The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant Faithfulness Interpretation

Irons, Charles

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Charles Lee Irons

The Righteousness of God

A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation

Mohr Siebeck
D. The Righteousness of God in the Old Testament

Having subjected Cremer's arguments for his relational theory to a critical analysis, we must now focus specifically on some of the OT passages that refer to God's righteousness ("my, his, your righteousness"). We cannot deal with every single text as there are too many (41 by my count), but this is not necessary since they are all fundamentally capable of being interpreted along the same or similar lines. Fundamentally, "the righteousness of God" in the Old Testament refers to God's justice in executing judgment on the enemies of his people and thereby vindicating his people in the face of their oppressors. Thus, it can refer to either side of the equation: (a) the act of punishing Israel's enemies; or (b) the deliverance that results when Israel's enemies are thus extinguished and Israel is vindicated. This may apply to Israel as a nation or to the individual godly Israelite who is suffering unjustly at the hands of his oppressors.

The law court imagery is present in the following forms:

I. Legal conflict absent or not explicit
   A. God's justice as king
   B. God's justice as lawgiver

II. Legal conflict (؟ "?) present in context
   A. Individual: God's righteousness = deliverance from one's adversaries
   B. Corporate:
      1. God's righteous triumphs in holy war
      2. Salvation for Israel = vengeance on Israel's oppressors
      3. Judgment on Israel

Table 8. "Righteousness of God" in Hebrew Bible ("My, His, Your")

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref</th>
<th>Lemma</th>
<th>Sub-cat</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Enemies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ps 72:1</td>
<td>tsedaqh</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>&quot;Of Solomon. Give the king your justice [NASB: judgments], O God, and your righteousness is the royal son!&quot; (ESV).</td>
<td>v4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps 89:17</td>
<td>tsedaqh</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>&quot;Blessed are the people ... who exult in your name all the day and in your righteousness are exalted&quot; (ESV).</td>
<td>v9-10, 22-23, 42, 50-51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps 97:6</td>
<td>tsedeq</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>&quot;The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory&quot; (ESV).</td>
<td>vv 3, 7, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps 98:2</td>
<td>tsedaqh</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>&quot;The Lord has made known his salvation, he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations&quot; (ESV).</td>
<td>vv 1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps 111:3</td>
<td>tsedaqh</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>&quot;Full of splendor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever&quot; (ESV).</td>
<td>vv 6, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps 145:7</td>
<td>tsedaqh</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>&quot;They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing aloud of your righteousness&quot; (ESV).</td>
<td>vv 19-20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Your righteousness is righteous forever, and your law is true" (ESV).

"Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me" (ESV).

"I will give to the Lord the thanksgiving due to him, and I will sing praise to the name of the Lord, the Most High" (ESV).

"They shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it" (ESV).

"In you, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me!" (ESV).

"Vindicate [lit. judge] me, O Lord, my God, according to your righteousness" (ESV).

"Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long" (ESV).

"Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; your judgments are like the great deep; man and beast you save, O Lord" (ESV).

"Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright of heart!" (ESV).

"I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have spoken of Your faithfulness and Your salvation" (NASB).

"Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness" (ESV).

"Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal from you" (ESV), or "may they not come into your righteousness" (NASB).

"In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me, and save me!" (ESV).

"My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness and of Your salvation all day long" (NASB).

"I will remind them of your righteousness, yours alone" (ESV).

"Your righteousness, O God, reaches the high heavens. You who have done great things, O God, who is like you?" (ESV).
## Chapter 4: Righteousness in the Old Testament

### D. The Righteousness of God in the Old Testament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref</th>
<th>Lemma</th>
<th>Sub-cat</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Enemies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ps 71:24</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.A</td>
<td>“My tongue also will utter Your righteousness all day long; for they are ashamed, for they are humiliated who seek my hurt” (NASB).</td>
<td>v 10, 13, 24</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ps 88:12</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.A</td>
<td>“Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?” (ESV).</td>
<td>God himself?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ps 103:17</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.A</td>
<td>“But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps 119:40</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.A</td>
<td>“Behold, I long for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life!” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 21, 23, 39, 42, 51, 53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps 143:1</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.A</td>
<td>“Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness!” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps 143:11</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.A</td>
<td>“For your name’s sake, O LORD, preserve my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble!” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 9, 12</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Deut 33:21</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.B.1</td>
<td>“And [God] came with the heads of the people, with Israel he executed the justice of the Lord, and his judgments for Israel” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 20-21</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Judg 5:11</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.B.1</td>
<td>“there they repeat the righteousness triumphs of the Lord” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 19, 31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Sam 12:7</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.B.1</td>
<td>“Now therefore stand still that I may plead with you before the Lord concerning all the righteousness deeds of the Lord that he performed for you and for your fathers” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 8-9, 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa 46:13</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.B.2</td>
<td>“I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory” (ESV).</td>
<td>47:1-15</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Isa 51:5</td>
<td>tseeq II.B.2</td>
<td>“My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 7, 9, 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa 51:6</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.B.2</td>
<td>“but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 7, 9, 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa 51:8</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.B.2</td>
<td>“but my righteousness will be forever, and my salvation to all generations” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 13, 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa 56:1</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.B.2</td>
<td>“Thus says the Lord, ‘Preserve justice and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come, and My righteousness to be revealed’” (NASB).</td>
<td>46:13; 51:5-8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa 59:16</td>
<td>tsedaqah II.B.2</td>
<td>“He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him” (ESV).</td>
<td>v 16-20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the above overview of the data and the fundamental context in mind, let us now briefly examine a representative sample of the passages that speak of God’s righteousness.

1. Psalm 7:17

“I will give to the Lord the thanks due to his righteousness (צדקתי) and I will sing praise to the name of the Lord, the Most High’ (ESV).

Psalm 7 is a lament attributed to David in which he calls upon God, asking him to deliver him from his enemies. Because of this reference to the righteousness of God in the final verse, the whole psalm attracts our attention to see what the context might suggest is the content of this divine righteousness. The opening verse is a call for God to “save me from all my pursuers and deliver me” (v 1 ESV). The way this will take place is clear from the rest of the psalm: the psalmist hopes that God will deliver him from his enemies by judging them. “Arise, O Lord, in your anger; lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies” (v 6 ESV). Then we read this stanza:

> The Lord judges the peoples;  
> judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness**162** and according to the integrity that is in me.

**162**“According to all your righteous acts” probably means “give us now as much mercy as you have given us righteous punishment up to this point.”

**163** How can the psalmist appeal to his own righteousness and integrity as the basis for God to vindicate him? “Such prayers were composed for a person who was in the right in relation with the antagonist. They are the expressions of a good conscience before hostility and opposition ... The innocence claimed by the petitioner was not an absolute righteousness but a righteousness with respect to the charges.” James Luther Mays, Psalms (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 64, 433.
Notice the high concentration of judgment and righteousness terms here. "O righteous God! ... God is a righteous judge." There can be no doubt from the above that God's righteousness is his perfect justice in judgment, expressed on the one hand in his vindication of the righteous or innocent and on the other hand in his judgment against the wicked.

Peter Craigie comments:

The terminology as a whole conjures the image of a court of law; peoples gather around and God takes his lofty seat of judgment (v 8). In this context, in the presence of the one who "adjudicates the nations" (v 9a), the psalmist asks to be judged according to his "righteousness" and "integrity"; he does not for one moment claim absolute righteousness or sinlessness, but only complete innocence with respect to the false charges which have been laid against him. Only in this divine court will the wicked "come to an end" (v 10) and the righteous be established; God, the Judge, is righteous, and by virtue of his divine ability to scrutinize the innermost thoughts and emotions of the persons standing in court—figuratively, the psalmist and his accusers—he will establish the righteous and terminate the wicked. 168

According to Psalm 7, then, "the righteousness of God" is not a thoroughly positive or relational concept. The heavenly courtroom is the metaphorical context for understanding God's righteousness, which is expressed in his judicial verdict in favor of the innocent sufferer who calls upon him for deliverance, a verdict rendered by means of his judgment upon the wicked oppressors of his servants. This is close to Cremer's thought insofar as he focused on God's activity of restoring the rights of the defenseless. But Cremer's analysis failed to take account of the bi-directional flow of God's righteousness, that is, the fact that God is described as "a righteous judge" because he righteously defends the innocent and punishes their oppressors. The second element, the punishment on the wicked oppressor of the innocent, 169 is the focus of attention in Psalm 7 and is what elicits the psalmist's declaration that "God is a righteous judge" and his concluding note of praise, "I will give to the Lord the thanks due to his righteousness." Clearly, God's righteousness is not a thoroughly positive concept that entails only salvation. It does entail salvation or vindication for the innocent sufferer; but for the wicked it entails God's just punishment. Both sides of the coin are involved in "the righteousness of God," but in Psalm 7, the punitive side receives the emphasis.

2. Psalm 35:23-28

22 "Awake and rouse yourself for my vindication (ἐκπεριέθησαι τοῦ δικαίου μου), for my cause (ἐπεί δικαιοσύνη μου), O Lord, my God!"

23 Vindicate me, O Lord, my God, according to your righteousness (ἐξακολουθῆσαι τῇ δικαιοσύνης σου), and let them not rejoice over me!

24 Let them not say in their hearts, "Aha, our heart's desire!

25 Let them not say, 'We have swallowed him up.'

26 Let them be put to shame and disappointed altogether who rejoice at my calamity!

27 Let those who delight in my righteousness (or my vindication, NASB) (ἐπαθήσωσιν τῇ δικαιοσύνης σου) shout for joy and be glad and say evermore,

28 'Great is the Lord, who delights in the welfare of his servant!'

29 Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness (ἐξακολουθῆσαι τῇ δικαιοσύνης σου) and of your praise all the day long. (ESV)

Although Goldingay translates the two references to God's righteousness as "your faithfulness" (vv 24, 28), he provides no rationale for this misleading translation and simply repeats the common view since Cremer that righteousness equals faithfulness. 170 But repeated usage of judicial language — "my vindication" (ἐπαθήσωσιν in v 23 and ἐπαθήσωσιν in v 27), "my cause" (ἐπεί in v 23), and the verb "to vindicate" (ἐκπεριέθησαι in v 24) — in the immediate context makes clear that the setting is a judicial one: "Awake and rouse yourself for my vindication, for my cause, my God and my Lord! Vindicate me, O Lord, my God, according to your righteousness, and let them not rejoice over me!" There is a controversy here between the psalmist and his adversary. The psalmist is crying out to God to judge between him and his adversary, to decide in his favor and vindicate him by giving him

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169 The psalmist protests his innocence in vv 3-5: "O Lord my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands, if I have repaid my friend with evil or plundered my enemy without cause, let the enemy pursue my soul and overtake it, and let him trample my life to the ground and lay my glory in the dust" (ESV).

170 John Goldingay, Psalms, Vol. 1: Psalms 1–41 (BCOT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 500-2. In his glossary he has an entry for "Faithful, faithfulness," which are his translations for ἐπαθήσωσιν and ἐπεί, respectively. He defines the terms as "acting in the right way in relation to people with whom one is in a relationship" (p. 593). Clearly, Goldingay has been strongly influenced by Cremer's relational interpretation of righteousness.
justice against his enemies. It is thus more in keeping with the context to render all three occurrences of προστατεύω in this Psalm with the English word “justice.”

1 Samuel 24 provides a real-life, historical situation in which just this sort of plea for divine vindication and justice might have been uttered. After passing up an opportunity to kill him, David says to King Saul:

“See, my father, see the corner of your robe in my hand. For by the fact that I cut off the corner of your robe and did not kill you, you may know and see that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it. 13 May the LORD judge (κρίνει) between me and you, may the LORD avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you. 14 As the proverb of the ancients says, ‘Out of the wicked comes wickedness.’ But your hand shall not be against you. 14 After whom has the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? After a dead dog! After a dead flea! 15 May the LORD therefore be judge (κρίνει) between me and you, and may sentence (κρίνεται) be pronounced between you and me, and see whether your hand is pure (κριστά εἰς κρίμα) and deliver me from your hand (καὶ δίκαιον μοι ἐκ χερσίν σου)’ (1 Sam 24:11-15 ESV).”

Thus the judicial component of the divine προστατεύω in Ps 35:24, 28 is not to be overlooked, nor can it rightly be reduced to God’s faithfulness. Though the idea may be theologically legitimate, the psalmist is not asking God to judge/vindicate him according to his faithfulness as the divine promise-maker and promise-keeper, but according to his righteousness or justice as the divine Judge: “Judge and vindicate me according to your justice (καὶ δίκαιον με κατὰ τὴν δικαιοσύνην σου), O Lord my God.”

3. Psalm 51:14
“Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; then my tongue will joyfully sing of your righteousness” (ESV).

Clearly, God’s righteousness here is salvific, and the oppressor from which the psalmist seeks deliverance is not an external foe such as the persecutor of Ps 35 but his own sins. But this does not mean that there is no judicial aspect here. As


The narrative setting [of l Sam 24] is a clue to the kind of situation for which [Ps 35] is composed,” noting the verbal parallels between 1 Sam 24:14-15 and Ps 35:1, 3, 23-24. Mays, Psalms, 154.

This interpretation of sin as an enemy is supported by another passage in the Psalms where the suppliant depicts his iniquities in military terms as a hostile force threatening to overpower him: “When iniquities prevail against me, you alone for our transgressions” (Psalm 65:3 ESV). The same verb rendered “prevail” is used in Lam 1:16 ("the enemy has prevailed") and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in reference to literal or metaphorical military force (Exod 17:11; 1 Sam 2:9; 2 Sam 11:23; Isa 42:13). Psalm 65:3 therefore justifies taking the sins of Psalm 51 as the enemy from which David seeks to be delivered by God’s stoning and justifying activity.

Erich Zenger says, this righteousness is a “judging-saving” righteousness. The judicial context is clear from the context mentioned in v 4 (v 6 in Hebrew):

"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified (προστατευόμενος) in your words and blameless in your judgment (προστατεύω / εἰς τὸ προστατεύων εἰς)" (ESV).

In other words, the psalmist is in an implied controversy (προστατεύω) with God. In other psalms (e.g., Ps 35), the controversy is between the psalmist and his enemies, with God as the impartial judge who renders a decision between them. Here, the psalmist is in a controversy with God; presumably before he came to recognize his guilt, he had accused God of unjustly causing him to suffer. But now he has come to realize that he is the one who is in the wrong and that God is in the right. God is now “justified” in this judicial controversy. By the same token, as the reverse-side of this justification of God, the psalmist is judged and pronounced guilty; it is not, however, a purely negative judicial condemnation but a positive pronouncement that, through acknowledging his guilt, casting himself on the mercy of God and receiving inner cleansing and restoration, he himself is now restored to a forgiven and righteous status as well. God’s saving righteousness thus involves judicial activity – for salvation comes through a judicial act in which God declares the sinner to be guilty before him and then, by his grace providing atonement for sin that “bloots out iniquities” (v 9), declares him to be no longer one who is reckoned among “transgressors” and “sinners” (v 13) but one who has been delivered from blood-guiltiness (v 14) and therefore by implication one of the righteous who enjoy God’s favor. “The beginning of salvation from sin is God’s judgment upon the sinner.”


175 In all likelihood, προστατεύω is to be taken in the active sense; “when you judge” (NIV, NASB), but the LXX (ep. Paul’s quotation in Rom 3:4) interprets it as a judicial proceeding in which God is the one being judged (εἰς τὸ προστατεύων εἰς). Hossfeld and Zenger, 24. Either way, a judicial controversy between God and the sinner is in view.

176 The psalmist’s sickness (as punishment for his sin) is implied in these words: “Let the bones that you have broken rejoice” (v 8). Some even call Ps 51 a “sick person’s psalm.” Ernst Wüthrich, “Bemerkungen zu Psalm 51,” in Neue Wege der Psalmforschung: FS W. Boyerlin (ed. Klaus Seybold and Erich Zenger; 2nd ed.; HBS 1; Freiburg: Herder, 1993), 381-88.

177 “The confession of sin seeks renewal as well as forgiveness. The psalm leads the penitent to seek both justification and sanctification.” Mays, Psalms, 202. The plea for justification is stated in vv 7-9 (“purge me with hyssop ... blot out my iniquities”), while the plea for sanctification is stated in v 10 (“create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me”).

178 Mays, Psalms, 200.
Chapter 4: Righteousness in the Old Testament

4. Psalm 98:1-3

1 "Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him (יהוה יתנ בארץם, ידם הימין של יוהו).

2 The Lord has made known his salvation (יהוה יתנ) / ידם הימין של יוהו),
he has revealed his righteousness
(יהוה יתנ, הימין של יוהו) in the sight of the nations.

3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness (יהוה יתנ, ידם הימין של יוהו)
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God
(יהוה יתנ, ידם הימין של יוהו) (ESV).

Sigmund Mowinckel categorized Psalm 98, along with Psalms 47, 93, 95-97, as enthronement psalms, that is, psalms with the cultic Sitz im Leben of an enthronement festival in ancient Israel, an annual celebration of YHWH’s kingship.180 This view has been quite influential among OT scholars. However, Tremper Longman takes issue with this view, especially the speculative nature of the thesis concerning an annual festival, and argues rather that Psalm 98 is a song celebrating the victory of the Divine Warrior as the commander of the heavenly armies.181 The idea is that upon a successful campaign in Israel’s holy war, the people would use this psalm and others like it to reaffirm God’s kingship (cp. the victory songs in Exod 15:20-21; Judges 5:1-31; 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6-7; Ps 46:24-27; usually in reference to the women singing with timbrels and dancing).

If Longman is correct, then it sheds light on the correlation between “salvation” and “righteousness” in Ps 98:2, for the divine Warrior is seen as accomplishing Israel’s victory and deliverance by means of a royal-judicial judgment upon Israel’s enemies, and so in this way God reveals his righteousness. The kingly office of ancient Israel involved two primary activities: the military aspect (to provide victory and security for the people against the surrounding nations) and the judicial aspect (to provide judicial rulings of defense on behalf of the poor, the orphan, and the widow against their oppressors). So it is not surprising that the two ideas would be welded into a single image when referring to the divine King: as the divine Warrior he comes to the aid of his oppressed people by granting them victory over their foes; God reveals his righteousness/justice by judicially deciding in favor of his people through a military victory that is at once the punishing/defeating of their oppressors and their vindication in the sight of the nations.

This argument is reinforced by the observation that the language of Ps 98:2 is highly reminiscent of the passages in Deutero-Isaiah that we looked at earlier in the section on passages where “salvation” and “righteousness” are used in parallelism. No doubt there is some degree of inner-biblical exegesis or intertextuality at work here, though whether it is Psalm 98 reflecting on Deutero-Isaiah or vice versa is impossible to determine.182 Whichever direction the influence flows, the intertextual linkage supports my thesis because we see the same dynamic at work in Deutero-Isaiah: God will reveal his righteousness and his salvation by judging the Babylonians who took his people into exile, then redeeming and restoring them to the land. “The Divine Warrior both saves his people and judges his enemies in the same act. In addition, Yahweh establishes his kingship through his military victories. This last point recognizes the Near Eastern background to the Divine Warrior motif in the OT and further the strong association between Yahweh’s warfare and his role as king.”183

In addition to YHWH’s “salvation” and “righteousness,” we also have his “lovingkindness” and “faithfulness,” so that all four terms are in parallelism with one another. Yet it is important to note that the verbs with which they are connected differ. YHWH has “made known” (יהוה יתנ, רואים את יוהו) his salvation and “revealed” (יהוה יתנ, הוראות את יוהו) his righteousness, but he has “remembered” (יהוה יתנ, ח出国留学 את יוהו) his lovingkindness and his faithfulness to the house of Israel. The Lord is the King of the cosmos (v 6) who will judge the earth in righteousness (v 9), and through that judgment he will bring salvation to his people.184 The remembering verb has strongly covenantal overtones in Scripture,185 and so we may deduce that the Lord’s saving activity not only is accomplished through his righteousness in royal-judicial action, but also is an expression of his covenant faithfulness in keeping his promises to the house of Israel. But, as we have seen, the nuanced nature of Hebrew parallelism suggests that we have here a complex of theological ideas in which each word or concept complements but does not coincide with the others, producing a three-dimensional theological affirmation larger than the sum of its parts.186 That broader theological affirmation is part of the discourse concept that resides in the


182 Mays, Psalms, 312.

183 The construction “to remember one’s covenant” (with God as the subject) is used around a dozen times in the OT (Gen 9:15; 16; Exod 2:24; 6:5; Lev 26:42, 45; 1 Chron 16:15; Ps 105:8; 106:45; 111:5; Jer 14:21; Ezek 16:60) and once in the NT (Luke 1:72).

184 Robert Lowth’s old paradigm of Hebrew parallelism leads one commentator to make the astonishing claim that “Psalm 98 forms the synonymous parallelism רואים — הוראות, through
statement, “he has revealed his righteousness (יַעֲשֹׁתָהּ יַתְנָה / ἀπεκάλυψεν τὴν δικαιοσύνην σώματος) in the sight of the nations,” a statement that must be read in the context of God’s cosmic kingship affirmed in the Psalm as a whole. But that theological affirmation is made by the clauses, strophes, and verses of the Psalm as a whole and does not reside in the lexical concept of the word יַעֲשֹׁתָהּ יַתְנָה in and of itself. The lexical concept of the word יַעֲשֹׁתָהּ יַתְנָה makes its own contribution to the broader discourse concept of Psalm 98, but that broader discourse concept must not be transferred back into the lexical concept.

5. Psalm 143:1-2, 11-12

1 “Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my pleas for mercy!
In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness!
(יוֹצְקִיתֶם וְנָתֵנִים וְנָתֵנִים / εἰς τῷ δικαιοσύνῃ σου, ἀπέκαλυψεν σου)

2 Enter not into judgment with your servant,
for no one living is righteous before you.

11 For your name’s sake, O Lord, preserve my life!
In your righteousness (יוֹצְקִיתֶם וְנָתֵנִים / εἰς τῷ δικαιοσύνῃ σου) bring my soul out of trouble!

12 And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies, and you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul,
for I am your servant” (ESV).

While it may be tempting to interpret “righteousness” as equivalent to “faithfulness,” such an identification is not in keeping with what we now know of Hebrew parallelism.186 It is more likely that the “righteousness” of God in v 1 is related to the “righteousness” that the psalmist lacks but desires in his relationship to God in v 2: “Enter not into judgment (יוֹצְקִיתֶם) with your servant, for no one living is righteous (Qal of יִתְנָה) before you.” In other words, the psalmist is asking God to deliver him from his foes by a judicial act of righteousness, that is, by vindicating him against his enemies. The psalmist “pleads for divine interposition in righteousness and a righteous judgment on enemies.”187

which יַעֲשֹׁתָהּ יַתְנָה moves completely into the meaning of salvation.” Hans-Joachim Kraus, Psalms 60–150: A Commentary (trans. Hilton C. Oswald; ET of Biblisher Kommentar; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 264 (emphasis mine).

186 Kraus again falls prey to this error when he says, “Alongside יַעֲשֹׁתָהּ (‘faithfulness,’ ‘constancy’), יַתְנָה has the meaning: ‘covenant faithfulness,’ ‘salvation faithfulness.’” Hans-Joachim Kraus, Psalms 60–150, 536. Another commentator translates יַעֲשֹׁתָהּ יַתְנָה in Ps 143:1, 11 as “in your consistency” and says “it refers to Yahweh’s doing what is right in the light of his covenant commitments.” Leslie C. Allen, Psalms 101–150 (WBC 21; Waco: Word Books, 1983), 280.

187 Charles Augustus Briggs, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907), 215. “The divine attributes are the sanctions of the pleading: faithfulness], to His covenant and people; righteousness], in their vindication against their enemies.

The forensic significance of God’s righteousness in vv 1 and 11 is evident from several considerations. First, the context has to do with the psalmist’s cry for deliverance from his enemies, which are mentioned three times: “For the enemy has pursued my soul; he has crushed my life to the ground ... Deliver me from my enemies, O Lord! I have fled to you for refuge ... And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies, and you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul, for I am your servant” (vv 3, 9, 12 ESV). The adversarial context of the psalm therefore points us in the direction of a controversy (ἐπίληψις) that is to be decided as both parties stand before the heavenly Judge and await his verdict (ἀποφθέγμα).188 This is the precise significance of the imperative, “Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my pleas for mercy! ... Answer me quickly, O Lord! ... In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble!” (vv 1, 7, 11 ESV). The psalmist is crying out to God for a judicial verdict of vindication for him and condemnation against his foes.

Second, the statement “for to you I lift up my soul” (יוֹצְקִיתֶם וְנָתֵנִים / ἀπεκάλυψεν σου τὴν σωτηρίαν μου) in verse 8 implies that the psalmist has placed the outcome of the controversy in God’s hands. The construction “to lift” (יוֹצְקִיתֶם) “my soul” (יוֹצְקִיתֶם) “to you” (יוֹצְקִיתֶם) “my soul” (יוֹצְקִיתֶם) occurs also in Psalm 25 (cp. Ps 86:4), where it is clearly in a legal controversy context, with the hoped-for outcome of shame upon the enemies and vindication for the godly supplicant:

1 “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
(יוֹצְקִיתֶם וְנָתֵנִים / ἀπεκάλυψεν σου τὴν σωτηρίαν μου)

2 O my God, in you I trust;
let me not be put to shame;
let not my enemies exult over me.

3 Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame;
they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous” (Psalm 25:1-3 ESV).

Who will be put to shame? The righteous who are being oppressed by the enemy, or the enemy who is gloating over the suffering of the righteous? The suppliant lifts up his soul to the Lord in confidence that “none who wait for him shall be put to shame.” As in Psalm 143, the psalmist of Psalm 25 does not appeal to his own righteousness as the basis for God’s vindication; in fact, he pleads for God’s forgiving grace: “Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions ... For your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great
He will bring me out to the light,
And I will see His righteousness (יִרְשָׁדֶה יִהְיֶה / דְָּרֵי מַה שֵּׁטרוֹן אַעֲדוֹ) (NASB).

It is important to recognize that the context of this passage extends back to chapter 6, which is the opening of YHWH’s covenant lawsuit against his covenant-breaking people: “Listen, you mountains, to the indictment (בֵּית הָעָזְרָנִים) of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth, because the LORD has a case (בֵּית הָעָזְרָנִים) against His people; even with Israel He will dispute” (Micah 6:2 NASB). It is a cosmic lawsuit, for even the mountains and the foundations of the earth are called to serve as witnesses or judges against Israel, a common feature of Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties. The covenant that Israel has broken is the Sinai Covenant, and thus the curses of that covenant are about to be invoked against her: “Therefore I strike you with a grievous blow, making you desolate because of your sins” (Micah 6:13 ESV).

But all is not lost, God’s bringing the punitive curses of the covenant upon Israel is not an end in itself, nor is it the end of the story, for in accordance with God’s earlier promises to the fathers he will not let judgment be the last word. A remnant will pass through the judgment and come out on the other side forgiven, restored, and vindicated. Thus in Micah 7:7-9, the prophet looks ahead to that vindication. Although Israel is guilty and must suffer the punitive dimension of God’s righteousness, the prophet, speaking on behalf of the people, will wait until God “pleads my case and executes justice for me.” God’s role will change from the plaintiff bringing the charge against Israel to the judge who decides in favor of the oppressed against their enemies. The expectation that Yahweh...
The web will ‘plead one’s cause’ and ‘accomplish justice’ for a person is metaphor derived from the judicial scene where the poor man needed a protector against a powerful enemy.” The context, of course, is that Israel feels she has been unjustly treated by the Babylonians, whom God sent in judgment on her for her covenant breaking. The enemy has gloated over Israel in her darkest hour, derisively calling out, “Where is the Lord your God?” (Micah 6:16; 7:10). Just as victims look to human judges for redress of the wrongs they have suffered at the hands of their enemies, so the divine Judge will now become Israel’s champion, deliverer, and vindicator.

With this strongly judicial context in view, then, the rest of the verse makes sense: “He will bring me out to the light and I will see His righteousness.” The phrase “his righteousness” is not to be translated “his salvation” (even though God’s righteousness is certainly salvific in its effects), but “his righteousness” (NASB). What Micah beholds is not the salvific effects but the righteousness of God himself. Micah and the nation as a whole will experience God’s deliverance and vindication, in spite of their sins; and having experienced such grace, they will then look upon and marvel at the righteousness of God. This language has strong intertextual echoes with Deutero-Isaiah and Ps 98:2, which we analyzed in a similar manner above. God’s “righteousness” in Micah 7:9 is therefore a judicially-stamped Normbegriff focused here on the notion of God’s vindication and justification of his servants: “God’s righteousness is the action he takes to vindicate his election of his people.” Thus, this passage in Micah comes very close to the Pauline notion of “the righteousness of God” as a judicial vindication, an act of justification in which the sinner receives a gift of righteousness that does not arise from himself (who has no righteousness) but from God. Zion’s “confidence is not in herself — she has sinned and that characterization is total — but in the righteousness of God.”

9.4; 140.12). This outcome of their trial before God will occur as an event of salvation.” James Luther Mays, Micah: A Commentary (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 159.

197 Hillers, Micah, 90.


199 E.g., Waltke, Micah, 435, quoting from Klaus Koch’s article on קְפֻרָת in TLOT.

200 Mays, Micah, 160.

201 Ibid., 160.