CHAPTER – 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

The morals and ethics prescribed with the laws and commandments of the Old Testament Torah stand out to be one of the widely dealt with subjects in any topics of ethics and morality. Secular philosophers are not free from the influences of the Pentateuch whether the influence is a negative or a positive one. On the subject of morality and ethics in reference to the Torah, nothing stands out more than the laws which seems so archaic in the contemporary world, and nothing can be as controversial as the narratives and commands that involved killings and punishments.

By modern standards, the sanctions of the laws in the Torah are harsh, vindictive and unreasonable. Death penalty was demanded for cases of premeditated murder, abuse of parents, abduction, adultery, homosexuality, incest and bestiality. Idolater, blasphemers and even those who break the Sabbath were condemned to be stoned to death. Clothe of different fabric should not be worn together and cutting of hairs of particular region was prohibited. These laws perhaps should not be put into practice in the modern world, but does this means it is the end of all the other positive laws that embraced economic equality, communal harmony and those reasonable laws against offenders. The Torah had been a subject of scrutiny amongst researches, a reason for disbelief amongst atheists, a template for law makers and the source of faith for believers.
6.2 New Atheists and the Pentateuch

Opponents of the biblical application and the faith of the monotheistic faith had strongly and unashamedly show their distaste towards the faithful that hold the traditions of the Torah dear to their heart. New atheist such as Hitchens and Dawkins had lashed out on believers of the faith and deemed them to be deluded and unintellectual. For them, religious beliefs, especially the adherence to the teachings of the Torah, is the cause of many evils and superstitions in the past, and will continue to be so. For the neo-atheists, the biblical tradition is a dangerous tradition that stunted the growth and development of the mind, causes war and evils, and killed many because of blind-faith. The reason these happens is because the God of the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible is such that is not healthy for the modern world. Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion* describes God as follows,

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

For Dawkins and the new-atheists, subjecting one’s life to this God is dangerous, infectious and cancerous for the individual as well the community, not to mention the nation. Further, to teach and admonish a child in the ways of the faith, as the Torah commands, is horrendous and as Dawkins described, “Those of us schooled from infancy in his ways can become desensitized to their horror.” Advocates of the new-atheists traditions such as Michael Shermer, Sam Harris and the like had make it

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2 Ibid.
their mission to educate the masses against the traditions prescribed by religion in exchange for an intellectual academic and scientific-based reasoning.

Despite the harsh comments of these new-atheists and their followers, they do have valid queries and reason for their disbelief in a tradition that may seem so irrelevant in a developing world. So, is God a moral monster that demands impractical and ancient obedience from its followers? How should one understand the laws and narratives of the Torah in light of the ever changing world with discoveries and inventions? Are the moral and ethical codes supposed to be followed in the present world of technological advancements? Does the Torah have valid principles that should be embraced, even so, why should it still be considered valid millennia after they were formulated?

6.3 Approaching Ethics in the Torah

The philosophies of the West and the theology of the faith had approached the ethics and morals of the Old Testament Torah in various directions for hundreds of years. The quest into the Torah, its principles and their application will not cease either in the years to come. Approaching the narratives, laws and commandments of the Torah through various traditions can help in the better understanding of the Torah. No particular interpretation should be considered superior above the other; neither should one interpretation be accepted as an absolute truth.

6.3.1 Cultural Relativist Approach

Cultural Relativism asserts that morals and ethics are relative to culture. “What is “good” is what is “socially approved” in a given culture. Our moral principles describe social conventions and must be based on the norms of the
society.” Customs, beliefs, traditions and practices of people vary from culture to culture and they should be understood properly taking into account the social and cultural context from which they emerged. Ethics of society varies from one to another because they adhere to different sets of moral values and systems. Thus, ethics should be understood culturally. Cultural relativism often implies ethical relativism. For them, morality is not a universal standard; rather it is always relative to the culture and period it belongs to. Certain ethical traditions of a particular society may not be accepted by another. What is legal in a particular country may not be so in another country. Cultural or ethical relativist would assert that there is no particular standard of ethics and morality that umbrella all the cultures of the world in any given period of time. To inculcate one’s ethical principles on another would thus be unhealthy and treacherous.

The ethics and morality in the Book of Torah is also a very cultural based ethics, primarily the culture and traditions of the Ancient Near East. Traditions of the Torah evolved out a particular situation in history, and for the relativists, they cannot be accepted in our present world because the biblical writers “lived in an agrarian, slave-based, patriarchal, polygamous society, and they presupposed beliefs about the physical world and social relations that we can no longer accept.” It would therefore be wrong from the view of the cultural relativist to impose the traditions and teachings of the Torah when it was given to a particular nation. To transport that moral and ethics to an entirely different society thousands of years later would be unreasonable and ineffective. Davies, from a cultural relativist point of view, explained.

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“...it must be recognized that the ethical values of the Hebrew Bible are historically and culturally conditioned, and they cannot be pressed into the service of a different world-view, nor can they be ‘normalized’ to accommodate our own particular standards and values. The Hebrew Bible was promulgated for a particular people at a particular time in a particular place, and it would be disingenuous to attempt to absolutize its claims and permits its ancient values to masquerade as universal norms.”

In light of the ethical relativists’ interpretations, difficult question and controversial issues of the Torah are less problematic and could be easily explained away as an issue of the past. This makes it possible to read the narratives of the Torah without necessarily applying it to our own lives.

Moral structures are always part of the cultural and societal needs, and the people of the Abrahamic religion are no exception. Should religion be the unifying factor for communities and countries? If yes, moral traditions of the Torah may be culturally relevant. But clearly, nations do not particularly ascribe to one religion even though they may accept one particular religion to be their official religion. By approaching the Torah in an ethically relativist manner, it may be understood that certain traditions and laws found in the narratives should be confined to their time. It however does not mean that the traditions and principles of the past should be totally dismissed. It may be agreed that the morals and ethics of the Torah was relevant to their time even though they may not fully be of application in contemporary world. Practices and traditions of the past should not be the standards of the present developed world. Nevertheless, traditions and cultural practices of the ancient Israel should neither be understood nor judged by the norms and standards of modern-day values and ethics.

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5 Ibid.
6.3.2 Evolutionary Approach

Evolutionary or developmental approach of the Old Testament Torah suggests that ethics and morals developed over a period of time in stages and this could easily be recognized with the progression of Israel’s religion and their perception of right and wrong. The primitive concepts developed into a more advanced moral codes of conduct. The evolutionary approach suggested that the development of the ethics in the Torah is conditioned by its history. Similar to a child advancing in knowledge and discernment of what is right and wrong, so is the ethics of the Torah suggest the evolutionary approach.

“Since the customs, beliefs and mores of Israel emerged only gradually over a period of several centuries, due allowance had to be made for the fact that there were constant changes in Israel’s ethical ideas and moral behaviour. The ethical apprehension of the people in the period of the Judges, for example, was bound to be inferior to that which existed at the time of the great prophets, just as the moral perception that existed at the time of the prophets was inevitably inferior to that which pertained at the time of Jesus.”

Strong advocate of the evolutionary approach was Julius Wellhausen who believed that awareness of the ethical dimensions between God and the people of Israel came about only during the eight century B.C. with the prophets. This was an important mark in the history of the Old Testament. His understanding on the evolution of ethics and morals in Old Testament times would further influence the criticisms of the sources of the Torah leading to what is now known as the Wellhausen’s hypothesis. Wellhausen was probably influenced by the emerging Hegelian philosophy of his time. The concept of development is significant in Hegelianism, which seems evident in Wellhausen’s approach as well. His description

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6 Ibid. 23
of the religious evolution of Israel is said to follow Hegelian system. He could also have been influenced with the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859. Nonetheless, his time was one where development and evolution seems to dominate the mind of the intellect and thinkers alike.

Critical study of the Pentateuch reveals that it was not written within a single short span of time but rather over a long period of time. As the content of the Pentateuch developed overtime with additions and explanations, the ethics and morals described and prescribed by the Pentateuch also develops overtime. The growth and development of the ethical, the moral and the theological concept of the Torah are inseparable with the development of nation of Israel.

The Torah displays the development of ethics with its increasing population as a nation in the midst of other nations that could be a threat to their identity. Thus, they were greatly affected by the neighbouring cultures. Economic development could not have been possible if they do not interact with their neighbours. It would not be unreasonable if exchange of thoughts and concepts have been part of the interactions. From a historical perspective, the narratives of the Old Testament would thus be a record of spiritual and historical development.

The Hebrew Bible could be understood as a development of traditions and ethics that continue to have its influence on the development of the religious outlook and moral concepts of the people of Israel in antiquity, the people of the past in history and the generations to come. Evolution of biblical theology and ethics is a fact, and just as the political and religious structure and organization of Israel developed so must the theological and ethical thinking towards the Torah.
6.3.3 Paradigmatic Approach

Paradigmatic approach maintains that morality and ethical principles in the Pentateuch embedded certain foundational principles. Ethical and religious directives should not be drawn from the narratives. They should not determine the belief and practices of the faith. Contrary to it, the Torah should provide guidelines for the ethical decision making and “establishes a standard to which we can appeal in order to justify the correctness of a position taken or to test the propriety of an action performed or contemplated.”

Supporter of the approach such as Christopher J.H. Wright and Waldemar Jenzen make use of the system and interpreted the principles of the Pentateuch in a more applicable and useful manner for contemporary readers. For example, Wright’s ethical angles of the Old Testament ethics served as a model for better understanding of the Torah. Janzen in explaining the Decalogue concluded that it was a “careful and comprehensive characterization, by way of selective sampling, of the new life within the covenant.”

Ethical and moral principles of the Pentateuch should be understood with the background and context it was written. Controversial themes which often raises question on the conduct and command of God, and the Israelites in the Pentateuch should be understood with the background and context they lived in. The narratives could be understood through different paradigm and may even offer better

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7 Ibid. 101
10 Jenzen, Old Testament Ethics, 95
interpretation of the text. For adherents of the paradigmatic approach, it is not the laws and the commands that is important, rather the principles and morals that is enshrined in it. And it is the challenge of modern readers to discover those principles and utilize them in order to make the teachings of the Torah effective.

