

2016

Human Rights and the Bible

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Recommended Citation

Yang, Sunggu, "Human Rights and the Bible" (2016). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. 253.
<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/253>

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Human Rights and the Bible

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I. Judaism

1. Rights vs. Obligations. Do contemporary Jews see the Bible as a source for a modern language of human rights?

At first glance, there are overwhelming differences between the thought world of the Bible and that of modern human rights. The HB/OT is essentially theocentric, whereas the discourse of human rights is anthropocentric. The very word “rights,” as it is used today, does not appear in the HB/OT. The nearest equivalent is perhaps the biblical word *mit-swah*, a concept whose closest equivalent among modern secular concepts would be “obligation.”

Robert Cover points to the differences between these two mythic structures. The foundational myth of human rights focuses on the free, autonomous individual. In this story, the community has no intrinsic value. It is only the product of a social contract whose ultimate authority flows from the individual, who voluntarily relinquishes autonomy in order to achieve security. In the HB/OT, by contrast, the foundational myth that underlies biblical law is the story of the revelation at Mount Sinai: a collective, shared experience that creates a community of belonging, whose members are linked by bonds of mutual responsibility. Heteronomy stands here in place of autonomy. The Bible does not see law as the product of active human choice, but rather of divine choice that humankind is commanded to obey passively. As the Israelites say at Sinai, “We will do and we will hear” (Exod 24:7; and cf. *bPes* 88a).

Contemporary Jews who seek to connect Scripture to the discourse of human rights must therefore work to bridge these differences. According to them, “rights” and “obligations” are two sides of the same coin. Israeli judge Haim Cohn has argued that the commandment “Thou shalt not steal” (Exod 20:15) implies a right to property. Similarly,

“Thou shalt not kill” (Exod 20:13) implies a right to life. Scripture uses the language of obligation because it expresses a religious consciousness, but that does not in itself imply any difference in the normative content of the two discourses. Indeed, Moshe Greenberg has argued that the HB does recognize the concept of rights, particularly the right to justice, which it treats as universal.

2. Law vs. Ethics. The discourse of human rights applies to the relations between individuals and relations between the individual and the state. Biblical law, by contrast, claims to apply even to the responsibilities of individuals towards themselves and their responsibilities towards God. Courts do not usually have coercive powers in these matters, and in this sense, biblical law has a distinctive ethical, perhaps utopian quality. It is not strictly a “law” in the usual sense. It establishes obligations for which there cannot be a corresponding enforceable right. Examples might include the prohibition on gossip (Lev 19:16) and the obligation of standing before an elder (Lev 19:32). In this regard, the language of obligations is potentially broader and more ambitious than the language of rights. While the language of rights is intended to allow the balancing of interests by a court, the biblical discourse of responsibilities creates a different consciousness. Therefore, as Moshe Silberg has argued, biblical law is directed to the citizen rather than to the court or state.

3. Universal vs. Particular. The discourse of human rights is self-consciously universalistic. For instance, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations declares that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” By contrast, beginning in Gen 11, both the narrative and the legal portions of HB/OT focus on the people of Israel. The majority of biblical law applies only to them; only the Noahide laws seem to apply to humanity as a whole.

Nevertheless, there are fundamental principles that are enunciated in Scripture that can ground a universal discourse of human rights. There is a deep religious humanism in Scripture, which some modern Jewish thinkers see as a basis for Western-style liberalism and for the Declaration of Human Rights.

4. Created in the Image of God. For example, according to Scripture, humankind was created “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27; Heb. *be-tselem Elohim*). That is, every human being has an aspect of the Divine, and therefore has unconditional personal worth. As various rabbinic and later Jewish sources emphasize (e.g., *BerR* 24), any attempt to diminish that – from bloodshed down to the infliction of shame – lessens the Divine image itself and is therefore prohibited.

5. Equality and Individuality. If all of humankind is created in the image of God, and all are de-

scended from a single mother, Eve, then there is no inherent hierarchy and all are equal. But what are the practical consequences of this notion of equality? From ancient times, Jewish tradition has debated this question. Some argue that we have equal responsibilities towards every other person, Jew or non-Jew. Others argue that in spite of human equality, it is natural for individuals to relate in one way to those who are near to them and in a different way to those who are farther from them. Therefore they interpret “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18) in a restrictive way – your neighbor, but not every human being.

