# Moses (and Jesus and Paul) for Your Hardness of Hearts

I apologize that because of a glitch in the scheduling for the meeting, I will have to leave after my paper to get to another session.

Jesus notes that the people of old were told not to murder or commit adultery, and to love their neighbors but hate their enemies, but he himself says that we should avoid the inner attitude that finds expression in murder or adultery, and should love our enemies (Mt 5:21-48). Western Christians often take his words as an indication that his ethical ideals are higher than the Old Testament’s.

This inference from Jesus’ words is mistaken. First, the Old Testament already affirms the importance of inner attitude as well as outward act. Job’s account of his life in Job 31 is a systematic exposition of this awareness, not least in connection with sex and with murderous thinking. Joseph embodies it in his forgiveness of his brothers who behave toward him as enemies. Second, there is no Old Testament exhortation to hate one’s enemies. Nor is there any exhortation to hate one’s enemies in any contemporary Jewish writings that we know. Jesus’ reference to an encouragement to hating one’s enemies is thus a puzzle. Of course, the idea of hating enemies is common enough in ordinary life, so maybe Jesus is not referring to some formal written source or piece of teaching but to a common human attitude—his disciples will have heard people issue this exhortation. Third, the context in which Leviticus urges people to love their neighbor indicates that the neighbor whom one is to love is the neighbor who is one’s enemy. It is the person whom one might rebuke for their wrongdoing, or from whom one might seek redress, or against whom one might bear a grudge (Lev 19:17-18). Leviticus’s own point, then, is that loving one’s neighbor implies loving one’s enemy; of course, people hardly need to be exhorted to love the neighbors with whom they get on.

In his exhortation to love one’s enemy Jesus is thus making explicit the Torah’s own implications, not setting forth expectations that contrast with the Torah’s. This understanding fits with the context in his words; he has just declared that he came to fulfill the Torah and the Prophets, not to annul them (Mt 5:17-20). The common Western interpretation of his words fits ill with that context. Something similar applies to the Blessings that precede that statement about fulfilling the Torah and the Prophets. The Blessings are indeed a profound, challenging, and encouraging proclamation about spirituality. In part they are so because of the way they are fulfilling the Torah and the Prophets. Most of their raw materials come from Isaiah and the Psalms, though one of the most striking of them comes resonates with the Torah. Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus says, which could seem to contrast with the Torah and the Prophets, but it resonates with the way Israel does its best to negotiate a friendly passage through Edomite territory on its way to the promised land, and when it receives a militaristic response, withdraws in order to go another way (Num 20:14-21).

Admittedly, the notion of fulfillment is ambiguous. Fulfilling the Torah might simply mean obeying it (cf. Rom 8:4; 13:8). Yet even contexts that imply this meaning also suggest the connotation of filling up or filling out, and this understanding makes sense in Matthew 5. Jesus is bringing out the meaning of the Torah and the Prophets. Leviticus 19:18 implies loving one’s enemy; Jesus makes the point explicit. To anyone who knew the Scriptures, there was nothing revolutionary or shocking in his expectation that one should love one’s enemies, though some people would no doubt find it offensive, as they do today. In thus “fulfilling” the Torah, Jesus acts as a prophet, like Micah when Micah opens up the question about what is the good behavior that Yahweh looks for, and answers that it involves implementing judgment, giving yourself to commitment, and being diffident in how you walk with your God (Micah 6:8). Micah, too, is fulfilling the Torah.

Of course the attitude to enemies in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings is more complex than the example of Joseph or the exhortation in Leviticus might suggest. While there is love of enemies in the Old Testament, there is also hatred of enemies.[[1]](#footnote-1) Conversely, in the New Testament, there is hatred of enemies, such as the attitude Paul expresses in 2 Thessalonians 1. And Jesus himself is the only person in Scripture to tell anyone to hate anyone else (Lk 14:26).

Jesus’ talk of fulfillment and his subsequent examples, then, point to one aspect of the method involved in interpreting the ethical implications of the biblical material. There are imperatives, and there are ways in which their implications need to be spelled out. Jesus makes a related point in responding to the classic Jewish question about the most important command in the Torah. His answer combines commands about love for God (Deut 6:5) and love for one’s neighbor (Lev 19:18); he adds that the entire Torah and the Prophets hangs on these two imperatives (Mt 22:34-40). The postmodern instinct is to ask whose interest is served by commands in the Torah and elsewhere. The alternative interpretive question Jesus suggests is how the commands express love for God or love for one’s neighbor.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A third comment by Jesus on the interpretation of the Torah offers a further related insight that stands closer to that postmodern instinct. It is the comment from which I take my title. Jesus is again responding to a question, concerning divorce. He rules out the idea that a man may initiate a divorce, which does not fit Genesis 1—2. How then does he understand the regulation about giving a woman a divorce certificate (Deut 24:1)? “It was because of your stubbornness that Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not like this” (Mt 19:1-12). Here, too, he is not introducing an idea of his own. Deuteronomy itself is fond of describing Israel as stubborn (e.g., Deut 9:6, 13; 10:18). So Jesus takes a critical stance in relation to the Torah, but his stance involves not criticizing the Torah from the outside, not introducing a new and higher standard than the Torah’s own, but analyzing the diversity of levels within the Torah itself. The regulation about divorce certificates stands in tension with Genesis, because it makes allowance for human stubbornness, but in keeping with his other comment, it was also an expression of love, because it gave a woman some means of establishing her status; she cannot simply be thrown out by a husband who is tired with her.

There are further areas where the Torah implies a distinction between how things were from the beginning and how they are when one is being realistic about how we are as people. The idea in Genesis 3 that husbands exercise authority over wives is an explicit example; such hierarchical relationships are a consequence of humanity’s going wrong. The idea that a man might have more than one wife or that one human being might be the servant or slave of another or that human beings might eat animals are implicitly further examples.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In his comment about fulfilling the Torah, Jesus challenges his disciples to show a righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees and scholars. The discussion of divorce suggests what might be involved, namely, that one does not take advantage of regulations in the Torah that make it possible to evade the Torah’s highest demands. The problem of “whose interest is being served” is not a problem within the text but a problem within interpreters. The text needs to be interpreted not in my own interests but as an expression of love. Augustine’s principle that the test of interpretation is whether it tends to build up the twofold love of God and neighbor[[4]](#footnote-4) is not merely a principle for the application of the text but a principle for its exegesis that corresponds to Jesus’ point about the Torah and the Prophets.

The disciples are horrified that they should have to forgo the right to divorce; they do not wish to aim at a higher righteousness than other people, to exegete the text on the basis of love rather than interpret it on the basis of their interests. Jesus then makes clear that he is not inflexibly rigorous in the stance he takes; he recognizes that not everyone can accept it. He himself does not seek to implement a standard that matches how things were at the beginning. While there are positive aspects to his attitude to women, he includes no women among his Twelve Disciples, and he calls no women to follow him. He does not take the egalitarian approach that is implicit in Genesis 1—2. Like Moses, he makes allowance for human stubbornness.

Jesus’ attitude to the material in the Torah concerning divorce, and his own practice in his relationships with women, thus suggest a way of handling some troubling data within the New Testament. The “household codes” there deal with areas of life where the New Testament has lower standards than the Old. There is no expectation in the Old Testament that wives should be silent when people gather for worship (1 Cor 14:34), and only the New Testament says that wives should obey their husbands (1 Peter 3:1). In regard to relations between the sexes, the New Testament represents what Margaret Davies calls “an impoverishment of traditions.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This is not to say that the New Testament is not authoritative Scripture; there was apparently reason for allowing such exhortations to have a place in the New Testament. They illustrate the way the New Testament also makes allowance for the hardness of human hearts. What it does mean is that we should not assume that the teaching of the Old is outdated by that of the New. Both Testaments are resources for the community’s understanding of God’s expectations. Both Testaments express God’s ideal or vision, and also God’s loving accommodation to human stubbornness.

The same principle underlies the New Testament’s acceptance of slavery. People who supported slavery in the United States were easily able to quote the New Testament to substantiate their case. Jesus and the New Testament writers refer many times to slaves and slave-owners and never raise any questions about slavery. Indeed, the New Testament frequently urges slaves to obey their masters (1 Tim 6:1-2; Tit 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-25). Paul does note that slaves and free are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28), but the same is true of male and female, so the statement carries no implications regarding the abolition of the difference. In keeping with his comment about all being one in Christ Jesus, Paul urges Philemon to accept back his runaway slave “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother” (Philemon 16), but both abolitionists and defenders of slavery have appealed to the exhortation. Perhaps Paul’s ambiguity tests Philemon and indicates the same combination of attitudes as Jesus: releasing Onesimus would be great, but Paul is not insisting on it. Ephesians 6:9 does exhort slave-owners not to ill-treat their slaves. But neither letter urges masters to free slaves after seven years of service in keeping with the Torah.

