Applying Biblical Ethics to Hot Button Issues

Part 2 of 2: Old Testament Narratives and Hot-Button Issues in America
with Darrell Bock, Daniel Carroll Rodas
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So, part of what was being said here is that to really pick up the story of the real life of the scriptures you’ve got to get your hands around how it’s telling the story, the way in which the characters develop, the trajectory that it’s taking, the emphases that it has. We’re about halfway through out time. Let’s transition and let’s take two particular issues and walk through them.

The first one is kind of the classic where people start. It’s the issue of slavery. You know, the old discussion was, “Well, the Bible assumes slavery – it addresses people. You don’t see any revolutionary statements to put an end to it.” That kind of thing. But, what you see is an acceptance of what’s going on around it, and this developed into a defense of the existence of slavery for some. That was challenged, if you will, by a hermeneutic that said, “But wait a minute. Let’s look and see what’s going on here about the dignity of the human person, and what the scripture has to say about the dignity about the human person.” Or, let’s look at those places particularly when we come to the New Testament after Jesus has come up where the way in which a slave is engaged has nothing to do with the fact that they’re a slave. A book as insignificant seemingly as Philemon putting a slave in the position of being equal to the apostle Paul is shifting the way we look at that slave as a person. And, so the alternative view was to say, in affect, that the direction of the thrust of scripture as a whole was asking us actually to reassess to some degree the way we saw the person who happened to be a slave. What lessons do you think for reading ethically do you get from the slavery discussion?

Oh, I’d say several. I mean, you’ve all ready mentioned the trajectory, because things become clearer with this whole idea of body of Christ and being one in the spirit, and all this kind of stuff. But, what happened in the Old Testament discussion on slavery is that certain passages were picked and read for slavery, like “everything according to its kind.” You see how they’re creation there. So, you can see how this let itself to yes, there are different kinds of humans, and so everything according to its kind. And, then Noah’s cursing, right? One of the son’s was linked – the curse was linked to blackness. So, what you are seeing not only was the trajectory not being captured, but then other passages were being, looking back, I would say manipulated according to a prior ideological, cultural, racial, social commitment.
The thing that I would add to the trajectory piece of what you said, Darrell, is that the trajectory is also structural. So, when you get into Old Testament law and you compare Old Testament law to other ancient or Eastern law codes, what you’re seeing is the treatment of slaves is different than it is in other cultures. It’s more humane, for instance. And, this is what you had to do in the 19th century in the U.S. It’s a structural discussion, not only an attitude discussion. And, you see the structural discussion going on in the Old Testament. Now, when you get into the New Testament I think it is structural in the sense internal to the church. But, the church is a structure. And, so the very fact that all of a sudden that you are brothers – see, that’s a structural statement. I mean, in James it talks about who sits where in the congregation. And, so what you’re seeing are structural moves internal to the body of Christ to the church, which will then eventually begin to permeate the rest of society. So, it’s a structural engagement inside out. The thing that the Bible did not do in itself – inside its pages – was the structural engagements, the attitudinal differences were major, but they weren’t a call to revolution.

Now, see one thing is what the scripture says of orientation. Another thing is to ask ourselves, “What does the scripture actually tell me to do?” Now, that’s a whole other issue. What happens with the scripture sometimes is it reorients our thinking. But, it doesn’t tell me what to do. If I’m in the prophets and it’s denouncing structural oppression, well, it hasn’t told me to do anything. It’s just said this is wrong. So, in one sense this is kind of good because then you’ve got to think through, “Okay, I’m not eighth century B.C. I’m 21st century U.S. What would that look like today?”

So, what you’re suggesting is there’s an open-endedness to this in terms of the application.
Daniel Rodas

Exactly. Yeah, and so what you find is a scripture and church history become the case studies. So, for instance, if we talk about the Jubilee that’s one structural mechanism to help poor people. Okay, we can’t do Jubilee like that now. So, the question is, “Okay, if they did it that way in the eighth century, or let’s say in the Monastic movement they set up these convents and monasteries to help poor people. And, St. Francis of Assisi”. I mean, these are all case studies. And, so Acts II, Acts IV. I mean, that’s a case study. So, the question now is, “Okay, so in 21st century U.S. what would that look like?” It may look different in Guatemala than it does in the U.S. than it does in Kenya, than it does in China. So, that becomes now the appropriation question. How do I appropriate the ethical vision? And, there again I think the scripture can give us guidelines and parameters. One more thing about that – I don’t want to talk too long. For instance, I would think that the scriptures would push us toward a non-violent parameter. Okay, so because of Jesus. And, so even though I see oppression, the option of revolutionary violence to me, I think, is excluded. So, it doesn’t tell me what I need to do because it was written 3,000 years ago. But, I think it gives some parameters about what I cannot do in terms of my options. So, it becomes a more nuance discussion.

Darrell Bock

Yeah. Now, this opens up the two examples I like to bring to kind of illustrate these tensions that we see, and how you wrestle with all the pieces, rather than cherry pick the two modern discussions that I think we see on the table today. One is gun control and the other’s immigration. And, we’ll take them in that order because we’re in Texas.

Daniel Rodas

Which is actually an important point.

Darrell Bock

Yeah, exactly right. Yeah, I can tell you I’ve had the discussion of gun control here in Texas. I’ve had the discussion in the northeast. It’s two very different conversations. And, if you have that discussion in portions of Europe where you don’t bear arms, it’s a completely different discussion yet again. And, so I remember making a point to a men’s Bible study here in Texas - the topic was gun control - in which I said, “Because we have the right to bear arms, we’ve already made an ethical decision that impacts the playing field about how you have this discussion. If I were having this discussion in Britain where you’re not allowed to bear arms, it’s a completely different discussion just because the context is so different for the discussion.”
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Daniel Rodas  This is what we were talking about earlier about the hermeneutical piece. And, even the hermeneutical piece taken further, back to the original document, is the second amendment even about that? Is it about, “Well, back then we needed a militia and so people needed to have guns if they were called up to fight a war.” Well, that’s different than – I don’t know if your hearers or viewers would remember Columbine, or we just recently had this killing in Aurora movie theater. That’s not the militia. That’s not second amendment Colonial period. This is a whole other world. So, the hermeneutical discussion is not only the placement in Texas out of Texas. The hermeneutical discussion is, “What about that document? Have we interpreted that document appropriately?”

Darrell Bock  Is it just a blanket statement of the right to bear arms? Or, was it a statement that was designed to allow for a certain way for the country to defend itself because of the way it was structured at the time?

Daniel Rodas  Exactly. And, its limitations at that time.

Darrell Bock  That’s right. Well, again, and so what happened in this discussion – what I do with the gun control discussion is I go through a list of concerns. You have some right of self-protection. You have a right to protect your family – those kinds of things. The kinds of things that would lead a person to say, “I have the right to bear arms.” But, then you have, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” and you have a series of text in the scriptures. This is a trajectory that you’re talking about. This is actually what I emphasis when I do this. The trajectory is that we are to be as peaceable a people that we can possibly be that our first instinct isn’t supposed to be to pull the trigger, but our first instinct is supposed to take us somewhere else. What that model does is it says, “Lay out the entirety of the portrait of the scriptures, and then ask yourself how you relate all the pieces that you have on the table to one another, along with the observation that you’re making, as well as understanding the nature of the context that you’re actually operating in. Which is extra Biblical, or extra scriptural in some ways.

Daniel Rodas  Right. And, I would say that part of that discussion – and you would know more about it because you’ll talk about it more in Texas than we do in Colorado. But, to me it has to be part of a coherent vision of the Christian life. See, and what happens is sometimes Christian ethics are basically, “Be a good person. Pay your taxes, and whatever.”
Darrell Bock

And, then you take it one issue at a time.

Daniel Rodas

One issue at a time. And, so for instance, and again, your viewers may disagree with me on this, but I’m a pacifist. I think that’s consistent with the trajectory of the scripture and Jesus. Okay, that’s all in the discussion. But, so as I think through gun control, that becomes the question I ask. How does that fit into my view of what it means to be a Christian? And, what should the church in a country – not only this one, but we live here – obsessed with violence. Our video games, our movies, our obsession with guns. And, you know, the macho, everyone’s pushing each other and standing up for themselves. In a country obsessed with violence of all kinds, what does it mean to be a Christian? That’s the kind of question I would want to be asking. Okay? So, does it mean arming yourself to the teeth? Going and asking for a concealed weapon permit – is that part of what it means to be a Christian? Can you even imagine Jesus having that conversation? So, that’s where I would like myself and others to get to. How does this cohere with what it means to be a Christian? And, those are the kind of conversations I don’t hear.

Darrell Bock

Well, let’s shift gears here and talk a little bit about immigration where you’ve got I think the same kind of dilemma. You’ve got the people who start with the Romans 13 text, and we’ve got our laws, and we’ve got to uphold our laws. And, a person who comes into the country has violated the law. And, then of course, the more difficult part of that is that someone maybe two or three generations ago made that decision to come into the country. Now they have kids. They have a family. And, I’m doing this on purpose to make the question more complex, but also to make it more real in terms of what we’re really dealing with. So, now if you talk about disciplining the person who came in, you’re actually talking about – according to the law – you’re actually talking about splitting families and doing other things that we know the Bible gets nervous about. So, that’s one side of the question. But, then the other side of the question is that is the teaching, the trajectory, if you will of the sojourner – how a host country should treat an alien. What hospitality is about. The generosity of the scripture. The emphasis of the scripture about the gospel itself being an invitation into forgiveness, as opposed to being something else. All those kinds of things. And, you start to line this up, and all of a sudden you realize this is a much more complex picture than simply one text.
Right. I mean, you open up so many lines of discussion, but let me just mention the Romans 13. When people say, “We ought to obey immigration law,” what they’ve just told me is they don’t know what it is. Because, if they did, they wouldn’t say that.

So, this is talking about understanding sociologically what the context is of the law that frames it.

Exactly. Let me give you an example. I mean, people have this idea if they’re here illegally there must be an office they can go to, and a form to fill out, and a fine to pay. Why don’t they want to do that? Well, in the current U.S. immigration law, if you were here undocumented, there is no provision for you to get rights. And, people – they just think, “Well, there must be some way.” Now, my answer is there actually isn’t. So, there’s no line to get into, no office to go to, no form to fill out, no fine to be paid. There is nothing they can do under current law. And, so that’s why we want immigration reform. Now, splitting families is another example where people don’t understand. Under current law if you’re undocumented and you’re the dad, and you’re picked up, that will leave the mother with three kids – two of whom may have been born here. Okay, so they’re citizens. Under current law, if one or both parents are deported that is not considered hardship. Okay? What would have to be – because I’m involved with someone who’s actually trying to get all this worked out in Colorado. And, the son – the middle son – he’s autistic. And, with immigration law, or the best in Denver tell me is, the deportation of both parents is not a hardship. The only way that that family could prove that the father needed to be there, she said – this is the way she said it, is if he’s in the hospital – the little boy – hooked up with tubes. Then they might consider it a hardship from a legal standpoint. So, under current law, there is the exception clause of hardship. But, to try to prove that is almost impossible. So, that is one of the few exceptions. Another exception under current law is, again, if you’re the husband, let’s say I’m the wife. And, you beat me. So, the wife can claim some kind of asylum, you see, because of abuse. That’s another exception, you see. So, this is what people don’t know. So, when they say, “Oh, they gotta obey law,” I’m going, “Well, you have no idea…”

How confused the law actually is.
Daniel Rodas: Yeah, and how – see, U.S. law is about entry. It’s really not about once you’re here, because they don’t know what to do with you once you’re here except deport you. Another thing people don’t know is about 40 to 45 percent of those who are here illegally came in legally. So, the idea of the fence doesn’t deal with 45 percent of those who came in illegally. “Well, what do you mean?” Well, what they did was they came in on student visas, tourist visas, temporary worker visas, and just stayed. The law, as it now stands, does not track you when your visa expires.

Darrell Bock: And, there’s no place for you to go. So, you’re stuck. You’re in no man’s land.

Daniel Rodas: Yup. And, so people don’t know that, either. So, if I tell them, well, you know, 45 percent of those who are undocumented came in legally,” they just assume everyone kind of crossed the boarder over, under, and through the fence. Well, not if you’re Asian. Not if you’re African. Not if you’re Canadian. We have undocumented Canadians in this country. You see, and about 20 percent of all Koreans, for instance, are undocumented. You see, this is the secret that no one talks about, you see? And, they didn’t come in through the fence. They came in on tourist visas, or student visas and then just stayed. So, this is why you need reform. So, one thing is the whole pragmatics of reforming a law that is incredibly messed up, which the U.S. democracy allows us to do. I mean, we change laws all the time, right? We don’t like them.

Darrell Bock: Right. Or, they don’t work.

Daniel Rodas: Or, they don’t work. And, so you’ve got to change them. You see, we do this all the time. Why can’t we do this with immigration, you see? And, what you’re seeing then is there’s other things driving the anti-immigration thing because they’re not thinking about – because they usually don’t know – how pragmatically broken the system is. But, even if they did sometimes they still don’t want to hear it. That tells me there’s more going on here than just the law. I mean, I hate to use this word, but there may be some racism going on, comfortableness with foreign language, foreign customs – which is all very human. But, yeah, so it’s a whole Pandora’s box.
Darrell Bock  Okay, so we do have Romans 13 on the table. It’s a part of the equation. So, you can’t just – you don’t just throw it out. But, I think part of the point that’s being made is when we look at the whole of scripture, we see Israel as a community being urged to have a certain attitude towards aliens and sojourners to understand and appreciate their own experience as aliens and sojourners, which makes them sensitive in this regard. I like to transfer this in thinking about the Christian perspective and seeing – we see in the scripture a principle of offering forgiveness for people to have a new start. That’s at the core of what the scripture is, and if you have any doubts about how important that is, a text like Matthew 18 is one of my favorites to bring up in relation to this. This is the parable where the guy is forgiven a huge debt, and then he goes out and he doesn’t forgive the guy with the little debt. And, so the guy who forgave him the huge debt comes back and says, “You didn’t get this. You should get this.” And, there’s a sense in which there is a willingness – the trajectory is there’s a willingness to take people in and to take them in on the basis of a start that involves an element of forgiveness in it. So, that’s also on the table.

Daniel Rodas  Yeah, and I think a piece in the Old Testament side is historical memory. You do this because once you were slaves in Egypt. And, what I see in this country is the historical immigrant memory is pretty truncated.

Darrell Bock  Weak.

Daniel Rodas  So, St. Patrick’s Day – so we all drink beer and wear green. Okay, but we don’t talk about the quotas on the Irish and the Irish ghettos. We don’t talk about how the Irish were marginalized.

Darrell Bock  We’ve forgotten the 19th century.
Male 2

We’ve forgotten the 19th century, or we’ve idealized it. Okay, the Chinese Exclusion Act, which kept Chinese out of this country, even though we imported them for labor to build our railroads during the gold rush. So, then we put in place this exclusion act that was in place for 63 years. And, so we’ve forgotten those stories. The most tragic story, getting back to the slavery issue, of immigration into this country was the importation of black labor. That’s what it was. The Africans were brought in to work our farms. And, we go to Civil War for this, and we have the 13th and 14th amendment, but we still have segregation for another century. So, what you’re seeing is there’s this immigrant population that we brought in to work, and so we want their work. We just don’t want them. And, so we’ve forgotten all of that. You see? The Italians – what we did to the Italians. The WOP – what does the WOP mean? Without Papers. We’ve forgotten all that language, and we idealize it with Columbus Day, or Oktoberfest. The largest immigrant group in mid-19th century were the Germans. We’ve forgotten that. I’ve got this great – I’ve got to give it to you. It’s this article written by Benjamin Franklin, and from the colonial period. And, he’s worried about the Germans because listen to what he says. “They have their own schools, stores, and churches, and newspapers.” He’s worried about them learning English. And, then he says, “And, the men beat their mothers.”

And, then he says, “They’re not the same pigment color that we are.” I’m going, “A German and a Brit? I mean, really? They’re that different?” But, what you’re seeing even with Benjamin Franklin is this rejection of the other – of the German speaking other. You see? So, it’s all very human, but we’ve lost all those memories. And, I think this is the wisdom of the scriptures because God says, “Don’t ever forget, because when you do, you become Egypt.” And, this is what happens. You repeat Egypt. And, that’s what we see in this country.
Darrell Bock

And, you look at the nature of the church theologically where part of what is supposed to represent is the ability of God to bring people together, and reconcile into one another, and help what I would call a positive assimilation happen. Which, isn’t that you become like me, but we together appreciating who we are, work together side by side. That’s another important trajectory of the scripture is. I think what we’re talking about here in one sense, when you talk your way through it you can begin to see it. But, on the other hand, it’s such a different way of thinking about reading scripture than the way most of us were taught. It takes some time, I think, and reflection to kind of get your hands around how it works. Let’s come back to the one piece. So, we’ve got this situation in which we’ve got these themes. And, there should be a feel – people want us to go back to being a Christian country, but they don’t want us to extend a hand. How does that work? So, let’s try and put all the pieces together. What kinds of things – we’ve all ready said this is somewhat open-ended in terms of how you address the particulars. How do you put the law piece in with the other stuff? How do you make the ethical reflection of the whole of the cannon?

Daniel Rodas

Well, on the law piece, if you want me to go somewhere else tell me. But, the law piece to me, that’s why I think the Old Testament law is important, because it’s grounded in creating a different kind of people. They’ve come out of Egypt with its social construction of reality, which was law, and religion, and hierarchy of race, and economics. He takes them in the middle of nowhere, gives them another law, which isn’t just about sacrifices for sin. Right? And, we get to Jesus and we’re done. I mean, it’s about what you eat, what you wear, whom you marry.

Darrell Bock

It’s building a people in a community.
Daniel Rodas: It’s building an alternative culture. So, if you begin, when I have the law discussion when I present on immigration, I talk about law as a cultural builder, and identifier, and definer. So, the question you ask is, “What does the law tell us about the heart of a country?” And, what the Old Testament law does is I think you see the heart of the Old Testament law in terms of what it does to the vulnerable people of the time, which would have been the poor, the widows, and the orphans, and the alien, or the immigrant – whatever you want to call them. So, what you see is this constant referral to these groups of people because that tells you who you really are. So, when you look at current U.S. law, the question is, “What does it say about ourselves? How do we treat those who are vulnerable in our midst? How do we treat poor people? What kind of attitudes do we have?” What did segregation law in this country tell us about us? That’s the kind of question you have to begin to ask, and that’s when we get to what you were saying about being a forgiving people. See, what do our attitudes about law and about the kind of law that we have on immigration tell us about us as Christians? If we accept it without any question, what have we just said about the church? That’s the kind of discussion that we need to get, and then to try to inform people about the history of immigration law, which is checkered. And, you know, what’s changed is the color of the people, but discrimination is just part of the history of the country.

Darrell Bock: It’s the cycle we go through. It’s just the names of the immigrants change.

Daniel Rodas: Exactly. And, everyone is listening to this or watching this – if they go back far enough, their ancestors went through the very same thing. But, they’ve probably forgotten and have idealized it. So, you have to go at immigration law. You have to talk about what law does and what it says about us. And, the one I hear, which kind of puzzles me, is they go, “Oh, we have the rule of law.” And, I’m going, “Every country in the history of the world had the rule of law.” I mean, we have ancient law codes. So, when you say, “We have the rule of law,” you’ve told me nothing.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, Hammurabi is very old.
Daniel Rodas: Yeah, I mean, so everyone today around the world is the rule of law. I mean, so you haven’t said anything. The question you have to ask is, “What kind of law do we have? Is it a good law, or a law that needs to be worked? And, what are the motivations and what are the values that drive the law?” And, that’s where I think the Christian contribution, because ideally biblically I think is that it would ground what we think would be good immigration law, which we need, in a different set of values than sometimes is out in the marketplace. So, those of us who want immigration reform, you get the caricatures. So, “Oh, you just want open boards.” And, I go, “Well, I don’t think anyone is talking like that,” because nobody is. I mean, there may be some kind of radical out there who is. But, what you’re talking about is a different kind of immigration law that covers the waterfront instead of just entry, and all these kinds of things. So, what are the values that area gonna drive that kind of discussion, and what is the place of the Bible and Christian faith in that discussion? Now, we can inform at least at the value level, and now the Bible becomes our moral compass even if it doesn’t give us the recipe for what we need to do.

Darrell Bock: So, it might not write the law for us, but it tells us what attitudes should go into the writing of those laws.

Daniel Rodas: What attitudes and what values we want the law to reflect.

Darrell Bock: Well, I mean, we’ve only just scratched the surface. But, hopefully this is a glimpse and it’s an initial one. I’m sure we’ll come back to this again, and again, and again because it is dealing with the ethical of scriptures is deep. And, it’s not something you just absorb in a sound byte. It’s something that really takes a reflection and a lifetime of study to appreciate the depth of the riches of what’s going on in the scripture, and the way in which it engages life, and the various tensions and angles that come from it. So, I appreciate you taking the time with us to be a part of this discussion, and to kind of lead us in the discussion.

I will mention the – yes, we will do the promo. Now, you originally wrote this how long ago? The first edition was –

Daniel Rodas: 2008. This one is coming out – well, by the time this shows it’ll be out.
Darrell Bock

Yeah. This is Christians, the Boarder, Immigration, Church, and the Bible, Second Edition by M. Daniel Carroll Rodas. And, this is a revision and expansion of an earlier version which works through the history of the discussion, elements of the sociology of what’s going on, as well as the Old Testament and New Testament values – that kind of thing. And, just kind of gets a person oriented by taking an exemplary look at the ethical dimensions of the question, and thinking through it biblically. So, I thank you for being a part of The Table podcast. And, we thank you for joining us. This is The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture.