

Jesus in the Torah: A Response to John Walton’s Lost World Ethics

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Abstract: Jesus’ testimony in Matthew 5:17–20 that He came to fulfill and not abolish the Torah is foundational for our understanding the Mosaic Law and its relevance for Christian ethics.

Recent scholarship, however, has challenged this premise. One prominent example is John Walton’s “Lost World” hermeneutic which interprets the Old Testament text through the lens of Ancient Near East patterns of thinking. This critiques this hermeneutic in Walton’s latest book *The Lost World of the Torah*, while exploring the consequences normative ethics. Taking Jesus’ declaration in Matthew 5:17–20 as a hermeneutical starting point, the paper will show that the Law was fulfilled—not by universalizing the particulars of Torah code—but by affirming the Torah was grounded in the universal nature of YHWH which was manifest through the incarnate person of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

Jesus’ testimony in Matthew 5:17–20 that He came to fulfill and not abolish the Torah is foundational for understanding the Mosaic Law and its relevance for Christian ethics. However, recent scholarship has challenged this premise. One prominent example is John Walton’s “Lost World” hermeneutic which interprets the Old Testament (OT) text through the lens of Ancient Near East (ANE) patterns of thinking reconstructed from his analysis of ancient source-documents. This paper evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of Walton’s hermeneutic in his

book *The Lost World of the Torah* and examines the specific consequences for Christology and normative ethics.

Jesus' declaration in Matthew 5:17–20, if taken as the hermeneutical beginning point, shows that Law was fulfilled, not by universalizing the particulars of Torah code which were limited to Israel's relational-covenant with God, but—*contra* Walton and Walton—by grounding the Torah in the universal nature of YHWH which was manifest through the incarnate person of Jesus Christ. This Christocentric hermeneutic allows for application of the Torah in modern cultures—not as an impersonal system of moral principles—but as a new covenant; given freely by God's grace, received through faith, and sealed by the Holy Spirit who indwells each believer.

Summary of Walton's Argument

In their book, *The Lost World of the Torah*, John H. Walton and his son J. Harvey Walton argue that God communicated the Torah to Israel within the “cultural river” of the Ancient Near East (ANE). The Torah must therefore be read, argue the Waltons, by skilled interpreters as a wholistic set of wisdom sayings pertinent to the values of the ANE. The Torah is not a revelation from God giving prescriptive legislation meant to guide obedience, but a collection of flexible wisdom sayings regulated by the customs and norms of the ancient world which were meant to bring civil order and justice.¹ These sayings were given to God's covenant people Israel in order to fulfill their twofold purpose of self-identification with YHWH and to protect God's reputation among the nations. To these ends, conclude the Waltons, the Torah neither reflected the character of God nor did it function as a prescriptive guide to Israel's moral decision-making.

¹ John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context* (2019), 270, Kindle.

In the ANE, write the Waltons, human beings were never to be like the gods in moral character: the gods were gods and humans were humans. Rather, Israel’s covenant relationship allowed them to co-identify with YHWH by imitating the temporal values of social order, wisdom, and justice. These moral ideals were highly prized in the ANE but said nothing about the eternal character or holiness of God.² The Waltons argue: “Instead, we should understand Yahweh’s self-revelation not in terms of absolutes or universals but rather in terms of contrast.”³ Christians today must recognize that “the purpose of the Torah (including the rituals) is not legislation, not moral instruction, not to form an ideal society, . . . not universally applicable, not incumbent on those outside the covenant, and not connected to salvation.”⁴ Therefore, the Waltons conclude, readers today should not imitate the values of the Torah because these are merely reflections of the values of the ANE.

The Waltons’ hermeneutical approach to the Torah is equally applied to the New Testament (NT). The NT writers produced works, write the Waltons, which interpreted the Torah from within their own Second-Temple worldview and whose moral sayings had limited application within the Greco-Roman culture. Therefore, both the Old and New Testaments operate from within their own unique cultural river and modern readers should not impose the artifice of continuity.⁵ The NT, argue the Waltons, is not a source of information for understanding the Old, but for understanding how the first century Christians applied the Torah to create social order within their own communities.

² Ibid., 907.

³ Ibid., 915.

⁴ Ibid., 1099.

⁵ Ibid., 1726, 2232.

