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A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

RON CLEMENTS

Loving One's Neighbour and Justice

Ron Clements looks at the foundational role of the Levitical command to 'love our neighbour as ourselves' in relation to state justice and international relationships.

The Old Testament injunction from Leviticus 19:18 – 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' – is singled out and alluded to no less than nine times in the New Testament as a point of primary emphasis for the new Christian ethic.¹ Jesus, in a celebrated parable, refers back to this admonition from Leviticus as the most comprehensive of all the Old Testament commandments, second only to the primary commandment to love God (Luke 10:25-37). In this short study we shall look at the commandment's significance in relation to the state, its movement beyond immediate kinship relations, and its place as a foundation for international law. There could scarcely be more important themes today in relation to justice.

Neighbour-love as the foundation for state law

The first point I want to draw attention to regarding this well-known admonition is that it expresses a complete and unreserved commitment to the rule of law, administered by an established governmental authority. It was intended to affirm something central about the nature and administration of law in Israelite society. It is not simply a pious aside, but a fundamental assertion about respecting and upholding the rule of law in the community in a right spirit.

When Henry Maine published his book on Ancient Law in 1861, it showed the way the rise of codified systems of law, and the concomitant growth of institutions to administer them, have become hallmarks of civilisation. The later discovery of the Hammurabi code, dating from more than seventeen hundred years before Christ, confirmed the emphasis. The Ancient Near East was a society in which the formulation, codification and administration of systems of law was the primary agency for improving the quality of human life. Nevertheless, behind any system of laws, there must rest a larger and more philosophical conviction about the very nature of law and justice itself and its place in human affairs. A system of law requires an understanding of love, not because (in the manner of Shylock) law may leave no room for love and compassion, but because law itself must be the supreme expression of such loving compassion.

1 A detailed study of the biblical material relating to the text in both Testaments is given in Hans-Peter Mathys, *Liebe deinen Nächsten wie dich selbst. Untersuchungen zum*

alttestamentlichen Gebot der Nächstenliebe (Lev. 19,18), Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 71, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Freiburg 1986.

The Old Testament reveals a deep commitment to a system of centrally administered public law as the foundation of its moral structure. It recognizes the right and duty of the state to administer this, affirming the rightful place of an appointed government to rule.² The kingdom of God is not a kingdom belonging to another world.³ For all the frank awareness that we find in the biblical writings that actual earthly kings were often sadly defective in their moral duties, the principle of the sovereign state is fully upheld. There is no private morality which is not also, in its varying commitments, a public morality. The Old Testament knows nothing of the notion that morality could be a purely private and individual affair.⁴ The call to love one's neighbour comes within a series of rules and admonitions concerned to uphold respect for, and submission to, a just society. Accordingly, the concept of the state, with its varied rights and duties, is part of the foundation of the ethics of the Old Testament.

Kin loyalty and neighbour justice

It has also long been recognized that the study of kinship is an indispensable guide towards an understanding of Israelite society. To protect the kin group from violation, to avenge it when its honour had been slighted or its members injured or murdered, was the most obligatory of human duties. Maintaining the integrity of the kin-group is a strong part of the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. There was clearly a time when a fellow member of one's community would more naturally and conventionally be described as a 'sister' or 'brother'. The fifth of the Ten Commandments shows the family forming the base-unit of society, and in no way is this superceded. Yet the emphasis on neighbour love deliberately extends justice beyond the self-interest of the family group. It meant looking outward instead of inward and it meant looking ahead, rather than behind, to new cultural forms. The transition to what is essentially a 'modern' understanding of society, with its complexities and varieties, instead of remaining content with the older protective umbrella of 'kith and kin', was central to the social context of the Old Testament.

The injunction of Deuteronomy 16:20 to pursue justice above all signals this change. Actions that were 'merciful' and 'steadfast' to the interests of one's family may frequently not have been actions which accorded with the wider demands of justice. The command to make one's neighbour the object of loving concern opens a window onto a very large panorama of moral and social interest. Kinship was all very well, but was too limited and circumscribed for God's second great commandment, and from this flowed national and international senses of neighbourliness.

2 The categorical assertion of divine wisdom is sweeping in its range. Prov. 8:15f.
 3 The 'this worldly', and hence profoundly ethical, nature of the religious emphasis of the Old Testament is well brought out in the study by W. Zimmerli, *The Old Testament and the World*, SPCK, London 1976.

4 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958, pp 22f; Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, SPCK, London 1986, pp 95f.

The theological meaning of community

This leads to one of the boldest and most enduring features of a biblical ethic, which we can illustrate from Proverbs.

Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
But whoever is kind to the needy honours him. (Prov. 14:31)

The economic point is a theological one. Rich and poor share a common Maker; they are children of God, made in his image, born with the same potential and destined to leave the world by the same mortality. Here the principle that every single human being is a creature of God is laid down into law and economic activity. This principle goes beyond the boundaries of family, clan, tribe or race, or even city or nation. It was persuasively put by Professor Edward Ullendorff to a theological summer school at St. Andrew's University: 'the translation of Lev.19:18 can only be: "thou shalt love thy neighbour, for he is as thou"; he is like you, a human being created in God's image – just like you'.⁵

The Hebrew Bible teaches us to think of every other human being as 'a person like myself'. This dimension is not sectarian or partisan in any restrictive way. It calls us to be theologically anthropocentric and is the basis of social relationships. When we talk of God, we cannot get away from rethinking the nature of the obligations we have towards the whole human scene. Indicatives become imperatives. As a result we see that the ultimate boundaries of neighbourhood and justice are without limit.

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5 Lecture published in R Loewe (ed.), *Studies in Rationalism, Judaism and Universalism in memory of Leon Roth*, Routledge and Keegan Paul, London 1966, pp 273-288.