

Resurrecting Justice

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MUCH TURNS ON HOW WE CONCEIVE OF justice. Justice defines what we may expect from one another in our families, workplaces, economic dealings, religious communities, civic associations, and, most quintessentially, political communities. Thinkers as diverse as Thomas Aquinas and John Rawls have held that justice is the first virtue of political institutions.

In today's constitutional liberal democracies, great prestige is enjoyed by a manner of conceiving of justice that is rooted in Roman law and developed through medieval, enlightenment, and modern liberal thought. It is expressed classically as the constant will to render another his due and today in terms of rights, equity, fairness, equality, and retribution. Justice in this conception is what people are owed, entitled to, deserve, or indebted to pay or perform. Debtors pay their bills, achievers garner rightful honors, workers receive fair compensation, convicted criminals render their debt to society, parties to a contract collect what they agreed to, nobody suffers wrongful discrimination, the poor receive a rightful distribution of goods, and everyone, everywhere enjoys human rights. Such justice contrasts with other kinds of behavior that are admirable, commendable, and perhaps lofty but are not due to anyone: generosity, mercy, gift, friendship, forgiveness, and love. Justice is outward behavior, not inner virtue or the ordering of the soul. It is known entirely through reason.

So thoroughly pervasive is this conception of justice that many western Christians never pause to ask: Is it ours? Is it the same justice as that found in the Bible, their divinely inspired founding story? I argue that the Bible's justice is markedly, although not entirely, different. Found in the Old Testament and New Testament, used to describe the actions of God and to prescribe the actions of kings, prophets, priests, merchants, judges, obedient Jews, and faithful followers of Jesus, justice carries an overarching meaning of comprehensive right relationship, consisting of right conduct in all spheres of life. Biblical justice includes obligations to render others their due but also obligations that extend beyond what is due. It describes inner virtue, the right ordering of the soul, as well as actions directed towards other people, towards the entire creation, and towards God. It is known both through reason and through faith in God's revelation. The justice that

humans are to practice is shaped by the justice that God practices towards humans.

The aim of this essay is to propose, defend, and explicate comprehensive right relationship as the Bible's conception of justice. It elaborates this conception through a typology that arrays the Bible's many expressions of justice into four categories: divine primary justice, divine rectifying justice, human primary justice, and human rectifying justice. Evidence for this conception of justice and its four dimensions is found in the Hebrew and Greek words that are most plausibly and commonly translated as justice, the meaning of which arises from their closely surrounding context as well as the larger narrative of salvation that they describe. The four dimensions help to depict this larger narrative as one of God's justice unfolding through God's interaction with humanity. The climax of this narrative is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, events that the scriptures describe as justice and that express this justice in its fullest sense. The meaning of this justice, as well as the endeavor of retrieving and plumbing it, then, is resurrecting justice. The aim of resurrecting justice is to offer Christians a better understanding of their own justice in a world where justice is defined differently.

DEFINITIONS AND LANGUAGE

Words that may express justice appear in the Bible hundreds of times, situated in manifold settings. Does any overarching meaning enfold them? Yes, I contend: comprehensive right relationship.¹ The acts that constitute right relationship are elaborated and distinguished through four dimensions, arrayed in the table below. The two rows are the two sides of a distinction, pivoting on agency, between divine justice, which God enacts, and human justice, which human beings perform. The two columns set forth a distinction, borrowed from philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, between primary justice, which defines what it means to live in right relationship, and rectifying justice, which

¹ Other scholars who see biblical justice as right relationship include James D.G. Dunn, "The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 43, no. 1 (1992): 16; A. Katherine Grieb, "'So That in Him We Might Become the Righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21): Some Theological Reflections on the Church Becoming Justice," *Ex Auditu* 22 (2007): 59; Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Righteousness in the OT," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G.A. Buttrick, vol. 4 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 80–85 at 80; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker, vols. I and II, (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2005), 371–372; John R. Donahue, SJ, "Biblical Perspectives on Justice," in *The Faith that Does Justice*, ed. John C. Haughey (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 69; Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 126; and Douglas Harink, *Resurrecting Justice: Reading Romans for the Life of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 1–18.

addresses past wrongs.² What emerges is a fourfold typology that begins with divine primary justice, the moral order that God establishes and upholds. Second comes divine rectifying justice, God's restoration of right relationship in response to sin. Third is human primary justice, the acts through which people enact right relationship with God and with other people and cultivate virtue within their soul. Fourth is human rectifying justice, through which people seek to restore right relationship with others and with God after they have broken right relationship. These dimensions of justice are necessary, distinct, and related. An account of Biblical justice missing one of them would be incomplete; one failing to separate them would be confused; and one omitting connections between them would be ill suited to describe the unfolding story of God's relationship with humanity.

² Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), ix–x.

Four Dimensions of Justice

	Primary Justice	Rectifying Justice
God (divine justice)	God performs justice by establishing right relationship in the world through his original creation and through his covenants with humanity, which set forth the norms that make up human justice. God orders the world out of his character, which is marked by justice.	God enacts justice by responding to the sin of humanity through punishment, forgiveness, vindication of the cause of the poor, and other measures that bring about the restoration of right relationship in God's covenant. God's saving justice is manifested most fully in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is equivalent to justification and reconciliation.
Human beings (human justice)	Humans enact right relationship towards one another, with respect to the natural environment, towards God, and by cultivating virtue in their souls so as to be disposed to right action towards others and God. The norms that define right relationship include the moral, judicial, and ceremonial precepts of the Old Testament and the New Law that Jesus taught and manifested most fully in his death and resurrection.	Humans respond to the wrongs of others, including in judicial contexts, according to norms set forth by God (examples include the <i>lex talionis</i> and Jesus's teaching against retaliation and in favor of forgiveness). This response involves the restoration of right relationship between humans.

This argument, that justice in the Bible means right relationship in the senses that this typology sets forth, rests upon the claim that the

English word justice properly translates words in the Bible that denote comprehensive right relationship in its original languages, Hebrew and Greek. This claim in turn comprises two assertions, corresponding to two sides of the translation task – first, determining the meaning of terms in the origin language, and second, finding the best words to express these terms in the destination language.

The first of these assertions is that certain terms in the original languages of the Bible denote comprehensive right relationship. The most important of these terms are the Hebrew noun *sedeq*, whose feminine form is *sedeqah*, in the Old Testament, and the Greek noun *dikaioisune* in the New Testament. *Sedeq* and *sedeqah* densely populate the Old Testament. Words with the root *sdq*- occur 523 times, *sedeq* 119 times, and *sedeqah* 157 times, with more than two-thirds of all *sdq*- words concentrated in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Psalms, and Proverbs.³ *Sedeq(ah)* contains a wide variety of meanings, but I follow the renowned Old Testament scholar Gerhard Von Rad who, along with other scholars, holds that these terms carry an overarching meaning and that they denote both divine and human agency.⁴ As I detail below, *sedeq(ah)* is God's establishment of an order of right relationship, God's restoration of his people to right relationship following their sin, and the right relationship that humans are to practice towards one another as prescribed by God's covenants, most importantly, the Torah given to Moses.