The scandal of this omission is deepened by the fact that the slavery of New Testament times is a much more oppressive institution than the short-term indentured labor caused by debt that is accepted by the Torah, which involve something more like being a servant than being a slave. New Testament slavery more commonly involves people becoming the property of other people and being subject to their absolute power, and it was New Testament-like slavery that Britain eventually encouraged and America accepted.

Augustine saw sin as the prime cause of slavery. He notes that the word “slave” does not occur until Noah uses it. “It is a name, therefore, introduced by sin and not by nature” (*City of God* 19.15). In other words, “from the beginning it was not like this.” Augustine’s stance contrasts with that of Aristotle, who justified slavery on the basis of the conviction that there were natural differences between people born to be free and to rule and people who did not have the gifts necessary to running their own lives, who needed to be subject to someone else (see *Politics* 1.3-6). While Thomas Aquinas’s view was somewhere in between Aristotle and Augustine, he does note that Genesis 1 gives human beings dominion over the animate world but not over one another (*Summa theologica* Supplement*,* Question 52, Article 1).

The argument in Philemon does introduce a new factor into the New Testament’s exhortations concerning slavery, as does Ephesians 5—6 concerning marriage.[[6]](#footnote-6) There, the expectation concerning a wife’s submission to her husband is transformed as a result of the redefining of the husband’s obligation. His job is to let himself be crucified on her behalf; her job is to submit to his doing so. Yet such reinterpretation of the expectations in the household codes is not a consistent feature of the way the New Testament reworks the household codes. Making Jesus’ acceptance of ill-treatment a model for slaves (1 Peter 2:18-25) is potentially an oppressive move. In New Testament times, the place of slavery in the Roman Empire and its role in the way households work make it difficult to imagine what the abolition of slavery would look like or how it might be achieved. Yet the difference over against the situation in Israel is more one of degree than of kind, and even when one makes allowance for the kind of reinterpretation that appears in Ephesians and Philemon, it remains troublesome that the New Testament raises no questions about the institution. It is the Torah that more clearly supports the abolitionist case.

It is in this connection that Margaret Davies thus comments on the contrast between the Testaments. The Old Testament has two approaches to social ethics. On one hand, it legislates for the social order, attempting to place limits on the oppression of the weak by the powerful. On the other, it lays out moral obligations before people, attempting to get them to be generous and considerate to the needy. In contrast, the New Testament writings “provide nothing like the breadth of vision in social affairs to be found in the Jewish Scriptures.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus “a comparison with Deuteronomy and Leviticus shows that the New Testament represents an impoverishment of traditions, an impoverishment which allowed gross injustice to flourish in Christian countries through the centuries.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The mixed level of the ethical attitudes in both Testaments suggests that the “problem” about diversity of ethical attitudes within Scripture is not a problem about the relationship between the Testaments. There is no “problem” about the relationship of the Old Testament and the New in connection with the level of their ethics. The problem, or rather the task for interpretation, lies in discerning in both Testaments the difference between the creation vision and the loving accommodation to human stubbornness.

There is a related question regarding method in connection with the Bible and ethics. At the International SBL this year, David Clines observed that when interpreting the Pentateuch he evaluates it in light of “the ethical standards… of a liberal Western conscience, affirming of personal dignity, individual and collective freedom and self-determination, and opposed to violence and discrimination, and so on.” He is aware that his values are those of our particular culture. We are inclined to think that out values are universal norms; as the American Declaration of Independence puts it, “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” Yet the very formulation of the convictions in that declaration shows it to be affected by the culture in which it was formulated, and a consideration of values from other contexts confirms the point.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Clines usefully articulates a reality that is common though not commonly recognized. In Africa, Asia, and the West, readers of the Bible who are committed to accepting the Bible’s authority are inclined to assume that their values and the Bible’s values must be the same and thus to look for ways of conforming the two. In the West, attitudes to violence are an example. Western readers expect to find their abjuring of violence in the Bible, and they do so by means of a selective reading of aspects of Jesus’ teaching and of the significance of his life, and by means of an evaluative reading of other parts of the Bible on its basis. Readers who are more comfortable with a suspicious reading of Scripture operate in a different way. Feminist interpretation, post-colonial interpretation, ecological interpretation, queer interpretation, and disability interpretation have a common approach. Their starting point enables them to see ways in which the Bible has been misinterpreted and ways in which its implications have been missed; it can thus be harnessed to resource their perspective. Their starting point also provides them with a basis for critiquing the Bible. But their commitment to their starting point systematically rules out the possibility of self-critique. Their own perspective is the absolute. James Barr once noted that the problem with allegorical interpretation is not that it was unwilling to learning from its texts. It was that it learned only within the framework of its presuppositions.[[10]](#footnote-10) The irony is that critical interpretation has the same problem.

