

# A God of justice and reconciliation? Perspectives from the New Testament

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## Abstract

Justice and reconciliation are central concepts in the NT, in explicit and implicit ways, and the terms and their usage often betray their Jewish origins and setting. As the ultimate author of justice and reconciliation, God also expects as much from God's followers, and ultimately from and towards the cosmos. Mindful that their encompassing reach may lead to semantic inflation, justice, and reconciliation in themselves – but particularly as divine attributes – need to be plotted over a broader spectrum that may have been the case in the past, and with much more attention to these notions in their particular first century context.

## Keywords

*Paul; socio-historical context; justification; iustitia; social justice*

## 1. Introduction

Justice and reconciliation are key concepts in the New Testament (NT), attested by the generous presence of words used to express such notions.<sup>1</sup> Given their significance and reach, dealing with justice and reconciliation as central terms and concepts and notions in the NT is exhilarating, but at the same time also daunting – more or less for the same reason, which cautions against an all-too easy overarching or generalising approach. Moreover, scepticism about a God of justice and reconciliation is rife in

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1 While quantity is no guarantee, the multiple use of semantic-related terms suggest some significance; Swartley (2006:30) notes that terms for justice are used a thousand times in the Bible.

today's distressed and disturbed world (Welker 2017:180), even if the world in which the NT originated did not fare much better. Caveats related to anachronism and ethnocentrism and the like aside, the centrality of justice and reconciliation is evident if not always uncomplicated in the NT, and the significance of portrayals of God's association with justice and reconciliation over time, and certainly in our day and age, is difficult to dispute.

Scholars have formulated various frameworks or senses of justice in the Bible and the NT in the attempt to provide a credible overarching picture. A recent attempt postulates three, seemingly contrasting frameworks: collective justice, individual desert, and life affirmation. Collective justice holds everyone in the group responsible for the actions of any one individual within the group. The notion that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get is embodied in justice as individual desert. Life affirmation encapsulates the often-expressed unconditional respect for human life, which forms the premise for intrinsic moral action. And as far as the New Testament is concerned, none of the three frameworks can be restricted to either inter-group or intra-group relationships (Pelton 2003:737–65). While such explanatory frameworks are useful in many ways and helpful to make distinctions, my presentation moves beyond such frameworks by deliberately trying to frame the NT's God of justice and reconciliation in the contexts of the time.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than attempting to address the whole of the NT, my presentation will lean towards Paul (as shorthand for the Pauline materials) and even selectively so – the reasons for my choices will hopefully become clear in the argument. I will sidestep some longstanding debates such as whether justice and reconciliation in Paul should be understood in forensic-anthropological or cosmological-apocalyptic terms.<sup>3</sup> Tensions in interpretive frameworks used in theological appropriations of Paul at times converge in discussions

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2 Ziesler (2004:212) put it diplomatically: “a quite reasonable sense is obtained if we start from the assumption that Paul uses the δικαί- word-group in the way indicated by the Hebrew and Greek background”.

3 Avoiding the debate and the many ways it flares out into discussions of Pauline materials is well-nigh impossible. Paul's apocalyptic framework cannot be avoided altogether, as can be seen below; the longer-standing discussion of Paul's apocalypticism will however not be engaged as such.

of the apocalyptic nature of the letters and their thought world. The themes of Paul's apocalyptic imagination, its content and significance are – and have in the past often been – studies on their own.<sup>4</sup> Typically also, justice and reconciliation are discussed as part of a broader constellation of what is often called Paul's "soteriological terms", alongside for example also salvation and sanctification (McGrath 1993:517), or peace (Swartley 2006). Largely suspending these debates for now, and after briefly establishing a framework for the NT's God of justice and reconciliation, my contribution scopes out five important dimensions of justice and reconciliation, before summarising with some broad parameters.

## 2. A framework for the NT's God of justice and reconciliation

The relationship between justice and reconciliation in the NT can be presented variously, as complementary, as two opposing spheres, as hendiadys and so forth, but here they are strongly juxtaposed and associated even if my argument may list over towards an emphasis on justice. Then again, "The justification of the unjust as the justice of God means God's reconciliation of enemies and God's compassion for the weak" (Gorman 2011:31). Claiming the NT's God as a God of justice and reconciliation is easier than profiling the NT's God of justice and reconciliation, due to the many perspectives found in the NT.<sup>5</sup> A good starting point, though, is to acknowledge that thinking about God as a God of justice and reconciliation means to think of God as "a discernibly efficacious power" (Welker 2017:185), and conversely, not to reduce God's justice to modern notions

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4 The list is long and include a range of scholarly contributions (e.g. Beker 1980; Blackwell, Goodrich, and Maston 2016; Campbell 2009; Hanson 1979; Keck 2015; Martyn 2000; Matlock 1996). Davies evaluates recent interpretations of Paul from an apocalyptic perspective which often feature the distinction "forensic" and "cosmological" apocalyptic eschatology. Taking his cue from the Bultmann/Käsemann debate, he explains how scholars resolve the tension either by defining the forensic by the cosmological, or the other way round, that typically results in cancelling out one of the options. Davies proposed a "non-competitive construal of this duality" so as to retain both forensic and cosmological aspects of Paul's apocalyptic thought (Davies 2022). For the debate, see also McGrath (1993:520–21).

5 Grieb argued, "Righteousness or justice is one of the most important components of any theological understanding of Scripture, especially since the biblical writers understand human concepts of justice as they are critiqued and measured by 'the righteousness of God'" (Grieb 2006:58).

balancing the punishment of evil people with the reassurance a free society brings (Bruckner 2006:7).

The larger discussion in Pauline studies regarding the profile of the divine has to be funnelled here towards a focus on justice and reconciliation. Although notions of God as the universal creator and father in the Pauline writings (White 1999) are not unimportant to our topic, those will not be the focus. So too, arguments that Paul's portrayal of God as a patriarchal figure who related to Israel as a father to his family, relied on a Jewish-Pharisaic notion of religion of the family and home, rather than a centralised state religion (Bossman 1988),<sup>6</sup> informs aspects of the argument but will remain outside our active scope of discussion.<sup>7</sup>

Discussions of justice in the NT, and especially in the Pauline writings, often turn theological in a narrow, even dogmatic sense of the word. All too often in the Pauline interpretive tradition, his letters are read as fixated on individual salvation, stifling Paul's claim(s) regarding the gospel that underscores God's faithfulness to Israel within a corporate setting and awareness. It is instructive that the Anchor Yale Bible dictionary's entry on "justification" is more than double the length of "just, justice" (cf Hays 1992; Mafico 1992), and that the entry on "justice" in a popular volume on the Pauline letters is an empty link to "justification" (Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid 1993). Contrary to the spiritualisation and individualisation so typical of Pauline studies (Hays 1992), Paul's thinking was embedded in Jewish understandings of justice in terms of God's relation to the cosmos.<sup>8</sup> Claims about divine justice have given rise to much discussion of the nature

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6 "Paul's adoptive filiation of gentiles into Christ as God's Son suggests how his missionary theology accorded with the familial metaphor for God, and represented an early level of Christian religious identification" (Bossman 1988). Some scholars argue that Paul, and Jesus, broke through the patriarchal mould (e.g. Bartchy 2003).

7 To be sure, even when such portrayals of the divine impinge on the understanding of justice. The notion of justice being served through a form of generalised reciprocity along the lines found in kinship structures laid the basis for social systems such as patronage. Economic, political or religious institutional relationships in particular were arranged according to an overarching characteristic of kinship or family feeling through the social, institutional arrangement of patron-client relationships (Malina 1993:133–37).

8 "Not least of importance for Paul at this point are two fundamental axioms of the Jewish concept of divine justice: that God 'will render to each according to [their] works' (2.6) and that God's judgment will be impartial (2.11)" (Dunn 1998:41–42).

of God justice, such as retaliatory, retributive, or restorative – categories which may reflect interpretive interests rather than the prevailing and contemporary contexts of the NT. Some scholars are highly sceptical about attempts to conflate God’s justice and righteousness with what can be called “alleged natural law”, pleading instead for acknowledging and promoting “God’s creativity in a creation that is clearly different from God” (Welker 2017:190; see Bruckner 2006:5).

### 3. Scoping out justice and reconciliation in the NT (Paul)

When it is accepted that neither justice nor reconciliation have Archimedean points, they have to be engaged as socially constructed and (thus) contested notions, “infused with cultural values” (Bruckner 2006:1). Despite many contestations regarding the adequacy of its historical presentation of Second Temple Judaism as well as the early Jesus followers, the hermeneutical accountability of its engagement with literary texts of the time, and the extent to which it actually presented a (re)new(ed) interpretive framework for making sense of the Pauline materials, the (not at all monolithic) New Perspective on Paul (NPP) rang in some important changes.<sup>9</sup> Paul could no longer be perceived as devastatingly afflicted with a guilt-ridden conscience, or overcome by the graveness of this predicament and thus concerned with finding a gracious God like Luther and Augustine, but rather as a pastor who had to cope with tensions among Jewish and Gentile Christians in newly found congregations on the issue of the “how” of salvation, and the communities’ subsequent formation and maintenance.

With reference to Rom 3:23–25a, perhaps the locus classicus for God’s justice (Grieb 2006:62), πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ 24 δικαιούμενοι δωρεὰν τῆ αὐτοῦ χάριτι διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ· 25 ὃν προέθετο ὁ θεὸς ἰλαστήριον διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ, Bruckner (2006:8) argues that “[t]he Apostle Paul helps us with a biblical theology of justice

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9 For a more extensive discussion and comparison of different “perspectives” on Paul, and for the scholarly industry created in the process, see Punt (2020, espec 378–383). See Ehrensperger (2013) for perspectival and other diversity among those associated with the NPP.

when he connects righteousness, justice, our sin, and justification by faith in Christ Jesus”.

### 3.1 Justification and/as justice

For many centuries scholars and believers have asserted that the notion of “justification” of people by God is the theological key to Paul’s writings, as well as the Bible and therefore the whole of Christianity<sup>10</sup> – in short, God saves people by grace alone through Christ, the monergistic soteriological principle (see Braaten 1990).<sup>11</sup> Diverging opinions, such as Schweitzer’s notion that justification was a subsidiary concern for Paul, were taken up by Beker (Beker 1980:15–16) and Wanamaker (1983:48–49) who for example argued, with structuralist underpinnings, that the Christ-event was Paul’s “primary symbolic structure” with the secondary ones being, among others, justification by faith.

It is, then, not surprising that some scholars in the past have slighted the notion that the Pauline writings are concerned with justice, and accorded justification pride of place in Paul – as though these are different or even opposing notions.<sup>12</sup> More recently scholars have made the case that justice and justification are not only related to one another in the Bible, but that they share the same purpose of restoring people to God and to each other (e.g. Bruckner 2006:5). Michael Gorman explored the relationship between justification and justice (with reconciliation very much included): and identified seven connections between these concepts.<sup>13</sup> The linguistic links

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10 As McGrath (1993:520) explains, the English translations of the Greek *δικαιοσύνη* and the Latin *iustitia* can create the wrong impressions. “Righteousness tends to mean something like ‘personal moral uprightness whereas justice tends to bear the meaning of ‘social and political fairness.’ The former has individualistic, the latter social and communal, associations.” He notes that *δικαιοσύνη τοῦ θεοῦ* similarly may conjure up individualist ideas and that the translation “the justice of God” is equally plausible.

