. This perspective of evil in its ethical realm was prevalent in the life, works, teachings and understandings of the prophets.

**4.4.1.2 Eighth-Century Prophets**

The prophets of the eighth-century B.C. were the great prophets of the Old Testament. They constitute largely of the Major Prophets and their works bring about the development of the relationship of religion and morality. They integrated the religion with its rituals and traditional with moral and ethical implications, which to them became the ultimate reason for all the structure and demands of the religion.

“Morality for them had no basis outside of religion, and religion was vindicated by morality.”\textsuperscript{72}

With these prophets there was a moralization of God which led to the in-depth implication of sin in the ethical understanding. They greatly reduced, and at some point eliminate, the emphasis and role of the ceremonial laws of the Torah. Obedience toward the moral law, to the prophets, was far more important in the eyes of God than the sacrificial and ceremonial laws. They denounced social evils and corruption, demanding righteousness and justice. They stood for the welfare of the poor, the orphaned, the widowed, the underprivileged and the oppressed.

\textsuperscript{71} H.H. Rowley, *Moses and the Decalogue* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1951), 95
\textsuperscript{72} Maston, *Biblical Ethics*, 44
The prophets did not see Israel as the only nation, but believed that God was God even to other nations though they may not accepted him as their God. This universal application of God above all nations made the prophets believed that all nations were accountable to him. God’s judgment was closely understood with the so called “day of the Lord.” Though scholars have debated over its origin and implications, the day of the Lord was seen as the day of judgment in which God is the ultimate Victor and all the enemies are crushed and defeated. It was believed to be a moment of purging and disciplining. However, in their message of God’s judgment, they also spoke of hope. The prophet Hosea spoke of God’s unconditional love despite the sins of men and God’s willingness to forgive and restore. The people are chosen by God and the prophet portrays them as God’s betroth, signifying the importance and indissolubility of the covenant. A promise of healing and love was also part of their understanding of God’s ethical nature. In their concept of the eschatology, God is the one who will judge the poor with righteousness, decide with equity for the meek and humble, and usher in the day of peace.

To the common man, sin was a neglect of the ritualistic regulations; but to the prophets, sin was a violation of the moral law which was to be taken seriously. The rituals and ceremonies were no longer an expression of genuine worship as these rituals were often used as a substitution to righteous living. It was this perception of substitution that the prophets spoke against vehemently. God, who was an ethical being do not accept this kind of substitution in the consideration of the prophets. The valid test of the reality of their worship was to be seen from the ethical results of their lives.

The prophet Amos was the prophet of justice because he saw the people and the rulers living in sin and corruption even though they were living in the time when Israel was at its peak of prosperity and power. Amos spoke of their destruction because their
foundation was falling apart, and the fact that they were the chosen nation did not guarantee the protection. The people of Israel were urged to understand that responsibilities were part of their privileges. Amos attacked the social evils of his day, in particular the oppression of the poor while others were living in luxury and self-indulgence.

Hosea, however, was the prophet of love as spoke of God’s unconditional love despite the judgment that may befall them. Hosea’s unique experience with his unfaithful wife Gomer gave a very distinct ethical principle of the character of God. It produced the profound understanding on the idea of love in the Old Testament. Israel is God’s betroth, and though Israel has sinned, God’s love had overwhelmed his wrath. The figure of God as the husband and Israel as the betroth became a metaphor for Israel’s relationship with God, which was extensively later used by prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel.73 God’s wounded heart but surviving love is the central theme of the book of Hosea.

Amongst the prophets of the Old Testament, Isaiah may definitely be considered the greatest in Old Testament theology. Isaiah’s though is dominated by the transcendence of God which was expressed in his holiness; thus holiness is emphasized greatly in the book of Isaiah. The ethical conception of holiness which is prevalent in Isaiah’s teachings displays God to be of a separate moral purity, free from any form of defilement. Emphasis of such holiness is recorded in Isaiah’s vision of the Lord in the Temple. Isaiah characterized God as the “holy one of Israel.” Therefore, holiness to the prophet was equivalent to belonging to God. Belonging to God entails a separation from sin and evils of the world. In the latter part of Isaiah, peace also became the essential of ethical living as it was God’s desire.

73 Cf. Jeremiah 2:2; 3:1; Ezekiel 16:32
A contemporary of Isaiah in the southern kingdom was the prophet Micah, who preached against the sins of the cities and Jerusalem in particular. He spoke against unworthy rulers who were idle and greedy, and false prophets. Micah’s call to do “what is right, to love mercy, and to live humbly with God”74 is said to have summed up the teachings of the prophets and is considered as the most comprehensive declaration of the ethical teachings in the Old Testament.

4.4.1.3 Transitional Prophets

The transitional prophets may include Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Most of these prophets have similar tone in their prophetic messages like that of their predecessors. Zephaniah’s approach was similar to that of Amos with the pronouncement of God’s judgment upon Jerusalem because they had rebelled against God, defiled themselves and oppressed the underprivileged. Nahum spoke of vengeance and that God will bring judgment even upon other nations because God reigns over all of them. Habakkuk questioned the suffering of the righteous and how the evil neighbouring nation could be used as the instrument of punishment to the people of God. He did not find solutions to his perplexed questions but found that righteousness is the reason to live and that too by faith. Habakkuk’s perception of righteous living by faith became the most frequently quoted passage in the New Testament.75

Jeremiah and Ezekiel are believed to both had their ministry during the seventh and sixth century; and they both sounded like Amos in their prophetic ministry with their defense for the fatherless, the widow and the needy. Their message reverberate the theme of their predecessor that God demanded kindness, justice and righteousness. The people in their times were doing too much evil and they do not even know the path of

74 Micah 6:8 (GW)
75 Cf. Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38
righteousness. As a result, God would take away his peace, his mercy and his love. Ezekiel specifically spoke against the sins of the princes, priests and false prophets.

4.4.1.4 Other Prophets

Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi may be considered as prophets of the restoration since they were concerned with the rebuilding of the temple. They advocate truth over rituals and that they should speak truth and render judgments of peace. Malachi may have ministered after the rebuilding of the temple, and he spoke on matters of social and ethical relevance. He spoke against those who married foreign wives, as it was not in line with the keeping of God’s covenant. Joel, Obadiah and Jonah also shared similar tone in their prophetic messages like their predecessor, but they spoke of God in a more universal term, as ruler and governor of all nations. Jonah’s central message was God’s inclusive love for all men. We see the development of the ethical towards universal application in the Prophets of the Old Testament, which ultimately paved the way for many philosophers and ethicist to ponder on higher concept of moral philosophy.

“There is no portion of the Old Testament that speaks more pointedly to the needs of our day than the prophets. The relevance of their messages stems from the fact that the problems they dealt with were human problems and those problems are basically the same from generation to generation. For example, many people in the days of the prophets thought they could be right in their relations with God simply by being faithful to the formalities of their religion. This has been a continuing problem that prophets of God have faced every age. The word of the prophet is that no man is acceptable to God unless he treats his fellowman rightly, and to treat his fellowman rightly means to treat him as God treats him.”

4.4.2 The Writings

In the Jewish understanding of the Bible (the Old Testament), the scriptures are divided into the Torah (תורה), the Prophets (נביאים) and the Writings (כתובים). The Writings are the least revered among the three, but has some of the most significant perspectives in the study of biblical ethics. Unlike the Prophets, there is barely an

76 Maston, Biblical Ethics, 69
unifying factor in their description of the ethical, but the central emphasis on God, his expectations and how people should react to God’s will is evident.

In the books of Chronicles, God is the centre of the history and he is portrayed as a holy God who keeps his covenant with his people Israel. God shows mercy and shows no partiality in justice. From the account of Chronicles, Saul died of his unfaithfulness as he failed to keep the command of God. David, on the other hand, is a god king because he executed justice and equity among the people. Nevertheless, David was not permitted to build the temple because he had shed blood. God’s gracious character is conveyed to Solomon, who was permitted to build the temple, may be considered as the epitome of the ethical character of God in the books of Chronicles.

“If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

Ezra and Nehemiah tackled the problems of people charging heavy interests on their fellowman, and the violation of the keeping of the Sabbath. Intermarriage, which even the priests and Levites were guilty of, was among the moral and social problem discussed by these prophets. This problem, however, was of a religious one rather than being political or racial since such marriages could lead to the worship of foreign gods.

