

Righteousness in the Book of Isaiah

H. G. M. WILLIAMSON
Christ Church, University of Oxford
Oxford, England

I am acutely aware of the many pitfalls that lie in the pathway that leads from a lengthy and varied biblical book to a coherent portrayal of a single idea. Inasmuch as semantics are bound to come into it, and while we all take on board the strictures of James Barr long ago, there is now quite a menu of approaches on offer.¹ Some are difficult to understand and apply, heavier on theory than on practice, but the clearest recent survey with sensible conclusions that I know is that of Kurtis Peters.² For myself, I take seriously Barr's bottom line that the context (with all that that entails) within which a word occurs in a given text has to be the determinative factor. From there, I like to work upwards to see where this same conclusion may be suitable in other passages as well and at the same time to make full allowance for variety between authors. Furthermore, given that the composition of the texts of the Hebrew Bible probably spans several centuries, only later to be unified as far as possible in the scribal and Masoretic schools, it is almost inevitable that the meanings of some words will have changed over time (as is true of all languages). Finally, given that the total corpus of Classical Hebrew is small and that many lexemes appear only occasionally, a healthy dose of modesty and circumspection is to be encouraged.

Of course, the English word "righteousness" has plenty of its own baggage in current usage, and it scarcely needs saying that, as far as possible, we must empty our minds of the freight that we bring to its application to

¹ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

² Kurtis Peters, *Hebrew Lexical Semantics and Daily Life in Ancient Israel: What's Cooking in Biblical Hebrew?*, Biblical Interpretation Series 146 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

literature of more than two thousand years ago. It often stands in English translations of the Bible for words from the root צדק, and I know of no better way to set about our task than to analyze how these lexemes are used in Isaiah. I shall try to show how well such a very traditional approach in fact illustrates the challenges I have just outlined and that a rather severely diachronic study reaps theological or ideological rewards. I should like to be able to say that redaction-critical methods predominate, as I find very often that this is the most illuminating way in, but as a matter of fact that is not so in this particular case except in the most general of ways.

By way of one other preliminary, it remains uncertain what distinction, if any, can be drawn between the two closely related nouns צדק and צדקה.³ That they are often interchangeable is clear from a comparison of the otherwise closely parallel texts 2 Sam 22:21 and 25, on one side, and Ps 18:21 and 25, on the other. For a short while I toyed with the idea that, in Isa 40–55, צדק refers to human righteousness and צדקה to divine, but even if that is often the case, it is not absolute, as we shall see when later on we look closely at 51:1–8. Equally, there is inconsistency even in stereotyped expressions in 1–39. I shall therefore proceed without making that particular difference a matter for further comment.

According to John Oswalt, there are eighty-one occurrences in the Masoretic Text of words based on the root צדק in the book of Isaiah.⁴ The verb occurs six times, צדיק fourteen times, צדק twenty-five times, and צדקה thirty-six times. In the Hebrew Bible, only Psalms and Proverbs have more, and the next after Isaiah (Ezekiel) has only about half as many occurrences. It is therefore clearly an important motif in the book. On this occasion I shall limit myself to the related pair צדקה–צדק rather than to the verb or to צדיק. The extent to which writers of Classical Hebrew were conscious of the links between words derived from the same root remains an open question.

In the first half of the book, צדקה and צדק are most often applied, whether positively or negatively, to human beings, especially the social elite. For several reasons I want to start with 32:1:

³ See Alfred Jepsen, “צדק und צדקה im Alten Testament,” in *Gottes Wort und Gottes Land: Festschrift für Hans-Wilhelm Hertzberg zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 78–89; Bo Johnson, “Der Bedeutungsunterschied zwischen *šādāq* und *šedaqa*,” *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 11 (1978): 31–39.

⁴ John N. Oswalt, “Righteousness in Isaiah: A Study of the Function of Chapters 55–66 in the Present Structure of the Book,” in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, vol. 1, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 70.1 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 177–91, at 182.

הן לצדק ימלך-מלך ושרים למשפט ישרו

See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice.

As often elsewhere, צדק is here used in close association or parallelism with משפט, but this is the only time when it appears first (contrast v. 16 and following, to go no further). Apart from the fact that this therefore makes it a good starting point for us, we are bound to wonder why. Although this verse has often been taken in Christian circles as a messianic prophecy, it obviously is not, because the second half of the line includes within its vision other political leaders besides the king. Furthermore, the verse is not unlike Prov 8:15–16:

בי מלכים ימלכו ורוזנים יחקקו צדק
בי שרים ישרו וגדיבים כל-שפטי צדק

By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just;
by me rulers rule, and nobles, all who govern rightly.

