M. Daniel Carroll and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds. *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2007. Robert L. Brawley, ed. *Character Ethics and the New Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2007.

Since 1996, the Society of Biblical Literature's annual meeting has included sessions on Character Ethics and Biblical Interpretation. Each volume under review comprises 16 papers from these sessions. Focusing on "character ethics," they concern themselves with the way(s) Scripture may help form individuals and communities as moral agents, or may nurture certain virtues. All 28 authors represented are Christian, and most are Protestant biblical scholars. Two who fall within these categories are also Mennonites: Theodore Hiebert and Willard Swartley. Women and scholars from beyond North America are well represented.

These anthologies, comprising some 500 pages of rather fine print, make for challenging and sometimes exhilarating reading. That they were first presented at joint annual meetings of two "learned societies," the SBL and the American Academy of Religion, portends more challenge than exhilaration for readers unfamiliar with the argot of those societies. Occasionally, the argot runs away with itself. In the NT volume, Robert Brawley's four-page flight across an intellectual landscape extending from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Levinas, Ricoeur, and Charles Taylor, in an essay on Galatians, leaves one breathless. However, many chapters in both volumes do cross boundaries in an instructive way – boundaries between biblical studies and ethics, but also between the academic guilds and normal folk seriously interested in the Bible and ethics.

All the essays relate themselves to the subtitle: "Moral Dimensions of Scripture." Almost all assume Scripture as at least a moral resource, and provide expositions of specific texts drawing on and exemplifying that assumption. Jens Herger, writing on Titus 3:3-9, and Sylvia Keesmaat on Romans 12–13 serve as prime examples, each performing a powerful, constructive exegesis of texts typically read otherwise and as counter to both Jesus and enlightened Western sensibilities.

On the OT side, the sky is cloudier. Cheryl B. Anderson, writing on

the laws, reminds us of those marginalized therein, both women and non-Israelites. The moral dimension of Scripture consists, then, in our necessary criticism of just that dimension. J.J.M. Roberts seeks to disabuse us of appealing to Isaiah 2:2-4 for peace purposes, pointing out its imperialist background. Roberts is entirely correct as regards background, so far as I know – a background that makes much of the NT intelligible. Oddly, he concludes that we now "have the power and responsibility to govern according to God's will" (127-28). By "we" he means "modern Christians in Europe and North America" (127). Writing on Micah 4 and 6, the former parallel to Isaiah 2, and writing from experience quite different from Roberts's, M. Daniel Carroll speaks modestly and clearly about moral formation. The differences between Roberts and Carroll include technical matters of history and exegesis, but also much more.

The "much more" comes to light also in the NT essays, and in a poignant way. Jens Herzer relates his reading of Titus 3 directly to Germany's reunification and a former Stasi (East German State Security) informer as a member of his family. In the course of a response, Jinesong Woo describes his incarceration in South Korea. Their exchange, which is not at all about "I had it worse than you," has the virtue of returning to the text, to Scripture, with questions about justice/justification, forgiveness, reconciliation, and also about directly or indirectly relating the Bible to these existential questions.

Obviously, no common interpretive approach governs the 32 chapters in these volumes. Some perform an almost purely historical-critical operation, while others draw biblical texts into a variety of contemporary intellectual or social matrices; some do both. Kathleen M. O'Connor on Jeremiah, and Jacqueline Lapsley on Ezekiel, relate their studies to the disaster that the Judean community experienced: Judah's and Jerusalem's utter destruction. By somewhat different means and to somewhat different ends, their elegant essays reach a congruent conclusion: the disaster resists understanding. In one of the most powerful and provocative sentences in either book, Lapsley writes, "Making sense of their experience is specifically disallowed" (96). The very idea that moral formation may include a proscription on making sense of a defining experience seems outrageous. Perhaps only those who

have genuinely suffered could comprehend the idea.

Along with suffering, peacemaking has a remarkably high profile in these books, even beyond contributions by Willard Swartley and Glen Stassen. Theology, on the other hand, seldom figures expressly, though several essays address matters related to atonement and salvation. L. Ann Jervis's comments on Philippians 3 and suffering "in Christ" are theologically rich. Systematic or dogmatic theological categories do appear in Swartley's chapter, by way of his quoting James Fodor and "the Trinitarian model of *perichoresis*" (233). And Theodore Hiebert, writing on creation (the subject appears prominently in the OT volume) and against *Heilsgeschichte*, concludes that "[t]he old language of 'transcendence' and "immanence,' of 'natural revelation' and 'special revelation' will no longer work" (9). Hiebert relies entirely on the Bible for this judgment.

Allen Verhey, professor of Christian ethics at Duke, offers one of the more exhilarating chapters. Verhey, whose work has fruitfully transgressed the boundaries between biblical scholarship and ethics, here treats the Beatitudes through affirming Scripture as scripted and as script. As scripted, Scripture requires rigorous attention to what its authors did "with the words they had available to them." As script, Scripture must be performed "again and again in the rhetoric and practices of the churches, in their theology and in their worship, in their ethics and in their politics" (19, in the NT volume). In this Verhey echoes Nicholas Lash, whom he credits, but the echo is worth hearing. And he foreshadows the contribution by Elna Mouton, who points to the disorienting and reorienting, or reforming, function of Scripture in worship or liturgy. Perhaps, as regards much contemporary worship, this function has a counterfactual or eschatological character.

A brief review cannot hope to list, much less respond to, all these diverse essays. At least, I cannot hope to do so. But I can and do commend these two volumes, whose mediocre or occasionally bewildering parts set the best parts in bolder relief. Among the best and the bewildering is J. Clifton Black's chapter on Mark's gospel. Black waxes eloquent on the cross as "*the* epistemological crisis" and on suffering as "*epistemic*" (13-14). In this, Jesus is one with us and at our front. But is the cross principally about how we should or should not understand our or others' suffering? Does that begin to exhaust what Mark wants us to understand about Jesus? But these books

are all about character ethics, which defines their limitation. One breathes easier when they occasionally, but clearly, stress God's initiative.

Ben C. Ollenburger, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN