

RIGHTEOUSNESS (Hebrew קָדַשׁ, *tsdq*;, הַקְדָּשׁ, *tsedaqah*;, קִידָשׁ, *tsaddiq*; Greek δικαιοσύνη, *dikaioσynē*, δίκαιος, *dikaios*). The quality, state, and characteristic of being in the right.

The English word “righteousness” refers to the quality of being righteous or in the right and is cognate to “just,” “justness,” and “justice.” In biblical usage, “righteousness” possesses ethical, forensic, salvific, and socioreligious connotations, depending on the context. Generally speaking, in relation to God, “righteousness” can refer to a divine attribute or to a divine activity, while in relation to human subjects, “righteousness” primarily denotes a legal and social status or a moral state.

Righteousness in the Jewish World

Understanding righteousness in its Jewish context requires the examination of key words in the Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, and early Judaism.

Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew words *tsdq*, *tsedaqah*, and *tsdyq* are ordinarily translated as “righteous” or “just,” as they pertain to doing right or being just. Scholars debate whether the underlying root concept means adherence to a norm, or right relationship. On the former, we read in Jer 4:2 about an oracle where Israel is urged to confess “in truth, in justice, and in righteousness” that Yahweh will bless the nations, and “righteousness” here is defined by the norms of truth telling and performing justice. For the latter, we might consider Gen 38:26, where Judah declares that Tamar “is more righteous than I” because, despite her deception of Judah where “she played the whore” (Gen 38:24), Tamar found a way around her father-in-law’s recalcitrance so she could fulfill her social obligations to produce an heir for her deceased husband. It is probably better not to play off normativity and relational notions of righteousness against each other. That is because while it is a linguistic mistake to try to attribute to *tsdq* any single *Grundbegriff* (i.e., overarching concept), it would appear that *tsdq* is associated with a web of concepts related to normativity and legitimacy, yet it is social and covenantal relationships that provide the norm itself.

In the Hebrew Bible, righteousness is often attributed to key figures for their upright and just behavior. For example, Noah “was a righteous man, without defect in his generations” (Gen 6:9; compare Gen 7:1). God chose Abraham so that he would “command his children and his household after him that they will keep the way of Yahweh, to do righteousness and justice” (Gen 18:19). Abraham pleaded with God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if 10 righteous men could be found (Gen 18:22–33). Jacob claimed that he showed “righteousness” in his dealings with Laban (Gen 30:33), and Judah had to admit that Tamar was “more righteous” because she raised up seed for her late husband (Gen 38:26). In Psalm 1, sinners cannot stand in the congregation of the righteous, and the Lord knows the way of the righteous (Psa 1:5–6). The book of Proverbs/ attests the close correlation of righteousness with justice. For example, Proverbs 12 says, “The thoughts of the righteous are just” (Prov 12:5; compare Prov 20:7; 29:7). Ezekiel refers to a righteous person as one who does justice (מִשְׁפָּט, *mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedaqah*; Ezek 18:5).

In addition, the standard of the law code given to Israel determines the meaning of righteousness. The Israelites are admonished to protect the integrity of those who are innocent and righteous (Exod 23:7–8; Deut 1:16), and Israel “shall be [righteous]” if they do all that God commands (Deut 6:25). The connection between righteousness and law observance is underscored by Ezekiel: “And if a man is righteous and does justice and righteousness, and on the mountains he does not eat and he does not lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, and the wife of his neighbor he does not defile and he does not approach a woman of menstruation, and he oppresses no one and he returns a pledge for his loan and he commits no robbery and he gives his bread to the hungry and he covers a naked person with a garment, and he does not charge interest and he takes no usury, and he holds back his hand from injustice and he executes a judgment of fairness between persons, and in my statutes he goes about and my regulations he keeps, performing faithfully—then he is righteous, and certainly he will live” (Ezek 18:5–9).

The underlying rationale for human righteousness is that God is righteous (e.g., Pss 11:7; 119:137; 129:4; 145:17; Jer 12:1; Dan 9:14). Similarly, the Israelites should not acquit the wicked, since God does not do so (e.g., Exod 23:7; Job 10:14–15; Isa 5:23; Mic 6:11; compare Sirach 42:2). Consequently, in many places in the Hebrew Bible, righteousness has a strong forensic character and pertains to executing justice in the court of law and ensuring right treatment of persons in social frameworks (Lev 19:15; Deut 1:16–17; 16:18–20; 25:1).

The Hebrew Bible depicts righteousness not only as a divine quality but as a divine action. The Song of Moses eulogizes God’s saving action in the exodus, noting that “all his ways are just; he is a faithful God, and without injustice; righteous and upright is he” (Deut 32:4). The judges Deborah and Barak sing about the “righteous deeds of Yahweh” after the defeat of the Canaanite king Jabin (Judg 5:11). The prophet Samuel testified against King Saul by recounting to him “all the deeds of justice of Yahweh that he performed with both you and your ancestors” (1 Sam 12:7). The link between God’s righteous character and his righteous actions stems from his commitment as ruler of the universe to execute justice for the world, including the monarchy, the Israelites, and the nations. Abraham pleads to God to deliver the righteous in Sodom by asking, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?” (Gen 18:25). Jeremiah rehearses God’s claim that “I am Yahweh, showing loyal love, justice, and righteousness on the earth” (Jer 9:24). The psalmist writes similarly: “Yahweh sits enthroned forever. He has established his throne for judgment. And he will judge the world with righteousness. He will judge the peoples with equity” (Psa 9:7–8). Isaiah announces: “For as the earth produces its sprout, and as a garden makes its plants sprout, so the Lord Yahweh will make righteousness sprout, and praise before all the nations” (Isa 61:11; compare Isa 62:2). God ultimately intends to flood the world with justice and put the nations and all of creation to rights.

God’s just reign over his creation also includes establishing Israel in the right. For example, the psalmist praises God’s reign over Israel by declaring, “You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob” (Psa 99:4). God in his righteousness could prosecute the curses of the covenant by contending against Israel on account of its unrighteousness (see Isa 1:21; 5:7; Amos 5:21–24). Yet at the same time, God chooses to deliver Israel from judgment as a display of his righteousness, which is why “righteousness” can also be correlated with God’s salvation, vindication, mercy, and faithfulness (Pss 7:10–11; 36:5–6; 71:15–16; 96:13; 143:1, 11; Isa 45:8; 46:12–13; 56:1; Jer 51:10; Dan 9:18; Mic 7:9; Hos 2:19;

Zech 8:8). Similarly, one of the penitential psalms reads, “Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, the God of my salvation; then my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness” (Psa 51:14). Isaiah also correlates righteousness with salvation: “My righteousness is near; my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples ... my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will not be broken to pieces” (Isa 51:5–6).

At the same time, the Hebrew Bible speaks of God establishing right for both the nations and Israel: “Yahweh has made known his salvation; to the eyes of the nations he has revealed his righteousness. He has remembered his loyal love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God ... Yahweh, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity” (Psa 98:2–3, 9).

The dual nature of God’s righteousness in the Old Testament, then, is that it includes both His judgment against human wickedness and His faithfulness to deliver His covenant people from wickedness.

Septuagint

The translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek led to words with the *tsdq* root being rendered most commonly with *dikaiosynē* for “righteousness” and “justice,” though periodically other Hebrew words like “judgment” (*mishpat*), “truth” (תְּמִימָה, *emeth*), and “mercy” (חֶסֶד, *chesed*) were also translated as *dikaiosynē*. In Greek, the semantic range of *dikaiosynē* is related to the fulfillment of one’s civic and familial duties (e.g., Plato, *Republic*, 433a), a distributive justice with giving each their due (e.g., Aristotle, *Rhet.*, 1.9), and virtue, as in the case of Theognis of Megara, who said, “All virtue is summarized in justice” (*Elegiae*, 1.147). Whereas the Hebrew notion of righteousness is closely aligned with the demands of the covenant, the translation of *tsdq* into Greek led to a broadening of the concept with various religious and ethical connotations related to the wider Graeco-Roman world.

Early Judaism

Jewish authors writing in the intertestamental and apostolic periods inherited the biblical language for righteousness and modified it in light of their own sectarian interpretation, apocalyptic worldview, and sapiential piety. It is possible to detect a strong emphasis on righteousness as doing God’s will. Ben Sirach comments, “Those who fear the Lord will form true judgments, and they will kindle righteous deeds like a light” (Sirach 32:16 NRSV). In 1 Enoch we read, “I say to you: Love righteousness and walk therein” (1 Enoch 94.1). For Josephus, a virtuous person like David is one “who is beautiful in piety, and righteousness, and fortitude, and obedience” (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 6.160).

Elsewhere, God’s righteousness is the basis for His judgment in delivering the righteous and destroying the wicked. Accordingly, several writings from this period describe God’s righteousness in terms of His faithfulness and mercy for Israel (e.g., Tobit 3:2; 2 Maccabees 1:24–29; 1QS 1:21–22). In the Damascus Document we read, “Salvation and righteousness will be revealed to those who fear God” (CD 20.20). Baruch asserts that “God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him” (Baruch 5:9 NRSV). In extant Jewish literature, righteousness is God’s expectation of humanity and characterizes God’s activity in His judgment of the wicked and His faithfulness to Israel.

Righteousness in the Christian World

Understanding righteousness in the Christian world involves situating the language in the coordinates of salvation in Christ and the ethical imperatives that this creates for believers.

The Gospels

References to the words “righteousness” and “just” in the Gospels are fewest in Mark and John but more prevalent in Matthew and Luke.

Mark records that Jesus came to call sinners rather than the righteous (Mark 2:17) and that Herod Antipas knew John the Baptist to be a righteous man (Mark 6:20). The Johannine Jesus refers to His judgment as “just” (John 5:30), and He tells the Jews to judge His actions justly (John 7:24). The ministry of the Paraclete (i.e., Holy Spirit) in the Fourth Gospel is to judge the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8, 10). In His high priestly prayer, Jesus addresses God as “Righteous Father” (John 17:25).

Luke uses “righteousness” primarily to denote an upright piety before God. On several occasions Luke refers to righteous people like Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–6), Simeon (Luke 2:25), Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50), Cornelius (Acts 10:22), and even Jesus (Luke 23:41, 47), who is called “the Righteous One” (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14). John the Baptist would have an Elijah-like ministry that would turn “the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous” (Luke 1:17). In Mary’s Magnificat, she prays that Israel would be able to serve God in “holiness and righteousness” (Luke 1:75). According to Luke, Jesus condemns those who would justify themselves or consider themselves to be righteous (Luke 16:15; 18:9). Luke’s Gospel also emphasizes that Jesus’ ministry offers repentance to sinners rather than the righteous (Luke 5:32; 15:7). Luke also uses the term to describe the future resurrection as “the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:14).

Matthew’s use of righteousness language is the most complex among the Gospels. In some instances “righteousness” is tantamount to salvation. For example, John the Baptist’s message of repentance and baptism can be abbreviated as the “way of righteousness” (Matt 21:32). However, Matthew also uses “righteousness” in other ways. According to Matthew, John baptized Jesus in order to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15). Jesus pronounced a blessing for those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt 5:6) and those who are “persecuted because of righteousness” (Matt 5:10), and He told the crowds to “seek first [God’s] kingdom and righteousness” (Matt 6:33). Furthermore, Matthew depicts Jesus as particularly focused on a ministry to sinners rather than to the righteous (Matt 9:13). While Jesus affirmed the righteousness of various persons (Matt 10:41; 13:17; 23:29, 35), He also censured the scribes and Pharisees for asserting their own righteousness (Matt 23:27–28). Disciples need a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20), which is why they must not be hypocritical or pretentious (Matt 6:1). The righteous should “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt 13:43). God’s common mercy extends to the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:44–45), yet at the final judgment, there will be a separation of the wicked from the righteous (Matt 12:35–37; 13:49); the righteous will be rewarded (Matt 10:41; 25:46); and salvation is a matter of responding to God’s call rather than meriting it by effort (Matt 20:11–15).

Pauline Epistles

Generally speaking Paul uses the noun *dikaiosynē* to refer to the behavior that God requires of people. For example, Romans 6 is full of exhortations that urge believers to offer themselves in service to righteousness rather than to sin (Rom 6:13, 16, 18, 19, 20). Paul can also refer to the “fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:11). This meaning of righteousness denotes an ethical trait that is coordinate with peace, joy, holiness, goodness, truth, nobility, loveliness, praiseworthiness, blamelessness, godliness, and self-control (Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 4:24; 5:9; Phil 4:8; 1 Thess 2:10; 2 Tim 2:22; Titus 1:8).

In other places *dikaiosynē* can signify eschatological salvation and final justification. For example, in Romans 10:10 Paul writes, “For with the heart one believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses, resulting in salvation.” Similarly, Galatians 5:5 declares that “through the Spirit by faith [believers] eagerly await the hope of righteousness” (see also Rom 2:13; 3:25–26; 4:1–6, 11, 22; 5:21; Gal 2:21; 3:6). In addition, Paul can also refer to his apostolic ministry as pertaining to *dikaiosynē*, a “ministry of righteousness,” in the sense that it proclaims and embodies divine righteousness (2 Cor 3:9).

More contentious is the meaning of “God’s righteousness” or the “righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, *dikaiosynē theou*) as Paul expounds it in Rom 1:17, 3:5, 21; 10:3; 2 Cor 5:21; and Phil 3:9. The main interpretations of the meaning of this phrase are:

1. an attribute or quality of God, i.e., God’s own inherent uprightness;
2. a punitive divine quality, i.e., God’s righteous judgment against wickedness;
3. a quality imputed to believers from God, i.e., a righteousness from God;
4. a righteousness standard before God, i.e., a righteousness that avails before God;
5. God’s covenant faithfulness, i.e., God’s faithfulness to His saving promises in salvation; or
6. God’s saving righteousness, i.e., the saving action of God manifest in Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, the meaning of the phrase the “righteousness of God” depends on the context in which it occurs. In some places the phrase likely refers to (1) above, the character of God (Rom 3:5), or to (3), a righteous status from God that is given to believers (Phil 3:9). However, in Romans, God’s righteousness approximates to and consists of (6)—the saving power of God whereby He establishes justice in creation, demonstrates His faithfulness to the covenant, and establishes the righteousness of believers through Christ.

General Letters and Revelation

The General Letters typically identify *dikaiosynē* with upright behavior that God requires of His people, sometimes in relation to the righteousness that is apprehended by faith.

The author of Hebrews extols Christ as the divine Son who “loved righteousness” (Heb 1:9; Psa 45:7). The author summarizes Christian teaching as “the message of righteousness” (Heb 5:13). Like Paul, the author also quotes Hab 2:4—“my righteous one will live by faith”—in order to exhort his audience to persevere under hardship (Heb 10:38 NIV; compare Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11). The author identifies faith as an instrument for attaining righteousness: “By faith Abel offered to God a greater sacrifice than Cain, by which he was approved that he was righteous,” and “by faith Noah ... became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith” (Heb 11:4, 7). Furthermore, the Lord’s discipline produces “the peaceful fruit of righteousness,” and those in heaven are described as “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Heb 12:11, 23 ESV).

James uses the term primarily in an ethical sense. For example, he states that anger does not produce the “righteousness of God” (Jas 1:20) and claims that those who sow in peace reap the “fruit of righteousness” (Jas 3:18). The ethical sense of the term is also evident in James’ censure of those who would condemn and murder a “righteous person” (Jas 5:6) and in his claim about the effectiveness of the prayer of a “righteous person” (Jas 5:16). There is a robust discussion of righteousness and justification in Jas 2, where James quotes Gen 15:6 with a view to demonstrate that justification is by faith and works (Jas 2:23–24). This view of righteousness, which is probably a correction to distortions of Pauline teaching, stresses that faith should result in faithful behavior, a point with which Paul would likely agree (see Gal 5:6).

In the letters of Peter, Jesus is said to have died a substitutionary death on the cross for believers—“the just for the unjust” (1 Pet 3:18)—so that believers might “live to righteousness” (1 Pet 2:24). First Peter also stresses the importance of righteous moral behavior since “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous” (1 Pet 3:12). The letter also states that if believers suffer, it should be for doing what is right rather than for wrong (1 Pet 3:14). The author of the letter further underscores the importance of righteousness by declaring that “the righteous are saved with difficulty” (1 Pet 4:18) in the sense that all face the judgment of God. Second Peter begins with a description of the “righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:1), which is a righteousness that avails before God. The letters of Peter present those who embody this righteousness. Second Peter describes Noah as “a proclaimer of righteousness” (2 Pet 2:5) and refers to Lot as a “righteous man” with a “righteous soul” (2 Pet 2:7–8). The letter refers to false teachers as those who do not follow “the way of righteousness” (2 Pet 2:21). By contrast, those who would live holy and godly lives can expect to share in a “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness resides” (2 Pet 3:13).

In the Johannine letters, righteousness characterizes God, Jesus, and believers. God is acclaimed as righteous and just (1 John 1:9). Jesus is “the righteous one” (1 John 2:1). Righteousness also pertains to deeds and acts congruent with God’s will (1 John 2:29; 3:7, 10), and unrighteousness is a failure to do God’s will (1 John 1:9; 5:17). In the book of Revelation, much like in 1 John, righteousness is predicated of God (Rev 15:3; 16:5); God’s judgments (Rev 16:7; 19:2); Jesus who returns to judge the world in righteousness/justice (Rev 19:11); and the faithful who are called to refrain from evil and do righteousness (Rev 22:11).

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