

The book cover features a background of abstract, wavy brushstrokes in shades of teal, blue, and yellow. The text is overlaid on this background.

foreword by Marlena Graves

Dennis R. Edwards

humility illuminated

*the biblical path back to
christian character*



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There is some debate concerning the extent to which the Old Testament treats humility as a virtue focused on human interactions.⁵ It is clearer, however, that the Old Testament offers humility as a fundamental basis for relating to God. Submissiveness to God's person and God's plans characterizes the way humble people think and act. Attitudes and behaviors that deny God's character oppose humility. Rejecting God's holiness, power, goodness—or any other divine attribute—betrays a lack of humility. Scripture abounds with examples of individuals, groups, and nations who rejected God in some way or another, failing to embrace humility. The people of Israel are no exception.

Israel struggled to practice humility in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. With the events recorded in Numbers 11–12, we begin to trace the trajectory of biblical humility.

HUMBLE MOSES

As if carried on eagles' wings, the people of Israel were propelled to freedom from their enslavement in Egypt (Ex 19:4). Through direct action—"with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment" (Ex 6:6)—YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, delivered the people of Israel, proving to be more powerful than Egypt's Pharaoh, army, and deities. But even after miraculous deliverance, Israel's journey through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land proved long and arduous. Fatigue, fear, doubt, and discouragement were constant companions to the weary travelers, and their

⁵See the response of John P. Dickson and Brian S. Rosner, "Humility as a Social Virtue in the Hebrew Bible?" *Vetus Testamentum* 54, no. 4 (2004): 459-79, to Stephen B. Dawes, "Humility: Whence This Strange Notion?" *Expository Times* 103 (1991): 72-75, and Dawes, "'Ānāwā in Translation and Tradition," *Vetus Testamentum* 41, no. 1 (January 1991): 38-48. These authors, with differing perspectives, join in opposition to the thesis of Wengst, *Humility*. The apostle Paul made humility a Christian virtue, but there is less certainty that humility expressed in interpersonal terms was considered a virtue in early Judaism.

mettle was repeatedly tested. Consequently, on several occasions, members of God's "holy nation" (Ex 19:6) became overwhelmed by their circumstances.

With their faith frequently fading, the children of Israel complained against God and God's appointed leader, Moses. The complaints of the people reveal a basic mistrust of God, or at least of God's goodness. During those times of discontent, Israel's posture toward God was adversarial, not humble. Humility, the Scriptures show, involves a submissive attitude toward God.

Numbers 11–12 records particular episodes of discontent among the people of Israel. The contrast between the complainers' behavior and that of Moses provides insights into aspects of humility. Some of the sojourners, tired of the mysterious manna that appeared six days per week (with a double portion before Sabbath), yearned for Egypt's dietary delights (Num 11:4-6). Apparently, hunger blunted memories of slavery. Craving Egypt, however, was tantamount to rejecting YHWH. The issue is not that people expressed their discomfort. Discomfort, disappointment, and pain are often expressed in the laments of Scripture. Those laments serve as examples for us of expressing the emotional pain of loss while maintaining a humble posture before God. God hears when people cry out. The problem is not lamenting life's circumstances. The problem is rejecting God. People in Numbers 11 viewed God as insufficient, or perhaps even worse, as hostile toward them. Members of the nation blamed God and looked back to their oppressors rather than embracing a posture of submission.

In response to the people's cries for meat, God sent bevies of quail—so much quail, in fact, that the complainers got sick of it (Num 11:18-20). Some Israelites died while gorging on quail (Num 11:33-34). Consequently, the location was given the name "Graves of Craving." Rejecting God demonstrates lack of humility. Israel's

pinning for imagined better days under Egyptian enslavement demonstrated hubris because the complainers acted as if they knew more than God knows or cared more than God cares. Despite the deaths due to arrogance, complaints continued.

Following this account, Numbers 12 opens with Miriam and Aaron, the siblings of Moses, raising a grievance against their brother. It's possible that xenophobia is lurking behind Miriam and Aaron's agitation over Moses marrying a Cushite woman.⁶ The new wife of Moses is dark-skinned and from outside the Israelite people.⁷ We are not given any specifics about Moses' new wife that were problematic for Miriam and Aaron, but we are privy to their complaint, in which they deny God's wisdom. They suggest that God plays favorites, saying, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the Lord hears it (Num 12:2).

It does not take long to see that Miriam and Aaron had crossed a line. God moves decisively to clarify the unique role that Moses had been given (Num 12:4-16). God appears to the three siblings in a cloudy pillar and calls Aaron and Miriam front and center.⁸ Ordinary prophets, God says, get divine revelations through visions and dreams, or perhaps through obscure sayings. Yet God speaks with Moses literally "mouth-to-mouth." In light of the special relationship Moses had with YHWH, Aaron and Miriam should have thought more soberly before complaining against Moses out of fear of provoking God's anger. But now that anger is kindled.

⁶Cushite indicates Nubian or Ethiopian. Targum Onkelos has "beautiful" in place of "Cushite." The *Jewish Study Bible* asserts that dark-skinned women were considered beautiful. See Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, Michael Fishbane, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). That assessment of Africans as beautiful eventually changes as European-based Christianity develops a negative view of dark skin. See Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁷Most scholars agree that the unnamed Cushite wife is not Zipporah, who married Moses years earlier before the exodus from Egypt (Ex 2:21).

⁸For God's presence in the pillar of cloud, see Ex 13:21, 22; 14:19; 33:9, 10.

God inflicts Miriam with a disease that makes her skin turn white as snow.⁹ Miriam's punishment is ironic; her whiteness provides a stark contrast to the skin of Moses' new wife. If Miriam has a problem with black skin, perhaps her stark white skin will teach her a lesson about judging based on skin color. Aaron beseeches Moses for mercy, who in turn beseeches God for mercy. Moses, who has been silent thus far, intercedes for his sister with a brief prayer that she be healed. Miriam is spared but must be banished from the camp for seven days. Her punishment is likened to being spit on the face by her father, an act meant to humiliate.¹⁰

The contrast between Moses and the complainers in Numbers 11–12 helps to clarify aspects of humility. A parenthetical observation appears in Numbers 12:3: “Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.” This indicates that humility is one subject found within the curriculum of Israel's wilderness academy. This terse parenthetical description of Moses points to the starting point of humility's trajectory: biblical humility begins as submission to God.

HUMILITY IS YIELDING TO GOD

In Numbers 11, Moses speaks a few times with people (implied in Num 11:18–20 but directly in Num 11:24, 29), but mostly with God. He prays to abate the fire of God (Num 11:2). Moses unburdens his weary soul in conversation with God (Num 11:11–15) and expresses his incredulity over God's plan to provide meat for over six hundred thousand people (Num 11:21–22). Similarly, in the

⁹Speculation abounds as to why Miriam is visibly punished and Aaron is not. Numbers 12:11 might suggest he expects to be punished. Because in Num 12:1 Miriam is mentioned first and the verb “spoke against” (*tedabber*) is feminine and singular, scholars suggest that Miriam instigated the accusations. Aaron may have been persuaded to make an evil choice, as appears to have been the case with the golden calf incident (Ex 32:1–2).

¹⁰Cf. Deut 25:9. Spitting in the face is well-known as a sign of shame in the ancient Near East, but there is no clear precedent in the Old Testament that links the shame of being spat on with banishment (see Berlin, *Jewish Study Bible*, 309).

incident with Miriam and Aaron recorded in Numbers 12:1-16, the voice of Moses is evident only in his brief prayer of intercession for Miriam (Num 12:13). The humility of Moses (Num 12:3) is primarily about his relationship with God and not as much about his posture toward others.

However, commentators typically interpret the representation of Moses as “humble” or “lowly” (‘*anaw*) as primarily describing his gentleness or meekness in relationship with others.¹¹ Stephen Dawes goes as far as to assert that Numbers 12:3 is a counter to an “accusation of arrogance on Moses’s part made in v. 2.”¹² Yet Miriam and Aaron never actually accuse Moses of arrogance—at least not that we can see explicitly. We only get details of their complaint directed toward God. The Numbers 12 context pictures Miriam and Aaron as complaining about Moses’ role as God’s spokesperson. As John Dickson and Brian Rosner point out, “The thing being questioned by Aaron and Miriam is Moses’ *status* not his ego.”¹³ The lowliness of Moses describes his connection to God more than his interpersonal connection with his siblings or with the rest of the people of Israel.¹⁴ The Hebrew word ‘*anaw* carries a range of meanings (i.e., “poor,” “afflicted,” “humiliated,” “lowly”), as does the Septuagint’s *praus*, which is often translated as “meek” or “gentle.” Both words at times describe the relatively lowly social position of some people when compared to others.¹⁵ However, in Numbers 12:3 ‘*anaw* refers to Moses’ unique relationship to God.

