Biblical Theological Investigations into the Righteousness of God

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Edited by

Francois P. Viljoen and Albert J. Coetsee

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RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION

Scripture reveals that God has various attributes. One of the attributes that Scripture frequently refers to, either explicitly or implicitly, is God's righteousness. As one of the primary attributes of God, God's righteousness enjoys a lot of scholarly attention in systematic theologies. Fewer studies, however, are devoted to investigating God's righteousness from a biblical theological perspective. This is exactly what this publication aims to do: it provides a number of biblical theological investigations into the attribute of God's righteousness by investigating specific verses, chapters and corpora from Scripture and indicating how these portray God's righteousness as part of the developing, unfolding and progressive story line of the text. This includes research of topics that have not been adequately explored in the past.

All the chapters contained in this publication were presented as papers of the research unit *Biblical Theological Investigations into the Attributes of God* at the annual conference of the *European Association of Biblical Studies* (EABS), 4–7 July 2022 in Toulouse, France, after which it was processed by the contributors into chapters.

No empirical research was conducted, and the various chapters do not pose ethical risks. The chapters contained in this volume are written by Old and New Testament scholars, and the target audience is fellow Old and New Testament scholars and scholars interested in God's attributes. All chapters are original investigations with original results. No part of the volume has been published elsewhere before.

The manuscript was subjected to rigorous two-step peer review prior to publication, with the identities of the reviewers not revealed to the author(s). The reviewers were independent of the publisher and/or authors in question. The reviewers commented positively on the scholarly merits of the manuscript and recommended that the manuscript be published. Where the reviewers recommended revision and/or improvements to the manuscript, the authors responded adequately to such recommendations.

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Key words: God's righteousness, Pauline theology, God's impartiality, gentile inclusion, revelation

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Originally from the United States, Matthew W. Watson moved to Portugal
in 2010, where he fell in love with the country and with Sílvia, who he
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headache) of Biblical and theological studies. After quickly developing a
passion for the exegesis and hermeneutics of the New Testament and its
application to contemporary society, he completed a BTh in 2016 and an
MTh in 2022, both at the North-West University of Potchefstroom, South
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begin a PhD project focused on these interests in the near future.

Introduction

Albert J. Coetsee and Francois P. Viljoen

The aim of this publication is to provide several biblical theological investigations into the attribute of God's righteousness by investigating specific verses, chapters and corpora from Scripture and indicating how these portray God's righteousness as part of the developing, unfolding and progressive story line of the text.

The publication consists of two sections, of which the first contains investigations of God's righteousness in the Old Testament and the second God's righteousness in the New Testament.

Section 1: God's righteousness in the Old Testament

In the first chapter of the volume, *The righteousness of God in the Pentateuchal narrative: Foundations for the concept of a righteous God*, Paul (P.P.) Krüger explores the extent to which the narrative sections in the Pentateuch depict God as a righteous God. The argument is simple: For any biblical theological investigation into the progressive storyline of the biblical text, the Pentateuch is foundational. The chapter focuses on the greater part of Genesis, Exodus 1–19, intermittent sections of Exodus 20–34, and intermittent sections of Numbers. He concludes that in the Pentateuchal narratives God is depicted as righteous in a judicial sense, that God's righteousness is emphasised especially when he maintains and reinstates relations, and that righteousness can also be linked to integrity and ethical behaviour.

Two chapters investigate God's righteousness from the book of Job. Anja Marschall (chapter 2, *God as a witness against divine justice: Developing Job's ideas on divine righteousness in Job 3–19*) studies Job's developing perspective on divine righteousness in Job 3–19. By means of genre-critical and motivic considerations she indicates how the process of Job's lament

alters his assumptions about divine righteousness. She argues that Job's change of perspective finally prompts him to present God to his friends as a witness for his own righteousness and against God's justice. At the end of chapter 19, Job expects God to confirm towards the human community that he (Job) is righteous and of integrity, and that this is the only expression of righteousness that Job still awaits from God.

In chapter 3, *The tension between divine righteousness and human protest: Ambiguities in Job 38–42*, Edward Ho examines divine righteousness in the book of Job. Unlike other biblical grievances against God that typically invoke his righteousness in hopes of resolving the present circumstances, the book of Job presents a direct clash between these two concepts. It is these tensions that Ho investigates in his chapter. He starts by providing a brief overview of the different approaches taken to resolve tensions in the book of Job. He then analyses how the prologue (chs. 1–2) subtly introduces the themes of divine righteousness and human protest against God, with ambiguities already present in these opening chapters. He continues by examining how each major human character, including Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu, interacts with these themes in the dialogue (chs. 3–37), with each character defending one concept over the other. He concludes that the ending chapters of Job (chs. 38–42) intentionally leave the tension between divine righteousness and the legitimacy of human protest unresolved, and that the book of Job offers a nuanced exploration of these complex themes, challenging readers to re-evaluate their own theological frameworks.

Chris (P.C.) van der Walt explores the righteousness of God in the book of Habakkuk (chapter 4, *Does "righteous" have degrees of comparison? God's righteousness and the righteousness of humanity in Habakkuk*). The prophet Habakkuk considers one group of people "more righteous" than another, and questions God's actions. Van der Walt argues that with each repetition of "righteous" in Habakkuk a more nuanced understanding of righteousness is revealed. He concludes that at the start of the dialogue between Habakkuk and God, the prophet interpreted righteousness according to his understanding of the notion made applicable to circumstances. Yahweh, however, refused to react based on the prophet's understanding, and revealed that life comes through an ongoing covenantal relationship with him. Habakkuk finally found the answer to his questions in the realization that the actual matter is not what the level of people's righteousness might be but that all should acknowledge the Lord's sovereign rule.

Section 2: God's righteousness in the New Testament

Francois P. Viljoen explores the attribute of God's righteousness as found in Matthew (chapter 5, *God's righteousness expressed in mercy: A Matthean perspective*). He focuses on Matthew's personification of righteousness in his anointed Son, and the righteous life that is required of Jesus' disciples as children of God. Jesus teaches that his disciples' righteousness should surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law (Matt. 5:20) and that they should be perfect as their Father in heaven is perfect (Matt. 5:48). The righteousness of Jesus' disciples is paralleled with the perfection of God. Luke 6:36 depicts the perfection of God as mercy: he compels them to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful". As "God with us" (Matt. 1:23), Jesus personifies that which God's perfect righteousness entails. He is God's anointed servant and he exercises mercy and compassion to the marginalized and vulnerable (Matt. 8–9; 12:18–21). However, as the Son of Man, he will play a decisive role at the Final Judgement (Matt. 13:24–30, 47–50; 16:27; 24:30–31; 25:31–46). The criterion for his judgement is related to mercy and compassion for the vulnerable and suffering. Jesus ultimately expresses compassion with his substituting suffering on the cross to fulfil God's righteousness (Matt. 26–28).

In chapter 6, *Sinners declaring God righteous? The curious case of Luke 7:29–30*, Matthew W. Watson deals with the narrative aside in Luke 7:29: "When all the people heard this, they and the tax collectors declared God righteous/just, having been baptized with the baptism of John". Watson demonstrates that these words have caused no small degree of hermeneutical consternation among interpreters of the third gospel. Luke's use of the verb δικαιόω in this verse represents a unique syntactical construction within the New Testament corpus, standing in apparent contrast with typical Pauline usage of the same verb and with many systematic formulations of God's attribute of righteousness. This chapter examines this curious case in light of Luke's hermeneutical program of providing the reader with certainty in the midst of a story line that frequently exalts unlikely protagonists and subverts established religious authority figures within late Second Temple Judaism. When Luke's gospel is read as an account of the unexpected "next chapter" in an unfolding story, the peculiar syntax of Luke 7:29 provides a unique contribution to the biblical theology of God's righteousness and the human struggle to comprehend and validate (or, alternatively, tragically reject) the "right-ness" of God's actions and plans.

From the Augustinian "rediscovery" of Paul in the patristic period to the Reformation since the sixteenth century to the New Perspective(s) in the last few decades, the quest of the meaning and significance of Paul's doctrine of righteousness continues unabated. The question of the understanding of the Pauline phrase "the righteousness of God" is part of this endless debate. The meaning of the genitive noun is disputed as scholars' opinions divert from taking it as an objective genitive to a subjective genitive. In chapter 7, *Revelation of God's righteousness*, Grace W.Y. Au argues that the phrase should be taken in the possessive genitive sense referring to a property of God's character. Instead of providing a general definition or meta-concepts of righteousness, her focus is limited to the linguistic pattern of the revelation of God's righteousness in Romans 3:21–31. She argues that when used with the theme of revelation, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ refers to God's fairness, impartially and equality in the way he distributes salvation without distinction to both Jews and Gentiles.

