

WISDOM CALLS

*The Moral
Story of the
Hebrew Bible*

Paul Lewis

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All quotations from the Hebrew Bible in this book come from the Tanakh translation of the Jewish Publication Society, in the *Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2004.

For Marsha and Timothy

Experience as both professor and pastor confirms that many Christians who take faith seriously yearn for ways to inhabit the Old Testament text and embrace it as a living organism. They ask, “How can I engage the Hebrew Bible in ways that simultaneously honor its integrity and display its functional benefit for living intentionally in complex, and sometimes disordered, times? How can the Old Testament be a resource for my development as a moral person?” In this highly suggestive and even sometimes edgy book, Paul Lewis has undertaken a novel approach for discerning how both Jews and Christians can learn about how their development as moral and wise persons are displayed in the Hebrew Bible.

—The Rev. Dr. Harmon Smith,
Emeritus Professor of Moral Theology (Divinity) and
Emeritus Professor of Community and Family Medicine (Medicine)
at Duke University

Paul Lewis is scholarly, spiritual and...well...worldly—in the best sense of the word. So, whether you wander the halls of academia, regularly sit in a church, or just hang out in coffee shops, his humor, heart, and insight will delight and benefit you. Paul shares a refreshing view of biblical literature that guides us past both the rigidity of legalistic answers and the murky, mysterious unanswerable questions of faith to a space of mature thought for our messy worlds. I’m guessing you’ll finish this book and think, “My bible, my life and my world make a little more sense to me now.”

—Dr. Jim Dant,
Pastor, First Baptist Greenville,
Greenville, South Carolina

Paul Lewis gifts the reader with a path into the Old Testament that integrates religious and psychological frameworks. The book is engagingly written and entices the reader to move forward on the path to wisdom. We can all benefit from such assistance!

—Dr. Darcia Narvaez,
Professor of Psychology, University of Notre Dame

In this perceptive and noteworthy work, Paul Lewis applies criterion generally associated with wisdom literature to the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures, creating a very fresh focus that amplifies our understanding of these sacred texts.

—Rabbi Larry Schlesinger,
Temple Beth Israel, Macon, Georgia

Contents

Preface.....	ix
Chapter One: An Experiment in Reading the Old Testament.....	1
Chapter Two: Law as Response to Need for Order	19
Chapter Three: Appeal to Principles	37
Chapter Four: Conflicting Advice for Living in a Hard, Cruel World.....	53
Chapter Five: Wisdom Calls.....	67
Appendix: Moral Development and Wisdom in Recent Psychology	85
For Further Reading.....	93
Bibliography.....	97

PREFACE

“And Now for Something Completely Different!”

That phrase, the opening line for each episode of the groundbreaking British comedy series *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, might well describe this book, for it is *not* a standard introduction to the Old Testament. This book should be treated instead as a thought experiment that investigates the question, “What does the Old Testament teach us about moral development?” The answer that I will develop over the course of the book is that it calls us to develop wisdom to live in a complex world full of competing voices. This is, in short, what I am calling the moral story of the Hebrew Bible. In fact, I will go further to suggest that reading the Old Testament as Hebrew Bible actually initiates its readers into a process of moral development, the end point of which is wisdom.

Given the eccentricities of this work, readers can—and should—ask, “How did you come up with this project?” Three primary factors led me down this path. First, I have long been intrigued by Jack Miles’ Pulitzer Prize-winning work *God: a Biography*.¹ A Jesuit-trained literary critic, Miles engages in his own thought experiment by reading the Old Testament in Hebrew Bible order as a continuous narrative. (See the next chapter for an explanation of the difference between the two.) More than that, Miles reads the story with one question in mind: “What happens to God as a character in the story?” The result is an intriguing view of God. In this book, we will take a similar approach as Miles, but will ask a different question, since I am not a literary critic. I am instead a Christian ethicist who is interested in moral development and who teaches multiple sections of Old Testament each year at a private university. So I must

confess that, to paraphrase the old television commercial, “I am not an Old Testament scholar, but I play one in the classroom.”

Second, a few years ago, I was looking for a way of “aligning” (a current buzzword) my teaching obligations with my research interests so that I could work more “efficiently” (yet another bit of jargon these days that is often an excuse for requiring people to do more with less. Leaders demanding such should read Exodus and see how well that turned out for Pharaoh. But I digress.) Doing some research on the Bible and character development, I discovered an essay by Old Testament scholar William P. Brown, who argues that the structure of the book of Proverbs moves readers from simplistic reliance on rules as the basis of morality to union with wisdom. Brown demonstrates how the opening poem and different collections of proverbs that make up the book lead the reader into increasing moral complexity as later sections critique overly simplistic views found earlier in the book. As he puts it, “In short, the bookends of Proverbs trace the formation of moral character that culminates in the union of Wisdom and her student, a movement that spans the process of maturation from receptive child to responsible adult, from dependent to patriarch.”² This line of thought was one that I believed could fruitfully be applied to the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole—a task I have undertaken in this work.

A third factor in the genesis of this project is my interest in moral development, an interest that goes back to my days as a psychology major in college. At that time, Lawrence Kohlberg’s research dominated the topic. Drawing from the cognitive theories of Jean Piaget, Kohlberg identified six stages in the development of moral reasoning clustered into three levels that he called the pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. These levels are distinguished by the basis upon which moral decisions are made. In pre-conventional reasoning, moral decisions are based on the impact they will have on the self—we decide on the basis of whether we will benefit or not. In conventional moral reasoning, decisions are based on social conventions, or what other people, customs, laws, etc., expect of us. In contrast to these two levels, those who reason at the post-conventional level base their decisions on so-called “transcendent ideals,” such as human rights or justice.

A number of critics have pointed out legitimate problems with Kohlberg's theory, but two features of his work are important for our purposes. The first is that we can and do develop morally over our lifespan. The second is that the direction of development goes from a focus on self to a focus on laws to a focus on principles. My question (and that of Kohlberg's critics, as we will see in the appendix to this book) is, "Is this enough?" Based on my reading of the Hebrew Bible, my answer is, "No." Reading the Old Testament as Hebrew Bible invites us to develop morally by moving from a focus on self to law and then to principles, but then compels us to go beyond in a quest for wisdom.

All of this is to say, again, that this book is not another introduction to the Old Testament—we have too many good ones already (some of which are overpriced, by the way). Neither is this book a study in contemporary moral psychology. Instead it is an attempt to integrate disciplines in a way that respects the scholarship of both fields but is slavishly beholden to neither. The result, for me at least, is a provocative and fruitful way of reading these ancient texts that helps us see their contemporary relevance—and hopefully challenges us to become wiser.

Even though this book is not another standard textbook, I do think it is best read in combination with a good study Bible and perhaps a more traditional introduction. For study Bibles, I recommend the *Jewish Study Bible* (now in a second edition), not only because the books occur in the order of the Hebrew Scriptures rather than the Christian Old Testament, but because the notes and articles add interesting material on Judaism's use and understanding of these texts. All of this helps us read these texts again, as if for the first time (with apologies to Marcus Borg's *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, which is also a good introduction to the Bible as a whole). I also recommend *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us*, by Douglas A. Knight and Amy-Jill Levine. Knight is Christian and Levine is Jewish, and together they have put together a wonderful synthesis of the scholarship of both traditions. For standard introductions to the Old Testament, see the recommended readings at the end of the book.

Although I am a college teacher, I do not write with an exclusively undergraduate audience in mind. I write as well for people who want to

think about their faith and who are open to reading these texts in fresh ways. The goal of doing this is not to be novel for the sake of being novel, but to gain insights that we otherwise miss because we all too often take these texts for granted. Thus I hope that this book will be useful to study groups in different religious communities, along with undergraduate classrooms.

Before saying more about the project, I must first pause to acknowledge groups and individuals who have contributed to this work by allowing me to try out these ideas in various settings: the Hailey Sunday School Class at Highland Hills Baptist Church in Macon, Ga.; the Seekers Sunday School Class at First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga.; students in my sections of Old Testament at Mercer University in the spring semesters of 2014 and 2016; participants in the “Virtue and Its Development” conference held at the University of Notre Dame in May 2014; and the conference “Between the Disciplines: from Theory to Practice,” held at Mercer University in March 2015. Individuals who have read and commented on this material at various stages of development and who have offered valuable (and sometimes blunt) commentary include Jim Dant, Pastor of First Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C.; Janell Johnson, a colleague at Mercer—and a bona fide Old Testament scholar; Amy-Jill Levine, Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University; Darcia Narvaez, Professor of Psychology at the University of Notre Dame; and Rabbi Larry Schlesinger, now retired from Temple Beth Israel in Macon, Ga. I am grateful, too, to David Casady, John Peirce, Lex Horton, and others at Nurturing Faith who were willing to take a risk on this project, one that some readers will at times find shocking, irreverent, and/or simply weird.

I must also express my gratitude for the financial support that made the research and publication of this book possible. Richard F. Wilson, Chair of the Roberts Department of Religion at Mercer, has been generous over the past few years with funds from the department’s Edward Dargan Johnston fund for research. All of us in the department are indebted to Dr. Johnston’s generosity and foresight in establishing this fund. Wayne C. Glasgow, Senior Vice Provost for Research at Mercer, has also generously supported this work, as has Highland Hills Baptist Church.

Last, but certainly not least, I dedicate this book to my wife and son. Although they are not God, they do serve as God's servants by drawing me out of myself into the service of a wider good.

I conclude with a preview of what is to come. Chapter One will explain in more detail how I want readers to enter into these texts. The next three chapters will be built around the three-part structure of the Hebrew Bible. Chapter Two will therefore explore what snapshots from the Law tell us about moral development. Chapter Three will do the same for the Prophets. Chapter Four will immerse us in the conflicts and complexities found in selections from the Writings. Chapter Five will put wisdom on center stage as we explore what wisdom meant in the ancient world and engage in some exercises intended to help us more consciously and conscientiously deal wisely with diversity. Each chapter will contain questions for discussion. An appendix will review the psychological literature that has informed this study. A bibliography and recommendations for further reading can be found at the end of the book.

I hope that readers will find that this book is more than an eccentric and illuminating way of reading the Old Testament. I hope that they will also read it as an invitation to do today what the biblical writers did in their day, namely discern what it means, in practice, to live wisely as the faithful people of God. Our world, as polarized as it is politically and religiously, is surely as contentious as that faced by the ancient Jewish people after the Exile. Perhaps we can learn from them as we try to negotiate gracefully the conflicting voices heard in our so-called "culture wars."

Endnotes

¹New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

²See his "The Pedagogy of Proverbs 10:1-31:9," in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by William P. Brown (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 153.