11 Unfortunately such claims were in the past mounted in anti-Judaism, when it is concluded that “justification takes us right to the heart of Christianity’s selfdefinition over against Judaism” (Motyer 1992:71–89). For an earlier overview of four positions on the status of justification in Pauline thought, see Fung (1981:4–11).

12 In recent studies, more balanced treatments of the relationship between righteousness and justice, and related complexities have started to appear; see e.g. Schnelle’s work on “Jesus Christ as God’s Righteousness/Justice” as part of a larger investigation of Christology in Pauline thought (Schnelle 2005:811–837 e pub).

13 Gorman’s definition of justification is helpful: “Justification is the establishment of right covenantal relations – fidelity to God and love of the neighbour – by means of

between words using the *δικαιο*-lemma are evident: but lamentably such apparent connections do not generally become evident in translations and commentaries on Paul (e.g. Rom 3:26; 4:5; 5:18–19; Gal 3:11; 1 Cor 6:11). A second connection is between the human condition and injustice: between the “human condition of covenantal dysfunctionality” and the breakdown of human relationships (Rom 1:18–3:20).<sup>14</sup> Justification as transformative participation establishes a third connection (Rom 1:16–18): “Justification ... is about reconciliation, covenant participation and faithfulness, community, resurrection, and life” (Gorman 2011:30). Four, God’s justice is reflected in the cross of Christ, so that for Paul divine justice is cruciform justice (1 Cor 1:18–31).<sup>15</sup> Paul’s own transformation constitutes a fifth connection, having turned from persecutor to follower of Christ including non-retaliation, reconciliation, and commitment to the poor (1 Cor 4:11–13; 2 Cor 5:18–20; Gal 2:10). Profiling the sixth as also the most significant connection, Gorman points to the embodiment of cruciform justice in the real-life communities of Jesus followers with whom Paul were involved (1 Cor 6:1–11; 8:1–11:1; 11:17–34; 12; 2 Cor 5:21; 8–9). A final connection is identified in terms of justice in the world (Gal 6:9–10; 1 Th 4:14–15; Rom 12:14, 17–18), “that Paul did in fact expect his communities to be agents of goodness, compassion, and reconciliation in the world, not just in the church” (Gorman 2011:39).

Caution about justification as the centre of Pauline theology, “as the starting point for Paul’s interpretation” (Deidun 1986:234), even the possibility of identifying such a key or basic issue in Pauline thought, do not diminish the Pauline letters’ concern with the newly formed “committed communities of apocalyptically minded late Second Temple Jews and pagans” (Fredriksen

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God’s liberating grace in Christ’s faithful and loving death and our co-crucifixion with him. Justification therefore means co-resurrection with Christ to a new life of faith and love within the Spirit-empowered people of God now, and the certain hope of acquittal, and thus resurrection to eternal life, on the day of judgment” (Gorman 2011:30).

- 14 As Gorman elaborates, “If justification does not renew and restore human relationships, it does not address the human condition as Paul sees it” (Gorman 2011:29, emphasis in original).
- 15 In the words of Bruckner (2006:4), “In the NT justice and righteousness are understood through the cross of Christ, requiring more radical obedience and sacrifice of self than the OT ever did” – the second part of the claim may be an overstatement. Welker (2017:190) echoes a similar sentiment: “For the Christian faith, this righteousness acquires clear contours in Jesus Christ, in his life, his charisma, and his spirit”.

2014:802). The focus of Paul was turned towards the interests of these communities for which justification provided the essential foundation.<sup>16</sup> Seifrid’s statement echoes a neo-conventional sentiment, “[t]o attempt to correct the personal nature of forensic justification by ‘reversing’ direction towards social justice is to remove the article on which all true justice hangs” (Seifrid 1994:94), and needs to be reversed: God’s quest for (social) justice in this world, implies God’s justification of the unjust, also on a personal and individual level.<sup>17</sup> Although he fills it with his own explanation of Jewish nationalism, Dunn’s criticism of the conventional reading of justification is nevertheless valid: “justification by faith as Paul formulated it cannot be reduced to the experience of individual salvation as though that was all there is to it” (Dunn and Suggate 1994:28).<sup>18</sup> Scholars distancing themselves from the conventional approach to Paul see justification as Paul’s presupposition, not only after his so-called Damascus experience, but even before it. Justification by faith is seen to inform what is found in the HB/OT,<sup>19</sup> even if expressed in different terminology. The grace of God as the golden thread of the whole Bible stresses Paul’s rootedness in HB/OT traditions.

### 3.2 Saving justice, with HB/OT roots

A consequence of Christian caricatures of the HB/OT is that the continuity that Paul regularly asserted with the Scriptures of Israel is dissolved and the alignment of his message with the Law and the Prophets obscured (Hays 1989:53). Apart from specific social emphases in the Pauline letters,

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16 Ziesler (2004:190) argues that although the emphasis on justification as divine act of grace permeates the Bible, Pauline statements in this regard cannot be side-tracked because the terminology is very much Pauline, and “the history of the question is so much the history of Pauline interpretation”.

17 See recently also the arguments by Stegman (2011:496–524).

18 Contemporary philosophers on Paul and law find value in Paul’s use of the Law as justice (see Jennings Jr 2009). The major shortcomings of the contemporary European philosophical “run” on Paul (by authors such as Agamben 2005; Badiou 2009; Taubes 2004) manifest both in sense of continuing FC Baur/Walter Bauer line (see e.g. Holmberg 2008) of Christian universalism vs Jewish particularism, as well as in terms of anti-Judaic (and possibly anti-Semitic) consequences.