As in our verse, we find the use of the nouns מלך and שרים with their cognate verbs and an emphasis on צדק by way of being repeated.

These considerations have led me previously to propose that our verse is in fact a proverbial saying which Isaiah cited and then developed in his own way in the following verses.⁵ Indeed, I am attracted to the small minority of commentators who have suggested that the introductory הן might be construed (as certainly sometimes elsewhere) as “a hypothetical particle, propounding a possibility” (an amplified citation from the Brown, Driver, Briggs lexicon [BDB], 243), with the apodosis introduced by the waw at the start of the next verse: “If a king reigns for the furtherance of righteousness, . . . then . . .” Either way, the main point our verse is making is that it is לצדק, “for the furtherance of righteousness,”⁶ which stands first in the saying, that kings should reign; if they do, the blessings of security

⁵ See my *Variations on a Theme: King, Messiah and Servant in the Book of Isaiah* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998), 62–72.

⁶ Not “in righteousness,” as in many translations; see the careful argument in John W. Olley, “Notes on Isaiah xxxii 1, xlv 19, 23 and lxiii 1,” *Vetus Testamentum* 33 (1983): 446–53.

and shelter will be enjoyed by their subjects. While no fixed definition is given here, the following verses imply that righteous rule should be defined widely, and this is something which will be given further specificity in a number of other related passages.

If, on this basis, we continue by looking at passages where *צדק* and *משפט* occur together in Isa 1–39, we find that there are some dozen examples, always with *משפט* standing first, sometimes in direct collocation and sometimes distributed over parallel lines. This pair comes a number of times elsewhere, of course, and has been the subject of special studies by Moshe Weinfeld, Walter Houston, and Jože Krašovec.⁷ With attention also to ancient Near Eastern parallels, Weinfeld concludes that this is effectively a hendiadys with the meaning “social justice.”⁸ His study is synthetic, however, taking all uses into account, whereas our interest here is in any particular features in Isaiah. In addition, the label “hendiadys” may be misleading. Without necessarily getting dragged into the question whether this is appropriate to Classical Hebrew at all,⁹ the fact that the words can be used in either order, and that in different forms they can also be distributed over parallel lines, suggests that each lexeme may retain its own integrity even if modified by this particular element of context as well as others.¹⁰

The first occurrence in Isaiah is at 1:21, where justice and righteousness (*צדק*), as well as faithfulness, once characterized the city. When Isaiah thought this was the case is not explicitly stated, but we may well suppose that, in his opinion, the reign of David represented something of a golden age. For what it is worth, the less common word for city, *קריה*, which is

⁷ David J. Reimer lists about twenty occurrences outside of Isaiah, but curiously omits the first one of all, in Gen 18:19, though there, admittedly, the two words occur in reverse order (“*צדק*,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. William A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997], 3:744–69).

⁸ Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995); Walter J. Houston, “Doing Justice: The Ideology, Theology and Distribution in the Hebrew Bible of *משפט וצדק*,” *Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 22 (2016): 75–99, and Jože Krašovec, *God’s Righteousness and Justice in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022; he deals specifically with Isaiah on pp. 68–110), all overtaking the earlier study by Karl Hj. Fahlgren, *Šedāḳā, nahesteheende und entgegengesetzte Begriffe im Alten Testament* (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1932), 120–38.

⁹ See the very substantial discussion by Rosmari Lillas, “Hendiadys in the Hebrew Bible: An Investigation of the Applications of the Term” (PhD diss., University of Gothenburg, 2012).

¹⁰ For a study of *משפט* in Isaiah, see Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001).

used here, occurs also in association with David at 29:1. The following verses amplify that the degeneration in the present is the fault of the שרים, who stood alongside the king in 32:1. In my understanding of the literary growth of this passage, the original chief indictment was that they were “rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.”¹¹ This puts the focus of attention in particular on perversion of the legal and judicial system, an emphasis that is clearly also uppermost in the use of the participle, abstract noun, and personal noun from צדק at 5:23 (“who acquit [מצדיקי] the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights [צדקת צדיקים]”). This statement in chapter 1 was later amplified by the chapter’s redactor with the more sweeping comment that they are now murderers, and also that they neglect concern for the rights of orphans and widows—a standard trope of concern for the socially disadvantaged, here again with particular reference to their lack of independent standing in law.

This broader meaning seems also to apply to Isaiah’s understanding of the present lack of “justice and righteousness,” as these two words come at the conclusion of the song of the vineyard in 5:7. There we note first that the application of the song in verse 6 is to the people as a whole rather than exclusively the elite. In addition, the indictment is driven as much by a clever word play (צדקה and משפט; צעקה and משפח) as by a concern for precise definition, but it certainly looks as though a general breakdown of civil society is envisaged, albeit in a way which goes beyond the narrowly legal.

As far as the future is concerned, we have already noted Isaiah’s endorsement of a political leadership that once again embraces justice and righteousness, and this same hope surfaces in such famous passages as 9:6, where it will characterize the rule of the new king in a way which brings peace in the international arena as much as, presumably, in the domestic society.¹² This vision for the future of the Davidic dynasty is also prominent at the start of chapter 11, where צדק occurs twice, along with אמונה (though not משפט). There, the application is specifically and rather narrowly judicial (the utopian continuation which follows having been added later, in my opinion, in a way which makes the passage far more messianic).¹³

¹¹ See my commentary, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1–27*, 1: *Isaiah 1–5*, International Critical Commentary (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 126–34.

¹² See 16:5 for a comparable expectation. The phraseology suggests a degree of literary dependence on 9:6 as well to a lesser extent on 11:1–5; but it is all set in an Ezra-like scribal rather than a judicial context. It should certainly be dated much later than Isaiah himself; see my *Variations on a Theme*, 56–62.

¹³ For justification of this proposal, see my *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on*

Moving beyond the royal realm, we find that these qualities will also characterize the restored Zion of 28:16–17:

Therefore thus says the Lord God, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: “One who trusts will not panic.” And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plummet; hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter.

According to verse 14, these words are addressed primarily to the ruling men (משלים) of Zion, whose fault is to have made a “covenant with death,” an uncertain reference which some regard as religious and others as political. Either way, we seem to be moving again into a broader realm than the narrowly judicial. With this may be compared 33:5, which clearly echoes the description of the golden past of 1:21 with a future hope for Zion. Although Zion will be filled with justice and righteousness by God, who is exalted as at 5:16 (see immediately below), they are nevertheless to be exercised by Zion’s citizens. For a similarly broad understanding of future צדקה, see 33:15. The several references in 26:7–10 may also be mentioned here, but of course they are much later in date.

Most of the uses of “righteousness” in Isa 1–39 can be included under the categories I have already summarized. But what needs to be noted now is that all I have spoken about so far concerns human righteousness. There are, in fact, very few references in the first half of the book to the צדק group in relation to God. One example is 5:16. Together with its previous verse, the text reads:

וישח אדם וישפל־איש ועיני גבהים תשפלנה
ויגבה יהוה צבאות במשפט והאל הקדוש נקדש בצדקה

People are bowed down, everyone is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are humbled. But the Lord of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness.

It is at once noteworthy that our familiar word pair appears here, but it is less obvious quite how the passage should be construed. Clearly, verse 15 repeats the familiar, indeed the cardinal, element in Isaianic thought that, beside the exalted God, all human pride will be brought low. The status of

the holy God as “high and lifted up” is fundamental to the call or commissioning scene in Isa 6 (see verse 1), and its centrality to subsequent thought is made especially clear in chapter 2, where indeed some commentators have suggested our present passage originally stood. However foreign to modern sensitivities, Isaiah espoused a hierarchical view of society with God on top, the Davidic king under him, then other leaders in society, and so on down. But unlike usual feudal systems, it was not that those at the bottom should work for the enrichment of those higher up, but rather that those in more exalted positions were responsible for the well-being of those beneath them. Any attempt to usurp this structure by getting ideas above one’s station (i.e., pride and haughtiness) would be met with divine displeasure that would bring the person low. We meet one form or another of this proposition time and again in the writings of Isaiah.

The converse, of course, is that, in verse 16, God quite rightly “is exalted” and “shows himself holy,” but how in this context should we construe the preposition *beth* before the reference to justice and to righteousness? To put the question in brief: is the reference to God’s or to human righteousness? The usual view, with which I am in agreement, is that as God exercises his justice and righteousness in the judgment of the haughty, so he is exalted and seen to be holy.¹⁴ In other words, for God, righteousness includes the maintenance of the proper order of things, which includes as a first principle God’s unique superiority. A comparable uncertainty relates to the use of our word pair in 1:27; I have discussed this at length in my commentary and concluded that it is closest to Trito-Isaiah and that, though justice and righteousness refer to human deeds, the use of the passive “will be ransomed” implies the active role of God in deliverance of the righteous.¹⁵ This close association will be seen later to be characteristic of the last main section of the book.¹⁶

That same principle, albeit in a different sort of context, can also be seen at 10:22, where, “though your people Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness.” Coming in a short passage (10:20–23) which is like a patchwork of allusions to a wide variety of other texts in Isaiah, an explanation is offered as to why the patriarchal promise of innumerable descendants of Abraham and Jacob will for the moment be frustrated.

¹⁴ Contra, e.g., R. W. L. Moberly, “Whose Justice? Which Righteousness? The Interpretation of Isaiah v 16,” *Vetus Testamentum* 51 (2001): 55–68.

¹⁵ Williamson, *Isaiah* 1–5, 155–58.

¹⁶ Separately, one may compare 4:4, where there is a reference to God’s exercise of מִשְׁפָּט in cleansing, but there is no reference there to righteousness.

Verse 23 indicates that the judgment envisaged at the end of chapter 6 is yet to be fulfilled on a universal scale, and our verse introduces that by saying that the same holds true for the remnant, whether in the land or in the diaspora. The expression “overflowing with righteousness” is a slightly odd, because telegraphic, phrase. The picture of something overflowing is used elsewhere to depict the severity of the coming judgment (at 8:8; 28:2, 15, 17, 18, the reference is always to judgment within Israel; at 30:28, it has a more universal application). Given that fact, it follows that our phrase has nothing to do with some form of approval of accompanying human righteousness, but rather that it must refer to God’s righteousness. This is not unlike 5:15–16, where again we saw that it occurred in a context that speaks of the haughty being brought low. The sense, therefore, is to stress that, despite the seeming anomaly of God wreaking destruction even among his supposed own people, the whole procedure will in fact be fully justified; it is righteousness in its most forensic sense: as at 5:16, “the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.”

To summarize this overview of righteousness in Isa 1–39, we may conclude that it refers to people doing what is right, that is to say, appropriate to their standing in society.¹⁷ In my opinion, the frequent association with *משפט* together with explicit contextual pointers in several early passages suggests that we should not take the words as a hendiadys in the formal sense of that word. Rather, for Isaiah, each retains its own integrity, initially in terms of doing the right thing in judicial settings, and then over time broadening that out so that it also covers integrity in the treatment of those towards whom one may have other forms of responsibility. It was once so practiced, and it is anticipated that it will be so again. But in the present it is not. What needs to be stressed in addition, however, is that only twice in all these chapters is righteousness mentioned in association with God, and both those passages are certainly to be dated quite late. In terms of composition history, they will not have been known to the authors of the second main section of the book.

The contrast when we turn to Isa 40–55 could hardly be greater. In the first place, more than half the occurrences refer to God’s righteousness, and in the second place, if the dominant word pair in 1–39 was *צדק* and *משפט*, now the commonest parallel with *צדק* is a derivative of the root *ישע* that relates to “deliverance, salvation” or the like (see 45:8, 21; 46:13;

¹⁷ I therefore note that the debate elsewhere as to whether divine righteousness is to be related primarily with creation or with covenant is not strictly relevant to the usage in Isaiah.

51:5, 6, 8). In addition, it is linked in other verses with: general support and help (41:10); with making Cyrus's path straight and successful (45:13; 41:2); with what God says, parallel with "declaring what is right" (מִישְׁרִים 45:19,); with his word (45:23); with his call to his people to keep them safe so that they may fulfill his wider purposes (42:6); with "strength" as a focus of universal attraction (45:24); with "peace" (48:18); and with freedom from oppression (54:14). Also to be included here is 42:21, where "it pleased the Lord, for his righteousness' sake, to magnify his law and make it glorious"; here again it is explicitly the Lord's righteousness which is in view, but its outworking is rather different, so much so that some commentators view the verse as a later gloss. Even without that, however, the focus on the Torah in this particular regard is unparalleled, even if it might be associated with the late material in 8:19–20.

This is a summary of something that has been frequently studied in the past and the general conclusion widely accepted.¹⁸ In consequence, the word is often translated in these chapters by English equivalents such as "victory," "deliverance," "salvation," "triumph," and "vindication." While I do not disagree with the general drift of the exegesis that leads to such proposals, and while I can see that there are some kinds of modern paraphrastic translations where such a rendering might be justified, it will be readily understood from my previous comments that I do not agree with the all-too-common assertion that, in Isa 40–55, צדקה "means" victory or whatever. From the point of view of semantic method, I think it would be preferable to say that victory and so on are the outcome of God's acting in צדקה. His character is such that, when dealing with his people in the negative context of exile, the appropriate manner for him to act, his צדקה, is to deliver, to grant victory to his agent in deliverance, and so on. To that extent, the direction of travel in Charles Whitley's generally dismissed article on the subject has something to be said for itself, even if he carried his analysis well beyond the point of credibility.¹⁹ God's righteousness is the ground and cause of deliverance, not the deliverance itself. Christopher

¹⁸ A number of older studies are summarized in John J. Scullion, "Sedeq-sedaqah in Isaiah cc. 40–66, with Special Reference to the Continuity in Meaning between Second and Third Isaiah," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 3 (1971): 335–48. Of more recent studies, we may note especially Friedrich V. Reiterer, *Gerechtigkeit als Heil: צדק bei Deuteronesaja; Aussage und Vergleich mit der alttestamentlichen Tradition* (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1976).

¹⁹ Charles F. Whitley, "Deutero-Isaiah's Interpretation of *Sedeq*," *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972): 469–75.

North's terse summary is appropriate: "Righteousness as vindicated, i.e. 'victory,' 'prosperity.'" ²⁰

It needs to be noticed next that this is not all that is to be said about צדקה in Isa 40–55. As already hinted, there are uses of it in these chapters which apply to people, not God. In 48:1, for instance, the audience is criticized for not invoking God's name in truth or in righteousness. Somewhat comparably, in 48:18 we find the mournful cry of the poet, which is rendered in the RV (1885) as:

O that you had hearkened to my commandments! Then your peace
would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves
of the sea,

but which the NRSV has drastically distorted, in my opinion, by translating:

O that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your
prosperity would have been like a river, and your success like the
waves of the sea.

Interestingly, this is the only place in the whole of 40–66 where there is a mention of God's commandments, מצות (and it is rare in 1–39 as well). There is admittedly scope for discussion of which commandments are in view, but the main point for us is that human righteousness in both verses seems now to be on the path towards response to God's initiative. Failure in this regard precludes enjoyment of the full benefits that he has on offer. ²¹

In recent research, Isa 54:17 has come to prominence as a key verse, so much so that, for some commentators, it is now treated as marking the conclusion of Deutero-Isaiah, rather than chapter 55, as has been traditional. ²² The main focus has been on the introduction of the plural "servants"—עבדי יהוה—which in the last section of the book as a whole

²⁰ Christopher R. North, *The Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Commentary to Chapters XL–LV* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), 93.

²¹ See John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, vol. 2, *Commentary on Isaiah 44.24–55.13*, International Critical Commentary (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 124: "No doing of right by God that matches God's doing of right by them."

²² See, for instance, Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* Anchor Bible 19A (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 368–69; Ulrich Berges, "Where Does Trito-Isaiah Start in the Book of Isaiah?," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Chronological and Thematic Development in Isaiah 40–66*, ed.

seems to replace or develop from the standard singular “servant” of many famous passages in the preceding chapters. Intriguing though that development may be, it is something else which attracts our attention just now:

no weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD and their vindication [צדקתם] from me, says the LORD.

Here again, the servants’ “righteousness,” just like the parallel “heritage” (נחלה), results from God’s prior protection of them in conflict and in word.

Let me try to bring these remarks on Isa 40–55 together by a look at the remarkable passage in 51:1–8, which contains no fewer than five occurrences of צדקה/צדק. The passage is divided into three stanzas, clearly marked by the introductory שמעו אלי in verses 1 and 7 and the very similar הקשיבו אלי in verse 4. (Incidentally, the following passage, 51:9–52:2, has an identical structure of two repeated introductions to its first and third stanzas and a more or less synonymous introduction to its second: עורי עורי at 51:9 and 52:1, and התעוררי התעוררי in 51:17, but we cannot pursue that here.)

There is clearly some kind of progress from the first stanza to the third, in that in the first the addressees are called “you that pursue righteousness” (רדפי צדק), whereas by the third they have become “you that know righteousness” (ידעי צדק). There are important elements in the context to suggest that “righteousness” here has the sense of deliverance from the despondency of the exile. The people are encouraged to look to Abraham and Sarah as a source of inspiration, and this is followed by an assurance that God has comforted Zion, bringing fertility and joy. Furthermore, at the end of the second stanza, God assures the listeners that “my salvation (ישועתי) shall be for ever, and my righteousness (צדקתי) shall not be abolished” (RV), whereas the third stanza ends with the comparable assurance that “my righteousness shall be for ever, and my salvation unto all generations.” We thus find the parallelism of צדקה and ישועה we have already seen, but with the order of their use reversed between the two occurrences. God’s righteousness as deliverance is thus prominent in this passage.

In my opinion, however, that is not the end of the story. This may be one of the occasions where a distinction is deliberately maintained

between צדקה and צדק in order to make the train of thought clear. Rather remarkably, whereas in the places already noted the former clearly refers to God's work in deliverance and the latter to that which the audience pursues and then finds, we also find this latter form used once of God in the second stanza. There, including a rather obvious allusion to the famous 2:2–4, we read:

Listen to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation; for a law [תורה] will go forth from me, and my justice [משפטי] for a light to the peoples. My righteousness [צדקי] draws near speedily, my salvation [ישעי] has gone forth, and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope. (51:4–5)

Here, unlike later on, God's deliverance, parallel with his salvation, derives from his צדק, and seems to be closely associated with his universal Torah. It is surely not coincidental that then, in the third stanza, those who "know righteousness" are further described as "the people in whose heart is my Torah." My suggestion, therefore, is that our author maintains a deliberate and clear distinction in this passage between צדקה and צדק. In particular, the latter refers to the human desire for righteousness, attained by what we might call the internalization God's universal Torah: "you who know" and "in whose heart." The close association of God's righteousness in deliverance is integrally associated with the people's appropriation of his Torah as their corresponding expression of righteousness.

There is no doubt that, as already indicated, "righteousness" in Isa 40–55 is predominantly a divine attribute that leads to such beneficial outcomes as deliverance and support of his oppressed people. The frequently expressed opinion that this is all that is to be said is mistaken, however. There are a few occasional uses of righteousness which are admittedly somewhat different from the bulk of uses in 1–39, primarily because they are always closely associated in their respective contexts with God's exercise of righteousness. Once again, therefore, what we might call the content of righteousness is determined by the kind of behavior appropriate to the person's or group's wider circumstances.

The third main part of the book of Isaiah is introduced by a verse of great relevance to our theme. It was the subject of a brief but very influential article by Rolf Rendtorff, to whom great credit is due even though there is an important aspect of his analysis where I differ from him.²³ The verse reads:

²³ Rolf Rendtorff, "Jesaja 56,1 als Schlüssel für die Komposition des Buches Jesaja,"

כה אמר יהוה שמרו משפט ועשו צדקה
כִּי־קְרוּבָה יְשׁוּעַת לְבוֹא וְצַדִּיקְתִּי לְהַגְלוֹת

which the RSV renders:

Thus says the LORD: Keep justice, and do righteousness,
for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

In the first line, צדקה follows in parallel with משפט, which makes the association with chapters 1–39 obvious. It is true that a comparable command may be found elsewhere too (e.g., Jer 22:3), but influence from earlier in Isaiah is the most probable, not least because the same will follow in the second half of the verse. The audience is commanded by God to fulfill the requirement which in the first part of the book they signally failed to do. There is no specific content here; perhaps appropriate to the introductory nature of the verse, it is left wide open.²⁴ In the second line, God speaks of his own צדקה, this time parallel with יְשׁוּעַתִּי. This, of course, draws on the common usage in the second half of the book. Occasionally, earlier commentators said that these two completely different meanings of צדקה were so contradictory that they could not both stand together, but Rendtorff's insight that we have here a deliberate attempt to unite the two previous parts of the book has been found widely persuasive.

At the diachronic level, I think it probable that this verse (and those which immediately follow) was framed at a late stage in the light of some of that which follows in the rest of 56–66, so that its importance as a literary or redactional join within the overall composition history of the book is

in *Kanon und Theologie: Vorarbeiten zu einer Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), 172–79 [English translation: “Isaiah 56:1 as a Key to the Formation of the Book of Isaiah,” in *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology*, trans. and ed. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 181–89]. Also building on Rendtorff's work, but with a focus on “salvation/deliverance” (which often appears in association with “righteousness,” as we have seen), Hibbard finds a rather more consistent pattern in chapters 56–66 than I do in the following; see J. Todd Hibbard, “From Name to Book: Another Look at the Composition of the Book of Isaiah with Special Reference to Isaiah 56–66,” in *A Teacher for All Generations: Essays in Honor of James C. VanderKam*, ed. Eric F. Mason et al., Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 153/1–2 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 133–49.

²⁴ For links with the immediately following verses, however, see, for instance, Ulrich Berges, “Trito-Isaiah and the Reforms of Ezra/Nehemiah: Consent or Conflict?” *Biblica* 98 (2017): 173–90, esp. 184–88; Judith Gärtner, “‘Keep Justice!’ (Isaiah 56.1): Thoughts Regarding the Concept and Redaction History of a Universal Understanding of *Ṣedaqa*,” in *Ṣedaqa and Torah in Postexilic Discourse*, ed. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher and Maria Häusl (LHBOTS 640; London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017), 86–99.

enhanced. As we shall see shortly, it gives expression to some emphases in what follows that allow us at the synchronic level to agree that it makes an admirable introduction to the last part of the book in a way that ties it all together with the two large preceding parts.

I disagree with Rendtorff, however, when (like many before him) he focuses on the translation of the word as posing an almost insoluble challenge (see the LXX before him!), or when he says “we find two different concepts of צדקה.” What neither he nor others seem to realize is that it is not “righteousness” as such that is the difficulty, so much as the fact that, as also between the two preceding parts of the book, what matters is whose righteousness we are referring to, humans’ or God’s. Given that the verse is perfectly clear that the first line refers to one and the second to the other, the two lines may be held together without difficulty: as the conjunction ו makes clear, the exercise of God’s righteousness in deliverance will enable the audience to exercise their own. We have seen that, in two or three passages in Deutero-Isaiah, this juxtaposition was already adumbrated. I shall now look at uses of the word elsewhere in the third part of the book to see how this may have been adopted and strengthened.

Working diachronically, I begin with Isa 60–62, on the ground that these chapters are widely agreed to stand closest ideologically to 40–55. That seems clear enough in regard to 61:10–11 (and see too 60:17), where in a joyful hymn of praise the singer gives as the substantiation that:

He has clothed me with the garments of salvation [יִשׁוּעַ], he will cover me with the robe of righteousness [צִדְקָה], as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

A little later he also rejoices that “the Lord God will cause righteousness [צִדְקָה] and praise to spring forth before all the nations.” If there is any development over the picture in Deutero-Isaiah, it might just be worth noting that there is a change of tense in the case of the first line I quoted: “he has clothed me . . . he will cover me.” This may just be the kind of variation that we find sometimes elsewhere in parallel poetic cola, and most English translations keep them both the same, but an independent preterite would be unlikely in so late a text, and it may be that there is an indication here that יִשׁוּעַ is a precondition that leads to צִדְקָה, which would certainly fit well with the direction of travel I have begun to follow.

This is taken a step further in the two verses immediately following, 62:1–2:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication [צדקה (*sidqâh*)] goes forth as brightness, and her salvation [ישועתה] as a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication [צדקך], and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name which the mouth of the LORD will give.

The parallelism that was formerly indicative of God's acting in righteousness is now ascribed to Zion/Jerusalem, and that in a way that will shine as a light to the nations. There seems to me to be an allusion here to 51:4–5, discussed above. Although some of the vocabulary is different ("light" there for "brightness" and "burning torch" here, for instance), the impact on the nations is comparable. The major shift is that God's untrammelled righteousness there, which was internalized in the following stanza of that poem, is now ascribed directly to Zion as her own.

In a sense, these verses spell out what was previously simply adumbrated. Isaiah 61:3 strikes me in this light as somewhat ambiguous: "... to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified." John Goldingay initially finds here a reference "to the divine commitment to doing right by the community," which, as he observes, is very much in line with the main usage in 40–55. But he also notes that, if 59:8 and 60:21 (where there is a reference to the צדיק) are brought into the picture, then a reference to the people's commitment might also be implied.²⁵ This is in line with Mark Gignilliat's more far-reaching investigation of the expression in the light of horticultural imagery elsewhere in Isaiah, concluding that "the term 'righteous' here in Isaiah 61 is located within this dual understanding of righteousness as both gift and obligation."²⁶

In chapters 57–59, which may include a response to the idealized vision of 60–62, the picture is more mixed and not always clear. At 58:2 we are close to the world of the first part of the book, with its talk of "doing righteousness" in parallel with asking after God's justice (משפט), and then in the following line we have the otherwise unparalleled combination of these two words in the construct phrase צדק משפטי (RV, "righteous

²⁵ John Goldingay, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56–66*, International Critical Commentary (London: T & T Clark, 2014), 306.

²⁶ Mark Gignilliat, "Oaks of Righteousness for His Glory: Horticulture and Renewal in Isaiah 61,1–4," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 123 (2011): 391–405, at 403.

ordinances"). A familiar trope is thus exploited in an idiosyncratic manner. Later in the chapter, at 58:8, in a clear echo of the exodus motif that is also used earlier in 52:12, God's righteousness and glory will serve as an advance- and rear-guard to the people on the condition that they give proper care to the hungry, poor, and naked. This is a single example where God's intervention, expressed in a familiar manner, is said to be dependent on the people's prior faithfulness.

Alongside these loose uses of our theme from earlier in the book, we find a comparable use of that from the second half of the book in 59:16–17, when God declares:

He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intervene; then his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as a mantle.

Here, צדקה is twice paralleled with ישע—once as a verb and once as a noun, and in second and first position, respectively. What is unusual here, of course, is that God is said initially to have expected some human individual to undertake the work of deliverance, a task not previously suggested, even for Cyrus. In line with this, the clothing image that we saw already in 61:10–11 is now applied to God rather than the psalmist (Zion?). The parallels with 63:1–6, where one who turns out to be none other than God himself, comes as a warrior who "speaks in righteousness [בצדקה], mighty to save [רב להושיע]," have been frequently noted.

Again, earlier in this same chapter, at 59:9 and 14 (and cf. v. 4), we find the familiar pairing with משפט. In the latter case, it comes as part of a confession which admits to the lack of these virtues, so very much in line with the uses in chapters 1–39. In the former case, however, which again bemoans their absence, the wider context suggests that the author may here have God's justice and judgment in mind, strengthened by the observation that in verse 11 we have an unprecedented paralleling of משפט and ישועה.

In 57:12 we have a unique parallelism of righteousness with "works" in what may well be an ironic statement: "They will not profit you." While the matter is not certain, it may be that the reference to "your works" is to idols. If so, "righteousness" would now be narrowed to the rather specific sense of hypocritical worship of God alongside illicit cultic practices. This would be the only occurrence where the word is applied in a specific cultic context.

These examples, I suggest, indicate that previous rather strict uses of word pairs are no longer being observed: in an almost baroque style, familiar language and motifs are used without considered regard for their original meanings. The effect on the one hand is to give enormous rhetorical emphasis to the statements that God alone can work in righteousness in the sense of deliverance, and on the other that the requirement for members of the community to practice justice and righteousness remains, even if what that entails is adapted to the current somewhat different circumstances.

My conclusion with regard to Isa 56–66 is thus that we have something of a mixed bag. In what I take to be the earliest part (60–62) we are in reasonably familiar territory, albeit with a strengthening of the motif that Zion (or however we wish to designate the faithful community) increasingly makes its own those features of God's faithfulness which were usually, though not quite exclusively, his alone in chapters 40–55. There were also less strongly expressed indications that the obligation on the human participants was not completely overlooked. In the later material, however, the picture became more mixed. Certainly, the requirement that God alone act in righteousness so far as deliverance is concerned was underlined, but the human obligation side, though far from absent, seems to have become even more general in content than it was before. The juxtaposition of divine and human righteousness in 56:1 is thus entirely appropriate, not just because it juxtaposes human and divine righteousness in terms familiar from the preceding part of the book, but also because it serves as a hermeneutical guideline to help the reader steer through the more mixed presentation that is to follow.

So, what may we conclude about righteousness in Isaiah? From the point of view of composition history, this might be added to quite a number of themes in Isaiah that others have studied in relatively recent times both to trace development over time and also to see how later insights are sometimes reflected back into earlier parts of the book in redaction-critical terms. In the present case I have found only a few relevant late references in the first part of the book and have not had space here to focus much on that. But my comments on 56:1 illustrate the sort of thing I have in mind. In the case of some themes, the presentations in different parts of the book seem sometimes to be almost irreconcilable with each other; mercifully, that has not been the case with righteousness.

In terms of definition—what righteousness is—I have tried to show that apparent different meanings of צדקה / צדק are more in the eyes of the commentators than in the textual data themselves. Stretching as far back

as the LXX, the compulsion to translate into other languages in a way that takes wider contextual considerations into account may be laudable, but I believe it is also semantically flawed.²⁷ To be righteous is to act in an honorable manner appropriate to the subject's social and moral position. For human beings, given that Isaiah seems mainly to address the elite in a class-based society, the right and unbiassed administration of justice together with wider considerations of responsibility for those lower down in the social spectrum predominates, and it is perhaps not surprising that, for the most part, in the heart of the book around which the first and third parts revolve, God's righteousness towards his exiled and dispirited people will inevitably involve deliverance and support. And then, as we read further, we find that these two emphases are not opposed. Rather, it becomes clear that the practice of the first is dependent on the prior experience of the second (we have found only one exception that rule), and as that eventually works out, so the people even begin to adopt God's righteousness in their relation to the nations.

This is therefore a rich and incremental theme. To what extent it coincides with the use of צדקה / צדק elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible I am not yet sure,²⁸ but its use in Isaiah is surely quite enough for one day. NEV

²⁷ In this regard, it is noteworthy that in post-biblical Hebrew צדקה came to refer specifically to deeds of charity (rather as in the Aramaic of Dan 4:24); see Alyssa M. Gray, *Charity in Rabbinic Judaism: Atonement, Rewards, and Righteousness* (London: Routledge, 2019).

²⁸ An obvious place to start would be the Psalms; see Megan Daffern, "Keeping Company in the *Psalms*: Ethics and Exegesis," in *The Exegetical and the Ethical: The Bible and the Academy in the Public Square: Essays for the Occasion of Professor John Barton's 70th Birthday*, ed. Hywel C. Clifford and Megan I. J. Daffern, Biblical Interpretation Series 197 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 102–22.