6.4 Ethics of the Torah in Present Age

Despite the fact that the Pentateuch is a collection of various sources, it agrees upon itself, especially with its ethical standards. Though it could be understood through various lenses of ethics, the Torah should best not be understood and interpreted in a canonical approach which often asserts that the book in its entirety should be accepted without any alterations.

With the development of life in all spheres of economic, technology, scientific, social and individual, the importance of the Pentateuch is revealed time and again. From the question of displaying the Ten Commandments in public places to the issues of migration, abortion, human rights and the like, the Torah exerts its influence in the past and will continue to do so.

Controversial issues that have boggled the mind of many will continue to do in the future. Acceptance to particular view cannot be enforced and neither will the dissolution of particular ethical standards hold strongly by a group of people. Issues such as abortion, reproductive technologies, euthanasia, human sexuality, gay-rights, economic inequality, environmental care, capital punishments, war, gender issues and many others, are still the subject that are tackled by theologians, ethicists, activists
and philosophers alike.\textsuperscript{11} It will not be easy or perhaps even possible to draw conclusions from these issues but with referencing the Pentateuch, one could possibly draw a better understanding of the book and the issue at hand.

The laws and traditions of the Torah need not necessarily be dismissed as archaic and arcane with little to do with the modern world. Though unlikely applicable in modern times, laws such as dietary laws of the Pentateuch need not necessarily be obeyed, but they do have a positive effect of those that follows it.\textsuperscript{12} Explaining some of the horrendous act and treacherous narratives of the Torah are not easy, but it too can be understood through the perspective of history, even though it cannot be condoned by modern standards.

As the epistle of James from the New Testaments compared obedience to the word of God as a person looking into a mirror\textsuperscript{13}, these narratives and laws of the Torah could serve us as a mirror into which one could look at its history, its present and its future. Through the Torah one could see where one needs to develop and grow into a better ethical and moral person and eventually as a society. The Torah could serve not only as the template for ethics and morals but also for a reflection of the past.

Morality and ethical life is best expressed in one’s freedom. The biblical narratives presents a moral standard that requires no monitoring and often demands a life that is accountable and responsible. The biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden

\textsuperscript{11} Readings in Christian Ethics Vol- I & II, ed. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Baker Academics, Grand Rapids, 1996) offers a realistic and moderate views and understanding of these issues though articles, writings and essays of various authors of their fields.
\textsuperscript{12} National Geographic, November 2005 issue featured Seventh Day Adventist amongst those that lived a long and healthy life. Seventh Day Adventist adheres to the dietary laws of the Pentateuch as an expression of their faith.
\textsuperscript{13} James 1:23 - 25
presents a place with freedom and responsibility. They were given the freedom to dwell therein and were responsible in naming the animals. The forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil stood as a restriction to their freedom. The command against the tree is mentioned but no fence or wall was erected to prevent them from partaking it. Adam and Eve had the choice to obey or disobey. Freedom comes with responsibility; and it is the execution of the responsibility despite the absence of a monitoring system that highlights the sense and requirement of a moral life. One should be morally sound even in the absence of a monitoring system. Obedience to a traffic signal despite the absence of a policeman or surveillances makes the person moral and ethically sound. The test of morality may not make sense if there is a policeman on duty because disobedience would be restricted or prevented by immediate punishment. The fear of punishment does not result in good morality but only the pretense thereof. Those taking exams on papers often do not cheat. However, would a person cheat in an examination if there is no person to invigilate? In the presence of an invigilator, no one cheats in the examination. To not cheat is the right thing to do, but it does not determine the state of morality for them. To not cheat in the absence of the invigilator or any monitoring system would be the determining factor for their moral and ethical conduct. The presence of an unattended shop called “Nghah loh dawr” in Mizoram is an example of sound morality. Vegetables and fruits are kept on roadside shops with a price tag and a money box. Customers may browse through the items, take what they desired and put the amount in the money box. The shop does not have a keeper or a surveillance camera. It is ethically built within the community to be honest and responsible towards such commerce. In the absence of freedom, there is no choice; without the availability of choice one is bound follow
particular standards. The development of ethics and morals culminate in that choice to be moral or not in the presence of freedom and choice.

It must be remembered that the ethical and moral development of the human cognitive mind was on its stage of development individually and communally. Seeing the Torah through the lenses of philosophers and biblical scholars, the amount of influence it had in the past cannot be missed. The ethical principles and moral standards of the Torah had evolved with its compilation and in its interpretation. They were written for a particular people at a particular time in history. Nevertheless, it continues to have its effect on its contemporary readers. Its relevancy does not end with the past but continued to be relevant in a new technological world filled with scientific and economical advancements. The relevancy of the Torah too evolves and developed in time, and will continue to be so. Understanding the Torah is possible through different paradigm and through various models offering better perspective and application of the narratives within it. As human understanding develops and venture into new concepts and thought, so will the ethics and morals in the book of the Torah.