

God, Justice, and Society: An Overview

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This non-evaluative overview of God, Justice, and Society: Aspects of Law and Legality in the Bible summarizes Jonathan Burnside's introduction to biblical law and his demonstration of its value as a resource for modern legal issues.

Jonathan Burnside presents a modern lawyer's perspective on biblical law in his book *God, Justice, and Society: Aspects of Law and Legality in the Bible*. Oriented toward teaching in law schools, this work attempts to lead uninitiated readers into the text and its original setting, including its Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) parallels, while, at the same time, drawing that ancient text into modern-day legal dilemmas. In the first four chapters, Burnside introduces biblical law and the basic theoretical legal propositions on which it rests. In the next seven chapters, he addresses a number of legal issues, ranging from the environment to sexual offences, both discussing biblical law in its ancient Israelite setting and demonstrating its contemporary relevance. Two final chapters deal, respectively, with how biblical law is applied differently by different communities that consider it authoritative and the legality of the trials of Jesus. Though Burnside does not explicitly divide the book in this way, I will consider the book in these three parts, which I will refer to as methodological preparation, topical application, and historical investigation.

Methodological Preparation

Burnside introduces biblical law by discussing four of its main features: its basic character, the theme of covenant, its incorporation of "natural law", and the way it expresses humanity's vocation to pursue justice. First, however, he justifies the study of biblical law. He defines biblical law as "an integration of different instructional genres of the Bible which together express a vision of society ultimately answerable to God" (xxxii). These genres include narrative, prophecy, and Wisdom, all of which contribute to his exposition of biblical law over the course of the book. Though he recognizes a distinction between "biblical law" and the actual "law of biblical society," he contends that biblical laws were more than purely literary creations. He sidesteps the debates about the historicity of particular laws and legal procedures by taking a canonical approach to the law, discussing it in its final form. This approach is similar to the way most lawyers treat modern law, as they also "work with the finished product and seek to make sense of it as a body of normative materials" (xxxv).

According to Burnside, the study of biblical law is valuable in the twenty-first century because of its staying power, cultural relevance, challenge to modern assumptions, impetus to appreciate law from a theological perspective in a time in which the sacred/secular divide is breaking down, and insight into law in general through its expansive understanding of law. Biblical law also offers five benefits to modern lawyers and law students: (1) it opposes contemporary "neophilic" culture in which the newest is the best; (2) it challenges modern society by presenting a society with different values and assumptions; (3) it presents an interconnected legal system and provides an opportunity to observe how it developed over a long period of time; (4) it identifies the essentials of justice, which can shape the worldview of its readers; and, (5) it encourages legal creativity by encouraging lawyers to think broadly about how law works.

Having stated his case for studying biblical law, Burnside turns to its character. He presents its various facets

in a “Top Ten” list of exemplary texts. The law prescribing penalties for a goring ox in Exod 21:35, with its close similarity to the Sumerian Laws of Eshnunna (1770 B.C.E.), demonstrates that biblical law is similar to ANE law. This implies that ANE laws can shed light on the meaning of biblical law. However, Deut 4:6–8, where Moses asks what nation has laws as righteous as Israel’s, illustrates that biblical law presented itself as different from ANE law. And actual differences do exist, such as the representation of biblical law as direct divine revelation and its explicit endorsements of a didactic model indicating it is intended to be taught. Biblical law is also not like modern law (Exod 22:2–3). It is bound up with the story of God’s involvement with humanity (Exod 23:9). It is didactic and incomplete (Deut 6:6–9). It relies upon rhetoric and literary art to convey meaning (Deut 15:7–8). It receives new expressions as God does more for Israel (Deut 15:12–15; cf. Exod 21:2–6). It is an expression of wisdom (Ps 19:7), and it is relational (Deut 6:4–5).

Building on the relational feature of biblical law in the next chapter, Burnside describes covenant—“an obligation or agreement between two parties” (31)—as the key way in which God relates to human beings. With an overview of the covenant as it recurs throughout the Bible, Burnside provides a synoptic view of God’s dynamic covenantal relations with humanity. He begins with God’s covenant with Noah after the flood, which is universal in scope. He then considers the covenant between God and Israel, which is initiated with Abraham (Gen 15, 17), prominent in the Sinai event and the giving of the Decalogue, and re-imagined in the “new covenant” of Jer 31 and the New Testament.

The covenant not only provides a context for understanding biblical law, it also bears a number of parallels with biblical law. Both are presented in unitary terms but are not monolithic. Both reflect changes in the relationship between God and Israel and are dynamic and new for each generation. Both are more like stories than systems, in that they depend on narrative and vocation. Further, the centrality of theophany in covenant illustrates God’s presence, creative power, and engagement in human affairs, which are all traits also shared by biblical law.

Despite the central role of covenant in biblical law, it also addresses those outside of the covenant, which

inspires a discussion of natural law in the Bible. Natural law deals primarily with the question of human obligation, arguing for a “continuity between acts of human lawmaking and ethical requirements that we experience as imposed on us” (67). This contrasts with legal positivism, the “quintessential liberal legal theory” that denies a necessary connection between law and morality, referring instead to social facts to determine what is and is not law (68). Instead of reviewing the use of the Bible in the Western philosophical tradition of natural law, Burnside focuses on the text itself, looking for “a connection between divine activity and human activity in the realm of normativity (that is, why we feel we ought to do things)” (69). He finds five features of biblical law that demonstrate this connection: (1) continuity between the divine and creation (e.g. the justification for the Sabbath in Exod 20:8–11); (2) continuity between the created world and human behaviour (e.g., the land’s mourning because of Israel’s sin in Hos 4:1–3); (3) universal knowledge of certain norms (e.g., the Noahide law in Gen 9:1–7); (4) continuity between different forms of revelation (e.g., the general similarities between universal knowledge and particular revelation, such as the Sinaitic homicide laws); and, (5) continuity between divine and human acts of judgment (e.g., the involvement of both God and humanity in the reckoning for human life in Gen 9:5–6). Though there are significant similarities between biblical law and natural law in the Western philosophical tradition, tensions exist, which may trouble modern natural lawyers. For example, though the Western natural law tradition is by no means a monolithic entity, it tends to reduce ethics to that which is universal to all, but the biblical claim to universality is more nuanced and complex. It emphasizes calling, presenting moral truth as a matter of one’s knowledge, social situation, and personal relationship with God.

In biblical law, vocation plays a vital role. For Israel, justice was a calling supported by an ideological conviction—that God is the sole source of justice, making all justice divine—and a practical belief—that human judges are capable of mediating actual divine decisions, though they are liable to failure if they lack appropriate wisdom. In another top ten list, Burnside provides several more ways participants in Israel’s judicial process pursued justice, such as fighting to overthrow the oppressor and liberate the oppressed, as well as putting justice

in the hands of the many, not the few. This biblical approach contrasts in several ways with modern ideologies of adjudication, particularly in its separation of religion from “law,” which derives its legitimacy from human instead of divine sources and institutions, and its emphasis on a rule-based legal system that puts responsibility for justice in the hands of a few judges instead of in the domain of a community that must exercise practical wisdom.

Israel often failed to live up to the biblical ideal of “grassroots justice,” leading to popular revolts, prophetic intervention, and prayer for divine intervention. The relationship between divine and human justice could be either a virtuous or vicious spiral. At their best, judges, and Israel as a whole, were on a “learning curve” (see Gen 18:19) in which they grew in wisdom and concomitant ability to actualize divine adjudication.

Though Israel had a special calling to represent God’s justice in the world (Exod 19:5–6), this emphasis on vocation could also contribute to the practice of modern law. In fact, the Bible presents seeking justice as part of the vocation of humanity as a whole, and, therefore, the full humanity of people and communities is stolen from them when this calling is taken from them and placed in an increasingly centralized justice system, such as those in England and Wales. To regain this calling, communities should pursue relational strategies of adjudication. They should take responsibility for justice, be better informed about punishments, feel ownership of prisons, and reform the role of victims to bring it closer to their proactive participation in ancient Israel. Essentially, the Bible’s ideology of adjudication is “grounded in the belief that all justice is divine” (144), meaning law and justice always have a transcendental reference point. Because adjudication is an important feature of divine-human relations, justice becomes part of the vocation of humanity as a whole.

Topical Application

Burnside next considers how biblical law deals with various issues and the insight it offers to modern law. As he proclaims, “Studying biblical law in its original setting does not mean we always have to stay there!” (xv).

Humanity and the Environment

Though many may think “the Bible is as eco-friendly as an oil slick” (145), the exploitative understanding of the Bible results from misreadings of the text, which, in fact, advocates a “modest materialism” (following Ellen Davis). A proper understanding of the biblical story may even be able to infuse new moral energy into current environmental debates, for, ultimately, the relationship between humanity and the environment is a question of narrative. As Max Oelschlaeger, a leading secular environmentalist, observes, “There are no solutions for the systemic causes of ecocrisis, at least in democratic societies, apart from religious narrative” (150).

There are four main ways biblical law structures the relationship between humanity and the environment. First, the creation narrative (Gen 1–2) presents humanity as a species made in the image of God. In this role, humanity has a vocation to relate to creation as God does in the creation narrative, to develop and watch over the earth and create conditions where life can flourish. Second, God’s judgments in the primeval history (Gen 3:14–24; 6:11–13) demonstrate that departure from this paradigm results in environmental destruction, such as the hostile ecosystem after the Fall and the Flood. Third, the postdiluvian blessing conferred on humanity (Gen 9:1–7) harks back to the original creation, though humanity’s vocation to master the earth was not reaffirmed, and conflict had arisen between humans and animals. Finally, various eco-laws throughout the Bible “identify clear rules for planetary protection that are designed to turn the pattern of God’s relationship with creation into specific guidance for humanity” (176). These include the Sabbath command, which allows animals to rest, and Deut 20:19–20, which forbids cutting down fruit trees, and which Burnside argues testifies to the didactic nature of creation, as the command corresponds to which people can be killed in a besieged city (men, not women and children).

People and Land

Turning to the second topic, people and land, Burnside begins by considering the effect of the biblical ideology of divine ownership on the practice of land tenure and land use. This ideology is, again, ultimately derived from the creation narrative, and it means that no human person ultimately owns anything. For Israel, the land was a gift, an

expression of God's covenant with Israel and an embodiment of the people's story. Thus, the incorporation of the national narrative into the offering of first fruits (Deut 26:1–15) is not surprising. Israel's understanding of the land creates a network of relationships: vertically, with God, because the people were forced to rely on him given the difficulty of agriculture; horizontally, with the needy, because land was a gift to be shared; and temporally, with past ancestors and future descendants, since the land was tied to the people as a whole. The temporal connection with descendants involves laws regarding inheritance and disinheritance. The former was concerned with keeping land in the family, which meant there were sound reasons for restrictive inheritance to sons. Even Zelophehad's daughters are primarily concerned that their father's land not be lost when they negotiate an addendum to the law so they can inherit because they do not have a brother to do so (Num 27:1–11).

Burnside next discusses sabbatical laws, a system he labels "restonomics" (197). It involves a "Sabbath spectrum" extending from the Sabbath day, through the Sabbath year ("Sabbath-plus"), to the jubilee year ("Sabbath-squared"). In each of these Sabbaths, the Israelites, recognizing that the land is God's gift, suspend their claims on it. The last of them is the most radical, and had the greatest ramifications for the Israelite relationship with the land. By restoring land to its original owners every fifty years, this law reunited people with alienated land, which prevented it from becoming a capital asset, provided incentive to care for it, and made it invaluable. The jubilee also allowed the poor to escape dependency, rejoined people with their families, and eliminated personal debt. Though some have suggested the jubilee was merely a noble dream, the texts do not present it that way, and there is some historical evidence that it was actually practiced.

These biblical land laws are relevant for modern conflicts between those who treat land as a commodity and those who see it as a unique form of property. As the UK Land Registration Act of 2002 demonstrates, land has increasingly become a form of capital. Narrative and relationship have been lost. Burnside endorses a recent call for a "relational view of land law" (214). He claims the Sabbath laws point to a need to see land in terms of intergenerational

justice, and he urges for land reform and housing schemes that increase the number of people who own their own property. This could invigorate local economies, though he acknowledges the difficulty of this reform because a non-economically fungible understanding of property ownership, like the one in Israel, does not currently exist.

Social Welfare

Because the jubilee ensured there were no freeholders, since no land could be bought or sold in perpetuity, it made all the people "strangers and sojourners" in land that actually belonged to God (Lev 25:23–24). This had a significant impact on social welfare as it created identification between those who did and did not have property. They had a shared dependence, unlike the Western model of competing claims. Additionally, the Sabbath day protected vulnerable workers, while the Sabbath year provided escape from debt, as all debts were wiped clean in that seventh year, and the jubilee required the release of debt slaves. Biblical social welfare laws also included a ban on interest for loans to fellow Israelites, tithes, food distribution through the Sukkot celebrations, and gleaning laws to protect and provide for the needy. The call to embrace the Sabbath year in Deut 15 demonstrates the mindset behind these welfare laws as it encourages national solidarity by offering the poor "brother" both sympathy and dignity.

Some draw a distinction between social welfare and social justice, but the biblical texts integrate the two. Transcending the supposed dichotomy between equality and liberty that characterizes modern debates on social welfare, they present a third way: promote access to means of production, which releases creativity and preserves incentives. In contrast to capitalism and Marxism, "biblical law addresses the question of social welfare by giving as many people as possible the capacity to produce and hence to look after themselves" (251). The biblical law assumes that what comes first is a gift, and in so doing, subverts the modern debate.

Burnside criticizes the excessive centralization of modern British welfare and supports Paul Mills's proposal of a contemporary jubilee that would give access to an income-generating asset, such as a national investment fund, to every family. "States cannot love," Burnside claims (241). Instead,

following the biblical model, modern welfare should have as its goal the creation of community solidarity with a strong sense of individual responsibility.

Homicide and Vengeance

Burnside next addresses how biblical law attempts to strike the balance between harm and culpability in responding to homicide and vengeance and how this compares with English law. Examining three sets of biblical homicide laws (Exod 21:12–14; Deut 19:4–13; Num 35:16–24) Burnside identifies three categories of homicide: premeditated, “spur of the moment,” and accidental. This is similar to English law, where the offender’s subjective state of mind determines the seriousness of the offense. However, the biblical means of punishment, death at the hands of the victim’s nearest kin (the “avenger of blood”), was applied even to the latter two categories if the offender was caught before he reached a city of refuge. This introduced chance into the Israelite penalty and potentially applied the same punishment to multiple states of mind. Even the accidental killer had to flee and experience internal exile. This approach of tying punishment to harm as much as or more than culpability is found in earlier instantiations of English law. Asylum at the altar (Exod 21) and in these cities of refuge was intended to save unintentional killers while not abolishing blood vengeance completely. Ransom and royal pardon were also possible means of escaping capital punishment, though both were less prominent in biblical law.

Biblical homicide laws flow out of the biblical commitment to *lex talionis*, which indicates that the punishment should fit the crime. Contrary to the popular reading of the classic *lex talionis* formula, “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Exod 21:24), Burnside, following David Daube and Bernard Jackson, argues with support from Hittite and Assyrian parallels that the Hebrew word *tachat* should be read as “in the place of” instead of “for.” This formula, together with the “as” (*ka’asher*) formula (e.g., Deut 19:19; Lev 24:19), expresses the qualitative and quantitative proportionality of biblical justice, which ultimately opposes “ultraviolence” and encourages restraint. Understanding the practical application of these laws qualifies their categorical language; for homicide, asylum was provided, and for *talion*, the threat of physical mutilation could be substituted by another form of negotiated compensation.

Theft and Burglary

Biblical law defines theft differently than modern law. In current English law, theft is predominantly subjective, and merely the intent to steal is tantamount to a conviction, as a number of recent cases demonstrate. However, biblical law takes an objective approach in which the accused must be doing something observably wrong in relation to another person’s property to be convicted. This could involve either ‘lukewarm possession’, in which the thief had the property at one time but has since disposed of it (e.g., the sale or slaughter of animals), or ‘hot possession’, in which the item is still in the thief’s possession. Proper restitution is crucial in biblical laws regarding theft and burglary, and a greater penalty was imposed for lukewarm possession (e.g., five oxen for an ox versus two for one in hot possession). Though this objective test was apparently arbitrary, in that no other evidence, even contrary evidence, seems to count, it reflects the seriousness of the offense by demanding a clear demonstration of guilt, and it was self-executing in that it could be applied by the parties themselves.

Biblical law must be read narratively and not semantically. This methodological commitment, which Burnside advocates throughout the book is exemplified in his discussion of Exod 22:2–4. Following Bernard Jackson, this law allows the killing of a thief who “tunnels” at night but forbids violence during the day. A semantic approach would seek to apply these laws literally, but a narrative approach determines the typical situation evoked by the law and then adjusts the penalty as other situations stray from that paradigm. Thus, the typical theft would be at night, which would justify homicide in self-defence, but daytime intrusion is farther from that paradigm so different actions are justified. Presumably, following this narrative interpretation, the killing of a thief at dusk or dawn would merit negotiation between the killer and the thief’s family. Nathan’s juridical parable, which uses laws of theft to address David’s adultery and murder (2 Sam 12), exemplifies a different narrative use of law and underlines its creative and didactic character.

Marriage and Divorce

Biblical law on marriage was largely dependent on custom, so there are few explicit regulations.

Reading between the lines, it appears heterosexual monogamy was the norm; Gen 2 refers to only one man and woman and the narratives present polygamy in a negative light. It also appears that the conventional marriage procedure progressed from an agreement between the parties (the man and the woman's father), to a bridal payment (*mohar*) and an inchoate state of marriage often for one year, before the marriage was completed by intercourse. When this order was violated, such as when intercourse came first (e.g., Dinah and Shechem in Gen 34), it could cause significant tension in the community, and could lead to punitive damages for the man (Exod 22:16–17; Deut 22:28–29). Biblical marriage law had to balance endogamy (marriage within the social group) and exogamy (marriage to "outsiders") and tended to favour the former, particularly in the patriarchal narratives. Several different kinds of marriage existed, including the *yabham*-marriage, in which a man is obliged to impregnate the widow of a brother who dies without sons (Deut 25:5–10), and *raubehe*-marriage by rape or capture as evidenced by the Mishnah and the account of Amnon and Tamar (2 Sam 13).

Divorce laws are even less clear than marriage laws. The Hebrew Bible never sets out grounds for divorce or living and financial arrangements for post-divorce family life. The primary text, Deut 24:1–4, is mainly concerned with the woman's remarriage, but it does indicate divorce was a private and unilateral act of the husband, though a narrative reading suggests divorce by the wife may have been possible. The husband must demonstrate some fault and give the woman a bill of divorce, which allowed her to remarry.

Even though marriage is now on the decline, biblical views of marriage parallel those in the modern West at several points, including some of the "stranger" aspects of biblical law (e.g., biblical polygamy and the modern facilitation of "polygyny" in sequential or contemporaneous relationships). Both also share concerns for consent, equality, and protection, though these play out differently in the two contexts. For example, a biblical view of consent focused primarily on the woman's father, which recognizes the impact of marriage on third parties, while modern consent is limited to the parties to the sexual act if of age. Because marriages and marriage laws do have broader social consequences beyond

the parties directly involved, Burnside calls for a recognition of the corporate dimension to marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Modern debates about marriage demonstrate the divide between modern family law and biblical law, but they also attest, albeit indirectly, to its continuing importance.

Sexual Offences

Burnside argues that Israel's vocation to be the people of God and the exemplar of a relationally well-ordered society "involves a concern for 'sexual order,' as opposed to 'sexual chaos'" (347). This order is laid out most fully in Lev 20, which proclaims a relational order that includes covenantal order, species order, gender order, generational or "descent" order, and kinship order. The consequences of "sexual chaos," however, stretch beyond the betrayed spouse to affect the cohesion of the community, the future of the nation, and the relationship between the people and God. Contrary to many, Burnside claims Lev 20 is not a random assortment of laws but demonstrates internal structure. He notes that it is patterned on the Decalogue, with three headings that allude to the commandments on idolatry, honouring parents, and adultery. But the key to unlocking its structure is attending to the penalties it proclaims, which form a chiasmic structure based on who carries them out, God or humans. The central section (vv. 9–16) is the most crucial. Though all the offences in vv. 10–21 come under the heading of adultery (v. 10), those in vv. 9–16 are punished by humanity and listed as a series of binary oppositions that move farther and farther from the paradigm of normal sexual relations, ending in a woman lying with a beast as with a man. The capital punishment required in each of these cases may not always have been carried out because it would have been difficult to satisfy the demand for two witnesses.

Other biblical laws indicate that adultery laws were androcentric—it was not adultery if a married man had intercourse with an unbetrothed woman (Exod 20:14), a husband could persecute the offenders if his wife committed adultery (Deut 22:22), a man could demand his new wife's parents prove she was a menstruant (not, as commonly understood, a virgin) to ensure his paternity (Deut 22:13–21), and intercourse with a betrothed woman was as serious as with a married woman (Deut 22:23–27).

In contrast to the modern focus on consent to determine legitimate sexual relationships, “biblical law seeks to channel sexual energy in such a way as to create community” (347), focusing on relational and sexual order. Thus, biblical law differs greatly with England’s reform of sexual offence legislation passed in 2003. Biblical law has a far more expansive category of harm. It takes into account the community, has a stronger and broader conception of the family, includes familial consent, privileges marriage over other sexual relationships, and protects children through its emphasis on stable families. Thus, as with the other topics Burnside discusses, he argues here that biblical law is valuable as “it forces us to shift context and question the seeming normality of what appears to be the social consensus of late-modern liberal society” (385). In this case, “Biblical law points beyond consent to a positive vision for society that is founded on relational order” (386).

