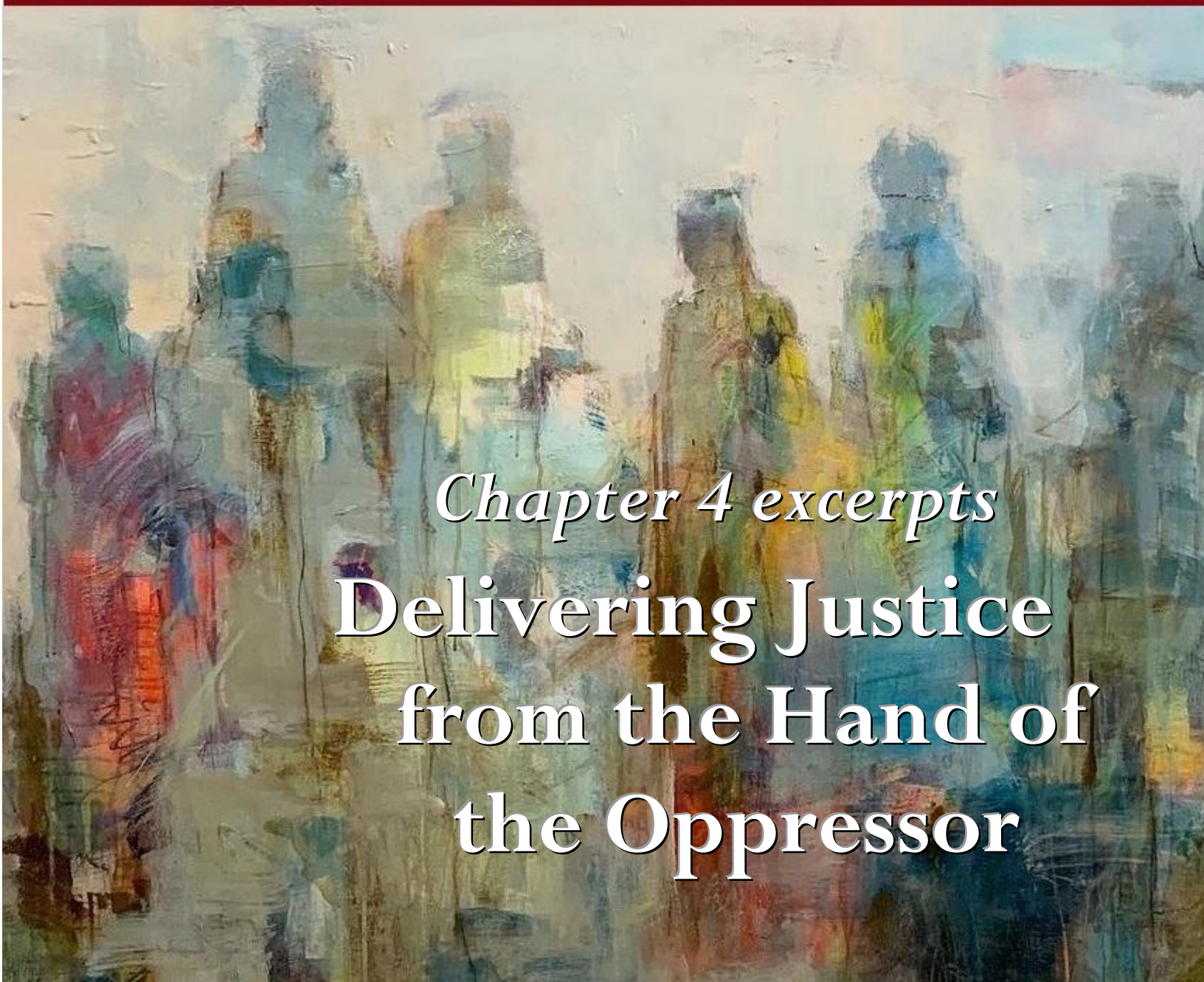


A GOD LIKE No OTHER

Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

An abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. It features several vertical, elongated shapes that suggest human figures or forms, rendered in a palette of muted blues, greens, yellows, and earthy tones. The background is a mix of light and dark washes, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

Chapter 4 excerpts
Delivering Justice
from the Hand of
the Oppressor

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Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

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According to biblical thought, the criterion for determining whether any particular order or system is just, good, and right is the extent to which it promotes well-being for all without exception. It is this objective that all within the order established by God are to seek collectively out of love for God and one another in accordance with the commandments of the Torah.

DELIVERING JUSTICE FROM THE HAND OF THE OPPRESSOR

In biblical thought, if there is to be well-being and wholeness in the world, there must also be justice. If justice does not exist, violent and destructive behavior will spread unchecked and fill the lives of human beings with pain and suffering. The only way that the God of Israel can accomplish his purpose of blessing the people he has chosen through Abraham and eventually blessing all of the families of the earth through that people is by demanding that they live in accordance with what is just, good, and right and put away behavior that is unjust, harmful, and destructive. At the same time, God must himself act with justice by promoting and defending what contributes to the well-being of all and being active to oppose the practice of evil and injustice, especially among those who willfully persist in doing harm to others through their oppressive behavior. Human well-being, therefore, can exist only if both God and human beings themselves are committed to practicing justice and opposing injustice.

Of course, the concern for justice is by no means unique to the biblical texts and those who composed and preserved them and embraced them as their own. Throughout history, people of all societies and cultures have recognized the need for the practice and administration of justice. The same was thought to be true in antiquity of the gods of peoples other than Israel. Even the gods who were believed to act with great cruelty were viewed as desiring and demanding justice in some sense. In fact, to a large extent it was precisely their desire and demand for justice that was thought to lead them to treat human beings in the ways that they did.

When one examines carefully the biblical texts, however, it soon becomes clear that the belief that the God of Israel was in many ways fundamentally different from the gods of other nations led to an understanding of both divine and human justice that was also fundamentally different from that of the peoples who worshiped those gods. At the same time, the failure of biblical interpreters to grasp and acknowledge these differences and their tendency to ascribe to the God of the Hebrew Bible the ways of being and behaving that characterized the pagan gods of antiquity has led to readings of the biblical texts that not only obscure the understanding of justice found in those texts but also run contrary to it. When one reads the passages in the Hebrew Bible that refer to divine and human justice on the basis of a belief in a God who

is fully committed to the well-being of all as an end in itself, the problematic nature of the traditional readings of those passages becomes readily apparent.

JUSTICE, RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND THE DELIVERANCE OF THE OPPRESSED

When we turn to the passages from the Hebrew Scriptures that speak of things such as justice and righteousness, we immediately encounter a problem that appears to admit of no satisfactory solution. The Hebrew words that refer to these two concepts tend to convey certain ideas that are not reflected faithfully or adequately in the English terms generally used to translate them, while the English terms in turn convey ideas that are not entirely in accordance with the meaning of the Hebrew words. The reason for this is that there are certain assumptions and ways of viewing and judging reality that are different in the worldviews associated with each of the two languages. Of course, the basic worldview reflected in the biblical texts and Second Temple Jewish writings is also distinct from that found in other belief systems of antiquity, due especially to the idea that the God of Israel alone is truly God and is the creator of all that exists.

While there have been many scholarly studies on the differences between the Hebrew and English understandings of the terminology of justice and righteousness, a consideration of the biblical texts themselves is not only sufficient to grasp those differences but also makes it much more clear precisely what they consist of. To begin with, the fact that English uses two different groups of terms to translate the Hebrew word *tsedaqah* and its cognates suggests that neither of them can capture adequately or fully the meaning of the Hebrew. These two groups of terms are those derived from the words “just” and “righteous,” including especially the nouns “justice” and “righteousness.”

In English, justice is generally defined in terms of fairness, impartiality, and conformity to a legal or moral norm. To do justice in relation to others is to treat them in a way that their conduct or actions deserve in accordance with that norm. Justice also demands that those who violate the norm are to be punished in some way, whereas those who adhere to the norm are to be declared innocent or not guilty and on that basis are either to be rewarded or simply left unpunished. The legal or moral norm that is to be upheld and enforced is based on certain conceptions of what is good, right, fair, and equitable.

