

Doing Right and Being Right in the Psalms: A Jewish and Christian Conundrum

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In this brief paper I shall start with psalms concerned with “doing right,” where there is an almost universal consensus between Jews and Christians. Whether based on the premise of Torah or the Gospels, the maxim “to love God and to love one’s neighbor as oneself” lies at the core of Jewish and Christian faith, so we would expect references to “doing right” to be an ideal witness to this consensus. I shall then discuss some of the more contentious psalms which speak of “being right” with God, where Jewish and Christian reception history testifies to different interpretations.

Doing Right in the Psalms

I assumed when preparing this paper that, given there are some fifty more variant uses of *tsedeq* and some thirty-five references to *tsedaqah* in the Psalms, I would find many instances of “doing right,” whether in performing “right deeds” for others or, more broadly, in practicing the “right ordering” of creation for the benefit of others.¹ After all, the practical

¹ This is my own estimation. J. J. Scullion proposes forty-nine and thirty-four relevant psalms, respectively (“Righteousness in the Old Testament,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 5 [O–Sh] [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 724–36, at 725). Jože Krašovec states there are seventy-two overall, but his list inexplicably omits references in, for example, Pss 17, 34 and 37 (“Righteousness of God in the Book of Psalms and in Its Major Translations,” in *God’s Righteousness and Justice in the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2022], 111–51, at 112n4). Moshe

aspect of righteousness is such a frequent theme in the prophets, often paired as a hendiadys with that other much-used word, “justice.” The citation in Amos 5:24—“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”—in the context of specific ways in which the people have failed to live up these ideals, is a case in point, as well as numerous references in Isaiah and Jeremiah. Similarly, serving others by “pursuing righteousness” is recurrent theme in wisdom literature: in brief, God loves those who “pursue righteousness” (Prov 15:9).

I was very surprised, therefore, that my search in the Psalms for a similar outward-looking ethical ethos about “doing right” yielded so few results. A general maxim, following Prov 15:9, is Ps 11:7: “For the LORD is righteous; *he loves righteous deeds*” (*tsedaqoth aheb*).² Similarly hopeful, at first sight, is Ps 15: the answer to the question “who may dwell on your holy hill?” is “those who walk blamelessly, and *do what is right*” (*wupoel tsedeq*, in v. 2), but this is then expanded *not* in terms of helping “the other” as an act of social justice, but in terms of *self*-improvement as an act of ritual purity: this seems to be less about doing right by loving one’s neighbor, and more about doing right by loving oneself.

The references which speak most explicitly of doing righteous deeds for others in need are usually found in psalms usually associated with the king. In Ps 45, the so-called wedding psalm, the scribe addresses the king: “In your majesty ride on victoriously for the cause of truth and *to defend the right*” (v. 4 [Heb. v. 5]: *weanwah-tsedeq*). The Hebrew is unclear, and the NRSV is also somewhat vague: a literal translation of the whole phrase might be “ride on . . . for the cause of truth, humility, and righteousness.” The inference, anyway, is that the *king* is the one who supports the cause of the righteous, but what this means in practice in Ps 45 is not spelled out. It is only made explicit in another royal psalm, 72: four times in the first seven verses the king is associated with “righteousness,” and this is very clearly about the protection of the poor: “May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice” (v. 2).³

Weinfeld argues that *tsedeq* in the Hebrew Bible generally refers to the principle of righteousness, and *tsedaqah*, to specific expressions of doing right, especially in relation to God (“Justice and Righteousness—the Expression and Its Meaning,” in *Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and Their Influence*, ed. Y. Hoffmann and H. G. Reventlow [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992], 229–46, at 236). This study did not, however, account for the pervasive use of the term *tsadiqim*.

² Most references are taken from the NRSV translation unless I state explicitly this is my own translation. On this account, and for the sake of simplicity, the NRSV enumeration is used unless stated otherwise.

³ Psalm 102, often associated with a kingly figure, offers similar insights, but the word

So there are surprisingly few references in psalmody to “doing right” for others, and what few texts there are suggest this is the responsibility of the king. Even that phrase “justice and righteousness,” cited earlier in relation to Amos, and occurring some sixty-four times in the Hebrew Bible, of which fifteen instances are in the Psalms, fails to yield many insights concerning the altruism of the psalmists.⁴ In the Psalter, this pairing almost always ascribes these qualities to God: only twice is this applied specifically to the practical concern of others. One is Ps 72:2, noted above. Another is in Ps 112:5–6, where there is a promise of prosperity for those who fear the Lord and obey his commandments (vv. 1–3). They are gracious, merciful, and righteous (v. 4), and they deal generously and conduct their affairs with justice (v. 5).⁵

Hence, in addition to one royal psalm (72), we also have a possible wisdom psalm, 112, and together they suggest some specific altruism in their view of “*doing* right.” This paucity of references to the selfless practice of righteousness is even more surprising when we consider those psalms which refer to the plight of the poor. The first article I ever wrote was on “The Poor in Psalms,” arguing that the words *dal* and *ebyon* are mostly terms used to refer to the economically deprived, whilst *anaw* and *ani* (sometimes used with *ebyon*) indicate a more spiritual attitude to humility, including a pious dependence on God alone. So I actually re-read this old paper to see if I could find anything there.⁶ In those psalms where *dal* and *ebyon* occurred together (Pss 72:13; 82:3–4; 113:7) only Ps 72 makes clear that our responsibility is to help the poor by specific actions, and again we are reminded that this is the ultimate responsibility of the king. This is explained by the fact that, in other psalms where these terms occur and imply some economic deprivation, the “poor” appear to include the psalmist himself and those in his circle: hence only God can be their cause of right, as they simply have not the means of reaching out to help others.

The same issue is evident when looking at those clusters of psalms which together refer frequently to the plight of the physically poor: here we might

“right” or “righteous” does not occur here. Even the great pious psalmist of 119, when speaking of observing God’s righteous ordinances, does not develop this explicitly in relation to his responsibility to others.

⁴ See Weinfeld, “Justice and Righteousness.”

⁵ Throughout the Fertile Crescent, legal and restorative action (*kittum u misarum*) belonged to the gods and was bequeathed to kings, such as: a millennium apart, both Hammurabi and Ashurbanipal “make judgments” to “establish the right order.” Psalms 45 and 72 have correspondences with this principle.

⁶ See Susan E. Gillingham, “The Poor in the Psalms,” *Expository Times* 100, no. 1 (1988): 15–19.

include Pss 9–14, 34–41, and 138–44. But, yet again, there is hardly any reference, other than in Ps 11:7 cited above, to the psalmist's obligation to perform righteous deeds to the poor, and again this is usually because the psalmist is one of those who belongs to the "poor." This point is best illustrated with reference to two pertinent psalms in the second collection (Pss 34–41). Psalm 34 is significant, for the term *tsadiqim* occurs three times.⁷ In each case, it is apparent that the psalmist sees himself as one of a particular group of "righteous," consisting of those within the community who are both spiritually and economically "poor." (See v. 6: "This poor soul [*zeh ani*] cried.") There is again surprisingly little in this psalm about "doing right" for others. Psalm 34 illustrates so clearly that God is the only source of "doing right," and so we read of pleas *to be helped* rather than of any promise to *do the helping*.

Psalm 37 is an important psalm, for it has several references both to the "poor" (see vv. 11 and 14) and to the "righteous." Psalm 37 is totally preoccupied with the possession of the land: the repeated phrase "inherit the land" is used only here in the Psalter.⁸ The word "righteous" also occurs here more than in any other psalm, including 119.⁹ But here, those who are righteous are not poor: "the righteous are *generous* and *keep giving*" (v. 21); "they are ever giving liberally and lending" (v. 26). They are not rich, but neither are they poor: "Better is a little that the righteous person has than the abundance of many wicked" (v. 16). Nevertheless, the wicked plot against the righteous (v. 12) as well as seeking to bring down the poor and needy (v. 14). Sometimes the wicked succeed, but even here the LORD upholds them (vv. 16, 17, 39), and their mouths still utter wisdom and their tongues still speak of justice (v. 30). On this account, it is the righteous, not the wicked, who will "inherit the land" (v. 29). "Doing right" is therefore in part about helping others, as in verses 21 and 26 noted above, and it will have its reward in the promise of the land. The

⁷ "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous" (v. 15); "When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears" (v. 17); "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD rescues them from them all" (v. 19).

⁸ See Susan E. Gillingham, *A Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1–72*, vol. 2 of *Psalms Through the Centuries*, ed. J. A. Sawyer, J. Kovacs, C. Rowland, and D. M. Gunn, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 221–31. The phrase is found in vv. 9, 11, 22, 29, 34 (see also v. 3). The phrase is found elsewhere only in Ps 25:13, using a slightly different formula. It occurs often in Deuteronomy, as in Deut 5:31, 33, and thirteen other times.

⁹ See Pss 37:12, 16, 17, 21, 25, 28, 29, 30, 32, 39. Conversely, there are also more references to the "wicked" than anywhere else: see vv. 1, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20, 21, 28, 32, 34, 35, 38, 40.

connection between “doing right” and the recurring promise of land inheritance resulted in the psalm’s promotion both at Qumran, which has the only lengthy *peshet* on this psalm, and also in the Qur’an, where the use of verse 29 is the only direct citation from the entire Hebrew Bible.¹⁰ The psalm also plays an important part in the teaching of Jesus.¹¹

It is ironic that, despite the prominence of this psalm in all three monotheistic faiths, and despite its emphasis on the practice of doing right, the “promise of the land” failed to materialize, and the righteous did indeed have to “beg for bread,” contrary to verse 25, as the poem by Edmund Blunden observes so well.¹² Nevertheless, if we are to select just one psalm which does speak in many different ways of the “good deeds of the righteous,” it has to be Ps 37.

Several illuminated psalters, from both the East and West, confirm this reading of Ps 37. The Byzantine *Khludov Psalter*, dating from the ninth century, and now in the Moscow History Museum, offers a marginal illustration of Ps 37:26 (“The righteous are ever giving liberally and lending”) on fol. 35r. It shows the personification of Charity, with a tree growing from her crown: she is giving alms to a monk and two other male figures, and the container on ground contains more of her generosity. The additional inscription, in Greek, reads: “Holy and good Charity teaches and manifests her own glory; and happy is he who will do and will teach her.”

The same visual exegesis is evident in Western psalters. One is the

¹⁰ See 4QpPs^a, where those at Qumran who will “inherit the land” are “the congregation of the poor.” See also in the Qur’an *Surah* 21:105: “We have written in the Psalms, after remembrance, ‘The earth shall be the inheritance of my servants.’ Surely this is a message delivered to a people who serve.”

¹¹ Verse 11 is also cited in Matt 5:5 and Luke 6:20, where here the reference is to the “meek” and not the “righteous.”

¹² Edmund Blunden, “Report on Experience,” poetsgraves.co.uk/Classic%20Poems/Blunden/report_on_experience.htm:

*I have been young, and now am not too old;
And I have seen the righteous forsaken,
His health, his honour and his quality taken.
This is not what we were formerly told.*

R. P. Carroll adds a further comment: “Too many Jewish children begged in the streets and ghettos of the Third Reich (not to mention through the long history of Christian Europe) for the modern reader to be impressed by its writer’s faith. . . . We cannot now read the text without reflecting on how false it sounds” (“The Discombobulations of Time and the Diversities of Text: Notes on the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the Bible,” in *Text as Pretext: Essays in Honour of Robert Davidson*, ed. R. P. Carroll, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 138 [Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1992], 69).

twelfth-century *Eadwine Psalter*, a vividly illuminated psalter with three interlinear texts, from Christ Church, Canterbury, and now kept at Trinity College, Cambridge. The image of Ps 37 (fol. 62v) is a narrative of the entire psalm. The psalmist sits just below Christ, who is looking down from heaven and surrounded by six angels. On a hill, four righteous men are being served at a table by an attendant (“in the days of famine they shall be satisfied,” as in v. 19). Beside the table, an angel is supporting another “righteous” man who is about to fall (v. 24). In the middle register at the right another righteous man is distributing provisions to a group of poor and needy (v. 26).¹³

It is still remarkable that there are so few psalms referring to “doing right” as a way of caring for others. Basically we now have two proverbial maxims (Pss 11:7 and 112:5–6), perhaps two royal psalms (Pss 45 and 72) and this didactic psalm, 37.¹⁴ It seems that the ethical outlook of the psalmists overall is more about asking to be saved from the wicked and one’s enemies, rather than actively helping those in need: the “love of one’s neighbor” in terms of “doing right” is a minor theme.¹⁵

And yet if we look up the occurrences of the many variants of *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah*, they extend far beyond the psalms cited here. If this term is not to be found prominently in the expression of “right deeds” for others, where else is the term found, and how is it used?

It is primarily found in two very different types of psalms. First, we read of “the righteous” in psalms where the plea of penitence is uppermost: here the emphasis is less on the psalmist’s righteousness and more

¹³ This image is online at bit.ly/435TP4T.

¹⁴ We might note four other psalms where there is an implicit connection between being righteous and doing good deeds. In Ps 1, for example, the psalmist is clearly one of the righteous, for he sits in the “congregation of the righteous” and knows God watches over the “way of the righteous” (vv. 5–6). Yet there is nothing here about performing specific righteous deeds for the sake of others. In Ps 5 the psalmist identifies with the righteous (v. 12) and knows God will lead him in the “way of the righteous” (v. 8), as in Ps 1:6, but again nothing is said about performing righteous deeds for others. Ps 52:6 and Ps 92:12 similarly speak of being one of the righteous, but with no reference to “doing right.” So these psalms also demonstrate that specific references to right action are very few indeed.

¹⁵ It is surprising that works explicitly on the ethical teaching in the Psalms do not draw the same conclusion. Gordon J. Wenham repeatedly makes the point that care for the poor, for example, is something God does (*Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* [Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2012], 115–18, 183–85). The righteous are not those who “do good,” but rather fear, trust and take refuge in God: this is a pious, not pragmatic term (149–54). Krašovec similarly makes nothing of this issue (“Righteousness of God”), as does Scullion (“Righteousness in the Old Testament”).

on the righteousness of God. It occurs in some of the seven penitential psalms: Pss 51 and 143 are the best examples. Here the psalmists feel they do not deserve to be called “righteous”; they are actually “unrighteous,” and because only God is righteous, God alone can “make them righteous.” Secondly, variants of *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah* occur in psalms where the protest of innocence is uppermost, where—as we saw in Pss 34 and 37—the psalmist appeals to their own “righteousness” and integrity, which God, in his own righteousness, has to recognize. Psalm 7:8 is a good example: “Judge me, O LORD, *according to my righteousness* and according to the integrity that is in me.” Here the psalmists feel they *do* deserve to be called “righteous” and appeal to God to declare them to be in the right. This kind of prayer, asking to be *declared* righteous, is very different from the plea to be *made* righteous in the psalms of penitence. We shall examine this shortly in relation to Pss 7, 17, and 71, for each psalm represents well slightly different emphases on the same issue.

We can see already that, although the idea of “doing right” is less prominent in the Psalms than we might expect, the idea of “being right” is very prominent, and actually quite complex. Its use is always dependent on the context of the psalmist, although this context can be interpreted in many different ways by different readers with different faith traditions. This can lead to multivalent readings, some contentious. Commentators in Western Christendom have a different approach from those in Eastern Christendom, not only because the Latin and Greek translations can be quite different, but also because each uses its own unique Christological approaches.¹⁶ Since the sixteenth century, there have likewise been many differences between Catholics and Protestants, with the former preferring the Latin versions and the latter the vernacular translations, which often result in a different approach to reading and applying the texts in liturgy and in teaching. There are, of course, differences of interpretation as expressed in Jewish and Christian commentaries: again, the issue of language choice is an important one, as is also a more historical interest in the psalm headings and the life of David in Jewish tradition compared with a more theological interest in receiving the psalm through the person and work of Jesus Christ in Christian tradition. In what follows I shall try, somewhat superficially within the time constraints, to disentangle some of these issues.

¹⁶ For example, Eastern commentators follow the Jewish interpreters in their interest in a psalm heading, but they combine this more “historical” approach with a more typological, Christological one.

Being Right in the Psalms

A Fundamental Principle: God Is Righteous

This point has been made already, but it needs to be emphasized even more strongly here. Let us reflect again on that phrase “justice and righteousness.” We have already noted that it occurs fifteen times in the Book of Psalms, but only Pss 72:1–2 and 112:5–6 use it in any altruistic way.¹⁷ We noted in passing that the pairing in the other psalms almost always ascribes these qualities to God, sometimes in what he *does*, and at other times in who he *is*. For example: God loves righteousness and justice (Ps 33:5); God is praised for his righteousness and judgments (Ps 36:6); righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne (Ps 97:2). More actively: God executes righteousness and justice in Jacob (Ps 99:4); God works justice and righteousness for all who are oppressed (Ps 103:6); righteousness and justice are part of God’s ordinances (Ps 119:7, 75, 160).¹⁸

Leaving aside this pairing of righteousness with justice, God is also directly ascribed simply as righteous. We heard this in Ps 11:7: “*The Lord is righteous*; he loves righteous deeds.” In Ps 7:9 he is called a “righteous God,” and in 7:11, a “righteous judge.” In Ps 116: 5 we read that the Lord is righteous, as well as gracious and merciful. Psalm 119:137 makes the direct statement “You are righteous, O Lord,” and Ps 129 makes a similar claim.¹⁹

In writing briefly about the Psalms as a source for ethical teaching, John Barton makes the important point that much of what we might find as “ethical” actually relates to the character of God, leading to “the question of how far God can be called ‘ethical’ himself.”²⁰ The moral character of God is very clearly seen in relation to his righteousness, and our character

¹⁷ Three other less obvious examples are Ps 89:15, where justice and righteousness are seen as part of the king’s throne; Ps 94:15, which speaks of justice and righteousness returning to the people; and Ps 119:121, where the psalmist declares he has kept both as ordinances from God. None of these actually marks a specific example of “doing right.”

¹⁸ In *God’s Righteousness and Justice*, 147 (in “Righteousness of God in the Book of Psalms and Its Major Translations”), Krašovec argues that the terms “righteousness” and “justice” are synonymous. Given the title of the book, it would appear that, according to Krašovec, “justice” is in fact subsumed under “righteousness”; in my view, this dilutes the richness of two wide-ranging metaphors.

¹⁹ Again, Krašovec contends that, when the term “righteousness” is not paired with “justice,” it is paired *synonymously* with other terms such as salvation (*yesua*), truth (*emet*), blessing (*beraka*), mercy (*hesed*), glory (*kabod*) (“Righteousness of God,” 147–48). By widening its focus in this way, however, it is difficult to focus on the distinctive value of the term “righteousness” as we have tried to do here.

²⁰ See John Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 38.

formation is often seen in terms of imitating who God is and what he does.²¹ Sometimes this is about his “right ordering” of the cosmos; at other times his righteousness is expressed in the right ordering of society. Psalm 19 is an important example here, in that it combines God’s gift of the sun, which provides order within the created cosmos, with God’s gift of Torah, which provides order for society: “The ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether” (v. 9). Psalm 33 has a similar tenor. If God did not uphold the earth in righteousness everything else would descend to chaos: “He loves righteousness and justice” (v. 5). Small wonder the psalmists, realizing how right ordering both of creation and of society lay beyond human control, returned everything into the righteous hands of God.²²

Let us see how this fundamental premise about the righteousness of God plays out in psalms with a penitential tone, where the prayer is that God will offer it where human righteousness has failed.

“Being Right” in Psalms of a Penitent Sufferer

Psalm 143 is an unusual penitential psalm as it is clearly composite, with many citations from other psalms, and therefore late.²³ Furthermore, it offers no direct confession of sin, although its general tone is penitential. It falls into two parts, divided by “Selah”: verses 1–6 and 7–12. Verses 1–2 and 11–12 mirror each other in their pleas for God’s righteousness: in verse 1 we read, “Answer me in your righteousness!”; and in verse 11 the psalmist pleads, “In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble!” God’s righteousness (whatever that may mean in this psalm) is thus seen as the psalmist’s only hope for salvation.²⁴

²¹ See also J. Clinton McCann, “‘The Way of the Righteous’ in the Psalms: Character Formation and Cultural Crisis,” in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. William P. Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 135–49; J. T. James, “Research Trends in the Study of the Ethics of the Psalms,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 18, no. 2 (2020), 118–41, at 128–31 (on *imitatio Deo* in the Psalms) and 131–33 (on character ethics in the presentation of the righteous and wicked in the Psalms).

²² Scullion makes a similar point (“Righteousness in the Old Testament,” 725). Ps 82:3–4 is interesting in this respect, where God’s righteousness in cosmic and societal terms exceeds that of other deities.

²³ These include Pss 18, 25, 69, 77, 86, and 119. See Susan E. Gillingham, *A Reception History Commentary on Psalms 73–151*, vol. 3 of *Psalms Through the Centuries*, ed. A. Mein, L. S. Tiemeyer, C. Rowland, and J. Kovacs, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 395–99.

²⁴ Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann argue that, increasingly in the post-exilic period, confession became a means not of restitution of one’s own righteousness, but an acknowledgement of God’s righteousness, using Ps 143:2 as an example

The problem is with verse 2. By contrast, this speaks about the way God's righteousness could in fact condemn the psalmist. It reads in the NRSV: "Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you." This has been a key verse in the Western Christian theology—especially in Augustine and Luther. These interpretations are of course based on the Greek and then later on Latin translations; so, at the end of 143:2 (142:2) the verbs *δικαίω* and *justifico* respectively have more forensic connotations, meaning "to justify," or even "to acquit." Hence, in Rom 3:20, Paul interprets this phrase as "no human being will be *justified* in his sight," thus not only using more forensic language, but also universalizing the psalmist's personal cry so that the need for God's righteousness now concerns the whole (sinful) human condition. In Gal 2:6 Paul expands this further, reading the phrase as "no one will be justified by the works of *the law*," to which is added the difference which Jesus Christ makes in offering justification *by faith*. This seems to be far removed from the more specific and personal tenor of the psalmist; but Paul undoubtedly did not *invent* any theology of righteousness, but rather took much of it from the Psalms and then applied it within his Christological framework. Augustine takes Paul's reading further still: he now reads the entire psalm as testifying to how Jesus Christ's sufferings have brought about justification by faith on our behalf. So, focusing on verse 11, Augustine argues that righteousness here is about what God in Christ has *given* every one of us, for we are all "unrighteous" in the eyes of God. And going one stage further still, for Reformers such as Luther, this became an ideal psalm to emphasize further the universal state of "unrighteousness" (verse 2), and hence the primacy of grace over works (verse 11). Thus, out of one penitential psalm—and indeed, out of just one or two verses—we have a whole theology of "being made right" by God in Christ.

The Jewish commentary tradition takes a completely different turn: most of the discussion is not so much about repentance at all, but about the biographical details concerning David in the psalm's heading. Perhaps in response to the Christian readings above, a Jewish reading finds the same themes as found in Pss 140–42 previously: 143 is as a psalm of *deliverance* (in the case of David, physical as well as spiritual), rather than a psalm of *penitence*. Hence, the issue of "being made right" as "being justified" is not

(*God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*, trans. M. A. Biddle [Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011], 294). The problem here is that one has then to consider dating the psalms of protest of innocence, such as 7, 17 and 71, earlier in biblical history, and it is notoriously difficult to date any of them. But as a comment particularly on Ps 143:2, this makes good sense.

dealt with at all. The Hebrew of verse 11, translated even in the NRSV as “in your righteousness *bring me out of trouble*,” confirms this interpretation: this is about deliverance from distress.

As we noted for Ps 37, these observations are borne out in images in illustrations of the Psalms. In this case we shall take one Christian example, and one Jewish. First, the eleventh-century *Theodore Psalter* from the Stoudios Monastery near Constantinople, and now in the British Library, has 480 marginal images, in color. They usually illustrate the historical details from the heading of the psalm (following the Jewish tradition), but then add to these typological and Christological interpretations. The illustration for Ps 143 is found next to verse 1 (fol. 181r). It shows David, crowned, in prayer—his name is inscribed above him—and his right hand is raised to a medallion enclosing bust of Christ-Logos. Under it we see Absalom riding to his death, and Joab about to cut off his head as he hangs by his hair in a tree. This is close to the Jewish reading of the psalm, other than that David is clearly praying to Christ for deliverance—for being declared righteous.

In my view, the image by the Jewish artist “Benn” makes excellent sense of this psalm.²⁵ [overleaf] It is of verse 6: “I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.” The suppliant, dressed in brown, set against parched grass and a blue sky, offers his hands up to the image of a white dove. Benn also assumes that this is a psalm of deliverance, and this is seen as both spiritual and material—and is dependent both on the faith of the psalmist, as he reaches out to God, and also on God’s Shekinah, as represented in heaven above.

So here the question is: how does the psalmist “become right”? The answer, dealt somewhat differently by Jews and Christians, is by reaching out in trust and allowing God to “make” them right. Whether this is offered by God alone, or by God through the work of Christ, is of course a debatable point, and whether the psalmist is speaking about a universal truth is another.

Psalms 51 is a private, tormented prayer, more personal in tenor than 143. Verses 1–9 comprise several particular pleas to God for forgiveness: “*Blot out* my transgressions/ iniquities” occurs in both verses 1 and 9, and “wash me” is in verses 2 and 7, whilst the Hebrew words for sin, transgression, and iniquity occur in every verse except 6–8. The key focus here

²⁵ Benn, 1940 (no page numbers). Benn was a French Jewish artist, originally from Poland, who produced evocative illustrations on the entire Psalter, based on sketches on scraps of paper during his time in a concentration camp in France during World War II.



is on the psalmist's wretchedness. By contrast, verses 10–17 focus on the psalmist's claim to have some inner integrity: the “clean *heart*” and “new and right *spirit*” (v. 10) are repeated in verse 17 by a “broken and contrite *heart*” and “broken *spirit*.” Verses 18–19 are an epilogue, indicating (like 50:14) that sacrifice per se is not the problem, but the spirit in which it is made.²⁶

Unlike in Ps 143, the word *tsedeq* does not appear frequently in this psalm: its only reference is in fact in a verbal form in verse 4 (Hebrew v. 6). Like Ps 143:2, this particular verse *contrasts* God's righteousness with human unrighteousness. Psalm 51:4 might be translated literally, “So that you are righteous [Hebrew: *qal*, imperfect] in your utterance and unblemished in your judgment.” Christian commentators, both in the East and in the West, make as much of this verse as they do of Ps 143:2. However, whereas 143 is understood to be about the nature of *God's* righteousness, Ps 51 is seen to emphasize the nature of human *unrighteousness*. This has focused particularly on verse 5: “Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” In Christian tradition especially, this has led to

²⁶ See Gillingham, *Commentary on Psalms 1–72*, 304–16.

various theories about “original sin”—not just at birth, but at conception, which follows on from verse 4.

Paul, in Rom 3:4, cites verse 4. First he makes the point that there is a great gulf between divine righteousness and human unrighteousness (as he also states in Rom 1:7; 3:21–22; 10:3).²⁷ He universalizes the psalmist’s personal and particular prayer in the same way as when reading Ps 143:2, positing that the psalmist gives such a comprehensive confession as linked to the entire human condition of utter sinfulness. Hence, again, this psalm too is not just about the psalmist, but indeed about everyone.

Augustine’s interpretation is taken from the Latin, which has an even more judicial emphasis: “Ut iustificeris in sermonibus tuis et vincas cum iudicaris”—“That you may be justified in your words and overcome when you are judged” (v. 6 in the Vulgate). Hence, as in 143, Augustine reads the psalm to be about what God in Christ has achieved in offering grace *despite* our sinfulness—from conception to birth to infancy and beyond.

It is ironic that this great “Miserere mei” soon became a model for *penance* as well as penitence. By 598 (the Council of Toledo) Ps 51 was used, with payment of fines, to avoid punishment for sinning, and by the Middle Ages it played a key part in rituals of penance. Luther of course later inveighed against this use, advocating Augustine’s reading: he wrote at least three different commentaries on Ps 51, each of which registered his journey towards a new understanding of justification by faith. His lengthy and final commentary on the psalm in 1532 is entitled “Recognition of Sin and Recognition of Grace.” In over a hundred pages, the overall importance of the psalm was its teaching on justification. Luther’s understanding of verses 4–5 is clear: “The human seed . . . is totally corrupt. The material itself is faulty. The clay . . . is damnable.”²⁸ There is no such thing as human righteousness *per se*: everything needs to be redeemed.

Despite its title, associating this psalm with the king’s adultery, Jewish commentators tend to exonerate David, viewing him as a *model* of repentance. Again, we might see here a reaction to the Christian commentary tradition. In fact, more is made of the need for repentance than in Ps 143: Psalm 51 is actually a penitential psalm for both Yom Kipper and the Sabbath of Passover. But nothing is made of original sin, or of any need for a once-for-all sacrifice offering justification for that sin.

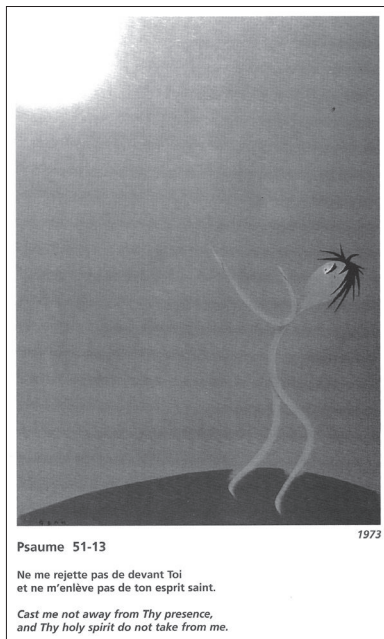
Our conclusion is very similar to that for Ps 143: the psalmist “becomes

²⁷ See Jože Krašovec, “Justification of God and His Word in Psalm 51:4 and Romans 3:4,” in *God’s Righteousness and Justice*, 189–203.

²⁸ Martin Luther, ed. and trans. J. Pelikan, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 12, *Selected Psalms* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1956), 183.

right” by reaching out in trust and believing God can “make” them right again. Again, whether this is offered by God alone, or by God through the work of Christ, is of course the debatable point and the answer is different within different faith traditions. Nevertheless, Ps 51 in particular has such a profound awareness of being “unrighteous” that it can be used by anyone oppressed by unresolved guilt seeking catharsis through repentance.²⁹

Two images, again one Christian and one Jewish, illustrate the diversity of interpretations of Ps 51:4–5. The first is from the twelfth-century *St. Albans Psalter*, an Anglo-Norman product from a Benedictine Abbey, now kept at St. Godehard’s church, Hildesheim.³⁰ All its images are illuminations set in the initial of the first word of each psalm. The one of Ps 51 suggests a church building, and the crowned psalmist urgently asks Christ to have mercy on him for his sins. Christ sends a cleansing ray onto a naked white baby which is held up by its sinful mother. “For behold I was conceived in wickedness: and my mother conceived me in sins; . . . you shall wash me and I shall be made whiter than snow.” This undoubtedly accords with the early Christian readings noted earlier.



²⁹ We might also note that the Muslim prayer “O God, cleanse me from my sins as a white robe is cleansed from dirt” has clear allusions to Ps 51:7 (cited in by E. F. Bishop, “Islam in the Psalter,” *Muslim World* 55, no. 1 [1965]: 19–27, at 27).

³⁰ See albanipsalter.de/stalbanpsalter/english/commentary/page171.shtml.

Benn's artistic representation provides a more shocking interpretation. Here we view a terrified naked soul in a brown abyss looking up to the only warm light in the image—another white dove brightened with the rays of the sun. This illustrates verse 11: "Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me." This also hints at the first two words of the psalm: "miserere mei"—"Lord, have mercy on me." These words are, after all, used both in Jewish prayer, for example in the Eighteen Benedictions, and in Christian prayer, for example, in the Daily Office. Psalm 51, however we read the process by which we receive the righteousness of God, is indeed a model for human repentance.

"Being Right" in Protests of Innocence

Psalms 143 and 51, because of their sense of being unrighteous, each affirmed that only God could "make" them to be right. Psalms which have a profound sense of innocent suffering, and of already being righteous, affirm by contrast that only God can "declare" them to be what they already are—in the right. Here I shall look briefly at just three psalms—7, 17, and 71—because in these different protests of innocence, the relationship between divine and human righteousness is most discussed. Here mercy and forgiveness are not so much the issue, as we saw in the two psalms of penitence: instead, restorative justice is key.

In Ps 7, these protests often use other forms of hendiadys, whereby the psalmist claims to be both "righteous and blameless" (*tsedeq* and *tom*), or "righteous and upright" (*tsedeq* and *yashar*). The first pairing is found in Ps 7:8, which the NRSV translates as "Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness [*ketsidqi*] and according to the integrity [*ketummi*] that is in me," where *tom* also has the sense of utter blamelessness. The second pairing is found in Ps 7: 9–10, where we read that God "establishes the righteous" (*tsadiqim*) and saves "the upright" (*yishre*) in heart.³¹ These pairings emphasize the utter righteousness of this particular psalmist: they could not be more different from the attitude toward "being unrighteousness" which we saw in, for example, Pss 143 and 51.

The psalmist contrasts the physical threats of his enemies (vv. 1–2) with his own innocence (vv. 3–5). His grounds for believing God will help are undoubtedly his own righteousness and integrity (v. 7). Verses 9–11

³¹ Psalm 94:15, for example, which contains a more corporate protest of innocence, places these two terms together: "Justice will return to the righteous [*tsedeq*], and all the upright [*yishre*] in heart will follow it." The same pairing is even more clear in Ps 140:13: "Surely the *righteous* shall give thanks to your name; the *upright* shall live in your presence."

concern again the psalmist's plea that he is one of the righteous (v. 9) and upright (v. 10) which is set alongside addresses to God as righteous, and indeed a righteous judge (vv. 9, 11). Verses 12–16 bring together a theme of natural justice found in other psalms, of the wicked falling into the pit they have dug for others, as in verses 14–16.³² This is set alongside a continuation of the theme of divine intervention (vv. 12–13). The psalm ends with a thanksgiving song praising God for—predictably—his righteousness (v. 17).

No other psalm, other than perhaps 71, exhibits such an interplay between divine *and* human righteousness. Psalm 7 was an embarrassment to the Reformers because of the psalmist's appeal to his *own* righteousness as the grounds for redemption. Luther sought to show that the psalmist was really comparing himself with his enemies, not God, as if he was saying, "in this instance, not guilty."³³ Jewish interpreters, by contrast, read the psalm through David's relationship with Saul, as alluded to in the heading concerning "Cush," and had no such theological problem.

A good example here is the illustration of Ps 7:2 ("like a lion they will tear me apart; they will drag me away, with no one to rescue") from the ninth-century Carolingian *Stuttgart Psalter* (fol. 7r).³⁴ The psalmist is praying in peril, pointing with his left hand to the jaw of the lion as he appeals to God's sense of righteousness to deliver him. The lion's front leg covers the leg of the psalmist as he advances on him, and his jaw is about to fasten on the psalmist's waist. This is one of many gory scenes concerned with persecution, innocent suffering and appeals to God to save and deliver.

In Ps 17, the suppliant similarly pleads they are "in the right" (v. 2): they have not sinned with their lips (v. 1), nor with their heart (v. 3), nor with the paths they have chosen to follow (v. 5). This is a remarkably corporeal psalm, both in terms of the psalmist's references to his own body and in terms of allusions to God's ears (vv. 1, 6), God's eyes (vv. 2, 8), God's lips (v. 4), and his hand (v. 14) and face (v. 16).³⁵ It is as if, by bringing *God's* corporeality into human experience, the psalmist is challenging God to act even more righteously on behalf of suffering humans. Thus, the psalmist's battle with evil is on a par with God's battle with evil. The implication is

³² See Gillingham, *Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1–72*, 68–72. Other relevant psalms include 9:15 and 57:6.

³³ Martin Luther, *Operationes in Psalmos*, cited in H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Commentary*, trans. H. C. Oswald (1961/1979, repr. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988), 172–75.

³⁴ See bit.ly/4i7n9MD.

³⁵ See Gillingham, *Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1–72*, 111–16.

that, if the psalmist can understand what is right and just, how much more should God himself reveal *his* justice and righteousness. The psalm ends with some resolution: “As for me (when I awake) I shall behold your face in righteousness.” God has proved himself worthy the challenge.

The Christian interpretation of this psalm is interesting. Jesus Christ, being sinless, cannot pray the psalms of penitence, but he *is* able to pray the psalms which protest innocence, and this psalm is one of them. Hence, early Latin and early Greek commentators viewed the psalm as an expression of Jesus’s suffering with us and for us, with the corporeal descriptions of God being now interpreted in the light of the Incarnation. Psalm 17 is seen as an extension of a sort of “Gethsemane prayer,” where human righteousness seeks divine acquittal. Several illuminated psalters depict this type of narrative, sometimes in relation to Christ’s prayer to God his Father and sometimes in relation to Christ’s prayer for his Church. The *St. Albans Psalter* does both: for example, its historiated initial *E* (for *Exaudi Domine iustitiam meam*) depicts Christ in the upper section holding a cross, shaped in the letter *T*, and blessing the psalmist, whilst below, the psalmist addresses Christ with one hand and points to the psalm text with the other: “Give ear to my prayer; . . . Protect me under the shadow of your wings.”³⁶

Somewhat surprisingly, Christian commentators make little of the contrast of the psalmist’s pleas for righteousness with the vindictive curses in verses 13–14. In Jewish mysticism, however, *Havdala de-Rabbi* shows how verse 13, spoken forwards then backwards, effects the magical incantation of a curse. There is no inconsistency here: it is all part of the righteous indignation of the psalmist who is imitating the righteous indignation of God.

This is a curious psalm, with several moods and interplays between human and divine righteousness. Like Ps 7, it could not be more different from Pss 143 and 51 in its perception of what it means to “be righteous” before God and what God’s righteousness can affect.

Psalm 71 is also a protest of innocence, with another different take on the same interplay between human and divine righteousness. In this case, the psalmist has more to say about God’s righteousness than about his own. The prayer starts, “In your righteousness deliver me,” but the body of the prayer exhibits more trust and hope in God; it no longer uses the expressions of anger and invective against the enemies, as in Pss 7 and 17. The exception is verse 13, adapting some of the language of the suffering

³⁶ Image at albani-psalter.de/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans096.shtml.

prophet Jeremiah, but the consequence is to increase the psalmist's hope and faith in God: "My mouth will tell of your righteous acts; . . . I will praise your righteousness, yours alone" (vv. 15, 16).³⁷

Jewish commentators have again read this psalm in part historically, alongside Ps 70; it refers to David's agitation at Absalom's bid for the crown. It has also been read corporately, as an expression of Israel's experience in exile. In this sense, the appeal to God's righteousness in suffering is an appeal to his mercy, and in this case is closer to Ps 143.

The same focus on God's mercy, albeit for different reasons, is also found in Luther's commentary on this psalm. The first two verses (like Ps 31:1–2, from which it was probably borrowed) were initially understood by Luther to be a reference to God's avenging *anger*. This was in his early years as an Augustinian friar, when he wrote his *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513–1515). By 1518–1521, however, when he was imprisoned and writing his *Operationes in Psalmos*, Luther saw the vital importance of the words "*your righteousness*": righteousness was a gift of God, so the verse bears witness *not* to God's anger, but to his *mercy*, making the believer righteous by their faith. So, as in the Jewish interpretation, this is more of an appeal to God's mercy in suffering, and trusting faith is an important part of the process. Again, this is closer to Pss 143 and 51. It shows ultimate trust that divine righteousness can vindicate those who exhibit human righteousness not by works, but by acts of faith and trust in God (as in vv. 15–16).

These observations might be illustrated from the ninth-century Carolingian *Utrecht Psalter* from Hautvilliers, with its 160 brown pen-and-ink drawings, and now kept at the University of Utrecht. Like the *Eadwine Psalter*, which it influenced, the *Utrecht Psalter* offers a narrative account of the whole text of each psalm. Psalm 71 (fol. 40r) depicts the bearded psalmist, pointing to his mouth (vv. 8, 23, 24), standing before a tabernacle (v. 3) with drawn curtains revealing a chandelier and asking aid from the Christ-Logos above, who is attended by two angels.³⁸ The psalmist holds a lute with his left hand. Beside him is a harp and what appears to be a pipe organ (vv. 22, 23). To the right is an armed group of the "enemy" who are shouting threats at the psalmist (v. 11). Below him to the left are three demons brandishing tridents and serpents which represent the "troubles" which the psalmist has seen and from which he has been delivered, "from the depths of the earth" (v. 20).

³⁷ See Gillingham, *Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1–72*, 381–85.

³⁸ See psalter.library.uu.nl/page/87.

We have selected only two prayers of penitence (Pss 143 and 51), and only three protests of innocence (Pss 7, 17, and 71), but these five examples together demonstrate just how varied were the psalmists' perceptions of what it meant to "be right" before God.³⁹ These perceptions were dependent in every case on the circumstance of the psalmist and show how cautious we must be in trying to create an all-embracing theology of "righteousness" in the Book of Psalms, particularly when it is based on one or, at the most, two verses within a particular psalm.

Conclusions

With respect to "doing right," the psalmists are not as specifically pragmatic and altruistic as we might expect: there is far less testimony to right action supporting the cause of others. Even with this limited evidence, or perhaps because of it, there is no Jewish-Christian controversy here.

With respect to "being right," Christians and Jews may differ in some details, but actually their overall perceptions are the same. Three examples must suffice. Each faith tradition affirms that divine righteousness is a gift, as an expression of divine mercy, although many Christian commentators from Paul to Augustine to Luther have often put more emphasis on the forensic aspects of this term. Each faith tradition also agrees that "being right" is used in different ways in different psalms, and that claims on divine mercy are made in different ways and for different reasons, although Christians have a tendency to universalize from particular verses to general theological observations. Finally, each tradition also agrees that faith, along with trust and hope, is an important aspect of bringing into action God's ability either to "make us right" or "declare us right," although many Christian commentators would question this distinction in God's acting in righteousness.

As far as the penitential psalms are concerned, Christians emphasize more the process of being *made* right, basing this on their confidence in the Incarnation, Cross, and resurrection of Christ. Jews, meanwhile, tend to look more at the historical David and their covenantal history as *examples* of penitence. Furthermore, as far as psalms protesting innocence are concerned, Christians are less inclined to see the claim to be righteous

³⁹ One issue we never referred to was the rewards given for "being righteous," which again differ from psalm to psalm. In Pss 143 and 51, the only reward requested was to be "made right." In Ps 37, the reward for the righteous was they would "inherit the land" (see similar ideas in 112:2, 3, 9, and 128:2, 3, 6). In Ps 17, the reward was more spiritual, to dwell in God's presence (an idea also evident in Pss 11:7; 92:3–16; 140:13).

(and hence not to have sinned) as being the condition upon which divine righteousness is given, and there is a tendency to assume human “unrighteousness” is part of the human condition. By contrast, the centuries-long Jewish experience of undeserved suffering has profoundly affected an interpretation of protests of innocence, and there is more openness to read these psalms literally—claiming to be righteous by virtue of not having sinned.

Overall, the Book of Psalms has more to say on our aspirations to “be right,” or to see right prevail, than any other biblical book, due to its wide range of theological, psychological, and spiritual implications. And because the psalmists offer so many different reflections on the human condition before God, and how it can or ought to be redeemed, these psalms are open to multivalent readings which depend as much on the reader’s predispositions as on the supposed context of the psalm in question. We have only scratched the surface where this diversity is concerned, but what should be clear is that the Psalter is an anthology of human experiences expressed in prayer and witness to God and the congregation respectively. The Psalter was never intended to offer a synthesized theology by virtue of stressing particular verses in relevant psalms. Hence it is clear to me that there is not one single theology of righteousness, but many different theologies, which make this concept more like a many-sided jewel expressing a myriad of human experiences in wrestling with God in prayer. N:V