Historical Investigation

The final two chapters of the book consider how biblical ideas are interpreted in later Jewish traditions and how particular biblical laws were applied in the trials of Jesus and interacted with Roman law and custom. In the former chapter, “New Laws for a New Age,” the interpretation of biblical laws on marriage and divorce in the Qumran community in the Temple Scroll, *Miqsat M’ase Ha-Torah* (MMT), and the Damascus Document is compared with that of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament. Though the Qumran writers regard the biblical texts as authoritative, or better, *because* they see them as authoritative, they feel free to reinterpret them as they apply them to their time. This involves picking and choosing laws according to their sectarian agenda and using metaphor, narrative, and reasoning by analogy to shape them to the needs of their community. So, for example, MMT B 75–82 chooses Lev 19:19 over the similar law in Deut 22:9 and intensifies the passage, requiring not just the high priest but all priests to marry within their own kin.

Jesus also intensifies biblical law, distinguishing between legal and moral divorce (e.g., Mark 10:1–12) and thereby both upholding and setting aside the law allowing divorce in Deut 24:1 by suggesting that

what is halakhically permissible may not be morally right. Though the exception for *porneia* added in the parallel passages in Matthew can be harmonized with the complete rejection of divorce in Mark and Luke on a semantic basis, the narrative-paradigmatic approach Burnside has advocated throughout may also be applied. It indicates the importance of calling. Jesus presents marriage, not celibacy, as a calling in Matt 19 (cf. 1 Cor 7), which suggests no one who is responding to that call to marriage would be interested in exceptions—“Inherent in the concept of marriage is the belief that one cannot ditch it” (423)—but concessions could be made to respond to social pressures, particularly on Jewish believers, and for those with unbelieving spouses.

Both the Qumran community and the early Christians interpreted biblical law according to what they believed “the God of Israel was doing and requiring now, rather than . . . trying to reconstruct interpretations of ‘what people thought’ in the past” (424). For both communities, the laws of marriage and divorce were important in promoting particular views of Moses, God’s purposes, and the eschaton, for defining group identity, and for calling people to intensified obedience of the Torah. However, the significant differences in their interpretations demonstrate the pluralism in Second Temple Judaism, a period marked by severe conflict.

It is in this period of conflict that “the most notorious trial in history” occurred (427). Jesus’s unjust conviction by both the Jewish leaders and Romans on a mix of charges, including false prophecy and blasphemy, which were all related to his rival claim to kingship, involved familiar adjudicatory injustices, such as trawling for evidence and judges who knowingly hand down unjust convictions to protect personal interests. And yet, Jesus’s crucifixion is unique, primarily because he saw it as a fulfilment of his vocation to die to end Israel’s exile, paying the penalty of insurrection on his people’s behalf and thereby, ironically and in defiance of human expectation, becoming king. By revealing its injustice, the “victim of a miscarriage of justice judges the justice process” (456), and, similarly, the trial of Jesus was ultimately a trial of the religious authorities, of Pilate, of Herod, of the people, and, even, of the world.

Conclusion

Burnside ends by considering the purpose of biblical law. Because it is “explicitly wrapped up in God’s plans for Israel, humanity, and the world” (465), the purpose of biblical law is inseparable from the purpose of God. There is no sacred/secular divide. And, thus, biblical law in the purpose of God: (1) provides a vision of the good for humanity and the world; (2) expresses and develops wisdom so that it can be applied to situations of human need; (3) orders human behaviour practically and holistically; (4) advances the story of God’s relationship with Israel and humanity; and (5) settles a vocation upon Israel and humanity. This divine purpose gives the law a transcendence that is vital because “[i]f the legal profession is to remain as a vocation, as opposed to a trade that pays by the hour, it needs to have a transcendent point of reference and to champion a vision of the good” (477). Without this, not only is our understanding of law “trivialized and reduced” but society is “maimed and diminished” because “our full humanity is not taken seriously” (477). Law, therefore, points beyond itself, so that “where we rightly encounter splendour and grandeur in the law, biblical law reminds us this is because law, at its best, is about something else” (477). Thus, “[t]he ultimate reason for studying biblical law is that it is an exemplar of how to see law in the purpose of God. That is its power and its enduring challenge” (478).

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