The book of Psalm reflected the faith and emotions of the people of God with great diversity in regard to the moral and religious themes. Though hymns are not instructions, but used for worship, they do contain moral and ethical materials to consider. God’s steadfast love is the theme that is repeated often in the Psalm, and is expressed in ways that even the earth being full of God’s love. God is a righteous God, a righteous judge, whose righteousness is often associated with his graciousness,

77 II Chronicles 7:14 (KJV)
goodness and mercy. God is portrayed as the refuge and helper of the oppressed, the poor, the needy and the weak. He is the father for the fatherless and the protector of the widowed. These ethical qualities of God affirm that God is the holy one of Israel, the covenant-keeping God who is mindful of the covenant he made with Israel. Happiness or blessedness is ascribed as part of the blessings of the righteous. The Psalmist praises God of his laws and that the law is perfect. Like the prophets, the Psalmist also spoke of God’s desire of a contrite heart above the ceremonial sacrifices.

The book of Proverbs may display a rich content of ethics among the Writings as its interest throughout the book is on the ethical and moral conduct of life. In regard to the Jewish community, the book may have even been called a “handbook of Jewish morality.” The book calls for the practice of justice and righteousness as it is more acceptable to God than sacrifices. It stated an ethical and moral purpose for mankind in the forms of proverbs and advises. God is the centre of the book, and admonished that the fear of God is the beginning or source of knowledge and wisdom. In the book of Proverbs, the word “abomination” is used at an ethical level when it was previously understood only in a ritualistic context. The practice of deceit, false balances, arrogance, and wickedness are considered abomination to the Lord. The proverbs convinced its readers that righteousness is wise and that sin is foolish. Knowledge on living a righteous and a holy life is wise and wisdom and intelligence is associated with holiness. Wisdom is understood in relation to the moral expectations, and righteousness is of significant importance in the Proverbs. It also warns of loose women, prostitutes and those who lie. In contrast, it praises a good woman who is considered a “crown of her husband” and is blessed by her children. Instructions regarding parenting are also

79 Proverbs 12:4 (KJV)
part of the book of Proverbs, admonishing that a child should be trained “in the way he should go.”\textsuperscript{80} One is advised not to bear false witness as such an act would lead to legal punishments. Wealth and other possessions are signs of blessings but wisdom is far greater than all the riches according to Proverbs. The rich and the poor should not forget that God is the creator of them both, and whosoever “mocks the poor insults his Maker.”\textsuperscript{81} God is an impartial God and he reigns over all men, rich or poor, wise or foolish, prideful or humble.

The book of Job gave a very challenging picture of God and ethics. Suffering, especially the suffering of the righteous is the underlining story of the book. Orthodox Jewish understanding that suffering is a result of one’s sin comes into question in the story of Job. Job did not deny his faith but found that in God he seeks the reason for his sufferings. Standing strong despite the questionings and accusations of his friends, Job found stronger faith in God. The knowledge of God he came to grasped during his sufferings was as superior and magnificent as his faith before his sufferings. Job, in his defense, describes himself as the pinnacle of an example of a righteous man when he claimed that he had never looked upon a virgin, walk in falsehood, enticed by a woman, rejected the cause of a servant, withheld things for the poor, ate bread without feeding the hungry, trusted in wealth nor rejoice in the sufferings of other, including his enemies. His claims stand as an ethical challenge to morality to its readers.

In Ecclesiastes, everything under the sun is considered vanity. Meaninglessness is the end of all things; wisdom leads to sorrow and pleasures are vain.\textsuperscript{82} Wealth and possessions, gold and riches will not bring satisfaction; and good name and patience are the things one should pursue. The conclusion of the entire discussion the book is this.

\textsuperscript{80} Proverbs 22:6 (KJV)
\textsuperscript{81} Proverbs 17:5 (ESV)
\textsuperscript{82} Cf. Ecclesiastes 1:18; 2:1
“Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”

Songs of Solomon or Songs of Songs is a collection of love songs or poems which climaxed to the lover’s description of love. It described the pleasure and joy of love which seems acceptable to be part of the biblical canon in the light of God’s command to man to be fruitful. Human emotions and desires are also part of God’s creation and is ought to be celebrated.

The book of Ruth is a love story with its appeal to kindness and beauty. Lamentations emphasize on the love of God and laments over the destruction of Jerusalem because of the sins of the people. The book of Esther ethical implication is that one will reap what he sows, which was evident in the life of Haman. The book gave insights to social, moral and religious problems in relation to racial discrimination. It exhibits problems of racial minorities and demonstrated that prejudice can be easily aroused by advantage and ambition for power.

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83 Ecclesiastes 1:13 – 14 (KJV)