

Righteousness in the Old Testament

by Art Katz

Righteousness in the Old Testament is the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, whether that relationship be with men or with God, and is based on God's grace, not law.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 24:17, Psalm 15:2-5, Psalm 51:14, Psalm 82:3, Proverbs 14:34, Isaiah 9:7, Isaiah 33:15, Isaiah 54:14, Jeremiah 22:3, Romans 5:8

Topics: "Righteousness", "Covenant Relationship"

Description

Art Katz explores the concept of righteousness in the Old Testament, emphasizing that it is fundamentally about fulfilling the demands of relationships, particularly with God and the community. He argues that righteousness is not merely about legalistic adherence to laws but is rooted in grace and the covenant relationship established by Yahweh. Katz highlights that the righteous are those who maintain communal peace and care for the marginalized, while God's righteousness is demonstrated through His faithfulness to His covenant despite Israel's unfaithfulness. He concludes that true righteousness is found in faith and dependence on God, who justifies and restores His people.

Transcript

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An article with innumerable quotes from The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible pp.80-85, E.R. Achtemeier, and liberally interspersed with thoughts from Art Katz. Righteousness as understood in the OT (Old Testament) is a thoroughly Hebraic concept, foreign to the western mind and at variance with the common understanding of the term. The failure to comprehend its meaning is perhaps most responsible for the view of OT religion as "legalistic"...but thanks largely to recent German scholarship, this important motif of biblical faith has been clarified.

Righteousness is not a behavior that is in accordance with an ethical, legal, psychological, religious, or spiritual norm; neither is it conduct that is dictated by human or divine nature. It is not an action appropriate to the attainment of a specific goal; neither is it a ministry to one's fellow man. Rather, righteousness in the OT is the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, whether that relationship be

with men or with God...Each of these relationships brings with it specific demands, the fulfillment of which constitutes righteousness...There is no norm of righteousness outside the relationship itself.

When God or man fulfills the conditions imposed upon him by the relationship, he is, in OT terms, righteous. Etymology: "Tzadik" means "straightness or "firmness." It is employed for justice, right, equity, uprightness; a concept of relationship that he who is righteous has fulfilled in the demands laid upon him by it. David was righteous because he refused to slay Saul with whom he stood in covenant relationship (I Sam.24:17; 26:23). Generally, the righteous man in Israel was the man who preserved the peace and wholeness of the community, because it was he who [preserved] fulfilled the demands of communal living.

Like Job, he was a blessing to his contemporaries. He cared for the poor, the fatherless, the widow...even defending their cause in the law court (29:16; 31:21; Prov. 31:9)...He was a good steward of his land and work animals...and his servants were treated humanely...he lived at peace with his neighbors, wishing them only good...When he was in authority the people rejoiced, and he exalted the nation (Prov.14:34). He lived in peace and prosperity because he upheld the peace and prosperity.

He upheld the physical and psychical wholeness of his community by fulfilling the demands of the communal covenant relationship (Cf. Ps.15:2-5; Isa.33:15). For this reason, Tzadik (righteousness) sometimes stands parallel with shalom, "prosperity" (Prov.8:18). At other times, it stands for "truth," for right speech, which upheld the covenant relationships existing within a community (Isa.59:4; 45:19) it is. The "wicked" rasha who exercises force and falsehood, who ignores the duties which kinship and covenant lay upon him, who tramples the rights of others...with whom he stands in relationship...destroys the community itself.

Righteousness is the fulfillment of community demands, and righteous judgments are those which restore community (Ps. 82:3; Prov.17:15). Thus the constant plea of the prophets is for righteousness within the gate, for a restoration of the foundations of community life (Jer.22:3, 15; Ps.72:2). In such contexts there is no difference between ethical and legal standards. They are one...The king's covenant duty was to preserve righteousness, and in so doing, he himself was righteous.

When the Messiah comes His Kingdom will prosper through righteous judgments (Isa.9:7; 11:3-5; Jer. 23:5-6; 33:14-16). Yahweh's station within the covenant relationship was that of Lord...its initiator, its defender, its preserver. He alone upheld it. Only He could break it. Israel could reject her God and thereby bring His wrath upon her, but she could not escape her relationship with God...God initiated the covenant. He alone could nullify it (cf. Ps.89:28-37). Yahweh was not dependent upon her righteousness...Yahweh had chosen her; that was the basic fact of her existence.

All else followed after. Thus in the OT there is nothing legalistic about this relationship with her God. It is not based on law but grace, on Yahweh's loving choice...as his peculiar treasure; a relationship received with joy and gratitude...Celebration, joyfulness and praise - these are the primary notes of Hebrew faith. Within this relationship of grace, law is given as a guide by God to his covenant people...as also an act of his grace, for all the people of the earth. He who does not in faith accept the context of the law, the Lordship of Yahweh, cannot be righteous...The relationship to Yahweh, the relationship of faith, is primary.

This is evidenced in the law itself providing [as it does] for a day of atonement (Lev.16)...[so that there is] a constant provision for restoration of right relationship with God and with community. The OT equivalents unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit as rebellion against His lordship, lack of repentance, faithlessness, the failure to acknowledge Yahweh's lordship in humility and repentance and the failure to

accept in faith his provision for restoration to communion with Him.

For they constitute a faithless rejection of Yahweh's grace, and the law without grace is useless. Faith [i.e., the recognition of God's grace in the giving of the law and the enablement for its keeping] is the fulfillment of the relationship to Yahweh and is thereby righteousness. Yahweh is righteous...the witness to God's person as He reveals Himself in his actions...not in works that conform to some norm or standard of right outside and above Him...Yahweh's righteousness is His fulfillment of the demands of the relationship which exists between Him and His people Israel; His fulfillment of the covenant which He has made with the chosen nation....Only he who stood within the covenant could speak of Yahweh as righteous...The purpose of His judgment[s] is the preservation of community, of His covenant with Israel (Ps.89:94).

Thus Israel constantly appeals to Yahweh's righteousness for deliverance from trouble (Ps.31:188:12;143:11), from enemies (Ps.5:8; 143:1), from the wicked, for vindication of her cause before her foes (Ps.35:24). His righteousness consists in His intervention for His people, in His deliverance of Zion (Ps.50:15; 102; Isa.35; 54:14-17). [The church's identification (Ps.102) and participation (Isa.35; Ro.11:25b), the statement of their righteousness, are the key to Israel's final redemption!

In short, Yahweh's righteous judgments are saving judgments (Ps.36:6), "a righteous God and a Savior" (Isa.45:21). Yahweh's salvation of Israel is His righteousness, His fulfillment of His covenant with her! Israel's righteousness consists in the fact that she is oppressed or afflicted and deprived of her right (Isa.54:14). Those who are righteous are those who are victims of oppressors...of violent men (Ps.140:13). And their hope is the Lord...who saves those who are bowed down (Pss.116:6; 146:8).

His judgments always favor the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoner and the blind, the widow and the fatherless, the alien and the poor (Amos 2:6). Righteousness and Sinfulness These facts seem strange that often in the OT he who is called "tzadik" is at the same time sinful. The OT consistently portrays Israel's persistent sin before God. Ps.143:2 declares that "no man living is righteous before Him." The Psalmists witness to God's salvation despite their sinfulness...and unhesitatingly number themselves among the righteous.

For Yahweh's righteousness is the source of their forgiveness (Ps.51:14; 103:11-12,17)! His righteousness consists not in ethical or moral blamelessness. He often openly confesses his transgressions. The poor and the oppressed have a further righteousness, and this righteousness is their faith, their fulfillment of their relationship with Yahweh...characterized by a complete dependence upon God. They trust in Yahweh, crying to Him in their distress, bowing before His judgments (Ps.94:12; 118:18), acknowledging their sin, offering to him a broken and a contrite heart (Ps.51:17).

Such faith is the righteousness of the afflicted. Because she repents of her sin she throws herself upon His mercy (Isa.1:27-28; Ps.37:39-40). Her faith is the fulfillment of her relationship with Yahweh...not because of her merit or moral blamelessness, but because she believes God is her refuge. He alone is righteous who has had righteousness imputed to him. In this sense, righteousness is justification by Him, a "being-declared-righteousness" by the Lord of the covenant (Isa.60:21)!

Those judgments that bring salvation to Israel at the same time bring destruction upon her foes (Isa.11:4; 61:1-2; Hab.3:12-13; Mal.4; Hag.2:22-23; Zeph.2:8; Zech.14). In the Day of the Lord, His vengeance and righteousness go hand in hand. When Yahweh saves, He also recompenses (Isa.35:4; 40:10; 62:11). However, Yahweh's righteousness is never solely an act of condemnation and punishment...His punishment is an integral part of His restoration...His righteousness is His restoration!

The gift of such righteousness is announced in the great eschatological witness of Deutero-Isaiah. Israel is a sinful folk, sunk in idolatry (44:9-20;50:11), full of transgressions (53:5-6,8,11), who is unable to confess her God rightly (48:1), who has burdened Him with her evil (43:24), who has refused to call upon her Savior (43:22). For this reason Yahweh has given her into the hand of her captors (42:24-25; 47:6) to suffer double punishment for her sins (40:1), to drink the full measure of the wrath of the Lord (51:17-20), to be refined in the furnace of affliction (48:9-11), and to be bruised (53:10) and forsaken (54:7-8).

And in the middle of her exile, Israel thinks herself to be lost, her way hidden from the Lord (40:27), rejected forever (49:14;50:1)...But Deutero-Isaiah's glad message is that the covenant still stands. Yahweh cannot forget His child...He has not divorced His wife Israel (50:1;cf.54:5-6). His relationship with His people endures. His word, His promise and agreement stand forever (40:8;55:11). This is Israel's hope! ...If she seeks deliverance, let her look to the Rock from which she was hewn, to the promise to Abraham and the covenant with the fathers (51:18).

There is Israel's hope. For the word of the Lord endures forever. Without such a word Israel has no hope, for she has no righteousness of her own...she has no faith and therefore ultimately no righteousness of her own but Yahweh will save Israel, for Yahweh has chosen her! His covenant stands despite Israel's unfaithfulness. God intervenes for the cause of his afflicted folk before all the peoples of the earth (51:22). He will deliver her from exile (43:14), He will forgive her sin (43:25;44:22cf.54:9), He will care for her as a shepherd cares for his flock [i.e., Abel, David] (40:11).

In short, Yahweh will fulfill the demands of the covenant...He will do so by justifying Israel, by imputing righteousness to her who has no righteousness...and this will be Israel's righteousness before all the world (50:9 cf.52:13-53:12). In God's righteousness Israel will be established (54:14; 45:24-25), "for while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

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