

A further study in the series on Biblical terms describing the work of Christ, by the Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne, author of many books, including the recent *The Cross in the New Testament*.

THE VOCABULARY OF ATONEMENT V

Justification

by Leon Morris

'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' asked Abraham (Gn. 18 : 25), and his question springs from one of the most deeply seated convictions of the Old Testament writers. To them it was fundamental that there is but one God, and that He acts righteously, not only with respect to Israel, but over all the earth. He is to be thought of as 'the Judge of all the earth'.

We would not so naturally refer to God as 'Judge', nor understand His activity in terms of law. In our day there is something of a suspicion of legal categories. We prefer to contrast law with love and we think of God basically in terms of love. But if we are to understand a good deal that is written in the Bible we must abandon this attitude. For men

of the Old Testament in particular legal categories were tremendously significant. In their day it was accepted on all hands that 'there is one law for the rich and another for the poor'. They were so used to injustice among men that it came as a wonderfully gracious revelation that God should act in accordance with strict justice. They did not find this something to apologize for, but something to glory in.

They did more than glory in it. They carried the thought over into an understanding of the whole manner of God's dealings with men. We have already seen that Abraham viewed God as acting in justice toward all the world. Jeremiah could think that in His ordering of nature God works by the method

of law. 'Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the swallow and the crane observe the time of their coming; but my people know not the judgement of the Lord' (Jer. 8 : 7 mg.). This appears to mean that judgement is as natural to God as the movements of the birds are to them.

It is not surprising accordingly that the Lord's dealings with men are often given in legal terms. Thus Micah pictures God as drawing up a legal indictment against His faithless people: 'Hear ye now what the Lord saith: Arise, contend thou before the mountains, and let the hills hear thy voice. Hear, O ye mountains, the Lord's controversy, and ye enduring foundations of the earth: for the Lord hath a controversy with his people, and he will plead with Israel. O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me' (Mic. 6 : 1-3). In this passage words like 'controversy' and 'plead' are not to be taken in a general sense, but in a legal sense. The former means a 'law suit' and the latter 'plead in legal form'. Notice also the 'testify against me', which invites Israel to proceed along legal lines.

In accordance with this the laws by which Israel lived are commonly associated with the Lord. They were not regarded as burdensome restrictions, but as God's gracious provision for ordering the lives of His people. The typical Old Testament word for law is *torah*, a term which is found 220 times. It usually occurs in some expression as 'the law of the Lord', 'my law', 'thy law',

or the like. In fact there appear to be only seventeen places in which the *torah* in question is clearly not one associated with the Lord. The same phenomenon is found with other words for 'law'. Thus *hag*, 'statute', is directly linked with the Lord in 87 out of its 127 occurrences, and *huqqab*, which is from the same root and also means 'statute' is linked with Him as many as 96 times out of 104. It is plain enough that law was not thought by the Hebrews to be something alien to the Lord. He was a God of law and He wanted His people to live by His laws. The Old Testament has a good deal to say about the mighty acts of God. It is clear that to the Hebrews God was a God of mighty power. But it is also clear that they did not think of Him as One who uses His power in arbitrary fashion. Quite often, when they could have referred to His mighty deeds, they chose instead to refer to His action by some legal term. Thus the Lord spoke to Moses about the deliverance from Egypt in this fashion: 'I will lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgements' (Ex. 7 : 4). Again, the Song of Deborah includes these words, 'There shall they rehearse the righteous acts of the Lord' (Jdg. 5 : 11). In both cases what is in mind is a mighty deed of deliverance whereby the Lord saved His people. But in both cases it is the justice and not the power which is emphasized.

JUSTIFICATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Our first point then is that the Lord

loves to deal with men in accordance with justice. We now proceed to the way in which the men of the Old Testament used the justification terminology. There is a slight difficulty in English in that we have two different roots for words like 'just', 'justice', on the one hand, and 'righteous', 'righteousness' and the like on the other, whereas in Hebrew (and in Greek) the same root does duty for both sets of words. English can thus use a precision impossible in the Bible languages, but on the other hand the Bible languages can indicate a kinship of meaning which we miss. We do not see that 'just' and 'justify' are in the Bible from the same root as 'righteous'. Or that one and the same word can mean 'justice' and 'righteousness'.

All this means that we may begin this section of our investigation with the concept of righteousness. Here we must be especially careful, for the English meaning of the term is derived from that held by the Greeks. They saw righteousness as an ethical virtue, and righteous as the adjective describing conduct in accordance with that virtue. But among the Hebrews righteousness was essentially legal. A close examination of the relevant terms in the Old Testament leaves no doubt of this, and we may well cite J. Skinner's summary: 'questions of right and wrong were habitually regarded from a legal point of view as matters to be settled by a judge... This, indeed, is characteristic of the Hebrew conception of righteousness in all its developments: whether it be a moral quality or a religious status, it is apt to be looked on as in itself

controvertible and incomplete until it has been confirmed by what is equivalent to a judicial sentence.'¹

Let us cite just one example. Isaiah complains of those wicked men who 'justify the wicked for a reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him' (Is. 5 : 23). Now if righteousness is understood as a moral quality it cannot be taken away from a man. It may be denied, but it cannot be removed. But Isaiah's meaning is that wicked judges will give the verdict to the wrong people. They will take bribes to give the verdict to the wicked. They will deprive the innocent of the acquittal to which they are entitled. The legal basis of righteousness is plain.

This passage shows the link between justification and the law court. This is brought out elsewhere also. Perhaps the classic passage is Deuteronomy 25 : 1, 'If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgement, and the judges judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked.' There cannot be the slightest doubt as to what is meant here. The rules for judicial procedure are being given. 'Justify' and 'condemn' are the two possible verdicts set over against one another. It is plain that 'justify' means 'acquit', 'declare "Not guilty"'. And this remains the meaning throughout the Old Testament.

THE DIVINE MERCY

Since we can scarcely speak of 'justification' in a Christian sense without adding 'by faith' we must ask whether this is found in the Old Testament. The answer must be no

if we mean the idea plus the terminology. 'Justification by faith' belongs to the thought world of the New Testament.

But in the Old Testament we have what is essentially the same idea. There we have the twin thoughts that men are accepted only on the grounds of the divine mercy and that the attitude that God looks for in men is that of humble trust. For the first point we might cite the well known words of Isaiah, 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat: yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price' (Is. 55 : 1). There are many such passages, expressed in a variety of ways. It was a fundamental thought of the men of the Old Testament that their God was able to deliver. Nothing they could do ultimately would be of avail. But God could deliver and He would.

What was demanded of them accordingly was faith, though this precise word is not often found. But what else are we to make of these words: "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and song; and he is become my salvation" (Is. 12 : 2)? Many such passages could be quoted, for the Old Testament writers loved to dwell on the thought that it is the men who trust Him who are acceptable with God.

JUSTIFICATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

We pass over the developments between the two Testaments and

come to New Testament thought. Here we find the basic Hebrew idea of righteousness and of justification, and not the Greek ethical idea. A few passages can be cited in support of the Greek idea, such as Pilate's wife's description of Jesus as 'that righteous man' (Mt. 27 : 19). But surely this is what we would expect. A cultured Roman would use the word 'righteous' in the ethical sense and not in the legal sense found among the Hebrews. A few other such passages may be found, but they are not typical.

A typical passage is that in which Jesus says, 'I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgement. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned' (Mt. 12 : 36f.). Here the imagery is plainly legal. It is a question of 'judgement'. And those who fare well in the 'judgement' are said to be 'justified' while those who do not are 'condemned.'

A favourite modern position is that justification normally means something like 'make righteous' rather than 'declare righteous' as it undoubtedly does in the passage just cited. Indeed, now and then a show of scholarship is given to the contention by pointing out that the verb rendered 'to justify' is *δικαίω* and that the class of verbs ending in *-όω* is factitive, i.e. it conveys the thought of 'to make -' as *ἐκάρθω* 'to make sufficient', 'to make strong'.

This argument is fallacious. It is true that verbs in *-όω* are often factitive. But when the words refer to moral qualities or the like the

meaning is always declaratory. Thus the verb *ὁμοίω* may be translated 'to make like', but it means this only in the sense of 'to declare to be like.' This is seen, for example, in the parables where Jesus speaks of 'likening' the kingdom of heaven to a net etc. Similarly *ἀξιόω* means 'to deem worthy', not 'to make worthy'. Other examples could be cited. The linguistics will not support the position.

But in any case it is usage, not structure, that must have the last word. And usage tells strongly in favour of 'declare righteous' for *δικαίω*. This is demonstrated by the use of the word with reference to God Himself. Thus Paul quotes the Psalmist as saying of God, 'That thou mightest be justified in thy words' (Rom. 3 : 4). It borders on the blasphemous to try and give the verb a meaning like 'to make righteous' here. The only possible meaning is 'to declare righteous', 'to show to be righteous'. There is no other way in which we can apply the term to God.

Passages like these show clearly enough what the word means. And the same meaning is really quite plain when we turn to passages where the term is used of men. Thus when Luke speaks of a lawyer who wanted 'to justify himself' (Lk. 10 : 29) he does not mean that the man wanted to reform, to make himself righteous. Rather he wanted to show himself to be righteous, to declare himself righteous before men.

JUSTIFICATION AND THE CROSS

The meaning of the word is thus

plain. The justification terminology in the New Testament as in the Old signifies the acquittal of the accused, the declaring of a man to be in the right. But how are men to be 'justified' when they stand at the bar of God's justice? Since they are sinners, how can they be declared 'Not guilty'?

The answer the New Testament gives is the cross. Paul can speak simply of 'being now justified by his blood' (Rom. 5 : 9). And that is the universal New Testament answer. Christ's death was not simply a display of love or the like. It was God's way of dealing with the guilt of man's sin.

Man cannot deal with it himself. 'Israel, following after a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by works' (Rom. 9 : 31f.). It is basic to Paul's thought that 'by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight' (Rom. 3 : 20). Israel is but the classic instance of what is true in the case of all men. If we seek salvation by our own efforts we shall be lost. Righteousness, that righteousness that avails when we stand before God to be judged, is 'apart from the law', it is 'the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe'. Paul goes on to bring out the tremendous importance of this: 'for there is no distinction; for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, by his blood, to shew his righteousness . . . that he might him-

self be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus' (Rom. 3 : 21-26).

This means that it is Christ's death which enables men to be justified. Apart from that death we would all be condemned, for works of law do not bring men salvation. But that death fully meets the claims of the law. Now God's justice is safeguarded at the same time as He is seen to be the justifier of all who believe. Elsewhere Paul has in mind the tremendous paradox implied in all this when he speaks of Him 'that justifieth the ungodly' (Rom. 4 : 5), an expression which is almost equivalent to 'acquits the guilty'. Justification, then, is salvation viewed as a legal process. There is more to salvation than this, but other words are used in the New Testament for those other aspects. We should be clear that when the New Testament writers used the terminology of justification they were referring to things legal. This is not always realized, and one often meets with statements like this from John Oman: 'We are justified because by faith we enter the world of a gracious God, out of which the old hard legal requirements, with the old hard boundaries of our personality and the old self-regarding claim of rights, have disappeared, a world which is the household of our Father where order and power and ultimate reality are of love and not of law.'² This is a moving statement, and I think we must all agree that Oman is giving us a fine description of an important aspect of the Christian life. But it is not the aspect which the New Testament writers describe with the justification terminology. If we do

not like the idea of a legal justification it is better to say so and to drop the word. But we ought not to give it a new meaning all our own and then claim that the New Testament writers understood it our way. They must be allowed to speak for themselves. And when they do they make it very clear that for them justification is a legal term. It is their way of saying that Christ in dying bore our legal liability. When we stand before God we shall be acquitted. Our salvation is legally valid (as well as efficacious in giving us victory over sin in our lives day by day). It is this legal validity to which justification points us.

NOTES

¹ *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, IV, p. 273. Cf. L. Köhler, the righteous man 'means primarily the one who, when accused of a crime, is in a position to prove his innocence' (*Hebrew Man*, London, 1956, p. 174).

² *Grace and Personality*, Cambridge, 1919, p. 206.