ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 15, No. 4, December 2021
Pages: 767–785

REVISIONING LÚCÁS CHAN'S BIBLICAL ETHICS AS AN ETHICS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Timothy Chapman♦
Boston College

Abstract

Lúcás Chan was a pioneer of biblical ethics who accepted the Vatican II call for the reform of moral theology. Building on his few twentieth century forebears and integrating the work of Catholic and Protestant biblical scholars and ethicists, Chan applied virtue theory as a hermeneutic for deriving a biblical ethic. His method insisted upon a dual competency for first exegeting a biblical text and then employing virtue theory as a framework for applying the scripture to contemporary issues. This paper adds another layer of hermeneutics, derived from Jesus's words in Luke's gospel, to read the whole of scripture through the lens of Christ. This Christological hermeneutic builds on and adapts Chan's method into an ethics of discipleship.

Keywords: Biblical Ethics; Discipleship; Exegesis; Hermeneutics; Lúcás Chan; Virtue

Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan was truly a pioneer of biblical ethics. Wholeheartedly and with great acumen, Chan accepted the challenge of the Second Vatican Council to reform moral theology: "Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world."[1] A half century later, Chan responded with a biblical ethic through the lens of virtue theory. Though several

♦**Timothy Chapman** has a ThM from Boston College (USA). He will soon begin doctoral studies at Durham University (UK). His dissertation seeks to build a biblical ethic of masculinity and work employing the framework of Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Theo-drama*. Email: chapmati@bc.edu

[1] Paul VI, *Optatam Totius: Decree on Priestly Training*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965, §16.

biblical scholars had attempted ethical work and some ethicists had engaged in biblical interpretation, none had the dual competency to offer the biblical ethic that *Optatam Totius* suggested. In his books and articles, Chan provided the framework and model for successful exegesis of the Bible that led to a thoroughly biblical ethic applicable to contemporary society.

This paper focuses on Chan's ethical hermeneutic. First, I survey his few twentieth century Catholic forebears who employed a biblical ethic. Second, I briefly situate his method within his broader scholarly interests. The bulk of the paper summarizes and analyzes the method Chan constructed for a biblical ethic through virtue. Then I amend Chan's method by adding a preliminary Christological hermeneutic. Fifth, I interpret Chan's method as an exercise of discipleship, which is more fully realized through a Christological hermeneutic. Lastly, I suggest some areas indicated by Chan's method that need or inspire further development. I contend that, although he rarely uses the term, Chan's hermeneutical method offers a way of discipleship, which extends to the whole of Scripture when read through a Christological lens.

1. Catholic Biblical Ethics in the Twentieth Century

After the Reformation, Catholic moral theology became increasingly rooted in reason and natural law, while Scripture became the territory of Protestants dedicated to *Sola Scriptura*. The retrieval of a Catholic biblical ethic did not occur until German New Testament scholar Fritz Tillmann was banned from New Testament studies in 1912 and shifted his career to morals.[2] In 1934 he published *Die Idee der Nachfolge Christi*,[3] which not only recovered biblical ethics but also set the focus for the next century on the New Testament and the theme of discipleship. He published *Der Meister Ruft* for a lay audience in 1937, and this was published in English in 1961.[4] This work, too, was rooted in the "Fundamental Idea of the Following of Christ," the invitation to which was "to all whom faith would lead to become His disciples."[5]

---

[2]For this history of Tillmann see, James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences,* New York: Continuum, 2010, 59-69.

[3]Fritz Tillmann, *Die Idee der Nachfolge Christi*, vol 3 in *Die katholische Sittenlehre*, ed. Fritz Tillmann, Dusseldorf: Patmos, 1934.

[4]Fritz Tillmann, *The Master Calls: A Handbook of Morals for the Layman*, trans. Gregory J. Roettger, Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961.

[5]Tillmann, *The Master Calls*, 3.

That same year, an English translation of the first volume of Bernard Häring's *Das Gesetz Christi* (1954) appeared.[6] This volume addressed how "Christ Invites Man to Follow Him," which includes a call to community, as well as the "moral duty of the disciple of Christ." Häring, too, is focused on the moral life as New Testament-inspired discipleship. Also significant is Häring's attention to virtue in Christ. He writes, "Christ taught us what virtue is, above all in His own all-embracing love."[7] Nevertheless, Häring's treatment of virtue is thoroughly Aristotelian-Thomistic rather than rooted in or applied to a scriptural exegesis.

Over two decades later, William C. Spohn published the short volume *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?*[8] which presented ethics as discipleship: "The Gospel begins with a person who claims that he himself is the 'norm' we are to follow: 'Come, follow me.' In both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures a way of life is presented to God's people to follow."[9] Spohn is the first to truly bring together biblical ethics and virtue theory (the theme that Chan adopts and fleshes out), which he does in his 1999 book, *Go and Do Likewise*.[10] This work also begins with discipleship which "necessarily involves ethical reflection and accountability. Disciples look to their masters for guidance, inspiration, and challenge."[11] Furthermore, Spohn argues that spirituality and virtue ethics are the best ways for disciples to truly take up Jesus's moral vision.[12]

Daniel Harrington and James Keenan likewise saw virtue ethics as a potential bridge between Scripture and moral theology.[13] In the few books published on biblical ethics between Spohn's first book and Lúcás Chan's first book, however, none brought virtue ethics together with the scriptures to the same degree, and certainly none

---

[6]Bernard Häring, *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, vol. 1, trans. Edwin G. Kaiser, Cork, Ireland: Mercier Press, 1961.

[7]Häring, *The Law of Christ*, vol. 1, 485.

[8]William C. Spohn, *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?*, Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984; fully revised and expanded edition, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995.

[9]Spohn, *Scripture and Ethics* (1984), 1.

[10]William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*, New York: Continuum, 1999. See also his "Scripture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 93-111.

[11]Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 10.

[12]Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 27.

[13]Daniel J. Harrington and James F. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges Between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology*, Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2002, 24-25.

developed a full hermeneutic of virtue combined with an insistence upon thorough exegesis like Chan does.[14]

2. Lúcás Chan's Project

Chan's broader scholarly work revolves around three themes: constructing and exercising a biblical ethic through the hermeneutic of virtue theory, bridge-building with Confucianism, and examining virtuous exemplars in the book of Ruth to apply to contemporary ethical issues.

Unsurprisingly, Chan's Boston College doctoral dissertation[15] is the basis of much of his future work. Part One (Current Attempts at Constructing Scriptural Ethics) and Part Two (The Hermeneutics of Virtue Ethics) are the sources of his second book, *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century*,[16] and explain his adoption of Allen Verhey's concept of Scripture as "scripted script." Part Three (Exegeting and Interpreting the Text—The Beatitudes as 'Scripted Script') would become the latter half of his first book, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes*.[17] The epilogue of this book shows the shared virtues between the Decalogue, the Beatitudes, and Confucianism, the last of which Chan also presents in Part Four (Bringing the Data Forward) of his dissertation. His exegesis and virtue analysis of the classical texts of Confucianism reappear throughout his career both in Chinese publications, pan-Asian conversations, and in comparative work with the West.

Similarly, in his thesis[18] for the licentiate he was already bringing virtue theory together with Scriptural analysis by reding Boaz as an exemplar of the virtue of hospitality in the book of Ruth. This research likewise appears in his earliest article[19] and was reworked

---

[14]For a detailed discussion of twentieth century, largely Protestant attempts at a biblical ethic, see, Lúcás Chan, *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century: Developments, Emerging Consensus, and Future Directions*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013.

[15]Yiu Sing Luke (Lúcás) Chan, "Why Scripture Scholars and Theological Ethicists Need One Another: Exegeting and Interpreting the Beatitudes as a Scripted Script for Ethical Living," PhD diss., Boston College, 2010.

[16]Lúcás Chan, *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century: Developments, Emerging Consensus, and Future Directions*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013.

[17]Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012.

[18]Yiu Sing Luke (Lúcás) Chan, "The Hospitality of Boaz as a Christian Virtue: Responding to the Contemporary Issue of Immigration," STL thesis, Weston Jesuit School of Theology, 2007.

[19]Yiu Sing Luke Chan, "A Model of Hospitality for Our Times," *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 10, 3 (2006) 21-46.

years later for another publication.[20] In these works he provides a model for applying virtue theory to biblical ethics in the genre of an Old Testament narrative, thus broadening the application of his method beyond the more direct statements of the Decalogue and Beatitudes.

3. Lúcás Chan's Method: Biblical Ethic Through the Lens of Virtue

Chan's first book, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes*, sets out his method for biblical ethics and applies it to these two foundational texts. Part I draws up the schema for bridging the two fields of biblical studies and Christian ethics, and the subsequent two sections exegete the texts for biblical living. He notes that, while there had been developments in the relationship between biblical studies and Christian ethics, there remained no consensus as to which ethical framework would make the best hermeneutic:[21] Chan proposed virtue ethics not only for the direct ethical applications it provides but also because "several important goods of virtue…are particularly relevant to the task of reading Scripture" in the first place.[22]

As he explained in his follow up book, *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century*, most previous attempts by biblical scholars and Christian ethicists to bridge the gap between their fields had been individual efforts which generally failed to successfully integrate insights from their colleagues or offer a project that was more substantive than exegesis plus a few ethical reflections or ethics with a few scriptural references. "While these Scripture scholars and theological ethicists are innovative in their own regards, they do not pay enough attention to the importance of the scriptural text and the importance of the hermeneutics of ethics at the same time."[23] Chan's project sought to build on these attempts, offer a guiding hermeneutic, and model a constructive integration of the two fields.

Moreover, Chan does not view his own project as "pure innovation" but as discerning and building upon a consensus that had been building since at least the 1980s.[24] Scholars gathered around the fundamental understanding that exegesis and hermeneutics

---

[20]Lúcás Chan, "The Hebrew Bible and the Discourse on Migration: A Reflection on the Virtue of Hospitality in the Book of Ruth," *Asian Horizons* 8, 4 (December 2014) 665-679; reprinted in Lúcás Chan, *A Lúcás Chan Reader: Pioneering Essays on Biblical and Asian Theological Ethics*, ed. George Griener and James F. Keenan, Bengaluru, India: Dharmaram Publications, 2017.

[21]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 1.

[22]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 2.

[23]Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 6.

[24]Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 6.

could not be separated from one another when doing biblical ethics. The best example of this integration for Chan was Reformed Protestant ethicist Allen Verhey's concept of the Scriptures as "scripted script."[25] The work of exegesis seeks to understand the ancient contexts in which these texts were "scripted" for their original audiences. These same texts function as a "script," which is to be applied and performed in the lives of people today. These two dimensions, which have generally fallen to the two separate fields (biblical scholars do exegesis; ethicists do hermeneutics), must become a dialogue done in the context of the Church community. Chan concludes, "Within the enterprise of methodological inquiry, Verhey's emphasis on Scripture as both 'scripted' and 'script' implies the need to pay equal attention to the scriptural text and to its interpretation."[26] This is exactly what Chan's method does.

Chapter 2 of Chan's first book brings the exegetical and hermeneutical together through virtue ethics. After briefly tracing the history of virtue ethics in Christian theology and up to Alasdair MacIntyre, William Spohn, James Keenan, and Jean Porter, Chan notes that the contemporary expression of virtue ethics has three characteristics: "It is a teleological ethics that is concerned about human good. It is interested in moral character and thus gives priority to being over doing. It also bears a kind of perfectionism that sees all aspects of life as morally relevant and urges one to moral growth."[27] Furthermore, Chan finds four goods of virtue, around which he will base his hermeneutical reading: "practices and habits, dispositions and character, exemplars, and community and communal identity." He will apply these four goods to each of the commandments and beatitudes.

Lastly, in terms of introduction, Chan shows how the concept of virtue is intrinsic to the Scriptures and is especially present in the wisdom literature. He notes that Athanasius was even more inclusive, writing, "the entire Holy Scripture is a teacher of virtues."[28] Though not universally, most scholars concerned with scripture and ethics have identified this internal treatment of virtue. For instance, many Old Testament figures serve as exemplars of virtue. The wisdom literature extolls many virtues and "character-molding motifs."[29] The Beatitudes enumerate virtues, and the parables display

---

[25]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 3.
[26]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 4. See also, Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 62-74.
[27]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 9-10.
[28]Quoted in Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 15.
[29]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 15.

them. Likewise, Paul often urged his readers to live out certain qualities in view of their salvation in Christ. Chan asserts, "Scripture not only reveals moral virtue, value, and vision, it actually promotes them."[30] When virtues appear in the scriptures, they are prescriptive, calling readers to align their own lives with these traits.

This is the first point at which I see the most need for further development. By thorough attentiveness to the Bible's own discussion, portrayal, and promotion of virtue, biblical ethics through the lens of virtue is strengthened on its own terms. Certainly, much can be gained by applying the virtue theory of other writers like Aristotle and Confucius to the biblical texts, but inasmuch as a biblical virtue ethic can be constructed from its own constituent materials, the more coherent it becomes. This is because virtue is, then, not a foreign hermeneutic applied to the ancient texts all these centuries later that may or may not illuminate their original meaning, but it is instead a piece of the exegetical process itself. Chan explicitly sees potential for this development in biblical narratives, where "exemplars make the person and the community more able to articulate the vision they are to attain." [31] The better our understanding of the Bible's own virtue ethic, the more thoroughly and natively we can apply this lens to the texts. Thankfully, some recent work has been done in this direction. [32]

As the above quote from Athanasius makes clear, Chan is also attuned at each turn to reception history. Both Parts II and III of *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes* begin with an introductory chapter on "The Decalogue/Beatitudes in History," focused especially on Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. He notes that interpretations by these four on the Decalogue "are clearly homiletic, catechetical, and pastoral in nature."[33] Further, Luther and Calvin especially emphasize the inner disposition targeted by these commandments, which, for Chan, "throws light on and supports our proposal to interpret the text through the lens of virtue."[34] While

---

[30] Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 15. He repeats this phrase in multiple future publications.

[31] Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, "Bridging Christian Ethics and Confucianism Through Virtue," *Chinese Cross Currents* 5, 3 (July 2008) 74-85; reprinted in *Lúcás Chan Reader*, at 160.

[32] See Patricia Vesely, *Friendship and Virtue Ethics in the Book of Job*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019; Arthur Keefer, *The Book of Proverbs and Virtue Ethics: Integrating the Biblical and Philosophical Traditions*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

[33] Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 26.

[34] Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 26.

exegesis is an enterprise essentially begun in the nineteenth century, interpretive attention to the effect on the reader has a much longer history which supports Chan's hermeneutical lens.

The last task before exegesis proper is to consider "Some Preliminary Questions" on each passage regarding its literary context and redaction history. For instance, Chan examines the place of the Decalogue in the book of Exodus, the Pentateuch, and the whole of the Hebrew Bible as well as its likely authorship according to Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis.[35] He also considers the genre, nature, source, and function of the Decalogue. Lastly, Chan briefly identifies his own conclusions and assumptions related to these questions.

Likewise, for the Beatitudes, Chan examines their place in the Sermon on the Mount and in the Gospel of Matthew and the meaning of the term as well as their background and origin, unity and structure, and function. Similar to the documentary hypothesis, Chan also briefly examines Matthew's sources and concludes that at least some of the Beatitudes are likely derived from Q.[36] Thus, before the exegetical work of examining the language of each Commandment or Beatitude, Chan addresses these larger contextual questions which will shape his close reading.

The bulk of the book is dedicated to the individual treatment of the Commandments and Beatitudes[37] with a chapter devoted to each. Here, Chan models his method of interpretation. Each chapter begins with exegeting the text, answering "What did the text command/proclaim?" The past tense of this title is key, for the section focuses not on a hermeneutic for today. These sections rely on a variety of biblical commentaries, articles, and other works, usually by bible scholars, to establish what the text would have meant in its ancient context(s). Both in biblical exegesis and in bridge-building with Confucianism, Chan is always concerned that texts be read on their own terms: "we will need to be mindful of the biases inherent in our very search for commonality. In short we must learn to understand the local presuppositions upon which these texts are

---

[35]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 31-35.

[36]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 149-156.

[37]For a more recent though shorter examination of the Beatitudes in light of virtue theory, see William C. Mattison III, "The Beatitudes and Happiness: The Christological and Ecclesiological Vision of Matthew 5:1-16," in *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology: A Virtue Perspective,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

based." [38] The project of exegesis must not be clouded by contemporary presumptions but must focus on what the texts were saying in their original context(s). This practice is shared by many Asian religious traditions.[39]

The step of exegesis is also where redaction criticism plays the biggest role as it can reveal how the "original audience" was actually multiple audiences through time as various pieces of the present text were written, pieced together, and edited. A thorough exegesis must take this into account even as it may ultimately focus on understanding the present form of the text. I note, however, that without close relevance to the exegesis of a passage, redaction criticism quickly becomes a mere historical curiosity that does nothing to inform the interpretation for today. Thus, those adopting Chan's method do well to keep their ultimate goal of a present-day biblical ethic in mind throughout the process, even as exegesis is meant to open up the interpreter to more possibilities rooted in historical meaning and not immediately apparent to a contemporary reader.

The second part of each chapter looks to apply the text to present circumstances. It identifies the key principle from each Commandment or Beatitude in terms of virtue. For instance, for the third commandment, Chan writes, "Our examination hints that the key ethical issue seems to focus on treasuring the sacred time itself."[40] Similarly, Chan identifies poverty of spirit, in the first Beatitude, with the virtue of humility.[41] The subsequent subsections of each chapter address the same five issues: "The Meaning of [the Principle]," "[the Principle] as Virtue," "The Practice of [the Principle]," "The Exemplars," and "The Social, Communal Aspect of the Virtue of [the Principle]." These sections more often rely on the works of theological ethicists. Here, too, Chan incorporates historical Christian thought—from Gregory the Great to Aquinas to contemporary scholars.

The fourth and final chapter of *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century* contains Chan's proposal for a hermeneutic of virtue ethics.[42] Here

---

[38]Chan, "Bridging Christian Ethics," in *Lúcás Chan Reader*, 165.

[39]Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, "Catholic Theological Ethics: Some Reflections on the Asian Scenario," in *Moral Theology in India Today*, ed. Shaji George Kocuthara, 101-21, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2013. Reprinted in *Lúcás Chan Reader*, at 227.

[40]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 67.

[41]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 163.

[42] This chapter was reprinted in *A Lúcás Chan Reader*, 66-91; and as "A Hermeneutical Proposal," *Asian Horizons* 13, 3 (2019) 281-306.

Chan identities five common characteristics and four dimensions of contemporary virtue ethics. First, virtue ethics is concerned with human *telos*. While versions of the good may be numerous, there is still a proper conception of the human end which should guide human performance. Second, virtue ethics is dynamic, concerned with who we are to become. It answers the three questions: Who am I? Who Ought I become? And What ought I to do? Third, virtue ethics is focused on human good. Virtues are not merely means to the human *telos*, but are intrinsic goods. Fourth, virtue ethics prioritizes being over doing. It is concerned with character development. Fifth, virtue ethics "bears a kind of perfectionism," calling everyone to continual growth in all areas of life.[43]

The four dimensions of virtue ethics are those treated by the hermeneutical sections of *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes*: dispositions and character formation, practices and habits, exemplars, and community and communal identity. Character development, Chan emphasizes, is, at least in part, a conscious and active process: "our choices and actions help form our tendencies and disposition, which, in turn, help inform and direct our subsequent choices and actions. One thus plays a role in the formation of one's character."[44] Practices and habits are built in the mundane but deliberate choices of everyday life. Simply put, "we acquire virtues by habitually acting virtuously."[45] Exemplars model the virtues, demonstrating what they look like applied to the real world. This assumes that virtue is teachable and inspire us to act as the exemplars do.[46] Lastly, countering the idea that virtue theory encourages self-focus and self-centeredness, Chan places it in the context of community. Communities help us understand the virtues and facilitate their development. Moreover, human good is not individual; "we depend on each other for moral development."[47]

At the end of this final chapter of *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century*, Chan again argues that scripture not only expresses, illustrates, or inspires the way of virtue, but that it becomes a tool by which the Christian and Christian community actually grow in virtue: "Whenever individuals and the faith community reflect on these life experiences recorded in Scripture, their basic character is shaped."[48]

---

[43]Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 82-84.
[44]Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 86.
[45]Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 87.
[46]Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 88.
[47]Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 91.
[48]Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 109.

Through a dynamic and communal reading of the scriptures, one becomes the type of person and community that the scriptures extoll in a distinctively Christian way. Second, particularly in narrative passages—both in the Old and New Testaments—the scriptures provide a wealth of virtuous exemplars. Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz each demonstrate a virtue which the Christian ought to emulate. Third, the scriptures not only define or distinguish the particularity or historicity of Christian communities but define them as moral communities. "The Gospels," for example, "likewise, do not simply portray a unique human being but also serve as manuals for training the follower to be part of the new community."[49] The Bible shows the way to becoming the type of community God wills for humanity.

In a 2015 article[50] in *Theological Studies*, Chan summarized his project, updated his previous review of scholarship, and celebrated engagements of biblical ethics with sacramental and systematic theology as well as spirituality and legal theory. The three dimensions signalled in the subtitle are familiar: integration, collaboration, and innovation and beyond. Here again, Chan calls for the integration of biblical studies with Christian ethics, collaboration between scholars in these (too) separate fields, and innovation through integrating other fields of study. By calling scholars from different fields to invest in all three dimensions, Chan is building a complex ethic that speaks to specific cultural circumstances and serves ecumenical and interfaith dialogues.

In one of his final works, Chan delivered a response[51] from an Asian perspective to three papers delivered at a conference in Opole, Poland. He identified three concentric circles of moral human relations: "(1) the moral self; (2) the family; and (3) the larger society. They are interrelated rather than hierarchical in structure."[52] At each point he connects certain biblical or Christian values (inclusive of virtues) to Confucian values. As for the self, Chan presents following one's conscience as a personal value. Indeed, "following conscience can be a *character* (and disposition) of the moral person and has a

---

[49]Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 112.

[50]Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, "Biblical Ethics: 3D," *Theological Studies* 76, 1 (2015) 112-28. Also reprinted in *Lúcás Chan Reader*, 114-134; I cite here the version adapted and updated as "Biblical Ethics: 3D," in *The Bible and Catholic Theological Ethics*, ed., Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, James F. Keenan, and Ronaldo Zacharias, 17-33, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017.

[51] Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, "Concentric Circles of Christian Values in Human Relationships: Voice From Asia," *Colloquia Theologica* 20 (Opole, 2015): 1-12; reprinted in *Lúcás Chan Reader*, 239-250.

[52]Chan, "Concentric Circles," in *Lúcás Chan Reader*, 239.

formative quality," and "the following of conscience is not just an important practice and habit but is also a quality of the moral person's character."[53] Thus, he connects the prominent post-Vatican II moral theme of conscience with both virtue theory and Confucian thought.

Next, Chan identifies the virtues of fidelity and religion as proper to Christian families, where parents are obliged to provide a healthy environment for their children and pass on the faith to them. Chan also argues that solidarity and justice, values discussed at length in twentieth century Catholic Social Teaching, are promoted in the Bible as well, especially by Jesus in the Gospels and by the prophet Amos.[54] Lastly, he proposed a fourth circle prominent in Confucianism: an anthropocosmic worldview that understands humanity, heaven, and earth as inseparably interrelated. Thus, as many Western societies have neglected and harmed creation, this Confucian cosmology offers a reparative and relational way forward.[55] Ever attentive to the dissimilarities between Christian ethics and Confucianism, nevertheless, Chan clearly demonstrates how these concentric circles of values are promoted in both. Both systems of thought are concerned with the growth and becoming of the human person, not as an isolated individual, but as a social creature embedded in family and society.

4. An Amendment: Reading Scripture Christologically

With the exception of the Sixth Commandment, where "one wonders if Jesus can be an exemplar here,"[56] Chan presents Jesus as the primary exemplar of the virtues connected to each of the Commandments and Beatitudes. Christ is the paragon of virtue both in his teaching and his way of life. The further exemplars Chan offers could be understood as Paul presented himself to the Corinthians: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (I Cor 11:1). Whatever virtue is found in other exemplars is, in some way, their imitation of Christ, their participation in his goodness. This is one way to read the entire text of the bible: not only through the lens of virtue, but first through a Christological lens.

Based on Luke 24:27, I propose an additional step in Chan's method that insists upon a Christological reading and interpretation of the whole Bible. A Christological reading and a Pneumatological

---

[53]Chan, "Concentric Circles," in *Lúcás Chan Reader*, 243.
[54]Chan, "Concentric Circles," in *Lúcás Chan Reader*, 247.
[55]Chan, "Concentric Circles," in *Lúcás Chan Reader*, 249-50.
[56]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, 100.

empowering (which must be left for another time) make a biblical virtue ethic a thoroughly trinitarian enterprise. It also makes the whole of Scripture relevant to discipleship.

In the final chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus replies to the incredulity of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Lk 24:25b-26). In this conversation, Jesus turns to the Old Testament scriptures to explain the events of his passion and resurrection: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (v. 27). Thus, Jesus offers himself as a hermeneutic for reading the Old Testament.

Alois Stöger stressed the applicability of Jesus's words here to the entirety of the Old Testament. He states that Jesus gave these disciples and the Church the "main 'hermeneutical (interpretive) rule'…The key to the Holy Scriptures is the resurrected Christ."[57] It was not only explicit or commonly interpreted messianic prophecies that contained information about the Christ, but instead Christ is in some way present "in all the scriptures." Thus, to follow Christ as the model for reading and interpreting the Old Testament is to do so with him in mind.

In his incredibly detailed commentary, Darrell Bock further clarifies the expansiveness of Jesus's interpretation. Bock states that "'Moses and all the prophets' is a traditional phrase…. This figure (called zeugma) describes the discussion's scope: he went through the entire Scripture front to back… Both the former and the latter prophets are meant since the Hebrew Scriptures are in view."[58] There was something relevant to Jesus himself in every section of the Bible; "Moses and all the prophets" is a synecdoche for the whole Hebrew Bible.

Certainly, many early theologians read Christ in the Old Testament. Augustine, commenting on this passage in Luke said, "So he opened to them the Scriptures…in short, the whole of the Old Testament. Everything in those Scriptures speaks of Christ, but only to him who has ears."[59] For Augustine, faith was necessary for sight,

---

[57] Alois Stöger, *Das Evangelium Nach Lucas*, vol. 2, Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1966, 319, translation mine.

[58] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996, 1917.

[59] Augustine, Homily 2.1 on I John; quoted in *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture New Testament III, ed. Arthur A. Just, Jr., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003, 381.

and one who reads in the light of Christ will see how everything in the Old Testament speaks of Christ. A few Evangelical scholars[60] have recently sought to revive a similar Christo-centric reading of the Scriptures.

It is important to stress that Christological reading is a hermeneutic, or a pre-hermeneutic, which is to follow exegesis in Chan's formula, not to replace it. The meaning of the text must first be exegeted on its own terms, as it would have been understood to the author, editors, and "original" audience(s). Then, the Christological step follows as an introduction to Chan's virtue lens. That is, this step is not to replace critical exegesis with pre-modern interpretive methods, but a way to integrate traditional and contemporary Christian readings with other hermeneutical methods. In this way, Chan's hermeneutic of virtue theory translates the contemporary relevance of these ancient texts through the eternal Christ.

A Christological reading may be done in various ways. It could mean reading the Scriptures according to salvation history, situating Old Testament texts in the long-range story of redemption of which Christ is the climax and fulfilment. For example, Chan sees Boaz in the book of Ruth as a model of ancient Near Eastern hospitality which may be translated into hospitality in modern contexts. But the book may also be read in light of the fact that Ruth and Boaz are ancestors of King David and thus ancestors of Christ. Just as gentile Ruth was welcomed into the people of Israel and the lineage of David through her faithfulness to Naomi, devotion to Naomi's God, and marriage to Boaz, so are people from every language and nation welcomed into the family of God through devotion to God and betrothal to Christ the bridegroom. As Jesus said, "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt 12:50). Reading Ruth Christologically reinforces and deepens our understanding of its portrayal of virtue even as this reading also opens up other ethical dimensions of the text.

Reading Christologically could also mean reading according to the traditional four senses: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, the literal sense is "conveyed by the words of Scripture and

---

[60]Michael Williams, *How to Read the Bible Through the Jesus Lens: A Guide to Christ-Focused Reading of Scripture*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012; Craig A. Carter *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

discovered by exegesis."[61] The literal sense is that discovered in Chan's method before hermeneutical interpretation. The allegorical and anagogical senses are ways of reading Christ in the text, which can amplify the moral meaning. Of course, allegorical and anagogical interpretations have historically been abused, faulty, or speculative, so these senses must be carefully tied to the literal sense. Explicit citations in the New Testament of such readings of the Old Testament provide authoritative interpretations. Alternatively, reading Christ as the exemplar of a virtue portrayed in the text is something akin to an allegorical reading, without asserting that Christ's modelling a certain virtue is definitely an interpretive sense contained in the Old Testament text.

Recognizing that the whole of Scripture in some way speaks of Christ can deepen the ethical relevance of the texts. Seeing Christ as exemplar expands our understanding of a text by showing first how that virtue was expressed in the Old Testament text, and second, how Christ, the paragon of virtue, perfectly lived it. Alternatively, understanding the text as part of salvation history connects it with the fuller story of God's redemption in Jesus Christ and calls readers to live virtuously in light of that fact. Thus, following the work of exegesis, reflecting on the passage in light of Christ will only expand the opportunities of applying a hermeneutic of virtue theory in Chan's next step.

5. Analysis: Hermeneutic of Virtue for a Biblical Ethic as Discipleship

Unlike his predecessors in Catholic biblical ethics, Lúcás Chan rarely uses the term or makes explicit reference to the concept of discipleship. Nevertheless, I argue that discipleship is at the heart of his project. In the prologue of *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes* Chan writes, "by perceiving the overall Sermon [on the Mount] as a kingdom ethics that describes right relationship with God and with others, one may argue that the social dimensions of the Beatitudes' ethical implications is implied in the broader meaning of discipleship."[62] Ethical living is that consistent with the values of the Kingdom of God and is arrived at by discipleship, by "right relationship with God and others."

In *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century*, most references to discipleship are made in the analyses of other scholarly works. Chan positively

---

[61]*Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 2nd ed., Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000, 116.

[62]Chan, *Ten Commandments*, xxii.

highlights the work of Anglican New Testament scholar Richard Burridge, who stresses the actions of Jesus as much as Christ's ethical teaching. He offers a Christological hermeneutic for the New Testament which urges imitation of Christ as the key to ethical living. As Chan summarizes, "The ethics of discipleship emphasized by Mark means following Jesus wholeheartedly, forming an open and inclusive community, and imitating Jesus to be friend of sinners."[63] Discipleship is following and imitating Jesus with one's whole being and in obedience to the dual love command.

In a 2011 article[64] Chan delivered his most direct treatment of discipleship. Here, he argued that "the Christian *telos* is one's conformity with Christ."[65] This is growing in virtue, the moral dimension of sanctification. "Moreover, Jesus' call to discipleship finds similarities with the yield of virtue."[66] To heed the call and follow Christ as a disciple is likewise to develop virtue in imitation of him, the paradigm of true humanity. Furthermore, "Christians are called to be followers of Christ and live a moral life in this world that embodies the kingdom of God and eternal union with God."[67] Again, a Christian virtue ethic is focused on ends—human purpose and eschatological accomplishment. Lastly, from the opposite perspective, "Christian acquisition of virtues, in contrast, is aimed at following Christ (discipleship), bringing about the kingdom of God, and achieving union with God."[68] In a reciprocal way, following Christ means acquiring virtue, but acquiring virtue also enables discipleship and union with God.

As these references indicate, a disciple is essentially one who follows and imitates Christ, who is both saviour and example. The German term "Nachfolger" makes this relationship to Christ more apparent, but both it and the English "disciple" translate the Greek *mathētēs*, which means "learner." Interestingly, the term is only used in the Bible in the Gospels and Acts. In Matthew's Gospel, in particular, it refers to "the life of an ordinary follower of Jesus."[69] In

---

[63]Chan, *Biblical Ethics*, 57-58.

[64]Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, "Bridging Christian and Confucian Ethics: Is the Bridge Adequately Catholic and Asian?" *Asian Christian Review* 5, 1 (Summer 2011) 49-73; reprinted in Chan, *Lúcás Chan Reader*, 188-218.

[65]Chan, "Christian and Confucian Ethics," 194.

[66]Chan, "Christian and Confucian Ethics," 194.

[67]Chan, "Christian and Confucian Ethics," 203.

[68]Chan, "Christian and Confucian Ethics," 210.

[69]J. Andrew Overman, "Disciple," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 168-69.

Judaism, the term referred to students of a rabbi or anyone who follows a teaching master or even a doctrine, as with the Pharisees' dedication to Moses. In Christianity, "the disciples par excellence are those who attach themselves to Jesus and try hard to conform their lives to his."[70]

The disciple is one who learns from Christ's teachings and actions and imitates Christ by following his exemplary virtue. Thus, Chan's method for biblical ethics is an exercise in discipleship, of learning from Christ in order to imitate him. Exegeting the Gospels with a hermeneutic of virtue enables readers to acquire the virtues in their own lives through imitation of Christ. Amending Chan's method with a layer of Christological hermeneutic, then, permits the ethical study of the Old Testament to likewise be a process of discipleship, for the Old Testament, too, reveals something about Christ's teaching and nature.

6. Directions for Further Study

As I stated in section III, there remains work to be done in drawing out and demonstrating a virtue ethic already present in the Bible rather than apply virtue theory as an extrinsic framework. Chan's hermeneutical method inspires further directions which may both strengthen his proposal and carry it forward. These directions include more study of the Old Testament and its varied genres, beginning with contemporary questions rather than biblical exegesis, and working toward consensus on the nature of biblical authority.

All of Chan's predecessors in Catholic biblical ethics focused on the New Testament, but Chan's method is certainly applicable to the whole Bible, as is demonstrated in his own several readings of the book of Ruth and, of course, the Ten Commandments. In this way, Chan both models Old Testament ethical analysis through virtue in the Law and narratives and invites further applications to other Old Testament genres and texts.[71] A preliminary Christological hermeneutic further enables an exemplarist reading of the Old Testament. Chan's first article[72] analyzed hospitality as a post-exilic virtue for Israelite community, exemplified in the character of Boaz,

---

[70]Jean Radermakers, "Disciple," in *Dictionaire Encyclopedique de la Bible*, 3rd rev. ed., Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2002, 365, translation mine.

[71]See, for example, Michael Benjamin Cover, "Model Hospitality: Abraham, Boaz, and Exemplarist Ethics," in *Bridging Scripture and Moral Theology: Essays in Dialogue with Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, S.J.*, ed. Michael B. Cover, John Thiede, S.J., and Joshua Ezra Burns, 201-213 (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

[72]Chan, "Model of Hospitality."

in order ultimately to examine modern crises of migration. Thus, the process of observing context, performing exegesis, and applying a virtue hermeneutic proves fruitful for directing ethical application of the various Old Testament texts to the present.

Years later, Chan reworked this article for publication in *Asian Horizons*.[73] In this version, Chan began with a discussion of the circumstances and challenges of migration in the twenty-first century. In this way, he modelled a third direction for the application of his method—approaching the scriptures in order to address a contemporary issue. This is not a brief or shallow consultation with the scriptures, however, nor an unexplained proof texting. It is a thorough exegesis and interpretation that begins by investigating "the Hebrew Bible as a Source for Christian Understanding of Hospitality,"[74] and then turns to the text of Ruth to draw conclusions for a virtuous response to migration. This approach could be valuable to Liberation theology, which has long valued the communal reading of the Scriptures and turned to the Bible for authoritative calls for justice. Chan offers Liberation theologians an even deeper method for engaging the scriptures and presenting their calls for justice to the Christian community and the broader world.

Finally, a strong exegesis of the text's "original" meaning cannot itself indicate how the text is to be applied or guide behaviour in the present. For this reason, even biblical ethicists who adopt Chan's virtue hermeneutic must work toward consensus on the precise nature of biblical authority. Do ancient narratives merely inspire certain virtuous behaviour, or can they prescribe it? What of the Pentateuchal Law still applies today (e.g., the Decalogue), what needs adaptation, and what has been abrogated under the New Covenant? Lisa Sowle Cahill outlines four epistemological problems for the issue of Biblical authority: "whether the message of the Bible is unitary or fragmented; whether the biblical message about ethics is unique; whether the Bible can ground moral rules and offer concrete guidance; and whether the moral message of the Bible has sense and significance outside of Christianity."[75] Cahill notes that Scripture cannot be authoritative on its own; it can only be authoritative in and for a community who ascribe or recognize authority in it. She proposes seeing the authority of Scripture in its capacity to form

---

[73]Chan, "Discourse on Migration," reprinted in *Lúcás Chan Reader*.

[74]Chan, "Discourse on Migration," reprinted in *Lúcás Chan Reader*, 98.

[75] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Christian Character, Biblical Community, and Human Values," in *Character & Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. William P. Brown, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002, 8.

community and character. "Specific instruction that [the Bible] does provide are of continuing relevance only in proportion to the similarity between our situation and their original one."[76] For Cahill, the Bible is not a timeless rulebook which people today must apply unquestioningly to their current circumstances but is instead an authoritative source that shapes persons and communities in light of the virtuous character portrayed in the text which must be re-contextualized by contemporary faith communities.

7. Conclusion

As biblical scholars and Christian ethicists continue to work toward a thoroughly biblical ethic, Lúcás Chan has presented and modelled a method which pays due attention to the tools, resources, and frameworks of both fields. Hopefully, more scholars will take up Chan's challenge to develop dual competency in both fields and thus restore the Scriptures to their rich and authoritative place in Catholic ethics. Though further study is needed on the nature of this authority, approaching Scripture with contemporary questions, application to other Old Testament genres, and investigations of the Bible's own portrayal of virtue, Chan's work has charted the course for these explorations. By applying a Christological pre-hermeneutic following the work of exegesis and before the application of a virtue hermeneutic, study of biblical ethics becomes more comprehensively an exercise in discipleship, in knowing, following, and imitating the Christ who reveals himself in the entirely of Scripture. Lúcás Chan's proposal for a biblical ethic through the lens of virtue employs the best methods of biblical studies and Christian ethics to apply the Scriptures to the life of the follower of Christ and the Christian community today.

[76]Cahill, "Christian Character," 10. See also Maureen Junker-Kenny, "The Bible as a Source of Theological Ethics," in *Approaches to Theological Ethics: Sources, Traditions, Visions*, New York: T&T Clark, 2019.