Great Moral Choices in the Bible

Teacher Background

The Bible contains the Moral Codes of two great religions - Judaism and Christianity. The Decalogue (Ten Commandments) and the Beatitudes can be considered to sum up the teachings and actions of the prophets and Jesus, who came to tell all creation of God’s dream of how human beings could act as co-creators and stewards of creation, being, as they are, made in God’s very image. It is as simple and as complicated as that.

There is considerable truth in the statement that the accounts of moral dilemmas of characters in the Bible are not there to give moral certainty, but rather they are a record of the gap between humanity’s response to the great moral questions faced by every age and culture and the intended response by God, who knows all and sees all and has a definite way of living in mind for all who would chose the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus over the gods of other cultures. Time and again the lesson from these stories is that humanity’s ways are not God’s ways.

Pope John Paul II states in Veritatis Splendour (1993):

(Note: Out of respect for the equality of all people under God, gender-based pronouns in the translation have been replaced with inclusive language wherever possible).

In the Book of Genesis we read: "The Lord God commanded the humans, saying, 'You may eat freely of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die' " (Gen 2:16-17).

With this imagery, Revelation teaches that the power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to humans, but to God alone. The humans are certainly free, inasmuch as they can understand and accept God’s commands. And they possess an extremely far-reaching freedom, since they can eat "of every tree of the garden". But this freedom is not unlimited: it must halt before the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil", for it is called to accept the moral law given by God. In fact, human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfilment precisely in the acceptance of that law. God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for humanity and by virtue of that very love, proposes this good to humanity in the commandments. (Para 35)

All of the great moral questions are found in the Bible: the seven deadly sins (Pride/ Vanity, Envy Gluttony Lust Anger Covetousness /Greed and Slothfulness) are repeated by every generation. The Books of Genesis and Exodus, which are an account of the foundational years of Israel, contain, for example, many of the great moral dilemmas faced by followers of Yahweh as they come to terms with the ways of God, not their old ways and customs, or those of neighbouring tribes. These experiences lead into the foundational moral code of the people of Yahweh, the Decalogue.

According to Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr, the very first struggle between humans and God over moral integrity occurs when the first humans want to “play God” and assume God’s role as the ultimate source of wisdom and justice (Gen 3). The Cain and Abel story is the archetypal admonition against murder and the affirmation of the sanctity of human life. Abraham faces the question of lying to Abimelech to save his own life (Gen 20) and the question of human sacrifice with Isaac (Gen 22). Lot faces a great moral dilemma over the sacred duty of hospitality (Gen 19). Jacob chooses to cheat his brother to his father’s blessing and struggles with God for a blessing for what he has done (Gen 32). The treachery and revenge killings of the Schechemites by Simeon and Levi (Gen 34) come at a cost to their father Jacob. Tamar’s deception of Judah her father-in law offends the sexual customs of the tribe, but gives her power and a heritage (Gen 38). The selling of Joseph into slavery is another archetypal story of sibling rivalry and jealousy (Gen 38). Moses asks God: "What’s
in it for me?” and seeks to avoid his call (Ex 3) and the story of Jonah is the classic account of one who would avoid one’s moral obligations. The lessons from the tragic consequences of David’s sexual lust are as applicable to today’s world as they were then (2 Sam 11).

The Decalogue (Ex 20) represents a culmination of the experience of a people who sought to live exclusively by the moral vision of one God. This is the great moral code of the ancient world and is Israel’s summary of God’s dream for humans who wish to live in a covenant relationship with the Universal Creator. The teachings and actions of Jesus, who came not to do away with the great moral code, but to complete it (Mt 5:17) are summed up in the Beatitudes and the Great commandment: Love one another as I have loved you (Jn 11-12) and love your neighbour as much as you love yourself (Mt 7:12). The moral imperative for Christians is higher than under the old law (Mt 5:20-48). Christians have the encounter of Jesus and the rich young man (Mt 19:16-22) as the ultimate expression of the Christian way of life: give up everything and do as Jesus did if we wish to be perfect.

Feminist theologians in particular, remind us to be sensitive to the fact that the Bible is, culturally and socially, a product of its authorship and development over time. The books of the Bible reflect a succession of hierarchical and patriarchal societies and authors and thus morality and moral issues highlight the concerns and perspectives of men rather than women. Many of the moral decisions of women are concerned with sexuality and occur in the context of the status of women in ancient society. The social and cultural issues of honour and shame and racial and ritual purity stem from the context of how human relationships were formalised in the ancient world. The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides an excellent contextualisation of the Decalogue for modern Christians. (See www.scborromeo.org/ccc/ccc_toc2.htm, paragraph 2052 onwards.)

Teachers should focus on the very different attitude Jesus displays towards women and his affirmation of their decisions, actions and choices, which recognises their equality and dignity in the eyes of God.