



Understandings of Justice in the New Testament

By Robert L. Foster

Justice is as one of the major themes in the New Testament. English translations often obscure this reality. Under the influence of the King James Version, many modern English translations use the word 'righteousness' instead of 'justice.' Modern versions however increasingly translate the key term *tsedek* in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament correctly as 'justice.' A similar change has not occurred in the New Testament for the key term *dikaosune*. This is true in spite of the fact that the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, the Septuagint, uses *dikaosune* to translate over 90 percent of the occurrences of *tsedek*. There is good reason to substitute 'justice' for 'righteousness' in many instances in the New Testament.

Matthew 6:33 provides a good example of the appropriateness of translating *dikaosune* as justice; "But seek first the kingdom and its justice and all these things will be added to you."¹ In the ancient world, the final responsibility for doing justice lay with the king whose law promulgated justice within the boundaries of the kingdom. The problem, as presented in Matthew, is that the justice of the kingdom of the heavens does not occur on earth as the Father in heaven intends. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount by contrast describes what the justice of the kingdom of the heavens on earth means: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice." The noun and verb forms of *dikaosune* occur seven times in chapters five and six of the sermon.

Who hungers and thirsts after justice in the biblical world? Those on the margins, people who stand at the edges of communities in need of care that they often do not receive because they are so easily overlooked. People like the Canaanite woman, whose predicament as a female and a foreigner, with an ill daughter, means she is not likely to receive justice in this world (Matt. 15:21-28). She, in fact, couches her need in images of hunger, challenging Jesus to grant her mercy in spite of the fact that she stands at the margins of society.

In the Bible, concern for justice often involves a reversal of fortune, a bringing down of the rich, who gained their wealth by exploiting others, and a lifting up of the poor, who suffered so much injustice. This reversal is clear in places like Psalm 107:33-43 and Psalm 113. Mary's Magnificat in the first chapter of the gospel of Luke also predicts a reversal of fortune when Jesus comes into the world. Mary, as one of the poor in Israel, lifts her praise to God for bringing down the proud and lifting up the humble, feeding the

¹ The New Revised Standard Version reads, "the kingdom of God and his righteousness." However, as the footnotes to the translation indicate, some early manuscripts lack "of God." In terms of textual criticism, it is easier to surmise that later copiers added "of God" rather than deleted this phrase. The pronoun can be translated either as "his" or "its," with the latter making more sense with the simple phrase, "the kingdom." The phrasing "the kingdom and its justice" reflects the expectation of justice to be carried out within the realm of any kingdom.

hungry and sending the rich away empty (Lk 1:52-53). In this view of God's justice, each gets what each deserves.

Scholars often note the way Jesus defines his ministry in the gospel of Luke in terms of justice by the opening statement he makes in the synagogue at Nazareth. There, Jesus tells the crowd that he fulfills the vision in the book of Isaiah of releasing prisoners, giving sight to the blind, and releasing the oppressed (Lk. 4:18-19). As the gospel relates more of Jesus' ministry we read that Jesus also imagines that as the oppressed find release, the rich will find suffering. In Luke's Sermon on the Plain Jesus speaks of blessings for the poor and woes (loud laments of grief) for those who are rich in this world (6:20-26). We also find this reversal in the parables, most especially the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). The parable warns that in the future judgment the rich man ended up in Hades and the poor Lazarus in heaven, without any hope for the rich man's brothers (likely also rich), who would also suffer the same fate, because they refuse to listen to the law of Moses (16:29), which teaches justice for the poor.

Dikaioisune terms do not often occur in scenes of the final judgment but, as in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, visions of the final judgment often have to do with whether a person carried out justice on the earth. Returning to Matthew for a moment, in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31-46), Jesus separates those who will enter heaven (the Sheep) from those who will not (the Goats) based on whether they cared for the marginal: the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned. The reversal of fortune, then, may not occur in this life but certainly in the next. These stories intend to both offer the oppressed a sense that they will receive their vindication and also to motivate the rich to care for the poor in the present.

If we understand from New Testament texts that justice often involves somehow caring for the marginalized then we find the concern for justice in many texts, even when the terms for justice do not appear. Quite often in the New Testament, justice is paired with mercy. In Matthew 5:7, we read: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy," which stands parallel to the blessing of those who hunger and thirst for justice in 5:6. Thus, when Jesus extends mercy to the Canaanite woman by healing her daughter, he exercises justice on her behalf. The implication of Matthew 5:7 is that those who show care for the marginalized in the present world will receive mercy in the future world. In their case there is no need for a 'reversal of fortune' for those who use their wealth and power for the benefit of those in need, to show mercy. The reversal of fortune implicates those with wealth and power who turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to those in need.

In the end, though, the writers of the New Testament, like the writers of the HB/OT, intend for justice to emerge in their communities, on the earth. The letter of James deals almost exclusively with developing just Jesus communities that contrast with the standard mores of the surrounding culture. The standards of the ancient Mediterranean world did not allow for much change in social roles. The elite were elite and the poor, poor. Each group served a particular function in society and was obligated to fulfill the duties inherent to their role in society.

Yet, for James the expectations of how people were to treat the rich and poor in culture generally had no place among the early Jesus communities, who ought to exercise justice according to God's standards. People who read the HB/OT but did not live up to the commands, did not show proper care for widows and orphans, for example (James 1:27) were like people who looked in the mirror and then walked away and immediately forgot

what they looked like (1:22-25). Favoring the rich and mistreating the poor was not something James was willing to stand for because it violated the most basic command from the HB/OT: love your neighbor as yourself. People could not claim to have faith in God through Jesus and then turn around and judge one person better than another (James 2:12-17).

It is important to remember that the vision for justice in the early Jesus communities emerged from the vision already present in the HB/OT. The New Testament writers drew from a deep well to press their communities to live up to standards they already knew from the God of Israel. This meant that the Jesus communities were to express justice by showing concern for the oppressed and to expect God to take action against oppressors. Yet, for both God and the Jesus communities, just action also meant showing mercy to those in need of mercy. Showing justice-in-mercy fulfilled the greatest commandment given in the HB/OT, to love your neighbor as yourself.

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