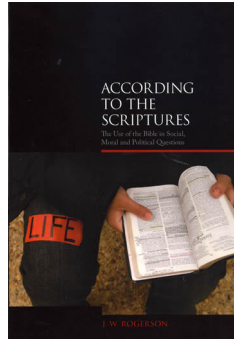


○ **REVIEW OF J. W. ROGERSON, *ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES: THE USE OF THE BIBLE IN SOCIAL, MORAL AND POLITICAL QUESTIONS* (LONDON: EQUINOX, 2007)**

*Craig Martin, Syracuse University*

*Correspondence to Craig Martin: [cmartin.rel@gmail.com](mailto:cmartin.rel@gmail.com)*



J. W. Rogerson addresses two important questions in *According to the Scriptures: The Use of the Bible in Social, Moral and Political Questions*. First, how has the Bible been used in the past in support of various social and moral positions? Second, what is the continuing relevance of the Bible for contemporary social and moral issues? Rogerson does an excellent job in providing clear and straightforward answers to these timely questions in this short and concise text.

The book may be divided into three parts: first, an introduction, second, a history of the interpretation of the Bible, and, third, a consideration of how one might responsibly use the Bible today. In the introductory chapter Rogerson targets overly simple ‘conservative’ interpretations that fail to take into account the difficulties inherent in the task of interpretation; he points to the inconsistency of those who read ‘literally’ or ‘by the book’ the passages in the Hebrew scriptures that recommend sexist social constraints, but simultaneously ignore those contiguous passages that, for instance, recommend the death penalty for adultery. ‘If biblical commandments about enforcing the death penalty are either no longer appropriate to the modern world or are no longer enforceable, why should this not also be true of the Bible’s teaching on male superiority’ (4)? At the end of the introduction, he offers four specific reasons why straightforward, literal interpretations of the commands in the Torah are not plausible. First, a literal interpretation is complicated by the fact that many injunctions found there are ‘expanded, modified, or countermanded’ in other parts of the Bible (6). Second, Jewish and Christian communities have always ignored some commands. Third, some injunctions are simply incapable of being followed in contemporary society, such as the recommendation of capital punishment for cursing one’s parents. Fourth, Rogerson suggests that since it is impossible to apply the commands in the Torah without some form of selection, it is necessary to explicate and justify one’s criteria of selection. ‘It is

reasonable to want to know who decides what remains applicable and what ceases to be applicable, and on what grounds' (7).

The second and lengthiest part of the book considers the history of the interpretation of the Bible with respect to moral and social issues; more specifically, this part analyzes the ways in which Jewish and Christian communities put the Bible to use while rendering irrelevant or inconsequential a variety of objectionable moral injunctions and prohibitions in the Torah. In seven chapters, Rogerson discusses the methods of acceptance and rejection used by later Jewish thinkers, the communities that produced the New Testament, the church fathers, Christian thinkers in the middle ages, and Christian thinkers in early modern and modern Europe. It is in this section that Rogerson reveals the impressive scope of his knowledge, including knowledge of both the Bible and Western intellectual history. He moves seamlessly and knowledgeably through discussions, for instance, of Clement and Augustine, Maimonides and Aquinas, and Luther and Calvin.

For each time period discussed, Rogerson reveals the criteria of selection used to sift between relevant and irrelevant passages in the Jewish law. Most of these criteria bear a structural resemblance to one another, and involve some form of a universal/local distinction. Augustine and Calvin, for instance, distinguish between *moral* commandments and *ceremonial* laws, and suggest that the latter are not universally applicable. Similarly, Richard Hooker makes a distinction between *necessary* and *accessory* laws, and Richard Baxter distinguishes between *essentials* and *customs*; for both Hooker and Baxter, the former applies universally, while the latter does not. In each case, the deployment of the criterion of selection allows the interpreters to maintain the authority of the Bible in general, while rendering inconsequential those specific passages that are met with disapproval.

At the end of this section, Rogerson points out that the debate shifted in the nineteenth century, as some Christians began to doubt seriously the claim that the Hebrew scriptures were of divine origin: 'What finally broke down... was the belief that moral prescriptions in the Old Testament had been revealed by God' (79). This resulted from the fact that many of the commands attributed to God, such as those concerning the conquest of Canaan, were considered unethical and inappropriate for all times and places, according to nineteenth century moral and ethical standards. Consequently, whereas before it may have been necessary to render a command irrelevant by demonstrating that it was only intended by God to apply to a particular time and place, now it began to be possible to render a command irrelevant by suggesting that it was never issued by God.

The third part of Rogerson's text attempts to provide a sophisticated and justifiable method of applying the Bible to contemporary social and moral issues. Following the Apostle Paul, Rogerson suggests that the text should not be followed according to the 'letter' but according to the 'spirit'—the Bible should not be thought as providing categorical injunctions, but *examples* to follow. In the penultimate chapter, Rogerson presents his method of determining the 'spirit' of the text, and in the final chapter he considers three specific cases (concerning marriage, usury, and homosexuality) and demonstrates how one might apply his method. He concludes the last chapter by offering a few guidelines that are necessary for any 'responsible' application of the Bible: one must consider one's own local social and moral norms; one must consider how the church's position has changed on moral matters over time; one must justify one's method of

application; and one must take into consideration the fact that the social context in which the Bible was written was entirely different from modern society.

In what remains, I want to offer two critical remarks. First, despite the fact that this book is aimed at undergraduate students and a general audience, Rogerson assumes throughout the obvious authority of the Bible. The normative assumptions about the contemporary relevance of the Bible that specifically underlie the third part of the text will be foreign to most readers who do not identify as Jewish or Christian. One of the strengths of the first and second parts of Rogerson's book is that it asks readers to reflect carefully on problematic assumptions or inconsistencies that might be at work in certain 'applications' of the Bible. However, the uninterrogated and problematic assumption fundamental to the third section of the book is that the Bible is obviously authoritative, and that it obviously has a contemporary relevance. We do not immediately award this sort of authority to Hammurabi's law code or Plato's *Republic*; why then should we immediately award it to the Bible? In Rogerson's book, the authority of the Bible is simply assumed, and the question of authority is neither asked nor answered; as a result, Rogerson uncritically reinforces the authority of the Jewish and Christian scriptures and forecloses serious reflection on the matter.

Second, even if readers grant Rogerson the assumption that the Bible is authoritative and has a continuing relevance, it is unclear that the third part of his text achieves its proposed task: to construct a sophisticated and justifiable method of application. When discussing Richard Baxter's distinction between 'universal' and 'local' laws, Rogerson notes: 'Baxter's view... raises the question of how one decides which is which' (71). Rogerson suggests that Baxter might respond to such a query by claiming that 'human reason' decides, but one could also argue that the method of sorting between these two categories may have more to do with *convenience* than 'reason', as Rogerson himself suggests at one point: 'A cynic could be forgiven for thinking that only those biblical commandments remain relevant that have not been declared illegal in modern nation states' (7). Rogerson's own method of distinguishing between 'spirit' and 'letter' is vague, and readers are left to wonder whether or not his interpretation of the 'spirit' of the text is the result of wishful thinking and arbitrary selective privileging. That is, is it possible that he simply selects those passages that support his own ethical stance and declares them to be representative of the 'spirit' of the text? At one point Rogerson suggests: 'The whole tenor of the Old Testament is that the exploitation of the poor and needy is an offence against God... and the Old Testament had numerous devices for trying to neutralize the effects of exploitation' (98). This is a particularly narrow and selective reading; many (although not all) passages in the Hebrew scriptures were ideological buttresses of ancient Israelite imperialism, such as the texts on the conquest of Canaan and the passages praising Josiah's program of stamping out religious and cultural diversity. Although there are many passages with a more liberatory 'tenor', why do they get to stand in for the 'spirit' of the Bible as a whole, unless the method used to sort between 'spirit' and 'letter' is at bottom based on what is convenient for Rogerson's own moral and social agenda?

Despite these drawbacks, Rogerson's text reflects an incredible breadth of knowledge, expertise, and erudition. This volume in general, and the historical section in particular, is an excellent addition and a valuable contribution to the literature on the history of the interpretation of the Bible.