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An Etymological Study of Δικαιοσύνη

Few words reveal the unique depth of Biblical thought more clearly than the New Testament concept of righteousness.¹⁾ It has been said of Paul that he used the language of his time but gave many of its terms a more profound spiritual significance.²⁾ What is true of Paul in this respect applies equally to the New Testament as a whole: its terminology is largely that of the *Koine* current in the first century of the Christian era; many an individual word, however, has a reach equal only to the scope of the hope born of the Christian faith itself.

To demonstrate the fact that the *righteousness* of the New Testament exceeds its antecedents, it is necessary but to reflect on the origin and the use of the word δικαιοσύνη. The Greek term as such seems to have come into use toward the end of the seventh and at the beginning of the sixth century B. C., as the by-product of a social revolution in the Greek trading cities on the coasts of Asia Minor.

The upheaval which gave birth to the term δικαιοσύνη followed fast on the heels of the introduction of coined money as a means of carrying on trade. A financial innovation of such potentialities quite naturally brought a new class of people to power in the city-states of the Ionian colonies. This precipitated a struggle with the landed aristocracy. During this contest for political control the citizenry began to demand written laws as guides for the conduct of each individual within the city-state. Hitherto the king and, in turn, the nobles had ruled and passed judgment on their own authority, by "divine right." Now, however, the Greeks of Asia Minor insisted on getting written laws, to which all, regardless of station or rank, should be required to submit in an orderly way. They wanted a share (δίκη) in the government.³⁾ When such demands were met, the authors of the new laws were put alongside the ancient poets as teachers and prophets of the people.

In this way the Greek concept of the city-state, in a constitutional sense, came into being. Now, it is not a far step from accepting lawgivers as divine teachers to making their directions the standard of private conduct. That is precisely the course taken: the demands and requirements of the city-state determined the ethical quality of a man's private as well as of his public behavior.

1) Δικαιοσύνη in the N. T. and LXX; דִּקְיָוּה, in Hebrew.

2) Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (Macmillan, 1928), devotes a whole chapter (VII) to the discussion of different words whose significance has been improved by Paul.

3) W. Jaeger, *Paideia* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1936), pp. 144, 145.

It is at this point that the term "righteousness" came into use. The "righteous" man was he who subordinated all private interests to the welfare of his community as a whole. He was one who showed respect for the share (δίκη) of his fellow-citizens in the affairs of the πόλις. The term "righteousness" was used to denote this political, or social, virtue which was coextensive with good citizenship. In its first stage *righteousness* applied to the relationship of men to each other as fellow-citizens, inspired and directed by the conclusions of lawgivers, whose wisdom was thought to have a direct divine source.

It was but natural that the processes of law as observed in the government of the city-state came to be thought of as the visible counterpart of similar planning in the world order (κόσμος). As a consequence the philosophy of that time gave the term δικαιοσύνη a more metaphysical turn. One of the Ionian philosophers speaks of the "righteous" universal order in this way: "Things give satisfaction (δίκη) and reparation to one another for their injustice according to the arrangement made by Time."⁴ What is this but a description of the κόσμος as an enlarged πόλις? *Righteousness* thereby became the virtue of conforming one's life to the basic principles directing the πόλις in particular and the world order as a whole.

Heraclitus of Ephesus broadened the base of the word "righteousness" by maintaining that the individual as such, and not only a lawgiver, could attain to an understanding of the righteous principles at work in the κόσμος and their application to life, by developing the intellect (φρόνησις) to its fullest capacity. In other words, he consciously introduced the subjective element into the concept of δικαιοσύνη; for he looked upon his own enlightened reason (λόγος) as part of the world *logos*. *Righteousness* to him, therefore, meant following the dictates of a mind in tune with the basic order at work in the universe.⁵

In the mean time the religion of Delphi had infused all of Greek thought with the ideas of balance and measure to such an extent that the reason of a Greek thinker was sure to bow to the demand for σωφροσύνη. As a consequence the greatest of ancient treatises on *righteousness*, Plato's *Republic*,⁶ suffuses the whole conception of the term with the notions of balance and moderation.

The political color of δικαιοσύνη remains, however, also in Plato's thought; for in his great opus Socrates begins the dialog

4) Cf. W. Jaeger, *Solons Eunomie*, in "Sitz.-Ber. d. preuss. Ak. d. Wiss.," 1926, p. 79; Gilbert Murray, *Four Stages of Greek Religion*, p. 47.

5) On Heraclitus see Ritter and Preller, *Historia Philosophiae Graecae*, pp. 24-41 (Ed. X).

6) Whose subtitle is περί δικαιοσύνης.

by an attempt to arrive at a definition of *righteousness* in a city-state. He finally comes to the conclusion that political, or social, — the two were coextensive in Greek thought, — *righteousness* is the complete integration of all groups within the πόλις, of which Plato mentions three: the rulers, the watchmen, and the workers. When each of these groups, he maintains, performs the specific work for which it was born and brought up, the state can be called "righteous." In this sense, righteousness, as inherent in the state, "exalteth a nation."

