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Merry Christmas

Forward in Christ

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Revelation and Moral Order

David Lyle Jeffrey reflects on Breaking Bad

In the recently concluded television series, *Breaking Bad*, people who do bad things seem ultimately to get what they deserve. Surprisingly, as reviewers have noted, moral reality is not presumed to be entirely a social construct. Rather, as one reviewer notes, “metaphysical truth exists—good and evil, moral and immoral, action and consequence... This is the stuff of the Old Testament.”

Vince Gilligan, the show’s creator, goes farther: “If there’s a larger lesson to *Breaking Bad*,” he says, “it’s that actions have consequence,” adding, “I feel some sort of need for biblical atonement, or justice, or something.” To appeal to biblical revelation in such an overt way is, at the least, counter-cultural. The entire history of modernity, as Hannah Arendt has famously argued, has been characterized by challenges to authority of all kinds; and we might add that in western culture now, no aura of authority, be it of pope or emperor, congress or church, goes uncontested. Scripture is just one item on a long list.

While I was finishing my PhD at Princeton in 1968, the buzz was about “what happened at Berkeley”; some of the placards carried by the chanting crowds surrounding Jerry Rubin and Abby Hoffman spelled it out: “Question Authority.” The placards might better have read “Abolish Consequences,” for that is what many in my generation really meant. Much of liberal activism since then bears witness to the actual demand: one need think only of the sexual revolution, in which a whole generation seemed to have struck out the first ‘g’ in Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*. But the wider health-care crisis, not unrelated, and the credit collapse likewise, confirm the anti-realism of our bizarre yet persistent demand for a consequence-free social order. The rhetoric of Berkeley in 1968, in which the dominant noun was “rights” and the favorite verb then still unprintable, has become more sophisticated and self-assured. Unfortunately, consequences have not been abolished,

and the cost of dealing with them has steadily increased. Licentiousness metastacizes.

One wonders if a representative narrative for American social history now, in 2013, might not be “what happened to Detroit.” There have been many attempts at retrospective analysis. Yet from a biblical perspective, the epidemiology of America’s unraveling is insufficiently explained merely in economic, social, or legal terms. More than a few thoughtful

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observers have looked at the ruins of Mo-town, and quietly wondered if, in a holistic analysis, “the wages of sin” isn’t about as good a diagnosis as any.

Not many, I think, expect biblical revelation to return to the public square. Association of the Bible with restraint upon sexual appetite is surely a part of this, but the resentment of the idea of transcendent authority is more general. Eran Shalev, for example, in his *American Zion: The Old Testament as Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (2013), has offered a catalogue of reminders of the enormous role that the Old Testament had as a moral authority in the founding years of this country, yet his readers will be struck by the almost complete absence of this framework in contemporary discussions of moral dis-order. Unfortunately, intervening frameworks (in Kantian and post-Kantian ethics) have had less evident success in practice. To think back

through our ethical evolution to the colonial period now requires a willing suspension of disbelief -- just to re-imagine how Revelation worked.

Yet at bottom it isn’t all that complicated. The basic difference between Revelation and secular reason in ethics has been aptly summarized by Søren Kierkegaard. “It is just not the same thing to say to somebody, ‘you should live responsibly,’” he quipped, “as to say, ‘you should live responsibly because there is a Last Judgment coming.’” Kierkegaard, an astute reader of the Bible, reminds us that one of the first truths of revealed moral order is the inevitable reality of consequences. Garrison Keillor, in one of his radio monologues, remarks that allusions to this principle were stock-in-trade of his mother’s philosophy of child-rearing. Reminders of how the Lord smote his adversaries, “hip and thigh,” weighed on his youthful mind.

“It occurred to me,” Keillor says, “that when the Lord smote you, you stayed smitten.” Kierkegaard and Keillor, each in their way, articulate an axiom of revealed rather than merely socially constructed moral vision. Moral order on the biblical model is neither a construction nor an abstraction; it is an ontological ‘given,’ bearing, in effect, the stamp of the manufacturer, and as we might expect in lesser circumstances, the manufacturer has stipulated abuses that will invalidate his warranty.

It is often claimed that the behavioral constraints of biblical commandments have led most of those who have rejected it to do so. Let’s be candid; they have also led many who do not admit to having rejected biblical revelation to soft-pedal or eschew the topic of revealed morality, even in sermons. The idea that there might be an actual divine law, at one time grounding with first principles the formation of our common law – an idea assumed and even cherished from Constantine to Charlemagne and, in the laws of the English-speaking peoples from Henri de Bracton’s

Laws of England to the *Institutes* of Edward Coke, William Blackstone's *Commentaries*, and F.W. Maitland's *History*, has by now largely been abandoned. The idea of divine justice is not only treated as an anachronism, it has become politically offensive to our elites. Visual reminders of Revelation, such as tables of the Ten Commandments, Bibles, crosses and the like, have now to be taken from public view, precisely because they might suggest to somebody somewhere that there is a higher, universal source of authority by which our own authority and actions might be judged. The outrage of the offended makes sense, of course, for anyone who rejects the idea that there is a God to whom all are accountable, and believes it is pernicious to social wellbeing - not to mention the authority of the state - when people entertain such backward ideas.

Latter day debates between authoritarian secularists and those who still believe in a transcendent moral order have clearly begun to lose quorum. This has come about largely through seismic shifts in the present balance of political power. Slogans with calculated double-entendres, such as, "We can. Yes we can. And we will." Or, less subtly, "We're here. We're queer. Get used to it," like the frat-boy chants outside sorority houses they echo, are markers of the triumph of confident political power over defensive, uncertain moral authority. I have a wonderful "Non-Sequitur" cartoon on the door of my office which shows Moses standing at the foot of the mountain, tablets in hand, evidently just having read them to the crowd, now adding a caveat: "unless, of course, you happen to live in a state in which all of this stuff is already legal." I tend to prefer the sly whimsy of the cartoonist to the stridency of political slogans, but in fact both tell us pretty much the same thing: the culture wars are effectively over, and conservatives—in particular religious conservatives—have lost. In such a situation as we find ourselves, what possible value can there be for us to advert to the Judeo-Christian foundation? Well, I want to suggest here, very little if we are thinking primarily about the public square. But perhaps it is worth thinking instead about the way Revelation invites those of us who accept it as such into other modes for life and witness than sloganeering of our own.

It may help to begin by asking what the purpose of revealed law was in the first place. Here, I am happy to refer to a recent book by Steven Kepnes on *The Future of Jewish Theology* (2013). Kepnes assumes that the culture wars, having become unproductive and incoherent, are marginal for a useful articulation of religious values in the public square. He argues that even the modern Jewish legacy of

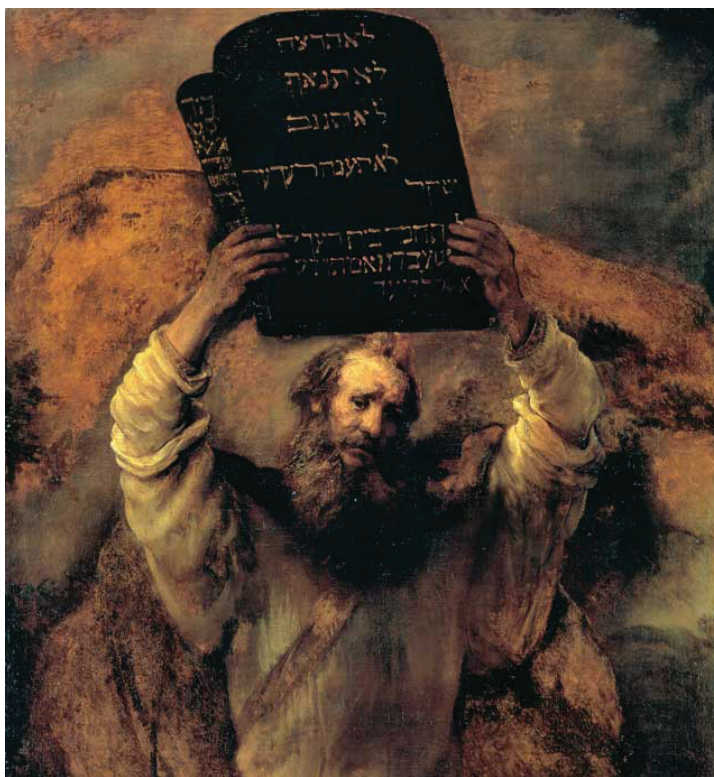
ethical monotheism, encumbered as it has become with Kantian baggage, has failed to prevent ethical incoherence within Jewish theology itself because it has overlooked the distinctive reason for Jewish law. Kepnes goes back to the text, and makes what seems to me to be an entirely warrantable conclusion. "The purpose of Jewish law," he says, "is precisely to map out a path through which the people [of] Israel can follow the commandment of God to be holy." It is erosion of the imperative to holiness, he argues, that has diminished with drastic consequences our appreciation of the most basic fact about God – not just that he is a Personal Being, but that he is Holy. God's prescription for human flourishing, if understood in Torah terms, can thus be stated succinctly: *qadoshim tihiyu*, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). The balance of this chapter of Leviticus shows how everything else in the moral order is,

to this basic commandment, a dependent clause. Social health is made dependent on a more or less conscious acknowledgment that we were made *imago dei*, in the image of God; embodiment of that understanding in the practices of life is what holiness is about.

This principle is reiterated in Christian calls to reformation of personal and social life through *imitatio Christi*. It turns out to be the case that everything about the Judeo-Christian high definition of the meaning and dignity of persons has its source in this most basic aspect of Israel's Revelation; because human beings are in the image of God, they possess inherent dignity and the right to respect. This is the seminal

form of later notions of rights, though in fact Jewish moral law itself speaks in this context not of "rights" but rather, characteristically, of "obligations."

What a focus on holiness/wholeness does is to bring the value of the Other – the person of the neighbor, and of persons in relation – into a more charitable view. The comparative limits of Kantian and post-Kantian de-ontological ethics in this regard have been a recent subject of analysis in many quarters. In one critique, Daniel Philpott's *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Reconciliation* (2013) points out that one of these limitations is the inevitable lack of a consensus on truth, truth not only in regard to events but truth as a matter of "right relation." "It is not enough," Philpott says, for an ethic to identify, adopt, or assert rights; it must also justify them. What grounds human rights? His answer is *dikaioyne*, righteousness, which he finds in the letters of St. Paul as a clear equivalent for *qedushah*, holiness, in Torah, and he regards it properly, I think, as in effect "right relationship" with God – a biblical principle evident also in Paul's use of





the term in its sense of “justification.” To state this another way: typically, those whose worldview includes Revelation are conscious of their own need for right relationship with both God and neighbor, and strive to achieve it; deprived of this sacred ontology, secularized “rights” are by contrast often demanded and received as an entitlement, requiring neither gratitude nor real relationship.

On the biblical view, a durable account of “rights” requires something more than is provided by Thomas Paine or Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Succinctly, pace their successors, including John Rawls, a transcendent authority is necessary, an eternally dependable Giver of moral law, not least because merely human authority cannot provide the security of right relationship except in shifting, transient terms. The answer that Israel’s Revelation gives to questions about how to achieve a flourishing life is not merely, “God said it,” but rather, if I may paraphrase, that God has disclosed something profound about his own nature in the Torah, namely that he is Holy, and he wills our participation in his health. His call to us to imitate him is detailed as it is because holiness of life – as distinct from knowledge of a right or definition of meaningful agency – must be a matter of sustained living practice. Moreover, and for the entire Judeo-Christian tradition this cannot be stressed too strongly, the commandment to be holy applies not just to individuals, but also to covenant communities. Biblical revelation offers no blueprint for political order, but something without which no political structure can be sustained, namely the moral authority of a higher ideal. Its perseverance as a minority

ideal has thus political implications, and this is precisely the point in contention for successors of Paine and Rousseau, who wish to substitute another source of absolute obligation, namely government.

Here, needless to say, we are on the brink of an abyss for philosophers and politicians alike. Boogeyman nightmares of Puritan roundheads and other ghosts of ‘theocracy’ readily rise in the defense of extreme ethical pluralism, even if it risks anarchy. In a culture in which the kindergarten ethic begins with the commandment, “Thou shalt not criticize thy neighbor” – “indeed, thou shalt affirm thy neighbor even or perhaps especially when he or she is doing something that might seem ‘wrong’ to you,” it is not that hard to see why the moral legacy of Israel can seem offensive. It is not surprising that even religious philosophers have tried to find a common ground elsewhere than in a Torah obligation to communal holiness and its corollary, the obligation to hand down the moral law within the home and religious community of the faithful.

Natural law theory seems to many to have made the best of the modern elevation of tolerance as the *sine qua non* virtue, not least because, as Rousseau noted long ago, natural law theory forgoes any necessary attachment to Revelation and thus can claim to be tolerant in a way that an ethic based upon divine obligation cannot (*Letter to Beaumont*). In his ironically titled *Letters from the Mountain*, Rousseau jests that in his new order there might be some hope for Protestantism as the basis for a completely tolerant civil religion, because each person seems to be entitled to interpret Scripture for himself. This is a species of ‘toleration,’ Rousseau observes, for the result of individualized interpretation is that Protestant clergy have no real authority—a point in which, according to Karl Barth, Rousseau has effectively anticipated the entire modern history of Protestantism. Catholics, meanwhile, for whom natural law theory has to this point appealed as more advantageous in debate with secularists, having gone so long with the ontological warrant of Revelation on ‘mute’, are now pressed to give essentially secular answers to anti-religious interrogation.

It may be that no theory of ethics can remain coherent without a source of transcendent authority. Secular alternatives, each in their own fashion trying to ground ethics in something higher than subjectivity and self-interest, have embraced Kant’s notion of willed rational assent to intuited or normative ethical obligations. Kant’s deontological stance led him to regard divine command theory—essentially the Jewish as well as Christian biblical view—as not really ethics at all. Consequentialism, of which utilitarianism is a version, has influenced the fissiparous field called ‘virtue ethics’, which attempts to derive all the moral concepts from the concept of a virtue, just as Kant tried to derive all morality from the notion of an unconditional imperative or a universal law of practical reason. Consequentialists are those who try to derive all morality from some idea of maximized welfare that can be distributed in a population—a version of Bentham’s ‘greatest good for the greatest number.’ My colleague Robert C. Roberts describes ethical theory on these models as “a hopeless conceptual mess,” adding, rather soberly, “such theories tend to be morally detrimental to those who take

them seriously.” Consequences are thus an issue at many levels.

Construing the goal of ethical standards as nothing more than an adequation of normative behavior, a kind of hyper-Baconianism, has become de facto the reflex of our current legal as well as political culture. If Hollywood is what most people appear to want, the Court will ensure that’s what all will get. If insufficient numbers want it, we will be scolded. Ironically, we have created thus a new absolute authority, effective not least because daily proclaimed by its own prophets, the media and entertainment industry. This oracular voice from the sky includes of course the “news,” which we consult each morning in order to learn what we are supposed to think. And do. And then encourage others to do. Nor is that enough; we are prompted almost daily to join in an obligatory chorus, celebrating those as courageous, even “heroic” who invent a new, perhaps previously unthinkable “norm.” Defense of notorious in-your-face performance vulgarities by third-wave feminists as “body-positivity” exemplify increasing social pressures to approve public behaviors such as might repel a wart-hog in rut. Other, less vulgar displays, attempt to seduce by behavior re-enforcement into

private imitations of the unholy, ad nauseum et ad infinitum.

Whether we consider the disappearance of moral authority as Hannah Arendt construed it, or believe the issue of moral authority to be inherently problematic, we cannot evade the evidence that consequences attend not only upon ideas, but follow in real time from actual moral choices made by cultures as well as individuals. It may be that our wider culture has made choices that we can do little to alter; our own choices, if we respond in repentance to biblical prescriptions, will to that degree be counter-cultural.

It would seem that “breaking bad” implies the possibility of the good, of a return to health, even of “breaking good.” And something else, perhaps: unacknowledged exhaustion with the ‘conceptual morass’ of an ethic whose highest principle is ‘thou shalt not criticize thy neighbor.’ What if a gesture of fraternal correction might be the only life-line we have to offer our neighbor in the hope he or she may avoid self-destruction? Keep your opinion to yourself, say the courts and the media. Yet even in this paralyzing context, the ideal of holiness – namely that the most whole and healthy way of life available to us is by way of imitation of something far higher than ourselves

– merits at the very least a review, both by ourselves and others. Faithful Christians must love their neighbors in such ways as conduce to health – and ultimately holiness – for all concerned.

Reason without Revelation hasn’t been working all that well for us—either at the cultural or religious level. It seems to me that those of us who continue to cherish reason as well as Revelation ought now to move beyond serial post-mortem analyses of our cultural demise to a fresh consideration of the legacies, ideals and prescriptions of Revelation that have formed and sustained us in the past and surely can form and sustain us in the future. We might begin by acknowledging that no higher ideal for moral order exists than that which asks us to regard both self and neighbor as made in the image of God—and to ponder, in that light, our call to be holy, even as He is Holy.

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This article is adapted from an address given to the Philadelphia Society earlier this year. David Lyle Jeffrey is Distinguished Professor of Literature and the Humanities at Baylor University, Texas.

