

THE JUSTICE OF GOD, PRINCIPLE OF THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

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It is clear that the justice of God occupies a central place in the history of salvation. It has been said that, in the Old Testament,¹ alongside *khesed* and *emet*, *tsedaqah* is one of the principal attributes of God, who shapes history.² It is even more evident that the justice of God orders the history of salvation, as the Letter to the Romans describes it, constituting one of the keys of the letter, in which it occurs no fewer than seven times.³ In contrast, in the rest of the Pauline corpus it is found only in 2 Corinthians 5:21, while in Philippians 3:9 it takes another form, for which there is no proof that it has the same meaning: "the justice that comes from God," for which the Greek is no longer *dikaïosynē theou* but *dikaïosynē ek theou*. It is worth the effort, then, to examine closely the meaning that St. Paul gives to this expression, especially given that exegetes are far from being in agreement about the precise meaning that it should be given, even if a certain consensus is tending to be established today, to which the *Ecumenical Translation of the Bible* bears witness.⁴ And this does not even take into consideration that the justice of God is linked, as we will

¹ Translator's note: In the course of translating this text it became clear that no English translation of the Bible could serve as a standard for rendering the numerous scriptural texts that the author quotes. Rather than to clutter the translation with indications of the English version that most closely approaches the original French, I translated the French quotations of Scripture directly into English. This has the advantage of allowing for maximum consistency in vocabulary and style throughout.

² Jürgen Becker, *Das Heil Gottes: Heils- und Sündenbegriffe in den Qumrantexten und im Neuen Testament*, Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 11.

³ See Rom 1:17, 3:5, 10:3, 3:21–26 (four times).

⁴ See, for example, note "c" on Rom 1:17, note "a" on 1:18, note "a" on 3:6, and above all, note "a" on 3:26.

see, to justification, the importance of which for ecumenical dialogue is well known.

Methods Not to Follow

Precisely because of the controversy with Protestants concerning the reality of justification in man, a number of exegetes have been used to posing the question as follows: does the expression “justice of God” that Paul writes of in Romans 1:17 and in other passages of Romans signify something belonging to God, an attribute of God, or on the contrary does it signify something pertaining to man—the gift that God communicates to man in justification. Obviously, Protestants incline toward the first response and Catholics toward the second. Moreover, sometimes, at least for several decades, some do not hesitate to appeal to the Council of Trent, where, when reading chapter 7 of the sixth session the matter seems in fact nearly resolved:

The unique formal cause of justification is “the justice of God, not that by which he himself is just [it is not a question, then, of an attribute of God], but that by which he makes us just,”⁵ [thus, it is a question of a gift of God] that, namely, with which when we are endowed with by him, we are renewed in the spirit of our mind [see Eph 4:23], and not only are we reputed but we are truly called and are just.⁶

But the Acts of the Council clearly show that the words in question, taken from St. Augustine and added after the fact, in no way intend to provide an exegetical interpretation of the Pauline formulation.

Further, and leaving aside the authority of Trent, some like to invoke the so-called “parallel” passage of Philippians 3:9, where “the justice that comes from God” is placed in opposition to “one’s own justice” and thus certainly signifies a quality of man and not an attribute of God. But it is arbitrary to suppose that the expression “justice of God” should have a meaning that is exactly the same as that of “the justice that comes from God.”

Others turn to 2 Corinthians 5:21, where St. Paul declares, “God made Christ to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the justice of God,” which they take to mean “so that we might become just,” or more precisely, “supremely just,” “just par excellence.” But, besides the fact that this interpretation is far from being compulsory, maintaining the parallel would necessitate saying that God made Christ to be a sinner, and more precisely, supremely a sinner, a sinner par excellence—an assertion that is not without difficulties.

⁵ See St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 14.12.15.

⁶ Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, no. 799 (old numbering).

In order to determine the sense of the expression “the justice of God” in Romans, it is obviously preferable to examine the passages in the same letter in which the formulation is found. These passages certainly have a better chance of constituting true parallels. Several, to say the least, speak without any possible equivocation of an activity of God, in particular Romans 3:5, and especially Romans 3:26, where it is said that “God shows his justice that he may be just.”

The real problem, then, is not to determine whether the justice of God denotes an attribute of God or a gift made to man, but rather to ask which attribute of God, or perhaps better, which activity of God it denotes. Yet here there is perhaps an even greater temptation, namely, to understand, without any further qualification, the justice of God about which Scripture speaks according to the meaning that the expression has in theological terminology or in current language.

For example, speaking as a theologian, for St. Thomas, the justice of God is set against mercy:

In God, we may consider both his justice, in respect of which he punishes those who sin, and His mercy, in respect of which he sets us free: in us the consideration of his justice gives rise to fear, but the consideration of his mercy gives rise to hope.⁷

It should be noted, however, that, when considering predestination, if the Angelic Doctor wants to illustrate the notion of justice, he has recourse to a text in which St. Paul speaks of the wrath of God, that is, Rom 9:22, and not to the passages where he speaks of the justice of God.⁸ As a result, according to St. Thomas, the theological notion of the justice of God is exactly what Scripture calls the wrath of God. As we will see,⁹ far from being identified with the justice of God, the wrath of God is opposed to it.

It is understandable that a theologian, accustomed to this meaning of the justice of God, would be tempted to interpret the Pauline formula in the same way. For example, while alluding to Romans 3:26, the theologian will say, “the passion of Christ is a manifestation of the justice of God, who did not want to let sin go unpunished.”¹⁰ Or, to take another example, inspired by the

⁷ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 19, a. 1, ad 2, trans., Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae, First Complete American Edition in Three Volumes*, vol. 2 (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947). Texts of St. Thomas available at the Aquinas Institute <https://aquinas.institute>.

⁸ See Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 23, a. 5, ad 3.

⁹ See below, pp. 200–202.

¹⁰ Jean Riviere, *Le Dogme de la Rédemption, Etude théologique* (Paris: Gabalda, 1914), 225.

passage of St. Thomas quoted above, a theologian will simply identify justice with wrath and, regarding Romans 9:22 will write, "God wanted to manifest his wrath, that is, his justice."¹¹

This is precisely the error of the young Luther, as he affirms:

I see clearly that in order to obtain heavenly light and life a gratuitous gift was absolutely necessary, and I anxiously applied myself to understand the phrase in Romans 1:17: "The justice of God is revealed in the Gospel." For a long time I searched and I fell short. The difficulty for me lay in the term "justice of God," which was typically interpreted as: the justice of God is an attribute in virtue of which God is formally just and condemns sinners. All the Doctors understood the passage in this way, except Augustine: the justice of God, that is, the wrath of God. Each time that I read this passage, I found myself wishing that God had never revealed the Gospel. Who indeed can love a God who becomes angry, judges, and condemns? Then came the day when, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, I studied more carefully the passage from Habakkuk 2:4: "The just will live by his faith." By this I understood that life must depend on faith. . . . And all of Scripture and heaven itself was opened to me.¹²

Luther expresses himself in the same manner in the preface to his Latin works:

With a noble ardor I greatly desired to know the thought of St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans, but hitherto one single word created an obstacle, namely, the phrase: "The justice of God is revealed in the Gospel" (Rom 1:17). I hated this expression of the justice of God, which the usage and practice of the Doctors taught me to understand philosophically as the so-called formal or active justice in virtue of which God is just and punishes the sins of the unjust.¹³

¹¹ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *La prédestination des saints* (Paris: Desclée, 1936), 118. See also, Garrigou-Lagrange "La prédestination d'après les docteurs du Moyen Âge," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 12, no. 2 (1935): cols. 2935–59, at 2954.

¹² Martin Luther, *Ennarationes in Genesin*, commentary to Gen 27:34, in *Opera Latina Exegetica* (Erlange: Sumtibus Caroli Heyderi, 1829–1886), 7:74.

¹³ Martin Luther, preface to the Latin works of 1545. See Heinrich Denifle, *Die abendländischen Schriftausleger bis Luther über justitia Dei (Rom 1:17)* (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1905), vii–viii.

Most certainly, Luther was mistaken in affirming that all of the doctors except Augustine had identified the justice of God of which Paul speaks in Romans 1:17 with the wrath of God. With no difficulty, Fr. Heinrich Denifle was able to show that the majority of commentaries on Romans preceding Luther never proposed such an exegesis.¹⁴ We will see that this was especially the case for St. Thomas. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the majority of theologians, including St. Thomas, understood at that time and still understand God's justice as "the attribute in virtue of which God condemns sinners."

A case like Cardinal Franciscus de Toledo, an exegete who is also a theologian, is strikingly typical. Explicating Romans 3:25, he recalls the interpretation of St. John Chrysostom, who understands the justice of God of which St. Paul speaks in the sense of a divine justice that justifies the sinner: "The truly just, writes Chrysostom, is he who justifies, just as the truly rich is the one who enriches others." But Toledo rejects this because, as he explains, "to justify sinners is the act of mercy and of goodness rather than justice, the act of the latter being to decree that sinners must be punished."¹⁵ Since, on the other hand, Toledo rightly thinks that the context of this Pauline passage precludes understanding the justice of God in the sense of vindictive justice, he no longer sees here an attribute of God, but the gift of justice, at least in verse 25, and some modern exegetes have followed him, such as Reginald Garrigou Lagrange, A. Médebielle, and others.

Furthermore, this is certainly the meaning that in ordinary language we give to the term "justice," for example when, after the conviction of a guilty person, we say that "justice is served," though we do not say this when an accused is found innocent. Again, the office that the French name "Minister of Justice" the Italians name "Minister of Grace and Justice," that is, the office of sparing the innocent and convicting the guilty. In this same sense, modern authors, whether theologians or other, often speak of the justice of God or of a just God.

Thus, an exegete as well-informed as Fr. Joseph Huby, who is solicitous to clearly to distinguish between the justice and wrath of God when explicating Romans 1:17 or Romans 3:21–26, elsewhere spontaneously uses the term "justice" in the sense of "wrath." For example, he translates Romans 3:19b as "so that every mouth be closed and the entire world be subject to the justice of God" while commenting very precisely: "all are guilty and subject to divine condemnations." Again, explicating Romans 11:9, Fr. Huby speaks of a "chastisement that shows divine justice," although St. Paul quotes Ps 69:23–24, which speaks of retribution (v. 23) and of wrath (v. 29). Even more, where the

¹⁴ See Denifle, *Die abendländischen Schriftausleger*, vii–viii.

¹⁵ Franciscus de Toledo, *Commentarii et annotationes in epistolam B. Pauli Ap. Ad Romanos* (Venice: Moguntiae Mylius, 1603), 173–74.

psalmist asks that his adversaries “no longer have access to the justice of God” (v. 28) or where St. Paul writes that “authority” is “an instrument of God . . . for wrath,” Fr. Huby comments that “the chastisement inflicted by those in authority is the practical manifestation of the justice of God.”¹⁶

The Method to Follow

To determine with greater care the meaning of the expression “the justice of God,” it is fitting first to study the context in which St. Paul employs this formula in the Letter to the Romans. The first instance occurs in Romans 1:17: “The justice of God is revealed in the Gospel.” Here St. Paul anticipates the development in Romans 3:21–26. There is, therefore, no doubt that these are parallel texts. Further, there is a chance that the latter passage, in which the formula recurs four times, provides us with the greatest number of teachings on what the Apostle understands by this “justice of God revealed in the Gospel.”

Now, Paul first asserts that this justice is “witnessed to by the law and the prophets” (Rom 3:21). This is clearly to say that the justice of God about which he speaks is the same justice of which the Old Testament speaks, not necessarily that of Aristotelian philosophy or of medieval theology.

It is true that the Old Testament also speaks of a God who “judges with justice,” regarding the meaning of which, not all exegetes are agreed. Further, St. Paul himself refers to “the just judgment of God,” who chastises the guilty and rewards the good (see Rom 2:5). The Old Testament itself, then, could very well contain several different understandings of “the justice of God.” Many are convinced of this, though I am less and less certain. In any case, happily, in this passage of Romans, St. Paul was careful to identify to which Old Testament notion of the justice of God he intended refer, if indeed there are several.

The Justice of God in Psalm 143:1–2, Quoted in Romans 3:20

In effect, according to a procedure that is found elsewhere in his letters, after having described, beginning with Romans 1:18, “the revelation of the wrath of God”—by which man, far from being justified, lives from sin to sin and ever more distances himself from God—St. Paul concludes his development with a quotation of the Old Testament, which, we are going to establish, at the same time introduces his consideration of the justice of God that immediately follows. The quotation is taken from the beginning of Psalm 143, given here with its context, which is necessary always to have in mind if one wishes to understand precisely why St. Paul chose this passage:

¹⁶ See Joseph Huby, *Saint Paul Épître au Romains*, Verbum Salutis 10 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1940), 106, 147, 385, 438.

Yahweh, hear my prayer,
in your fidelity listen to my pleading,
in your justice answer me;
do not enter into judgment with your servant,
for no one will be found justified before you. (Ps 143:1–2)

For us as for Latin speakers, “justice” evokes the activity of a “judge” because the two terms belong to the same root. But, neither in Hebrew nor in Greek is it the same. In any case, here the psalmist clearly opposes an activity by which God judges people (“Do not enter into judgment with your servant”) to an entirely different activity by virtue of which God manifests what the psalmist names, with two parallel terms, the “fidelity of God” (or his truth: *alêtheia*) and his justice (*dikaïosynē* in Greek). In other words, in contrast to an activity by which God condemns by virtue of a judgment—and St. Paul specifies, a judgment regarding actions—the psalmist places an activity by which God saves. Here, then, the justice of God is an activity that is essentially “salvific,” as St. John Chrysostom accurately notes when commenting on this psalm:

Here justice signifies philanthropy, and one can attest that in numerous passages of Scripture justice is understood in this sense.¹⁷

There can be no possible doubt about the salvific sense of the term in verse 11 of the same Psalm 143, where this same “justice of God” is presented as “the source of life” for the psalmist:

Yahweh, for the sake of your name,
in your justice give me life. (Ps 143:11)

And the new Psalter, which, following the Hebrew text, connects the phrase “in your justice” to the following verse, does not hesitate for once to translate “in your clemency” (*pro clementia tua*):¹⁸

For the sake of your name, Lord, give me life;
by your clemency snatch my soul from oppression. (Ps 143:11)

The Salvific Justice of God in Romans 3:21–26

It is precisely this justice invoked by the psalmist that St. Paul is going to declare to have been revealed in the redemptive act. Neither St. Thomas nor the

¹⁷ St. John Chrysostom, *On the Psalms* 142.1, in J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Graeca* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1856–1867), 55:448.

¹⁸ [Translator’s Note: Interestingly, the *Nova Vulgata* (1979) has “In iustitia tua . . .”]

ancient authors were mistaken on this point. We have seen that St. Thomas was perfectly aware that the theological notion of the justice of God—the justice that condemns in contrast to the mercy that pardons—corresponds to what St. Paul calls the wrath of God. It is understandable that he would refrain from imposing this sense on the passage where St. Paul speaks of the justice of God. Thus, commenting on Romans 1:17, he writes:

The passage lends itself to a twofold interpretation: a first, according to which it is the justice by which God is just . . . that is, the justice by which he *keeps his promises*; . . . a second, according to which it is the justice by which God *justifies men*.¹⁹

Explicating Romans 3:26, he writes similarly:

Thus St. Paul continues, “to show that he himself is just,” i.e., that by remitting sins God may appear to be just in himself, either because he remits sins *as he had promised*, or because it belongs to God’s justice to *destroy sins* by leading men back to the justice of God.²⁰

In both cases, it is a question of a justice that is essentially salvific, that is, a justice that “restores man” by reinstating him in the goods that God has promised and that triumphs over the obstacles to this restoration, the first of which is sin and its consequences, including therefore the punishments that are called medicinal²¹ and not those that theology calls purely vindictive, such as the suffering of the loss of God.

The Salvific Justice of God in St. Thomas

Elsewhere, in his theological treatises, St. Thomas takes up this same notion of salvific justice. For example, in the *De veritate* he appeals to St. Anselm’s words in chapter ten of the *Proslogion* to explain that the forgiveness of sins is a work of God’s justice:

In the forgiveness of sins a sort of justice is observed, since “all the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth” (Psalm 24:10). This is especially true on the part of God, since in forgiving sins He does what befits Him, as Anselm says: “When You pardon sinners it is just, for it does befit You.” And that

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Super Rom* 1, lec. 6 (Marietti no. 102).

²⁰ Aquinas, *Super Rom* 3, lec. 3 (Marietti no. 312).

²¹ See below, p. 202–3.

is what is said in the Psalm (30:1): “Deliver me in your justice.”²²

The two citations of Scripture show that St. Thomas employs the biblical terminology according to which the “justice of God” is not that by which God punishes or condemns, but that by which he pardons, spares, or delivers. In other words, this saving justice is what traditional theological terminology attributes to mercy in opposition to justice.

Even more clearly, in his commentary on *The Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius, the Angelic Doctor explains this notion of “salvific” justice in as much as it signifies “what is befitting for God.” In effect, Pseudo-Dionysius speaks of an attribute of God, a “divine name,” that he calls “salvific justice” (*dikaiosynē sōstikē*). While striving to link this to the notion of “distributive justice,” according to which “each one receives according to his condition,” St. Thomas explains that this is a justice by virtue of which “God acts as befits his goodness.” Here is the text:

And indeed God does this through a salvific justice [*in justitia salutarī*]. For through distributive justice [for St. Thomas, there cannot be any commutative justice in God] each one receives according to his condition. And just as by means of distributive justice, established by the head of the city, the entire political order is safeguarded, so by means of this (salvific) justice the whole order of the universe is safeguarded by God. . . . And God does this as “it befits God”; for, it befits him by his goodness to save those he has created.²³

If it befits God the Creator, the only one considered by St. Thomas, to “save what he has created,” how much more does it befit the God of revelation to save those to whom he has promised salvation, that is, to Abraham and to all mankind.²⁴

The Salvific Justice of God in the Old Testament

Moreover, this notion of God’s salvific justice is familiar to the Old Testament, as St. John Chrysostom noted and as the best of the modern dictionaries attest, such as that of Fr. Franz Zorell, who, for the term *tsedeq*, for example, gives no other signification:

²² Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 28, a. 1, ad 8.

²³ Aquinas, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus* 1, lec. 1 (see also ch. 8, lecs. 4 and 5), translator’s translation.

²⁴ See below, p. 204.

The term signifies the justice of God in relation to men and in particular in relation to the people of Israel with whom in an entirely free way he contracted an entirely special covenant, a covenant of love and of grace on the part of God and of obedience to the law on the part of the people. This justice acts for example when the people are attacked by their enemies and call upon God as defender of its privilege; . . . God promises a special protection of his people, and the messianic salvation—which is the fulfillment of this promise, that is, liberation, salvation—is likewise called *tsedeq*.²⁵

Here are a few examples, among many, taken from the Psalter and from Isaiah:

There is no other god except me,
a just and saving God,
no other besides me. (Isa 45:21)

I make my justice come near,
my salvation will not delay. (Isa 46:13)

I shall make my justice come suddenly,
my salvation will come like the light. (Isa 51:4–5)

My salvation is ready to come,
and my justice [Greek: mercy] is ready to be revealed.
(Isa 56:1)

Lord, your love in the heavens,
your truth to the clouds;
your justice, like the mountains of God,
your judgments like the great abyss.

Lord, you care for man and beast;
how precious is your love, O God.

So the sons of men,
find refuge in the shadow of your wings. (Ps 36:6–8)

The Lord has made known his salvation,
has revealed his justice to the eyes of the nations,
remembering his love and his fidelity,
for the house of Israel. (Ps 98:2–3)

²⁵ Fr. Franz Zorell, S.J., *Lexicon Hebraicum et Aramaicum* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1946), 683.

Such is the divine justice that the psalmist so often proclaims in the liturgical assembly:

I have proclaimed the justice of Yahweh
In the great assembly; . . .
I have not sealed your justice in the depths of my heart,
I have spoken your fidelity, your salvation:
I have not hidden your love and your truth,
from the great assembly. (Ps 40:10–11)

I give thanks to Yahweh with all my heart,
in the midst of the just and in the assembly.
Great are the deeds of Yahweh,
worthy of study by all who love them.
His work is magnificence and splendor,
his justice endures for ever.
He leaves a memorial of his great deeds;
Yahweh is tenderness and mercy.
He gives food to those who fear him,
he remembers his covenant forever.
He makes his people see the power in his works,
by giving them the heritage of the nations.
Justice and truth, the works of his hands,
fidelity, all his laws, (Ps 111:1–7)

And Psalm 22, evoked by Christ on the Cross, does not speak of any other justice:

I will proclaim your name to my brothers,
in full assembly I will praise you. . . .
They will proclaim the Lord to the ages to come,
his justice to peoples yet to be born. (Ps 22:31–32)

It is again this salvific justice that the pious Israelite implores, aware of the sins of his people, exactly as the author of Psalm 143, quoted by St. Paul in Romans 3:20, asks of God not to “enter into judgment” with him but to answer him in the name of his “fidelity” and his “justice.” Just one example will suffice, the confession inserted into chapter 9 of the book of Ezra, where the context cannot leave any doubt about the meaning given by the author regarding either the noun “justice” or the adjective “just” proclaimed by God:

From the days of our ancestors until now our guilt has
been great; on account of our crimes we, our kings and

our priests, were given into the power of the kings of other countries. . . . But now, suddenly, Yahweh our God by his favor has left us a remnant and granted us a refuge in his holy place. . . . For we are slaves; but God has not forgotten us in our slavery. . . . Now after all that has come upon us on account of our evil deeds and our great fault [that is, the chastisement is merited]—although you, our God, have weighed our crimes less than their wickedness and left us this remnant here—are we to break your commandments again and intermarry with these people who practice such abominations? Would you not be provoked to the point of destroying us, so that not even the smallest remnant would survive? Yahweh, God of Israel, *you are just* because we survive as the remnant we are today; here we are before you with our sin [so that you may wipe it away]. (Ezra 9:7–15)²⁶

The meaning is crystal clear. By reason of his fidelity to the covenant, the mercy of God has never ceased manifesting itself through the course of Israel's history, in that the one who, by reason of his faults, would have merited being entirely destroyed was not. God allowed a remnant to subsist, and this is the irrefutable witness of his fidelity to his promises of salvation. This is why he is acclaimed as "just" in verse 15. We immediately perceive the misinterpretation of some translators who, assuming that God was acclaimed "just" because he punished his people for their guilt, do not hesitate to add a negation to verse 15 and render the verse: "Yahweh, God of Israel, you are just because we are nothing more than a remnant of fugitives."²⁷ In any case, the Jewish tradition was never mistaken. The Greek version of the Septuagint speaks explicitly in verse 15 of the "remnant of the saved." Much more clearly yet, the Greek commentary on the Book of Ezra, called Ezra III or Ezra I (Ezra alpha), removes any possible ambiguity by translating the adjective "just" as "truthful" (*alēthinos*):

Lord, God of Israel, you are truthful because we are a remnant as we are today.

The Notion of the Justice of God in Recent Judaism

This last example indicates what we should think about an opinion that is encountered fairly often according to which the notion of salvific justice has

²⁶ [Translator's note: *Jerusalem Bible* translation, slightly modified.]

²⁷ Thus are the Bibles of Crampon, Crampon-Bonsirven, du "Cardinal Liénard," de "Maredsous," of "Centenaire," etc.

practically disappeared from recent Judaism, to be replaced by vindictive justice alone, understanding this as opposed to mercy. It is true that the rabbis love to juxtapose in God the two attributes of justice and mercy.²⁸ But it is necessary to clarify right away that, in this case, the justice of which it is a question is never expressed by the terms *tsedaqah* or *tsedeq*, which the Greek *dikaïosynē* translates, but by the term *din*, which never corresponds to the *dikaïosynē* of the Septuagint.

The same confusion is found in the article on *orgē* in Gerhard Kittel's great theological dictionary, in which it is asserted that "according to recent Judaism the wrath of God is considered to be a function of divine justice."²⁹ But the only texts adduced here as support for this assertion (4 Macc 4:21; see also 9:23) do not speak of *dikaïosynē*. Rather, they speak of *dikē*, which in fact signifies vindictive justice and, in the Septuagint, never translates the terms with the same root as *tsedaqah*, but generally *rib* or *naqam*.

Far from saying that the salvific aspect of the notion of God's justice—in as much as it is expressed by the Hebrew terms *tsedaqah* or *tsedeq* and the Greek *dikaïosynē*, the latter alone being able to serve for clarifying the meaning of *dikaïosynē theou* in St. Paul—has disappeared or has been attenuated in recent Judaism, it should rather be said that it is becoming more and more prominent in the consciousness of Jews. This can be concluded from the explanations dedicated to it in the dictionaries, with the result that *dikaïosynē* ends up signifying (as the New Testament itself bears witness) alms or "an act of charity" (see Matt 6:1–2).

In any case, such a notion as salvific justice is found often enough in a Jewish work of the second century before Christ like the Book of Jubilees,³⁰ or again in the documents of Qumrân, for example, in the final hymn of the Rule of the Community, which extols the mercies of God and his "justice."

The faithfulness of God is a rock for my steps,
and his power upholds it on my right,
and his justice is the foundation of my judgment. . . .
He draws me close in his mercies,
by his grace he will guide my judgment.

²⁸ Numerous examples can be found in the work of E. Sjöberg, *Dieu et les pécheurs dans le judaïsme palestinien* (1939). Unfortunately, the author fails sufficiently to distinguish "judgment" (*din*) from "justice" (*tsedaqah*) and places *din*, *tsedeq*, and *tsedaqah* in the same category (for example, on p. 2).

²⁹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, *Xi-Phi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1968), 415. See also Stanislas Lyonnet, "L'étude du milieu littéraire et l'exégèse du nouveau testament," *Biblica* 36, no. 2 (1955): 202–12, at 208.

³⁰ Thus Book of Jubilees 1 and 5; see also 1:15; 3:31, 25, etc.

In His faithful justice he will judge men
 and in the abundance of his goodness he will expiate
 all my iniquities.
 In his justice he will purify me of the impurity of man
 and of the sin of the sons of men.
 So as to extol God for his justice,
 and the Most High for his majesty. (1QS XI, 5, 13–15)

Such is this “justice of God” regarding which St. Paul tells us in Romans 1:17 that it “is revealed in the Gospel” and in Romans 3:21 that it “has been manifested” in the redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ. The *Ecumenical Translation of the Bible* is not incorrect when it clarifies, commenting on Romans 1:17: “not the distributive justice that rewards works but the salvific justice of God that fulfills his promises by grace.”

The Justice of God and the Wrath of God

It follows from the preceding that the justice of God, which is essentially ordered to salvation, is necessarily opposed to the “wrath of God” that, according to the Bible, results in perdition. In effect, if “St. Paul associates the wrath and the salvific justice of God,” as the *Ecumenical Translation of the Bible* adds regarding Romans 1:18, it is in order to contrast them and to combine them.

Thus, already in the Greek of the Septuagint of the Old Testament, Moses juxtaposes the wrath of God directed against the Egyptians to the justice (*dikaïosynē*, which translates the Hebrew *khesed*) by which he leads his people:

By the greatness of your glory,
 you overthrow your foes;
 you unleash *your anger*,
 and it devours them like stubble.
 At the flare of *your fury*,
 the waters amass. . . .
 By *your justice* you have guided
 your people whom you redeemed. (Exod 15:7–8, 13)

Yet again, the prophet Micah says that, in relation to Israel, God has successively manifested his wrath (allusion to the chastisement of the exile), and then his justice (allusion no less clear to the promised deliverance):

I will endure the *wrath* of Yahweh,
 because I sinned against him;
 Until he comes to my trial,
 and he passes judgment on me.

Then he will bring me into the light,
and I will see his *justice*. (Mic 7:9)³¹

In precisely the same way, Psalm 85 opposes the time of the exile, when God manifested his wrath against Israel (vv. 5–6), to the messianic times, when “justice will look down from heaven” (v. 12):

Make us return, God our salvation,
master your *resentment* against us!
Will your anger with us be unending,
will you keep your *wrath* from forever? (Ps 85:5–6)

Make us see your love, Yahweh,
that we may know your salvation. (Ps 85:8)

Fidelity will spring forth from the earth,
and *justice* will look down from heaven. (Ps 85:12)

Justice will go before him [Yahweh]
and peace on his footprints. (Ps 85:14)

The opposition of God’s justice and his wrath is no less clear in the “confession” of Daniel:

Justice [*hē dikaiosynē*] is yours, Lord, ours the look of shame.
. . . Lord, ours the look of shame. . . For we have sinned
against you. Yours, O Lord our God, are *justice and mercy*
[Hebrew: “mercies” and “your pardons”], . . . and [we] have
not listened to the voice of Yahweh our God nor followed
the laws he has given us through his servants the prophets.
. . . And now, Lord our God, who by your mighty hand
brought your people from the land of Egypt, . . . we have
sinned, we have done evil. Lord, *by your justice*,³² turn away
your anger and your fury from Jerusalem, your city, your holy
mountain. . . My God, turn your ear and listen. . . It is not
because of our just deeds that we pour out our supplication
to you, but because of your mercy [Greek]. (Dan 9:7–18)

Not only does salvation imply that God’s wrath has ceased, but Daniel implores such a cessation in the name of God’s justice: “Lord, by your justice,

³¹ [Translator’s note: Fr. Lyonnet notes here that he is using the translation by Edouard Dhorme.]

³² Such is the translation of the Septuagint: *kata tēn dikaiosynēn sou*. Theodotus even substituted *eleēmosynēn* for *dikaosynēn*. The Hebrew has “by your justices.”

turn away your anger and your fury from Jerusalem" (v. 16). The reasoning is entirely the same as that of the psalmist whom St. Paul quotes in Romans 3:20, as we have seen, as he concludes the section dedicated to the revelation of the wrath of God and introduces a new section dedicated to the manifestation of the justice of God in Jesus Christ.³³

The Justice of God and the Justification of Man

The justice of God to which the Apostle refers in Romans 3:21–26 is, then, the very same justice that the psalmist and Daniel invoke, the justice that Isaiah said would be revealed in the messianic age, that is: an activity of God by which he is just, not insofar as he condemns reprobates—according to the notion of justice generally employed in theology, corresponding to what the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testament, calls the wrath of God—but rather insofar as he restores his people and delivers them from the slavery of sin to reunite them to himself. In other words, it is an activity by which God "justifies" man.

In the Old Testament, this restoration generally occurs by means of the victory of the people over their enemies. As a result, this implies the defeat of enemies. The New Testament preserves the same way of presenting things, but with all of mankind having become "people of God" at least by right, the enemies can be only the satanic powers or personal sin, as for example in 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 or in Romans 8:3.

On the other hand, because man is a free being and not a mere thing, this restoration can take place only if man himself accepts it by an act of his free will and, thereby, in a certain manner, makes it his own. This is why St. Paul explicitly mentions the act of faith by which, according to the words of St. Thomas commenting on Romans 4:5, "man submits himself to his justifying action and thus receives its effect."³⁴

Furthermore, given that man is considered a sinner and alienated from God, such a conversion to God can take place only if man turns away from his sin and renounces his egoism—in other words, dies to the flesh. Indeed, Scripture never conceives the sin from which man is delivered or purified as something purely exterior, along the lines of a debt contracted in relation to God, a debt that would end by the simple fact that God remits it, as if his pardon could be conceived prescinding from consideration of the communication of grace. Scripture, and particularly St. Paul and St. John, understand sin as a force that constantly turns man away from God and even separates him from his fellows and from himself. Thus, such a restoration of the whole man—of his will and the powers of his soul—entails a total liberation from sin.

³³ See above, p. 192–93

³⁴ Aquinas, *Super Rom 4*, lec. 1 (Marietti no. 331).

There should be no surprise that the proclamation of the revelation of God's salvific justice often be accompanied by an admonition or an exhortation, or even by a plea for conversion. Sometimes these follow conversion. Thus, Psalm 50 says:

Let the heavens proclaim his justice ...
Listen, my people, I mean to speak to you,
Israel, I mean to warn you, (Ps 50:6–7)

The final phrase of warning corresponds exactly to the exhortation in Psalm 81 (notwithstanding the Jerusalem Bible and the new Psalter):

Listen, my people, I mean to warn you;
Israel, if only you could hear me! (Ps 81:8)

Elsewhere, these admonitions precede conversion, for example in two passages of Isaiah, quoted earlier:

Pay attention to me, you peoples;
nations, turn your ear to me.
For a law comes forth from me
And my judgment will be the light of the nations.
I shall make my justice come suddenly,
my salvation will come like the light. (Isa 51:4–5)

Thus says Yahweh,
Do what is right, and practice justice,
for my salvation is ready to come,
and my justice is ready to be revealed. (Isa 56:1)

For good reason, therefore, it can be said that it belongs to the justice of God, even understood in the sense that we have set forth, to strike sinners with chastisements, so long as it is a matter of a medicinal punishment by virtue of which man is restored and not of a purely vindictive punishment, like the punishment of hell. Indeed, far from knowing nothing of such punishments that are not of themselves medicinal—although God could, as he does for sin itself, make such punishments “work for the good for those who love him” (Rom 8:28)—the Bible often mentions them. Still, the Bible attributes them to the wrath of God and to his justice because, if order can be considered in some way to be reestablished by them, man himself is not restored.

Biblical Categories and Theological Categories

Perhaps the preceding is the reason that the biblical notion of God's justice does not coincide with the theological notion, which is also that of current

language. The Bible, as we have shown, systematically places the justice of God in the same class with mercy, goodness, love, and so on while opposing it to the wrath of God. In contrast, for theology and current language, justice is opposed to mercy and signifies the attribute by which God punishes sinners, either with an essentially medicinal punishment, like that of Purgatory, or with a punishment that is in no way medicinal but purely vindictive, like that of Hell. Might this be because “natural” theology considers the attributes of God insofar as he is the Creator of the universe, in relation to which it pertains to him before all else to conserve it or to reestablish its order, so that what normally pertains to justice is all that which “restores the order disturbed by the sin of men by means of just and severe punishments”?³⁵

To the contrary, the Bible does not consider so much the preservation of the order of the universe as it does man and mankind, to whom God promises, in Abraham, an inheritance: as the New Testament specifies, participation in his own divine life, or put another way, the people of Israel that God has chosen and called, with whom he enters into a covenant. The Bible carefully distinguishes, on one hand, that by which man is truly restored—that is, purified from sin, he returns to God and is united with him—which is the justice of God, and on the other hand, that by which man remains in his rebellion against God and even sets himself in a definitive way, and this is this wrath of God, which, according to Romans 1:18–32, is revealed by the multiplication of sins.

Such a conception of the justice of God is diametrically opposed to the wrath of God, while it perfectly corresponds to his mercy, his goodness, his fidelity, his love. This is why prophets and psalmists petition God to take away his wrath but never his justice. The revelation of God’s justice is awaited and desired as the supreme good. The Gospel in which it is revealed truly and fully merits its name: it is Good News! In as much as the justice of God is revealed in it, the Gospel arouses in the hearts of men certainly not the fear that the young Luther thought of and that St. Thomas acknowledged in the theological concept of justice, but hope, which, in the same passage, St. Thomas attributes to the notion of “mercy.”³⁶

The Justice of God in Romans 3:5

The examination of another passage of the epistle where the Apostle evokes the justice of God while opposing it to the injustice of man will allow us, at the same time, to confirm what we have just said about the meaning that the

³⁵ The formula comes from Rudolph Cornely, who defines as “*ominibus consentientibus*” this “vindictive justice” indicated in Rom 1:18 by the term “wrath of God” (*Epistola ad Romanos* [Paris: Lethielleux, 1896], 77).

³⁶ See above, pp. 189–90.

phrase had and to show the importance of this understanding for the history of salvation. It is a question of the passage in which Paul opposes the infidelity of men to the fidelity to God, who is truthful, while men are liars (Rom 3:4), in which he declares that "our injustice shows forth the justice of God" (v. 5) and that "by my falsehood the truth of God abounds for his glory" (v. 7). In effect, the context seems clear, and a number of exegetes who believe that they must interpret otherwise the term "justice" when applied to God admit that St. Paul, here at any rate, intends to signify by this word "God's fidelity to his promises of salvation." Fr. Pierre Benoît rightly notes "the practically synonymous nature, in this passage, of *pistos*, *alêtheia*, and *dikaïosynē* in God."³⁷

An apparently insurmountable difficulty arises, however, and yet it will be very helpful for us in coming to grasp to what extent our interpretation differs from that which St. Paul gives for the justice of God, which is so prominent in scripture.

For, in order to illustrate this opposition between the truthful God who is faithful to his word and man, who is untruthful and unfaithful, in verse 4, Paul bases himself on a citation taken from Psalm 51, the *Miserere*:

As it is written: "That you may be justified in your words,
and prevail when you are judged." (Rom 3:4, quoting Ps
51:6)

In the Apostle's thought, the meaning hardly admits of any doubt. Fr. Lagrange comments: "Sin is only something on man's part; God himself remains faithful to the covenant."³⁸ And even more clearly, Fr. Huby writes:

If man enters into judgment with God, that is, if he should consider with total impartiality the divine conduct in history, he must acknowledge that God is just in his words, irreproachable in his prophecies. He has been faithful to the promises that his prophecies contain.³⁹

From such a trial, God can only come forth victorious. Put another way: he is faithful, while man is unfaithful.

The difficulty is obvious. In the *Miserere*, the psalmist, while intending "to justify God," was not thinking of "God's fidelity to his promises of salvation," that is, to a "saving justice," but rather of a "vindictive justice"! It is in this way that all of the modern commentators explain the verse:

³⁷ Pierre Benoît, *Exégèse et théologie* (Paris: Cerf, 1961), 2:38n3; or Benoît, "La loi et la croix d'après Saint Paul (Rom. 7:7–8:4)," *Revue Biblique* 47, no. 4 (1938): 481–509, at 508n3.

³⁸ Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Saint Paul Epître aux Romains* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1950), 124.

³⁹ Joseph Huby, *Epître aux Romains* (Paris: Les Éditions Beauchesne, 1940), 139.

By humbly confessing his sin, the psalmist “justifies God” in as much as he proclaims that God has justly pronounced the sentence by which he is condemned. It is thus not at all a question of some “promises of salvation” but, as Fr. Podechard writes, of “the sentence that God imposes on the psalmist and of the judgment that he made in striking him in his body. God has not acted unjustly, since the afflicted one had sinned.”⁴⁰

As Fr. Huby suggests, one can respond to this difficulty by saying that Paul, in all freedom, “adapted the text of the Old Testament to a different situation than that of the psalmist.”⁴¹ However, a different solution comes forward: Paul is quite simply making his own the interpretation that the Jewish tradition of his time gave, in fact, to this proclamation of the justice of God, the very justice that we have seen Ezra and Daniel attribute to him in their “confessions”: “O Lord, you are just, for we are left a remnant” (Ezra 9:15). A text like that of Ezra I does not hesitate to translate “You are truthful (*alēthinos*).”⁴²

A first comment, indeed, is necessary. As odd as it might seem, the exegesis of this verse that is universally accepted today does not seem to have taken account of the ancient Jewish versions, Targum or Septuagint. Regardless of the original meaning of the psalm, they quite naturally understand it in the framework of the history of David, as does the title given to the psalm: “When Nathan the Prophet Came to David because He Had Gone to Bathsheba.” Now, neither the Targum nor the Septuagint dream of making the psalmist say here simply that the punishment inflicted by God was deserved and that consequently God had been just in inflicting it. This is clear for the Targum, which gives an entirely different translation of this verse:

Before you alone have I sinned
and before you I have done evil.
And you will purify me by your word,
you will make me clean when you judge.
In iniquity I was born
and in sin my mother conceived me.

This is without doubt no less clear for the Greek version in the Septuagint, which follows the text much more closely as it was later interpreted by the

⁴⁰ E. Podechard, *Le Psautier: Traduction littérale et explication historique* (Lyon, FR: Facultés catholiques, 1949), 232.

⁴¹ Huby, *Épître aux Romains*, 139.

⁴² See, above, p. 198. For the “confession” of Daniel, see p. 201.

Masoretes, who nevertheless introduced (unless it has been retained) a modification of great importance, even if grammatically it is very small. In place of reading the singular “that you may be justified in your word” or, according to the translation of the new psalter, “in your sentence,” the Masoretic text gives a plural, “in your words,” the Greek, *en tois logois tou*, and the Vulgate *in sermonibus tuis*. Now, this plural suggests at the very least that the translators were not thinking of the sentence of David’s condemnation promulgated by Nathan in the name of Yahweh, especially given the fact that the word *logos* would likely not have been best adapted to signify such a sentence. On the contrary, *logos* or *logoi* is used to translate the Hebrew *dabar* that occurs ceaselessly in the prayers of David and Solomon to signify the promises made to David.

This interpretation is confirmed by the way in which the Septuagint substituted the passive voice, “when you are judged” (*cum iudicaris* in the Vulgate), for the active voice of the Hebrew, “when you judge.” No doubt this idea of God being summoned before the tribunal of his creature, who declares him just, might seem unexpected. Fr. Lagrange saw in this “a shocking idea that could only be accepted if it is obvious.”⁴³ Nevertheless, it is an idea that is familiar to the Bible, and the Israelite is accustomed to having recourse to it in his prayer. Thus, already, Joshua prays: “What will the pagans say if God’s promises are not fulfilled, if Israel’s enemies are victorious?” (see Josh 7:9). So, too, do Moses on Sinai (see Exod 32:12), or at Kadesh (see Num 14:16 and Deut 9:28), and David himself, right after Nathan’s prophecy (see 2 Sam 7:26 and, above all, 1 Chr 17:21–24).

Before the nations, Yahweh thus stands as one perpetually accused. Yet, Israel’s vocation is to assure that he leaves the legal hearing against him as the victor: “that you prevail when you are judged.” God’s people accomplish this by confessing “the justice of God,” that is, his fidelity to his promises of salvation, despite the infidelity of a stiff-necked people.

The author of Psalm 89, faced with the apparent infidelity of God, evokes the same unconditional promises made to David and his descendants:

Lord, where is your loving kindness of old,
which you swore to David in your faithfulness.
(Ps 89:50)

The context is entirely the same as that of the *Miserere* according to St. Paul and the Septuagint, all the more because the same Psalm 89 also mentions God’s saving justice in verse 17:

⁴³ M.-J. Lagrange, *Épître aux Romains*, 124.

Blessed the people whose festal acclamation is "Yahweh."
 In your name they rejoice throughout the day,
 In your justice they are exalted.

Moreover, the interpretation of St. Paul and the Septuagint seem to have a foundation in the Hebrew text itself. Indeed, verse 16 mentions a "justice of God," which no commentator ever dreamt of identifying with the vindictive justice that God would have exercised in punishing David:

Deliver me from bloodshed, God, God of my salvation, and
 my tongue will acclaim your saving justice.

As is often the case, the psalmist's desire is to acclaim "in the great assembly" the justice of Yahweh—that is, his fidelity, goodness, love, salvation, or his marvelous deeds that he calls his "justices," that is, the "great events of the sacred history by which Yahweh demonstrates his loyalty to the covenantal promises."⁴⁴ Thus, in all likelihood, the Septuagint was inspired by verse 16 in giving to verse 6 the interpretation that Paul followed. In both cases they observed exactly the same notion of the "justice of God": David confessed God's fidelity to his promises of salvation, promises that man's infidelity, far from canceling, contributes "to demonstrate" (Rom 3:5) or "to increase" (v. 7).

In order to hold to the interpretation of the Septuagint, Rudolph Cornely was not mistaken to claim that the justice of which the psalmist was speaking is not "vindictive" justice, but another kind of justice that "comes close to faithfulness." David, he explains, might have feared that his sins had canceled the promises: "the psalmist sets forth David's situation, which is very similar to that of the Jews rejecting their Messiah." Cornely paraphrases the text of the psalm in this way:

I confess my sin (or even: you permitted my sin), so that you be justified in your words, that is, so that *you be recognized as just and faithful in all that you have said and promised*, when *you upheld your covenant*, even with me, a sinner, and so that you are proved truthful when you are placed in judgment. Put another way: so that you be *declared just and faithful* by the very ones who dare to submit your actions to their judgment, when they see you fulfill your promises in behalf of the very ones by whom you have been gravely offended.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The New Jerusalem Bible, note "e" on Micah 6:5.

⁴⁵ Cornely, *Epistola ad Romanos*, 77. He adds: "There is no doubt that this explanation, the only one concordant with this passage, does not entirely suit the psalm's context and the terms used by the Greek of the Septuagint."

One is less surprised that the Patristic tradition, which moreover made use of the Greek version of the Septuagint (Greek Fathers) or the Vulgate that translated it (Latin Fathers), generally understood the confession of David in the *Miserere* in this way, and in particular that this tradition seems never to have suspected that the psalmist had in mind to proclaim a vindictive justice by virtue of which God had punished his sin. Taking one or two examples as sufficient, among the Greek Fathers, Theodoret proposes this paraphrase of the verse:

"I myself am the cause of my troubles on myself, whereas your justice is resplendent. If one should take me to court to compare the beneficences that you have heaped on me to the crimes that I have committed, you will be judged just and good and I will be shown unjust and ungrateful." In this way, the contrast between what God has done for David and what David has done against God manifests the goodness of God and the maliciousness of man.⁴⁶

Among the Latin Fathers, the "meditation" attributed to St. Anselm speaks no differently of King David:

Therefore, forgive me . . . so that you, who spoke by your Holy Spirit, "When a sinner repents and groans, I will no longer remember the evil that he has done," may be justified, that is, so that you be known as *just and truthful*, as you are in reality, in your words. For your speech; is truth you convict of lying those who say that you do not forgive the repentant sinner. So that you prevail over those who judge that you are without mercy, you for whom having pity and forgiving is most proper. Merciful God, look upon my weakness and my poverty and show forth in me the grandeur of your mercy.⁴⁷

For his part, St. Thomas gives an interpretation that, at first sight, might seem aberrant but that follows logically from the explanation given by the whole of the preceding tradition. In the *Summa Theologiae*, on the subject of Christ's passion, he explains:

If [God] had willed to free man from sin without any satisfaction, He would not have acted against justice.... If He forgive sin, which has the formality of fault in that it

⁴⁶ Theodoret, Commentary on Psalm 51.

⁴⁷ St. Anselm, Meditation on the *Miserere* Psalm.

is committed against Himself, He wrongs no one: just as anyone else, overlooking a personal trespass, without satisfaction, acts mercifully and not unjustly.

Now, without any surprise, precisely here, the Angelic Doctor appeals to the example of David:

And so David exclaimed when he sought mercy: *To Thee only have I sinned* (Ps 50:6), as if to say: *Thou canst pardon me without injustice.*⁴⁸

Thus, one will not be further surprised that an exegete like André Feuillet, who at first had discerned in the verse of the *Miserere*, according to a current interpretation, an allusion to the vindictive justice of God and judged that the psalmist intends to assert “the legitimacy of the divine chastisements heaped upon the repentant sinner,”⁴⁹ did not hesitate, several years later, to understand the same verse in terms of God’s salvific justice and to write: “the sin of man serves first of all to make shine, not the exactitude of a judge, but the exactitude, that this, the fidelity, of a God of love in the fulfillment of his promises of salvation.”⁵⁰

In this way, the Pauline interpretation of God’s justice, even in his quotation of the *Miserere*, situates itself in an established Jewish and Christian tradition. From our perspective, the primitive meaning of the Psalm as it was composed has little significance. It is much more important to know how the Jews at the time of St. Paul actually understood it if we desire to clarify the meaning that they gave to it and that St. Paul would spontaneously give to this “proclamation of the justice of God,” and more generally to the very notion of the “justice of God.”

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *ST III*, q. 46, a. 2, ad 3.

⁴⁹ André Feuillet, “Le verset 7 du ‘Miserere’ et le péché original,” *Recherches de sciences religieuses* 32 (1944): 50–26, at 13.

⁵⁰ André Feuillet, “Le plan salvifique de Dieu d’après l’épître aux Romains,” *Revue Biblique* 57 (1950): 336–87, at 349n1.