In Philip La G. Du Toit's contribution, *The relation between God's righteousness and the new identity in Christ in the Pauline corpus* (chapter 8), the notion of God's righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) that was revealed in Christ (Rom 3:21) is assessed in terms of its bearing on Christ-believers' identity. Here, the focus is on how righteousness as a divine attribute is reflected in believers' new-found identity in Christ and thus how divine righteousness and human righteousness relate. Some of the prominent positions in the Traditional Perspective(s) on Paul as well as the New Perspective(s) on Paul are brought into the discussion, especially in respect of the way in which God's righteousness is understood. It is especially the eschatological significance of God's revealed righteousness in Christ that lies behind the redefinition of both believers' new identity and their soteriological status before God. This approach is intended to combine and formulate afresh theological notions about God's righteousness from both the Traditional and New Perspectives on Paul.

In chapter 9, *God's righteousness versus humankind's righteousness in the letters to the Romans and Ephesians*, Elma (E.M.) Cornelius investigates the distinction between God's righteousness and humankind's righteousness in said letters. She starts with the question whether the righteousness of God is a communicable attribute, namely an attribute that can be shared with or transferred to or transmitted to human beings. Romans 3:9–20 states that humankind is not able to achieve righteousness on their own. On the other hand, the letter to the Ephesians exhorts the addressees to pursue righteousness (Eph. 4:24; 6:14). The question therefore arises: What is the difference between God's righteousness and humankind's

righteousness, as presented in the letters to the Romans and Ephesians? She answers the question by interpreting relevant passages from Romans and Ephesians using a multidisciplinary approach. Her conclusion is that God's righteousness is his commitment to what is right. Humankind's righteousness, in contrast, turns out to be the outcome of God's righteousness, namely a repaired relationship between God and humankind, giving humankind the option to react in faith upon it. Once taken up in faith, humankind's righteousness overflows into a commitment to what is right.

Next, Albert J. Coetsee (chapter 10, *"God is a consuming fire": An intertextual study of Deuteronomy and Hebrews*) turns to an investigation of a specific verse in Hebrews related to God's righteousness: he provides an in-depth investigation of the background and implications of the phrase "our God is a consuming fire" (ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν πῦρ καταναλίσκον) in Hebrews 12:29. He argues that while most scholars indicate the possible Old Testament background of the allusion, very view (and none in detail) discuss its implications for the interpretation of Hebrews 12:29. The chapter starts with a brief overview of the place and function of Hebrews 12:29 within Hebrews 12:25–29. Next, he investigates the most probable Old Testament background of Hebrews 12:29, confirming why most scholars view Deuteronomy 4:24 as the background of the verse. He then investigates the use and function of the phrase "consuming fire" in the Old Testament (especially the LXX) for its possible bearing on the use of the phrase in Deuteronomy. This is followed by discussion of the use and function of the phrase "God is a consuming fire" in Deuteronomy. Turning to Hebrews, he then combs through the text of Hebrews 12:14–29 (especially 12:18–29) for possible intertextual parallels between the passage and Deuteronomy 4 and 9. Based on the previous findings, he then investigates the use and function of Deuteronomy 4:24 in Hebrews 12:29 by comparing similarities and differences between the two passages and reflecting on the author's employment of the allusion. The chapter concludes by reflecting on what Hebrews 12:29 reveals about the righteousness of God.

References to righteousness in the First Epistle of John mostly occur in two pericopes: 1 John 1:5–2:2 and 2:28–3:12, and once in 1 John 5:17. The adjective δίκαιος is used seven times (1 Jn 1:9; 2:1, 29; 3:7 [2x], 10, 12), while the noun δικαιοσύνη is used three times – in combination with the participle ὁ ποιῶν (1 Jn 2:29; 3:7, 10; cf. ἀδικία in 1:9; 5:17). In 1 John 1:9 (cf. 1 Jn 2:29), δίκαιος refers to God who is characterised as faithful and just (NRSV), and who purifies believers from all unrighteousness (ἀδικία in 1 Jn 1:9) when they confess their sins. In 1 John 2:1, Jesus Christ is also

referred to as righteous (δίκαιον). In chapter 11, *The righteousness of God according to the First Epistle of John*, Dirk G. van der Merwe investigates he entire pericope (1 Jn 1:5–2:2) to establish the attributive meaning and understanding of God being righteous. This is because words only have meaning in contexts. In this chapter, the focus is on the immediate literary context. The following important and related concepts have been identified to determine what the Elder had in mind in his reference to the righteousness of God: (Un)righteousness (δίκαιος [2x], ἀδικία [1x]), to forgive (ἀφίημι [2x]), sin (ἁμαρτία [7x]), darkness (σκοτία [2x]), light (φῶς [3x]), fellowship (κοινωνία [2x]), and cleanse/purify (καθαρίζω [2x]).

Working together with scholars on the theme of the righteousness of God from the biblical text has been a wonderful experience. As editors we are once more convinced of the necessity of collaboration in biblical studies and learning from those who specialise in certain biblical books or themes.

We would like to express our gratitude to each author for his or her contribution, as well as to Mrs. Bertha Oberholzer for her assistance in preparing the document for publication.

SECTION 1

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

CHAPTER 1

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN THE PENTATEUCHAL NARRATIVE: FOUNDATIONS FOR THE CONCEPT OF A RIGHTEOUS GOD

PAUL KRÜGER

1. Introduction

For any biblical theological investigation into the progressive storyline of the biblical text, the Pentateuch is foundational. This chapter explores the extent to which the narrative sections in the Pentateuch depict God as a righteous God.

The Pentateuchal narrative is the first of three narrative complexes in the Hebrew Bible, the other two being the Former Prophets (the so-called Deuteronomistic History) and the Chronistic History. The narrative complex discussed in this chapter comprises the greater part of Genesis, Exodus 1 – 19, intermittent sections of Exodus 20–34, and intermittent sections of Numbers.

In this chapter, all texts displaying the characteristics of narratives such as a story line and the use of the *wayyiqtol* form of the verb are regarded as narratives, irrespective of considerations such as historicity or the use of categories like myth or saga. Narratives in Genesis 1 to 11 are included, although the nature of these narratives differs from that of the subsequent narratives. The terms 'narrative' and 'story' are used interchangeably.

The first four chapters of Deuteronomy are excluded from the present discussion because these chapters of Deuteronomy serve a special purpose as an introduction to the book of Deuteronomy and even the Deuteronomistic History by recapitulating events already described in Exodus and Numbers.

This chapter first reflects on some methodological matters, then establishes what righteousness in biblical Hebrew implies, before turning to the Pentateuchal narratives where this attribute of God becomes manifest.

2. Methodological concerns

The first step in a study like this should be to define the concept "*righteousness"* in terms of biblical Hebrew. Selecting the English term "*righteousness*" will be of no avail since the English meaning does not necessarily correspond with the notion of righteousness in biblical Hebrew. Even the term *righteousness* (δικαιοσύνη) in the Greek of the Septuagint, New Testament, and early Christian writings may be misleading because, firstly, it may represent a later development or expansion of the concept, and secondly, it may lead us to impose foreign concepts on to the text.

In biblical Hebrew there is a specific word group, the so-called צדק terms,[1] occurring 523 times[2] in the Old Testament, which are traditionally translated into English as "*righteousness*" (or related words like "*righteous*"). Two nouns are used, namely צְדָקָה and צֶדֶק, which are often translated as *righteousness*. Despite attempts to differentiate between the meanings of these two words,[3] the variation in meaning between the masculine form צֶדֶק and the feminine form צְדָקָה is slight, so that they can practically be regarded as mere variants.[4] God as the subject is often

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[1] There is a high degree of overlap between these terms related to righteousness, so that their semantic nuance is better derived from context than morphology. David J. Reimer, "צדק (#7405)," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis (NIDOTTE),* ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 744–769. In the subsequent discussion these terms are discussed together.

[2] Klaus Koch, "צדק sdq gemeinschaftstreu/heilvoll sein," in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament (THAT)*, eds. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1976), 2:507–530.

[3] For example: B. Johnson, "צָדַק ṣādaq II–VII," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (TWAT), eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1989), 6:903–924; James Swanson, ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew Old Testament* (*DBLH*). (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2001) 7406 [צֶדֶק] and 7407 [צְדָקָה]; David Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (DCH). Volume VII (צ to ר) (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 80 [צֶדֶק]; and Lee Irons, *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 109–156.

[4] Laird R. Harris, ed. *Theological Wordbook of The Old Testament* (TWOT). (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 752; Reimer, *NIDOTTE*, 752 [צדק].

associated with both these terms.[5] He is the guarantor of the principle or condition of צֶדֶק, and also acts to implement צְדָקָה. Related to the two nouns are the adjective צַדִּיק (*righteous*) and the verb צָדַק (*be righteous*).

One would expect a word study of the Hebrew text, with the Pentateuch being the context of the Pentateuchal narratives, to inform us of what righteousness means. However, in the Pentateuch, the צדק word group is rarely used.[6] One has to revert to the rest of the Hebrew Bible for a word study to determine possible meanings of the צדק word group. That would be valid, since one can hardly imagine that the conceptual world of the Pentateuch and use of terminology used in the Pentateuch will differ substantially from the rest of the Hebrew Bible, especially if one bears in mind that the Hebrew language used in the Pentateuch points to a late date of final composition.

The few occurrences of the צדק word group in the Pentateuch are found almost exclusively embedded in poetry, prophecy, or speech. The rest of the Hebrew Bible follows the same pattern, namely that words related to righteousness, including God's righteousness, are seldom used in narrative texts.[7] Narratives tend to act out righteousness rather than name righteousness as such. A divine attribute like righteousness is implicated through God's actions rather than explicated. A major characteristic of narrative is to *show*, rather than *tell*. Occurrences of the צדק word group in narratives are simply not sufficient to provide a clear picture of what righteousness means.

Thus, a word study of the צדק related terms is not feasible either in the Pentateuchal narratives or other narratives in the Hebrew Bible, so that the biblical scholar is dependent on non-narrative texts to determine the meaning of the concept of *righteousness.*

The צדק word group is mainly used in the Wisdom literature, Psalms, and the Latter Prophets.[8] Although the focus in the two subsequent sections will be on the meaning of the צדק word group in the Pentateuch, it is essential to consider the meaning of this word group in various texts in the Hebrew Bible.

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[5] Johnson *TWAT*, 6:717.
[6] צְדָקָה (9x), צֶדֶק (13x), צַדִּיק (16x), צדק (4x).
[7] Reimer, *NIDOTTE,* 750.
[8] About 65% of biblical occurrences (Koch, *THAT,* 511).

The meaning of a word is largely determined by its context. Still this chapter recognises that words are used in typical fashion with particular potential meanings. Categories stated by standard lexicons and theological dictionaries of biblical Hebrew are used as a basis in the next section (section 3, 'Righteousness as a concept') to define the semantic range of righteousness in the Hebrew Bible.[9]

The notion of righteousness as reflected in other biblical texts will finally, in the last main section of this chapter (section 4, 'God's righteousness enacted in history'), be applied to Pentateuchal narratives.

3. Righteousness as a concept

Gerhard von Rad considers the concept of righteousness one of the most important concepts in the Hebrew Bible:[10]

> There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as that of צְדָקָה. It is the standard not only for man's relationship to God, but also for his relationships to his fellows ….

In biblical Hebrew, the general meaning of righteousness as reflected in the צדק word group is *doing what is required according to a standard.*[11] The word group is also used in a stative sense as *being in the right according to a standard*. "Righteousness" thus means that a person or an object conforms to religious or societal norms,[12] a norm being "what ought to be so".[13] If the

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[9] In a recent study, Jože Krašovec (*God's righteousness and justice in the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022]) calls a predominantly lexicographical or conceptual approach problematic. He analyses occurrences of the צדק word group in the light of semantic, theological, and philosophical concerns, where conceptual schemes that are shared by speakers of different languages are considered (p. viii). Although the present chapter takes note of this seminal work, the focus is on lexicographical or conceptual categories.

[10] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Volume I: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 370.

[11] Swanson, *DBLH*, 7406 [צֶדֶק] and 7407 [צְדָקָה]. Incidentally, this general meaning corresponds with the use of the Semitic root in the Ancient Near East in the sense of 'the right comportment: status or behavior in accord with some implied standard' (Reimer, *NIDOTTE,* 746).

[12] Johnson, *TWAT,* 6:903; Harris, *TWOT*, 752.

[13] Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures.* Trans. Samuel P. Tregelles (London: Bagster, 1979), 702 [צֶדֶק, 2].