19 Wright (1980:19–20) emphasizes the need to look at justification from the perspective of the Old Testament. Following Paul in Galatians 3:6, Wright refers to Genesis 15 and 17, and the call of Abraham within the context of faith and righteousness, the latter meaning “status within the covenant”.



recent interpretations such as the new or radical new perspectives on Paul have refocused the reading of these letters away from narrow, introverted positions, to also include the socio-political setting as well as communal perspectives. Dunn, for example, argues that Paul's use of justice and righteousness should be understood from an HB/OT-perspective (Dunn and Suggate 1994). A one-sided emphasis on justification by faith may be an important overt reason, but more subtly the failure to hear the echoes of Scripture in Paul's letters, such as for example Ps 143 in Rom 3, may worsen the situation.<sup>20</sup>

The HB/OT is a key departure point for the NT's profiling of justice, reconciliation, and God. Scholars have argued the key to Paul's apocalyptic theology is situated in "the vindication of God's ancient purpose for the covenant people, and through them for the liberation of all creation" (Elliott 1994:138). Reading Paul beyond narrow individualist and spiritualist positions, to include contemporary socio-political settings as well as communal perspectives is increasingly common even if not a consensus position. The Pauline emphasis on the justice of God correlates with the HB/OT's concern for divine justice (e.g., Ps 99:4) flowing from God's  $\text{דָּבָר}$  or unwavering covenant love. God's encompassing love calls forth neighbourly love or justice. These sentiments permeate the HB/OT in all its parts but are particularly prevalent in the prophetic tradition with repeated calls upon  $\text{מִשְׁפָּט}$  (justice) and  $\text{צְדָקָה}$  (righteousness).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, rather than forensic or judicial terms, these notions of justice and righteousness were relational in nature<sup>22</sup> (Dunn and Suggate 1994; Gorman 2011).

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20 The continuing dominance of a forensic understanding of justice alongside the tendency to create artificial distinctions may be reflected in comments such as "While *justice-judgment* upholds standards of God's law through human decision making (usually in a courtroom), *justice-righteousness* is a personal quality that God seeks to develop in all people" (Bruckner 2006:2).

21 Bruckner (2006:1 emphasis in original) argues that the retributive sense of justice often connected to  $\text{מִשְׁפָּט}$  is overridden in the HB/OT: "God's goal *injustice-judgment* is not simply equilibrium, but *restoration*". The kind of justice envisioned by  $\text{צְדָקָה}$  implies notion of kindness and generosity, not in the sense of niceness but rather "intelligent, loving reflection, and action that restores health and well-being to communities and individuals" (Bruckner 2006:2) – acts of justice towards others in response to that shown by God (e.g. Deut 24:17–18).

22 As in the "golden texts of the prophetic ethic" (Swartley 2006:32), e.g. Isaiah 1:17 urging the seeking of  $\text{מִשְׁפָּט}$  (LXX κρίσις); Ezekiel 18:5–8 on the  $\text{צְדָקָה}$  (LXX δικαιοσύνη) doing  $\text{מִשְׁפָּט}$  (κρίμα) and  $\text{צְדָקָה}$  (δικαιοσύνη); Micah 6:8 indicating  $\text{מִשְׁפָּט}$  (LXX κρίμα) as

With greater appreciation for Paul’s Jewish frame of reference, it means that justice or righteousness is understood also and perhaps primarily from a HB/OT-perspective. “Justice for Paul is continuous with the concerns of the prophets but is also reshaped by his gospel of Christ crucified; justice is covenantal and cruciform” (Gorman 2011:40). Righteousness can be appreciated first and foremost relationally rather than ethically. “Indeed, Paul’s whole understanding of God’s justice as fundamentally an act of gracious generosity is derived directly from the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms and Isaiah” (Dunn and Suggate 1994:15). Righteousness then is less an ethical norm used to measure people and their actions than a relational concept, with both horizontal (human relationships) and vertical (the relationship between God and people) dimensions.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.3 First century *iustitia* and justice

Without renegeing on the centrality of the HB/OT as well as the Second Temple Jewish setting for dealing with justice and reconciliation in the NT, the NT documents originated by and large in the first century context where the Roman Empire exercised absolute power and considerable socio-cultural influence. If Lakoff (2009:3) is right, that 98% of people’s thinking is unconscious and influenced by various frames, narratives and metaphors, then the imperial context of the NT cannot simply be dismissed.<sup>24</sup> The point of departure for or orientation of Paul’s rhetoric was God’s actions involving salvation or justice or righteousness, which originated in God’s

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requirement of God; and the imperative in Amos 5:24 for צדק (LXX κρίμα) to roll down along with δικαιοσύνη (LXX δικαιοσύνη). See also texts such as Genesis 18:19 with Abraham portrayed as embodying justice; Leviticus 24:22 on the reach of divine justice, and numerous others. The translations of these key terms are approximations given a wide semantic range (see e.g. Bruckner 2006). Keen to stress its links with peace (εἰρήνη), Swartley (2006, 33) suggests that δικαιοσύνη means both justice and righteousness. For a brief overview of justification and righteousness terms in the NT, see Reuman (1992).

- 23 “Equally fundamental to Jewish thought is the axiom that responsibility towards one’s neighbour arises out of Israel’s relationship with God. God had chosen Israel to be his people and had given them the law to show them how to live as his people. Within that relationship the Israelites had a twofold responsibility – towards God and towards their fellows. The point is that the two go together. One could not be just before God without being just to one’s neighbour” (Dunn and Suggate 1994:37).
- 24 The widespread, insidious presence of Empire in NT texts gives rise to questions of culture, ideology, and power: “How do the margins look at the ‘world’ – a world dominated by the reality of empire – and fashion life in such a world?” (Segovia 1998:57–58).

faithfulness. God expressed faithfulness in the faithfulness of Jesus (Rom. 3:21–26), which called forth the Jesus followers' faithfulness and which included elements such as living in trust and with commitment, showing loyalty and obedience (Rom. 1:5). But Paul's language reverberated in a context filled with imperial discourse.<sup>25</sup> Loyalty promises in imperial discourse required reciprocal pledges and actions, which entailed submission to Empire's resolve and collaboration with self-serving rule. In a similar way Paul declared God's faithfulness, but to purposes different from the Empire's namely focused on justice for all. Paul called on the recipients of his letters to align themselves with these purposes, to faithfully and loyally join God in striving for such justice (Carter 2006:91).<sup>26</sup>

*Iustitia* (justice) was one of the many virtues ascribed to Augustus, cited by numerous sources; the others were *victoria* (power to conquer barbaric peoples and rule over enemies); *securitas* (security); *pax* (peace); *concordia* (social harmony); *felicitas* (providence or good luck); *fides* (loyalty); *clementia* (grace shown by the victorious over the conquered); *salus* (health); *pietas* (religious values and piety); *virtus* (general goodness); and *spes* (hope) (Elliott and Reasoner 2011:125; Elliott 2008:28–29; Horsley 1997:15–16; Schnelle 2005:827–828 e-pub). Each on their own, the ascribed individual virtues portrayed aspects which the imperial household promoted, and jointly the virtues constituted the larger imperial discourse.<sup>27</sup> At the time of Paul's ministry, the legacy of Caesar Augustus still prevailed, aided by physical artefacts such as building and statues, and also through propaganda such as the *Res Gestae* (RG). Augustus was fond of being portrayed as exemplum of virtue (RG 8.5; 34.2), embodying in particular the four cardinal virtues of *virtus*, *clementia*, *iustitia* and *pietas*.

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- 25 Among others, this assumed an active role for the goddess Fides among the rulers. The emperor embodied Rome's trustworthiness and loyalty regarding treaties and alliances, as is clear in Augustus' *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (31–34). Schnelle (2005:811 e-pub) goes as far as claiming that "In all high cultures and in every effective religion, 'Righteousness/ Justice' is one of the names of deity".
- 26 The primary and probably clearest expression of loyalty, and with which Paul's use of πιστις resonated, was found in the imperial, military context of the first century.
- 27 See also Elliott's (2008:58–85) longer discussion of Paul's letter to the Romans in connection with imperial *iustitia*. "But the meaning of justice (*mišpāt*) in Hebrew thought is not the same as the Greek view, popular in Western society, that each person receives equal due. Compassion and mercy are inherent to justice in the biblical understanding" (Swartley 2006:30).

Also with regard to his work for the Empire, Augustus was portrayed in the RG (2; 6.1; 10.1; 26.3) as living up to the virtue of *iustitia*.<sup>28</sup> James Harrison pointed out how Paul's portrayal of virtue as characteristic of the Jesus follower community stood in stark contrast to Augustan *iustitia* and other virtues claimed by the emperor. Rather than being bound legalistically, the freedom granted by the unleashing of the Spirit and the newness it brings, believers have become "instruments/weapons" (ὄπλα, Rom 3:16) or "slaves" (ἐδουλώθητε; Rom 6:18) of righteousness. Paul used language of conforming to the image of Christ and to righteousness rather than imitation language, suggesting that Paul may have wanted to avoid the Augustan exemplum motif.<sup>29</sup> "This corporate understanding of conformity to 'righteousness', energized by the Spirit because of the obedience of Christ, is vastly different from the vision of justice centralized in the princeps in the RG" (Harrison 2013: 33). In two other ways Paul's portrayal of God's justice went in line with the HB/OT and beyond imperial design, the focus on justice as social as well as on the cosmos.

### 3.4 Social justice and reconciliation

For some scholars, justice in Paul is first-and-foremost, social justice even if such a phrase is not always deemed the most appropriate of terms: "And the only commission given to Paul by the Jerusalem 'pillars' was to 'remember the poor' (Gal 2:8) ... The justice gift, grace, was the fruit of the justification gospel that Paul preached among the Gentiles. Mutual aid bonded Gentiles and Jews" (Swartley 2006:33). Elliott argues very strongly for reading Paul with a political key, by identifying Paul's preferential option for the poor as well as considering the political aspects of divine justice.<sup>30</sup> "I suspect

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28 A larger debate in Hellenistic society concerned the tension between universal justice (by nature) and no justice by nature, the latter which made it a matter all about power, the rule of the jungle or the survival of the fittest. The idealists of the time garnered support for Roman efforts to coordinate just this utopian venture (Meeks 1986:19–39).

29 As Elliott puts it, "The empire as such is never [Paul's] direct target: his goal is to lay a claim on the allegiance of his listeners with which the rival claims of empire inevitably interfered", but this did not mean Paul could untie him from his own context, "Paul's own thinking and rhetoric also was shaped by the ideological constraints of his age" (Elliott 2008:15).

30 Claiming the political significance of justice and reconciliation in the NT impinge also on debates about topics like the radical Jesus (Oakman 2004) or whether Jesus was an egalitarian (J. H. Elliott 2002).

that the continual remembrance of the poor for which Paul expressed such resolve was not incidental to his theology, and that the scars he bore on his body were the measure of his commitment to that vision” (Elliott 1994:90). Beyond the conventional approach to Paul, scholars saw Pauline thought aligned towards a more socio-political position. “In the NPP, the social dimensions of Paul’s views come into focus, and in particular his effort to accommodate and reconcile Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ” (Barclay 1996:201). Examples include Dunn’s emphasis that Paul addressed Jewish exclusivism<sup>31</sup> related to the social function of the Law, or Georgi’s (1991) insistence that Paul’s primary concern was with relationships between Jewish and Gentile Christians. “The enhancement of life in free, creative self-withdrawal of human beings on behalf of their fellow creatures is the secret of divine justice and righteousness in this world” (Welker 2017:188).

Liberation Theology took the early twentieth-century criticism of an idealised and over-optimistic humanity further by uncovering and stressing the influence of socio-economic dimensions of our historicity on our consciousness and understanding. Liberationist interpretation blamed the theological tradition’s “introspective conscience of the West” (Stendahl), particularly prevalent in the biblical sciences, for relating Paul’s notion of justice to faith only, and on the individual and personal level to boot.<sup>32</sup> “When we bring a new set of questions to Paul, we find that the justice of God embodies not only God’s gratuitous gift of redemption to the sinner, but great power working in the entire world to regain it under divine sovereignty” (Tambasco 1982:126). Paul was not only concerned with the individual, and their salvation but “a walking in trust that God is at work in history through Jesus” – not regardless of but exactly because the correlate of justice is faith. Instructions directed at the communities

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31 Not without unintended negative consequences; the appreciation for Dunn’s concern to apply the value of a new understanding of Paul to more recent sociopolitical concerns that include the British missionaries of the 19th century, Nazi Germany, Apartheid South Africa, contemporary Zionism and the breakup of Eastern Europe (Dunn and Suggate 1994:28).

32 Some biblical scholars challenged the inward-focussed approach to Paul, e.g., Georgi’s (1991) study of the Pauline letters from the perspective of theocracy claimed that this was Paul’s ultimate vision for the world; Hengel (1991:51) argues that Paul’s thought should be understood in terms of pre-70 CE Pharisaism with, among other emphases, its strong theocratic concerns.

receiving the Pauline letters, the insistence on avoiding matters pertaining to “the flesh”,<sup>33</sup> and Paul’s advocacy of peace that embraced “corporate and social well-being and not just individual welfare, all point toward Paul’s concern with social matters of this world (Tambasco 1982:125–27).<sup>34</sup>

### 3.5 Justice and reconciliation as remaking creation

Already in the HB/OT, it is clear that “God’s intent is nothing less than the restoration of the wholeness of his good creation” (Bruckner 2006:2). In Jewish tradition, new creation language was invoked for individual converts (cf. Genesis Rabbah 39.4), for the community of faith (e.g., Isa 65:17–19), and for the cosmos (e.g. Isa 56–66).<sup>35</sup> New creation language in Paul’s thinking had two important characteristics: believers reconciled to God, with the imperative to work for the reconciliation of the world to God through Christ; and the rejection of worldly standards, such as ethnic divisions between Jews and Gentiles, or in individual rivalry (Levison 1993:189–90).<sup>36</sup> Paul’s claim that creation itself will be set free from Adamic distortion (8:21) built upon a significant theme in Jewish prophecy and apocalyptic (cf. Is 11:4–5; Jubilees 1:29; 1 Enoch 24–25; 91:16–17; 4 Ezra 13:26; Sib Or 3:744–745; 750–751). Echoing a matrix of ideas rather than specific texts from the Scriptures of Israel, Paul connected the disruption and death of natural ecological systems with human corruption (φθορά) flowing from the human predicament described as enslavement (δουλεία, cf. 8:15). In contradiction to imperial ideology, the overcoming of ecological disorder is depicted as divine gift central to which, moreover, were God’s

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33 Tambasco argues that “the flesh” can refer to at least four matters: sins of sensuality, of pagan religion, of community conflicts, and of intemperance. The third of these could indicate structural injustice (Tambasco 1982:126).

34 Various challenges remain in using Pauline writings when it comes to gender justice (Grung 2015) and issues of sexuality and justice (Ellison 1996). See also Grassi (2003). Other questions remain, such as would it mean to see forgiveness as justice? (Philpott 2013).

35 “According to the prophets, when justice-righteousness is absent in the human community, the fish, animals, water, trees, and land are also adversely affected (Hos 4:1–3; 2:18–23; Deut 20:19; Jer 22:29; Joel 2:21–22)” (Bruckner 2006:4–5).

36 Welker noted also how, unlike the divinisation of heaven and earth in ancient creation myths, in the biblical accounts the “ambivalent independent power” of the earth and creatures on it is acknowledged (Welker 2017:183).

children rather than emperor, priest or empire (Jewett 2004:39). The restored creation will serve the purpose of liberating the children of God.<sup>37</sup>

In Rom 8:24 the argument is not about a Greek philosophical notion of the invisible world perceptible only at rational level, but rather a Jewish apocalyptic notion. According to imperial ideology, “the length and breadth [sic, breadth] of the Roman Empire culminated in the rule of Augustus” as *Aeneid* 8.724–728 makes clear (see Vella 2004:10). Paul, however, portrayed salvation not through hope but in terms of hope.<sup>38</sup> Used three times in short succession, ἀπεκδεχέσθαι (8:19,23,25) marks the character of the in-between time as primarily one of eager waiting. This is not a period of resigned or stoical suffering, nor one simply of anguished groaning, nor one of careless enthusiasm, but rather of patience with a vibrant quality. By associating the charismatic Spirit with human vulnerability (τῇ ἀσθενείᾳ ἡμῶν, 8:26)<sup>39</sup>, Paul’s cosmology excluded the notion of human beings transformed into deity as was found in the civic cult’s apotheosis of emperors (see Jewett 2004:44).

Central to Paul’s argument was that God ensured the best for God’s faithful (8:28),<sup>40</sup> a programme of action that was not dependant on whims but tied to God’s larger purpose with the world (κατὰ πρόθεσιν, 8:28; cf προέγνω in 8:29). In this he shared the characteristic Jewish thought<sup>41</sup> of God’s (pretemporal) purpose moving history and through history moving to its intended end (cf. e.g., Ps 33:11; Prov 19:21; Isa 5:19; 19:17; 46:10; Jer 49:20;

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37 Again a scriptural echo sounds in the background, that the deliverance of Israel is for sake of the whole creation (Fretheim 2005).

38 The dative in τῇ γὰρ ἐλπίδι ἐσώθημεν is not instrumental but rather modal or associative.

39 Weakness probably refers to the human condition in this age, to creatureliness, as creature and not creator, with all that that implies for human dependency on divine assistance. Weakness is more than exposure to “external temptations” or the inability in prayer as such but the totality of the human condition (the corruptibility of the body, the subvertedness of the flesh) which the believer is still part of and which comes to expression in prayer inability (Dunn 1988). Keesmaat (1999) sees an allusion to the sufferings of the eschatological struggle, in which the Spirit assist people who stumble as result of persecution (cf. Rom 8:35–38 on list of apocalyptic trials).

40 “Those who love God” (τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν τὸν θεόν) is a characteristic self-designation of Jewish piety; it takes up only the first part of the regular formulation, thereby both evoking Christianity’s Jewish inheritance while at the same time separating it from its more distinctively Jewish devotion to the Torah.

41 For πρόθεσιν, cf Romans 9:11; Ephesians 1:11; 3:11; 2 Timothy 1:9; and Philo, Mos. 2.61.

50:45). The human being as likeness of God (τῆς εἰκόνας τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, 8:29) was not only a Jewish notion, but with Adam central in the letter (Rom 1:22–24; 3:23; 5:12–19; 7:7–13; 8:20) the Jewish tradition is influential here. The resurrected Christ is described as the pattern of new humanity of the last age, the firstborn (of the dead) of a new race of eschatological people (πρωτότοκον ἐν πολλοῖς ἀδελφοῖς) in whom God’s design from the beginning of creation is at last fulfilled.<sup>42</sup> Rom 8:29–30 dispelled any doubts about the agent of recreation, as Paul deliberately set the timeline of cosmic and human history between two markers, pre-temporal purpose and final glorification as the completion of that purpose. Not without some irony, since humans were so reluctant bestow the glory upon God (Rom 1–2) God rightfully deserved, God now nevertheless bestows glory upon humans.

#### 4. Divine justice and reconciliation in the NT: some parameters

To pull these ideas together, four important parameters can be identified. One, and to summarise in one sentence, to refer to the NT God as a God of justice and reconciliation, is tautologous.<sup>43</sup> Welker argues that, even if not the sole distinctive feature of God, it certainly is a most central dimension of God. “For without righteousness, God would not be the true God ... that righteousness is intended for humanity itself, and this bestowal of divine righteousness should prompt humans in their own turn to be grateful to God and to practice justice and righteousness with one another” (Welker 2017:180).<sup>44</sup> Justice and reconciliation in the NT is not a value, or project, or even divine policy as it defines who God is and God’s kingdom and inscribed God’s every action in the Bible (Bruckner 2006:1).

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42 See Hebrews 2:6–10 for probably the closest parallel.

43 And to add, “Jesus is the demonstration of the justice and righteousness of God” (Bruckner 2006:4). With reference to Matthew 5:20–22, Brucker (2006:6) argues that “Jesus insisted that humility before God and others was a necessary component in pursuing just and right actions”

44 “In Scripture justice is never abstracted or separated from God as its source. When one deifies the *idea* of justice and speaks without reference to God, this critical point is obscured” (Bruckner 2006:1).



Two, for Paul, the God of justice and reconciliation is unthinkable without the cross of Jesus which explains Paul's cruciform, apocalyptic theology.<sup>45</sup> The cross meant returning to the accursed (e.g., Gal 3:13) victimisation that constituted Jesus' death, and while the cross unmasked the powers and its imperial terror, it was at the same time also an act of solidarity with the marginalised, and a disruption (*skandalon*) of the conventions of the world of the time, of the bigger "scheme of things" (Zerbe 2003:88; see Georgi 1991:46–51).<sup>46</sup> More than a religious symbol (readiness for suffering and sacrifice) and more than an ethical model (calling for discipleship), the cross symbolised much more, namely that God identified Godself with the "extreme of human wretchedness" in the cross of Jesus, endured representatively for all people (Hengel 1977:88–89). In fact, within the agonistic, hierarchical world informed by strong honour and shame codes, the cross became the ultimate symbol of non-retaliation, of both putting an end to the scapegoating of the innocent and an end to the punishment of the guilty. The cross was what underlined God's establishment of justice for Paul, that the cross was ultimately about justification which happened by grace, and not retaliation (McCann 2007:164–65).

Three, and in step with a cruciform justice, is how the tension between justice and mercy, or between righteousness and the consistent safeguarding of the weak is resolved in the NT.<sup>47</sup> Theologically, in the Bible the best example of human injustice is probably Jesus' death, which ironically, is also the ultimate manifestation of the God of justice and reconciliation. For Paul, both were validated in Jesus' resurrection as the triumph of God's justice over the powers of evil (1 Cor 15) (see Marshall 2005). Also in appraisal of human power's political and religious dynamics, divine justice serves as benchmark (Welker 2017:189). "Working toward health, wholeness, and strength for weaker communities is a necessary and constitutive part of participating in God's kingdom" (Bruckner 2006:8). Counter to, and

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45 The cross retained its radical dynamic, since in his portrayal of it "the Crucifixion is for those who challenge and work towards dissolving hegemonic and imperial codes" (Sugirtharajah 2002:85).

46 "Paul has not obscured the nature of the cross as historical and political oppression; rather he had focused it through the lens of Jewish apocalypticism" (Elliott 1994:139).

47 The earliest available "Christian" document refers to God as *ἐκδικος κύριος*, the Lord is an avenger (1 Th 4:6). See also Romans 13:4 where political authorities are accorded a similar role.

in fact, in explicit opposition to the natural and also human inclination towards self-preservation, God justice promotes and favours the other.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, justice as self-withdrawal for the sake of others – as much as it may run counter to humans’ natural tendency toward self-preservation and self-assertion – is not portrayed in Paul as restrictive and inhibiting but as “an expansion of life, an intensification of life” (Welker 2017:187).

Four, how to balance a God of justice and reconciliation in an age where human dignity is a key social value and concern? Notwithstanding claims to love-patriarchalism and other forms of rationale, how to proclaim a biblical God of justice and reconciliation with texts quiet or even approving with respect to inhumane indignities such as slavery and misogyny and sexism?<sup>49</sup> The potential of appealing to justice and reconciliation in the NT has to be considered alongside the danger of elevating justice and reconciliation to divine levels (deciding on behalf of God).<sup>50</sup> Like other apocalypticists, Paul also posed the question: “How shall God’s justice be realized in a world dominated by evil powers?” (Elliott 1994:138). The emphasis on justice and reconciliation as relational (e.g., Gorman 2011; Marshall 2005; Dunn and Suggate 1994) frames these terms beyond a narrow spiritualisation and restores a holistic understanding, but also narrows down the divide between the theological and the social, and

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48 “This close connection between righteousness and mercy prompts humans to practice *free and creative self withdrawal on behalf of others*” (Welker 2017:186). “The need to work continually toward justice abounds. God’s first call, however, concerns what one *may become* and *is free to do*, not what one *should do*. One is free to become the righteousness of God in Christ. If we are reconciled to God, we have become his righteousness and his ambassadors of God’s message of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17–21)” (Bruckner 2006:8).

49 Already in the Old Testament, the human being is presented in rather ambivalent way. On the one hand, a human is described as created in the image of God (Gen 1; Ps 8), but on the other hand, the transitory nature of human life, and therefore of human existence itself, is generally emphasised. In the Pentateuch their story is not characterised by dignity, nor do they exercise a claim to dignity. In the wisdom literature it is the vulnerability of human life which receives different responses: “Fear God” (Prov 2:5; Eccl 12:13) as well as “Eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we die” (Prov 9:7). Even the position that the prophetic literature holds human dignity as a basic consideration is to be subordinated to these texts’ strong focus on divine justice as their primary point of departure.

50 “Jesus warned against separating the pursuit of justice from faith and prayer (Lk 18:1–8)” (Bruckner 2006:3).

ultimately between God of justice and reconciliation and people as agents of justice and reconciliation.<sup>51</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

When justification overpowers justice (Carson 1992), the God of justice and reconciliation can be abstracted in dogma and justice and reconciliation curtailed into personalised-individual, spiritual-ethereal notions.<sup>52</sup> Brueggemann noted that it is proper to think of justice as the earthly form of God’s holiness (1994). “Justice is described as God’s personal passion for those who lack the basic resources and dignity of life. God leans towards those who cry out to him for help. This preference of God extends to just acts expected by God of those called to be God’s people” (Bruckner 2006:4).<sup>53</sup> Reflecting on the NT’s God of justice and reconciliation is no luxury in a world where the realisation that the predatory nature of life is, more than ever, prevalent in many ways (see Welker 2017).<sup>54</sup> However, in a time when justice and reconciliation have become profiled as much as overworked terms, talk about social justice, gender justice, climate justice and various others versions abounds, can become inflationary so that

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- 51 Space does not allow further discussion here, but Bruckner (2006) is at pains to distinguish between the justice of God in the Bible, and the modern associations with equality and freedom; see also Welker on natural law (Welker 2017). “*The freedom of God’s love*, not freedom itself, is the goal of biblical justice” (Bruckner 2006:7).
- 52 “Justice, therefore, is not an optional supplement to the Pauline and Christian gospel; it is the church’s name. Justification that is not inclusive of justice is un-Jewish, un-Pauline, and un-Christian” (Gorman 2011:40). And, “justification must do something about injustice by making liberation from practices of injustice possible and practices of justice attainable” (Gorman 2011:29).
- 53 For exploring divine justice in Paul in connection with indigenous traditions in Africa, see e.g., Gusha (2022).
- 54 Armstrong suggests that unlike science, religious literature or scriptures have always had a moral dimension and was essentially a summons to compassionate, altruistic action and, thus, the art of scripture was designed to help human beings to achieve radical spiritual transformation. She promotes religious imagination through the human brain’s right hemisphere that “reflects a holistic rather than an analytical vision; it sees each thing in relation to the whole and perceives the interconnectedness of reality” (Armstrong 2019: 15 e-pub). Also in other scriptural traditions: “Biblical traditions as well as the Qur’an repeatedly associate God’s justice and righteousness with God’s mercy. The Jewish Kabbalah speaks of the two hands of God, righteousness and mercy, emphasizing that without God’s mercy, the world would suffer grievously from God’s righteousness” (Welker 2017:187).

dilutionary threats to justice and reconciliation loom large – also within theological discussions – suggesting a return to biblical texts situated within their historical contexts.

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