The question these considerations raise for interpretation is as follows. The diversity within the scriptures means one can find material to support almost any position one wishes to maintain. And the principle that both Old and New Testament scriptures combine God’s ideal vision with allowance for human stubbornness provides us with a golden key to using the Bible to support what we approve of (which we define as God’s ideal) and undermine what we do not approve of (which we define as material making allowance for human stubbornness). Yet whatever set of values we presuppose, we would surely be wise to assume that it should not be treated as final; we are likely to be wrong at some points. An awareness of another culture’s values gives us something to think against in this connection, and at the very least, the Bible has the capacity to fulfill that function. We will be wise then to start from the conscious assumption that there are likely to be differences between our values and the Bible’s rather than the unconscious assumption that they are the same, and thus to look for the differences that will provide a critique of us, not just ones that will invite our critique. At least, we will be wise to seek to stay in ongoing dialogue with the parts of the Bible that we don’t like. If reading the Bible issues only in providing us with material that reinforces what we already think, our reading is very likely ideological.

1. . Ironically, the Israelites’ attacks on the Canaanites, which offend modern Westerners, are arguably not an example. The Canaanites were not Israel’s enemies, and the account of Israel’s attitude to the Canaanites does not refer to hating them. Israel was to attack the Canaanites in an unprovoked way even though they were not their enemies, because God viewed them as his own enemies. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Philip Jenson posits a suggestive background to this understanding within Deuteronomy itself, whose rules represent three levels: (a) “The command,” as 6:1 puts it, the Shema; (b) “The ten words” (4:13); and (c) “The laws and decisions” (4:14) (see Jenson, “Snakes and Ladders,” in Katharine Dell [ed.], *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament* [New York/London: Clark, 2010], pp. 187-207, following Eugene H. Merrill, e.g., *Everlasting Dominion* (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), p. 164: “The Shema is to the Decalogue what the Decalogue is to the whole covenant text, especially in its Deuteronomic rendition.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joachim Schaper in a paper on “Ritual, Monotheism and the Place of Leviticus in the Pentateuch” (SOTS July 2013) points to another tension within the Torah over the killing and eating of animals. Genesis 1 (P) states the ideal; humanity is to be vegetarian. Genesis 9 (P) makes a concession in light of the human waywardness that succeeding chapters of Genesis have described. Leviticus 17 (H) tightens the concession in requiring draining of the blood and killing the animal at the sanctuary. It thus takes one step back towards the ideal in its respect for animal life, in its assumption that shedding an animal’s blood is wrong, and in its concern for worship of Yahweh alone (as it does in its Jubilee teaching). On the other hand, in connection with sacrifice Leviticus itself does require much slaughter rather than attempting to implement the vegetarian ideal. Deuteronomy 12 allows for killing animals away from the sanctuary and thus extends the concession. Historically Deuteronomy preceded H but in the compiling of the Torah (by H?) Deuteronomy was allowed to stand at the end and to have the last word.. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Christian Doctrine* 1.36. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Work and Slavery in the New Testament,” in John W. Rogerson and others (eds.), *The Bible in Ethics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 315-47 (p. 347). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See e.g., Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of Nations* (Cambridge/New York: CUP, 1996), pp. 183-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Further, “there is nothing in the New Testament to compare with Philo’s description of Essene belief and practice: ‘They denounce the owners of slaves, not merely for outraging the law of equality, but also for their impiety in annulling the statute of nature, who like a mother has borne and reared all alike as genuine brothers.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Work and Slavery in the NT,” pp. 321, 342, 347. She refers to Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber sit* 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The core African principles of Kwanzaa, for instance, are unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. Asian values include a belief in consensus rather than confrontation, respect for authority, and commitment to the well-being of the community over against that of individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM/New York: Harper, 1966), pp. 108-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)