

Righteousness and Mercy in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Terminology

There has been quite a lot of study of biblical terms that we translate in modern English as righteousness (Hebrew: *tsedaqah*), justice (*mishpat*), mercy (*Rakhum*), compassion (*khanan*), kindness (*khesed*), faithfulness ('*emet*/'*emunah*), etc. We now claim to be more aware than our forebears about the complexity of translation and the limited ability of one language to express adequately the meaning of terms in another language. Thus, attention to context indicates that biblical righteousness is not primarily a juridical or legal term but a relational one. A person is righteous when he or she is in a proper relationship with another, be it God or a fellow human being, not so much when one conforms to certain norms. What characterizes a proper or right relationship is loyalty. According to OT thinking a loyal relationship is a loving relationship, hence we need to be cautious about applying our western romantic notion of love to the biblical use of the term. Loyalty or love in the biblical sense is about how you live or conduct yourself. One needs to know how to do this and this is where instruction and law come in. These outline the framework within which relationships are loyal. It is a world of order that reflects the dynamic order of creation that God has established. According to biblical thinking, a person who conducts himself or herself according to the instructions of Torah, is living in harmony with God, neighbour and creation. Life will flourish. The implication of this of course is that God, the source of our righteousness or right relationships, must be the righteous one par-excellence.

The related biblical term that is often translated as justice is now regarded as referring to particular decisions or judgements that seek to uphold righteousness and identify cases where it has been abused. The role of the biblical judge was to maintain and restore right relationships, in other words, to uphold righteousness.

The biblical term often translated as mercy derives from the Hebrew word for womb. Like righteousness, it conveys the sense of an attitude rather than a feeling, although the latter is not excluded. Again, the emphasis seems to fall on the notion of relationship and a commitment to heal or restore a relationship that is in some way damaged or missing something. One should be merciful towards the widow, the stranger, the orphan, etc; that is, one should seek to ensure that they enjoy appropriate relationships within the community and this will of course involve making decisions and judgements. In other words, it will involve justice or righteousness. There are a number of biblical terms that are associated with mercy

and are variously translated as compassion, kindness, faithfulness (a key notion in the biblical idea of truth), and favour or grace. As with righteousness, God is believed to be the source of all these ways of acting or relating to another and shows Israel how to do so in an appropriately human way. Hence there are instructions about how to be compassionate, kind, merciful and gracious and the aim of them is to bring about righteousness—the right relationships without which human life cannot flourish. The theology of a righteous and just God means that God is always portrayed as intolerant of evil that disturbs or threatens right relationships, identifying evil and evildoers, punishing them and rescuing their victims. God judges the evildoer and is compassionate and faithful to the one wronged or abused. Hence, God's intolerance of evil is an integral part of God's resolve to bring about the establishment of right relationships—in this alone lies the good of humanity and creation.

Terminology in Context

The preceding remarks provide a very brief sketch of what I hope are two key theological principles that course through the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and through the New Testament—righteousness/justice and mercy/compassion. The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament does not define them neatly for us; instead we gain an idea of their meaning from reading the biblical text, in particular the Pentateuch or Torah, which occupies the primary place in the HB/OT as the Gospels do in the NT. What is striking is that these key components of human life and their relationship with one another are explored in both HB/OT and NT in the context of a story. Context is almost everything and in my judgement it was a truly inspired move by biblical authors to instruct their readers about justice and mercy in the context of a story that embraces creation, humanity and the chosen people Israel. The book of Genesis proclaims continuity between the story of Israel's ancestors and the whole of creation via the table of the nations in Genesis 11 and thence to the account of creation in the earlier chapters of the book. As **John Barton** notes 'this has important consequences for the character of God as understood in the religious tradition of Israel, since it means that one and the same God is responsible for *both* creating the world *and* for directing its subsequent history' (*Reading the Old Testament* [2d. ed., DLT, 1996] 48). It claims moreover that God has a purpose that is signalled at the point in the text that creation takes place and that this divine purpose for creation unfolds in time and in the complex and seemingly chaotic arena of human history. No matter how fragmented and, from our point of view, separated the various strands of the human story may seem, they are embraced within the story of God's creation which God is bringing to its fulfilment (according to the claims of the story's authors). The story of Israel

and humanity as it unfolds in the Bible—and the various stories within this story—enables us as readers to explore the links between righteousness and compassion, even though the characters in the story are portrayed at times as not seeing such connections. They may feel threatened by chaos and meaninglessness (cf. the lament psalms). Given that God is instructing us through the Bible, this is meant to help us discern connections between righteousness and compassion in our own lives—our stories—and give us the courage and confidence to make decisions. To put this another way, our particular stories occur within the larger story that is about God and creation. We are meant to be creative but the biblical claim is that we can only be so within the context that God establishes. Our creativity and freedom are real but limited. This is captured in the garden story by the boundaries, the permissions and prohibition, the context in which the couple are meant to live and work—to be creative.

Some Guidelines for Reading Texts

I would now like to explore the notions of righteousness and mercy/compassion a little more by way of some examples from the Torah. In doing so we need to keep in mind not only the context of the text we are examining but also the context of ancient Israel. While we believe there is revelatory teaching (torah) in the text, we can't expect it always or even often to speak immediately to our modern world: a certain amount of translation or interpretation is necessary. This is part of the invitation and challenge to be creative that I believe is an integral aspect of the role of the Bible in our lives. We also need to remember that even though the authors of the Torah were inspired they still had to make use of the limited tools of human communication—forms of speech and writing in their culture. Each literary form, whether story, song or law code, enabled them to be creative but also imposed certain limitations. The same goes for us in our culture with its peculiar ways of communication. We can't say everything that may need to be said and we have to make selections. Otherwise, we would never finish our discourse and I am sure all would agree that this is not desirable!

Reading the Torah, you will notice that righteousness and compassion only emerge as topics within the context of evil/sin. The story of the couple in the garden portrays humanity as prone to inordinate desires (to be like God on their terms) that lead to boundary violations and a distorted perception of reality. Once outside the appropriate context established by God, evil comes to be seen as good and vice versa. God enters this distorted context to instruct human beings to distinguish clearly between good and evil; to do the former and avoid the latter. In other words, to be righteous/just and merciful/compassionate.

Comment on a Selection of Biblical Literary Forms (story/narrative, law, song)

The Flood Story

According to **Christopher Booker** (*The Seven Basic Plots*, London: Continuum, 2004), one of the most popular plots in human storytelling is overcoming the monster, or the battle against evil. It permeates our reading, our TV viewing, our movies and our computer games. One direction this story can take is where evil or the monster wins—a Greek version of this is called tragedy. The other direction is where good triumphs over evil—a Greek version of this is called comedy. According to **Francesca Aran Murphy**, the Bible is a comedy not a tragedy (*The Comedy of Revelation: Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained in Biblical Narrative* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000). Perhaps it is not accidental therefore that one of the paradigmatic stories in the Bible is about the hero God overcoming the monster or evil and bringing about good. This is the flood story and the plot establishes a kind of template that recurs in various forms throughout the Torah and the Prophets. What is striking about this story and subsequent ones in the Bible is that the monster, the evil, is humanity. We can be/are the most dangerous creatures in creation. According to the flood story human beings corrupt all living things on earth (fish are not mentioned) and the earth becomes filled with violence or chaos. The righteous God of order must be portrayed in the story acting to root out this evil and re-establish order—for the good of creation—otherwise the Bible's notion of God is in danger of being deeply compromised. This is done in our story via the highly ordered flood: it is not a return to pre-creation chaos but the elimination of it. The flood is not evil although evil human beings will experience or 'see' it as such because of their completely distorted perception of reality. Rather, the flood removes evil.

In this kind of story telling one needs a hero or heroic group to survive the crisis, otherwise end of story and no further chance to promote one's theology. Besides what am I a human being doing telling this story about the end of humanity if there are no survivors? To meet this need, the story introduces Noah as one who alone 'walked with God' and was pronounced righteous by God (7:1). God is the authority on this because God is the source of all righteousness. Noah obeys God's orders and he and his family are protected. But in 8:21 God announces rather strangely that there will never be another flood, not because Noah is righteous, but because the 'imagination of the human heart is evil from its youth'. Here we have an example of how the mythic mode of storytelling is able to combine things that seem to us radically opposed. The flood states that God is intolerant of evil; it is the irruption of

chaos in God's good creation and must be eliminated. But the culprit, the human being, is incapable of change—the imagination of its heart is evil from its youth—as will be verified by the subsequent portrayal of Noah and his family. To overcome this seeming theological impasse, the story appeals to the compassion of God, who resolves never to unleash another flood. But this compassion must also be righteous, acting to bring about a true relationship between God and humanity, otherwise the text would create an intolerable tension between divine righteousness and compassion. Hence, the post-flood scenario has God providing instructions about how flawed human beings are to relate to one another and to the living creatures of the earth in a righteous and just way (9:1-7). This is followed by a covenant that underscores God's ongoing commitment to humanity. But God's commitment must also have a purpose and this is revealed via the choice of Israel's ancestors from among the nations in the genealogy of Genesis 11. The implication is that this divine plan to bring flawed humanity and creation to its fulfilment is at once righteous and compassionate.

The Story of the Ancestors of Israel

One does not have to go far into the story of Israel's ancestors before righteousness and its relationship to compassion surfaces. When, after initial failures, Abraham trusts God's word in Genesis 15, he is deemed at rights with God. In the famous dialogue between Abraham and God over the fate of the just in the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham asks 'shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just'? In reply, God says that he will spare the cities even if there are only 10 just people in them. One could take this as a sign of divine compassion or mercy but Abraham's question was about God's justice. Within the context therefore, God gives a just judgement that is at the same time a compassionate one.