However, there is universal agreement in the talmudic sources that both Jews and non-Jews are created in the image of God. A passage in the Mishnah (*mSan* 4:5), frequently quoted by contemporary Jews, expresses the infinite value of each individual:

Why was Adam created alone? To teach you that anyone who destroys a single human being is considered to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a single human being is considered by Scripture to have saved an entire world.

6. Social Rights. Similarly, biblical concern for the stranger and for the poor, and for slaves and workers, have been interpreted frequently by modern Jews as supporting a discourse of social rights. The exodus from Egypt is called to mind daily in the prayer service, and as the Bible itself states, it is intended to serve as a reminder of our responsibilities towards the stranger. The reminder that “you were strangers in the land of Egypt” accompanies both the prohibition against harming the stranger (Exod 22:2) and the commandment to love the stranger (Deut 10:19). The biblical “stranger” was a non-Israelite living under an Israelite sovereign regime, and may be understood to exemplify the victims of society.

Besides the stranger, there are several other categories of the weak or unprivileged for whose benefit the Bible imposes a host of obligations, often corresponding to implied “rights.” The poor are protected, e.g., by the laws of tithing and other required gifts of food and grain. Workers are protected by the biblical labor laws, such as the Sabbath law and the prohibitions against delaying wages (Lev 19:13) and economic exploitation. Debtors are protected by the prohibition against interest and special rules concerning deposits. Biblical law also limits enslavement through the laws of the sabbatical year and other laws. There are many other examples.

7. Political Rights. The religious obligations set out in the Bible apply to everyone in society, including the sovereign. In contrast to much of ancient culture, in which the king was seen as the origin of the law, the king in the Bible is subject to the law. It is this that allowed the biblical prophets to act as social critics and to challenge unworthy leaders.

The prophets claimed freedom of speech and claimed ethical authority for their protests. This prophetic model has served generations of modern Jews daring to demand human rights.

8. Human Rights and Modern Jews. Given all of this, it is not surprising that there is a deep bond between Jews and the modern discourse on human rights. The experience of antisemitism and racist persecution, and above all the Holocaust, have inclined them in this direction. The UN's original declaration of universal human rights was in fact drafted by a leader of the French Jewish community, the jurist Professor René Samuel Cassin, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968. Cassin himself associated the Declaration with the Jewish experience and Jewish values. Jews have been active in the field of human rights in many parts of the world, e.g., in South Africa, in the civil rights movement in the United States, and elsewhere where Jewish minorities have played a disproportionate role in advancing the cause of human rights.

In the State of Israel, for historical reasons, there is no written constitution, and on that account no constitutional declaration of human rights. However, two "basic laws" were passed in 1992, which establish human rights in the realms of "human dignity and freedom" and also "freedom to work." "Basic laws" are the topmost rank within the hierarchy of types of Israeli law. These laws have been interpreted broadly by Israeli courts, in a manner that has given them signal importance within the framework of Israeli law. Israel also has a number of organizations devoted to human rights, including one called "B'tselem" (meaning "in the image" cf. Gen 1:27).

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II. Christianity

The concept of human rights is a modern one, yet it is based on a philosophical tradition from antiquity. The concept first arises in Cicero's *De officiis* as '*ius gentium*' (*Off.* 3.69) and is later developed in Gaius' *Institutes* as derived from Stoic tradition rather than Roman law. Gaius describes the common human right as the right of all humans in all nations based solely on their being human (*Inst.* 1.1). The Stoic principle of reason (*logos*), however, informs the idea of a fundamental right common to all people. The *logos* represents the nature common to both God and humankind. The law of na-

ture can be traced back to the cosmological order. The *logos*, which establishes the eternal order, weaves human together with divine. This interweaving of human reason and the cosmological order guarantees the metaphysical order. The divine *logos* links human reason to the cosmological order. Consequently, human rights reflect this cosmological order and they are justified due to this reflection.

