

“Righteousness of God” in the Intertestamental Literature

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I am not committed, in principle, to the notion that the theological vocabulary of the NT must conform to or reflect the theological vocabulary of the intertestamental literature. While I recognize that temporal proximity is an important determinant of lexicography, I have two reservations regarding the use of intertestamental literature. First, we have little to no NT evidence that the apostles were familiar with that literature.¹ First century Palestinian Judaism was sectarian, in some cases fiercely so, so we cannot be assured that those dwelling in Jerusalem were familiar with all (or any of?) the literature of separatist sectarians such as the Qumran covenanters. Second, we have hundreds of incontestable citations of the canonical OT in the NT; so we know the authors were familiar with, and therefore influenced by, the LXX, which was regarded as theologically authoritative. Therefore, if the intertestamental literature employed particular words differently than did the canonical OT, I would ordinarily prefer to assume the NT authors used such words as did the OT authors, even though the other literature was temporally more proximate to the NT.

¹ Jude’s use of Enoch 1:9 (can be found at 4Q 204) at Jude 14-15 appears to be the one exception. Jude reads: It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord came with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.” Enoch reads: “When He comes with] the myriads of His holy ones, [to execute judgment against all; and He will destroy all the wicked,] [and will convict all] flesh, with regard to [all their] works [of wickedness which they have committed in deed and in word,] 17 [and with regard to all] the proud and hard [words which wicked sinners have spoken against Him.”

Nevertheless I recognize that for many, the intertestamental literature is more influential than I regard it to be, so I am willing to examine the available evidence, and see if its use is significantly different from that of the LXX, especially as regards the contested “righteousness of God.” In each case, having cited a text, I will state briefly my judgment about its meaning. Recall that, in large measure, four somewhat-different uses have been proposed for the expression: God’s moral uprightness, God’s uprightness as a judge, God’s (apocalyptic) power (Käsemann), and God’s faithfulness (to covenant or promise, N. T. Wright). The first two are so profoundly well-established that no one refutes them as possibilities. Further, few would challenge Stephen Westerholm’s suggestion that the second is largely grounded in the first. Part of Westerholm’s reasoning is that when δικαιοσύνη is situated with its antonyms, they are routinely the language of moral wickedness.² The contest, since the mid-20th century, and again since the appearance of N. T. Wright’s various writings, is whether the term can bear the lexical meaning of “power” or “faithfulness.”

Abraham A 13:9 “The two angels on the right hand and on the left, these are they that write down the sins and the righteousness (τὰς ἀμαρτίας καὶ δικαιοσύνας), the one on the right hand writes down the righteousness (τὰς δικαιοσύνας), and the one on the left the sins (τὰς ἀμαρτίας).
10 The angel like the sun, holding the balance in his hand, is the archangel, Dokieli the just weigher (ὁ δίκαιος ζυγοστάτης), and he weighs the righteous deeds and sins with the righteousness of God (τὰς δικαιοσύνας καὶ τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ θεοῦ).

² “The Righteousness of the Law and the Righteousness of Faith in Romans,” *Interpretation* 58, July, 2004, pp. 253-264

The presumptive meaning of “righteousness” here is evidently moral uprightness; δικαιοσύνη is the antonym of ἁμαρτία. Dokieli is considered to be “just” (δίκαιος) when he acts to judge/balance (ζυγοστάτης), because he weighs/compares “righteous deeds and sins” to the proper standard of judgment, namely the “righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ). Here we find in one text the two undisputed semantic ranges within the OT canonical literature: moral uprightness, especially as that is reflected in the act of rendering upright judgment. The “moral” and “forensic” ranges of the term are both on display here; and, as is usual, the latter is based upon the former. Because Dokieli is himself just, he manifests and upholds justice when he renders judgment.

1QS 10:23 For thanksgiving shall I open my mouth, the righteousness of God (לְצַדִּיקוֹת אֵל) shall my tongue recount always. Human rebellion, made full 24 by sin, as vain I shall purge from my lips; Impure and crafty design I shall expunge from my mind. Counseled by wisdom, I shall recount knowledge; 25 both prudent and wise, I shall compass it close about, so to preserve faith and strict judgment (אֱמֻנָה וּמִשְׁפָּט)-conforming to the righteousness of God (לְצַדִּיקוֹת אֵל) I shall mete out 26 the statute by the measure proper to each time and [... dispense] righteousness (צִדִּיק) and lovingkindness to those cast down, even strong encouragement to those who are fearful.

Interestingly here, there is an expressed desire to observe/watch/keep “faith and strict judgment,” the latter of which surely appears forensic in this context, and the former of which suggests fidelity or faithfulness. Here, at least, a lexical distinction is made between the forensic term on the one hand (*mishpat*) and the term associated with “faithfulness” on the other (*emunah*). Together (or, possibly, modifying only *mishpat*),

they conform to “the righteousness of God.” Contextually, the passage is highly moral and forensic. The covenanter contrasts his ways with those of “rebellion...sin...crafty design,” and pledges his intention to be an arbiter of justice/righteousness to those who are downcast by meting out the statutes and proper measures. While there is mention of “faith” or “faithfulness” here, it is not the *zadiq* lexical stock that denotes such, but rather the *emunah* stock that does so.

1QS 11:10 Surely a man’s way is not his own; neither can any person firm his own step. Surely justification (המשפט) is of God; by His power 11 is the way made perfect. All that shall be, He foreknows, all that is, His plans establish; apart from Him is nothing done. As for me, if 12 I stumble, God’s lovingkindness (אהסדי אל) forever shall save me. If through sin of the flesh I fall, my justification (משפטי) will be by the righteousness of God (בצדקת אל) which endures for all time.

Twice here, justification/acquittal is referred to, using the unmistakably-forensic *mishpat* language. God’s “lovingkindness,” close to what N. T. Wright means by “faithfulness,” is referred to here, but it uses the *chesed* language to do so. By comparison, justification/acquittal will be “by the righteousness of God.” Contextually, I would conclude that the “righteousness” language here is on the forensic side, associated with *mishpat* rather than with *chesed*.

1QM 4:6 When they go to battle they shall write on their banners, ‘The truth (אמת) of God,’ ‘The Righteousness (צדק) of God,’ ‘The glory (כבוד) of God,’ ‘The justice (משפט) of God.’ And after these the list of their names in full.

Contextually, I can find nothing here than a list of divine attributes, and I think the text is not decisive for the meaning of “righteousness of God.” It is associated here with the “justice of God,” but with other attributes also, including the truth/faithfulness of God.

4Q260 5:5 For thanksg[iving shall I op]e[n] my mouth, the righteousness (צדקוֹת) of God shall my tongue re[count]

The text is corrupted here, but it appears to be a re-statement of 1QS 10:23, above. If it is a textually corrupted version of the same, then the comments there would be apropos; otherwise the text itself is too fragmented to contribute to the discussion.

General observations

We find here what we find throughout the OT canonical literature, and what Stephen Westerholm, Douglas J. Moo³ and others have pointed out. “Righteousness” designates upright behavior, and moves naturally and by extension into the forensic arena to designate the upright dispensing of justice. While this attribute of God can be mentioned in contexts that celebrate other attributes, *emunah* appears to be the natural and ordinary way to refer to God’s truthfulness or faithfulness, *chesed* to his mercy or grace, whereas the *zedekah* language retains its ordinary meaning of moral or judicial uprightness.

³ Cf. the excursus at 3:20 in Moo’s Romans commentary.

I do not disagree with Wright's understanding of "righteousness of God" because I disagree with polyvalency. Some terms, in any language, are polyvalent, and only a study of the actual usage of terms in varying contexts can determine when this takes place. My concern with Wright remains two-fold; First, lexically there are ordinary, well-established Hebrew and Greek words used in both the LXX and the NT to mean "faithfulness," and these terms differ from the lexical stocks that denote "righteousness." Second, in almost every context in which Wright attempts to make "righteousness of God" mean "faithfulness of God" (nowhere more evident than the first three chapters of Romans), the context is overwhelmingly forensic.⁴ That is, even if we granted that there might be passages in which "righteousness of God" could be understood as "faithfulness of God," there would have to be some convincing contextual reason to do so. I haven't found a NT text yet where the expression appears in such a convincing context, and therefore regard Wright's arguments to be little more than special pleading. That some words are polyvalent is not disputed. That in some Pauline texts δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ could plausibly be construed as God's faithfulness is not disputed. That there are any Pauline texts where the context suggests that "faithfulness of God" makes more sense of the context than "moral or judicial uprightness of God" is what is disputed.

Among the Pauline texts in which there is some relationship between justification and faith, some are grammatically more ambiguous than others: πίστεως Ἰησοῦ at Galatians 2:16 (and elsewhere) carries all the ambiguity of any use of a qualifying genitive. In the unambiguous Pauline passages, however, the relationship between righteousness/justification/acquittal on the

⁴ Cf. my "Observations on N. T. Wright's Biblical Theology With Special Consideration of 'Righteousness of God,'" in *By Faith Alone*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), pp. 61-73.

one hand, and faith/faithfulness on the other, clearly affirms that the believer is acquitted by faith *in* Christ and what Christ has done, rather than by the alleged “faithfulness” *of* Christ.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law (μη ἔχων ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ νόμου), but that which comes through faith in Christ (τὴν διὰ Πίστεως Χριστοῦ), the righteousness from God that depends on faith (τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην ἐπὶ τῇ Πίστει). (Phil. 3:8-9)

Rom. 3:26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ Πίστεως Ἰησοῦ).

Rom. 3:30 He will justify the circumcised by faith (ἐκ Πίστεως) and the uncircumcised through faith (διὰ τῆς Πίστεως).

Rom. 4:2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed (ἐπίστευσεν) God, and it was counted to him as righteousness (εἰς δικαιοσύνην).” 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly (πιστεύοντι δὲ ἐπὶ τὸν δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἄσεβῆ), his faith is counted as righteousness (λογίζεται ἡ Πίστις αὐτοῦ εἰς δικαιοσύνην),

Rom. 4:11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith (τῆς δικαιοσύνης τῆς Πίστεως) while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe (Πατέρα πάντων τῶν Πιστευόντων) without being circumcised, so that righteousness (δικαιοσύνην) would be counted to them as well, 12 and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith (Πίστεως) that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Rom. 4:13 For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith (διὰ δικαιοσύνης Πίστεως). 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null (κεκένωται ἡ Πίστις) and the promise is void. ...16 That is why it depends on faith (ἐκ Πίστεως), in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham (ἐκ Πίστεως Ἀβραάμ), who is the father of us all, 17 as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed (ἐπίστευσεν), who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18 In hope he believed against hope (ἐπίστευσεν), that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” 19 He did not weaken in faith (μὴ ἀσθενήσας τῇ Πίστει) when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith (ἐνεδυναμώθη τῇ Πίστει) as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” (εἰς δικαιοσύνην) 23 But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe (τοῖς Πιστεύουσιν) in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν).