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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reconstructing Public Theology with Old Testament Foundations

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Abstract: This essay proceeds from the conviction that public theology, to be properly theological, needs an exegetical grounding in Scripture rather than starting from general (public) values that are easily manipulated in the hands of political activists. It examines the meaning of justice and righteousness in Old Testament texts, especially Isaiah and Job 28.11-17, in light of their Ancient Near Eastern context. The ANE texts advocate a particular rather than generic value understanding of active justice and righteousness, ones that overlap with but are not the same as the OT understanding. These are even more different from liberation or Critical Theory notions of justice and equity. Biblical justice is impartial, neither partial to the poor nor weighted in favour of some group. Yet it is an active justice, seeking out and helping the needy to receive impartial justice. In light of the discussion of the OT in its ANE context, a number of conclusions are drawn at the end of this essay that distinguish Biblical justice and righteousness from the vague values often assumed in public theology.

KEY WORDS: Justice, Righteousness, Equality, Ethics, Biblical theology

Introduction

The focus of this essay is on the Old Testament as a foundation for any public theology. First, I will orient the discussion with some comments on defining public theology and developing problems for public theology. I will then suggest that a better alternative for public theology than how it is developing lies in a different methodology that is Biblical, theological, and ecclesial. Given this different focus, I will then demonstrate what I am

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proposing by reconstructing public theology with Old Testament foundations, specifically those of righteousness, justice, and equity.

Defining Public Theology

The term “public theology” apparently stems from an article by Martin Marty entitled, ‘Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience’ in 1974. By discussing public theology in relation to Niebuhr, Marty indicates that public theology was already in existence and just needed a name and a clearly defined programme. The purpose of public theology is to bring together the Church and politics to address public issues. The programme of public theology is, according to Marty (1974: 339), “from practice through ethics to theology”. Niebuhr serves as a model for public theology because his approach to theology was not the ideological speculation of Europe but the pragmatic concerns in the American context (Marty 1974: 337). Thus, public theology positions itself in opposition to “Protestant pietistic individualism” (Marty 1974: 350; cf. Niebuhr 1932).

Public theology, then, begins as a critique of European and American, Protestant theology. Such a theology resonates well in areas of the world that find the theology of the Church too disconnected to the realities of life, let alone the social or political realities faced on a daily basis. Thus, for the Latin American theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez, a commitment to charity and service must precede theology, activism must precede theology, and faith is relegated to being reflection on pastoral activity.² Social justice and activism take the higher ground, replacing dogmatic theology. In Africa, many pressing needs of society include not only liberation concerns for the poor, women, and colonialism but also matters such as corruption and race relations. Public theology, then, is seen as a way to remove the sacred-secular divide and to address issues of social justice (Agang, 2020).

The Developing Problems for Public Theology

So understood, public theology is more than social ethics. It harbours a distrust of theology as doctrine, and it prioritises activism over theological study. Social action is self-justifying and does not need a Biblical or theological warrant. If practical and public concerns overtake systematic theology, they also overtake the foundation for orthodox theology, the Scriptures, and their right interpretation. Instead of a model for theology that moves from Biblical interpretation to the formation of Christian convictions to practice, the practices of a present iteration of Christian community that is active in social justice define the theological task. Activism might shed light on Scripture and theology, but it does not draw its substance from them. Theology is an after-hours reflection following a busy day of action.

² Gutiérrez (1988: 9) says, “What Hegel used to say about philosophy can likewise be applied to theology: it rises at sundown. The pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it.”

When public theology is understood in this way, Christians are co-opted into social movements, like Black Lives Matter, and Marxist activism, like Critical Theory's "long march through the institutions" of society.³ For Progressive Christians, Christianity does not represent its own movement, as the coming of the Kingdom of God did for John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Early Church of the New Testament. Instead, Christians are urged to join other social change movements. Moreover, progressive, public theology does not find in New Testament authors the theological method for theology, that is, the method of *interpretation of sacred texts* in light of the *Good News of Jesus Christ* so as to address the Christian community. Biblical interpretation is instead replaced with reader-response interpretations (cf. G. West 1994), and the activist causes of social justice supersede not only theological convictions but also any Christocentric theology. As Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner (1989: 40) advocate, "The experience of poverty and oppression is for the liberation exegete as important a text as the text of Scripture itself." Carlos Mesters (1984: 122) insists that "the emphasis is not placed on the text's meaning in itself but rather on the meaning the text has for the people reading it". Hence, the theological focus is articulated in terms of the "grassroots" – the vulnerable, victimised, and marginalised. Their situation, causes, and interpretation of Scripture are privileged over any reading of Scripture in its original context. Thus, Mesters (1985) favours "grassroots exegesis": "The principle objective of reading the Bible is not to interpret the Bible but to interpret life with the help of the Bible." This means reading from a situation of injustice and seeking to transform it. The threefold way of reading Scripture that Mesters advocates is:

- a. *See*: begin from one's experience, which mostly means from one's poverty in Latin America.
- b. *Judge*: "understand the reasons for that kind of [poor] existence and relating them to the story of the deliverance from oppression in the Bible" (Rowland and Corner 1989: 38).
- c. *Act*.

Similarly, the South African theologian, Gerald West (1996), sees three challenges to a traditional understanding of the Biblical exegete providing works for others to use in building a theology or applying the text to their context:

1. Liberation Theology: Liberation hermeneutics required commitment to the experience of the poor and marginalised.
2. Postmodernism: There is a turn from finding the elusive "right" reading to the "useful" reading, a shift from "epistemology to ethics, truth to practices, foundations to consequences" (C. West 1988: 270-1).
3. Reader-Response: The reader "creates" meaning, not merely "receives" it (G. West 1996: 27).

³ The phrase was used by the communist student, Rudi Dutschke in a speech in 1967. Cf. Loren 2018.

The work of Stanley Hauerwas also focusses on the importance of a community, but he is highly critical of liberation theology. The community is not defined in terms of their social situation but in terms of their being a particular people, the people of God – the Church. Moreover, this community is shaped by its convictions that define its distinct identity in the world. Hauerwas (1983: 99) writes,

I am...challenging the very idea that Christian social ethics is primarily to make the world more peaceable or just. Put starkly, the first social ethical task of the church is to be the church – the servant community. Such a claim may well sound self-serving until we remember what makes the church the church is its faithful manifestation of the peaceable kingdom in the world. As such the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic.⁴

Hauerwas rightly identifies this further problem for public theology when it is understood as social activism with little to no need of the Church. A further correction is still needed to be in continuity with the Old Testament prophets in their very public theology, the New Testament authors, and the Early Church: theology as interpretation of Scripture must be the foundation for the theological and pragmatic tasks of any public theology.

Finally, the new values of diversity, equity, and inclusion are expressed in terms of “intersectionality”, a development of Critical Theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw (see Crenshaw 1996). The concept of intersectionality arose in legal theory in the 1990s in particular as a development of critical theory and has to do with how one’s various group identities (gender, religion, race, sexuality, age, weight, height, etc.) intersect to define one’s identity as a privileged or victimised person to a greater or lesser degree. The theory postulates that these different identities give one an advantage or disadvantage that is greater or lesser with respect to other people’s intersectionality. The groups, it is said, that have experienced discrimination or that have been victimised or that are minorities deserve weighted privilege to rectify the injustices that they have experienced, and the individual with more of these identities than someone else deserves more privilege than others. On this view, justice is not blind, and it weights the scales in favour of the select groups that can claim greater historical or systemic victimhood. This “equity justice” would put the foot on the scale for a short, black, “transgender”, woman over against a tall, white, straight, male. Obviously, this determination of preferred classifications is socially determined. However, when the Old Testament identifies particular groups requiring active justice, it does not do so by putting the foot on the scale for them but by taking the foot off of the other side of the scale where privilege has been shown so that the scales are in balance. That is the proper meaning of “equity”.

⁴ Also note Hauerwas (1991).

An Alternative: A Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesial Public Theology

In this essay, I intend to provide some groundwork for rethinking public theology with a Biblical foundation. The theological method will be (1) Biblical interpretation leading to (2) the formation of convictions that (3) are lived by the people of God (4) in ways that are relevant to the larger society. Only in this way will public theology be in continuity with its practice in both the Old and New Testaments. For the remainder of this essay, the focus will be on the Old Testament values of truth, liberty, righteousness, justice and equity.

Truth, Liberty, Righteousness, Justice, and Equity in the Old Testament

The issues that public theology addresses are typically about values and disvalues: truth and falsehood, righteousness and unrighteousness, justice (also equity) and injustice, and equality or inequality. All such terms appear in the Old Testament, some with great regularity. Values need definition. In popular parlance today, “righteousness” might be understood in a limited sense of personal ethics and piety. “Justice” is connected to various and conflicting legal and ethical theories. It is easily co-opted by some extra-canonical theory when not interpreted Biblically.⁵ “Equity” has recently been given a meaning from Critical Theory that divides society into oppressors and victims. “Truth” is increasingly understood as a local community’s own value, or even an individual’s own truth, rather than as objective.

Philosophers in classical Greece not only identified the virtues that were needed to live well in society but also which virtues were primary. Four cardinal virtues were widely accepted: wisdom/prudence, courage, temperance/self-control, and justice. Other virtues needed to be defined in relation to these, and a wrong ordering of the virtues would become a problem for an individual or society.

We do not have this level of organisation of the virtues or even a clear virtue ethic in the Ancient Near East, which focussed more on laws. Yet we do have general agreement about the values under consideration in this essay, and some can be discussed as virtues as well (righteous, just, truthful). Thomas Aquinas believed that, to the cardinal virtues of the Greeks, the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love needed to be added, though they were the result of God’s work within Christians and not a product of human development of character. The Enlightenment introduced different values on which to build society: freedom, equality, and, for the French, fraternity. These were considered basic and essential for all humans, whether established by God or (from a secular perspective) simply a feature of human existence. The West has moved on from these virtues, at first by building on them but slowly by moving away from them to the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and this without any claim to God’s endowment of these values.

⁵ An example would be Miranda (1977). Miranda did attempt to interpret Scripture in favour of his Marxist agenda, but he was so enamored with Marxism that he even believed the Old Testament opposed private ownership of property – that despite two of the 10 Commandments affirming private property (the 8th and 10th).

Thus, societies are organised and directed by the values, virtues, and laws that define them, and by how these are organised. As a result, one society's understanding of a cardinal virtue/value like "justice" will differ from another's, and other virtues/values like "righteousness" or "holiness" may not even be entertained in one society over against another. Much could be said about this, but the main point to make here is that we simply cannot assume that we know the meanings of stated values in the vocabulary of different societies. A public theology has to define its terms and ought to do so in relation to the understanding of those terms as they are used in Scripture.

The first task in studying truth, righteousness, justice, equity, and liberty in the Old Testament is to understand the vocabulary, meaning of texts, and practices in the historical and cultural context. This is a large undertaking, and only some comments can be made about the meaning such terms had in the Ancient Near East, and also within the Old Testament.

In the Ancient Near East, kings would deliver royal edicts at the beginning of their reign that announced "freedom/liberty" of some sort and that established "justice". A new ruler could thereby right the wrongs that crept in or were intentionally introduced in the previous regime and present himself as a good and well-intentioned ruler who deserved the appreciation of his subjects.

The terms under discussion are, in the Ancient Near East, sometimes paired as they work together to produce a good society. Thus, Hammurabi stated that he was commanded by the god Marduk to establish "truth and justice [*misharum*]" in the land to enhance the well-being of the people (*CH* 14-24). The later Babylonian king, Ammi-saduqa (c. 1645 BC), invoked a royal decree, a *misharum*, that remitted payments due from farming agents, shepherds, and others (Bergsma 2007: 24-25). This practice, also referred to as pronouncing an edict of freedom (*andurārum*, Akkadian), has some parallel to the Israelites' Sabbath and Jubilee Years (especially Deuteronomy 15; Leviticus 25), which were a re-establishing of justice in the land, a starting over again, particularly by setting debt slaves free. As can be seen, the Hebrew, *derôr*, relates to the Akkadian word, *andurārum*, and means "liberty". Setting people at liberty is an example of doing righteousness and justice. Righteousness and justice are terms that appear together frequently in the Old Testament. Terms such as truth, justice, liberty, righteousness, and equity are the vocabulary in the Ancient Near East of a social ethic that we might today call "public theology".

The Old Testament Covenantal Relationship as a Ground for Righteousness and Justice

As already noted, the Ancient Near East understood values for society to come from a god or the gods. The gods valued order and fought against chaos, as in the ancient Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, where Marduk and other gods fight against and overcome Tiamat, Chaos. This fight against chaos lives on in some traditional societies today. In Sudan, for example, the Dinka creation myth of Abuk ku Garang explains God's withdrawing from the first man and woman when the woman's hoe for tilling the earth

struck the creator accidentally. The story involves humanity's development as a disturbance for the creator, and so He sent a bird to cut the rope between heaven and earth. Thus, humans could no longer fellowship with him. Whereas Ancient Near Eastern stories continue with what the gods require of rulers to re-establish order, the Dinka story has god withdraw from humanity such that they now experience trouble, sickness, and death. Indeed, African Traditional Religion understands the departed ancestors to be concerned with social order; the creator has withdrawn from human chaos.

In the Old Testament, God and His chosen people are intimately connected, despite sin, because of God's own character. This relationship is expressed in terms of covenantal commitments. Values like righteousness, justice, liberty, equity, and truth are understood within a covenant relationship characterised by covenantal virtues: mercy, grace, slow to anger, steadfast love (*hesed*), faithfulness, forgiveness, and justice (Exodus 34.6-7). "Steadfast love" and "faithfulness" are paired together and often referenced in the Old Testament, especially as characteristics of God Himself. From such attributes flow God's continued work of salvation with sinful humanity; despite His holiness and righteousness, He does not withdraw. He is righteous, faithful, saves, and shows steadfast love and mercy (cf. Psalm 40.9-11;⁶ 103.4, 8). God's steadfast love and *salvation* from troubles of various sorts are another common pair of terms (e.g., Psalm 59.16-17; 85.7; 86.13; 98.3; 109.26; 143.12; 144.2), and God's "steadfast love" is also paired with His salvation that delivers sinners from their own sins (Psalm 25.6-7; 51.1; Joel 2.13; Jonah 4.2; Micah 7.18). Also, God's steadfast love is, on a few occasions, associated with His *righteousness* and *justice*:

- He loves *righteousness* and *justice*;
the earth is full of the *steadfast love* of the LORD (Psalm 33.5; cf. 36.5-6).
- *Righteousness* and *justice* are the foundation of your throne;
steadfast love and *faithfulness* go before you (Psalm 89.14).
- I am the LORD who practices *steadfast love*, *justice*, and *righteousness* in the earth.... (Jer. 9.24).
- And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in *righteousness* and in *justice*, in *steadfast love* and in *mercy* (Hosea 2.19).
- Sow for yourselves *righteousness*;
reap *steadfast love*;
break up your fallow ground,
for it is the time to seek the LORD,
that he may come and rain *righteousness* upon you (Hosea 10.12).

Thus, "steadfast love", forgiveness, and mercy are not alternatives to righteousness and justice but go together.⁷ God protects and cares for those in covenant relationship with Him whether the threat is from outside enemies or from His people's own sinfulness. God will do whatever is necessary to save and to establish justice. If He deals

⁶ The Hebrew has "righteous" (*šedek*) where the ESV translates "deliverance" in vv. 9-10.

⁷ This is also clearly seen in Isaiah 16.5.

with injustice toward His people, He demonstrates His steadfast love and faithfulness to them. If His people are sinful, He will do what is necessary to re-establish the relationship while also fulfilling justice and righteousness. The message of Scripture, and particularly in the Gospel, is that He will even “put forward” the blood of Jesus Christ as a “propitiation” or sacrifice of atonement and, in this way, show His righteousness (Romans 3.25-26).

Other Old Testament Texts on Righteousness and Justice, especially Isaiah

We might drill down into the understanding of “righteousness/justice” in a particular Old Testament author. Isaiah, for his part, has in view an active righteousness and justice. In Isaiah 1.17, the phrase, “plead the widow’s cause” translates the Hebrew well enough but is rendered in the Greek Septuagint *dikaiōsate chēra* – “do righteousness/what is right for the widow”. The whole verse is instructive for a study of justice in Isaiah as it involves five imperatives that reveal what this involves:

learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow’s cause.

The first line says to learn “to do good” (*hētēb*, a Hifil in Hebrew, i.e., a causative verb). The second line says more than simply be just; it says to *seek* justice (*mišpāt*). The active sense of justice is given more detail in the next three lines. God’s people are to find those needing justice and bring it to them by correcting oppression, providing justice for orphans, and pleading the cause of widows. The last two examples of justice picture two categories of people easily exploited by others and who need particular attention so that this does not happen. Note that the point is not that a special “justice” should apply to victims but that the same justice everyone else gets should also be given to those whom the more powerful might exploit or abuse. This call to justice is given by Isaiah because the culture is unrighteous. The “faithful city” that was once “full of justice” is compared to a whore, and its citizenry that was once “righteousness” has now been replaced by murderers (Isaiah 1:21). Political leaders are now rebels. There are thieves, and everyone takes bribes and gifts (1:23). In the face of corruption and oppression, righteousness is more than doing the right thing yourself, it is actively identifying and assisting the oppressed to get justice and opposing the corruption of the powerful. On the other hand, it must be stated, righteousness does not ever mean taking something away from the righteous to give to victims of injustice.

“Righteousness” is paired with “justice” on numerous occasions (e.g., Is. 1:17; 5:7, 16; 32:1; 32:16; 58:8; etc.). The idea is that the right thing, justice, should be done for those in need, for example, widows and orphans. To do justice means both helping the needy and punishing the oppressors (Proverbs 21:15). In so doing, God is glorified: “But the LORD of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness” (Isaiah

5:16). Doing righteousness and justice “is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice” (Proverbs 21:3; cf. Hosea 6:6). Amos, similarly, has an oracle in which God calls for justice among the people rather than empty worship if they are to avoid His justice on the Day of the Lord – when He comes. Thus, God says, “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24). Micah encapsulates what God asks from His people in equally well-known words:

He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (6:8).

God's righteousness, too, is a righteousness of action. In this sense, His righteousness is paired with His being a Saviour (Isaiah 45:21; 51:5; 63:1), or bringing deliverance (56:1) or healing (58:8). God's saving action to establish righteousness is pictured in Isaiah 51:5: “My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out.” The establishing of God's righteousness is sometimes presented as coming through a ruler in the Davidic line of royal succession (Isaiah 11:1 and 4-5; 16:5; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; Zechariah 9:9). Yet, when this requires removing Israel's sin, God alone is the one to act. God, seeing that there is no justice in society, brings it Himself like a warrior, according to Isaiah 59:17. The verse poetically says that He dons righteousness like a breastplate and the helmet of salvation, puts on vengeance, and wraps Himself in fury. By punishing the unjust, God establishes righteousness and justice, but He also does so by removing Jacob's transgressions and establishing a righteous people on whom God's Spirit rests and who internalise the words of the Law (59:20-21).

A parallel passage in Isaiah 63:1 depicts God wearing a crimson robe, marching in greatness and strength, “speaking in righteousness”, and mighty to save. John alludes to this passage in Revelation 19, where the rider on the white horse comes to do battle with the wicked nations. He has dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and He conquers by a sword coming out of His mouth (vv. 13, 15). The red robe is red from trampling the blood of the unrighteous nations in wrath. The weapon from the mouth is His speaking in righteousness (Isaiah 63:1): it is a sword from the mouth of the One whose name is “Faithful” and “True” and who judges and makes war “in righteousness” (Revelation 19:11). The “servant” or “chosen one” in Isaiah brings forth justice on the earth (42:4-5), and he accomplishes righteousness for the iniquitous through his own suffering (53:11). With a similar understanding of substitutionary justice, Jeremiah says that God looks for a single man “who does justice and seeks truth” that He might pardon Jerusalem (5:1). In several passages in Isaiah, as later in Revelation, God's plan is to establish righteousness and justice (Isaiah 28:17; 32:1, 16-17; 33:5; ch. 61). We can see that this eschatological vision is a necessary outcome of divine character, for God “loves righteousness and justice” (Psalm 33:5; cf. 37:28). As Zephaniah says, the Lord is righteous and “every morning He shows forth his justice” (3:5c). The Ancient Near East's practice of king's issuing royal

decrees to establish justice or bring liberty is the cultural practice that helps us to understand what it means to do righteousness and justice.

God's people, therefore, are expected to "keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon [says God] my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed" (Isaiah 56:1). They are to do what God will do when He acts. More detail is provided just two chapters later where "fasting" is interpreted as doing righteousness. In response to active righteousness, God will draw near to help His people. Several verses are worth citing for these points:

- ⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
- ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
- ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
- ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, "Here I am."
If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
- ¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday (Isaiah 58:6-10).

The problem in Isaiah is that the people of God have been unrighteous. God desired that they would have "hearkened to my commandments" as they would then have been a people whose peace would flow like a river and whose righteousness would break like waves on the shore (Isaiah 48:18). Instead, their sin needs to be removed to make them righteous, and this is done vicariously through God's righteous servant who bears their iniquities (Isaiah 53:11). Isaiah 59 also depicts unjust, unrighteous, and sinful Israel depending on God to bring them righteousness.

Isaiah's theological solution to the problem of human unrighteousness is not justice, otherwise God would wipe out the sinful people for their sins. The coming of God's righteousness may, of course, mean judgement. Yet it might also mean God's acting out of His own righteous character to remove transgression from Jacob. This is not limited to forgiveness of sins or mercy. It also means making those who were sinners to be God's

obedient, righteous people. This theological perspective is stated in a few verses after an in-depth depiction of Israel's unrighteousness in Isaiah 59:16-21:

- ¹⁶ He saw that there was no man,
and wondered that there was no one to intercede;
then his own arm brought him salvation,
and his righteousness upheld him.
- ¹⁷ He put on righteousness as a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.
- ¹⁸ According to their deeds, so will he repay,
wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies;
to the coastlands he will render repayment.
- ¹⁹ So they shall fear the name of the LORD from the west,
and his glory from the rising of the sun;
for he will come like a rushing stream,
which the wind of the LORD drives.
- ²⁰ "And a Redeemer will come to Zion,
to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the LORD.

²¹ "And as for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD: "My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring," says the LORD, "from this time forth and forevermore."

Righteousness makes the problem "right". Where there is injustice, righteousness means judgement and wrath. Where there are transgressions, righteousness means their removal – forgiveness. Where there is unrighteousness, righteousness means making people righteous. This last action of God – making sinners righteous – involves God giving of His Spirit to His people and placing His words in their mouths (internalising the Law). Everyone experiences the justice and righteousness of God, and God's people are to be the righteous waves that wash over society.

Equity as the Impartial Administration of Justice to All

The Hebrew word translated as "equity" in the English Standard Version is *mêšār/mêšārim*.⁸ It is related to the word for justice or a royal decree of justice in Babylonia (*misharum*). The Septuagint usually translates the Hebrew with *euthytēs*, uprightness or justice. All its uses in the Old Testament that are translated in the ESV as

⁸ The ESV also translates other *šēdākāh*, righteousness, as 'equity' in 2 Samuel 8.15 and 1 Chronicles 18.14.

equity” will be considered here. (The Hebrew word is sometimes translated as “uprightness/right” or some version of this: 1 Chronicles 29:17; Isaiah 33:15; 45:19; Psalm 9:8; 17:2; 58:2; Proverbs 8:6; 23:16; Song of Songs 1:4 (also note Proverbs 23:31; Song of Songs 7:9; Isaiah 26:7; Daniel 11:6 for some other translations)). Synonyms for *mêšār* are “righteousness” and “justice”, as in these two Proverbs:

to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity.... (Prov. 1:3)

Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path.... (Prov. 2:9)

The Ancient Near Eastern notion of a royal edict declaring justice provides the background for understanding a passage such as Isaiah 11:4 concern the Davidic ruler promised by God:

but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity [*mîšôr*] for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

More often, when we find the term “equity” in the Old Testament, it is used in reference to God’s rule as King of the heavens and the earth. Kings of the earth were expected to rule, as God Himself, with righteousness, justice, and equity. This is reflected in psalms that speak of God’s rule as King:

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth. (Ps. 67:4)

The King in his might loves justice.
You have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob. (Ps. 99:4)

The reason that the nations can be glad about God’s judgement is that He shows no partiality among the nations in His justice. Within Israel, God’s justice is equitably administered.

A number of times, the idea is also applied to God’s *eschatological* justice: when He comes, He will establish His eternal and universal justice. Three psalms celebrate this:

At the set time that I appoint
I will judge with equity. (Ps. 75:2)

Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity." (Ps. 96:10)

... before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity. (Ps. 98:9)

Jesus' proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God, similarly, is a prophetic announcement that God's justice was about to break out over the earth. The righting of injustices are announced as blessings on the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and those who are reviled and persecuted and had evil things said about them and who have been accused falsely on account of Jesus (Matthew 5:3-12). These beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount are Jesus' royal edict announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God. The people addressed in this sermon have awaited the new King's coming to reign as they have not had justice on the earth.

The term "equity" has been given a new meaning of "equal outcomes" in the postmodern cardinal values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The present debate over the meaning of "equity" is whether society should concern itself with (1) equality as equal opportunity or (2) equity as equal outcomes. Equality as equal opportunity is what people have long understood "equity" to mean. The new, postmodern meaning of "equity" as equal outcomes calls for *inequality* in service of restoring equality. Given a Marxist notion of social strife between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, equity means favouring the proletariat or other marginalised groups. The extreme of the Marxist approach to righting the wrongs of society occurred under Josef Stalin when land was taken from landowners – the *kulaks* – and redistributed collectively. The *kulaks* of Ukraine were either killed or removed from their lands. This understanding of "equity" continues in cultural Marxism, where the privileged – white, male, Christian, conservative – has his privileges undermined or revoked in favour of the victimized – "persons of colour", gender diverse, non-Christian, and progressive.

In the ESV's use of "equity" to translate the Hebrew, *mēšār*, it refers to justice in the sense of (3) an impartial administration of justice to all. Since many have experienced injustice, this impartial administration of justice means a great reversal as the righteous are finally given their reward and the unrighteous are finally given their punishment. This third understanding can be found in two related texts of note:

... nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit. (Exodus 23:3)

You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour. (Leviticus 18:15)

The Ancient Near East's royal edicts establishment of justice is also understood as a proclamation of *liberty* for those who are unjustly oppressed by others, loss of land or freedom, over taxed, and so forth. The term *derôr*, (liberty) in Hebrew is found in Leviticus 25:10; Isaiah 61:1; Jeremiah 34:8, 15, 17; Ezekiel 46:17. A decree of justice in the Ancient Near East might concretely mean a decree of liberty for those who need an act of the king to set things right for them once again. King David, too, is described as administering "justice and equity to all his people" (2 Samuel 8:15; cf. 1 Kings 3:28; 10:9; 1 Chronicles 18:14; 2 Chronicles 9:8; Psalm 72:1-2). Psalm 99, describes God as a king, using the language expected in the Ancient Near East to describe the character and work of a king:

The King in his might loves justice.
You have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob (v. 4).⁹

This is who God was and is: "The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed" (Psalm 103:6). Similarly, in Psalm 99, God is said to be the King who loves justice and establishes uprightness – and this is what the Israelite people were to be and to do as well (Psalm 106:3).

The Marxist notion of equity involves favouring one group over another. The Biblical view, however, is to protect the vulnerable widows, orphans, poor, and foreigners, not favour them with special status in place of others. Biblical "equity" is the justice of equality, not favouritism, as has been seen in Exodus 20:3 and Leviticus 19:15. Deuteronomy similarly says, "You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike" (1:17a). Showing partiality (literally, "recognising the face") would be a "perversion" of justice:

You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you (Deuteronomy 16:19-20).

By contrast, in Critical Theory, whether with a racial (critical race theory) or some other focus for a social "justice" agenda (e.g., economic, gender, intersectionality), justice must be *partial*. The Biblical view, however, calls for *impartiality*. Consider also Deuteronomy 10:17:

⁹ The word translated "equity" here (ESV; Hebrew *mēyšārim*) is related to the Akkadian word *misaram* in *misaram sakdnum*, meaning "to establish justice". This technical phrase was used in royal edicts declaring the remission of debts.

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.

Justice as impartiality runs throughout the Old Testament. This Old Testament understanding that God's justice is impartial is repeated in the New Testament:

- For God shows no partiality (Romans 1:16).
- Masters, do the same to them [the slaves], and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him (Ephesians 6:9).
- For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality (Colossians 3:25).

This understanding of impartial justice is found in the Ancient Near Eastern interest in written law codes, but it is more pronounced in Egyptian and Israelite law. A comparison with other Ancient Near Eastern law codes shows that justice was meted out differently for different classes of people.

The Egyptian understanding of justice rejected different applications of justice to various classes, and in this Israel's law is agreed (even if the actual laws are quite different). The first century BC historian, Diodorus Siculus (from Sicily) wrote of the customs of ancient Egypt. In his *Bibliotheca Historia*, he described Egypt's judicial system with reference to a mural depicting Egyptian justice in the ruins of Ramses II's (13th century BC) Ramesseum (mortuary temple) at Thebes. In the scene, thirty judges are depicted

without any hands, and in their midst the chief justice [has] a figure of Truth hanging from his neck and [is] holding his eyes closed, and at his side [are] a great number of books. And these figures show by their attitude [i.e., not having hands] that the judges shall receive no gift and that the chief justice shall have his eyes upon the truth alone (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 1.48).¹⁰

The figure of Truth was actually worn around all the justices' necks, Diodorus latter tells us (cf. Muntz 2011: 585).¹¹ It was a "small image made from precious stones" on a gold chain (*Library of History* I.76.2). The image was likely that of the god *Ma'at*, meaning "the way things ought to be", hence truth, justice, and harmony (Allen 2010). The Hebrew word *'emet*

¹⁰ Diodorus visited Thebes and knew the accounts about Egypt in Herodotus and Hecataeus. He used some of Herodotus' material (*The Histories* II), but Herodotus does not report on the judicial system of Egypt. We have only a few remaining fragments of Hecataeus of Abdera's *Aigyptiaka* and do not know if Diodorus is referencing him or not at this point. Plutarch attests that the mural in question was at Thebes and says that the handless judges signified that they were not influenced in their judgements by gifts or intercession (*Isis and Osiris* 10).

¹¹ Muntz also argues that we cannot say much about Diodorus' sources and should certainly not attribute his work to a single source in Hecataeus. As to the material on Thebes, Diodorus did himself (briefly) visit Thebes.

can be seen to relate to the Egyptian, *ma'at*, but it sometimes means “truth” and sometimes “faithfulness”, depending on context. Its basic meaning is “firmness”, hence the related meanings of truth and faithfulness. In Egyptian mythology, *Ma'at's* father, *Re*, replaced the god of chaos, lies, and violence, *Isjet*, with *Ma'at*. This relates to the Old Testament story of creation in that God replaced the world that was “without form and void” (Genesis 1:2) when He brought about order on the first three days of creation. In Egyptian mythology, *Ma'at* was the wife of *Thoth*, the god of Wisdom. She governed the order of the natural world as well as the affairs of humankind. She is the god that weighed the heart of the dead against a feather of truth to see how weighty their misdeeds in life had been. Only the person whose heart was lighter than the feather could be admitted into paradise, the field of reeds where the righteous dead were taken.

Ma'at's concern for the right order of things relates to the notions of “righteousness” and “justice”, concerns of the gods and kings throughout the Ancient Near East and therefore for all people. Truth, righteousness, and justice all have to do with right order. Thus, as John Scullion (1992) says, “The combination *ṣedeq-ṣēdāqâ* [righteousness] and *mišpāt* [justice] is in essence a hendiadys describing that proper order in the life of the people that is put there and willed by God.”

Ma'at, as James Allen (2010: 120) points out, “was not perfect social and economic equality but rather the harmonious coexistence of society's different levels”. Without *Ma'at* (Truth), her brother, *Isjet* (Chaos) emerges. In the Egyptian myth, their father, *Re* (Sun) replaced *Isjet* with *Ma'at* when he created the world. Humans swayed by *Isjet* introduce practices that are opposed to truth and righteousness:

I made every other man like his fellow.

I did not command that they do *jzft* [cf. *Isjet*]:

It is their hearts that destroy what I have said (CT VII, 463f-464b) (Allen 2010: 120).

Chaos was not understood as inequality, or Truth as equality. When *Isjet* ruled in place of *Ma'at*,

The beggars of the land have become rich men

and the owners of things, those who have nothing (Adm. 8.2) (Allen 2010: 121).

Ma'at, however, does not simply support the rich and poor staying in their harmonious balance. She is also concerned that the rich treat the poor well. Allen (2010) notes that writings on Egyptian tombs declare words to the effect, “I have given bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked” and “I was a husband to the widow and a father to the orphan”. Such acts would reduce the weight of the heart that was to be measured by *Ma'at* after death against the feather of truth.

In Egyptian courts of justice, both positive and negative arguments were written out, and the judge looking at the case would indicate his decision by placing his image of truth on the argument he favoured. No verbal argument was permitted, only written argumentation, because the Egyptians recognised that, unlike the Greek and later Roman

rhetorical practice in forensic arguments, judges were persuadable.¹² Greek and Roman teachers taught rhetoric, the “art of persuasion”, so that their students could persuade jurors and judges by their eloquent arguments. The Egyptian practice, then, shows a concern to eliminate any persuasion so that the facts of the case and the written law alone produced just verdicts. The books depicted on the mural of the Ramesseum described above presented the eight books of Egyptian law that developed over time from various lawgivers (*Library of History* I.76.3). Having written law codes also eliminated subjectivity on the part of the judge.

The “books of Moses”, Israel’s lawgiver, compare to the Egyptian and other Ancient Near Eastern practices of justice. Genesis-Deuteronomy mix legal codes with narratives, covenants, and other material, but in them we can identify several legal corpuses that overlap and may, like all legal developments, include later laws after the time of Moses. The Law codes in the Pentateuch are: the Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21); the Book of the Covenant (20:22-23:23); the Holiness Code (Leviticus 18-20, or perhaps 17-26); and Deuteronomy 12-25. That Israel’s distinct identity as a people would have required laws and judges is a certainty, and the giving of the law after the exodus from Egypt was a necessary part of Israel’s separation from Egypt, devotion to God, and following of Moses. Having books of law was an essential part of justice, whether in Egypt or in Babylon (the Law of Hammurabi) or in-between (Hittites, Assyrians, etc.). This kept justice “just”, that is, as objective as possible.

With the Egyptian system of justice in view, we might say that “equity” was maintained in a system that aimed to (1) allow no bribery, (2) not recognise persons but only the alleged action, (3) avoided the influence of persuasive speech by lawyers, and (4) applied written laws to cases to minimise subjectivity.

Moreover, everyone among the Egyptians and Israelites was equal before the Law, over against other Ancient Near Eastern practices of justice. For example, Diodorus Siculus says,

If anyone intentionally killed a free man or a slave the laws enjoined that he be put to death; for they, in the first place, wished that it should not be through the accidental differences in men's condition in life but through the principles governing their actions that all men should be restrained from evil deeds, and, on the other hand, they sought to accustom mankind, through such consideration for slaves, to refrain all the more from committing any offence whatever against freemen (*Library of History* I.77.6).

Similarly, in Israel, the law on this matter reads:

¹² “Scribes employed in the legal system supplied procedural information; the parties were not represented by legal advocates. Both parties spoke for themselves and presented any pertinent documentary evidence. Witnesses sometimes were called, but usually the judge ruled on the grounds of the documents and the testimony of each party” (“Egyptian Law”, n.d.).

When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money (Exodus 21:20-21).

The law in Exodus 21:20 is like that in Egypt: slaves were treated as human beings with access to the law. If killed, the killer was punished the same as if he had killed someone else. In v. 21, the point is that the master may not intend to kill the slave, since he lives for a time. The master's intent was punishment, not murder. When the slave dies in a case of homicide, not murder, the master has penalised himself by losing a slave that provided work and income for him.

As noted, equality before the law was not always the case in other nations at the time. In other cultures, the law included distinctions of class. In the Assyrian "Hymn to Sin, the Moon God", the god Nannar, chief of the gods and creator, is praised.¹³ He begets all things and determines the decisions in heaven and on earth (21-22). He governs all things by his word:

Thy word causes truth and righteousness to arise,
That men may speak the truth (31)....
Where thine eye does glance faithfully there cometh harmony (?)
Where thou dost grasp the hand, there cometh salvation (?) (36-37)...
Gleaming Lord, who dost guide and lead truth and righteousness in heaven
and upon earth (38).... (Allen 2010: 121).

Similarly, the goddess Ishtar, daughter of Sin or Nanna – the Sun God – is praised for directing humankind in a Neo-Babylonian incantation text, "A 'Prayer to the Raising of the Hand' to Ishtar" (Allen 2010: 153-4). She is said to frame all laws (7), and establishes peace in place of hostility (9). The text says,

Thou judgest the cause of men with justice and right;
Thou regardest with mercy the despised man,
thou settest right the down-trodden every morning (25-26).

She is even praised as the one who "openest the bonds of all slaves" (33). By beholding her face, "the unjust become just" (41). As with the previously cited hymn to Ishtar, this hymn includes an appeal for deliverance in light of the god's oversight and power to set things right or establish order.

The king was the earthly ruler to carry through the righteous governance of the gods. Hammurabi of Babylon says in the prologue to his law code that the god, Marduk, set him on the throne "to promulgate justice" (column 5, line 15). Thus, he "put righteousness and justice into the language of the land and promoted the welfare of the

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-161.

people” (column 5, line 20) (Allen 2010: 402). In the epilogue to this code of laws, Hammurabi says,

[Column XXIV] (40) The great gods have called me, and I am the shepherd that brings good, whose staff is (45) righteous, and my good shadow is spread over my city. In my bosom (50) I protect the people of Sumer and Akkad; under my protection I let their brethren (55) work in peace; in my wisdom I hide them, that the strong may (60) not hurt the weak, that orphans and widows may be protected in Babylon, the city of Anu and Bel may lift up (65) the head; in Esagila, the temple whose foundations stand like heaven and earth. (70) To pronounce the justice of the land, to decide questions, to right the wrong, my precious words have I written (75) upon my monument, and established them before my image as king of righteousness.... By the command of Shamash, (85) the great judge of heaven and earth, righteousness shall be established in the land.... [Column XXV] Let him who is (5) oppressed, but has a cause, come before my image as king of righteousness, (10) read my inscription, heed my precious words, (15) my monument shall make him to know his cause, he shall find justice, and make his heart merry (*Code of Hammurabi Epilogue*) (Allen 2010: 459).

The Law Code that Hammurabi establishes is called the “words of righteousness”:

[Epilogue, column XXV] In the days that are (60) to come, forever and ever, the king who is in the land shall attend unto the words (65) of righteousness, which I have written upon my monument (*Code of Hammurabi*).

Hammurabi himself is the “king of righteousness” whom the god, Shamash, has endowed with justice (Epilogue, column XXIV, lines 75-79 and 95-99, and column XXVI, lines 15-19). He will therefore “establish righteousness in the land” (lines 85-89).

Given these values of justice and righteousness, specific laws provide concrete examples of what is meant. So, for example, the Law Code of Hammurabi called for an application of the *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth”) among people of the upper class (*awilu*) offending against people of the same class. (An *awilu* was someone owning land and not dependent on either the palace or temple authorities.) The law states, “If an *awilu* should blind the eye of another *awilu*, they shall blind his eye” (no. 196). However, the law is different for a commoner: “If he should blind the eye of a commoner or break the bone of a commoner, he shall weigh and deliver 60 shekels of silver” (no. 198).

By contrast, no such legal distinctions of class applied in Israel (Exodus 21:23-24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21), though there were slaves. Blinding or knocking out a slave’s tooth gained the slave his or her freedom (Exodus 21:25-26). Contrast this further with Hittite Law, which called only for a payment of 10 shekels of silver for blinding, knocking out a tooth, or breaking an arm or leg of a slave (*Hittite Laws* ¶18, 12). For biting off a slave’s nose or tearing off his or her ear, the fine was 3 shekels (¶14, 16), compared to 40 shekels for doing this to a free person’s nose and 12 shekels for his ear (*Hittite Laws* ¶13,

15). The Mosaic Law's insistence on "equity" in justice was a rejection of such classifications that recognised class distinctions in the law. The equal application of justice for all did not allow different systems of justice for different classes.

Even though Mesopotamian law differed among classes, everyone was under the Law. The laws of the Medes and Persians are famously presented in the story of Daniel being thrown into the den of lions (Daniel 6). King Darius was persuaded to establish a law against petitioning any god or person other than the king himself for thirty days. Of note are verses 8, 12, and 15, which repeatedly state that the law of the Medes and the Persians could not be revoked. When Daniel fell afoul of this law, as those who crafted it intended, the king attempted to find a way to deliver him. He could not issue a decree against his own law and had to condemn Daniel. Even the king of Persia could not override the written law.

Just as a law could not be revoked by a judge or king, a judge's verdict could not be revoked. The verdict, right or wrong, became authoritative. If one were allowed to change verdicts, the possibility of corruption was greatly increased. Thus, Hammurabi's Law Code states:

If a judge renders a judgment, gives a verdict, or deposits a sealed opinion, after which he reverses his judgment, they shall charge and convict that judge of having reversed the judgment which he rendered and he shall give twelvefold the claim of that judgment; moreover, they shall unseat him from his judgeship in the assembly, and he shall never again sit in judgment with the judges (*CH 5*) (Roth 1995).

Furthermore, a principle of equal justice was applied in regard to witnessing at a trial. Witnesses giving false evidence or evidence that they could not prove were punished severely. If the case was a capital offense, the witness without evidence for his testimony was put to death, and in other cases involving fines, such a witness was fined the same amount (*CH 3, 4*).

If "equity" is defined as favouring victims over oppressors by "recognising the face of each" in the court of law, then it fails the Biblical standard. The Biblical standard is to make certain that each receives what is legally just without seeing who from this group or that is involved in the lawsuit. Equity makes certain that victims and the vulnerable have access to the law, not that they are favoured, just as much as it makes certain that the powerful do not receive privileges. That would be a perversion of justice.

Job 28.11-17

We might further drill down into the meaning of righteousness in one, final Biblical text. In chapter 28 of the book of Job, Job is reflecting on his past life when he was a respected ruler in the city. The specific passage explains how he ruled, and in it we get his understanding of justice:

¹¹ When the ear heard, it called me blessed,
 and when the eye saw, it approved,
¹² because I delivered the poor who cried for help,
 and the fatherless who had none to help him.
¹³ The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me,
 and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.
¹⁴ I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
 my justice was like a robe and a turban.
¹⁵ I was eyes to the blind
 and feet to the lame.
¹⁶ I was a father to the needy,
 and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know.
¹⁷ I broke the fangs of the unrighteous
 and made him drop his prey from his teeth.

What is the meaning of “justice” in this passage? The term appears in verse 14, but its meaning is clarified by the whole passage. Justice is used in the sense of doing righteous deeds. In v. 14, God clothes Himself in “righteousness” and “justice” (as in Isaiah 59:16ff) - He dresses for action. This understanding of righteousness knows that the world has oppressors and oppressed. It knows that not all will be able to receive equal opportunity or outcomes. The righteous ruler, Job, does not trust individuals or society to provide justice but is active to search out the needy in society. Righteousness removes the oppressor's power to harm rather than puts the victim in the seat of power. As verse 17 says, it breaks “the fangs of unrighteous” and makes “him drop his prey from his teeth”. Further, it identifies the poor, the fatherless, the widow, the blind, and the needy in order to give such individuals a helping hand as needed. Individuals in these groups have a greater likelihood to have fallen out of society's safety nets and will not recover without assistance. Leaving them in their situation is injustice. Righteousness is active: it removes oppression, identifies the needy, and gives them help as needed. In doing so, it does not oppress others by insisting on equal outcomes or by practicing reverse discrimination. It does not privilege individuals because of their group identity or intersectionality but in terms of their individual needs.

Conclusion

Several conclusions may be drawn from this study about the related social values in the Old Testament of truth, liberty, righteousness, justice, and equity.

- Values are vague and require definition. Values such as righteousness and justice were defined by the concrete laws in written Law codes.
- Values allow one to compare and contrast different cultures and ethical systems as they are studied in the contexts in which they are used, whether in antiquity or today. Different cultures of the Ancient Near East shared values such as liberation,

righteousness, justice, equity, and peace. The Law codes introduced significant distinctions between the cultures in regard to these values, however.

- Societies in the Ancient Near East believed in objective Truth, since it and other values such as righteousness and justice were concerns of the gods. Polytheism raised problems for social justice as the gods fought with one another. The Old Testament, however, claimed a universal justice based in the one, true God. Thus, there was no “local truth” or socially constructed understanding of righteousness and justice.
- In both the Old Testament and other Ancient Near Eastern religions, truth, righteousness, and justice had to do with divine order established by God in creation. They were, therefore, grounded in a creation, natural theology.
- The kings ruled as vice-regents of the gods and were to embody and practice the values that concerned the gods. Kingship was not a right but a responsibility, at least in theory. The sovereign was under the law as it was divine Law.
- Righteousness and justice had to do with social order and harmony or peace. Restoring order is a very different concept from revolution to attain social justice. For whatever reason, chaos enters into society and requires some active correction to reestablish order. This meant giving individuals vulnerable to abuse by the powerful an equal access to justice rather than establishing equal outcomes in society.
- Righteousness and justice could be and needed to be stated in codes of law.
- Doing righteousness and justice entailed protecting the vulnerable population from any aggressive injustice toward them by the powerful.
- Justice was blind, particularly in Egypt and Israel, where humans were equal before the Law. Any preferential weighting of justice for one group or another, for the powerful or the victims, was not justice. Such a definition of “equity” does not apply to the Ancient Near East, including Biblical texts in which the word “equity” is used in translation.
- Judges were to be impartial, not take bribes. They were expected to base their judgements on the written Law.
- People could not be simply divided into two unrelated groups of righteous and unrighteous, since all were sinners. No concept of social justice should stigmatise a group so that they always remain in an unrighteous category, as Critical Theory does.
- God alone can bring the righteousness and justice that sinners and the world needs. No social justice can be rightly expressed without having the right understanding of God’s character and plan of salvation for all creation.

A public theology that seeks to join theology with social and political concerns in the public square cannot assume that vague values mean the same thing for everyone. Some overlap is inevitable, but different societies have different understandings of truth, righteousness, justice and equity.

Righteousness is active in removing the power of the unrighteous and seeking out those individuals in need to give them aid. Righteousness rejects the new “equity” justice that treats individuals in terms of their group identities’ victimhood status. It does not automatically interpret the needy as victims, but it still reaches out to help them when they cannot get a foothold for justice. It does not treat society as all about power, and therefore its help for the needy is not understood in terms of taking power away from the powerful and giving that power to the victims (as Critical Theory understands the new meaning of “equity” to be). For example, it rejects reverse racial discrimination. It is not opposed to merit or private property; it rejects equal outcomes. On the other hand, it finds the powerless or oppressed and brings them help. It makes the powerful drop the prey in their mouths. Righteousness is presented in Scripture as a virtue by which to live. The righteous person *does* righteousness and justice, imitating the character of God, who does righteousness to all the oppressed and even makes sinners righteous.

Much more could be said about Old Testament society and how its laws and activities related to these public virtues. What is important to realise from the argument of this essay is that values in a Christian public theology are not easily shared values with a diverse public but need to be Biblically grounded and understood in their original context and the vocabulary of Scripture.

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