The wider effect of the Waltons' book is to release present-day readers from the difficulty of trying to establish any ethical norms from the Scripture. On a corporate level, the universal nature of Divine justice is replaced by the ideal of social justice (a term not fully defined by the Waltons). On an individual level, the call to be a holy people must remain distinct from the call to be a moral people. God's people are declared to be holy within the divine covenant; but the Waltons argue that this status does not require the individual believer to follow any universal moral system. Instead, it requires only that each person demonstrate respect for the social order particular to his or her own cultural river. The Christian understanding of moral order, therefore, does not come then from God's character, laws of nature, social convention, the Torah, or even the NT. Morality, conclude the Waltons, is a set of behaviors, customs, taboos, and traditions set by each community within each culture that establish and preserve social order.⁶ Consequently, moral purpose for the individual believer is found in following after God's plan for their life. This plan may entail some particular moral choices, but these individual choices should never be understood as universal norms.

Critical Analysis

In analyzing the ethical entailments of the Waltons' hermeneutic, it is important to recognize some points of agreement. The Waltons rightly observe: (1) the Torah is not a comprehensive text covering every possible moral dilemma for every age and every culture, (2) the Torah is uniquely tied to Israel's covenant relationship with YHWH, (3) the Torah was written to communicate a Divine message suited to the unique historical-cultural context of the

⁶ Ibid., 2915.

ANE, and (4) the Torah should not be divided into arbitrary categories of ceremonial, civil, and moral law.⁷ The veracity of these four hermeneutical principles, however, does not logically or theologically require a commitment to the Waltons' conclusion. The Waltons' conclusion does, however, rely on at least four distinct premises repeated throughout the book:

P1: The Torah must be accepted or rejected as a complete ethical system.

P2: The Torah makes no universal moral claims binding on anyone outside the ANE.

P3: The Torah can only mean what a human reader of the ANE would understand it to mean.

P4: Virtually no Christian theologian has accepted the entire Torah as a universal system of ethics.

C: Christians today cannot use any passage in the Torah for moral guidance.

The first three of these four premises are claims about the Torah itself. The fourth premise is a hermeneutical claim based on theological tradition. Each of these four premises is used in an informal argument by the Waltons to justify the conclusion that the Torah cannot be used as a trans-cultural guide to normative ethics. The following argument demonstrates the failure of these four premises to provide a sufficient logical or theological justification for accepting the Waltons' conclusion.

Premise 1: The Torah must be accepted or rejected as a complete ethical system.

Without question, the trichotomous division of the Torah into ceremonial, civil, and moral law has strong roots in the history of the church that can be traced back to Tertullian in the

⁷ Ibid., 1903.

second century.⁸ This radical division, unknown to the Jews or first-century Christian, is commonly invoked in Reformed doctrine and was advanced in the early 20th century among Fundamentalists who believed these categories were inherent to all legal codes.⁹ More recently, this trichotomy has been advanced among scholars who accept the moral codes but also argue that the ceremonial and civil laws were suspended by the finished work of Christ on the cross.¹⁰ Despite these traditions, the Waltons' argument for the Torah's unity is accepted by this author as sound. This premise, however, improperly conflates the concept of the Torah's wholistic nature with the obligation of Christians to embrace it as a complete ethical system. For the two reasons outlined below, accepting the unity of the Torah does not provide a ground for affirming the Waltons' conclusion.

First, *The Lost World of the Torah* fails to interact critically with the historical creeds which respect the wholistic nature of the Torah, recognize some degree of discontinuity between the Old and New covenants, yet point to Christ's declaration in Matthew 5:17 as the foundation for accepting the value of each covenant for normative ethics. In examining a variety of creedal traditions, Jon English Lee makes clear that the trichotomous division of the Torah is both arbitrary and imposed on the text using outside sources. Nevertheless, he concludes, the Law

⁸ William W. Combs, "Paul, The Law, and Dispensationalism," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 18 (2013): 19.

⁹ George Frederick Wright, "The Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch," in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of Truth*, ed. R. A. Torrey and A.C. Dixon (Los Angeles, CA: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917), 52, Logos Bible Software.

¹⁰ H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1946), 64–65.

itself still speaks to the eternal character of God.¹¹ One example of this historical precedent is found in the Waterland Confession of 1580. In article 10:49f, the Anabaptist reformers affirm the end of the Torah in the person of Christ who has, “Demonstrated what the law of Christians is, what the rule and norm of life, and what sort of life and path leads to eternal life.”¹²

Second, *The Lost World of the Torah* creates a false dilemma in asserting that the Christian reader must either apply all of the Torah as a comprehensive and universal ethical system or none of the Torah. This argument fails to engage contemporary scholars who find a middle road between these two options. William W. Combs, for example, embraces the indivisible nature of the Law and affirm its enduring value through the finish work of Christ. In evaluating Jesus claim in Matthew 5:17, Combs finds affirmation in Romans 10:4 which reads: “Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”¹³ Given this translation of *telos*, Combs concludes that the entirety of the Law finds both its temporal culmination and its teleological consummation in the person of Christ who was the incarnation of God’s true nature. The doctrinal implication is that Israel was bound to God’s eternal moral law by a unique covenant relationship that was tailored to the culturally distinct elements of the ANE. And while Christians are not bound by the particulars of the Law, they are bound by the New Covenant to the same God who stands as the moral ground of both. Given both the creedal history and secondary literature, one can accept the wholistic nature of the

¹¹ J. Daniel Hays, “Applying the Old Testament Law Today,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158, no. 629 (January–March 2001): 22.

¹² Jon English Lee, “The Moral Law of God And Baptist Identity,” *The Founders Journal* 94, no. A Closer Look at Confessions of Faith (Fall 2013): 8.

¹³ Combs, “Paul, The Law, and Dispensationalism,” 31.

Torah, reject its use as an ethical system, yet find its value for Christian ethics through the person of Jesus Christ.

Premise 2: The Torah makes no universal moral claims binding on anyone outside the ANE.

The Waltons reject the universality of the Torah by arguing it reveals nothing of the moral nature of God. Embedded in this second premise is the assertion by the Waltons that the Torah is a collection of flexible wisdom sayings, relevant to the customs and norms of the ancient world, which provided a guide to social order, but not a moral guidebook for individual behaviors. Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, gives readers an incomplete glimpse into the character of God and therefore cannot provide a foundation for trans-cultural ethical norms.¹⁴ In consideration of these limitation, the Waltons assert that Christians cannot affirmatively ground moral obligations in God's nature. In place of God, the Waltons attempt to ground their sense of moral truth in the neo-Platonism of C.S. Lewis. The Waltons conclude, "there is no uniquely Christian morality, any more than there is a uniquely Christian cosmic geography...Whether morality is objective or subjective, morality is a part of reality, just like the structures and arrangement of the cosmos are part of reality."¹⁵ This quote, however, demonstrates a lack of understanding of both C.S. Lewis and neo-Platonism which deny subjective morality because Platonic forms make all morality objective. Despite this confusion, taken at face value the Walton's denial that any universal moral claims can be taken from the Torah results in significant problems for Christian ethics.

¹⁴ Walton and Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah*, 2978. See also, John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 133.

¹⁵ Walton and Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah*, 2915 See also, C. S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, *Christian Reflections* (London: Bles, 1967), 56, 68.

Following the Waltons' logic, the apodictic commandment of God, "Thou shalt not kill (Exo. 20:13, Deu. 5:17)" is neither a moral guide to anyone outside of Israel, nor a command given to safeguard the sanctity of human life. As a Torah saying, this commandment can be nothing more than an artifact of ANE culture that was meant to secure social order and respect from Israel's neighbors. To support their case, the Waltons fail to provide any evidence that the Jews embraced this limited interpretation of the Torah. While the OT covenant may depict YHWH as a Suzerain-King, this cultural accommodation is an accidental property and not a limit on the essential fact that YHWH is a transcendent king: he is the creator of all the natural world. If, however, this Torah command not to kill was understood by Israel as both trans-cultural and normative, then this second premise fails the test of the Waltons' own hermeneutical framework.

A second problem facing the Waltons' second premise is the life of Jesus himself. Alva J. McClain, like the Waltons, accepts the Law as a wholistic covenant under which Jesus was born and morally bound to obedience (Galatians 4:4).¹⁶ However, McClain sees Matthew 5:17 as a declaration that Jesus—an individual citizen of Israel during the Second Temple period—was still bound by the Law and required to fulfill its demands of personal righteousness (Matt 3:15).¹⁷ Thus, in the person of Jesus we find reason to reject the Waltons' claim that the Torah made no moral claim on any individual outside of the ANE.

¹⁶ Alva J. McClain, "What is 'The Law?'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 110, no. 440 (October 1953): 334–335, 339.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 339–340.

Premise 3: The Torah can only mean what a reader of the ANE would understand it to mean.