Righteousness in turn is generally understood in terms of a quality that is also in conformity with a norm that defines what is right and just. To be righteous is to behave in accordance with that norm and on that basis to be judged or regarded as being in the right and therefore free from sin, guilt, and blame as well, although in a sense no human being is ever entirely innocent or guiltless.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the noun *tsedaqah* undoubtedly conveys the idea of both justice and righteousness in the sense of these terms just mentioned. In many passages, however, it also involves coming to the aid of those in need in order to deliver them from their suffering, especially when that suffering is

the result of oppression and injustice. Often *tsedaqah* is paired with the term *mishpat*, which is generally translated into English as “judgment.” In many cases, however, judgment is regarded as having the same objective of delivering those who are suffering and in need from their plight. While this plight is often the result of mistreatment or violence at the hands of an oppressor, it may also be due simply to natural causes or to the failure of others to care for those in need or uphold equity. Even in those cases, however, the suffering of those who find themselves in need may be considered the result of injustice, since it is expected that all of God’s people should be active to search out and assist those who are unable to meet their basic needs so that they are not forced to endure hardships or affliction.

The difference between the English and Hebrew understandings of justice is particularly evident in passages such as Psalm 146. There the Psalmist rejoices:

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who remains faithful forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the foreigners in the land; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin (vv. 5-9).

Here to do or execute justice is to help those who are oppressed, hungry, imprisoned, incapacitated, and humiliated, as well as those who are foreigners, orphans, and widows. This usage, however, is for the most part foreign to English, which sees such actions as expressions of compassion or kindness rather than expressions of justice or righteousness. This is especially the case with the idea of setting prisoners free, which would generally be understood as an act that is *contrary* to justice. Undoubtedly, it is kind and compassionate for God to do these things, yet it is also *just* in that it is fair and equitable. Because in biblical thought justice exists only when all have what they need and resources are distributed evenly and equitably, to assist those who are suffering and in need is not a voluntary act of compassion or kindness but an *obligation* on the part of those who have the power or means to do so.

The idea that to do justice is not only to do what is good and right but also to help and defend the poor and needy appears in many other passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. In Isa 1:16-17, God tells the rulers of his people: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and defend the widow’s cause.” A similar understanding of justice appears in Ps 82:3-4: “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; do justice to the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” Often it is God himself who is said to do justice in this sense. In Deut 10:18, for example, it is said that God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow and loves the foreigners, providing them with food and clothing.” The same concept of God is expressed in Ps 10:17-18:

“O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart. You will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.”

In many passages, however, it is the ruler or those in positions of power who are expected to fulfill the role of doing justice by caring for the poor, needy, and oppressed in obedience to God. Israel’s hopes and expectations regarding a king descended from David, for example, present him bringing justice in this sense.

Give the king your judgments, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity (*shalom*) for the people, and the hills, in justice. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor. . . . For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. He redeems their life from oppression and violence, and their blood is precious in his sight (Ps 72:1-4, 12-14).

He will defend the poor with justice and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked. Justice will be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins (Isa 11:4-5).

O house of David! Thus says the LORD: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed (Jer 21:12).

Thus says the LORD: Execute judgment and justice, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place (Jer 22:3).

These passages demonstrate just how common it is for the Hebrew terms generally translated as “justice” and “righteousness” to convey the idea of a concern for the well-being and wholeness of people, especially those in need, and a commitment to delivering them from the plight they are suffering, often as a result of oppression. For that reason, to use English terms such as justice and righteousness to translate the Hebrew can often be misleading, since those English terms are not usually understood in the same way. Unfortunately, however, there is no single term in English that captures accurately the meaning of the Hebrew terms, which makes it extremely difficult to translate the Hebrew in a way that is faithful to the original.

Judging to Save

Especially associated with the idea of executing justice and righteousness is that of establishing shalom. In fact, according to biblical thought, justice can be said to exist when all the members of a people or society enjoy shalom or wholeness. When any are lacking such shalom, there is a situation of injustice. The intimate relation between shalom and justice or righteousness is evident

in numerous passages from the Hebrew Bible. In the opening verses of Psalm 72, just cited above, the Psalmist affirms that as a result of the king's practice of justice the mountains will yield shalom for the people and the hills justice so that justice will flourish and shalom will abound (vv. 1-4, 7). Other passages also relate the two concepts to one another:

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace (*shalom*) to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is near for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; justice and peace (*shalom*) will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and justice will look down from the sky (Ps 85:8-11).

His authority will grow continually, and there will be endless peace (*shalom*) for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice (*mishpat*) and with righteousness (*tsedaqah*) from this time onward and forevermore (Isa 9:7).

The effect of righteousness will be peace (*shalom*), and the result of righteousness, quietness and security forever (Isa 32:17; cf. 48:18).

All your children will be taught by the LORD, and the prosperity (*shalom*) of your children will be great. You will be established in righteousness. You will be far from oppression, for you will not fear; and from terror, for it will not come near you (Isa 54:13-14).

Closely related to the idea that to do justice and righteousness is to help and defend those in greatest need are several other ideas that are evident in these passages. First of all, in Hebrew thought to do justice or to judge is essentially to *save* or *deliver* those who are suffering hardships or afflictions, especially as a result of injustice, oppression, or some type of violence. Second, to do justice in this sense is an act of *love*, since it is motivated by a desire to see those oppressed and in need restored to a condition in which they can experience wholeness and well-being. And third, while at times the salvation and deliverance of those in need requires acting against the oppressors who are responsible for their plight, the objective in taking such action is not simply to punish the oppressors or make them suffer but to prevent them from continuing to oppress others.

The two verbs that Hebrew most commonly uses to refer to the act of judging are *shafat* and *dan*, from the root *dyn*. While at times it is the oppressors and evildoers who are the object of these verbs, it is also common to speak of judging the oppressed and those in need. This usage is contrary to what we find in English, where judging tends to be understood in the sense of determining guilt and dictating sentences or punishments upon those found to be guilty. At times, these verbs are used to speak of judging the cause of the needy or defending their rights. Thus, for example, according to a literal translation, Jer 5:28 speaks of those who "go beyond all limits in their deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan to make it prosper, and the judgment of the needy ones they do not judge." Here,

as in a number of the passages considered above, to judge or do justice has nothing to do with questions of guilt or innocence or the imposition of punishments. Instead, it simply involves delivering those who are suffering from their plight. The same basic idea is evident in other passages already cited above, which in Hebrew use the verb *shafat* with the weak, poor, and needy as the direct object. If the English verb “judge” is used to translate this verb, the passages would read thus:

O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to judge the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more (Ps 10:17-18).

May he judge the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor (Ps 72:4).

Judge the weak and the orphan; do justice to the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked (Ps 82:3-4).

Learn to do good; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the orphan, and defend the widow’s cause (Isa 1:17).

He will judge the poor with justice and decide with equity for the meek of the earth (Isa 11:4).

Because this usage of the Hebrew verbs used to speak of judging is different from the English, translations must use a variety of different phrases to translate those verbs. Many translations of the passages just cited, for example, speak of doing or giving justice to the poor and oppressed, defending their cause, pleading for them, or saving and delivering them rather than judging them, as the Hebrew does. It is also important to note that in Hebrew the language of judging is frequently used in parallelism with verbs that refer to saving, delivering, rescuing, and defending. It is for this reason that the proclamation that God is coming to judge Israel, the nations, or the earth is repeatedly seen as a motive for rejoicing in the biblical texts, since his purpose is not to do harm but to save by putting an end to injustice and violence:

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

Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns! The world is firmly established; it will never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.” Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice! Let the sea roar and all that fills it! Let the field rejoice, and everything in it! Then will all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD, for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with justice and the peoples with his truth (Ps 96:10-13; cf. 98:7-9; 1 Chr 16:31-34).

The LORD reigns! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne (Ps 97:1-2).

At times, God is expected or called on to judge people both in the sense of acknowledging that they are in the right and in the sense of saving them from those who wrongfully seek to do them harm. When the Psalmists cry out to God to judge them, they are asking him to acknowledge that they have done no wrong and to deliver them from their enemies, that is, those who wrongly persecute them and seek to do them harm:

The LORD judges the peoples! Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me. Let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the righteous, for you test the minds and hearts, O righteous God (Ps 7:8-9).

Judge me, LORD, because I have walked in my integrity (Ps 26:1).

Judge me, LORD my God, in accordance with your justice, and do not let them rejoice over me (Ps 35:24).

Judge me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; deliver me from those who are deceitful and unjust (Ps 43:1).

Numerous other passages from the Hebrew Bible reflect this same understanding of judging and judgment. The figures referred to as “judges” (*shoftim*) in the biblical book that bears that name in English are not judges in the sense in which that word is used in English but saviors or deliverers. In many passages, the terms that in Hebrew refer to justice or righteousness appear as virtual synonyms of terms that refer to salvation. Often this involves the use of parallelisms in which the same basic idea is repeated twice in different ways:

Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; your judgments are like the great deep. You save humans and animals alike, O LORD (Ps 36:5-6).

By awesome deeds you answer us with justice, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas (Ps 65:5).

In your justice deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me (Ps 71:2).

You pronounced judgment from the heavens; the earth feared and was still when God rose up to execute judgment, to save all the oppressed of the earth (Ps 76:8-9).

My eyes fail from watching for your salvation, and for the fulfillment of your promise of justice (Ps 119:123).

The LORD is exalted, he dwells on high; he filled Zion with judgment and justice. He will be the stability of your times, a rich store of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is Zion’s treasure (Isa 33:5-6).

Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down justice. Let the earth open, that salvation may spring up, and let it cause justice to sprout up also; I the LORD have created it (Isa 45:8).

There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me (Isa 45:21).

Thus says the LORD: Maintain judgment and do justice; for my salvation is about to come and my justice to be revealed (Isa 56:1).

We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us (Isa 59:11).

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my whole being will exult in my God. For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of justice, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels (Isa 61:10).

In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he will execute justice and judgment in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness" (Jer 33:15-16).

In each of these passages, of course, the translator must choose whether to employ the terminology of justice or that of righteousness in order to render into English the Hebrew word used, even though the Hebrew original itself makes no such distinction. In many cases, however, it is necessary to use English terms that refer to salvation or deliverance to translate the same Hebrew words, since in English the language of justice or righteousness does not adequately convey the meaning of the Hebrew original. This can be seen in the following passages by contemplating two possibilities of translation in each one:

But the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for judgment/salvation. He judges/saves the world with justice/acts of deliverance; he brings justice/deliverance for the peoples with equity (Ps 9:7-8).

Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the LORD. They will come and proclaim his righteousness/deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it (Ps 22:30-31).

Like your praise, O God, your name reaches to the ends of the earth! Your right hand is filled with righteousness/salvation. Let Mount Zion be glad; let the towns of Judah rejoice because of your judgments/acts of deliverance (Ps 48:10-11).

Open your mouth, judge justly/save with justice; judge/rescue the poor and the needy (Prov 31:9).

Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness/deliverance: I am bringing near my righteousness/deliverance, it is not far off, and my salvation will not tarry. I will grant salvation to Zion, for Israel my glory (Isa 46:12-13).

My righteousness/deliverance is near; my salvation has gone out and my arms will judge/deliver the peoples! The coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath. For the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness/deliverance will never come to an end (Isa 51:5-6).

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous/saving Branch, and he will reign as king and deal wisely, and will execute judgment/deliverance and righteousness/salvation in the land. In his days

Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD our righteousness/deliverance" (Jer 23:5-6).

Some passages from the Hebrew Bible associate judgment or the practice of justice and righteousness with leading, guiding, and instructing people. In Ps 5:8, for example, the Psalmist tells God: "Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my persecutors; make your way straight before me." As already noted above, the author of Psalm 67:4 exclaims: "Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon the earth!" In Isa 42:4, it is said that God's servant "will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice on the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching," that is, his *torah*. The same association between *mishpat* and *torah* appears in Isa 51:4: "Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching (*torah*) will go out from me, and my justice (*mishpat*) for a light to the peoples."

Often the language of reigning appears in parallelism with that of judging or executing justice and righteousness. As noted above, the task of judging in the sense of rescuing the oppressed and helping those in need is especially associated with Israel's kings and with the imagery of God as king. In a number of passages, in fact, this is considered the primary purpose for which kings are appointed by God. In 1 Sam 8:5, the people say to Samuel: "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to judge us, like other nations." This is what David is said to do in 2 Sam 8:15: "So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered judgment and justice to all his people." In 1 Kgs 10:9, the Queen of Sheba tells Solomon: "Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king to execute judgment and justice." Of course, kings such as David and Solomon are also presented as judging the people in the sense of determining guilt and innocence, yet even in these cases the purpose of that activity is that of acting to establish wholeness, well-being, and equity among the people.¹ The hope that one day those who rule over God's people will fulfill this task faithfully is expressed in Isa 32:1, where the prophet announces: "See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice."

Justice as Love and Compassion

Precisely because God's justice and righteousness are aimed at helping those in need and saving those who are suffering oppression, the Hebrew Bible sees God's justice and righteousness as expressions of his *love*. Passages from the Psalms and the prophetic writings repeatedly make use of parallelisms to present justice and righteousness as virtual synonyms with words such as mercy, compassion, faithfulness, goodness, kindness, and steadfast love or *hesed*. A number of these passages have already been cited above, yet the sheer

1. See, for example, 1 Kgs 3:9, 28; 1 Chr 18:14.

number of passages from the biblical texts that speak in these terms demonstrates how central to Hebrew thinking is this relationship between justice or righteousness and love.

He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD (Ps 33:5).

Your steadfast love, O LORD, reaches up to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you (Ps 89:14).

I will sing of steadfast love and of justice (Ps 101:1).

The LORD executes justice and judgments for all who are oppressed. He made his ways known to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps 103:6-8).

But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his justice to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments (Ps 103:17-18).

His work is majestic and glorious, and his justice endures forever. He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and compassionate (Ps 111:3-4).

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is compassionate (Ps 116:5).

Your name, O LORD, endures forever; your renown, O LORD, throughout all ages. For the LORD will judge his people and have compassion on his servants (Ps 135:13-14).

They will celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and will sing aloud of your justice (Ps 145:7).

The LORD is righteous in all his ways, and kind in all his doings (Ps 145:17).

Whoever pursues justice and steadfast love will find life, justice, and honor (Prov 21:21).

Then a throne will be established in steadfast love in the tent of David, and on it will sit in faithfulness a ruler who judges, seeks justice, and is swift to do what is right (Isa 16:5).

Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him (Isa 30:18).

I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the LORD (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 compassion. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you will know the LORD (Hos 2:19-20).

But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to steadfast love and justice, and wait continually for your God (Hos 12:6).

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

According to these passages, to practice justice and righteousness is to show care and compassion for others. In Hebrew thought, therefore, what characterizes the righteous is not simply that they do not transgress God's law or are innocent of wrongdoing, as if righteousness had to do primarily with what one does *not* do, but that they actively reach out to those in need with compassion to give them the support and assistance they require. According to Ps 37:21, "the righteous are generous and keep giving." Psalm 112 repeats the same idea: "They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, compassionate, and righteous. . . . They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever" (vv. 4, 9).

Because in biblical thought the practice of justice and righteousness involves coming to the aid of those who are in need of help out of love and compassion for them, in the Psalms it is common for those who cry to God for deliverance from injustice and oppression to appeal not only to his compassion and his steadfast love but to his justice and righteousness as well. In Hebrew, one appeals *both* to God's compassion and love *and* to God's justice and righteousness because God's justice and righteousness are *grounded* in his love and compassion and are *expressions* of these things:

Answer me when I call, oh my God of justice! You have set me at large when I was in distress. Have mercy on me and hear my prayer! (Ps 4:1)

I have not hidden your justice within my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation. I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation. O LORD, do not withhold your compassion from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever (Ps 40:10).

For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life. In your righteousness bring me out of trouble. In your steadfast love cut off my persecutors, and destroy all my adversaries, for I am your servant (Ps 143:11-12).

This biblical use of the language of justice and righteousness once again runs contrary to what we generally find in English, since to appeal to God's justice or righteousness would involve affirming that one deserves to be saved or has a right to be helped. In fact, because even those who are poor and in need are sinners, for them to call out to God to judge them or do them justice might even be understood in the sense that they are asking him to dictate some sentence upon them or even punish them for their sins rather than imploring him to deliver them from their plight.

This idea that justice and righteousness are an expression of love is also reflected in the affirmation that the commandments God has given his people are just and righteous. In Psalm 119, the Psalmist rejoices and praises God for his righteous precepts and ordinances (vv. 7, 62, 106). Toward the end of the

Psalm, after affirming: “I love your law (*torah*),” the Psalmist continues: “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances. Great peace (*shalom*) have those who love your law” (vv. 163-65). The idea here and elsewhere in the same Psalm is that the law is good and wonderful precisely because it is just and righteous. In other words, it promotes justice and righteousness because it is a means by which God saves and guides his people, promotes their well-being, and seeks to avoid oppression.

Of course, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there are two different aspects to God’s justice or righteousness and his activity of judging and saving. The first of these is the type of caring, compassionate activity and concern for those in need to which the passages just cited refer. This aspect is evident, for example, in a very moving passage from Ezekiel, where God tells his people through the prophet: “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek out the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice” (Ezek 34:15-16). In this case, for God to judge his people or feed them with justice is to care for them with tenderness and compassion.

According to the Hebrew text in the last part of this passage, however, God promises to feed the fat and the strong not with good and pleasant things but with judgment. The idea is clearly that some of the sheep have become fat and strong by oppressing others. This is stated explicitly in the following verses, which describe the manner in which the fat sheep tread on others and foul their drinking water (Ezek 34:17-19). Here again the two sides of judgment are evident: what God seeks is to care for those who are suffering and in need, but in order to do so he must take action against their oppressors who are responsible for their suffering and need. According to the opening verses of the same chapter of Ezekiel, the problem is that those in positions of power and authority are not taking care of the sheep or people under them as they should (34:1-10). They are not strengthening the weak, healing the sick, binding up the crippled, or seeking out the lost, but instead are eating their fat, clothing themselves with their wool, and letting them scatter so as to become easy prey for the wild beasts (vv. 3-6). For that reason, God promises to execute judgments on the rulers (vv. 10, 17, 20). The purpose of this judgment, however, is to save and rescue the people by setting a new shepherd over them (vv. 11-16, 22-31). In other words, what interests God is not punishing the oppressors as an end in itself but saving those who are suffering at their hands.

This understanding of justice and judgment is reflected in many of the same passages from the Hebrew Scriptures that we have already considered above. In order to come to the aid of the weak, needy, and oppressed, it is necessary to take action against those who are responsible for their suffering and are doing them harm:

For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.

He redeems their life from oppression and violence, and their blood is precious in his sight (Ps 72:12-14).

Judge the weak and the orphan; do justice to the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked (Ps 82:3-4).

For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life. In your righteousness bring me out of trouble. In your steadfast love cut off my persecutors, and destroy all my adversaries, for I am your servant (Ps 143:11-12).

He will defend the poor with justice and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked (Isa 11:4).

When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and marauders have vanished from the land, then a throne will be established in steadfast love in the tent of David, and on it will sit in faithfulness a ruler who judges, seeks justice, and is swift to do what is right (Isa 16:4-5).

O house of David! Thus says the LORD: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed (Jer 21:12; cf. 22:3).

While God's justice and righteousness are undoubtedly often seen as expressions of his love in the biblical text, at first glance it might seem that he shows this love only for the oppressed and not for the oppressors. Many passages relate God's justice to his anger and his activity in crushing and even destroying those who practice injustice, violence, and oppression, including several of those already cited above:

Rise up, O LORD, in your anger; lift yourself up against the fury of my adversaries! Awake, O my God; you have appointed a judgment! Let the assembly of the peoples be gathered around you, and take your seat on high over it. The LORD judges the peoples! Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me. Let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the righteous, for you test the minds and hearts, O righteous God. God is my shield, who saves the upright in heart. God is a righteous judge and a God who has indignation every day (Ps 7:6-11).

You are to be feared. Who can stand in your presence once your anger is roused? From the heavens you proclaimed judgment; the earth feared and was still when God rose up to establish judgment, to save all the oppressed of the earth (Ps 76:7-9).

Zion will be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners will be destroyed together, and those who forsake the LORD will be consumed (Isa 1:27-28).

As we shall see in Chapter 6 of this study, while undoubtedly there are passages that speak of God hating those who practice injustice and oppression, this should not be understood in the sense that God does not love them in the sense of seeking their wholeness and well-being. On the contrary, the Hebrew

Scriptures constantly present God as sending his prophets and messengers to call the oppressors to repent and change their ways so as to put away their wrongdoing not only for the sake of the oppressed but also for their own sake. As long as they persist in their oppressive behavior, they not only prevent others from enjoying wholeness and well-being but also deprive themselves of these things. For that reason, rather than being *contrary* to God's love, his anger and indignation at the injustice and violence of the oppressors is an *expression* of God's love for all, as is his action to prevent the oppressors from continuing to harm others.

In a sense, therefore, for those actively engaged in oppression the proclamation that God comes to reign, judge, save, and deliver the oppressed is not good news or a motive for rejoicing. In their case, such a proclamation should be a source of fear and trembling because it involves their destruction. What God would greatly prefer, however, is not to destroy them but to see them turn from their oppressive ways so as to do instead what is good, right, kind, and just for their own good as well that of others. For these reasons, rather than simply acting to destroy them, he first calls them to put away their violence and oppression. If they do not do so and as a result he does act against them to destroy them, it is not because he does not love them and want their well-being, but rather because their refusal to put an end to their oppressive ways makes it impossible for his loving purposes in relation to them to be fulfilled.

CONTRASTING JUSTICE IN HEBREW AND ENGLISH

This survey of passages from the Hebrew Scriptures makes it clear that there are significant differences between the manner in which justice and righteousness are understood in English and the manner in which these terms are used in the biblical texts. The most significant of these differences is that whereas in English justice and righteousness are commonly viewed as being *antithetical* to love, kindness, mercy, and compassion, in the Hebrew Scriptures all of these terms are often used as virtual *synonyms*, despite the differences of meaning among them. In English, in fact, to practice strict justice is generally understood in terms of being entirely impartial so as to *refrain* from showing kindness, compassion, and mercy to others, unless of course they are deserving of these things. If they are deserving of these things, however, in reality one is not showing them mercy or compassion when one treats them with kindness or offers them assistance but is merely giving them the type of treatment to which they are entitled by right.

Similarly, because in English the act of judging is usually understood to involve determining guilt and innocence in order to inflict punishments on the guilty, those who execute judgments on others are not viewed as helping them, showing them favor, or seeking their well-being. Nor is the task of a judge understood to consist of delivering people from a plight or leading, guiding, and teaching them. For that reason, it is not considered an act of love to judge people. On the contrary, judges are expected to enforce justice

and adhere to what is fair and right without any type of bias, favoritism, or preference for particular persons or groups. If a judge determines that certain persons are innocent of an accusation, when the judge leaves them unpunished and lets them go free, the judge is not doing them any favor or showing them love or compassion but is simply adhering to the law and giving them what they rightfully deserve. Conversely, if a judge determines certain persons to be guilty and imposes some type of punishment on them, that judge is not attempting to save or help anyone. Nor is the judge said to be acting out of love or in a way that is contrary to love.

Among most English speakers, both justice and judgment are defined primarily in negative terms. To judge is often to condemn but never to save. For that reason, to speak of God or a human authority judging the poor and needy in the sense of delivering them from their plight or their suffering sounds extremely odd in English. As noted above, this difference between Hebrew and English makes it necessary for English translations of the biblical texts to alter the Hebrew phrases that speak of God judging those in need so as to speak instead of God defending the cause of the needy or doing justice on their behalf.

As we have also seen above, in English righteousness tends to be defined primarily in negative terms as well. To be righteous is to be blameless, innocent, or free of guilt. For that reason, even though a righteous person may show love, kindness, and compassion to others, generally it is not the practice of these things that is said to define a person as righteous but rather the avoidance of behavior that is unjust or morally wrong, that is, the things that a person does *not* do. Thus, while righteousness involves conformity to a norm, that norm usually has to do more with the absence of sinful or unacceptable behavior rather than the practice of behavior that is gracious, loving, kind, and caring.

Rather than perceiving as good news or as a cause for celebration the proclamation that God is just and righteous, many English speakers would regard such a proclamation as a motive for fear and concern. The main reason for this is that, in contrast to God, all human beings are thought to be imperfect, sinful, and unjust, at least to some extent. Because no human being is perfectly just and righteous as God is, no one can expect to be well-received or accepted by him. Instead of bringing him to save, help, or pardon them, God's justice and righteousness will lead him to condemn and punish them. The affirmation that God's law is just and righteous will be received in the same way. That law will be understood as a means by which God imposes his will on people and demands that they be perfect in their justice and righteousness as he is. At the same time, rather than benefiting anyone, a just and righteous law will lead to judgment, condemnation, and punishment for all, precisely because no one can ever measure up to God's standard of perfect justice and righteousness. In English, therefore, the notion that people should rejoice because God is just and righteous and gives people a law that is also just and righteous sounds strange.

Because in English judgment is understood primarily in terms of condemning and punishing, the biblical exhortations to rejoice because God is coming to judge his people, the earth, or the nations also come across as odd. Judgment is usually something to be feared rather than a motive for joy. Among many English speakers, in fact, the affirmation that people are to rejoice because a judge is going to execute just judgments would be understood in the sense that they should derive some type of morbid pleasure at seeing the manner in which pain and suffering will be inflicted on those who are guilty of wrongdoing in order to punish them. When people are involved in legal disputes, they may also rejoice that a judge will execute judgment, but only if the judge will decide in their favor. If the judge instead determines that justice is on the side of their adversary, rather than rejoicing that justice has been done, they will lament it.

These ways of understanding judgment and justice, therefore, stand in stark contrast to biblical thought, where judgment and justice are associated with deliverance from suffering, hardships, and oppression. When God judges, he restores the well-being and wholeness of his people and puts an end to their oppression. While this often involves acting against the oppressors to put a stop to their oppression of others, once again the emphasis is consistently on *deliverance* rather than punishment. To judge, therefore, is to act with love and concern for the well-being of those who are suffering and in need and to treat them with kindness and compassion so that their wholeness may be restored.

In English, justice is also commonly understood in terms of giving people their due, that is, making sure that they receive what they are entitled to or deserve on the basis of their actions. It therefore sounds odd to say that the needy, the oppressed, and the downtrodden *deserve* to be delivered from their plight. Such an affirmation would be understood in the sense that their behavior *merited* their receiving the assistance they need. In fact, it is common to maintain that those who are suffering or in need *deserve* to be in the condition in which they find themselves, either because they have done something that justifies their condition or has led to it, or else because they have not done what is required on their part to overcome that condition. Their suffering is therefore said to be *just* and *deserved* rather than *unjust*.

When the writings of the Hebrew Bible speak of justice, their emphasis tends to be on *distributive* justice. The aim of distributive justice is that all the members of the community or people have everything they need in order to enjoy well-being and wholeness. There is to be equity in that resources are to be divided and shared as evenly as possible. Injustice exists when some members of the community or people do not have what they need in order to experience the well-being or shalom that God desires for all. When efforts are made to ensure that their needs are met in accordance with God's will, in biblical thought this is regarded as an act of justice rather than compassion or mercy, since it involves doing what is just, fair, and right. In English, however, care for the poor and needy is generally viewed as an expression of

compassion and mercy rather than justice, since it is thought to involve acting out of kindness and generosity rather than obligation. Conversely, the failure to ensure that the needs of the poor and the suffering are met is generally understood as a lack of love, kindness, and compassion rather than a breach of justice. Those who do not reach out to help those in need are not usually considered unjust or unrighteous but rather unkind and uncaring.

In contrast, among English speakers justice is understood primarily in terms of *retribution*. Justice is said to be done when wrongdoers receive the punishment due to them. Undoubtedly, in Hebrew justice is often seen as taking the form of retribution as well, since it is necessary to take action against those who oppress others in order to prevent them from doing so. This generally requires the use of force and the imposition of punishments, not only to bring the oppression to an end but also to deter any who might come to oppress others from falling into such behavior.

In biblical thought, however, retributive justice is not regarded as *an end in itself* but is instead viewed as a means to attaining the objective of distributive justice, that is, equity and well-being for all. Simply inflicting punishment on a wrongdoer does not establish or restore justice. Punishments are regarded as just only when they put an end to injustice, inequity, and oppression and contribute in some way to the well-being of the community. For this same reason, when the oppressed cry out to God for justice, in biblical thought what they are understood to be seeking is not to see their oppressors subjected to suffering and punishment as retribution for their wrongdoing but rather to be delivered from their condition of oppression. In other words, the punishment of those who oppress and do harm to others is regarded *not as an end in itself* but rather *as a means to another end*, namely, that of restoring well-being and wholeness for all. If justice were simply a matter of punishing wrongdoers, then it would be necessary to maintain that once the guilty have been punished justice has been done, even if the poor and oppressed remain in the same condition and are not helped or liberated. Such an idea runs contrary to biblical thought.

In many cases, in English justice is also thought to involve doing good to people in the sense of rewarding them for behaving in accordance with a desired norm. Those who comply with that norm are said to be deserving of the reward they receive, which is due to them on account of their righteous or just behavior. The language of merit is also used to convey the same ideas. In biblical thought, however, when justice is associated with doing good to people, the reason why they are to be treated favorably is not that their behavior merits or deserves some type of reward but rather that all people without exception deserve to be treated well, including especially those who are suffering and in need of assistance. Undoubtedly, the biblical texts speak of God rewarding just and righteous behavior, but this reward is generally not seen as something that goes beyond the well-being and wholeness that result intrinsically from living in accordance with God's will. Those who practice justice and righteousness are not doing something exceptional that deserves a special reward but are merely

living in the way that God expects and demands of all people for their own good. Because they can be said merely to be fulfilling a duty or obligation, God has no reason to offer them any type of reward in addition to blessing them in the way he wishes to bless all people. Their righteous behavior, however, does make it possible for God to bless them rather than having to chastise or correct them, since that behavior makes it possible for the blessings they receive from God to do them and others good rather than harm.

When justice is understood in terms of coming to the aid of those who are suffering and in need, those who receive that assistance are not thought to have deserved or merited it as a reward for their actions. For that reason, those who are delivered from suffering and oppression are generally not said to be rewarded. If they are living righteously and obeying God's commandments, it might be said that they are rewarded for their righteousness and obedience when God comes to their aid, yet even in these cases it is God's kindness, grace, and concern for those in need that leads him to act on their behalf rather than some merit on their part. Their righteous behavior merely makes it possible for them to be restored to the well-being that God desires for them. In biblical thought, therefore, to deliver the poor and needy from their plight is to do them justice, yet this does not involve rewarding them even if they are living righteously, since what leads God to assist them is not their behavior or any merit on their part but their *need*. Similarly, in the Hebrew Bible, to do justice is not to reward good behavior as an end in itself but to ensure that all are able to enjoy wholeness and well-being. This well-being is something that all people deserve, independently of how they live, yet only those who live in accordance with God's will can attain it because any who refuse to live as God has commanded will instead bring ruin, violence, and suffering upon themselves. This understanding of justice, merit, and reward is also for the most part foreign to English, which generally does not speak of people in need deserving to be helped or meriting the help they receive, since merit and reward are generally seen as a response to *behavior* rather than to *need*.

JUSTICE IN THE PAGAN WORLDVIEWS OF ANTIQUITY

These observations raise the question of what is at the root of these differences between the way in which the Hebrew Scriptures and modern-day English define and understand justice and righteousness. To answer this question, it is necessary to consider once more the manner in which the pagan belief systems of antiquity conceive of the origin of the world as well as the gods and human beings that inhabit it.

The Justice of the Gods

As we have seen in Chapter 1 of this study, in most of the belief systems of the nations of antiquity, the gods are either equated with some primeval reality that exists from the very beginning or are said to have emerged from a

it costs to obtain the spells and incantations. Even those who did in fact live virtuous lives and practice what is good and right could not hope to attain the salvation they sought without the monetary resources necessary to purchase the spells they needed.

For these reasons, it cannot be thought that texts such as the Negative Confession actually promoted justice, righteousness, and ethical behavior in ancient societies such as Egypt. On the contrary, such texts served as a basis for claiming that the rich and powerful were truly worthy of the privileges they enjoyed both in the present life and the life to come and for justifying all that they did as good, just, and right in the eyes of the gods. At the same time, these claims would be used against the common people and those of lower social classes in order to bring them to submit to the rich and powerful as the defenders of justice, given that they were faultless and just in all that they did and decreed. According to the logic of these texts, the rulers and elites would enjoy a blessed existence not only in the present life but for all eternity in the life to come, whereas such a life would be unattainable for the vast majority of human beings. Like the other writings known to us from the great empires of antiquity, rather than promoting the practice of justice, righteousness, and compassion, texts such as the Code of Hammurabi and the Negative Confession ultimately defend unjust and oppressive social and political orders by justifying the dominance of powerful elites in the name of what is good, right, just, and loving.

THE SUBVERSIVE JUSTICE OF THE GOD OF ISRAEL

This analysis of the manner in which justice and righteousness are understood within the type of belief systems found among those who worshiped pagan gods in antiquity makes it possible to distinguish much more clearly the uniqueness of the understanding of justice and righteousness that runs throughout the Hebrew Bible. This uniqueness is rooted in the beliefs regarding the creation of the world that are reflected in the biblical texts, which we have considered in Chapter 2 of this study, as well as the commitment to the well-being of all that lies at the heart of the biblical conception of God.

Establishing an Order That Is Truly Just

According to the logic of the Genesis account and other passages from the Hebrew Bible, when God created the world and the human beings who inhabit it, he was free to do so in any way he pleased. Unlike the gods of the nations, he was not subject to any type of natural order or natural laws that dictated to him what he could and could not do, nor was he limited in any way by anything external or internal to him. He did not emerge from a preexisting primeval reality, nor did that which exists emerge from him through some type of natural process. Instead, the God of the Hebrew Bible was believed to have brought the world and human beings into existence as the result of a

deliberate decision and in accordance with a design that had its origin in him alone rather than anything above or beyond him.

At the same time, creation was understood as an *act of love* on the part of God. Because he had deliberately willed everything he had created to be *good*, it followed that he also wanted only good for everything he had created. This included especially the human beings to whom he had subjected his creation. When he had done so, he had chosen to give dominion over all that he had created not only to *some* human beings due to their superior power, knowledge, or wisdom but rather to *all* human beings collectively. This meant that everything in creation was to serve the needs of all human beings equally and to be distributed among them as evenly and equitably as possible. The good things in God's creation were to serve the needs of each and every person, whose well-being was *an end in itself*. According to biblical thought, God had not created human beings to serve some end or purpose that was above or beyond them, that is, to satisfy his own needs or to give him honor, reverence, obedience, or worship for his own sake. Rather, he desired the well-being of human beings *for their sake* as an end in itself. This was the end or purpose for which he was thought to have created human beings, and therefore also the end or purpose that he himself pursued and demanded that *they too* pursue collectively in their day-to-day existence. While it could be said that their well-being would constitute a source of joy for God and in that sense would satisfy a desire of his own as well, this was because from the very beginning he had linked his own happiness to theirs, as we have seen in Chapter 2. Therefore, if he was said to desire their well-being for his own sake, such a claim did not contradict the affirmation that he also desired their well-being for *their* sake as an end in itself, but rather stood alongside of it and complemented it.

These ideas are reflected in the commandments of the Torah as well. As we have seen in the previous chapter, behind many of those commandments is a concern for distributive justice. They mandate that provisions are to be made so that all without exception have what they need, including especially the weaker elements of the society, such as the poor, the widows, the orphans, the foreigners, and those with various types of disability. According to this understanding of the order that God intended to establish among his people, for example, if there was a poor, elderly widow in the community, all were to make sure that she was taken care of and that her needs were met. She was to receive the assistance she needed *not* because she was a means to the well-being of others or because of anything she might contribute to the social order, but because *her well-being was an end in itself*. She was to be valued and supported *unconditionally*, independently of any contributions she made or did not make within the order, because this was what God desired and commanded and therefore what all others within the order were also to desire and seek. The same was true of the well-being of every other person within the order. The well-being of each person was not to be regarded simply as a

means to some other end or purpose but constituted an end in itself. All were to be cared for and loved unconditionally, independently of any qualities they possessed or did not possess.

This logic is evident in many of the commandments that appear in the Torah. As we have seen in the previous chapter, those who had more were to share generously what they had with the less fortunate, not closing their hand to them when they were in need of help. Provisions were to be made so that all might have the food they needed by doing things such as leaving a part of the fruits and crops unharvested so that the poor might find something to eat. The people were told not only to refrain from oppressing others but also to show special concern for those in greatest need. As Deut 15:4 states, the ideal was that there be no poor among them. The king was also to use his power and authority for the good of all and was prohibited from amassing great wealth and acquiring many wives, servants, and horses for himself. By prescribing the cancelation of debts, the return of properties to their original owner, and the liberation of slaves every fifty years, the Torah also sought to preserve and restore a certain degree of equity among the people. On the seventh day of every week, *all* were to rest and be refreshed, including the servants, slaves, foreigners, and animals. These laws and others are based on the notion that the well-being of each individual is an end in itself and that none within the system or order are to be regarded merely as a means to the happiness or well-being of others who are superior to them or of greater value and importance.

To say that the well-being of each person was an end in itself, however, was not to deny that all were also to see themselves and their own well-being as a means to the well-being of others. Because all people need others and depend on them to help satisfy their own needs and desires, it was necessary and inevitable that all regard the well-being of others not only as an end in itself but also as a means to their own well-being. Each individual was to be valued and cared for, yet was to value and care for everyone else as well. According to this same logic, all were to regard themselves and what they possessed as a means to the well-being of others rather than seeing their own well-being purely as an end in itself. As the law commanded, all were to love their neighbor as they loved themselves, caring for their neighbor's needs as they cared for their own. Any who were not dedicated to using the life and resources that God had given them to serve others and help meet their needs were sinning not only by failing to see the well-being of others as an end in itself but also by failing to see themselves as means to the well-being of others in the way that God desired and commanded. Thus, while the principle of *do ut des* is undoubtedly operative and necessary in relations among human beings, in biblical thought it does not constitute the basis for defining what is just and unjust. When one gives to others, one does so not only in order to receive something in return from them, but also in order to help satisfy their needs and promote their well-being.

Justice, therefore, was said to exist when all without exception had what was necessary for them to live and prosper. If such was not the case, then *injustice* was said to exist and it needed to be corrected. To be righteous was to be committed to the well-being of all together with one's own well-being, regarding the well-being of each individual as an end in itself, and also regarding one's own well-being as a means to that of others. For that reason, righteousness was understood as being essentially *synonymous* with terms such as kindness, compassion, mercy, and steadfast love rather than being *opposed* to these things or in conflict with them. Conversely, sin and unrighteousness were defined in terms of *not* loving and caring for others by seeking their well-being together with one's own.

Within this order, of course, there were some who had been gifted and endowed by God or nature with greater intelligence, strength, and resources of various types. Others, in contrast, might not only be less gifted in these areas but might also be weak, sickly, disabled, or disadvantaged in some way. As a result, it would be both good and inevitable that those who were stronger, wealthier, and more intelligent or gifted assume positions of leadership within the society and that others submit to them in various ways. What mattered, however, was that all use the gifts and resources they had received for the good of all and not only for their own benefit by ascribing to the well-being of others the same importance that they ascribed to their own. What God had commanded was: "You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*" (Lev 19:18). This meant not only that all were not to love others *less* than themselves but also that they were not to love others *more* than themselves by regarding the well-being of others as more important than their own. In other words, within the social order each person was to be regarded as being of equal value, to the extent that this was possible. The principle that all were to be committed to the well-being of every other person within the order was intended not only to avoid the excessive accumulation of power and wealth among a privileged few but also to prevent people from refusing to contribute to the well-being of others by being irresponsible, unproductive, or uncaring.

Because justice was understood in terms of ensuring that all without exception had what they needed, this ideal constituted the basis for defining what each person *deserved*. For that reason, it would be said that those in need *deserved* to be helped, saved, or delivered from their plight. Of course, it would also be said that the actions of each person determined what that person deserved, but the criterion for defining whether particular actions were just or unjust was the extent to which they contributed to the well-being of all as an end in itself. In biblical thought, the objective is not merely to maintain order, since any particular order may be unjust and oppressive and not truly contribute to the well-being of all. What matters is not the order itself but the well-being and wholeness of each person and group within the order. For that reason, *the criterion for defining what is just and unjust is not whether certain actions and behaviors preserve order but whether they promote the well-being of all.*

If they do not, then justice demands that the established order be replaced by a *different* order that *does* in fact serve the needs of all without exception, and to uphold the established order rather than changing or replacing it must be considered *unjust*. Whereas in pagan thought it is the established order that defines how justice is to be understood and applied, in the biblical texts it is justice in the sense of the well-being of all that defines what order must be established and preserved.

For this reason, in biblical thought there is no question that the imposition of slavery and hardships on people such as the Israelites by dominant powers such as Egypt is unjust and oppressive. The Pharaoh is hardly seeking the well-being of the Hebrews as an end in itself when he subjects them to slavery. The order that the Pharaoh seeks to maintain does not truly promote the well-being of the Hebrews and other enslaved peoples, since even though it allows for many of their needs to be provided for, it treats them only as means whose sole purpose is to satisfy the needs and desires of those in positions of power and privilege, such as the Pharaoh himself and those Egyptians on whose behalf the order over which he rules was established. In biblical thought, there is no sense in which the Israelites *deserve* the harsh treatment they receive at the hands of the Pharaoh, since what justice requires is an order or system in which the needs of all are satisfied equally and in which the well-being of the weak and the minorities is as important as the well-being of the strong and the majority. Similarly, from a biblical perspective, the gods of Homer's poems are not just but unjust and oppressive in that they favor some over others and show little if any interest in the needy and those who have nothing to offer them. They can hardly be said truly to care for all human beings collectively and be committed to the well-being of each and every human individual.

According to the biblical understanding of justice, those who judge are to seek the well-being of those whom they judge, along with the well-being of all others within the society as well. For that reason, the idea that a just judge is going to execute judgments is a motive for rejoicing for those who will be judged if they are in need or suffering hardships. In that case, the judge is indeed understood as a savior figure who acts in favor of those in need out of a desire to help and support them, since the judge establishes justice by doing what is necessary to bring their plight or suffering to an end. In principle, the coming of a just judge to execute judgments should be a motive of joy for all others as well, whether rich or poor, strong or weak, since all should be concerned for the well-being of each member of the society and therefore be glad when those who are in need of help receive that help and are delivered from their plight. The only ones who would not regard as good news the coming of a just judge to execute judgments would be those who are *not* concerned for the well-being of others as an end in itself, either because they do not care for them or else because they are acting oppressively and unjustly in relation to others and the judge will take measures to prevent them from

continuing to do so. Such people are regarded as sinful, unjust, and unrighteous precisely because they are not committed to the well-being of all within the society as an end in itself. For the same reason, when speaking of sin and injustice, the biblical texts tend to view these things in terms of the refusal or failure to show care and concern for others, that is, the failure to do good to others rather than the violation of prohibitions. The sinners and unrighteous are those who neglect those in need and do not reach out to help those who are suffering, though of course the violence and harm that they do to others actively is also viewed as being sinful and unjust.

In biblical thought, those who are set over others as rulers are therefore to define their task in terms of ensuring that all have what they need to enjoy the well-being that God desires for them, including especially those in greatest need, as well as delivering those who are suffering hardships from their plight. The rulers are to do this out of *love* for such people and not simply out of obligation. Nevertheless, in order to treat the well-being of those under them as an end in itself, they must *listen* to them and attempt to discern what is necessary to establish their well-being in dialogue with them rather than defining unilaterally what they need. They must also listen to others within the society and above all submit to everything that is prescribed in the commandments that God has given. At times, both the rulers and the judges need to be flexible in the application of those commandments, yet the criterion they must use to determine when to be flexible is not merely what promotes and preserves order but what is best for the well-being of all as an end in itself. In particular, the rulers must listen to the prophets God sends to speak his word and communicate his will, most of whom come from among the common people rather than from among those who enjoy greater wealth and power. Those prophets serve as a means to prevent the rulers and the elites from arbitrarily imposing their will on the rest of the population in the name of the common good and defining unilaterally what is just, right, and fair. It is not the rulers who are ultimately to determine these things but God's good law, to which all collectively are to be subject, including especially the rulers.

Both the rulers and the judges, therefore, are accountable to the people as a whole and in that sense are subject to their judgments as well, since it is the task of all to ensure that God's commandments are respected by everyone within the society, including especially those in positions of power and authority. Rather than refusing to submit to the judgments of others, including those of the people as a whole, or doing so reluctantly, the rulers and judges should do so willingly and gladly as long as those judgments are truly just and promote the well-being of all, since this should be precisely what the rulers and judges desire above all else as well. Nevertheless, the rulers and judges also require a great deal of wisdom, knowledge, and experience in order to promote and defend justice and well-being for all. For that reason, it is important for the people to have rulers and judges who possess such qualities, as well as a genuine concern for the well-being of all

and a sincere commitment to doing whatever is necessary to accomplish that objective. When such rulers and judges are in place, the people will be able to trust and respect their decisions and judgments, even when they do not fully understand them or agree with them. While the administration of justice requires authorities who are committed to the well-being of all within the society, therefore, it also demands ongoing dialogue and continuous evaluation among both the authorities and the people who are under their authority so that together they can determine whether justice is being administered properly and the needs of all are being met.

It should also be noted that in biblical thought, the purpose of the laws and their observance is not simply to promote morality in the sense in which that term is often used in English. Generally, morality is understood in terms of following rules and conforming to certain norms that are considered to be good, upright, and acceptable in themselves. What God was thought to seek through the commandments he had given, however, was not merely that all of his people be moral, upright persons who respect the rules he has established simply because it pleases him that they do so, but that all be fully committed to the well-being of everyone else within the society. The objective was not that people follow rules or adhere to norms for the sake of those rules and norms themselves or for God's own sake, but that they truly care for one another, and especially for those in greatest need.

In contrast to pagan conceptions of justice, therefore, in biblical thought the primary concern is for *distributive* justice rather than *retributive* justice. The objective is that the resources available be distributed in ways that allow all to have what they need in order to enjoy the well-being that God desires for each person within the society. Nevertheless, retributive justice is also important since it is the means by which those who prevent others from attaining the well-being that God desires for all are restrained and held in check. As we shall see in the next chapter, retribution is also necessary as a means by which people are brought to act in ways that contribute to the well-being of others, yet it is not to be regarded as an end in itself.

For the same reasons, according to biblical thought, the primary task of judges does not consist of determining innocence or guilt, assigning blame, inflicting punishments on the guilty, or rewarding those who observe the law. In itself, simply determining that certain persons are guilty of violating the law and on that basis inflicting punishments on them does not establish or restore justice, since what matters is promoting, preserving, and restoring the well-being of all, including especially those in greatest need. For the most part, punishing wrongdoers does not benefit either the victims of wrongdoing or the wrongdoers themselves, who need to be brought to put away their wrongdoing both for the sake of others and for their own sake. Similarly, simply assigning guilt and blame does not necessarily promote the well-being of anyone, since what matters is seeing that people's needs are met and that they are able to enjoy the well-being that God desires for

them. If some people have suffered injustice or violence, what is necessary is not merely to determine who is responsible for their suffering in order to punish them but to see how those who are suffering can be delivered from their plight and receive the help and support they need. Likewise, rather than seeking a reward for themselves, those who observe the laws given by God for the good of all are to do so precisely because they care for one another and wish to see others enjoy the same well-being that they desire for themselves. They therefore serve and care for others not to receive some reward for their own sake but because they regard the well-being of others as an end in itself. If the language of reward is used, it should be understood in the sense that the only reward that people are to seek is that of achieving the well-being that God intends for all as a result of their commitment to the well-being of others together with their own.

At the same time, those who are in need of help due to injustice, oppression, or simply a lack of resources have a right to demand that they receive such help rather than being forced simply to depend on whatever mercy, kindness, or goodwill that those in power choose to show them. The authorities who are in charge of administering justice are under obligation to assist those in need. It is therefore not a matter of their simply being gracious, merciful, and generous if they so desire. Much less are they to use the support they give to those in need as a means to manipulate them for their own ends. For their part, rather than regarding the authorities who assist them as merciful benefactors who have done them a favor, those who receive assistance from them are to see that assistance not as an act of compassion but as something that they are entitled to in accordance with justice. Undoubtedly, they should be grateful for the love shown to them by the authorities, yet what should interest the authorities is not that people be grateful to them but rather that they be able to enjoy well-being and from that point on be able to contribute to the well-being of others as well. In this way, when the authorities assist those in need, they are seeking the well-being not only of those who receive the assistance but of the society as a whole. At the same time, those who receive assistance must also be concerned not only for themselves and their own needs but for the needs of others as well, whose well-being is to be considered just as important as their own. While all are to be committed to the well-being of others, all have a right to demand that others be committed to their own well-being in the same way.

This same concern for the well-being of all will lead both the people in general as well as the authorities to regard the just laws given by God as something *good* and thus to rejoice that in his love God has given those laws and that they are just and righteous. All will take delight in those laws because they help to ensure that everyone within the society is able to enjoy well-being and wholeness. This is something that all desire not only for themselves but also for one another in the same way that God desires well-being and wholeness for all without exception. For that reason, those who study those laws

and reflect on them will find them sweeter than honey and more precious than gold, not only because those laws promote their own well-being and prosperity, but also because they serve as means by which all within society are enabled to enjoy these things (Ps 19:10; 119:72, 103, 127). God's laws will therefore be seen as an expression of his love for all, and that same love for all will characterize all the members of his people, who will rejoice just as much in the well-being that others attain through the implementation and observance of those laws as they do in the well-being that they attain themselves. By definition, then, any who do *not* love the commandments of the Torah are being selfish and are sinful and unrighteous, since they are not concerned for the good of all that comes through the study and observance of those commandments.

Of course, to affirm that the laws and commandments given by God as well as his judgments are good, just, and righteous because they promote the well-being of all of the people without exception leads to the same conclusion regarding God himself. To affirm that God is just and righteous is not to *oppose* his justice and righteousness to his love but to see his justice and righteousness as *expressions* of his love, goodness, kindness, and compassion, as the Psalms and other writings of the Hebrew Bible consistently do. Any view of God that opposes his justice and his righteousness to his love, kindness, and mercy cannot therefore be regarded as reflecting faithfully biblical thought but must instead be seen as rooted in pagan conceptions of God and his justice. In biblical thought, people do not need to be saved from God's justice or righteousness. Much less do they need God's mercy to temper his justice and hold it in check. What people must be saved from is not God's justice or righteousness but their own injustice, unrighteousness, and sin due to the harmful and destructive effect that the failure to practice what is good, right, just, and loving has on them and others. Thus, while they need to be saved *by* God in the sense of being brought to live in ways that allow them to experience the well-being he desires for them out of love for them, there is no sense in which they need to be saved *from* God.

Any reading of the Hebrew Bible that pits God's justice and righteousness against his love and mercy or that denies or rejects the notion that God is fully committed to the well-being of all human beings without exception must therefore be considered contrary to biblical thought and to reflect instead pagan conceptions regarding the gods and justice. Any God who regards as more important something other than the well-being of all human beings collectively is not the God of the Hebrew Scriptures but a pagan god. In biblical thought, what the God of Israel desires is to be served, obeyed, and worshiped, not for his own sake, but for the sake of the human beings whom he has created, because only by doing these things will they be able to enjoy wholeness and well-being by being brought to live in ways that make that wholeness and well-being possible.

Restoring a Justice That Saves

There can be little doubt that the view of God and the justice and righteousness of God that has prevailed in the West has been grounded much more in ancient pagan thought rather than the biblical texts. God is commonly presented as a strict judge whose primary concern is imposing a moral order on human beings that is in conformity with his holy and righteous nature and acting to punish any who deviate from that order. As we have noted in the previous chapter, at times that moral order is also associated with God's own personal desires and preferences, which lead him to deem certain behaviors as righteous and others as sinful. While he is undoubtedly said to be a God of love as well, that love is viewed as standing in tension and opposition to his justice and righteousness, which demand that the sins of human beings be properly punished before he can act to save and bless them. According to this mode of thought, the problem that must be resolved if human beings are to be saved is not the sinful and destructive behavior of human beings itself but the inability of God to tolerate and overlook that behavior due to his just, holy, and righteous nature. Supposedly, if God could simply leave the destructive behavior of human beings unpunished, they could enjoy peace, well-being, and happiness by pursuing a way of life in accordance with their own desires and pleasures rather than having to submit to the dictates of a holy and righteous God whose commandments they often find overbearing and even oppressive.

Because God's justice and righteousness have been understood in this manner, the affirmation that both God and the commandments he has given are just and righteous has generally been regarded as a motive for anxiety and apprehension rather than rejoicing. A just and righteous God is said to demand perfection of human beings and to stand over them constantly threatening them with punishments if they fall short of that perfection. Obviously, what moves him to relate to human beings in this way is not his love for them but the demands of his just and holy nature. While God is certainly said to love human beings and to show them mercy and kindness, his justice and righteousness are regarded as placing limits on that love, mercy, and kindness and even taking priority over them. In this way, it is not only human beings but God himself who is subject to the dictates of his just and righteous nature.

According to this understanding of God's justice and righteousness, God's primary concern is not the happiness and well-being of his creation but the satisfaction of the demands that his nature makes upon him. What his nature demands above all else is retribution for sin, which is defined as any action or behavior that is in conflict with his justice, holiness, and righteousness. For their part, human beings must give priority to obtaining God's love and favor and avoiding his wrath and condemnation by living in compliance with the demands of his justice and righteousness and making atonement whenever they violate his just and righteous commandments. The emphasis is therefore on the actions and behaviors that human beings must follow or avoid in order to remain in God's favor and be accounted as righteous in his sight rather

than a life dedicated to seeking the well-being of all out of love for God, oneself, and others. What interests God is that people not break the rules he has laid down for the sake of his justice and righteousness.

Because the primary objective of God and his justice is said to be that of giving to all what their actions deserve, God tends to be presented primarily as a judge who is constantly seeking to determine guilt and innocence and ensure that the guilty are duly punished. While he is also seen as rewarding just and righteous behavior, less importance is ascribed to this aspect of God's justice because in reality no human being is considered to be truly righteous or deserving of his love. On the contrary, all without exception are imperfect sinners who deserve only to be subjected to his just punishments. The idea that some might actually be regarded as innocent or blameless is rejected out of hand, despite the fact that the Hebrew Scriptures often use such terms to refer to certain human beings, who are of course never entirely without sin.⁹ If they wish to be delivered from God's righteous judgments and condemnation, human beings must find a way to be declared righteous in his sight and obtain a verdict of not guilty. Of course, in traditional Christian thought, Christ's vicarious death is said to make it possible for human beings to be accepted by God as righteous and absolved of their guilt. As we shall see in Chapter 8, this is also the role and purpose commonly ascribed to the sacrifices for sin ordained in the Mosaic law.

According to this view of God, what God demands of human beings is not only obedience to his commandments but also their loyalty and allegiance. They are to serve him alone in the sense of satisfying his personal desires and the demands of his just, holy, and righteous nature. It is also generally said that they must manifest their loyalty to God by loving and serving God willingly and with a sincere heart. Curiously, at the same time they are threatened with punishments should they fail to love and serve God in that way. For that reason, ultimately what motivates them to serve and obey God is fear of punishment rather than a love for God that is genuine and sincere.

Among those who are accustomed to conceiving of God and his justice and righteousness in this way, the affirmation that God's primary concern is for the happiness and well-being of human beings is regarded as highly problematic and is generally rejected. From their perspective, to speak of God in those terms is to conceive of him as catering to the desires and whims of human beings as if he had made himself their servant or slave. Both divine and human love are understood in terms of fulfilling the desires of others, even when those desires are selfish and self-serving, rather than truly seeking the well-being of all and demanding that they live in ways that promote that well-being for their own good.

Such an objection to the notion that God is concerned for the happiness and well-being of his creatures above all else is rooted in a failure to grasp the

9. See, for example, Gen 6:9; Exod 23:7; Deut 19:10; 1 Sam 19:5; 2 Sam 22:21-25; Job 1:1; 2:3; Ps 19:13; 94:21; 119:1.

biblical understanding of God's love as well as his justice and righteousness. In biblical thought, those who live selfishly and put their own happiness and well-being above that of others in reality do harm to themselves and others, since there cannot be true happiness and well-being for some unless there is happiness and well-being for all. In giving priority to that happiness and well-being above all else, therefore, God is not catering to the selfish whims and desires of human beings but seeking what is truly in their best interest. And because God has linked his own happiness to that of human beings and his creation as a whole, as he seeks the happiness of human beings he is also thought to be seeking his own happiness. In no way, therefore, is he understood as having enslaved himself to human beings. On the contrary, he seeks their happiness and well-being by demanding that they be committed to these things themselves and commanding that they obey him by living in ways that promote that happiness and well-being. For the same reason, rather than wanting for human beings to pledge loyalty to himself personally, he asks and demands that they be loyal to the practice of what is good, just, and right out of love for them.

On the basis of these observations, it should be clear that in many ways the understandings of God and God's justice and righteousness that have prevailed in traditional Western thought have been rooted in ideas associated with the pagan belief systems of antiquity rather than biblical thought. In the Hebrew Scriptures, to speak of God's justice and righteousness is at the same time to speak of God's unconditional love for human beings and his firm and unbending commitment to do whatever is necessary to bring them to live in ways that truly promote their happiness and well-being. What God seeks in his justice and righteousness is not to uphold a moral order that is grounded solely in a concern for himself and the inviolability of his holy and righteous nature but to deliver human beings from the destructive behavior that makes it impossible for them to enjoy the well-being he desires for all and bring them instead to live in ways that are truly in their best interest. Rather than being saved *from* God's justice, therefore, human beings need to be saved *by* that justice, which seeks to deliver those who are suffering and oppressed from their plight, even when it is they who are responsible for that suffering and oppression themselves. As we have seen previously, what the God of the Hebrew Bible seeks is that the human beings whom he has created in love be just as firmly committed to their own well-being as he is. Those who do not share that commitment need to be saved, not *from God*, but *from themselves*.