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THE STRAND OF JUSTICE

Justice and the Bible

Steven Thompson

The Bible has been used to justify slavery and the occupation of other people's land. It has been used to deny children vaccinations, blood transfusions and hospital treatment. It contains commands to carry out what amounts to ethnic cleansing. Many of its stories seem stories of injustice. But what place does justice have in the Bible? Is there really enough justice in the Bible?

One common objection to the Bible as a guide to justice is the command to destroy the Canaanites who lived in the land promised to the Israelites: "You shall utterly destroy them" (Deuteronomy 7:2). How could a God of justice call for such destruction? But every text has a context, including Bible texts.

A quick look at the context will show, first, that these words are not God's; they are the words of Moses. While God often spoke through Moses, not every word spoken by Moses was from God. Second, within this speech, Moses twice states that God, not the Israelites, will move the peoples rather than slaughter them: "Yahweh your God will clear away these seven nations" (verses 1 and 22). Third, God will do it with hornets! "Furthermore, there are the hornets which the Lord your God will send against them" (verse 20). Fourth, the process of clearing away the nations would take a long time, "little by little. You must not make an end of them quickly" (verse 22). Fifth, "God will confuse them with a great confusion" (verse 23).

When read in context, even this apparent command to violence loses most of its force. While context may not neutralise all the Bible's apparently violent commands, it gives readers a new viewpoint. They may, for example, ask, "Whose land was it, anyway? Did those seven nations come to occupy it justly? Or was God gently displacing them in just response to an earlier injustice?"

Yet justice runs like a strand of a cord through the Bible's heart. It appears repeatedly in laws and stories, in both

Old and New Testaments. The very stories of injustice help highlight the Bible's core focus on justice. In spite of—and even because of the injustice in some of its stories—it offers guidance for anyone wanting to understand justice, especially to anyone wanting to practice it.

The source of justice

Where does justice come from? Did it emerge “naturally” as humans evolved from lower forms of life as a survival tactic, as Charles Darwin theorised?¹ Or did “justice” emerge from the shifting, unstable truce between the empowered minority and the disempowered majority, as suggested by Plato's imaginary sophist Thrasymachus?²

Ancient Israelites did not believe justice sprang from social necessity among evolving humans. Nor was it invented by strong humans to justify their control of the weak. They were convinced that justice is part of the nature of God. If there were no God, there would be no justice. Since God exists and justice is part of His nature, justice exists! It was that simple. Justice as part of God's nature is expressed in many ways in the sacred scriptures of the ancient Israelites, the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament.³ The Lord is God of justice, according to *Isaiah 30:19* and *Malachi 2:17*. God loves justice, according to *Psalms 33:5*. Yahweh is a God of justice (see *Isaiah 30:18*).

The Israelites developed word pictures to great effect to depict God as the source of justice. Readers of the Old Testament “get the picture” of the importance of the message that justice comes from God. Thrones and throne rooms were effective symbols for power in the world of ancient Israel. The throne itself, as well as the ruler sitting on it, spoke of power and authority. Psalm writers tapped into this forceful image when they wrote, “Righteousness and justice are foundations of your throne” (*Psalms 89:15*) and “The Lord remains seated forever; He has set up his throne for justice” (*Psalms 9:8*).

Justice sometimes seemed far away to the Israelites. Like ours, their world was marred by injustice. What had begun as a perfect creation, pronounced “very good” by its Creator, had become violent: “Now the earth was spoiled . . . filled with violence” (*Genesis 6:11*). This state of affairs continued through the entire history covered by the Old Testament and was noted by a number of Bible writers: “He looked for justice, but found spilt blood” (*Isaiah 5:7*) and “Justice has been turned back; righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the street; uprightness is not able to come in” (*Isaiah 59:14*).

Had justice abandoned this world? It led people to question God's existence: “Where is the God of justice?” some were asking, according to *Malachi 2:17*. “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God!’ They are corrupt, they do terrible things, no-one is left who does good” (*Psalms 14:1, 2*).

Can justice be known?

Since justice was a part of the nature of the God of Israel, it was up to Him to make it available to His chosen people. The original state of pure justice, lost to this world at the fall, God planned to restore through His chosen people. It could be known and even practiced by those who committed themselves to Him.

When the newly crowned King Solomon asked God to help him know justice so he could rule the people, his prayer was soon answered. He justly resolved a dispute between two mothers claiming the same baby, convincing all Israel that “he had God’s wisdom to do justice” (1 Kings 4:28). He argued that “a wise heart knows justice” (Ecclesiastes 8:5). Spiritual leaders in Israel were expected to know justice: “Hear now, heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Shouldn’t you have learned justice?” (Micah 3:1). But such knowledge of justice is not limited to kings and leaders. All persons are promised knowledge of justice: “You will then understand righteousness and justice and equity and every well travelled track” (Proverbs 2:9).

While God took the initiative in restoring the knowledge of justice, some human initiative was called for. Israelites were encouraged to search for it: “Learn to do good; search for justice” (Isaiah 1:17) and “Men of evil do not understand justice, but those who search for the Lord understand it, every one of them” (Proverbs 28:5).

Justice in an unjust world

Many passages make clear the Bible’s message that justice was not only knowable but also doable. The expression “do justice” occurs 25 times in the Hebrew Bible and God’s calls for justice were enablings: “He has explained to you . . . what is good and what the Lord requires from you—only that you do justice, and love mercy, and walk carefully with your God” (Micah 6:8). Doing justice was so fundamental that God would rather have His people do justice than offer sacrifices, if they were forced to choose: “The Lord would prefer that people do righteousness and justice rather than to sacrifice” (Proverbs 21:3).

A big part of “doing justice” in the Old Testament was helping needy persons. Those most needing justice in ancient Israel were widows, orphans, the poor and immigrants.⁴ Old Testament justice called for care to be given to others as well, but these were the most vulnerable in Israelite society, who had no welfare system to support them: “[God] does justice for orphan and widow, and He loves the immigrant, giving him food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:18). God’s people are directed to follow God’s example. If Israel failed to do this sort of justice, they would lose the blessing God intended for them, and the people would find themselves on the receiving end of the curses that God promised, rather than His blessings: “Under a curse is the person who turns away justice intended for the immigrant, the orphan and the widow” (Deuteronomy 27:19).

The Hebrew Bible’s law of jubilee (see Leviticus 25) was an important device for keeping a just economic distribution across the generations. It would have prevented the gross accumulation of land and goods by some, and the permanent loss of the land and goods by others. The jubilee declared that every 50th year all land that had been sold would be returned to the descendants of the family to which it had first been assigned when the Israelites occupied the land of Canaan. Any Israelite who was forced to work for another Israelite as a servant because he was unable to repay a loan would be released from servitude and returned to his family’s land at the

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next jubilee. He could take with him any children born to him during his time of service. The jubilee regulations would prevent the poverty resulting from people being forced off their land, and the acquiring of that land by a few people.

The Bible does not record whether the jubilee was observed. If so, it was not observed at all times and in all places. The prophet Isaiah spoke out against the injustice of those who “add house to house and join field to field, until there is no longer any place for anyone but themselves to live” (Isaiah 5:8). Even if the jubilee had been fully observed, it was limited to ethnic Israelites and certified immigrants. It did not apply to non-Israelite slaves, whom the Israelites could buy from neighbouring countries. Those could be kept in slavery along with any children, and their children’s children for generations. The Hebrew Bible’s laws for social justice thus favoured the Israelites and immigrants. Foreigners were not covered.

Justice for the nations

But God had a plan to extend justice to non-Israelites. The plan included a servant-messiah who would bring justice to all nations. Several prophets foretold the coming of this servant-messiah: “Look! Here is my servant . . . I will put my spirit upon him; he will bring about justice to the nations . . . he will be reliable in bringing about justice” (Isaiah 42:1, 3). This and similar prophecies take us beyond the period of history covered by the Old Testament and into the New Testament story of Jesus and His followers, who applied Isaiah’s prophecy of a justice-bringing servant-messiah to Jesus (see [Matthew 12:18](#)).

The best-known public declaration made by Jesus Himself about the place of justice in His mission is in His “Sermon on the Mount.” Its fourth “beatitude” speaks of justice: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice” (Greek *dikaiosunē*, [Matthew 5:6](#)). Anyone familiar with this saying of Jesus will be surprised that the “righteousness” of most translations is replaced here by “justice.” But the standard reference work explaining New Testament Greek words lists three fields of meaning for *dikaiosunē*: (1) “the quality, state or practice of judicial responsibility with focus on fairness, *justice, equitableness, fairness*; (2) quality or state of juridical correctness with focus on redemptive action, *righteousness*; (3) the quality or characteristic of upright behaviour, *uprightness, righteousness*.”⁵ Jesus’ fourth beatitude makes clear that justice is among the goals of His mission.

Many of the remaining 90 New Testament occurrences of *dikaiosunē* also communicate the idea of justice. In His parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus again focused on justice. The human needs that the “sheep” met and the “goats” ignored included feeding the hungry, sheltering strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned—especially those of low social status, “the least of these my brothers” (see [Matthew 25:31–46](#)). So important were these acts of social justice to Jesus that He repeated the list four times in this parable. Jesus’ actions marched alongside His words. He practised the justice He preached by His healing, feeding and associating with the least of His brothers. However, Jesus’ ultimate lesson about justice was the cross, where He and His heavenly Father scored a resounding and eternal victory for justice over the combined forces of cosmic injustice.

Did Jesus convince His followers that social justice was an important part of His mission? In answer, note the

words and the works of His two best-known followers, the apostles Peter and Paul. Peter was invited to explain Jesus and His mission to the Roman military commander Cornelius. His explanation included justice: “In every nation the person who fears [God] and who works for justice (*dikaiosunē*) is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:35). Peter then described Jesus as: “One who went around doing good” (verse 38).

The apostle Paul placed justice in the core of Christianity when he explained the Christian faith to Felix, Roman procurator of Palestine. Paul reasoned with Felix about “justice (*dikaiosunē*) and self-control and the coming judgment” (Acts 24:24, 25). Elsewhere Paul urged the followers of Jesus to give careful thought to “whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just . . . Whatever you have been taught and taken over and heard and seen in me, do!” (Philippians 4:8, 9). Paul acknowledged that justice and injustice continue side by side in this world and even among Christians. Some Christians owned slaves and Paul urged them: “Treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have an ‘Owner’ in heaven” (Colossians 4:1).

Justice returns to the cosmos

However, Peter and Paul understood that justice would not fully return to this world in its fallen state. That could happen only after God brings this world to His own court of justice for judgment. Paul stated this in his speech at the Aeropagus, the meeting place of a prestigious court in the city of Athens: “[God] has set a day on which he will judge the world by justice” (Acts 17:31). No-one can avoid their day in that divine court: “It is necessary that we all appear at Christ’s judgment bench so we can receive the consequences of what we have persisted in doing, whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5:10) and “The one doing wrong will be paid back for the wrong he does, and there is no favouritism” (Colossians 3:25).

At that time, God will reveal all the injustices ever done. There can be no cover-ups: “God judges the secrets of humans through Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:16). Both the victims of injustice and its perpetrators will face the full and complete account of what really happened, the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Then they will be dealt with according to justice as only God knows and exercises it.

Both the victims of injustice and its perpetrators will face the full and complete account of what really happened.

Faithful Bible, faithful justice

Our opening question—“What place does justice have in the Bible?”—has been answered by arguing that justice is central in the Bible’s message. From beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible sustains the story of justice. It begins with an account of justice imparted, then lost. As part of the character of God, justice was woven into creation and embedded in the directions He gave about the consequence of doing what was clearly forbidden. The blood of Abel, the first murder victim, took up the cry for God to restore justice. It remains

a core theme through the Bible. Justice was learnable and doable by God's people, Israel. Justice was a core teaching of Jesus for His followers and for the nations. At the cross, justice defeated injustice, making possible the good news that justice will finally be restored to the cosmos. Justice is such a core theme of the Bible that it is not possible to "take in" its full message without recognising the place of justice.

In answer to the second question—"Is there really enough justice in the Bible?"—note that the first to criticise the "justice" of God's justice was the serpent in the Garden of Eden, with devastating results. From that day until the present, the quantity and quality of biblical justice is questioned and doubted. A few seemingly unjust commands and acts are appealed to, often out of context, to question God's justice. The answer to such criticism is summed up by one word: "context." Every Bible passage has a context. Every command, every action, every narrative needs to be read in the all-important, three-part context of the character of God, the Cross and the Second Coming.

And the Bible's closing message is that it's just a short time, by God's timetable, before the return of justice to the cosmos: "We wait for a new heaven and a new earth, in which justice (*dikaionē*) lives" (2 Peter 3:13).

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1. Charles Darwin believed that the human sense of "how each member ought to act for the public good" came about after the evolution of human social instincts and the ability to speak. See his *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Vol 1, John Murray, 1871, page 72.
2. Plato, *Republic* 338C.
3. All Bible passages cited in this chapter are the author's translations. Behind the occurrence of the word "justice" in each Old Testament passage cited in this chapter stands the Hebrew word *mišpat* (pronounced *mishpat*, stress on first syllable). The definitions that fit the passages cited in this chapter include "the principle of conduct that conforms to [righteousness]" and "the sense of right as a principle."—B Johnson, article *mišpat* in Botterweck, Ringgren & Fabry (editors), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol 9, Eerdmans, 1998, page 93.
4. Hebrew *gēr* is usually translated "sojourner, foreigner, stranger" but the word "immigrant" seems closer to the sort of person referred to in its 92 Hebrew Bible occurrences. "*Gēr* is a man who (alone or with his family) leaves village and tribe because of war . . . famine . . . epidemic, blood guilt, etc, and seeks shelter and residence at another place, where his right of landed property, marriage and taking part in jurisdiction, cult and war has been curtailed."—Koehler-Baumgartner-Stamm-Richardson (editors), *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, E J Brill, 2001, page 201.
5. F W Danker (editor), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (3rd edition), University of Chicago Press, 2000, pages 247–8.