The legal sayings of the Torah are, without doubt, part of a larger narrative which only makes sense within its ANE context. Yet, the need to understand the Torah through its cultural context, is not the same as the Waltons' negative assertion that the particulars of ANE civilization limit the universality of the Law. This claim falls short for several reasons.

First, throughout *The Lost World of the Torah* the Waltons assert time and again that the modern reader cannot look outside the Torah to other biblical passage for a reliable hermeneutic. By this standard, however, the Waltons' reliance on ANE culture as the external source for interpreting the Torah fails. Just as there is no passage in the Torah that tells readers to use the New Testament to understand its meaning, there is likewise no claim within the Torah to use the ANE culture. This argument from silence, if a defeater for trusting in the hermeneutical value of later biblical revelation, must also be a defeater for the Waltons' trust in ANE culture.

Second, the Waltons reject the use of the Torah as a guide to normative ethics based on their observation that every hermeneutical systems suffer from the problem of indeterminacy (the inability to resolve conflict surrounding difficult passages). Yet, the Waltons' own hermeneutic suffers from this same problem. If our understanding of the Torah is bound by the perceptions of the ANE reader, then one must ask, which reader? Certainly the "people of the ANE" cannot be treated as if they represent a monolithic block of cultural ideas and norms. Noel Weeks concludes:

Just as the Waltons do not acknowledge that there are multiple cultures in the ancient world, they do not mention multiple cultures in the modern world. Their position would seem to imply that Christians in non-Western cultures should have a quite different faith from Christians in the West. This failure to recognize modern cultural difference is

actually insensitivity to diversity of cultures, which is one of the “good” things the modern world emphasizes.¹⁸

Consequently, the Waltons’ theoretical “average ANE reader” provides neither a reliable nor a sustainable hermeneutic. The Waltons’ penchant for oversimplification may be effective in dismissing the ethical implications of difficult passages, but it ultimately turns every Torah saying into nothing more than a cultural convention with no trans-cultural meaning. Dennis Hollinger, recognizing the dilemma created by hermeneutical methods comparable to the one employed by the Waltons, concludes, “The challenge, of course, is not to turn uncomfortable texts into particularistic texts that do not apply today simply on the grounds that they are ‘hard passages.’ The key here is finding reasons in the text, context, or other biblical texts that warrant a limit of its application.”¹⁹

Third, the Waltons’ reliance on cultural narrative fails to properly address the concurrent theological narrative of the Torah which, from Noah through Israel’s redemption from Egypt, tells the story of God’s sovereign work of deliverance.²⁰ This ongoing theological narrative of covenant redemption for the people of Israel comes to its zenith in the Law of Moses which is sealed in blood (Exo. 24:3–8).²¹ The Waltons’ argument throughout *The Lost World of the Torah* which seeks to privilege the ANE cultural narrative over this clear theological narrative of redemption is clear but unconvincing.

¹⁸ Noel Weeks, “Problems with Comparative Method in Old Testament Studies,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 62, no. 2 (2019): 293.

¹⁹ Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 160.

²⁰ Hays, “*Applying the Old Testament Law Today*,” 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

Fourth, time and again the Waltons argue that the Torah cannot be interpreted to mean anything outside of the author's original intent which is bound by the perceptions of the typical ANE reader. Thus, conclude the Waltons, "we are accountable to an Old Testament author's intention in context."²² Literary genre, they say, is the major authority for understanding the meaning of the Torah. Any attempt, therefore, to apply the text to a modern context would be like, "trying to derive timeless moral truths from a chocolate-chip cookie recipe."²³ Again, it is important to note that the Torah itself makes no such internal claim, but even more the Waltons' hermeneutic fails to consider God as the ultimate author of the text. If God is the ultimate author of the Torah, the faithful reader is not tethered to the text but tethered to the person of God who himself authored the text and who was manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. If, then, we understand Matthew 5:17–20 as Jesus' claim to authorial privilege, the Christian is given permission to understand the text beyond the impressions of the ANE reader and through the mediating work of the Spirit of Christ.

Finally, the Walton's third premise alienates the modern Christian reader from understanding the text and creates a need for specially trained "brokers" to unmask the meaning of Scripture hidden by ancient cultures. These brokers, argue the Waltons, have a privileged understanding of the text and can therefore tell us what is applicable for today's Christian. In *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest*, John Walton makes this point clear:

What this means is that the idea of goodness described in the text needs to be translated, not simply adopted, for the same reason that the Israelites (the original audience of the Old Testament) were supposed to be good citizens of the ancient world, and the early

²² Walton and Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah*, 1880.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2501.