In composing the Septuagint, the third century BCE Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, translators used *dik*- words to translate 90 percent of instances of *sedeq(ah)* and commonly translated both *sedeq(ah)* and *mishpat* through *dikaioisune*.⁵ *Dikaioisune* then appears 92 times in the New Testament, more frequently than any other *dik*-term, and echoes the meaning of *sedeq(ah)*.⁶ As with *sedeq* and *sedeqah*, *dikaioisune* in the New Testament involves both divine and human agency, connoting the saving action through which God restores the world to right relationship through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as the entire meaning of right relationship

³ K. Koch, "sdq," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 1048–1049.

⁴ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 370. Similar statements on the sweeping importance of *sedeq*, understanding it to be related to justice, can be found in Rolf Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Method and Cases* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 87–88; Donahue, "Biblical Perspectives on Justice," 68; and McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 127. Arguing for the overarching character of justice in the Old Testament is Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: 1997), 421–425.

⁵ Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 47.

⁶ John Reumann "Righteousness (NT)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 747.

that Jesus teaches humans to enact, towards both other humans and God.

Two other terms, *saddiq* and *dikaios*, the adjectives that correspond to *sedeq* and *dikaioσune*, denote virtue, the character of one who acts consistently with right relationship. In some instances in the Bible, this agent is God; in others, it is a human person such as Noah (Genesis 6:9) or Joseph, the guardian of Jesus (Matthew 1:19).⁷ *Saddiq* appears 206 times in the Old Testament, in Psalms and Proverbs far more than any other book, while *dikaios* shows up 79 times in the New Testament, concentrated most in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.⁸

A final term, *mishpat*, can also mean comprehensive right relationship. Like *sedeq(ah)*, it pervades the Old Testament, appearing 422 times. Often, it means more narrowly the standards that govern the courtroom or economic dealings: fairness, equity, right procedure. At other times, though, it means general right behavior, enacted by God or by humans: the entirety of God's law, deeds that God loves, and deliverance. In numerous instances, *mishpat* appears with *sedeq* or *sedeqah* as a hendiadys, or pairing of words, that means right behavior in the social and political realm, often pertaining to a king.⁹

The second assertion is that the English word justice soundly translates the terms that connote comprehensive right relationship in Hebrew and Greek. Translators of the Bible into English have turned to the words justice and righteousness, and more generally to the family of words with the root just- (justice, justify, justification) and to the family of words with the word right- (righteous, righteousness) in order to translate the Bible's families of words that have the *sdq*- root and the *dik*- root. It is uniquely English that contains both the just-family, which carries a Latin lineage, and the right- family, which carries an Anglo-Saxon one.¹⁰

Some translators of the Bible into English, including some of the earliest translators in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, adopt the term righteousness to refer to personal piety or to God's atonement for people's sins, and justice to refer to juridical social norms that are

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, Bible verses in this article are drawn from the New American Bible. In places, I add the term justice to righteousness so as to read righteousness/justice in order to convey the argument of the paper.

⁸ Koch, "*sdq*," 1049; Reumann, "Righteousness (NT)," 747.

⁹ Barbara Johnson, "Mishpat," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green, IX (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 89; on the hendiadys and its social connotations, see Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 7–56.

¹⁰ John Reumann, "Justification and Justice in the New Testament," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 21 (1999): 28–29.

germane to government, courtrooms, and commerce and involve equity, fairness, or just deserts.¹¹ Such a scheme of translation, though, reflects—and has surely done much to lodge into the English language—a dichotomy that is not found in the Hebrew and Greek terms that connote comprehensive right relationship. It is exactly this dichotomy that I wish to challenge—one that confines the meaning of justice to what is due, public, and involving external conduct.

In fact, both of the English words justice and righteousness are far more semantically elastic and enjoy usages that convey holism, encompassing both personal, pious uprightness as well as adherence to public, juridical norms. English speakers may understand each term more narrowly, depending on when, where, and among whom they live, but the English language also offers wider meanings. The Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, defines righteousness as “[t]he state or quality of being righteous or just; conformity to the precepts of divine law or accepted standards of morality; uprightness, rectitude; virtue, integrity,” a definition that includes the word “just” and that could apply to behavior that is private or public, inward or outward, and practiced in any sphere.¹²

Likewise, the term justice also finds holistic meanings in English, as five instances of supporting evidence show. First, certain philosophers and theorists writing in English put forth a concept of justice that means something much like comprehensive right relationship. Contemporary examples include theorists of restorative justice and “care feminists.”¹³

Second, English translators of Greek literature long have employed justice to translate *dikaiosune* in instances where the word carries a holistic meaning. They do so, for instance, in Plato’s *Republic*, where justice is right order in the soul and, by analogy, in the city, where each person performs his duty to others according to his station, and in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, where general justice governs the entirety of one’s relationships to others.¹⁴

¹¹ Reumann, “Righteousness (NT),” 746; Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 222–223.

¹² “Righteousness,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, oed.com.

¹³ On restorative justice, see John Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame, and Reintegration* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990). On care feminism, see Elizabeth R. Schiltz, “West, MacIntyre, and Wojtyla: Pope John Paul II’s Contribution to the Development of a Dependency-Based Theory of Justice,” *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies* 45 (2006): 369–414.

¹⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), Bk. 4; and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), Bk 5.

The third instance of supporting evidence is found in the translation of the Bible itself. Various translations of the Bible into English embody varying choices about whether to use justice or righteousness (and their respective cousins) to translate the same terms in the original Hebrew or Greek. This suggests a fluidity, some scholars even would say an interchangeability, between these English words such that justice can include the range of meanings attributed to righteousness and vice-versa. At least one translation, the Douay-Rheims Bible, consistently uses just- words to translate *sdq*- and *dik*- words.¹⁵

Fourth, the Vulgate, dating back to the fourth century, translates *sdq*- and *dik*- words, with all of their holistic connotations, into Latin words such as *justus* or *justitia*, which in turn translate readily into English just- words.¹⁶ Because Latin lacks the competing family of right- terms, translators face no dilemma in readily employing just-terms. So, in encountering translations of the Bible from Latin, as well as translations of classic theological works written in Latin that quote the Bible, English speakers will read justice where they may be accustomed to reading righteousness. The reason why the Douay-Rheims Bible uses just- terms is that it is translated from the Vulgate. So, too, English speakers will read in Gregory of Nyssa's sermons on the beatitudes "blessed are they who hunger and thirst after *justice*"; in Aquinas's *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, "seek first the kingdom of God and his *justice*"; and in Aquinas's commentary on Romans, "the *justice* of God is made manifest."¹⁷ They will find in the works of Augustine usages of justice that embody the holistic meaning of *sedeq* and *dikaioisune* and are even equated to the love of God and neighbor.¹⁸ Likewise, words closely resembling the English justice are used in translations of the Bible into Romance languages such as French, Spanish, and Italian (*justice, justicia, giustizia*).

¹⁵ On this fluidity, James D.G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 32–37; Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 35–37; Enrique Nardoni, *Rise Up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World*, trans. Seán Charles Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 217, 267; John C. Haughey, "Jesus as the Justice of God," in *The Faith That Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, ed. John C. Haughey (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1977), 276–288; and William C. Mattison III, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology: A Virtue Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 32, 49–50; Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 110–113.

¹⁶ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 370; Koch, "sdq," 1049.

¹⁷ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's Prayer, The Beatitudes*, trans. Hilda C. Graef (New York: Newman Press, 1954), 117; Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew Chapters 1–12*, trans. Jeremy Holmes and Beth Mortensen (Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute, 2018), 230; Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, trans. Fr. Fabian R. Larcher, OP (Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute, 2018), 98, italics added.

¹⁸ See Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10–12, 72–114.

Finally, certain contemporary scholars, including Pope Benedict XVI, follow suit in deploying justice widely in their translations of the Bible and in interpreting it holistically.¹⁹

If righteousness and justice each enjoy holistic usages in English, then no definitive case exists for adopting one or the other word to translate biblical terms that mean comprehensive right relationship. What I am arguing for is not the necessity but rather the merited possibility of using justice (and related *just-* terms) for this translation, a possibility that is warranted if justice is understood in a wide, holistic sense. If, in turn, justice translates the Bible's Hebrew and Greek terms for comprehensive right relationship, then it will describe a remarkably wide range of actions that God performs and calls upon humans to perform. What will emerge is a distinctively Christian notion of justice.

DIVINE JUSTICE IN THE BIBLE: GOD'S ESTABLISHMENT AND RESTORATION OF RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

Divine Primary Justice

Out of God's just character, God proclaims commandments that govern the entirety of human beings' relationships to one another and to God; fashions human beings so that they flourish through following these commandments; attaches blessings and curses for following or failing to follow these commandments; and constantly sustains all of these realities, which together make up God's right order. This is nothing other than the justice of comprehensive right relationship. Insofar as God establishes and upholds this justice according to his character, it is divine justice. Because this divine justice sets forth right relationship and its orientation towards human fulfillment, it is primary justice. Divine primary justice is that of the upper left-hand quadrant in the table above.

Help in understanding this dimension of justice in the Bible comes from Thomas Aquinas, who argued that God first exercised mercy in creating the universe and then justice in giving right order to his creation. The "order of the universe...shows forth the justice of God," he wrote (ST I q. 21, a. 1, co.) With respect to humanity, God first created humans out of his goodness (or mercy), and then, out of justice, gave humans a rational soul that befitted their humanity, and then hands that

¹⁹ See, for instance, Pope Benedict XVI, "The Justice of God Has Been Manifested Through Faith in Jesus Christ: Pope's Lenten Message for 2010," February 4, 2010, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/lent/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091030_lent-2010.html; Michael J. Gorman, *Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul's Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 191–201; and Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 369–380.

befitted their rational nature. God's will towards this right order is his justice, Aquinas holds (ST I q. 21, a. 1, co; ST I, q. 21, a. 4, co.).

The Bible expresses divine primary justice through justice words found mainly in Psalms and Isaiah. Psalm 11:7 conveys God's just character and its close link with God's laws, "[t]he Lord is just (*sedeq*) and loves just deeds; the upright shall see his face," while Psalm 119: 137–138 declares, "You are righteous/just (*saddiq*), Lord, and just are your edicts (*mishpat*). You have issued your decrees in justice (*sedeq*) and in surpassing faithfulness." Other verses speak to God upholding justice, including Psalm 36:7, "Your justice (*sedeqah*) is like the highest mountains; your judgments (*mishpat*), like the mighty deep; all living creatures you sustain, Lord"; Psalm 9:5, 8–9, "You upheld my right (*mishpat*) and my cause, seated on your throne, judging justly (*sedeq*).... The Lord rules forever, has set up a throne for judgment. It is God who governs the world with justice (*sedeq*), who judges the peoples with fairness"; and Isaiah 9:6, "His dominion is vast and forever peaceful,/ From David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains/ By judgment (*mishpat*) and justice (*sedeqah*), both now and forever."²⁰

Divine Rectifying Justice

The justice of the upper right-hand quadrant is divine rectifying justice, which describes the action through which God restores right relationship in response to sin. In the Old Testament, it is *sedeq(ah)* that communicates this justice most frequently. Synonymous with God's salvation and deliverance, it shows up multiple times in the Psalms, appears in Hosea, Micah, Amos, and Judges, but is most concentrated in its occurrence and rich in its meaning in Second Isaiah, Books 40–55.²¹ The setting of Second Isaiah's drama is Israel's exile in Babylon, and the plot of the drama is Israel's return to its homeland. *Sedeq(ah)* is the justice of a God who is faithful to the covenant by which God freely and graciously promises to make Israel his people and to be their God (Isaiah 55:3). Isaiah 46:13 is only one of many

²⁰ For other verses that express primary divine justice, see Psalm 11:7; Psalm 35:28; Psalm 65:6; Psalm 71:17–19; Psalm 95:15; Psalm 97:1–6; Psalm 98:7–9; Psalm 99:4; Psalm 101:1; Psalm 111:7; Psalm 116:5; Psalm 119:159–160; Psalm 119:172; Isaiah 5:16; Isaiah 30:18; Isaiah 32:16; Isaiah 33:5; Isaiah 41:10; Isaiah 42:4; Isaiah 45:8; Isaiah 51:6–7; Jeremiah 9:23; and Zephaniah 3:5.

²¹ J.J. Scullion, "Righteousness (OT)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 732–734. Scullion notes that *sedeqah* occurs 34 times in the Psalms, 9 of which refer to God's saving action. For examples of the term, see Psalm 7:10; Psalm 31:2; Psalm 35:24; Psalm 35:28; Psalm 40:10; Psalm 51:16; Psalm 71:2; Psalm 71:15; Psalm 71:16; Psalm 71:19; Psalm 99:4; Psalm 103:6–7; Psalm 143:11; Judges 5:11; Amos 4:24.

instances where *sedeq(ah)* means God's salvific action: "I am bringing on my justice (*sedeqah*), it is not far off, my salvation shall not tarry."²²

God's restorative, salvific justice is both punitive and regenerative. In Isaiah 10:22, justice (*sedeqah*) "demands" the "destruction" of Israel, only a remnant of which is to remain. In Second Isaiah, God "poured out wrath upon," rebukes, displays anger, and speaks of vengeance towards Israel.²³ Exile is punishment for Israel's sins. Yet punishment is not permanent. Second Isaiah also makes it clear that Israel's "service is at an end" and that God will "restrain my anger," "not accuse forever," not remember the events of the past, and restore Israel.²⁴ Frequent is the language of payment. God has redeemed, ransomed, and secured recompense, expiation, and "service" from Israel.²⁵ God likewise promises to requite Israel's foes and take vengeance on Babylon.²⁶ All told, what emerges is a disciplining punishment through which God carries out his overarching plan of restoring right relationship with Israel according to his covenantal promises.²⁷

Renewal is sung, too. Israel is to be restored to its land, with Jerusalem again its central city, as well as to right relationship within the community. "In justice (*sedeqah*) shall you be established," reads Isaiah 54:14. Second Isaiah, along with Third Isaiah's vision of Israel restored, returns repeatedly to the uplifting of the poor—the afflicted, needy, blind, hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, and dejected.²⁸ Conveying Isaiah's restorative vision are natural images, especially that of water bringing nourishment to dry land, often alluding to peace and prosperity.²⁹ God conducts his salvific action through the figure of a servant, whose mission is justice, with whom the New Testament identifies Jesus.³⁰ "I the Lord have called you for the victory of justice (*sedeq*)," reads Isaiah 42:6, shortly following verses in which God announces that the servant "shall bring forth justice (*mishpat*) to the nations" (42:1) and "[establish] justice (*mishpat*) on the earth" (42:4).

In the New Testament, divine rectifying justice is found first in the Gospel of Matthew (12:18–21), where Jesus quotes Isaiah 42 directly and identifies himself with the servant who brings justice to victory. Earlier in Matthew (3:15), Jesus also presents himself as justice in his

²² Isaiah 45:8; 45:13; 45:19; 45:21; 46:12; 46:13; 49:8; 51:1–8; 54:14; 56:1; 59:17.

²³ Isaiah 42:25; 43:19; 47:3; 48:9; 52:20; 57:17; 59:17; 63:4; 65:1–7.

²⁴ Isaiah 40:2; 44:22; 48:9; 57:16; 62:4–12.

²⁵ Isaiah 40:10; 41:14; 43:1; 43:14; 44:22; 44:23; 47:3; 48:20; 49:4; 49:26; 50:1–2; 51:11; 59:20. On Israel's payment of debt in Second Isaiah, see Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 44–50.

²⁶ Isaiah 41:2–3; 41:10–11; 47:1–15; 49:26; 59:18.

²⁷ Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 51–53; Achtemeier, "Righteousness (OT)," 83.

²⁸ Isaiah 41:17; 42:7; 42:16; 43:8; 49:9–10; 55:1–2; 57:15; 58:6–10.

²⁹ Isaiah 41:17–19; 42:15; 43:19–28; 44:3–4; 48:18–21; 49:8–10; 51:3; 52:12.

³⁰ Several authors of the New Testament link Jesus to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah; see Matthew 8:1–7; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32–33; 1 Peter 2:21–25.

reply to John the Baptist concerning his own baptism: “Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Why does Jesus allow himself to be baptized? Fulfill means to bring to pass what was prophesied, prefigured, or foretold. The object of fulfill in this passage is *dikaosune*, which, reflecting the pattern I have identified, is translated in most English Bibles as righteousness but is translated in the Douay-Rheims Bible as justice and in the Latin Vulgate as *justitiam*. So, what is the righteousness or justice that scripture prophesied and that Jesus is now fulfilling by being baptized? Arguably, justice here is the saving justice of God, denoted by *sedeq(ah)* in the Old Testament and translated by *dikaosune* in the Septuagint. Although, as we shall see, Matthew uses *dikaosune* elsewhere in his gospel to denote the human justice that Jesus commends to his followers, here, justice is performed by Jesus himself, the one whom John the Baptist has just identified as the mighty one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (3:11–12). It is divine rectifying justice, prefigured in Second Isaiah, brought to a climax in Jesus’s death and resurrection, and launched here in his baptism. In baptism, Jesus identifies himself with the repentant sinner, whose cleansing he will bring about definitely through his sacrifice on Calvary. At the end of the baptism passage, in Matthew 3:17, God’s voice from heaven says, “[t]his is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” paralleling the words that God spoke in Isaiah to the servant who will bring about justice.³¹

It is in Paul’s letters that we find the preponderance of references to the saving action of the cross and resurrection as justice. Much as the Psalms identify justice as a characteristic of God, so, too, Paul writes in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1:30) that “Christ Jesus... became for us... righteousness/justice,” where righteousness is *dikaosune*, the word that Paul uses for the saving justice of God. Out of his just character, Jesus Christ performs his saving justice on behalf of humanity.³²

God’s act of saving justice through Jesus Christ is the unifying theme of Paul’s Letter to the Romans.³³ Pivotal is the term *dikaosune*

³¹ In this interpretation, I found helpful John P. Meier, *Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), 241–242; Reumann, “Righteousness (NT),” 755.

³² On divine action emanating from divine character, see Thomas D. Stegman, SJ, “Paul’s Use of *Dikaio-* Terminology: Moving Beyond N.T. Wright’s Forensic Interpretation,” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 502.

³³ Making this claim, among others, are Grieb, “So That in Him,” 58–59; Reumann, “Righteousness (NT),” 759; Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 369; Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 39; Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 1988), 102; and Gorman, *Participating in Christ*, 193–194. Gorman cites the similar claim of L.T. Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2001), 13, 19–30, 47, 52–62.

theou, translated into English as the righteousness of God, or the justice of God. Paul writes in Romans 1:17, “[f]or in it [the gospel] the saving righteousness/justice of God (*dikaiousune theou*) is revealed”; in Romans 3:21–22, “[b]ut now, apart from the law, the saving righteousness/justice of God (*dikaiousune theou*) has been disclosed”; and in Romans 10:3, “the righteousness/justice that comes from God (*dikaiousune theou*).”³⁴ Although theologians long have disputed the meaning of *dikaiousune theou*, in recent years several have made a strong case that it denotes both a quality of God and an activity manifesting this quality.³⁵ Echoing Psalms and Isaiah, God’s saving justice is closely related to God’s faithfulness, expressed, according to some scholars, in the phrase *pistis Iēsou Christou*, which also refers to both the character and action of God, manifested in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:22; Galatians 2:16).³⁶

The fruit of divine justice is human justice, the comprehensive right relationship that people enact towards other people and towards God. Human justice will be considered more thoroughly in the following section but is noted here as a manifestation of divine justice. This can be seen strikingly in the only instance where *dikaiousune theou* appears outside of Romans, which is in 2 Corinthians 5:21. Here, immediately following the phrase, “For us [or ‘for our sake’] God made the one who did not know sin to be sin”—referring to Jesus taking on humanity’s sin on the cross—comes the purpose that this act realizes: “so that in him we ourselves would become the justice of God (*dikaiousune theou*).”³⁷ God’s saving justice is what the Christian actually becomes—one who lives as Jesus does.

Paralleling Isaiah and other Old Testament passages, these passages from Paul witness to God’s restoration of humanity through Jesus’s cross and resurrection, a restoration that takes place through a double movement of a negation of sin and a regeneration of humanity, as a wide range of metaphors in the New Testament (and not only in Paul’s letters) express. In this justice, God is defeating sin through his loving sacrifice, restoring right relationship, and extending this restoration from Israel to all of humanity. Conveying the negation of sin are images that include acquittal, freedom from bondage and captivity,

³⁴ For Romans 1:17 and Romans 3:21–22, I draw from the translation offered by Gorman, *Participating in Christ*, 194.

³⁵ Stegman, “Paul’s Use of *Dikaio*- Terminology,” 502; Frank J. Matera, *God’s Saving Grace: A Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 107, 232–233; Dunn, “The Justice of God,” 17.

³⁶ On this reading of the phrase *pistis Iēsou Christou*, see Stegman, “Paul’s Use of *Dikaio*- Terminology,” 508; Gorman, *Participating in Christ*, 123–129; and, for the fullest argument, see Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

³⁷ Gorman, *Participating in Christ*, 197; Grieb, “So That in Him,” 64–66. The translation here is Gorman’s in *Participating in Christ*, 224.

forgiveness, liturgical sacrifice, payment of debt, ransom, and redemption.³⁸ Conveying regeneration are Paul's references to life, peace, grace, the presence of the Spirit, and new creation.³⁹ Life in particular is a term that Paul repeats often in Romans to mean the condition of being made just—and thus being restored to right relationship, full of God's life—by God's saving justice. "Through one righteous/just act acquittal and life came to all," Paul writes in Romans 6:18, and elsewhere speaks of "walk in the newness of life," (6:4); "we shall also live with him" (6:8); "reign in life" (6:17); and "the law of the spirit of life in Christ" (8:2). Summing up concisely these negating and regenerating movements as well as the establishing of human justice through divine justice is 1 John 1:9: "If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just (*dikaios*) and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing."

Divine Rectifying Justice and the Justice of Rendering Due

God's rectifying justice in the Bible contains elements of, but is also wider than, the classical notion of justice, rendering another her due. In rectifying justice, due means deserving punishment, the core idea of retribution. The Old Testament is replete with episodes in which God requites, inflicts his wrath upon, or otherwise punishes Israel or Israel's enemies for their sins, as Isaiah exemplifies. In the New Testament, due is conveyed through terms and metaphors that describe the deserved punishment from which Jesus saves humanity: acquittal, debt for sin, expiation, and ransom. In Romans 1 and 2, Paul describes humanity as meriting God's wrath for its sins. Several passages speak of rewards and punishments in the afterlife and in the final judgment.⁴⁰

God's rectifying justice, though, cannot be confined to rendering due. The Old Testament recounts many episodes in which God forgoes or withdraws punishment. Vivid is Psalm 103:8–10: "Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger, abounding in kindness. God does not always rebuke, nurses no lasting anger, [has] not dealt with us as our sins merit, nor requited us as our deeds deserve." Jesus's saving act of death and resurrection confounds retribution in several ways. It was not necessary: God, acting justly, either could have punished humanity or have waived the penalty. In paying humanity's debt for sin, Jesus thwarts retribution's requirement that the perpetrator of a deed be punished. Flouting retribution most of all, this act is, as Paul insists, a "gracious gift" that God bestowed "while we were still sinners," and

³⁸ Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; Mark 10:45; Romans 3:25; Romans 4:7; Romans 5:16; Romans 8:33; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Corinthians 7:23; Galatians 3:13; Galatians 4:5; 1 Timothy 2:6; 1 Peter 1:18; and 2 Peter 2:1.

³⁹ Romans 5:1–2; Romans 8:6; Romans 8:10; 2 Corinthians 5:17.

⁴⁰ Matthew 5:12; Matthew 6:1; Matthew 25:41–43; Luke 6:23; Luke 14:13–14; Luke 16:19–31.

not on the condition that humanity pay up in advance (Romans 5:8; 5:15).

Divine Rectifying Justice in Relationship to Justification and Reconciliation

Two concepts in the Pauline letters—justification and reconciliation—extend the reach of God’s divine justice in the scriptures in that they turn out to share the content of this justice. Justification, of course, has been a disputed concept, particularly since the Reformation. While I cannot fully argue the case here, I am persuaded by theologians who show that justification involves exactly the negation of sin and restoration of right relationship that God’s saving justice does. The verb, justify, *dikaioō*, and the noun, justification, *dikaiōsis*, both belong to the *dik-* family and share in its meaning of right relationship. Theologian Michael Gorman, through a detailed analysis of the passages where justification appears, including Galatians 2:15–21 and Romans 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8, as well as 2 Corinthians 5:14–21, where the term does not appear but the concept resides, makes a strong case that justification involves not only acquittal and release from sin but also life, peace, the imparting of grace, the gift of the Holy Spirit, resurrection, and the presence of righteousness/justice as denoted by *dikaiosune*. This is none other than the restorative justice of the cross and resurrection. Through faith, people may participate in Christ’s justification, dying to sin and becoming resurrected through him.⁴¹

The second concept is reconciliation, a term that appears fifteen times in the New Testament, thirteen of these in Paul’s letters, including Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Ephesians and Colossians. Reconciliation is God’s saving action through the cross and resurrection, bringing about a comprehensive restoration of right relationship between humans and God, between humans, within the soul, and, in light of certain verses, within the whole cosmos. The resulting restored relationship is a condition of being reconciled. Reconciliation, then, is essentially the same as God’s saving justice and the same as justification.⁴² This close relationship is apparent in Romans 5, where reconciliation is mingled with Paul’s discussion of justification through the

⁴¹ Gorman, *Participating in Christ*, 116–235. On justification as both liberating from sin and restorative, see Stegman, “Paul’s Use of *Dikaio*-Terminology,” 499. Others who argue that justification is closely linked with justice include Dunn and Suggate, *The Justice of God*; Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1987), 65; Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 53–59; Haughey, “Jesus as the Justice of God,” 282–286; Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 130; Douglas Harink, “Setting it Right,” *Christian Century*, June 14, 2005, 25; and L. Cerfaux, *Christ in the Theology of St. Paul*, trans. Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker (New York: Herder and Herder, 1959), 138–142.

⁴² Arguing that reconciliation and justification are exceedingly close in meaning are Gorman, *Participating in God*, 207; Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of*

messiah's death and resurrection. In Romans 5:10, Paul describes reconciliation through the same double movement found in saving justice and justification: "[I]f, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life." Reconciliation is also a strong theme in 2 Corinthians 5:14–21, where the word appears five times in this passage about the accomplishment of the cross and resurrection. The phrase, "[i]n Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (5:19), appears shortly before the verse that speaks of the resulting right relationship: "For us [or 'for our sake'] God made the one who did not know sin to be sin so that in him we ourselves would become the righteousness/justice of God" (5:21).⁴³ The comprehensiveness of reconciliation is expressed in Colossians, which reads, "[f]or in him the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him," shortly following a passage proclaiming that in Christ "all things were created in heaven and on earth" and that "in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16–20).

Reconciliation, like justification, is the same as the divine rectifying justice of Second Isaiah, which several scholars believe Paul had in mind in describing Jesus Christ's atoning action.⁴⁴ The servant with whom the gospels identify Jesus is one who performs saving, delivering justice on behalf of God and, in the Fourth Song, "gives his life as an offering for sin" and "[t]hrough his suffering... shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear" (Isaiah 53:10–11). The rectifying justice of Jesus the Messiah is comprehensive, saving the entire world from its bondage to sin and inaugurating the total restoration of all things, in which humans are invited to join.

The Bible uses the language of justice to describe this total restoration following a Last Judgment in which God finally and definitively "makes all things new" (Isaiah 43:19; Revelation 21:5). An eschatological narrative in Second Isaiah (45:23) reads, "I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness/justice (*sedeqah*), and shall not return / That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear"; while 2 Peter 3:13 declares, "We await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness/justice (*dikaioisune*) dwells."⁴⁵ Likewise, the *Catechism*, commenting on the biblical nar-

Paul's Theology (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1989), 37, 76, 80; Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 485–486; and Matera, *God's Saving Grace*, 108–109.

⁴³ Again, the translation is Michael Gorman's in *Participating in Christ*, 6, 224.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Stegman, "Paul's Use of *Dikaio* Terminology," 523–24.

⁴⁵ The translation of Isaiah is from the King James Version. Justice language also appears in eschatological contexts in Isaiah in Isaiah 9:7; 11:5; 26:2; 26:7; and 26:9.

rative, reads, “The Last Judgment will reveal that God’s justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by his creatures and that God’s love is stronger than death” (no. 1040).

HUMAN JUSTICE: RIGHT RELATIONSHIP RESTORED

If divine justice establishes and restores the human justice of comprehensive right relationship, what is the character of this human justice? It is revealed in the scores of instances of justice words—*sedeq(ah)*, *mishpat*, *dikaioisune*, and their cousins—that describe how God summons human beings to live in conformity with right relationship and to restore right relationship after it has been broken. This is the justice of the bottom two quadrants, consisting of human primary justice, found in the lower left-hand quadrant, and human rectifying justice, found in the lower right-hand quadrant.

The Original Justice of the Garden of Eden and the Injustice of Sin

Resulting from God’s original establishment of justice was the state of right relationship in which the first humans participated, the human justice of the Garden of Eden as described in Genesis. Reflecting on the Bible, major voices in the tradition, including Anselm, Aquinas (ST I-II, q. 85, a. 3, co), the Council of Trent, and today’s *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 375), have called this condition “original justice.”⁴⁶ Sustained by grace, this justice was comprehensive in enfolding three dimensions of right relationship. First, the original humans lived in friendship with God, obeying and acknowledging him. Second, they lived in harmony with each other according to God’s design (a harmony that was extended to all of creation). Third, there existed right relationship within the soul, where reason governed the lower parts, as Aquinas explains (ST I-II q. 85, a. 3, co.). Interior justice is the console from which the other two dimensions are enacted. A rightly ordered soul is disposed to act consistently with right relationship towards God and others.

That the Bible conceives of justice as right relationship, involving these three dimensions, is evident in its language for the action that severs this right relationship: sin. “The sinner rebels against the order of justice,” writes theologian Matthew Levering in his interpretation of Aquinas’s thought on the Bible.⁴⁷ On twenty-five occasions, New Testament writers denote sin with *adikia*, a word that attaches the prefix *a* to a *dik-* word, indicating the opposite of the justice that is right

The latter half of the quote from Isaiah 45:23 is used by Paul to describe Jesus in Philippians 2:10–11.

⁴⁶ The *Catechism* quotes the First Decree of Session V of the Council of Trent; find at www.thecounciloftrrent.com/ch5.htm.

⁴⁷ Matthew Levering, “Creation and Atonement,” in *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 61.

relationship.⁴⁸ In the Septuagint, *adikia* frequently translates the Hebrew word, *’âvôn*, which means sin in the broad sense of both an offense and the wide destruction of persons and relationships. In Romans, Paul uses *adikia* to refer to the condition of sin to which cross and resurrection respond. In Romans 1:18, he uses *adikia* to mean sin or “wickedness” immediately following verse 17, where he writes of the righteousness/justice (*dikaïosune*) of God and of the righteous/just (*dikaïos*) person who lives by faith. Then, in Romans 3:10, the phrase “there is no one just (*dikaïos*)” begins a passage (3:10–18) that describes sin and is followed with the dramatic turn, “But now the righteousness/justice (*dikaïosune*) of God has been manifested apart from the law.” Paul contrasts sin to the justice of right relationship.

Adikia and *’âvôn* are not the Bible’s only words for sin, but through all of its references to sin, in all of their contexts, in both Old and New Testaments, the Bible depicts the breaking of right relationship in its threefold sense—with God, with others, and within the soul. Sin incurs humans’ separation from God, a debt of punishment to God, a loss of God’s glory and grace, and God’s punishment, sometimes in the form of God’s allowance of ill consequences, sometimes through measures that God wills directly. Sin ruptures relationships between persons, including in the sociopolitical realm, especially in the context of Old Testament kingship, as well as with respect to the natural world (Romans 8:20–22). Sin disintegrates the soul, too, illustrated by metaphors like burden and stain, culminating in death. What sin damages is the justice of comprehensive right relationship.

Human Justice in the Old Testament

The Old Testament conveys the comprehensiveness of human justice through numerous instances of *sedeq(ah)*, and sometimes *mishpat*, that imply generality—simply, all that God commands of his followers in every sphere of life—and through the adjective, *saddiq*, which describes a person who is faithful to these commands in a general sense.⁴⁹ Comprehensiveness is expressed in Psalm 119:172, “[m]ay my tongue sing of your promise, for all of your commandments are just (*sedeq*),” as it is in Deuteronomy 16:20, “Justice and justice alone shall be your aim,” as well as in Deuteronomy 6:25, “Our justice (*sedeq*) before the Lord, our God, is to consist in carefully observing all these commandments he has enjoined on us.” This last verse indicates that human justice is prescribed by God, most prominently through his covenants. The verse appears just after Moses reveals the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai and introduces an exposition of God’s law. This justice promotes well-being. The same verse is preceded by one reading, “Therefore, the Lord commanded us

⁴⁸ Reumann, “Righteousness (NT),” 747.

⁴⁹ On the comprehensiveness of *sedeq(ah)*, see footnote 4.

to observe all these statutes in fear of the Lord, our God, that we may always have as prosperous and happy a life as we have today,” (Deuteronomy 6:24) while Psalm 106:3 offers the beatitude, “Happy those who do what is right (*sedeqah*), whose deeds are always just (*mishpat*).”

The content of this justice is the sum total of the Old Testament’s commandments and the actions that they prescribe or proscribe. Again, Thomas Aquinas comes to our aid, this time by offering an enduring taxonomy of these commandments that begins with the Decalogue, which he calls the moral precepts, and teaches that they express justice, are revealed by God, and are also knowable through reason, belonging to the natural law (ST II-II q. 122, a. 1, co). The first three of the Ten Commandments express human obligations towards God and the final seven, obligations between persons. The hundreds of other precepts found in the Old Testament are derivative of the Ten Commandments, revealed by God, but not known through reason alone. What Aquinas calls the ceremonial precepts entail duties towards God and are derivative of the first three commandments, whereas what he calls the juridical precepts involve the duties of Israelites towards one another and outsiders and derive from the last seven commandments. Both sets of precepts are found in the Torah. Spread throughout the Old Testament are also verses that stress the interior origins of these commandments, often referring to the heart. The exposition of God’s law in Deuteronomy, for instance, contains the Shema, part of which runs, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The Old Testament’s invocations of justice extend to the social and political realm, especially in books written during the period of monarchy.⁵⁰ In all three parts of Isaiah (i.e., chaps. 1–39, 40–55, and 56–66), God’s restoring justice brings about a just Israel or Jerusalem—a “city of justice (*sedeq*),” as Isaiah 1:26 puts it. Frequently, especially in the Psalms and Isaiah, *sedeq* is paired with *mishpat* in a hendiadys that connotes kingship and its attendant qualities. Sometimes, it is God’s rule that is meant, but other times a human king’s.⁵¹ Isaiah 16:5, for instance, declares that “[a] throne shall be set up in mercy, and on it shall sit in fidelity [in David’s tent]/ A judge upholding right (*mishpat*) and prompt to do justice (*sedeq*).” Justice is meant to be practiced by the king and by subjects in social and political affairs.

⁵⁰ Nardoni, *Rise Up, O Judge*, 95–121.

⁵¹ God’s rule is referenced in Psalms 9:9; Psalms 45:4; Psalms 89:15; Psalms 97:2; Psalms 98:9; Isaiah 9:6; Isaiah 16:5; Isaiah 33:5; and the king’s rule in Psalms 72:1; Psalms 72:2; Psalms 99:4; Isaiah 16:5; Isaiah 32:1; and Jeremiah 22:3.

A prime characteristic of this justice is right treatment of the vulnerable, whom the Old Testament identifies as widows, orphans, resident aliens, and the poor.⁵² The prophet Jeremiah (22:3) recounts that the Lord told him to tell the King of Judah: “Do what is right (*sedeqah*) and just (*mishpat*). Rescue the victim from the hand of his oppressor. Do not wrong or oppress the resident alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.”

Human justice in the Old Testament also includes rectifying justice, that of the lower right-hand quadrant, which is found in the portion of the judicial precepts governing the redress of wrongs, most of which are found in the Torah’s compendium of laws for the Israelite community. Many issues surround these precepts, including their stipulation of capital punishment, the meaning of the *lex talionis*, the place of restitution, and their underlying rationales.⁵³ What is important here is that they are included in the righteousness/justice that comprehends all criteria for action.

Human Justice in the New Testament

In the New Testament, too, justice words sometimes mean the comprehensive right relationship that God calls humans to enact, expressed by the noun *dikaosune*, and the interior disposition toward this action, expressed by the adjective *dikaios*. In these instances, justice words refer not to a characteristic of God, God’s establishment of justice, or the saving justice that God performs, as is true for the Bible’s divine justice, but rather to the justice that persons enact towards other persons, towards God, and in cultivating their own character.

Though scattered throughout the New Testament, these terms are concentrated particularly in the Gospel of Matthew. Greek words with the root *dik-* appear there 26 times: *dikaios*, 17 times, the verb *dikaioo*, twice, and *dikaosune*, seven times, five of which are found in the Sermon on the Mount.⁵⁴ In one instance, that of Jesus’s words to John the Baptist at Jesus’s baptism, *dikaosune* means divine saving justice, as I argued above. The other instances arguably mean human justice. In the Sermon on the Mount, *dik-* words are “an umbrella concept that envisages what Jesus expects of his disciples so that they may enter the kingdom of heaven,” argues Bible scholar Jonathan Pennington. Especially important is *dikaosune*, which Pennington claims is one of

⁵² Nardoni, *Rise Up, O Judge*, 80–81.

⁵³ An excellent treatment is that of Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 120–127, 201–241.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 88.

the two main ideas in the Sermon on the Mount (along with the Kingdom of God) and argues that it means “whole-person behavior that accords with God’s nature, will, and coming kingdom.”⁵⁵

In two instances in the Sermon on the Mount, *dikaiosune* opens a long passage in which Jesus expounds upon what it means to act rightly.⁵⁶ In Matthew 5:20, Jesus says, “unless your righteousness/justice (*dikaiosune*) surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of Heaven,” and continues with six contrasts—“you have heard that it was said...but I tell you”—in which he deepens and renders more demanding the moral law of the Torah (Matthew 5:21–48). The passage ends with the injunction, “be perfect,” implying the entirety of human behavior and interior disposition. Pennington holds that “this idea of *greater righteousness* [is] the meta-category that makes sense of the whole Sermon.”⁵⁷ Then, in Matthew 6:1, Jesus says, “Take care not to perform righteous/just (*dikaios*) deeds in order that people may see them,” and proceeds to enjoin his hearers to act with the motive of serving God the Father in giving alms, praying, and fasting, actions that people direct respectively towards other people, God, and the soul—the entirety of right relationship.⁵⁸

Jesus also speaks of general right behavior when he exhorts, “seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness/justice (*dikaiosune*)” (Matthew 6:33).⁵⁹ *Dikaiosune* appears in Matthew 5:6, one of the beatitudes, as that for which the blessed hunger and thirst—that is, they desire to see right relationship realized in the world.⁶⁰ In Matthew 5:10, *dikaiosune* identifies faithful behavior as that for which the blessed are persecuted.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 88–91. Italics removed from the latter quoted phrase. Pennington cites other scholars who share in his judgment about the importance and meaning of *dikaiosune* in the Sermon, including Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, rev. ed., trans. James F. Crouch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 177; Johan C. Thom, “Justice in the Sermon on the Mount: An Aristotelean Reading,” *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009): 315; and W.S. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 2004), 499. Sharing in this judgment is also Frank J. Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 31.

⁵⁶ Most translators of *dikaiosune* render the term as righteousness, but as I have been arguing all along, the term could equally well be justice. See footnote 15, especially the reference in Mattison, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 31, 32, 49.

⁵⁷ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 89; Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 4.

⁵⁸ See Mattison, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 157.

⁵⁹ For this interpretation, see Mattison, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 181; Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 96; and Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 250. Pennington also cites Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 344.

⁶⁰ Mattison, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 32; Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 37.

⁶¹ Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 37.

The Gospel of Matthew also features the adjective *dikaios*, which describes the person who lives in all of the ways that God has set forth. When Jesus teaches, for instance, that “your heavenly Father... causes rain to fall on the just (*dikaios*) and the unjust (*adikaios*),” he means by *dikaios* those who keep the law faithfully (Matthew 5:45). When Jesus speaks of the righteous or just (*dikaios*) at the last judgment, he means those who saw him in the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoner, the ill, and the stranger and acted accordingly (Matthew 25:37, 46).

These justice words, *dikaiosune* and *dikaios*, are found elsewhere in the New Testament, for instance, in the Letters of John, where they are situated in passages that exhort followers of Jesus to keep all of the commandments and to avoid sin, as well as in Paul’s letters, in James, and in Hebrews, where they also mean living rightly in general or the qualities of a person who does so.⁶²

Dikaiosune includes the entirety of the commandments that Jesus taught, ones that deepen and do not discard the justice of the Old Testament. The Sermon on the Mount summarizes this “new justice,” as theologian Servais Pinckaers calls it, manifesting the new law, promulgated from a mountain by the new Moses.⁶³ Jesus calls for a more stringent and interior adherence to the moral law, avoiding not merely adultery but also all lust, not merely murder but also all hatred, and so on.⁶⁴ Like the law of the Old Testament, the new law charts the contours of human flourishing, doing so most explicitly through the beatitudes, which prescribe blessedness or happiness.

Human Justice and the Justice of Rendering Due

As was true for divine justice, human justice in the Bible both entails and exceeds the justice of rendering due. With respect to the lower left-hand quadrant, primary human justice, due implies rights, that is, entitlements that require the respect of others. While explicit mentions of rights mottle the Bible, rights arguably have a greater presence in the Bible by virtue of being entailed in obligations: what recipients of actions are entitled to assert mirrors what performers of actions are required to do. A right not to be killed, robbed, or cuckolded is entailed in the commandments against murder, stealing, and adultery.⁶⁵

⁶² 1 John 2:29; 1 John 3:7; 1 John 3:10; 1 John 3:12; Romans 14:17; 1 Corinthians 9:10; Philipians 1:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:10; 1 Timothy 1:8–9; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 3:16; Titus 2:12; Hebrew 12:11; James 3:18.

⁶³ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, OP (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1995), 143; Thomas Weinand, *Jesus Becoming Jesus: A Theological Interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 146.

⁶⁴ See also Matthew 15:1–20.

⁶⁵ John Finnis, *Aquinas*, 134–136.

Not all duties, though, entail corresponding rights. Some are wide duties, which require an end to be pursued but leave open how, when, where, and to what degree, and lack the specificity of those duties that are paired with a matching right. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ,” a norm that Paul teaches in Galatians (6:2), is unspecified and unlimited in its discharge, as are Jesus’s commands to love one’s neighbor and to take up one’s cross and follow him (Luke 9:23). The Bible employs justice language to describe wide duties such as practicing generosity towards the poor. Ezekiel 18 includes “[giving] food to the hungry and [clothing] the naked” in “[doing] what is right (*mishpat*) and just (*sedeqah*).” In Matthew 25, Jesus calls righteous/just (*dikaios*) the one who sees and serves him in the poor. In Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians (9:9–15), he describes as justice (*dikaiosune*) giving generously to the poor and quotes Psalm 112:9, which makes the same link.⁶⁶ The Bible also associates justice with the open-ended commandment to give alms, as in the Book of Tobit (12:8) and in Jesus’s articulation of giving alms as a righteous/just deed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:1).

Jesus departs from due more markedly with respect to justice in the lower right-hand quadrant, pertaining to what people may demand from one another in the aftermath of a wrong. In this dimension of justice, due means retribution, the repayment of wrongs with a penalty against the wrongdoer. Jesus zeroes in on retribution in the Sermon on the Mount in one of the six contrasts that reads, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil” (Matthew 5:38–39). A long tradition of interpretation that includes Augustine and Aquinas holds that Jesus is teaching his hearers to reach beyond keeping their retribution proportionate and dispense with retribution altogether.⁶⁷ Paul echoes in his Letter to the Romans, “[d]o not repay anyone evil for evil” (Romans 12:17).

Jesus teaches similarly with respect to forgiveness. In the Lord’s Prayer, also situated in a section of the Sermon on the Mount that is prefaced as one about justice, Jesus teaches his hearers to pray, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” implying that the sinner owes payment both to God and to the person wronged and that the person wronged ought to forgo this debt. Jesus amplifies the lesson in Matthew 18, where he enjoins Peter to forgive seventy times seven times and elaborates with the story of a king who forgave the debt of

⁶⁶ Katherine Grieb, “So That in Him,” 59.

⁶⁷ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 180; Augustine of Hippo, “From Against Faustus, Book 19,” in *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, 100–1625*, eds. Oliver O’Donovan and John Lockwood O’Donovan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 115–117; see also Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 119–133.

a servant who then refused to forgive the debt of a fellow servant and was thus harshly punished by the king: “So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart” (18:35).

Human Justice as the Fruit of Cross and Resurrection and Reconciliation

Human justice, the new law, is defined, authorized, and empowered by Jesus’s death and resurrection. As Gorman explains, “Righteousness...is not only *derived* from the Messiah’s death but also *defined* by the Messiah’s death.”⁶⁸ This new definition of righteousness, or justice, involves a loving, sacrificial gift of self—“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13)—which bestows new meaning upon the beatitudes, which in turn deepen the meaning of the Ten Commandments. In this way, Jesus fulfills, and does not abolish, the law (Matthew 5:17).⁶⁹

Paul employs *dikaiosune* to describe the ways of the person who is transformed and renewed by the cross and resurrection. He writes, “Freed from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness/justice (*dikaiosune*)” in Romans 6:18, and “through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous/just (*dikaios*)” in Romans 6:20.⁷⁰ It is through faith that a person comes to embody this justice, as Paul argues in Romans 1:17 when he writes, “The one who is righteous/just (*dikaios*) by faith will live,” and as he expresses in Romans 10:6 through the phrase, “the righteousness/justice (*dikaiosune*) that comes from faith.”⁷¹

This human justice is the fruit of reconciliation, the ways of one who has been reconciled. This person becomes an ambassador of reconciliation, a new creation, one who suffers for others, loves his enemies, and practices “righteousness/justice [*dikaiosune*], peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).⁷² Cross and resurrection give the new law a divine imprimatur, the authority of the God who triumphed over death. They also enable people to live the new law through grace. The same Holy Spirit who empowered the resurrection empowers people to participate in the life that Jesus taught and exemplified, a life in communion with the Holy Trinity. The new justice is an infused justice.⁷³

⁶⁸ Gorman, *Participating in God*, 141.

⁶⁹ On how cross and resurrection shape the beatitudes, see Weinandy, *Jesus Becoming Jesus*, 146–178.

⁷⁰ See also 1 Peter 2:24: “freed from sin, we might live for righteousness/justice (*dikaiosune*).”

⁷¹ See also Philippians 3:9.

⁷² Corneliu Constantineanu, *The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul’s Theology* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2010), 99–206.


⁷³ Mattison, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 202–203.

All told, human justice acts in intimate partnership with divine justice. God enacts divine justice in establishing human justice in creating the world and in promulgating his covenants, most definitively the new covenant in Jesus Christ. The people who received this justice both followed it and turned away from it, and after they turned away, God enacted divine justice anew by exiling his people, bringing them home from exile, and ultimately redeeming all of humanity by way of Jesus's cross and resurrection, through all of these actions restoring and redefining human justice. The human justice set forth by Jesus Christ is not merely a new form of wisdom but is also a participation in God's renewal of the world.

CONCLUSION

As biblical justice comes unveiled, its contrast with modern liberal justice becomes clearer. What is most distinct about biblical justice is the authorship of God, who establishes, sustains, and restores the right relationship that God calls humans to practice towards one another. Biblical justice enfold but exceeds obligations to render others their due, including wide obligations such as service to the poor and living as a gift to others as well as forms of restoring right relationship that are not retributive. Biblical justice involves not merely external behavior but also rightly ordered souls that are disposed towards right action towards other persons and God. The full meaning of biblical justice, manifesting all of these qualities, defining right relationship most comprehensively, is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Modern liberal justice, by contrast, is secular, known solely through reason, revolves around due, and is a matter of external behavior.

Other contrasts and implications warrant exploration. Theologians in the Christian tradition have conceived justice solely in terms of the natural law as well as almost completely apart from the natural law, whereas the present argument suggests that justice is a synthesis of the natural law, known through reason, and the divine law, which God reveals and that widens, deepens, and specifies the natural law. The contrast and the synthesis merit further analysis. So, too, does the relationship between the justice of comprehensive right relationship, an umbrella concept, and the narrower dimensions of justice that it arguably encompasses, for instance, distributive justice, commutative justice, restorative justice, and the justice embodied in the panoply of rights. Worth probing, too, is the meaning of comprehensive right relationship for areas of social life such as economic dealings, immigrants and refugees, humanity's relationship with the natural environment, and the family. Finally, the connection of this justice with other virtues and fruits such as mercy, faith, and peace begs to be plumbed. The task at hand has been limited to establishing that biblical justice

is comprehensive right relationship. That this justice summons these further tasks points to its power and its possibilities.⁷⁴ 

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⁷⁴ For helpful comments on the piece, the author wishes to thank Gary Anderson, Michael J. Gorman, Brian Lee, William Mattison, Kevin Offner, and Jonathan Pennington.