The Bible does not have anything to contribute to the question of origins of the human rights tradition. The concept in the sense of individual legal rights is not a biblical concept. The Bible is neither a book of civil rights, nor of any rights in a juridical sense. Its focus is on the relationship between God and humankind and on life in an eschatological sense. The story of human origins in the Bible neither addresses legal issues nor the social and ethical dimensions of life as these pertain to human rights. Christian theology therefore has had to address the concept of human rights in the face of biblical silence. The prevailing argument, however, that mitigates against a Christian acceptance of human rights is a theological one. Christian theologians have great difficulty in affirming both the positive and optimistic understanding of humanity that is presupposed by the concept of human rights and the Augustinian Christian belief that every human is a sinner. Christian acceptance of the idea of human rights was also historically rendered problematic by the French revolution, in which the struggle for human rights was accompanied by an unacceptable antireligious movement. The extreme violations of human rights during World War II, the cruelties of Nazism and the crimes of communism, precipitated the development in Christian theology to reconsider the importance of human rights. Only after World War II did Christian theologians reformulate anthropological and theological claims that were compatible with the concept of human rights. This development was informed by new exegetical insights and the introduction of new ideas from parts of the Christian world that were concerned with the ecumenical movement. Christian theologians were then able to find traces of the idea of human rights in the anthropological beliefs of biblical authors.

Yet while Christianity is characterized by an abiding reluctance to accept modern ethical and legal achievements, modern Christian theology has regarded as central its task to promote the idea and actualization of human rights. The implicit biblical basis for this commitment is the idea of *shalom* and the *imago dei*. In the NT, the *imago dei* is pertinent to God's redeeming act in Jesus Christ; justification is offered to all, Jews and Gentiles alike, without exception. Furthermore, the addition of other concepts to the discourse, e.g., dignity, personality, freedom, and solidarity, open up a view of the Bible

that discerns the concept of human rights in both the OT and NT. God's prevenient grace effects the return of human beings to their original status as the *imago dei* (Gen 1:26–27; 5:1, 3; 9:6; Ps 8:6). The OT concept of *shalom* and the NT ideas of the kingdom of God and the teaching that all are children of God (Rom 8:12–17) are glimpses of freedom and full acceptance by God (Gal 3:20), of personality and solidarity (Gal 5:13). Human rights is also articulated in claims of equality (Gal 3:20) and freedom (Gal 5:1). While the precise term is not in the Bible, the principles of human rights are contained in the Bible. Furthermore, the ideas of *imago dei* and universal justification have inspired the modern understanding of human rights.

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III. Film

The United Nations in the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* declares:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.... All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

In light of this fundamental concept of human rights, the document provides specific examples of these rights, including, yet by no means exclusively, the right to life and liberty, freedom of residence and movement, freedom of conscience and religion, abolishment of any forms of servitude and human trafficking, free choice of employment, right to education, special care for motherhood and childhood, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, etc.

Not all of the human rights issues mentioned above, yet certainly a good number of them, appear in a variety of genres of films. When they do, they either: (1) openly advocate human rights issues in focus; (2) rather indifferently inform us about the violation of human rights for further consideration; or (3) attempt to articulate the complexity of a given human rights case. Some films convey one of the three purposes while others combine two or three together. Films more often than not use biblical references to boost the mentioned purposes, either in an explicit or implicit way – or on certain occasions in both ways at the same time.

The Ten Commandments (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1956, US) is one of the classic examples that promotes and advocates a grave issue of human rights in a straightforward way. Among many others, the advocacy for human freedom or abolishment of slavery shows up as a core theme of the well-known ancient biblical saga, the exodus. When Moses boldly utters against the Egyptian pharaoh, “Let my people go,” the film is a sheer echo of what African American abolitionists used to cry out during and even after the American Civil War. In a similar vein, *Lincoln* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2012, US) depicts a North American version of Moses, Abraham Lincoln, whose vision for human freedom and termination of slavery parallels that of DeMille’s Moses in many senses, especially the notion that all people are created equal and free before God, the Creator of the world. *Selma* (dir. Ava DuVernay, 2014, US), which films Dr. King, Jr.’s and his associates’ work for the voting rights movement, and *Amistad* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1997, US) are other good examples of the explicit use of film for human rights advocacy with the similar biblical ideal *Lincoln* takes.