Christians (the original audience of the New Testament) were supposed to be good citizens of the classical world.²⁴

What the Waltons fail to provide in their book, however, is a foundation for what qualifies one to become this special “broker” of culture. What qualifies these special people to determine for all the church what constitutes a moral good? And which cultural norms—ancient or modern—do the Waltons believe should be accepted as the new standard of conformity?

In contrast to this new form of scholastic elitism, the, Scripture itself makes the claim that there is no better broker with greater authority than the person of Christ. J. Daryl Charles concludes, “Most interpreters of Matthew acknowledge that Jesus is not a new law-giver but *the* legitimate interpreter of the divine will as contained in the Torah and reiterated by the prophets. Thus, Matthew 5–7 can be legitimately understood as ‘the fruit of Jewish piety.’”²⁵ Jesus, contra the Waltons, is therefore not a mere Second Temple period interpreter of Torah, but the law giver with authority beyond the limits of ANE culture.

Premise 4: Virtually no Christian theologian has accepted the entire Torah as a universal system of ethics.

Premise 4 of the Waltons’ argument is that virtually no Christian has treated the Torah as consisting of timeless, universally binding norms. This premise, however, equivocates on the term “universal” and creates a false dichotomy. Paul R. Schmidtbleicher shares the Waltons’ belief that similarities between the Old and New Testaments do not necessitate an imposition of the Mosaic Law on the Christian. There are, without doubt, particulars in the Torah which hold

²⁴ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 23.

²⁵ J. Daryl Charles, “Garnishing with the ‘Greater Righteousness’: The Disciple’s Relationship to the Law (Matthew 5:17–20),” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12 (2002): 3.

no moral obligation on the Christian. Nevertheless, this limitation does not logically, or textually, preclude the possibility of finding universal norms in the Torah. The Torah recognizes an eternal law given by God to the patriarchs, which is embedded in the Mosaic Law, and is now written on the hearts of Christians to guide their moral choices.²⁶ In recognizing the unity of the Torah, and its particularity to ancient Israel, Christopher Wright contends there remains a universal ethic of love which precedes the Mosaic Law and endures in the command of Christ.²⁷ As Roy L. Aldrich concludes, “all people in every dispensation are under the moral law of God. Moses did not originate this law and it did not cease with the cross.”²⁸

Conclusion: Christians today cannot use any passage in the Torah for moral guidance.

The Waltons’ conclusion is that the use of Torah as a moral guide is an either/or proposition: either you accept it as applicable in every command or reject it in total. Any attempt to rely on the Torah for moral guidance, conclude the Waltons, is simply an exercise in justifying one’s preconceived opinions of right or wrong.²⁹ The previous analysis has shown the weakness of the Waltons’ four premises which cannot logically sustain their conclusion. However, there remain several considerations that further weaken the case for the Waltons’ conclusion.

The purpose of the Torah, argue the Waltons, was to promote civil order and justice, not, moral guidance. Despite this assertions, the Waltons still define morality as a set of behaviors,

²⁶ Paul R. Schmidtbleicher, “Balancing the Use of the Old Testament,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 8, no. 3 (July–September 2002): 62.

²⁷ Christopher Wright, “Ethics and the Old Testament: a Functional Understanding of Law,” *Evangelical review of theology* 2, no. 1 (April 1978): 69.

²⁸ Roy L. Aldrich, “Causes for Confusion of Law and Grace,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 116, no. 463 (July 1959): 226.

²⁹ Walton and Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah*, 2410.

customs, taboos, and traditions set by each community in each culture used to establish and preserve social order.³⁰ This definition given by the Waltons leads to the first challenge against the soundness of their conclusion. The reader is left to reconcile the apparent contraction: if morality is defined as the promotion of social order and the Torah is used to provide social order, how is it that the Torah is not a moral guide even to Israel?

