

Some Biblical Perspectives on Justice and Peace

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Theo Aerts

“Justice and peace have embraced”, not only according to the Psalmist (85:10), but in many other ways as well, so much so, that the well-known *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* lacks a particular article under “justice”, but refers instead to what it will say about “Peace in the OT”. Hence, one might say that, for some recent scholars, the two concepts are interchangeable, or, at least, very much intertwined. On another practical level, justice and peace like each other’s company, such as, for example, in the PNG “Commission for Justice, Peace, and Development,” or in the WCC “Programme for Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation”. In both these instances, the first two concepts seem to be joined, as the basis for something to be realised further ahead, or maybe as something, which needs some further addition, in order to give edge to the preceding realities, which have been overused in the past. Surely, justice and peace are basic biblical themes. But, even without going into their statistics here, it would be impossible to outline even the most important passages concerned. Still, I do feel that it is useful to first make some general linguistic observations.

It appears that, since the KJV, and its immediate predecessors, the two terms: “justice” and “peace”, have obtained an inalienable place in the English Bible. They are, therefore, the regular equivalents for the Hebrew תְּצִדָּקַת (ts^edāqāh) and מִשְׁלָמָה (shālōm), and for the Greek δικαιοσύνη (dikaiosunē) and εἰρήνη (eirēnē). This fact derives, in part, from the translation techniques followed in these earlier versions, down to the RSV and the NIV. We call this the method of “formal equivalence”. One English word for the same original word. This method has the advantage that those who are knowledgeable can see the original inspired words through the modern

readings. But it has, for the layman, the disadvantage that certain words are preserved, while their meaning has shifted; they become like ciphers, conducive to a kind of church jargon, which is out of touch with daily life.

Whatever modern translation computers are able to do, one can no longer translate the Bible mechanically. One must, in the words of Charles Dodd, resolve oneself “on Englishing the Bible”. Newer versions have, therefore, opted to introduce the “closest cultural equivalent”, and it would surely be a rewarding exercise to check the renderings of the NEB, JB, and TEV for the Hebrew **תְּדַקֵּחַ** (*ts^edāqāh*), etc., to identify the passages where “justice”, etc., have now been replaced by less common terms. As a rule, these other terms represent one possible translation, which might be discussed, but which is, in idiomatic English, and helps the reader to discover the broader spectrum of what was intended by Isaiah, or Amos, or one of the writers of the New Testament. However, the average Bible user loses some of the connotations, traditionally linked with the foreign, Semitic concepts of “justice” and “peace”. To these we now turn.

1. Justice

For our first concept, we should recall that the English language has two words, one derived from the Anglo-Saxon: “right, righteousness”, and another from a Latin stock; “just, justice, justification”. Both terms might render the Hebrew verb **צָדַק** (*tsādaq*), which means, in the first place, “to be stiff”, “to be straight”, or “to be right”, in a material sense, and then also, figuratively, both in itself, or compared with some kind of norm or covenant. From the simple verb **צָדַק** (*tsādaq*) (qal), there is also found an intensive form (piel): “to consider”, “to make appear”, “to prove”, “to declare”, “to be right”. Then comes the causative form (hiphil): “to do justice towards”, “to help somebody to his or her right”, “to pronounce right/guiltless”. Finally, one has the reflexive form (hithpael): “to justify oneself”. There are not many derivations from this verb (only the adjective “just”, the two nouns “just one” and “justice”, and several personal names, such as Zedekiah, Zadok, etc.). Among the Hebrew synonyms of **צָדַק** (*tsādaq*), one might refer to **רִשְׁעָה** (*yāshār*): “just”, and to **שָׁפֵט** (*shāfat*)/**מִשְׁפָּט** (*mish^epāt*): “to govern”/“just

judgment”, being the rule, which a so-called שׁופֶט (*shōfēt*), or judge, should follow. However, we will only concentrate on צְדָקָה (*tsādaq*) and תְּצִדָּקָה (*ts'adāqāh*), which represent the bulk of relevant texts. We leave it to the specialists to decide whether, in the Bible, the central meaning refers to God, or to His people, whether it is something absolute in itself, or has to be measured against some norm, and other similar issues. The older opinion held that the juridical sense had priority, but more-recent authors agree that the ethical and religious meanings are equally ancient, and that the concept is rather analogous, thus covering many elements at the same time. At this point, we might give a logical overview of some of the many applications.

1. As first usage, we have mentioned already the sense of right or straight, which is applied also to inanimate beings. Two interesting examples are Ps 23:3: The Lord is my shepherd . . . who leads me along *straight*, i.e., walkable paths; or further, “the trees of *justice*” in Is 61:3, which are perfectly straight trees, or, for other translators, just normal, i.e., evergreen trees.

2. Next to this material, physical meaning, comes the moral application, which is indeed very old, and already found in some of the patriarchal narratives, e.g., when referring to Jacob’s “honesty” in living up to his sheep-contract with Laban (Gen 30:33), or also to the Mosaic references to “just” balances, and measures (cf. Lev 19:36; Deut 25:15). This meaning is extendable to the judgments by judges, which “conform” to laws or customs (Deut 16:18: “righteous judgments; 16:20 has the double צְדָקָה (*tsādaq*)).

3. A further generalisation uses “just” for God’s ways and will, being a norm for the human life (Deut 32:4). Even though God is not answerable to anybody else, the term might also indicate God’s own standard, as a divine attribute (Ps 89:14 [Hebrew v. 15]). This realm includes the many passages where the divine justice is paralleled with God’s faithfulness, or mercy, or some other attribute, and even with God’s “reliability” in preserving human and animal life (Ps 36:6).

4. The human quality of being just, then, turns also in a special obligation of kings (2 Sam 8:15), judges (Qoh 5:7), etc., who are particularly enjoined “to do justice” (cf. Ps 119:21). The opposite of such a behaviour is “to sin” (cf. Qoh 7:20). There is an essential link between rejecting God and rejecting a fellow human being.

5. When applied to God, the Hebrew **תִּדְאַק** (*tsādaq*) may also indicate that the Lord demands punishment for breaking the moral law. So it is said, that, “He is *just*, while people are wicked” (Ex 9:27; Deut 33:21). Or injustice is not condemned here, because it clashes with customs or laws (see n. 2), but, because it militates against God’s holiness, i.e., because of a theological reason.

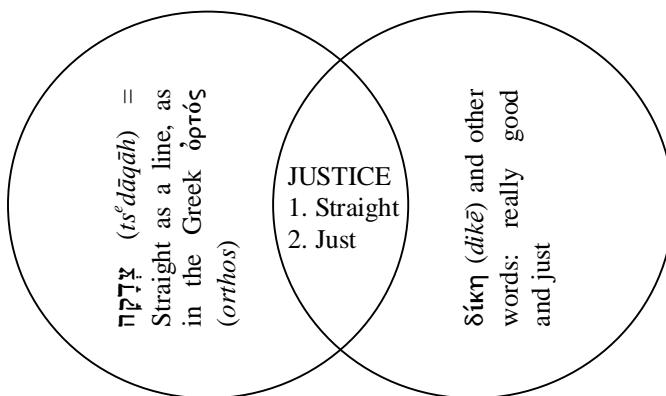
6. Another, almost opposite, application of divine justice is God’s merciful pardon for the guilty sinner, irrespective of any human merit (Ps 51:14: David). In a similar vein, Isaiah says that “*in God we are righteous*” (Is 45:24), or that “*our righteousness is from God*: (Is 54:17). One may note that the relationship of reward and mercy, or of punishment, does not imply a change in God, but only in us, who are either just or sinner.

7. Lastly, some Old Testament passages call “justice” some particular human obligations done for the poor, such as almsgiving (Dan 4:24).

Whatever one decides about the history of the term, it is probably true that, in certain periods of time, particular understandings prevailed. The classical prophets, e.g., will be noted and quoted, because of their cry for justice, without which religion is without any value (Amos 5:7, 21-24; also Is 58:5-8). We should speak here of their efforts to bring “justice in society”, because this vague term includes various kinds of justice, distinguished by modern moralists (i.e., distributive justice, commutative justice, as found in contracts, and social justice proper, as expressed in civil rights and duties). Let us add that, in the Bible, there is an abundance of moral instructions regarding life in society, but that the terms **תִּדְאַק** (*tsādaq*) or **תִּדְאַקָּה** (*tsādaqāh*) are not always present (only in Amos 5:7, 24 and Is 58:8, of the passages quoted above). After the exile, people realised, more and more, how humans fell short of doing and

providing justice. Here Isaiah comes in with his expectation of a “righteous prince”, who will administer a faultless justice (cf. Is 9:6; 11:4-5; 42:3). Another development in so-called “late texts” is that **תְּצִדָּקָה** (*ts'ēdāqāh*) now more-easily signifies social justice (cf. Job 5:3; Qoh 5:7 [Hebrew v. 6]; Sir 38:34). Leading on from here, the deuterocanonical tradition almost identifies justice with wisdom put into practice (Wis 1:1, 15). This trend eventually borrows from Greek philosophy the understanding of justice as one of the main moral virtues (next to temperance, prudence, and fortitude of Wis 8:7).

In a biblical perspective, the Lord is the perfect just One, who, in His transcendence, does not tolerate any fraud, or partiality, or being bribed (2 Chr 19:7; cf. already Deut 10:17). But this does not make him (or any other just person) a model of Olympic aloofness and passivity (as exemplified in the Western symbol of a blindfolded lady with her perfect balance, or also in our wig-adorned judges). A biblical judge is characterised by a positive commitment to the cause of justice and order. His just decisions are particularly noteworthy, where the underprivileged are concerned. These are the biblical “aliens, orphans, and widows”, and those, whose “innocent blood” is of no value in the eyes of their oppressors (Jer 22:3-4; Ex 22:21-24). They are the ones to be delivered and redeemed, shown “mercy” to, and even assisted by material almsgiving. Therefore, the biblical just one, especially the judge, is an “asymmetrical” person, both helping and fighting. The scales he holds are “fixed”.



Turning now to the New Testament, all that has been said remains true, and it would not be too hard to find instances of the various meanings listed above, except possibly the first one, applied, e.g., to “straight” paths (Heb 12:13) and standing “upright” (Acts 14:10); here the Greek ὄρθος (*orthos*) is used. However, three major factors might be mentioned.

(a) The New Testament does not repeat what is well said in the Old Testament, which is in the Bible of the early church (cf. statements on the goodness of creation, man’s tendency to make himself idols, etc.). This applies also to social justice, which is clearly taught in the Jewish scriptures, or in “the Law and the Prophets”, which Jesus did not come to abolish (cf. Matt 5:17).

(b) Another factor to be mentioned is that, in the Christian era, when the socio-political life was greatly marked by foreign rulers, and no longer exercised by theocratic judges, the typical God-related notion of justice loses its importance. This would explain why Jesus’ teaching is more centred around God’s Kingdom, or God’s Fatherhood, instead of being centred around His justice.

(c) A third factor is that Late Judaism was very much concerned with the תֹּרֶה (*Tōrāh*), leading to a religious legalism, which is not absent from the New Testament either (cf. Matt 5:19, 20, etc.). Hence, the concern with meritorious deeds, and the classes with people called “just, who (so they believe) stand in no need of repentance” (cf. Luke 15:7). At the end of this line, stands the apostle Paul, who, in Romans, makes the point that Christians have no justice of their own, but only a justice derived from Jesus Christ (Rom 4:25; 5:18: εἰς δικαίωσιν (*eis dikaiōsin*) = “unto justification”; also Phil 1:11, etc.). It seems, however, that justification does not occupy the central place in Paul’s thinking, as was once believed; more central is, rather, an idea like “new creation”. Here “justification” through faith alone (cf. Rom 3:28) fits in quite well, just as this can be said of the God-given “peace” (Rom 5:1), and of other messianic goods.

Apart from the historical discussions around justification, the theme of “justice” has not gained great attention in centuries past. We cannot point to a biblical programme of social justice, which the

church would have gradually realised. (Just note the ancient acceptance of slavery, and the general patriarchal outlook in the Bible). Nevertheless, in many ways, injustice is condemned, and does not fit with the life of the kingdom. An incarnated form of Christianity has not been loath to “learn from the enemy”, both in the field of the people’s economic and cultural rights (life, food, clothing, shelter, work), so much stressed by the Marxist system, or in the realm of political and civil rights (freedom of thought, movement, religion, association, etc.), as advocated, in particular, by capitalist countries. All the forms of struggle for human dignity link up well with the Old Testament concept of justice, right, and order, based on the revealed will of the Lord.

2. Peace

שָׁלֹם (*shālōm*) occurs some 236 times in the Hebrew Bible, but the root of this word is also represented in half a dozen or so other terms, and in several personal names as well (e.g., Solomon, Shallum, etc.). It is another of those basic biblical concepts, and has become, not unlike the term “justice”, the compendium of whatever the human heart hopes for. Again, “peace” is also one of those ciphers, which has gone through a whole lot of different meanings, and whose biblical content is much richer than any contemporary usage of the term would suggest.

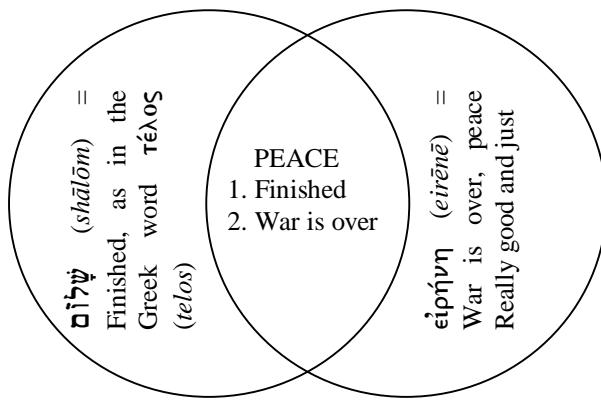
1. As in other Semitic languages, the fundamental idea of the simple verb שָׁלַם (*shālam*) (qal) is that of being completed and finished, with nothing left undone. A passage, which will illustrate this meaning, is 1 Kings 7:51, which refers to the moment with “all the work, which Solomon did to the house of God, was *finished*”. A similar passage occurs in 1 Kings 9:25, but some translations interpret it here as “finishing all the temple obligations” (NIV), or also refer to Solomon’s efforts “to keep the temple in repair” (NAB). Another unusual passage is the prophet Jeremiah’s threat that “all Judah will go in exile, and that the deportation will be *complete*” (Jer 13:19: שְׁלֹמִים (*sh'�ōmīm*)). Surely, these texts have nothing to do with any modern concept of peace, but make good sense as “complete”! Closely related to this first sense is, elsewhere, the idea of being safe and sound, unharmed and uninjured. Similar, is the sense, when Ps 50:14 refers to the fulfilment of a vow, or Ex 21:34, to the payment to

a creditor; without these actions something is un-finished, incomplete.

2. Going further still, שָׁלָם (*shālam*) means “to keep peace”, “to live in peace”, and “to have friends”, which is the essential completeness of human relations. The more-complex verbal forms, like the intensive (piel), and the causative forms (hiphil), also follow suit, signifying, respectively, “to make intact”, “to recompense”, etc., and “to make peace with”, or “to live in peace with”. In other words, the Hebrew notion of “peace” is a very, very positive one, indicating that something is literally “all right, fulfilled, finished, completed”. Hence, it is most fitting to use it for the well-being of one’s daily existence, as done in the Semitic greeting “Peace be with you”. Such a greeting comes close to our wishes like: “All the best, keep well, good luck, to your health; or even a prosperous New Year”, etc. In biblical language, common equivalents to “peace”, are blessing, rest, glory, riches, salvation, and life. Still, one should not forget the link, which exists with situations of strife and war. In ancient Israelite society, these were daily worries, settled only by a victory, a compensation payment, or a settlement of some sort, say, a truce, a treaty, or a peace-covenant. However, on several occasions, this hoped-for peaceful situation after a war is rather called “rest” (e.g., 1 Chr 22:9: מְנֻחָה (*mēnūchāh*); Judges 3:30: שֵׁקֶשׁ (*sh'qōt*)), and not “peace”.

3. Leaving the area of peace-between-people, we turn now to peace in relation to God. There are, of course, the peace offerings, that is, the gifts and sacrifices made to seal one’s communion with the Lord; they seem to transpose into a religious context the compensation payments known on the daily social level. But it should be noted, too, that Israel did not favour the modern dichotomy between a secular and a religious department of life, and that, more specifically, “peace” was not only earthly happiness, but a spiritual good as well: there is, therefore, implied, what we would call a heavenly origin or source. Gideon built an altar to יְהוָה שָׁלֹם (*J'hw̄vāh Shālōm*) (Judges 6:24), i.e., “The Lord is Peace”, alluding to God’s words in the preceding verse “Be calm (lit: Peace to you), and do not fear”. This usage we encounter in the famous blessing of Moses for Israel (Num 6:24-26). The same peace of God is elsewhere

bestowed upon the chosen people (Ps 29:11), the House of David (1 Kings 2:33), the priests (Mal 2:5), the “city of peace” Jerusalem (Ps 122:7), and upon everyone who trusts in the Lord (Ps 4:9). In a way, God’s gift of peace is not gratuitous. I mean, it requires, according to the Old Testament, a struggle for justice, and a suppression of sin. As Isaiah says, “there is no peace for the wicked” (Is 48:22; 57:21). The sad reality of life is that kings try to procure peace for themselves, and on their human terms. (Just as in modern societies, the victors impose impossible conditions of peace, thus planting the seeds for the next war!) Again, “false” prophets, Jeremiah says, proclaim “lasting peace”, without touching upon the complete state of sin (Jer 14:13). They cry: “Peace! Peace!”, but there is no peace (Jer 6:14), meaning: their wishful thinking lacks a concern for justice and equity in the dealings with other people. At a later stage, it is realised that the historical obstacles to bringing about peace are of such a magnitude that only God can “create” peace (Is 26:12; Ps 147:14), or also that only a future “Prince of Peace” – the Messiah – can give peace without end (Is 9:5-5; also 2:4). This eschatological gift, Isaiah teaches, will encompass the whole of creation (Is 11:6-9; 32:16-17). Then will be established “the new heavens, and the new earth”, and “peace will be flowing like a river” (Is 66:12, 22).



When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, an adaptation to a different culture took place. When speaking of Solomon’s temple, the Greek uses a verb *συντέλεια* (*sunteleia*), which denotes completion, or end, elsewhere, the word *εἰρήνη* (*eirēnē*) is the normal Greek term for “peace”. *εἰρήνη* (*eirēnē*) seems

to derive from a verb εἴρω (*eirō*), which means “to join”, or “to weave together”. It denotes, then, basically, a relationship, hence, also, a peaceful, or, rather, trouble-free situation. Such exist in the state, under a just, beneficent ruler (cf. also the *Pax Romana*), or also in a village under one conscientious official, called the peacekeeper. Still, the connotation of living in public tranquillity, with absence of war and strife, or after the experience of a reconciliation, makes the Greek term rather negative, in comparison with the much-wider, more-positive spectrum associated with the Semitic מְלֹא־שׁ (shālōm).

The New Testament occasionally opposes “peace” to “war” (so Luke 14:31-32), but, as a rule, the mere material meaning is not found. Thus, Jesus did not come to bring peace (Luke 12:51), in the sense of the easy peace the false prophets had talked about (cf. Jer 6:14). His peace is synonymous with salvation and life, for instance, when he sends away the repentant woman, who believed in Him, and assures her quite a better gift than the mere psychological peace of mind (cf. Luke 7:50). Similarly, when the apostle Paul begins his letters, with “Grace and peace”, he combines both the Greek and Semitic greetings, wishing his readers (like any Greek person), the most comprehensive form of well-being. Semitic sayings in the New Testament are not only the references to “the God of peace”, but also to “the peace of God, which is greater than all understanding” (Phil 4:7, 9). Whoever possesses such a peace can even rejoice under hardship and eternal difficulties, for it is based upon doing God’s will, and it is made possible through a gift of Jesus (Luke 2:14; John 14:25ff), who also reconciled us to one another, and to the Father (cf. Rom 5:1, 10; Eph 2:14-22). Naturally, this “peace” is also a major aspect of the harvest of the Spirit (Gal 5:22; Rom 14:17).

In the New Testament, too, there is no peace for the wicked. Hence, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus doesn’t praise the peace-lovers, or the pacifists, the people who want to have their peace and quiet at all costs. Such people do not care to tackle unjust and harmful situations, and so prepare for greater trouble in the future. Jesus speaks of the “peace-makers”, or “peace-bearers”, those who go out of their way to bring people together, and pay themselves dearly for it by facing opposition and dangers (Matt 5:9; 10:34-36; James 3:18). Similarly, the apostle Paul recommends to the Romans, “have

peace with all men” (Rom 12:17), while, in the letter to the Ephesians, similar efforts are recommended, not so much in the face of enemies, but in order that those who have been “called” strive earnestly to maintain, among themselves, the unity given by the Spirit (Eph 4:3). With the Old Testament, Paul agrees that “vengeance is the privilege of the Lord” (Rom 12:19, quoting Deut 32:35).

Let us try, now, to sum up some of the major points made.

- There is a frequent association, in the scriptures, of justice and peace (cf. Ps 72:7; 85:11; Is 48:18; 57:2; 60:17), which shows an implicit identity of the two concepts, or, also, the fact that the two are different aspects of one-and-the-same reality. The reality is the state where everything is well and right, which is hardly possible to achieve by human means, but can be realised as a gift of God, and – adds the New Testament – as a gift, which comes to us through Jesus Christ.
- Occasionally, the relationship between the two concepts is seen as peace being the work of justice, or, also, as justice being the cause of peace (so Is 32:17), although, it is also said, that to live uprightly, to be faithful, to love truth, and practice what is right, are more like conditions for true peace (cf. Sam 20:19; Is 59:8; Mal 2:6); Zec 8:19). In short, God’s will must first prevail. As a result, Saint Augustine said, one will have peace with God, with fellow human beings, and also with himself.
- Ancient texts describe the result of this peaceful state, with glorious material benefits: to have a fertile land, to eat plenty, to dwell in security, and sleep without fear, to win the battles, to have many children, etc. (cf. Lev 26:1-13). In other words, material goods are part and parcel of the divine blessings. However, by and by, the emphasis moves to the spiritual level, where sinners are made just, and receive a “peace”, which the world will never be able to take away from them (cf. Rom 3:24; John 14:27; 16:33).

Beyond Bible times, this ideal of God-given justice and peace has attracted many people, who have seen here the ultimate fulfilment of their every wish, understood according to their ever-changing experiences. For them, the Bible words became what we have called “ciphers”, which still can kindle the hopes of each and every one of us.



Melanesia is not short of tasks to be undertaken to advance the cause of *justice*. Let us mention only the rights of all the underprivileged people, who are short of education, employment, human rights, etc. In all these cases, there is something wrong with the principles of equity and balance; people do feel that the situation is not right, straight, or as it should be. We come, indeed, very close to the concept of justice, from where we started in the Old Testament. Melanesia, too, longs for peace, because it has a long way to go before the hundreds of social groups can achieve harmony, dwell in security, sleep without fear, and not just win the next round in a traditional fight, or shame an adversary in exchange and display ceremonies. Melanesians also have “brothers” beyond their national borders, who look for support, whether asylum or economic cooperation, or some other kind of sharing in their riches. This kind of well-being of one’s daily existence also falls within the field of the biblical מְלֹא־שָׁלוֹם (*shālōm*). And the list is not ended here. We saw that

Old Testament “justice” even included God’s reliability to preserve human and animal life (Ps 36:6), and that the messianic “peace” would encompass the whole of creation, and restore, as it were, paradise on earth (cf. Isaiah). The New Testament, too, mentions that the whole creation is groaning to be redeemed (cf. Rom 8:19-22). True, God’s salvation is not outside the present world. He is working on it everywhere. And so we should pray and work to achieve the same.

Suggested Readings

- Byrne, Tony, *Working for Justice and Peace: a practical guide*, Ndola Zambia: 1988, 153 pp.
- Hendrickx, Herman, *Bible on Justice*, Quezon City Philippines: JMC Press, 1978, 68 pp.
- Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, ed., Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1962.
- Rajendra, Cecil, *Dove on Fire: Poems on Peace, Justice, and Ecology*, Geneva Sw: WCC Publications, 1987, 80 pp.