Each of the three classes of people mentioned represents for Plato one part of the human soul. The rulers of the state are the counterpart of that function of the human soul which he calls φιλομαθής or λογιστικόν, the reasoning element. The θυμοειδής corresponds to the watchmen, determinately warding off harm from without and protecting against insurrection from within. The φιλοζήματων or ἐπιθυμητικόν, roughly the equivalent of the emotions, functions as do the unlearned and untrained workmen within the state. When every part of the soul carries out its specific function, the ψυχή is "righteous," according to the thought of Plato. In this sense, *righteousness* is approximately synonymous with what psychologists today call the integration of the personality.

Plato hardly ever thought of a human being as an entity apart from the city-state; and so his discussion of δικαιοσύνη was intended really as a guide for the training of political leaders. In the later chapters of his monumental work he outlines in detail how future rulers are to be trained in order to attain this quality of personal *righteousness*. Again the requirements of the πόλις create the necessity for, and set the standards of, *righteousness*.

In the generation after Plato, however, Alexander began his successful campaign for a world-empire; and with the fall of the Greek city-state as the definitive unit of government the political aspect of *righteousness* faded into the background or disappeared altogether. Men became more cosmopolitan and, as a consequence, more individualistic. The result was an increased emphasis on δικαιοσύνη as a psychological virtue, in the strict sense of the term. It became more subjective in its outlook, the standards differing according to the beliefs and needs of the individual, with varying emphasis on the will (Stoics), the emotions (Epicureans), or the intellect (Academy and Skeptics). *Righteousness* was still classified as an ethical virtue, but only because each individual became his own final authority. The fact is that it became less a virtue of action than a certain poise of the soul.⁷⁾

In the light of this background the New Testament use of the

7) Cf. fragments in Ritter and Preller, *op. cit.*, s. v. δικαιοσύνη.

word δικαιοσύνη takes on special significance. First of all, it should be clearly noted that the New Testament explodes the theory that man can develop standards of true righteousness out of himself; for "out of the heart proceed evil thoughts" and not noble desires. Chrysippus had said that "the source of righteousness is nothing but Zeus and our common nature [φύσις]";⁸⁾ and that accurately reflects the view of pagan philosophy and ethics in general. That the human φύσις can attain to the will of the Supreme Being and develop standards of conduct which conform to that will was (and still is) the common denominator of all philosophic systems. But this is the very first notion the New Testament scuttles. St. Paul is especially emphatic on this point when he says that "natural man [ψυχικός, his highest faculty!] receiveth not the things of the spirit of God," 1 Cor. 2:14.

The New Testament does speak of *righteousness*, however.⁹⁾ One of the very first words Jesus used in his public ministry was this term (Matt. 3:15), when he told John the Baptist: "Thus it becometh us to fulfil all *righteousness*." Zahn translates this word *Rechtsordnung*;¹⁰⁾ and Stoeckhardt says of it: "Was fuer die Menschen Gottes Recht und Ordnung war, das wollte Jesus erfuel-len."¹¹⁾ In other words, *righteousness* in Jesus' sense is submission to God's will, which at the outset reveals its Old Testament background.¹²⁾

Interestingly enough, the δικαιοσύνη of the Old Testament also had a political aspect, which on the surface looks quite similar to the term as it was used among the early Greeks. The Septuagint version of Prov. 8:15, for instance, reads: δι' ἐμοῦ βασιλεῖς βασιλεύουσιν, καὶ οἱ δυνάσται γράφουσιν δικαιοσύνην.¹³⁾ According to this passage the source of *righteousness* within a state or nation is God's will. In the case of the Old Testament, however, the will of God is not something vague and subjective, as it was in Greek thought, but something very definite and objective: His laws were put into writing, *expressis verbis*, in the very first stage of Israel's history as God's people.

This leads right into the second distinction between the *righteousness* of the Old Testament and that of ancient philosophy, namely, that God's unit of government is a kingdom, with but

8) Ritter and Preller, *op. cit.*, p. 482b.

9) Ninety-four times, to be exact.

10) "Kommentar."

11) "Biblische Geschichte des N. T.," p. 23.

12) Where, for example, we have Ps. 119:172, in its LXX translation: πᾶσαι αἱ ἐντολαὶ σου δικαιοσύνη.

13) Echoed in St. Paul's words ἡμῶν γὰρ πολιτεύματα ἐν οὐρανοῖς, Phil. 3:20.

one will as the norm for all who would follow the paths of righteousness.

When God first chose the descendants of Jacob, His will was to establish a *kingdom* of priests.¹⁴⁾ One of the characteristics of this kingdom was to be the willing subjection of each individual to the dictates of the divine will; and to make sure that Israel would know what the demands of this will were, laws were given to cover every phase of life: religious, social, political, cultural, and even hygienic. The many laws recorded in the books of Moses emphasize the point that *righteousness* consisted in following the precepts of God. Quite naturally, since a nation was to be established, there was much stress on the external observance of the prescribed rules.¹⁵⁾

No one, however, can read the Old Testament without perceiving that the concept of the kingdom of God and its *righteousness* basically is something spiritual. From the very beginning the principle was "to obey is better than sacrifice," 1 Sam. 15:22. The spiritual interpretation of the kingdom appears with special force just before the Exile and especially during it and after. The prophets point ever more emphatically to a new kingdom, whose subjects would do the will of God from the heart. "I will put My Law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts"¹⁶⁾ is the distinguishing feature of this new kingdom and its *righteousness*. This *righteousness* will consist in glad obedience to the precepts of the divine Law.¹⁷⁾

At times there is less emphasis on the civil and ceremonial laws; but everywhere mere external conformity is rejected as unsatisfactory and sinful (Is. 1).

In the prophets from Isaiah on to Malachi, and especially in the work of Amos, the social, or even political, side of this *righteousness* receives special emphasis. This is evident from such words as those of Amos, chap. 5:24: "But let judgment run down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream"; or again from Isaiah, chap. 5:7: "And He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry"; and still more clearly from Micah, chap. 7:2: "The good man is perished out of the earth, and there is none upright among men; they lie in wait for blood; they hunt every man his brother with a net."

The traditions of the elders debased this Old Testament

14) Ex. 19:6: מְמַלְכָה בְּהַרְיָם.

15) M. Reu, "Der biblische Begriff des Reiches Gottes," *Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, Aug. 1931, p. 552.

16) Jer. 31:33; cf. Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 456.

17) Cf. E. F. Scott, *The Kingdom of God* (Macmillan, 1931), pp. 96-110, on "The Kingdom and the New Righteousness."

concept of *righteousness* to refer to the accumulation of νόμοι and made it consist in the observance of all the written *and oral* laws of Moses. "If thou hast learned much Torah," said Rabbi Tarphon, "they [i. e., God] give thee much reward; and faithful is the Master of thy work, who will pay thee the reward of thy work; and know that the recompense of the reward of the righteous [sic!] is for the time to come."¹⁸⁾

The preaching of John and the doctrine of Jesus were bound to come into conflict with this literalistic and legalistic interpretation of the demands for *righteousness*. When John came, preaching repentance, he described as the fruits of this μετάνοια not the observance of Mosaic precepts as formulated by the scribes and Pharisees and elders of the people nor improvement by ascetic exercises but the practice of love toward one's neighbor in all situations and by all classes of people.¹⁹⁾ The term "righteousness" occurs again in the doctrine of Jesus in express criticism of the interpretation put upon this word by the religious leaders of His day. He says, Matt. 5:20: "I say unto you that, except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." It is clear from the verses which follow that what He is criticizing about their *righteousness* is the lack of stress on the demands of the Moral Law.

The term occurs also in the Beatitudes. "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled," Matt. 5:6. Whether it refers exclusively to observance of the law of love to one's neighbor or whether it includes the idea of love to God is hard to determine. Nor does it make much difference; for love to God and love to men cannot be separated. 1 John 4:20.

In its wider application the New Testament concept includes the demands of both tables of the Law. It is used in a narrower sense, however, in many cases, where it refers exclusively to man's relationship to man. The Christmas Epistle (Titus 2:11-14) shows this most clearly; for there man's attitude to God and his relationship to fellow-men are separated from each other by the use of two words: εὐσεβῶς, and δικαίως, of which the former refers to the fulfilment of the demands of the first table and the latter those of the second table of the Law.²⁰⁾ Here δικαιοσύνη includes

18) Mishna, *Aboth*, II, 19 (20); cf. W. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background* (London, 1936), p. 103.

19) Cf. especially Luke 3:10-14; see Zahn, *Grundriss der neutestamentlichen Theologie*, p. 9.

20) This passage is also interesting because it gathers up man's attitude to himself under the word σωφρόνως.

everything the individual owes to his neighbor, such as love and mercy, patience and gentleness, friendliness and mildness.²¹⁾

In other words, the concept of *righteousness*, true to its origin, pertains to a virtue of human relationships; but its content has been purified and immeasurably deepened. The old framework remains, but a new structure has been built up within it. The *righteousness* of the Holy Scripture flows from a new source, the Spirit of God;²²⁾ its compass has been increased to include love and all its subdivisions; and its intrinsic value has been increased, it is Godlike, deriving from above. We are well aware that the term *righteousness* as used in the Bible includes far more than we have brought out in this brief paper.

All this time it is the ethical *righteousness* of the New Testament which has been under consideration, not the *righteousness* of imputation. What makes us righteous in the sight of God is the righteousness of Christ, which becomes ours by justification through faith.

God's ultimate intention with men is to lead them into righteousness. Luther has given expression to this fact most beautifully in his explanation of the Second Article, where he posits as the final aim of Christ's redemptive work "that I may . . . serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."

Athens, Wis.

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21) M. Reu, *Notes to Epistle Pericopes*, p. 41.

22) Dr. Koeberle in his fine book *The Quest for Holiness* devotes the first chapter to a discussion of this point.