In part, the Waltons attempt to reconcile this paradox by limiting the value of Torah—along with any tangentially moral sayings—to the ANE context. Sexual ethics, for example, is nothing more than taboos and traditions used to bring societal order to Israel alone and does not denote an absolute transcultural moral standard of purity for modern Christians. If true, this leads to a further challenge that can be illustrated through the story of King David. Using the Waltons’ hermeneutic, one must conclude that David’s affair with Bathsheba, and the subsequent killing of her husband, was judged wrong by the prophet Nathan only because David’s actions violated the social order and expectations of ANE culture. One could not, relying on the Waltons’ hermeneutic, conclude that David’s actions were wrong because they violated a universal moral standard tied to God’s nature. Nor could one use this passage to judge modern instances of adultery, abuse of power, or murder as immoral. This hermeneutical approach turns the Scripture into a set of culturally conditioned ethical saying and ultimately divorces individual Christians from knowing anything true about God’s purpose for human sexuality.

Finally, the Waltons’ continued rejection of any universal normative ethic runs counter to the underlying assumption of their book that civil order and justice is itself a universal ethic. Their book never provides any justification from within the Torah, or through logic, which

³⁰ Ibid., 2915.

compels the reader to accept social order as the ultimate guiding purpose for morality. Even more, if societal order was valued in the ANE and valued in the Torah, there is no compelling reason for the modern Christians to accept social order as a normative guide for sexual ethics. Nor is there any basis to universally prefer a society which accepts a rape culture over a purity culture.

Jesus as the Hermeneutical Focal-Point of Torah Fulfillment

Having demonstrated a few of the self-refuting and unsubstantiated premises advanced in *The Lost World of the Torah*, the following pages will demonstrate the coherence of the counter proposal that Jesus' testimony in Matthew 5:17—established the universal nature of the Law by granting each Christian direct access to a normative ethic through the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. The argument begins with a point of agreement. The Waltons are right to assert that Scripture gives an incomplete glimpse into the character of God. On its face, this assertion is sound because there is no way for any finite book (even one inspired and inerrant) to contain the fullness of knowledge about an infinite God. Nor would it be possible for a finite human to comprehend the infinite nature of God. Yet the Waltons' conclusion that the absolute and complete picture of God's character is the necessary standard for establishing a moral universal does not follow from that premise. If, for example, a complete and perfect picture of an infinite God were the standard for Christian knowledge, then the Waltons' argument would count against any claim to know anything of the person of God. The Waltons' epistemology creates an insurmountable divide between the world we experience and the reality of God which exists outside and beyond our comprehension.

On the other hand, if one accepts that the Scripture provides a partial but authoritative revelation of God's moral nature, then the Christian has access to a genuine knowledge of God.

If, in addition, one accepts that Jesus himself was the incarnation of God, then through him we also have access to a genuine knowledge of God and his true moral nature. Can a case then be made that Jesus claimed to be the hermeneutical focal point of the Torah?

The Waltons concede their book does not fully investigate the NT use of the Law, Paul's theology of the Law, or Jesus' connection to the Torah.³¹ This lack of investigation does not, however, prevent them from making at least two strong claims. First, the Walton's assert that the theology of both Paul and Jesus was bound by the culturally conditioned hermeneutical methods of their day.³² Second, they conclude that Jesus' prophetic utterance in Matthew 5:17 makes no universal moral claims and was limited to fulfilling his role as Israel's king.³³ To evaluate these claims, it is important to read first the words of Jesus:

¹⁷ Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17–20, ESV).

In verse 17 Jesus points to his own incarnation as the point of unity between the writings of the Torah with the Prophets. Jesus' declaration harkens back to Jeremiah 31:31–32 which promises that the law will be written on the hearts of God's New Covenant people. This law will be distinct from the Mosaic law since the old law as tied uniquely to the people of Israel. Yet, both Old and New, argues Femi Adeyemi, are said to come directly from YHWH and reflect his

³¹ Ibid., 1734.

³² Ibid., 1847.

³³ Ibid., 2801.

moral nature.³⁴ The fulfillment of the Torah in Christ only reinforces its universal value for understanding God’s character, which informs the Christian life (see also, 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

In verse 18, Jesus establishes the culturally transcendent nature of both the Torah and Prophets in their eschatological purpose. Within its historical and biblical context, it is fair to conclude that the universal nature of Torah is primarily relational and only secondarily propositional. This claim is not without merit as even the Waltons agree that the “Torah provided the means for them [Israel] to be in relationship with Yahweh through the covenant.”³⁵ Therefore, for Christ to fulfill the Law he must stand as both the incarnation of God’s moral character and as the sign that the Torah endures into the age of the New Covenant. Endurance of the Torah through the person of Jesus does not, however, preclude discontinuity of the particulars between old and new.

The Waltons create a straw man in suggesting that those who argue for a continuity between the Torah and NT are committed to affirming every principle and practice of ancient Israel. The Walton’s are simply wrong to assert that those who argue for an eschatological continuity between the Torah and NT ignore important textual distinctions or create artificial categories for the law. Discontinuity between the covenants, does not necessitate discontinuity between the living word of Christ who stands behind both the Old and New Testaments. Walton is correct that neither the Torah or the New Testament, “have the literary-theological purpose or function of revealing a moral system.”³⁶ However, recognizing the absence of a singular moral

³⁴ Femi Adeyemi, “The New Covenant Law and the Law of Christ,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163, no. 652 (October–December 2006): 446.

³⁵ Walton and Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah*, 2252.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2811.

system in the Scripture does not preclude the claim to a universal ontological foundation grounded in the character of God. The Christian can lay claim to a universal ethic revealed through a variety of covenant relationship limited to historic periods and cultures, but which is nonetheless universal through the person of God. The source of morality for Christian then is not in obedience to the specific laws of the Torah but is found in the life of the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:1–10; 4:10; 5:1–4, 13, 16–26).

Finally, it is critical to see that in Matthew 7:28, Jesus was recognized by all as one who taught with an authority beyond even that of the scribes. While the Waltons argue that Jesus has no privileged standing as an interpreter of the Torah, it is clear that Jesus and the people of his day saw him as a unique interpreter of Scripture. For the Waltons' conclusion to stand, the Christian must trust that the Waltons' hermeneutical framework is more authoritative than the direct words of Christ recorded by Matthew.

Conclusion

This paper critiqued both the strengths and weaknesses the Waltons' Lost-World hermeneutic and it how it was applied in *The Lost World of the Torah*. It was shown that the four main premises of the Waltons' argument are insufficient to sustain their conclusion that Christians today cannot use any passage in the Torah for moral guidance. To assert that the Torah can only be understood through lens of ANE culture and the anthropocentric perspective of the ancient hearer, is to deny the progressive nature of God's self-revelation, which culminates in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. This does not perfectly alleviate the tension between the Law and the Christian life, but it does provide a coherent hermeneutic for understanding Christ as the living word who stands in authority behind the written word of Scripture. Walton is right to warn against principlizing the Scripture especially to the exclusion of pursuit of the

biblical virtues. John Goldingay acknowledges the same concerns as Walton but offers one possible way forward:

We can then ask an equivalent set of questions about our own context in order to think out how we can implement the regulation's objective there. The Torah offers a model for the implementation of God's will in society in a particular cultural context. We learn from it not by lifting out particular principles or practices that look immediately applicable in ours but by gaining an understanding of its understanding of life in society as a whole.³⁷

The key to this wholistic approach is to acknowledge that the Torah was fulfilled, not by universalizing the particulars which were limited to Israel's relational-covenant with God, but, *contra* the Waltons, by affirming the particulars were grounded in the universal nature of God made incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. This Christ-centered hermeneutic allows for application of the Torah in modern cultures through the mediating covenant of the cross.

Neither the Torah nor the NT is given as a textbook on ethics. Scripture, even taken as a whole, cannot be used establish a system of moral principles capable of guiding every possible decision. Consequently, a valid hermeneutical process will consider the cultural, historical, and theological context of every passage. That said, it is a mistake of the postmodern reader-based philosophy to reject the universal and normative nature of the Torah as a Divine revelation fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. The power of the Scripture to serve as a guide to normative ethics lies not in dismissing the universal nature of Torah code, but in recognizing each passage points us toward knowledge of YHWH's true moral nature. Moral knowledge, then, provides the foundation for ethics which is rooted in the Christian's warranted true belief in the self-revelation of YHWH through both his written word and the living word of Jesus Christ.

³⁷ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Life*, Vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 334.

Christian Ethics then becomes not a set of propositions to be followed, but the absolute re-creation of life (e.g. behaviors, attitudes, mission, etc.) revealed in the Scripture, made real through the cross of Christ, manifest in the Spirit, and experienced in community as the adopted sons of the Father. Moral choice within a particular cultural context, therefore, finds meaning at the confluence of ethics and theology in one's daily choice to live in accord with God's covenant-love. The Waltons err in their choice to privilege the culture of the ANE (or any culture) as the hermeneutical focal point of the Torah. This paper has shown, however, that Christ's words in Matthew 5:17 reveal him as both the author and perfecter of Torah revelation.

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