

Examples of conceptualisation of morality in emerging Christianity

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Against the background of current interdisciplinary discussions in philosophical and theological ethics and discourses on morality, this interdisciplinary essay explored the conceptualisation of morality in emerging Christianity. It illustrated how the early Sayings Source Q and the Gospel according to Mark recollect Jesus of Nazareth's reception of the Jewish Torah. Then it sketched how Paul's understanding of God's and Christ's compassion serves as guide to integrate basic notions from Hellenistic ethic in his moral exhortation.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Taking cognisance of modern discussions on ethics and morality, the essay placed Early Christian morality within the context of the Law (Jewish Studies) and highlighted Christian reception of virtues in the Graeco-Roman world as studied by ancient philosophy. In conceptualising morality, emerging Christianity borrowed cardinal moral guidelines from its social environment. This foundational procedure studied by the History of the Early Church (within its Jewish and Graeco-Roman context) can serve as a model for Systematic Theology and Ethics to guide contemporary Christianity in their adaptation of moral principles from their cultural environment.

Keywords: morality; early Christianity; Jesus; Paul; virtues.

Introduction

Under 'morality', we understand the set of values giving orientation to persons to act in ways that have social implications for themselves and others, either as individuals or as a group. As in most religions, morality in emerging Christianity motivates good and prevents bad behaviour in specific social contexts. In this essay, the focus will be on exhortation to act in a way that is good for oneself as part of a group and for others in and beyond the group; to put it differently, on commendation of virtues rather than on prohibiting vices. Such commendation or exhortation to act in a way that is good, presupposes that the group and the individuals in it adhere to certain convictions about what is good and are able to discern it from evil. It also presupposes that they are motivated to choose that which is good, virtuous and to act accordingly and to refrain from doing the adverse. We call these cognitive convictions about morals in the group and the reasons why they motivate each other to act accordingly, their conceptions of morality. By the 'conceptualisation' of morality, we ask that they trace the origin of some of these conceptions of morality in emerging Christianity and the reasons why they are regarded as binding motivation to act in a certain manner. We do not attempt a systematic description of 'the ethics' of the first two generations of the followers of Jesus.

I shall start with a quote from the most recent study on conceptions of morality in the New Testament, that of Matthias Konradt from Heidelberg, who following the German tradition, prefers the term 'Ethik' rather than 'Moralität': 'The development and formation of early Christian ethics takes place in context and on the basis of the intellectual and social history of Graeco-Roman Antiquity in general and Judaism in particular. The great importance of the behavioural dimension of faith in emerging Christianity arises from this context, independently of internal factors' (Konradt 2022:17, My trans.). For Konradt and many before him, this is not only because of the fundamental importance that the Jewish way of life has for Christianity emerging within Judaism. Values determining Christian behaviour also correlate with that of non-Jewish Graeco-Roman antiquity. In this paper, I shall firstly discuss the Torah briefly, then its influence on Jesus, closing the section with the reception of the Jesus-tradition by two Christian apologists from 2nd-century Athens. Secondly, we shall turn to the influence of the Torah in Greek and of the virtues propagated by Hellenistic moral philosophy in Paul's letters, with a short note on the Deutero-Pauline tradition. A few conclusions end the paper. Constraints prevent us to turn to John (see Van der Watt 2019).

Note: Special Collection: Morality in history.

The conceptualisation of Christian ethics within the realm of early Judaism

The Torah

The organisation of life according to the law in early Judaism presupposed the interpretation of scripture by scribes. Because of the reading and interpretation of the scriptures in the synagogues, a certain familiarity of the general population with key aspects of the law can be presupposed. However, what is the law? According to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, it is about the will of God (Josephus, *Ant.* 1:14). According to the Jewish philosopher Philo, laws in general, even those formulated by Plato, come from the Jews (Philo, *Legat.* 210). Their core, the Ten Commandments, were spoken by God himself (Josephus, *Ant.* 3.89; Philo, *Spec.* 1.1; 2.189; *Decl.* 175; also *Avot* 1.1–2). The lifestyle of the Jews, their ancestral laws, are thus not of human origin. Morality is rooted in the belief in the one and only God, the Creator of everything. God's supreme power is that of legislation (Philo, *Sacr.* 131).

The divine law has comprehensive validity and a community-preserving function. According to Josephus, it has to determine all areas of daily life (Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.170–171). When the people live according to the law, they fulfil the obligations of the covenant with God. Such a lifestyle sanctifies life and brings salvation in the coming eon.

If we ask about the meaning of the law and how it was used in early Judaism, the following should be noted: so far, we have used the Greek term νόμος [*law*]. The Hebrew term *Torah* means 'instruction'. Following the Torah is a reaction to a previous act of God. The Torah is a gift from God, the 'law of life' that the chosen people of Israel received as an obligation through Moses at Sinai. Keeping this Sinai Torah was a collective task.¹ The Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, play a crucial role in setting out this obligation.

Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitates Biblicarum* retells the biblical story from Genesis to the death of Saul.² The work places special emphasis on the Decalogue in retelling the biblical laws in 11:6–14. The remaining instructions of Moses are merely summarised in 11:15. The question now arises whether the Decalogue generally held such a pre-eminence before the

1. It is important to clear up a misunderstanding right away. The Judaism of the Second Temple did not value the law so highly because it could have secured its own existence before God with the law in pious self-assertion and through formalised moral action. The law is not the way of salvation, but the 'order of salvation'. Jews at the time of the emergence of Christianity were not trying to force God's grace by acting according to the law. They lived by the Torah because living by the law made it possible to stay in the covenant they already have with God. Torah was not about getting into the covenant, but about the order of staying in the grace of the covenant. There is definitely a connection between the Torah and salvation. Whoever rejects the Torah rejects life, and does not remain in the covenant. When the people live according to the law, they place themselves under the dominion of God and await the consummation of God's history with his people. If the members of the chosen people profess their belief in the one God and behave towards one another and in certain cases deal with one another as required by the Torah, then they share in the salvation and blessing that God has intended for them in the covenant. See Neusner (1993:49–78) on Sanders (ed. 1977).

2. The book was created between 70 and 135 AD. It was originally written in Hebrew, then translated into Greek. It is available to us only in a Latin translation of the Greek.

Jewish War of AD 66–70, that is during the life of Jesus and formative years of the first groups of those who believed in him. Because the Qumran community had to leave their settlement at the Dead Sea during the Jewish War, the texts they hid in the caves at Wadi Qumran must have been written before AD 70. Inscribed leather strips that were found in the fourth Qumran cave had once been tied to the doorposts as Mezuzot and to the foreheads of the pious Jews as phylacteries (*Tefillin*: 4Q128–129, 134–136, 139–142; *Mezuzot* 4Q149–155). The inscriptions on them are mainly texts from the Decalogue (Ex 12:43–13:7; 13:9–16; Dt 5:1–6:3 (+4–5); 10:12–11:21). From this, it can be seen that the Decalogue played an important role in Palestinian Judaism before AD 70.

However, it is difficult to explain early Jewish understanding of the law as simply based on the Sinai Torah or the Decalogue.³ Torah, Decalogue and current law were by no means the same and there were differing interpretations of the Torah. This means that Jesus's interpretation of the law, insofar as it can be grasped, cannot be contrasted with a *specific* Jewish interpretation of the law. Rather, one can at most compare Jesus's reception of the Mosaic regulations with the multitude of interpretations of the law by other Jewish groups. Obviously, Jesus also interpreted the Torah and the Decalogue as its kernel in the light of specific circumstances.

Jesus the Jew and the Law (remembered)

We must always remember that Jesus was not a Christian. He was a Jew, and Christianity came after him. How was Jesus of Nazareth's interpretation of the Torah remembered in emerging Christianity? We have nothing written by Jesus. Therefore, we can only see how the earliest gospel, Mark, depicts Jesus's handling of Moses's commandments and how the so-called *Sayings Source Q* has kept Jesus' acceptance of the law in memory. In both cases, the ethical directives that Jesus gives are motivated by the advent of God's kingly rule. The coming of the kingdom of God motivates the action. According to Matthias Konradt (2022):

... Jesus does not locate the already present earthly manifestation of God's rule on the stage of global political action, but in everyday life; in the overcoming of hunger and disease, which is understood as a reduction in life caused by demons, in the forgiveness of guilt and in the concrete turn to the socially marginalized. (p. 42. My trans.)

3. Of course, the Pentateuch was read. However, because it is not identical with the Decalogue, it requires interpretation. Pseudo-Philo already shows us that even the text of the Decalogue was not simply copied but interpreted at the same time (cf. LAB 11:6.8). The text of the Pentateuch is not even quoted directly. In the Temple Scroll from Qumran, God himself speaks to Moses in the first person and dictates the law to him. Josephus presents his summary of the law in *Ant.* 4.199–301 as the words of God. However, these are by no means just quotations. Josephus interpreted a number of provisions and added several. The legal provisions were applied to the concrete historical circumstances of the recipients. This can also be observed in the receptive summaries of the law in Josephus, in the Book of Jubilees, in Tobit 4 and in the Temple Scroll. 'Law' existed in early Judaism also as a response to prevailing state law. The pagan environment, even the hostile environment, can determine early Jewish *Halakha* (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 4:207; *C. Ap.* 2:237). There are even legal traditions in early Judaism that do not appear in the Torah and are not provided for there either (cf. 11QT 49.11–12; 50.10–12; 51.11–18; 57.15–19). There can even be laws that are in no way specified in the Torah and even contradict its tendency. Although no further justification is given for this, there is no doubt anywhere that such 'laws' are also considered to have been imparted by Moses on Sinai, that is have the theological substance and the weight of revelation. The law needs not necessarily to be a methodically controlled emanation from the Torah. Over the entire period, however, there is no method of interpreting the Scriptures that can be fixed according to rules in order to obtain the current *Halakha*.

The Sayings Source Q

The Q Source is older as and most probably independent of Mark, mainly comprises aphorisms and parables of Jesus, and was used alongside Mark by the later Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The tradition of Jesus of Nazareth is that the tree is known by its fruit (cf. Lk^Q 6:44/Mt^Q 7:16).⁴ Jesus inferred the inner quality of the tree from the visible fruit (cf. Lk^Q 6:43/Mt^Q 7:18; Lk^Q 6:45/Mt^Q 12:35). From this, we can deduct a first principle: it is crucial how the individual person acts. That shows their true character. People are not defined by what they say as being either right or wrong, neither by their origin or group membership, but by their actions. It is precisely here that the Sayings Source criticises the Pharisees (see Lk^Q 11:44/Mt^Q 23:27).

Like other pious Jews, Jesus most probably recited Deuteronomy 6:4–5 every day:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord. (5) And you shall love the Lord your God with the whole of your mind and with the whole of your soul and with the whole of your power. (Dt 6:4–5 LXX, trans. NETS)

The way of living [*Halakha*] gains its orientation from the exclusive worship of the one and only God. In the temptation narrative in Q, Jesus rejects the devil with a reference to Deuteronomy 6:13: 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him alone shall you serve' (Lk^Q 4:7/Mt^Q 4:10). This second principle is of utmost importance. For example, the bond with God excludes service to Mammon (Lk^Q 16:35/Mt^Q 6:24). The kingdom of God belongs to the poor (Lk^Q 6:20).

In the words attributed to Jesus, God himself sets the third principle. Crossing borders to the sinners, he lets his sun rise on the good and the evil, and he lets it rain on the just and the unjust (Lk^Q 6:35/Mt^Q 4:45). His children, who call him Father, should behave accordingly. They should do good to others irrespective of the person concerned. Normal family ties and usual social boundaries are crossed. Those who adhere to the Golden Rule of the Jesus tradition should do to their fellow human beings what they themselves ask of other people: 'And as you would have people do to you, do to them' (Lk^Q 6:31/Mt^Q 7:12). Jesus's followers are asked not only to love those who love them, but also to love their enemies and to pray for their persecutors (Lk^Q 6:27f/Mt^Q 6:44). This instruction of Jesus of Nazareth became the hallmark of Christianity. It determines Christianity's non-retaliatory and non-xenophobic efforts in the course of history.

Why does one have to act in a certain way? As a fourth principle, Q places action under the Golden Rule and the guiding principle of God's mercy.⁵ 'Be merciful, as your

4. John the Baptist already presupposed the connection between the covenant and a life according to the Torah (see Lk^Q 3:8/Mt^Q 3:8–9).

5. The behaviour to be rejected is illustrated negatively using the example of the tax collectors, the non-Jewish peoples, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The tax collectors do not love their enemies, only those they love; the nations only lend to those from whom they expect to get it in return (cf. Lk^Q 6:32/Mt^Q 5:46). The Pharisees are accused of being ambitious and ignoring justice and mercy and faithfulness (cf. Lk^Q 11:42/Mt^Q 23:23). The teachers of the law impose a heavy burden on people, which they, the teachers of the law, do not bear themselves (cf. Lk^Q 11:46/Mt^Q 23:4).

Father is merciful' (Lk^Q 6:36; cf. Mt^Q 5:48). Jesus instructed his disciples to pray to God, to address him as Father and to ask him to 'forgive us our debts' (Lk 11:4/Mt 6:12). He tied the prayer for remission of debt to the willingness of the defaulter or transgressor to write off the debt of others. According to the traditions about Jesus of Nazareth, it is needless to pray to God for forgiveness, unless those making supplication have granted their fellow humans remission of debt.⁶ God, who extends his mercy to his enemies who are sinners and does not hold their transgressions against them, is more than an example. His action motivates similar human action.

Jesus of Nazareth was remembered in such a way that the validity of the Torah was associated with his teaching. The Torah of Moses, and within it the Decalogue, thus remain in force for Q, not an iota or tick of the law will become void (Lk^Q 16:17/Mt^Q 5:18). This comes with a warning. Anyone who acts against the law will not be part of the eschatological banquet but will be rejected by the householder: 'I do not know you! Depart from me, you who act against the law' (Lk^Q 13:27/Mt^Q 7:23). Just as one cannot just formally claim to be a son of Abraham, one cannot, according to Q, confess Jesus as Lord without doing what he asks: 'Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say?' (Lk^Q 6:46/Mt^Q 17:21). Anyone who hears the word of Jesus and does not act accordingly is building his or her house on sand, as the first and well-known parable from Q explains (Lk^Q 6:47–49/Mt^Q 7:24–27).

The Gospel according to Mark

Unlike in other early Jewish circles, the Gospel according to Mark redefines family relationships. According to Mark, Jesus's family are not descendants, his mother and siblings, but those who do his father's will (Mk 3:20–22, 31–35). However, what is the will of the Father? The Torah remains important for this. The rich man who wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life is referred to the commandments of the Decalogue as Deuteronomy 5:16–20 point out: 'You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not falsely testify, you shall not rob, honor your father and mother!' (Mk 10:19). However, that is not all. They should sell their possessions and follow Jesus. Just as Peter and Andrew, John and James left home, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children and property to follow Jesus (Mk 10:28–30). Jesus placed commitment to himself as messenger and representative of the good news about the advent of the reign of God above the commandment to honour parents.⁷ Jesus thus dissolved a connection that was firmly established in early Judaism, because he did not presuppose the community that descended genealogically from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and lived in the covenant. Symbolically, he chose 12 men as the basis for a renewal of Israel, establishing a new community based on the will of God and commitment to himself, and whose continued

6. The relationship between the remission granted by the Father and the own forgiveness, however, differs in the various strands of the Jesus tradition (Lk^Q 11:4/Mt^Q 6:12 and Mk 11:24): Breytenbach 2010:283.

7. Q formulates it even more radically: 'He who does not hate his father and mother cannot be my disciple' (Lk^Q 14:26/Mt^Q 10:37).

existence was based by not only living according to the Torah but by following him and adhering to his teachings.

In many other episodes of Mark's Gospel, the commandments of Deuteronomy form the background to Jesus's appearance. Here, too, one can show that in his interpretation of the Sinai Torah he defied current contemporary *Halakhic* practice. One example should suffice (More examples in Breytenbach 2006). According to Deuteronomy 5:14, the Sabbath is a day of rest on which everyone should rest. The Sabbath determined lifestyle, for that day was the centre of the life of the Jewish family. All families, including those in the diaspora, were thus bound together as all of Israel in the worship of God on that day. They prepared the day in such a way that they could celebrate God's creation according to Exodus 20:8–11 or God's liberation from Egyptian slavery according to Deuteronomy 5:12–15. According to Mark, Jesus seems to have interpreted the commandment according to Deuteronomy. Accordingly, it is a day of prescribed rest for all in remembrance of the salvation from Egypt. As the Markan Jesus puts it, the Sabbath is there for people and not people for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27; cf. Mek. on Ex 31:14; bYoma 85b). According to the rabbinical interpretation of the Torah, it is permissible to save lives on the Sabbath (cf. Yoma 8.6; bYoma 85b), but according to Mark, Jesus went further: 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath' (Mk 2.28). His authority is higher than the Sabbath commandment. He took the place of the commandment to keep the Sabbath and allowed his disciples to forage, that is work, on the Sabbath (cf. Šabb 7:2). He decided to do good to people on the Sabbath, to save lives. He healed the man's withered hand in the synagogue (cf. Mk 3:1–5). With his authority, he overrode the Sinai revelation.

According to Mark, not only did Jesus disregard the Sabbath commandment but he also distinguished between the Decalogue and Moses's application of the law. Again, let us stick to an example. The episode Mark 10:2–9 deals with the legal question of whether it is permissible for a man to divorce a woman. The Pharisees again ask it. The ultimate answer to the question is not a statement by Moses, but a statement by Jesus (Mk 10:9). Firstly, the question of whether divorce is permitted is to be placed in the context of what is permitted by Moses. 'What did Moses command you?' The Pharisees answer Jesus's question, following Deuteronomy 24:1–4: Moses allowed the man to write a letter of renunciation, that is a statement renouncing his rights over the woman, takes and releases the woman from the marriage (cf. Breytenbach 2006:23–43, 32–36). Therefore, according to Moses, the Pharisees' question is to be answered in the affirmative: as there is due process, it is lawful for a man to divorce a woman. Secondly, according to the evangelist, Jesus does not contradict Moses's commandment, but evaluates it negatively. Moses's procedure allows the man to write the woman a letter in which he declares his renunciation of her and dismisses her. However, this testifies to (the) hardness of heart and resists the connection to one flesh, which can be traced back to the human being as male and female. This fundamentally devalues what Moses wrote. Only now does Jesus answer the Pharisees' question: it

is not lawful for a man to divorce a woman. God made man male and female; therefore, a separation of their union is a division of what he joined together: 'What God yoked together man must not separate'. This saying of Jesus forms the basis of the Markan narrative and shows that Jesus' stance was closer to the Decalogue than the Mosaic application of the prohibition of divorce.

The Markan Jesus differs not only from Moses's application of the Decalogue but also from the oral interpretation of the law by the Pharisees. In Mark 7:5, one finds a question from the Pharisees and some Jerusalem scribes to the *Halakha* of Jesus's disciples: 'Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with unclean hands?' Again, Mark tells the episode in such a way that Jesus only answers this question later. Jesus shows (7:6–13) first by means of a quotation from Scripture combined by evangelists how the Pharisees and the scribes legally invalidate (reject) the word of God and make their own tradition binding (Breytenbach 2006:27–32). For the evangelist Mark, it was quite conceivable that Jesus rejected the Torah interpretation of the Pharisees and scribes. With the saying with which Jesus then answers the question of the Pharisees and scribes in Mark 7:15 as to why his disciples eat with unclean hands. The author of the Gospel of Mark preserved a traditional saying of Jesus in the negative form typical of Mark: 'It is not what goes into man from without that is capable of making him unclean, but what comes out of man is what defiles man'. This is contrary to the classical Jewish position (cf. Lv 11 and 1 Macc 1:62–63; Ac 11:8). In the Jesus tradition, as passed on by Mark (and Matthew), it is not what goes into man, but what comes out of man in word and deed that defiles him, because it comes from within, from his heart and if it is bad, it defiles the person (cf. Mk 7:21–23; Mt 15:11). Here, at a central point – how do I go to eat and what do I eat – a fundamental conflict between the Jesus tradition and the Torah practice of Pharisaic Judaism becomes apparent (on this see Eschner 2019).

Mark tells his story in such a way that the argument about washing hands before eating in the story of the multiplication of bread (Mk 6:35–44) gives rise to the accusations of the Pharisees and scribes. He proceeds similarly in Mark 2:15–17. Here a domestic banquet with sinners and tax collectors sets the stage for a critical inquiry by the Pharisee scribes as to how Jesus can eat with tax collectors and sinners (2:16). According to the Mishnah (ehar. 7:6), a tax collector not only defiles the house but also the food and liquids in the house. In this case, the Mark narrative is reminiscent of a Jesus who disregarded the *Halakhic* practice, which strictly regulated access to eating together.

Another story, the healing of the leper (Mk 1:40–45) makes it clear how the Markan Jesus defied the boundaries that separate the unclean from the clean. Leviticus 13–14 has various regulations for dealing with patients suffering from contagious skin diseases. The concept behind this is that certain skin diseases cause impurity (cf. Lv 13:3). Qumran and Josephus recap Moses's instructions. According to their descriptions, lepers were

expelled from the city and were not allowed to live with other people. According to Josephus, they were regarded as corpses, that is through contact with them one became unclean oneself. In the Markan tale, the patient therefore asks for purification. According to Mark 1:41–42, Jesus's gut-felt compassion is emphasised. Contrary to expectations, he touches the unclean and cleanses him through his word. Success is noted immediately. Whoever is healthy again is pure (cf. Lv 14:1, 7) and no longer needs to be separated from the community. However, he must first show himself to the priest. Only he can declare him pure again and accept his regular offerings (cf. Lv 13:16–17; 14:2–7; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.261–264; 11QT 45.18; CD 13.3–7).

Although we are to consider the Markan narratives primarily as episodes in the narrative of the earliest gospel rather than as events in the life of Jesus, it is noteworthy that Jesus is presented as breaking the taboos of dealing with tax collectors and lepers. He decided differently about with whom he share a table and whom he touches.

Two second century Christian apologists and the Jesus tradition

We move on a century to the third and fourth generation Christians in Athens. Aristides and Athenagoras were highly educated persons who were able to write treatises in Greek to the Roman rulers to defend the Christians of their day against slander an ill treatment (Breytenbach & Tzavella 2023). In their apologetic writings, Aristides and Athenagoras show that the appeal to the Decalogue and oral Jesus tradition (esp. Mt 5 and Lk 6) guided Christian conduct in 2nd-century Athens.

In the first quarter of the 2nd century, the Athenian apologist *Aristides* draws on Judaeo-Christian tradition (references in Geffcken 1907:87) and according to the later Syrian translation of his Apology, he implicitly claims that Christians followed the Decalogue. They do not commit adultery or fornication, do not give false witness and do not covet other men's goods. In positive fulfilment of the Decalogue, they honour father and mother. In the vein of the Jesus tradition, it is added (*Arist. apol.* 15.4) that they love their neighbours (Mk 12:31; Mt 5:43), give right judgement (Mt^Q 7:1–12/Lk^Q 6:37), do not do unto others that which they would not have done unto themselves (Mt 5:17), comfort and befriend those who wrong them and work to do good to their enemies (Lk^Q 6:27/Mt^Q 5:44). The original Greek version of the *Apology* goes further. Aristides acknowledges that the Christians kept slaves but adds that they accepted them as brothers and sisters in the Lord; they cared for the poor, in particular the widows and the orphans; they delivered those imprisoned, and buried those who died in poverty; they praised God in the morning and during the day and thanked Him for food and drink. From birth to the grave, Christians' life was enshrouded by their faith in God.⁸

In the last quarter of the 2nd century, another Athenian apologist, *Athenagoras* describes a situation in which Christians were put on an unfair trial just because they were Christians.

⁸ See P.Lond. inv. 2486, fol. 1r + v. Breytenbach and Tzavella 2023:97–98. For the other Greek texts referred to in this essay, see Pantelia 2022.

This situation became life threatening for the Christians. Important in our context is that the Christians endured unjust persecution. Because of their teachings, they did not strike back when beaten and did not take to court those who rob and plunder them. In his *Legatio*, Athenagoras takes the liberty of describing Christian conduct (cf. Malherbe 2014:831). In the tradition of Jesus (Mt 5:44–45 and Lk 6:27–28), they turn the other cheek; give the cloak when the tunic is taken away. They were brought up to love their enemies, to bless those who curse them and to pray for those who persecute them so that they may be sons of their Father in heaven, who makes his sun rise upon evil and good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (*Athenag. leg.* 11.2). Athenagoras's depiction of the Christian choice for a moderate, philanthropic way of life is motivated by the belief in the Trinity and governed by an expectation of eschatological judgement (cf. Malherbe 2014:831). Christians believe that they are accountable for their life on earth before God, the creator and eternal judge. No one will escape the judgement of the triune God (cf. *Athenag. leg.* 1.4).

The conceptualisation of Christian ethics within the realm of the Torah in Greek and virtues propagated by Hellenistic moral philosophy

Aristides and Athenagoras are mere examples of how the instruction ascribed to the Galilean Jesus influenced the morality of Greek speaking Christians in faraway Athens until deep into the 2nd century. Of course, there were other Christian writers between Jesus and the Apologists, the first and probably most important one, the Apostle Paul. What type of moral instruction did he give? How did he motivate the exhortation to the addressees of the letters he wrote in the fifties of the 1st century?

Paul, the Torah in Greek and Hellenistic moral virtues

Essential for moral exhortation, is its motivation. Why does a person strive to act in a particular manner? In Judeo-Christian morality, a crucial motivation is *theological*. Exodus 34:6–7 and Deuteronomy 4:31 express a fundamental aspect of how God was perceived. Exodus 34 recalls the words of Moses when God passed before his face on Mount Sinai. I quote the first lines in English translation:

The Lord, the Lord God is compassionate and merciful, patient and very merciful and truthful (7) and preserving righteousness and doing mercy for thousands, taking away acts of lawlessness and of injustice and sins. (Exod 34:6–7 LXX)

On this basis, assures:

Because the Lord your God is a compassionate god, he will neither abandon you nor wipe you out; he will not forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them. (Dt 4:31)

Here lies not only the terminological origin but also the theological basis for many of Paul's moral exhortations. God's goodness [χρηστότης] is rich; he is longsuffering, and in

patience [μακροθυμία] he gives the wrongdoers time to repent (see Rm 2:4; 9:22). Following the axiom that the servant cannot be different from his Lord, Paul the servant of God, acts with patience and in goodness (2 Cor 6:6) and mentions patience and goodness among the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gl 5:22) that those led by the Spirit should bear (5:18).

Resounding a motif from Exodus 34:6–7 that the Lord is οἰκτιρῶν, merciful, being concerned about the misery of the sinner, Paul calls God ‘the Father of mercies’ (2 Cor 1:3). For the Letter of James 5:11, the Lord is πολύσπλαγχνος. For Paul, the death of Christ for sinners is *the* example of God’s compassion and mercy. It is this belief about God that motivates his moral exhortation. When he beseeches the Romans (12:1) to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, he does so by appealing to the mercies [οἰκτιρμοί] that God has shown through Christ (Breytenbach 2010:213–219). Paul also takes up the motifs from Exod 34:6–7 in the exhortation in Philippians 2:1, presupposing that there should be gut-felt compassion and sympathy [σπλάγχνα καὶ οἰκτιρμοί] among the community of saints in Philippi. The motivation for this specific kind of community building action is both theological and Christological. Believers are urged to resemble the actions of God and Christ. From Old Testament and Jewish tradition (Pss. Sol. 106:1; 136:1; 144:9; Wis 15:1; Dn 3:89), Paul knew that God is good (χρηστός in Lk 6:35; Rm 2:4). Believers should accordingly strive to do good (Rm 13:3) to everyone, especially the family of the faithful (Gl 6:10).

Of course, Jesus’s commandment that one should ‘love your neighbour’ plays a crucial role in Paul’s moral orientation. Above all is love (1 Cor 13), which should be ἀνυπόκριτος, without dissimulation (Rm 12:9; 2 Cor 6:6). Through his letters, Paul instructed his listeners to love one another. ‘Paul’s main focus is not on the ethical perfection of the individual, but on the success of social community’ (Konradt 2022:91). As members of the community of faithful, they should live in concord, love one another with the same love (Phil 1:27).

Matthew transmitted a saying in which Jesus says:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart [πραῦς εἰμι καὶ ταπεινὸς τῇ καρδίᾳ], and you will find rest for your souls. (Mt 11:29, see also 21:5 as addition to Mk 11:9–10)

Probably referring to the meekness [πραύτης]⁹ of Jesus, who acquitted the debt of sinners, Paul appeals to the Corinthians ‘by the gentleness and mildness of Christ’ [πραύτης] to motivate his own humble demeanour (2 Cor 10:1)¹⁰ and calls on the Galatians to restore transgressors in a spirit of gentleness (Gl 6:1) as Jesus did (see e.g. Mk 2:1–12).

9. ἡ πραύτης, ‘the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance, gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness, meekness’, BDAG, s.v. See also Spicq 1994:3.161–162. Sir 1:27; 3:17; 4:8).

10. For Schmeller (2015:127), the phrase refers to the incarnation of the pre-existent Christ.

According to an early Christian hymn in the Letter to the Philippians, Christ Jesus illustrated his humility. Having been in godlike form, he humbled [ταπεινώω] himself by becoming human and obedient until his death on the cross (Phil 2:8). This gives the motivation of why and how the faithful should act. Paul urges the Philippians to do nothing in selfishness or conceit; in humility [ταπεινοφροσύνη] rather, they should count others better than themselves, not look to their own interests, but to the interests of others. (2:3–4).

In contrast to Deuteronomy 32:5 LXX, the Philippians (2:15) living among a crooked and perverse generation, should be without reproach [ἄμεμπτος] and uncontaminated [ἀκέραιος],¹¹ without blemish [ἀμόμητος]. Paul himself had set an example by acting holy, justly and blamelessly [ὁσίως καὶ δικαίως καὶ ἀμέμπτως] towards the Thessalonians (1 Th 2:10; See Malherbe 2000:150).

However, Paul does not always take the terminology expressing virtues from the LXX or from the Jesus-tradition. A non-LXX term is εἰλικρινής or εἰλικρινεία normally translated a little off the mark with ‘sincere’ and ‘sincerity’. The verb εἰλικρινέω means to separate, distinguish, to make pure in the sense that one there is only one substance. Paul claims for himself to engage in the world and with the Corinthians (2 Cor 2:17) ἐξ εἰλικρινείας, based upon a motive that is absolutely pure.¹² Unlike others, he does not have a hidden agenda; he does not sell the word of God.¹³ Paul wants the Philippians (1:10) to be pure [εἰλικρινής],¹⁴ without anything else mixed with it and not giving offence, blameless [ἀπόσκοπος], until the day of Christ’s judgement. 1 Corinthians 1:8 shows how Paul thought this would be achieved. Jesus Christ himself will establish the Corinthians unto the end as legally irreproachable [ἀνέγκλητος].¹⁵ Using ἐπιεικὲς as noun, Paul calls on the Philippians (4:5) that all humans should get to know their fairness.

In Romans, Paul presupposes (Rm 2:4; 11:22) the goodness (χρηστότης) of God and appeals to the Corinthians to practise goodness (2 Cor 6:6). The noun χρηστότης has its firm place within Stoic ethics. For Chrysippus (3rd c. bc) χρηστότης is the skill to do good [εὐποητική] out of free will (Chrysippus, *Fragmenta moralia* 273.4; 264.28). In works of Philo and Musonius Rufus, it is mentioned with other virtues like φιλανθρωπία. For Musonius Rufus, a man has dignity and self-

11. From μέμφομαι ‘to blame’, κεράνυμι, to make a mixture of various ingredients, *make a mixture* and μωμάομαι ‘to blame’. See BDAG, s.v.; LSJ, s.v.

12. The contrasting word is ἡ μίξις, εὖς ‘mixing, mingling’. See Ps. Arist. *De coloribus* 793a. See also 1 Corinthians 5:8.

13. See the illuminating passage in Plato, *Rep.* 549b: ‘And likewise’, I said, ‘when such a one is young he would look down on material goods, but the older he got he would be gradually more keen to have them owing to the share he has in the moneygrubbing nature, and not being pure as regards virtue owing to the lack in his personality of the best safeguard, wouldn’t he?’ trans. LCL 276.225.

14. See Plato, *Phaedo* 81c; *Phileb.* 32c, 63c, *Symp.* 211e [εἰ τῷ γένοιτο αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν ἰδεῖν εἰλικρινές, καθαρὸν, ἄμεικτον ...]; *Rep.* 478e; *Wis.* 7:25. See also Spicq 1994: 1.420–423.

15. See also 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 5:23. Derived by negation of the law term ἐγκαλέω (‘to prosecute, take proceedings against’) the adjective means ‘giving no ground for dispute’. LSJ, s.v. Plato, *Leg.* v 737a.b. The legal connotations are not always essential; see Longinus, *Subl.*, 33.1. Here in 1 Corinthians 1:8, it is suggested by the context.

command [σεμνὸν καὶ σώφρονα] when he reigns over lust and greed, lives frugally, has a sense of shame, can control his tongue, has discipline, order and courtesy and behaves orderly and appropriately (cf. Musonius Rufus, *Diss.* 8.44–50).

Towards the end of the letter to the Philippians, Paul lists several virtues:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true [ἀληθής], whatever is respectable [σεμνός], whatever is just [δίκαιος], whatever is pure [ἀγνός], whatever is pleasing [προσφιλής], whatever is laudable [εὐφημος], if there is any virtue (ἀρετή) and if there is anything worthy of praise [ἔπαινος], think about these things. (Phil 4:8)

This section illustrates the dependence of his exhortation 'in Christ' on terminology common in popular Hellenistic moral philosophy (cf. Dibelius 1925:73). However, in verse 9 Paul reminds the readers that his apostolic example and teaching set boundaries in which they have to think about the list (cf. Müller 1993:196).

Beyond Paul: The Pastoral Epistles

Because of time constraints, a short reference to the Pastoral Epistles should suffice. They set standards for overseers [*episkopoi*] and deacons. An overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity. Many of the virtues commended by the author of the Pastoral Epistles, overlap with what the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus (30 – c. ad 100) called the law of Zeus, the common father of all humans and all gods:

His command and law is that man be just and honest, beneficent, temperate, high-minded, superior to pain, superior to pleasure, free of all envy and all malice; to put it briefly, the law of Zeus bids man be good. (Musonius Rufus, *Diss.* 1.84–88, trans. Lutz 1947)

The Pastoral Epistles took their moral requirements for the clergy from the virtues, which according to contemporary popular philosophy, humans should strive for and choose by leading prudent and self-controlled life.

Conclusion

What is the relevance of our findings about Jesus and Paul's approach to ethics for the way in which Christians conceptualise ethics in our global era? Jesus and Paul initiated an ethos of kindness beyond the circles of natural family and friends within a worldview dominated by the Jewish belief in one God as the Creator and the Torah. God's commandments and the way in which he was depicted in the Bible had a great impact on that what was expected from humans. His mercy and goodness should lead to analogous human behaviour.

Brought up in a culture permeated by the interpretation of the Torah, in this tradition the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth gave moral guidance to his followers, focussing on love towards

one's fellow human beings, care for the poor and socially marginalised and non-retaliatory forgiveness. Jesus' recourse on the Law was guided by the unwavering love to God and the wellbeing of his fellow human beings, his enemies included. To allow love to make the rules alive, is still today as relevant as then.

Paul, who wrote that love is the fulfilment of the law (Rm 13:10), was the first Christian writer whose conceptions and exhortations to act accordingly, guided his readers in moral matters. He used notions from the Torah in Greek and from the moral philosophers of his day, leaning on biblical tradition and on contemporary moral exhortation. He took his language from the Torah, from contemporary Jewish wisdom and from the possibilities Greek legal and Hellenistic popular philosophy gave him. The guidelines for his reception of moral exhortation derive from how he perceived God and the love of God shown in the incarnation and death of Christ (Breytenbach 2010:129–148, 217–226). The focus is not on individual prudence and self-control, but to live an irreproachable life in society, led by the Spirit in humility and goodness, interacting in a gentle and mild manner with everybody, especially within the family of the faithful.

Contemporary Christianity does not for the first time need to adapt moral principles from their cultural environment. Steeped in Christian tradition, primarily biblical tradition, one has to join the circumstances, challenges and culture of one's own time and should have an acceptance for valuable moral insights and guidelines from post-Christian and from non-Christian cultures. Leaning on their strong tradition, Christians can reach into the moral world of others, and like Paul integrate that which is compliant with the Gospel. On the other hand, Christian ethos had, has and can have an exemplary impact on the morality of the societies in and beyond which they live.

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