Advocacy for human rights is especially evident in Third Cinema, which occasionally draws upon biblical stories and images (Sison: 741–42). For example, the South African film *Son of Man* (dir. Mark Dornford-May, 2006, ZA) situates the story of Jesus in a fictional, modern-day African nation torn by internecine conflict. The film combines scenes from the Gospels with speeches of late anti-Apartheid activist Steve Biko (1946–1977). Dornford-May’s Jesus teaches:

When those with imperial histories pretend to forget them and blame Africa’s problems on tribalism and corruption while building themselves new economic empires, I say we have been lied to. Evil did not fall. When I hear someone was beaten or tortured in the Middle East, I say we have been lied to. Evil did not fall. When I hear that in Asia child labor has been legislated for, I say we have been lied to. Evil did not fall. When politicians in Europe and the U.S. defend trade subsidies and help to restrict the use of medicine through commercial patents, I say we have been lied to. Evil did not fall. When you have been told, and you will be, that people just “disappear,” you must say we have been lied to and evil will fall.

Films are also good at informing audiences about violations of human rights around the world. These films do not explicitly advocate human rights cases disturbed by various social, economic, or political causes. Yet still, the films reveal uncomfortable truths of human rights violations, which could lead to the possible future resolution, even though not in the films themselves. *The Mission* (dir. Roland Joffé, 1986, US) is one of the best instances in this respect. The film depicts the exploitation of natural resources for economic gain and ruthless murders and enslavement of native Indians in South America, supported by religious authorities collud-

ing with European governments. Throughout and mostly at the end of the film, the only conceivable hope vis-à-vis all kinds of violation of human rights lies in the sacred symbolism of the wooden cross, the Eucharist bread, the baptism of the murderer in the river, and martyrdoms of saints. All these reflexive images from the biblical past appear to foster hope for restoration of sound humanity, “already arriving” from the eschatological future.

Another example in this category is *Romero* (dir. John Duigan, 1989, US), in which against political corruption, disenfranchisement, ferocious abduction, economic inequality, and violated freedom of speech and peaceful assembly, stands the ultimate demonstration of the Eucharistic and baptismal equality of all humanity – each and every person partaking of one bread and the same wine standing before one compassionate God, regardless of political status, gender difference, social distinction, age difference and economic condition. Thus, it must be both ironic and natural that the human rights advocate and priest Oscar Romero, as a Christ-like figure, had to die at the hands of ruthless gunmen while breaking the bread and sharing the cup supposed to be for everyone equally.

Jésus of Montréal (dir. Denys Arcand, 1989, CA/FR) also depicts the complexity of human rights issues occurring in modern western society. This film represents the third use of film listed above, which does not necessarily address the issue of human rights explicitly as in the previous cases, but demonstrates how given issues can be heavily entangled in both good and evil. An established actor is commissioned by a priest to play the role of Jesus in an Easter Passion play. Soon after, this “Jesus-like” actor confronts the sexual exploitation of one of his actress friends in a scene reminiscent of the cleansing of the temple. Further, as his play achieves success and acclaim, a greedy lawyer tempts him to commercialize his “Jesus-career” just as biblical Jesus was enticed by Satan (Matt 4:1–11). Last, but not least, his play is stopped and even destroyed brutally because it conveyed information about Jesus that had presumably been suppressed by religious authorities; as a result of the tumult, he sustains mortal injuries on a cross. In such ways and more, the film entangles matters of sexual abuse, inhumane commercialism, and violated freedom of conscience and religion with basic human aspirations of success, happiness, liberty, and security. The film does not show or know the exact answers to these enigmatic issues of fundamental human rights, but at least it acknowledges the depth and breadth of what is out there from a novel biblical perspective.

The Bible is one important resource that films rely on when addressing moral or ethical matters, at least in the West. For films target the very populace living in post-Christendom in order to achieve com-

mercial success, yet are still produced under the heavy influence of biblical symbolism conveying profound moral and ethical norms for society.

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See also → Image of God