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Disciplinary Brief

A CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION OF JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS BY A BIBLICAL THEOLOGIAN

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Introduction

Prof. Nicholas Wolfterstorff has written an insightful and thoughtful theological brief (hereafter NWTB) on justice and rights. Any response to such rich, dense and evocative piece is mainly an expression of my gratitude for the gift of friendship afforded by the Global Faculty Initiative (GFI) platform. This disciplinary brief is a constructive dialogue with NWTB from my field of biblical interpretation that pays attention to the relationship between the Bible and its cultures as a salient theological method to promote cross-disciplinary research.

A Dialogue with NWTB from a Biblical Interlocutor

Two Different Methods of Two Theological Fields

There are two different methods by which theologians may bring Scriptures and the theologies that derive from them to disciplinary scholars and their research topics. One is NWTB's approach of a "systematic" or constructive theologian who introduces a philosophical category (first and second orders, theory of justice, etc), then looks to its scriptural supports, logic and argument, offers a critical analysis and constructive synthesis, as well suggesting helpful applications to practical issues, including the scholarly life. The merits of this approach are: it is comprehensive in scope of the topic examined, persuasive in its method of enquiry, and winsome in finding biblical support for its thesis.

An alternative approach, that of a biblical theologian, is to start with the biblical text, and examine the particulars of time and place and situation of a biblical text, and then move up to more variegated biblical texts and their contexts, as a biblical theology is summarized and constructed at a more abstract level, finally applied to new contexts. My approach emphasizes "context" or "culture," which are used interchangeably here. They refer to the tool I use in biblical studies in at

least three areas:

1. the salience of cultural context of the Bible and its authors in my biblical exegesis;
2. culture itself or the social location of the first readers and subsequent readers down through the centuries as lens to receive and understand the biblical messages;
3. the cultural contexts of the Bible are *part of the content* in the Bible as well as in our contemporary biblical interpretations.

The benefits of this approach are: attentiveness to contexts and nuances; and conscious effort to extrapolate from one context to another in order to make the biblical message more fitting to new situations. This contextual reading of the Bible may supplement, reinforce and extend NWTB's account of justice and rights in ways that can offer ways for disciplinary scholars across the entire range of GFI disciplines to fruitfully expand their awareness of justice and rights in their scholarship and scholarly lives.

Let me illustrate this second approach through two examples of contextual readings of biblical texts cited by NWTB.

Firstly, the meaning of the word "righteousness" in Habakkuk 2:4:

Hebrew Bible [MT, ca. 538 bce]	Greek Old Testament (OT) [LXX, ca. 250 bce]	New Testament (NT, 1st century ce)
Habakkuk 2:3, 4 For the vision [is] yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold, his soul [which] is lifted up is not upright in him: but the **righteous** shall live by his faith.	Habakkuk 2:3, 4 For the vision is yet for a time, and it shall shoot forth at the end, and not in vain: though he should tarry, wait for him; for he will surely come, and will not tarry. If he should draw back, my soul has no pleasure in him: but the **righteous** shall live by my faithfulness.	Galatians 3:11: Now it is evident that no one is justified [set right] before God by the law; for **"The one who is righteous will live by faith."** Romans 1:17: For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith: as it is written, **"The one who is righteous shall live by faith."** Hebrews 10:37, 38: For yet in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but **my righteous one will live by faith**.

This is a complex text. The word "righteous" in the OT context is first and foremost not a *moral* category, but a *theological* one, which refers to a people who are *set right* before God in the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12, Romans 4, Galatians 3). This people are called "righteous" not because their own moral fortitude or sinlessness but because of God's faithfulness ("my faithfulness" in the Greek OT, ca. 250 bce). The book of Habakkuk in its original context (Hebrew Bible, ca. 538 bce) is addressing the question stated in 1:1–4, "Why God's elect, called the righteous, are allowed to suffer in their captivity under the arrogant and unjust Babylon?" Habbakuk 2:3–4 replied that, God is not pleased with the person who is not upright (i.e., the wicked Babylon), but the members of the covenant "shall live by his faith [in God]"—the contrast in the original context is not "faith versus work," but "faith that leads to life" versus "wickedness or injustice that leads to death".

Without a contextual reading, one easily slips into a historical theology perspective, notably the Reformation debate regarding whether it is the believer's faith or his works that bring the salvation of God. The context of Martin Luther in 16th century Europe is about whether the purchase of a letter of indulgence (works) will guarantee salvation or salvation comes simply by "faith alone." The Reformers are doing biblical interpretation that is *cross-culturally* biblical.

A contextual reading of Habbakuk 2:3–4 shows that the righteous and just language is about being in the Abrahamic

covenant of faith, and thereby covenant members are to live out the just requirements of the covenant (as explicitly spelled out in the Mosaic law) as the concrete expression of one's relationship with God. The people of God have broken the covenant when they defy justice, or worship false gods; therefore God has allowed the wicked Babylon to punish his own elect. Without the contextual reading, justice in its abstract quality may have the adverse effect of focusing on judicial justice and the following of commandments and injunctions. Habbakuk understands biblical justice has an intricate relationship between being God's people through faith and doing God's requirements as an obedience of that same faith.

Secondly, the phrase "those who are hungry and thirst for righteousness [*dikaiosune*]" in Matthew 5:6 has a different meaning than "you who are hungry" in Luke 7:21, though both are parallel texts that describe the same teaching of Jesus, called "beatitudes," albeit in two different literary styles and nuances. Matthew's Gospel overall has certain features that focus on the inner life of being God's people, such as pursuing righteousness (the word appears seven times in Matthew, none in Mark, once in Luke, twice in John) as a quality of life in the Spirit of God (Matthew 5–7). In contrast, Luke's Gospel overall has certain features that focus on the social-political transformation of the gospel through the mission of God's people, such as "peace on earth and goodwill to all people" (2:14), and to "proclaim good news to the poor, release the captives, recover the sight of blind" (4:18).

It is not strange at all for the community of Matthew who are predominantly Jewish to understand the word "righteousness" in the OT sense, that is, "righteousness" means one's relationship with God within the covenant (one's being) *and* one's faithful obedience as the duty expected from the members of that covenant (one's doing). In contrast to Matthew, Luke uses reversal as a literary style, so in Luke 6:21, 24–25, the blessing is pronounced on those who are hungry (because of an unjust social system) for they will be filled (by the reign/realm of God), the woe is pronounced on those who are full now (the oppressive rich) for they will be hungry.

This contextual reading of Matthew and Luke allows us to let both texts stand without the need to change Matthew's meaning ("one hungers and thirsts for righteousness") into Luke's ("one hungers and thirsts for *justice*"). I see the contextual readings of Matthew and Luke speak to the beauty and power of diversity in the biblical revelation and its embrace of the creative tensions of differences within the Biblical canon, thus enabling biblical conceptions of justice to speak to myriad contexts.

Toward a Biblical Theology of Justice

After a close reading of two biblical texts in their individual contexts, the next step for a biblical theologian is to offer what justice means as additional biblical texts are gathered together. The larger and variegated contexts of the biblical canon grant us a more robust understanding of justice than a few texts can.

Do the biblical writers explain what justice is? Due to limited space, let me offer briefly my view of what justice (*mispat/krima*) and righteousness (*tzedek/dikaiousune*) mean in the OT:

Justice (*mispat/krima*) is one of the *attributes* of God (Deuteronomy 32:4; Isaiah 28:6; 51:4–5; Jeremiah 9:24; Ezekiel 34:16) the Judge (Psalms 67:4; 96:13; 98:9), whose character is fairness (without prejudice) and (up)rightness in his dealing with people. "He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong,

upright and just as he." (Deuteronomy 32:4) So the biblical language of justice is primarily *theological* (about who God is and what God does), *covenantal* (about the relationship God has with people), *and legal* (about laws or courts of law. An example of this language of justice is seen in the Book of Job, where Job charges God for breaking his covenantal relationship and therefore questions about his sovereignty over injustice in the cosmos.

"**Righteousness** (*tzedek/dikaiousune*)" [1] in the OT is neither simply a legal concept nor the quality of religious observance, but about a relationship with God that requires a fulfillment of conditions of integrity, trustworthiness and uprightness that contribute to the peace and prosperity and flourishing of all (Job 29:16; 31:21; Proverbs 8:18; 14:23; 31:9). This idea of righteousness and its vocation extend from the OT's "people of God" to the NT's "kingdom of God" and the church.

Justice Applied to the Academy

While the Bible may be understood in its cultural contexts, it does not mean the scope and responsibility of justice and righteousness are restricted to its first readers, for the God as described in the Bible is neither bound to contexts nor does God work only with one people (Israel or the church). God is the Judge-King of *the universe* and cares for the well-being of *all* his creation. The task of a biblical theologian is to apply the biblical theology of justice and righteousness to contexts beyond that of the Bible. Let me offer two suggestions regarding the "rules of engagement" between faith (and Bible) and the academy (or disciplines) on the theme of justice:

1. The Bible affirms that the relationship God has with all people and the whole creation is established and maintained in equity or fairness (Isaiah 1:27 "Zion will be redeemed with justice") and what is right (2 Chronicles 12:6; Nehemiah 9:33). Justice is God's concern for the shalom of all, and the Bible has a universal scope of justice. God's peoples, who are called "the righteous" or "the just," are expected to keep (in obedience to) the covenant as a way to maintain their identity of being God's people (Psalm 37:28; Proverb 28:5) for the sake of the goodness to the world. "My justice will become a light to the nations. My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations" (Isaiah 51:4–5). God uses his people, scholars among them, as an instrument to bring about justice in the world. Whoever else participates in the mission of a just God then aligns with the vision of God's reign on earth (Mark 9:40). The church does not have the monopoly of doing good and just. This point is significant to GFI because most of us work in a "secular" academic settings with colleagues who are gifted and may not (yet) profess their religious faith, or not (yet) articulate what is biblical justice. Still, God can work through the life of Mahatma Gandhi; God can even use the wicked Babylon. We need humility.

2. "Rights" and equity are measured and judged by the law or wisdom of God as contained in the Scripture. Yet biblical reading and biblical canon are never meant to limit what we can read, because the purpose of the Scripture is to be "a lamp to our feet, a light to our paths," guiding and empowering us to be "salt of the earth." In other words, the Bible warrants us to use it to read our world and cultural texts (such as laws of the land, sacred texts of civilizations, textbooks and research papers on physics, etc), using the Bible to shed light and transform our disciplines and our world today (Romans 12:1–2). One way to do this is to derive mega principles of the Bible on justice based on sound exegesis and robust biblical theology, and use the mega principles to engage

constructively with our disciplinary research and scholarly life.

Based on the two pointers above, let me highlight the twofold thesis (one of the mega principles) of the biblical theology of justice toward preserving and flavoring the world concerning justice and rights. The twofold thesis, like two sides of the same coin, is: 1) the being and doing of justice, and 2) justice based on love. The mega principle states, God's justice (his being just and his doing of justice) is relational to God's mercy or loving kindness (*hesed*), which is a fundamental aspect *of who God is*. Both concepts of justice and righteousness in the OT are based on God's loving kindness rather than simply on the law. God's loving kindness, including cruciform love (i.e., love taken as far as the Cross) as expressed in the NT, tempers forensic judgement from "cold legal culture and rights-talk" with a "new heart of the Spirit" in a caring, empathizing, honoring culture. [2]

The modern discourse about justice and rights often overemphasizes actions, behavior and duty, to the point of leaving aside the formation of a person and the community. Justice and right are *not just* legal injunctions or prohibitions ("Thou shalt not…") and requirements ("do justly"). When Jesus teaches "love one another" as "the new commandment" (John 13:30), this *new commandment* has its continuity with Leviticus 19:18 (the old commandment) in the necessity of "loving other" but also goes beyond the duty and legal aspect of loving others. Jesus in effect is saying, *to be just you must be a loving person*—be formed by God's love so much so that one just loves to love others. Without justice, love is not expressed, but without love, justice could be mere doing absent of relationship. Without love, justice may be restricted to litigation and cold culture; with love and mercy, justice looks toward mutually edifying community and flourishing culture. If love is the interpersonal relationship that forms *justly* who we are as human beings and the mutual indebtedness of love is the basis we do justice to all people, then Paul says it well in Romans 13:8 "*owe* no one anything except to *love* one another." Love is the eternal "due/debt" one has to others.

Three Frames for Conversing with Other Disciplines

In order for me to have a conversation with other disciplines in GFI, I wish to push the boundary of justice beyond the "social systemic" and take a cue from NWTB that "justice is the ground floor of shalom" and shalom is about "flourishing in *all dimensions* of one's existence" (emphasis mine). There are three cultural frames about shalom (well-being) in biblical theology that will enable us to see justice (what is right and what is due) in a more fulsome language and elaborate vision, which can then be applied to the research interests of other disciplines (fields of study).

1. The first frame is that of a *truthful and legal universe*, and much of NWTB focuses articulately on this frame. Justice is about obeying the rules of life, abiding the laws of God, following the orders of the cosmos—be they moral, political, economic, familial, etc. Injustice is missing the mark (*hamartia*), or doing wrong (*hata*). Mosaic laws have a lot to say about this, as do the Psalms, providing more or less direct biblical guidance to some disciplines:

    a. How can the "love your neighbors" commandment of Leviticus 18 be practiced by , architects to design buildings that promote community life, to construct spatial justice etched with hospitality, especially to the vulnerable? In finance and banking, how can "love your neighbors" overcome poverty and challenge zero-

sum games, e.g., offering lower interest loans (e.g., in micro-financing) or the zero-interest of cooperatives (e.g., Basque cooperatives, Israeli kibbutzim) in sharing of capital for, say, small business startups?

b. In the fields of law, criminology, politics and public policy, how can truth rather than prejudice address police violence and prison-sentencing which are so often racialized and class prejudiced? How can restorative justice better shape and transform the incarcerated beyond punitive justice? How can we create new policy, regulation and law that promote a human flourishing society?

2. The second frame is that of a *moral universe* that highlights the heavenly order of inherent goodness—though some cultures view the order of this moral universe as oscillations or roles of yin and yang, cycles of good and evil. Justice in this frame is viewed as health due to do a person, animals, plants, outer space; and injustice is viewed as illness, toxic wastes, space trash, etc:

   a. How can the fields of deep ecology and climate change and carbon cycle studies envision justice-oriented programs to restore the health of our habitat, ecology, outer space? Will they in turn generate justice for humanity?

   b. In medicine and stem-cell research, how do we rectify the problem of ethnic and gender disparities in access to medical care or stem cell-based therapies to those who need them? Are particular diseases still regarded as "taboos" as some "patients" continue to be "stigmatized"? In the fields of language studies, do we have a duty to overcome bigotry, bullying and toxic language?

3. The third frame is that of *a holy and beautiful universe*, one that is covered with its Creator's presence and glory. "Honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God" (1 Peter 2:17) is considered justice in this frame, because what is due to everyone is "honor" (shaming others is injustice); what is due to friends is "love" (hatred is injustice); and what is due to God is "fear/reverence, glorifying". In contrast, injustice, as sin, has "fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

4. How can astronomy and physics attract scientists who are people of color or minorities, and by so doing *advance* the fields? In music, mathematic and photography, is the "golden ratio/mean" universal or culturally defined in terms of what is aesthetically pleasing or morally just?

5. Is it a matter of injustice in the world when the elitism of academics makes their works inaccessible to the wider world, or unintelligible to sister disciplines? Does "ivory-tower" research produce the best scholarship, even when not immediately practical in its applications? How do scholars within GFI envision and promote bridge-building among ourselves as ways to honor the gifts and talents has given us in ways that reflect God's glory holistically?

. . .

Finally, the relational nature of justice is the hard thesis of this paper, and it raises a fundamental question for academics: How can interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary knowledges be viewed as essential for one's discipline? And as busy researchers, how do we care for our loved ones, our research assistants, our colleagues, beyond productivity (just as we

will look into the eyes of a beggar affirming his humanity when we hand him the money)?

Let us have tea or coffee—Let us break bread *together*!

Further Readings

Reventlow, Henning Graf, and Yair Hoffman. *Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and Their Influence.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992. (The work examines the nuanced and complex biblical concepts of justice and righteousness.)

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Justice in Love.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. (A companion volume to his *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, the author examines the complex but harmonious relationship between justice and love here.)

Yeo, K. K. *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing? Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective*. 20th Anniversary Edition. Contrapuntal Readings of the Bible in World Christianity. Oregon: Pickwick, 2018. (Ten cross-cultural biblical interpretation essays that read the Chinese cultures biblically and read the Bible contextually and indigenously; a number of essays on justice, righteousness and love.)

End Notes

[1] The verb of “righteousness” in English is difficult to render, and has caused a lot of confusion because of the cognate verb rendered as “justifying.” Perhaps, “rightwising” (Middle English) is better, meaning “to make things right” or “to rectify,” to “set right” people in broken relationships, to restore them in a community of loving relationships (Psalm 82:3; Proverb 17:15).

[2] This is a dominant prophetic theme in the OT such as Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and the NT discourses between Jesus and the Pharisees, also Paul with his opponents in Romans and Galatians.

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