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TXR2011 – Examine the Ethical Teaching of the Eighth-Century Prophet Isaiah

Introduction

This essay will examine the context and basis of the social and personal morality as seen in Isaiah 1-39. This is the part of Isaiah generally considered to be the earliest writing and authored by Isaiah, son of Amoz. It will assess whether or not Isaiah can be seen to be taking a distinct ethical viewpoint grounded in the legal or wisdom traditions or whether he is simply acting 'in an *ad hoc* fashion in relation to the specific situations with which he was confronted.'[1]

When dealing with the ethics of a civilisation, it is inevitable that the beliefs of that civilisation about the nature of Man must be fundamental in framing them. Eckhart highlights the fundamental distinction between the near Mesopotamian mythology and Israeli theology:

> "In Mesopotamian tradition man was created from the blood of a god who represents chaos and guilt…Thus…man within himself…a life bound to failure…whose purpose is to relieve the gods…of the burden of work…How different from Genesis."[2]

In ancient Israel Man was considered 'a little lower than God'[3] and it is reasonable to assert that these vastly different interpretations of man will have consequences for the ethics of the community:

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[1] Davies, E.W., *Prophecy and Ethics – Isaiah and the Ethical Tradition of Israel*, p118, Sheffield:1981.
[2] Eckhart, Otto, *Theologische Ethnik des Alten Testaments*, p62, Stuttgart:1994.
[3] Psalm 8:5. This is a strong translation of *elohim* which is translated 'God' in many places but sometimes rendered 'judges' or 'angels'. Thus, the KJV translates this verse 'a little lower than the angels' but the central idea remains one of being an agent of God with His message as exegeted in Hebrews 2.

> "…the dignity of the human person, and of human beings in society…in a world where there are no evil gods on which to place the burden of the world's wickedness, human responsibility is necessarily more marked.."[4]

On a basic level, it seems clear that Isaiah considers the basis of his ethics as theological rather than of modern Western ethical systems that might simply give the answer of 'mutual advantage' to the fundamental question, 'why be moral?'.   In this sense, 'He is certainly not trying to convince his hearers that morality is a matter of natural law but that their actions are evil and will bring the wrath of God'[5] and '..Judah had suffered military disaster and Isaiah understood it to have been a divine response...'[6].

However, what is considered by many scholars to be unique within Isaiah, is that divine ethics extends to all aspects of Man's interaction with creation as opposed to a simple system of divine imperatives, 'Isaiah is the first to suggest that there is a comprehensible and comprehendible plan which involves all creation'[7]. In this sense then, Isaiah has been presented as having an understanding of ethics "which has…affinities to…natural law"[8] that will be concerned with social and personal morality as ends in themselves as perhaps explored in the wisdom tradition.

The language of Isaiah indicates a strong social ethical current in his thinking. He asserts the rights of disadvantaged groups which might loosely be called 'the poor' and frequently pairs righteousness with justice. The Hebrew words

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[4] Barton, J., *Understanding Old Testament Ethics – Approaches and Explanations*, p1, Louisville:2003.
[5] Barton, op.cit., p130
[6] Birch, J., *Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, p314, Nashville:1999.
[7] Birch, J., *Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, p312, Nashville:1999.
[8] Barton, op.cit., p130.

Michael Macneil

translated 'righteous' encompass theological meanings[9] that are beyond the normal word field of the English meaning but they also imply righteous actions and implicit justice as in English. A righteous person is necessarily a just person:

> "Justice…refers to a society that values fairness, especially…in court, and a society in which all share…[justice] is both social, of the people as a whole, and individual…Justice is the principle that reward…and punishment…follow respectively and irrevocably from good and evil. This is retributive justice…if [social] justice is not present…that society will be justly punished."[10]

The "social gospel" movement of the late 19th century aggressively adopted this interpretation and the same idea of an "advocacy for the poor"[11] is a fundamental supposition of modern Liberation Theology. Pleins makes this case forcefully, '…the picture of a social consciousness rooted in the concrete struggles of the landless could hardly be more plain'[12] and uses the term "rent capitalism"[13] to describe the exploitation of the rural poor of Israel by the urban establishment. YHWH is presented as 'judging the rulers of the land for their exploitation of the poor.'[14]

However, such an interpretation is arguably an oversimplification and minimises the divine basis for his ethics. The concepts of "good" and "bad" are defined from a theological base rather than a social one although they may have social corollaries, 'righteousness and goodness are to trust and hope in the Lord, to choose God's ways (Is. 1:19; 2:5)…sin is a rebellion

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[9] The words are often rendered 'salvation' and 'deliverance' in different contexts.
[10] Quinn-Miscall, P.D., *Reading Isaiah – Poetry and Vision*, pp51, 56, Louisville:2001.
[11] Pleins, J.D., *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible*, p216, Louisville:2001.
[12] Ibid., p254.
[13] Ibid., p257.
[14] Ibid., p259.

Michael Macneil

against authority, a refusal to do what one should.'[15] This has led to an

emphasis by some scholars to be placed on the legal, covenantal basis for

interpreting the ethics of Isaiah:

> "…what we might call legal language is remarkably prominent in prophetic literature…some have called prophets God's prosecuting attorneys…most prophets identify specific ways in which God's people have violated the covenant relationship…such violations will lead to destruction, whether at God's hand or by enemy troops."[16]

However, such an emphasis would also seem to be over-restrictive as it

implies Isaiah is simply using the Pentateuch and has not developed its

ethics. There are obvious difficulties with this approach when Isaiah deals

with issues not dealt with by the Law but more fundamentally, there is a basic

problem with expecting legislation, of an in itself, to correct social and

personal apostasy:

> " [there is] often ground for scepticism regarding the effectiveness of the law to combat social abuses and to correct injustice and oppression…part of the prophet's task was to make clear the various aspects of man's social responsibility which could not be controlled through legislation."[17]

Davies continues to make the case that Isaiah should not be viewed so much

as a mouthpiece of the covenant with a primary motivation of the restoration

of a legalistic framework for Israel's life but that his ethics are based on

appreciating the relational, i.e. social aspect, implied in the Father-Son

language[18], appealing to the fundamental egalitarianism or even "wisdom" of

ancient Israel:

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[15] Quinn-Miscall, op.cit., pp43-44.
[16] Birch, op.cit., pp298, 300.
[17] Davies, E.W., *Prophecy and Ethics – Isaiah and the Ethical Tradition of Israel*, p116, Sheffield:1981.
[18] Deutero-Isaiah uses Mother-Baby language and could be seen to be much more powerful evidence for support of this interpretation.

Michael Macneil

> "Israel was expected to serve Yahweh from a sense of spontaneous respect and affection rather than out of a sense of duty or obligation…[thus - MM] people should treat each other with a mutual respect and affection which transcended legal duty."[19]

Thus, this approach very much places the moral imperative within the realm of Western 'natural law' ethics and minimises the theological import into Isaianic ethics. It must be considered that the narratives are predicated with 'The Lord will' implying a primarily theological dynamic.

The approach of Barton is helpful in drawing these divergent perspectives together which all clearly have some merit from the text. He classifies Isaiah's moral statements as first, second or third order[20]. The first order statements refer to the acts themselves, which may be called 'social sins'. The second order statements concern the attitudes and states of mind; the pride, haughtiness and arrogance of 'those who are wise in their own eyes' (5:21) and 'who attribute their successes to their own power' (10:5-15), the "fundamental sin of…pride with which [Man] sets himself up against God…Luther's dictum '*omne peccatum est superbia*', all sin is pride."[21] The third order statements are those which, 'either by explicit formulation or…by metaphors and analogies, [describe] what is the essence of both sinful actions and wrong attitudes'[22]. It is that God has ordered the Universe and assigned each a proper place. God's place is to be first:

> 'when people ignore the universal moral order, they become foolish and lose both moral and practical insight…they…overestimate their own importance…they fail to see where their trust and confidence should properly be placed.'[23]

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[19] Davies, op.cit., pp114-116.
[20] Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics – Approaches and Explanations*, pp134-136, Louisville:2003.
[21] Eichrodt, W., *Der Heilige in Israel (Jes, 1-12)*, Stuttgart:1960.
[22] Barton, op.cit., p135.
[23] Barton, op.cit., p136.

Michael Macneil

Barton is thus postulating that Isaiah is using a form of natural law as the

basis of his ethics but that the basis of the moral law is not human subjectivity

but is God himself:

> "…ethics begins with a hierarchical ordered universe whose moral pattern ought to be apparent to all whose vision is not hopelessly clouded, and one which derives all particular moral offences from the one great sin, a disregard for natural law."[24]

Such an interpretation gains strong scriptural backing from Is 14, vv12-14 and

Ez 28, v16.   Lucifer's rebellion was against the order and authority of God.

He "merchandised"[25] (v16a) himself and that led him to moral failure and

predicated his sin (v16b):

> "Sin…therefore…[is] disregard for the order and is a deliberate refusal to see the world [as it is]"[26]

Conclusion

Isaiah has been shown to have developed a keen sense of ethics that is more

than a list of social wrongs as defined in the law or of moral imperative passed

down from the covenants. Neither can it be seen as solely as having a basis

in natural law that emphasises the relational aspects between the people

themselves or the people and their God prevalent in the wisdom literature,

with the consequential *ad hoc* approach to social morality based on a

nostalgic import from Israel's primitive pre-Kingly egalitarian past.

Rather, Isaiah is seen as going beyond his contemporaries in connecting the

social sin with an underlying attitude and the underlying attitude with the

fundamental moral failure of the created in honouring its Creator. In a

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[24] Barton, op.cit., p139.
[25] That is, promoted and advertised himself as an alternative to God.
[26] Barton, op.cit., p138.

Michael Macneil

primitive but discernible form, it demonstrates an overall ethical framework that has as its basic assumption, a universal ordering of every aspect of Creation where right, wrong, justice, righteousness and mercy are predicated on God alone.

1500 words (approx).