The Story of Israel

The story of Israel as a people opens with the story of its enslavement by the evil Pharaoh and its deliverance by a compassionate God through God's faithful servant and hero, Moses. We have here another example of the 'overcoming evil' plot, a kind of retake of the flood story applied to the battle or conflict between two nations. In this story, Egypt gets to play the role of the monster while Israel is the victim, delivered via its loyal (sic. righteous) hero Moses. The freedom from evil and chaos won in the exodus is then enshrined in the covenant and law proclaimed at Mt. Sinai. Keeping the commandments does not win Israel a righteous relationship with God; this depends completely on God as Deuteronomy 7 points out later in the Torah. Obedience to the commandments is Israel's right or righteous response to God's

gift and enables it to live a life of freedom and order—a righteous life. In keeping with the garden story, human beings can only be truly free within a context or boundary established by God. It is a created freedom.

A Law Text

A particular and more mundane example of the relationship between righteousness and compassion can be seen in the law about making loans in Deut 24:10-13. If a poor person provides a cloak as pledge for a loan, the lender is to give it back at sunset so the poor person can sleep in it. We might see this as a kindness but Deuteronomy sees it as the righteous thing to do. In the relationship between the parties established by the law of loans, this is the way to maintain a right and just relationship; in other words to be loyal to it (the NRSV does not translate this well).

A Song about Israel (Deuteronomy 32)

A final example can be taken from one of the last texts of the Torah, the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, his farewell aria. This is an important text because it functions as a kind of overall summary of the story of Israel. The song commences with the faith claim that all the works of God are faithful, without deceit. 'Just and upright is he'. The righteousness and justice of God is then contrasted with the falsity and deceit of the chosen people. How has God shown righteousness to the people? According to the subsequent verses of the song, it has been through God's care of the people from their journey through the howling desert to the bounty of the land. One can see here the flexibility of the biblical terminology. Righteousness and Justice become as it were compassion and deliverance (cf. also Psalm 85:10). One finds a similar example in the song of Deborah in Judg 5:11 which uses the Hebrew term for righteousness but which the NRSV correctly translates in the context as 'the triumphs of the Lord'. God showed loyalty to the people by delivering them from their enemies. But, to return to our deuteronomic poem, it claims that Israel's response to God's loyalty was gross disloyalty, abandoning the Lord for other gods. According to Torah and the prophetic books, this leads to abandonment of righteousness and compassion and their relationship to one another, and, what is worse, their replacement with distorted notions of the duo that do violence to human life rather than enhance it. It is akin to the chaos that erupts in the prologue to the flood story and, in accord with that paradigm story, such evil needs to be confronted and eliminated.

However, the song proclaims that God resolved not to destroy faithless Israel but to show them favour (NRSV 'have compassion'; cf. Deut 32:36). Why so? Not because of God's loyalty to or love for Israel—although this is a reason given in other texts such as Deuteronomy 7—but because of God's loyalty to God. God would not sever the relationship with Israel because this would cause its enemies to develop a distorted perception of reality (cf. the garden story) and deny God's hand in the unfolding of history, both of Israel and their own. Because this text comes at the end of the Torah, I would judge that it offers a primary reason why God would not destroy the relationship with Israel—it is above all for God's sake, and this is the supremely just and compassionate thing to do. It is only when God is manifested to all and acknowledged by all as the one true and righteous God that everything else can find its proper place. God acting for God's sake means that God acts for the good of Israel and through it for humanity and for all the living things on earth (the heavens and earth itself do not seem to fall within this theological schema but are more directly under the guiding hand of God—cf. Genesis 1).

Concluding Remarks

To translate or interpret this in relation to our world, it is only God who is able to show how the seemingly fragmented strands of our lives, both as individuals and as societies, belong together within the divine purpose which is to lead us to 'see' and honour God. If we accept this then we can begin to sort out the righteous relationships from the unrighteous ones (which are not real relationships) and to understand that God's compassion aims to restore right relationships, with God above all and, in the light of this, with one another. At times we might think that it is too late to sort out the frayed strands of our lives or that it is just beyond us. But it is never too late for God or impossible for God who comes to enable us to make decisions, not to impose on us. One way of being decisive about our lives is to examine them honestly within the context that our faith provides. If we do this, we will see some stories/events in which we have overcome the monster and displayed righteousness. We will see others where we have failed. We will also see, hopefully, that both successes and failures fall within the infinite embrace of God's guidance of human history—the great comedy working towards its fulfilment. Advent is a timely reminder that our past, both bad and good, does not have the final word. There is always much more to come, an eternity of it in fact. Even if our particular stories fail to manifest righteousness and compassion at times, they do not fall outside the embrace of divine righteousness and compassion.