¹¹E.g., Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 224; Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary 5 (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 136. The Septuagint’s word used to describe Moses, *praus*, is how Jesus describes himself in Mt 11:29, indicating his submission to the Father (see chap. 2).

¹²Dawes, “Humility,” 72.

¹³Dickson and Rosner, “Humility as a Social Virtue,” 472 (emphasis original).

¹⁴See Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 111. Wenham notes that humility in the Old Testament denotes “dependence on God.”

¹⁵E.g., Is 11:4 has ‘*anaw* in parallel with *dallim* (“weak,” “lowly”); LXX uses a form of *tapeinos* for both words. See Job 24:4, where ‘*anaw* (LXX: *praus*) refers to vulnerable people.

God's response to Miriam and Aaron (Num 12:6-8) confirms that Moses' humility corresponds to his submission to God. God explains that Moses has rare access to God's presence. Other prophets receive God's messages mediated through visions or dreams, but with Moses God speaks "mouth-to-mouth." The correlation of humility and intimacy with God is clear. Moses being "very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num 12:3) means that he enjoyed greater intimacy with God than others did. Numbers 11-12, along with other places in the Pentateuch, show that Moses used his special relationship with God to lead Israel through the wilderness and to intercede for them in prayer.¹⁶

Even though humility starts as submission to God, it does not signify a relationship with God in isolation from others. Rather, our peacemaking actions and attitudes directed toward others flow out of our intimacy with God. As we follow this trajectory, we find we need another key biblical practice: repentance.

HUMILITY AND REPENTANCE

Repentance requires humility, which entails a submissive posture before God. Repentance is the recognition of human frailty evident in our inability to be and do all that we should, regardless of the amount of physical and emotional striving. Penitent people acknowledge their need to yield to God by renouncing sin and orienting their life around God's person and words.

Some of the places in Scripture that demonstrate the role of humility in repentance are 2 Chronicles 7:14, Zephaniah 2:3, and James 1:21. The first passage, 2 Chronicles 7:14, is part of God's invitation to ancient Israel (2 Chron 7:12-21) that comes in response to King Solomon's prayer of dedication before the altar of

¹⁶Another moment of Moses' intercession is Num 14:13-19, which takes place during the pivotal incident at Kadesh when the people disregarded Joshua and Caleb's faithful report from their reconnaissance mission into Canaan.

the new temple (2 Chron 6:14-42): “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chron 7:14). Humility is presented as praying, seeking God’s face, and turning from wickedness. The Hebrew word translated “humble themselves” here describes submission before God and others (e.g., Lev 26:41; 1 Kings 21:29; 2 Chron 12:6, 7, 12; 30:11).¹⁷ The connection between humility, repentance, and submission to God becomes even clearer a few verses later: “As for you, if you walk before me, as your father David walked, doing according to all that I have commanded you and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, then I will establish your royal throne, as I made covenant with your father David saying, ‘You shall never lack a successor to rule over Israel’” (2 Chron 7:17-18). Obedience to God’s commands, evidence of repentance, is what it means for the people to humble themselves (2 Chron 7:14).

Furthermore, Solomon and the people are called to prayer, which includes both repentance and intercession. Prayer demands honesty with God. Honesty in prayer increases intimacy with God, and that intimacy further nourishes humility, as we saw with Moses. Ultimately the “not my will but yours be done” prayer of Jesus (Lk 22:42) epitomizes humility’s foundation of being yielded to God.

Zephaniah 2:1-3 is another place in the Old Testament that demonstrates how humility is first of all about submitting to God.¹⁸

Gather together, gather,
O shameless nation,
before you are driven away

¹⁷Many occurrences of *kn'* in the niphil conjugation are in 2 Chronicles.

¹⁸Dickson and Rosner, “Humility as a Social Virtue,” 463-64.

like the drifting chaff,
before there comes upon you
the fierce anger of the LORD,
before there comes upon you
the day of the LORD's wrath.
Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
who do his commands;
seek righteousness, seek humility;
perhaps you may be hidden
on the day of the LORD's wrath.

At first glance the passage might appear to admonish those who have been marginalized as the “impoverished” or “poor” (*anawim*) of the land, but closer scrutiny shows that the humble are those who seek the Lord and do his commands.¹⁹ Since the same few biblical words can describe all manner of lowliness—for example, spatial, financial, emotional, psychological, and relational—there is frequently overlap. Humility, therefore, means recognizing that the materially poor and powerless—the lowly in the world's eyes—exemplify the posture we ought to have in God's presence.

In the New Testament, James 1:21 connects repentance and humility as preparation for receiving biblical teaching: “Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” Meekness here, as with Moses in Numbers 12:3, indicates receptivity to God's word rather than describing interpersonal dynamics. In James 1:21, repentance is turning away from wickedness in order to receive godly teaching, and in Zephaniah 2:3, as well as 2 Chronicles 7:14, repentance can

¹⁹Julia M. O'Brien, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 114.

lead to restoration and not destruction. All three passages indicate that repentance and humility are intertwined.

HUMILITY AND FEAR OF THE LORD

“The fear of the LORD” is a frequent Old Testament expression to describe devotion to God.²⁰ Humility as a posture of submission to God is reinforced in its connection to the fear of the Lord.²¹ One stellar example is Proverbs 15:31-33:

The ear that heeds wholesome admonition
will lodge among the wise.
Those who ignore instruction despise themselves,
but those who heed admonition gain understanding.
The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom,
and humility goes before honor.

The synonymous parallelism in Proverbs 15:33 connects the fear of the Lord to humility. The earlier verses help to explain what is meant by both terms. Wisdom (Prov 15:31) and understanding (Prov 15:32) are found within those who possess a willingness to heed admonition (Prov 15:31) and not ignore instruction (Prov 15:32). The humble are those who are open to learning (Prov 15:33), and such instruction is correlative to the fear of the Lord.²² The fear of the Lord is love and devotion directed toward God. Other people will benefit from that love

²⁰The expression occurs dozens of times, ranging from Wisdom literature (e.g., Job 28:28; Prov 1:7, 29; 2:5; several more times in Proverbs), including Psalms (e.g., Ps 19:9; 34:11; 111:10), to prophetic literature (e.g., Is 11:2, 3; 33:6). The fear of the Lord is also a popular notion in Sirach (e.g., Sir 1:11, 12, 18; many other places). The term carries into the New Testament (e.g., Acts 9:31; 2 Cor 5:11). “Fear of God” is typically synonymous with “fear of the Lord” (e.g., Ps 36:1; Lk 18:4).

²¹See Dawes, “*Ānāwā* in Translation and Tradition,” 44; Dickson and Rosner, “Humility as a Social Virtue,” 468-70. Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation with Notes*, Anchor Bible 39 (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 159-60.

²²See Dickson and Rosner, “Humility as a Social Virtue,” 465; Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 8.

and devotion, but God is the chief focus. Such is the case with humility, as those who submit to God will bless others, but God is the ultimate object of devotion. Honor (Prov 15:33) comes from God rather than people (see Prov 18:12), which reinforces the idea that humility is fundamentally an attitude toward God.²³

Another example is Proverbs 22:4:

The reward for humility and fear of the LORD
is riches and honor and life.

Scholars note the difficult syntactical relationship between humility and fear of the Lord. The terms are in apposition and could be rendered “humble fear of the LORD” or simply as synonyms (i.e., “humility, which is fear of the LORD”).²⁴ The point, however, is that those who demonstrate deference to God are rewarded by God.

Humility is often viewed primarily as an ethical virtue that focuses on our willingness to defer to others. But it is more than that. A fuller picture of biblical humility develops when it is understood as primarily a posture of submission to God. The episodes in Numbers 11–12 demonstrate that mistrust of God and even rejection of God fuels criticism of God’s methods. Humility, as shown with Moses, is the opposite of mistrust and encompasses complete devotion to God. The fear of the Lord, as seen in Proverbs, for example, can be equivalent to humility, with both describing devotion to God.

Numerous passages in the Old Testament connect humility to godly devotion, but one of the most well-known to Bible readers is Micah 6:8.

²³Waltke, *Proverbs*, 8.

²⁴See Dickson and Rosner, “Humility as a Social Virtue,” 466.

HUMILITY AND WALKING WITH GOD

Yielding to God is where humility starts. Biblical writers—prophets, poets, and apostles—summon humanity to humility and celebrate those who recognize their dependence on God. Micah 6:8 contains what some have considered a summary of all God’s commands to the Jewish people in the Old Testament.²⁵

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

In the second strophe of Micah 6:8, Micah calls Israel to three duties that the nation should already know and be embracing: (1) To do justice (*mishpat*), which is making right judgments according to God’s instruction, (2) to love kindness (*hesed*), which is to embrace God’s love, grace, and kindness, and (3) walk with God according to “humility” or “modesty” (*tsenea*).

The term for humility here is rare in the Bible (only other occurrence is Prov 11:2), and its meaning is not clear. Many scholars understand the last line of the verse to mean something like walking wisely, or circumspectly, with God.²⁶ James Luther Mays concludes that the humility urged here in Micah 6:8 “lies not in going one’s own way presumptuously, but in attending the will and way of God.”²⁷ Matthew 23:23 may allude to Micah 6:8 in that Jesus declares that the “weightier matters of the law” consist of “justice and mercy and faith [or faithfulness],” a triad similar to Micah’s, where faithfulness equates to walking humbly with God. Submission to God has practical implications for our treatment of others since justice and mercy coincide with walking humbly with God.

²⁵See Berlin, *Jewish Study Bible*, 1215.

²⁶E.g., Berlin, *Jewish Study Bible*, 1215; James Luther Mays, *Micah: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 142.

²⁷Mays, *Micah*, 142.

YIELDING IN PRACTICE

Competition demands winners and losers. Consequently, division and tension are endemic within competitive societies such as that in the United States. As Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung observes, “Our culture is especially competitive. Because so many of those competitions are public, it is perilously easy to feel like we can’t be good unless we’re better than another, as judged and confirmed by an audience.”²⁸ We are compelled to compare ourselves to friends, neighbors, and even strangers. Instagram makes us envious as influencers provoke our fear of missing out so that we wonder why our lives are not better. There may even be a tendency to use the social media posts of others as an indication of our relationship to God. If, for example, our network of friends includes Christian believers whose lives appear to be going well, we may attempt to mimic their behaviors. But of course, we can only copy what they allow us to see.

In this competitive environment, we take our guidance from those who fit the popular image of success, and we prefer “winners” in this competitive world. Even though Christians know humility is a biblical value, we are—like most people—drawn to those who project worldly success. But we learn humility from those who are truly submitted to God’s service, and many of these people are often among the least impressive according to society’s standards.

During most of my years at Cornell I attended a predominantly African American church that attracted many Black students. Like many students, I was fairly oblivious to the lives of most of the older attendees, but I appreciated their Sunday-morning enthusiasm and their joy whenever we students showed up.

One evening I was on campus in one of the student unions and happened to see a custodian buffing the floors. It jarred me a bit

²⁸Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Vainglory: The Forgotten Vice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 120.

when I noticed he was one of the most vocal deacons at my church, one who was always bolstering the preacher with “amen,” “yes,” and “help yourself, McClain.” (The pastor was Rev. R. D. McClain, and to this day my wife and I fondly recall those “help yourself, McClain” admonitions.) I said hello to the deacon, and my mind went to my own parents, who labored in difficult jobs with the hope that my siblings and I would fare better in this society than they did.

Years later, when I was a pastor in Washington, DC, I often heard White people say, “No one is from DC.” They never paid attention to the African Americans—the majority of the city’s population—who were consistently in the background serving as cooks, elevator operators, custodians, and other service workers whose families had long lived in DC. I will never endorse the injustices that African Americans and immigrants faced—and continue to face—but I will always celebrate their faith and fortitude. Many, such as the deacon who worked as a custodian, are models of the Jesus way of life because they served God as best they could in an oppressive, competitive society. They have much to teach us all about humility.

Humility, according to the Scriptures, is not grounded in how well we compete in the world’s game of life. As we observe from both the Old and New Testaments, humility begins with deference to God. The fear of the Lord and continual communion—walking—with God, in contrast to arrogant defiance of God, brings divine favor. Humility will affect our relationships with others, but it is fundamentally rooted in devotion to God. I describe humility as having a trajectory because it begins with submission to God (by individuals as well as groups), then advances outward to govern interactions between people. Those interactions, at the core, are meant to engender peace. Humility is a unifier—at least to the extent that members of the group recognize

it as starting with submission to God. When members of Christian community submit to God, they are better able to submit to each other (Eph 5:21).

Since the Lord Jesus Christ is the ultimate practitioner of humility, the New Testament's portrayal of Jesus, particularly in the Gospels and Pauline letters, will guide our understanding of this often-misunderstood characteristic of Christian life.

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