

Social Justice in the Kingdom of God

Tim Little

Abstract: Social justice advocates promote a different justice than biblical justice. Biblical justice is defined by righteousness which is connected to the character of God; whereas, social justice is defined by equality qualified through postmodern philosophy. This equality, they claim, should permeate all social institutions (competitive markets, family, etc.). Some even claim social justice concerns not only equal opportunity, but equal outcome. While there is ontological equality in the kingdom of God, there is not economic equality. Social justice promotes equal opportunity and the distribution of wealth, but the kingdom of God, however, will favor the nation of Israel and wealth will be consolidated in Jerusalem. Social justice feeds off sinful man's covetousness; whereas, biblical justice promotes righteousness and contentment.

Key Words: Kingdom of God, social justice, biblical justice, ontological equality, economic equality

Introduction

Social justice has become a lightning rod topic in our culture. Social justice concerns the academy and the masses. "Wrong" decisions can be politically, socially, and financially ruinous. Building upon a postmodern culture, social justice thrives upon lies, deceit, ambiguity, and confusion. One of the primary challenges with social justice is a definition. This movement prospers in a postmodern culture because proponents can read whatever meaning they want into the words and become a proponent of social justice. Who would not want to associate with social justice? As a result, many people subscribe to social justice as they perceive it. The lack of clear definition is

Tim Little, Ph.D., serves as a professor in Old Testament at Faith Baptist Theological Seminary in Ankeny, IA. He can be reached at little@faith.edu.

compounded because grassroots organizations have sprouted up supporting social justice.² Lee Staples encourages “collective action through community organizing . . . to overcome unjust social relations and achieve changes that further human rights, participatory democracy, and distributive justice.”³ Staples’s quotation also illustrates the diversity within the movement. This article first defines biblical justice and social justice. It will be demonstrated that the social justice movement would be better named social covetousness, for there is little biblical justice within the movement. The social justice movement has more in common with the seven sins which the Lord hates (Prov 6:16–19) and the injustice which the Messiah overthrows (Isa 59) than anything his arm will establish on this earth (Isa 59:15b–60:22).

Definitions

The biblical idea of justice is different from the contemporary meaning of social justice. Semantically, righteous/righteousness (צדקה, צדק) and judgment/justice (משפט) can refer to justice in the Hebrew Bible and they occur about seventy-five times together.⁴ Wytsma recognized the parallel uses of righteous and judgment and concluded “they meant the same thing—roughly, the right relationship between God, self, others, and creation.”⁵ A

² Peter Gundelach defines grassroots organizations as follow: “Grass roots organizations are a rather recent phenomenon. In the project they are defined as ‘local political organizations which seek to influence conditions not related to the working situation of the participants and which have the activity of the participants as their primary resource’” (Peter Gundelach, “Grass Roots Organizations,” *Acta Sociologica* 22, no. 2 [April 1979]: 187).

³ Lee Staples, “Community Organizing for Social Justice: Grassroots Groups for Power,” *Social Work with Groups* 35, no. 3 (July 1, 2012): 287.

⁴ Search results using Accordance Bible Software. Johnson lists about 80 times together (B. Johnson, “קִדְּשׁ,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, 15 vols. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974–2015], 12:247).

⁵ Ken Wytsma, *The Myth of Equality: Uncovering the Roots of Injustice and Privilege*, exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 107.

judgment (משפט), however, may be either right (Isa 56:1; 58:2)⁶ or wrong (Hos 10:4; Hab 1:4), but righteousness (צדק) pertains to what is right. Johnson explains that the words “are not synonymous. The semantic field of ‘decision, judgment, law’ attaches to *mišpāt*, while *šdq* focuses on the principle of ‘what is right, correct.’”⁷ Judgment (משפט) and righteousness (צדק, צדקה) are frequently used together, sometimes as a hendiadys.⁸ A hendiadys, according to Watson, “is the expression of one single but complex concept by using two separate words, usually nouns.”⁹ One function of the hendiadys is to extend the existing vocabulary.¹⁰ Moberly explains the use of this hendiadys creates “a differing semantic range from that of *š^edaqâ* on its own.”¹¹ “Righteous” ascribes an attribute to the judgment—right judgment.¹² This idea of a right judgment approximates the contemporary idea of “justice.” Correctly defining justice requires a study of righteousness more than judgment (משפט). Justice could be biblically defined as the judicial enforcement of

⁶ Johnson explains, “A just cause coincides with the substance of a right verdict. In this context *mišpāt* often has the meaning ‘what is right and proper, righteousness’ (B. Johnson, “משפט,” in TDOT 9:93).

⁷ B. Johnson, “צדק,” in TDOT, 12:248.

⁸ Judgment and righteousness (משפט וצדקה) occur 23 times, righteousness and judgment (צדקה ומשפט) three times, righteous and judgment (צדק ומשפט) four times, and judgment and righteous (משפט וצדק) two times for a total of 32 times. Not every use in these searches are hendiadys constructions. Search results generated using Accordance Bible Software.

⁹ Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2005), 324–25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 327. There are other functions of the hendiadys. It could be evoking a word-pair as well. But if it is evoking a word-pair, one might wonder why the word-pair is being evoked? It could be for a poetic reason, or it could be to further explain the kind of justice, righteous justice. Moberly agrees (R. W. L. Moberly, “Whose Justice? Which Righteousness? The Interpretation of Isaiah V 16,” *Vetus Testamentum* 51, no. 1 [January 2001]: 60).

¹¹ Moberly, “Whose Justice?,” 60.

¹² Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2000), 2:652.

God's righteousness. Judgment (משפט) frequently means "justice" because the writer implies that the judgment is *right* (cf. Isa 1:17, 21, 27; 56:1).¹³ What makes the judgment *right*, however, is righteousness.

Defining Biblical Justice

This section begins to create a definition of biblical justice based upon four principles of righteousness. First, God defines what is right. Wayne Grudem writes, "God's righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right."¹⁴ In Genesis 18:25, for example, Abraham describes the Lord as "the judge (שפט) of all the earth."¹⁵ The judge of all the earth exacts judgments according to God's righteous laws and expected the same of earthly judges (Deut 1:16–17; Prov 17:15).¹⁶ Wildberger describes the Lord as "the protector of justice and guardian of righteousness."¹⁷ The Lord is the one who defines righteousness.¹⁸

Second, God's righteous judgment does not change. Deuteronomy 32:4 employs five different words to describe God's unmovable moral character, "The rock [the Lord], perfect (תמים) is his work; because all his ways are just (משפט); a God of faithfulness (אמונה) and there is not injustice (עול); righteous

¹³ Johnson explains, "A just cause coincides with the substance of a right verdict" (B. Johnson, "משפט," in TDOT 9:92).

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 203.

¹⁵ For additional scriptural support that the Lord is the standard of righteousness see Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16; 50:7; Zephaniah 2:3; Psalm 96:13; 98:9 119:75. In Psalm 119:75 the psalmist exclaims that even in times of affliction (ענה), God's judgments (משפט) are right (צדק).

¹⁶ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 52.

¹⁷ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 64.

¹⁸ B. Johnson, "צדק," in TDOT 12:243. See also Moberly, "Whose Justice?," 63; and E. R. Hayes, "Justice, Righteousness," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. G. McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 467.

(צדִיק) and upright (יֵשֶׁר) is he.”¹⁹ Describing the Lord as a “rock” instructs the reader in another attribute of God—his immutability.²⁰ While the world may change its views concerning right and wrong, God does not. One manner in which God is unchangeable in Deuteronomy 32:4 concerns his character—justice.

Third, righteousness includes not only external actions but internal motivations.²¹ In Psalm 15, the choir master asks, “Who can dwell in your holy mountain?” The response includes what could be the beginning of a definition of righteousness, “one who walks perfectly (תָּמִים); one who works righteousness (צַדִּיק); and one who speaks truth (אֱמֶת) in his heart.” This last phrase explains that one must not only speak the truth, but must speak truth in one’s heart. Allen Ross explains, “This added description [in his heart] requires the sincerity of the speaker and the accuracy of what is spoken. There can be no guile, no hidden agenda, no half-

¹⁹ All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted. See also Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 203; William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3d ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 292.

²⁰ Craigie explains, “The epithet or name, *Rock*, emphasizes the stability and permanence of the God of Israel. It is one of the principal themes in the song (see also vv. 15, 18, 30, 31 and compare v. 37), stressing the unchanging nature of the God of the covenant and contrasting with the fickle nature of the covenant people” (Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 378.

²¹ Methodologically, this section borrows from von Rad and defines righteousness as what creates a relationship with the Lord. See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1967), 370–77. Von Rad analyzes Psalms 15 and 24, the “liturgies of the gate.” This method builds off of the holiness of God. Goldingay writes, “‘Holy One’ is the most fundamental description of Yhwh” (John Goldingay, *Israel’s Faith*, Old Testament Theology [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006], 22). He writes, “In Christian parlance ‘holy’ is a moral category; it points to the absolute integrity, uprightness, goodness and righteousness of God, to be reflected by those who claim to belong to God” (ibid., 23).

truths. The truth that is spoken must be sincere; it must be the intent of the heart.”²²

In Psalm 15:4 the Psalmist continues describing the person who “can dwell in the Lord’s holy mountain” and the attributes continue to address the intentions of the heart: “A worthless one is despised in his eyes; but the ones who fear the Lord he honors; he swears to his hurt, but he does not change *the terms*.” The righteous one despises the “worthless.” Görg explains that “every offense against the will of Yahweh implies a *bazah*, ‘contempt, despising,’ of Yahweh.”²³ One who *despises* the Lord (the worthless one), the righteous *should despise* (it is a word-play). Instead of desiring the things of the wicked, the righteous despise the wicked.²⁴ The final characteristic here gives a powerful example of keeping one’s word. Even if one will suffer damage (financial, reputation, etc.), one must keep their word. Additional acts of righteousness could be added to this list.

Fourth, according to Psalm 15, righteousness does not include the following: slander, evil (רעה) to others, sharp criticism (חרפה), lend money with interest (greed), and take a bribe.

Consulting other passages could create an extensive list of righteous and unrighteous deeds. These lists serve as a basis for condemning not only the social justice movement, but any aspect of a culture that uses slander, reproach, disinformation, and lies to promote its agenda.

Justice in the Messianic Kingdom

The Messianic kingdom will be a kingdom of *righteous* judgment. The Messianic king will be the executor of justice, his kingdom will be a kingdom of justice, and his people will be a people of justice. Everything concerning the Messianic king and his kingdom will be characterized by justice. Isaiah 1:26–27

²² Allen P. Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 1 (1-41)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011), 391.

²³ M. Görg, “בזה,” in TDOT, 2:62.

²⁴ Ross agrees, “This is contrary to popular culture in which people tend to idolize many who are vile and worthless. John reminds believers not to love the world or the things that are in the world, for they are passing away (1 John 2:15–17)” (*Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 1 [1-41]*, 392).

explains, “Then I will bring back your judges like in the beginning, and your counselors like at the first; after this it will be called of you; The City of Righteousness (צדקה); The Town of Truth (נאמנה); Zion, with judgment (משפט), will be redeemed; and her penitents, with righteousness (צדקה).” When the Messianic king returns, the Adulteress City (Isa 1:20) will be reconstituted as the City of Righteousness because her king is righteous. Isaiah 9:7 (H:6) explains, “Upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom; to establish it, and to sustain it; in judgment (משפט) and in righteousness (צדקה), from now and until forever; the zeal of the Lord of armies will do this.” Thus, according to Isaiah 9:7 (H:6), the Messianic king and his kingdom will be characterized by justice.²⁵

The Messianic king’s kingdom can be a kingdom of justice because of the manner of his judgment: “And not according to the sight of his eyes will he judge (שפט); and not according to the hearing of his ears will he rebuke (יכה)” (Isa 11:3). The Messianic king will judge according to the intentions of the heart. Jesus exemplified this kind of judgment during his first coming (Luke 6:8; John 13:11). This point concerning the Messianic kingdom cannot be understated. It is only through the Messianic king’s physical rule that biblical justice can be meted out. Finite man will never be able to bring about justice upon the earth because he lacks the Messianic perception required for justice (Ecc1 5:8).

Defining Social Justice

Defining the social justice movement is like trying to hit a moving target. Religious organizations and ministries advocate for social justice as a means of helping the unfortunate within society. These organizations, however, are rarely concerned with corrupt judges and injustice. Instead, they perform acts of compassion to the poor and marginalized within their

²⁵ Motyer does not recognize the hendiadys, but he does recognize the distinction between the משפט and צדקה, “The divine holiness will be perfectly manifested in true procedures (*justice*) which reflect righteous principles (*righteousness*).” See J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 103.

community.²⁶ Others promote controversial political agendas which some would call unjust.²⁷ Authors employ the term without definition.²⁸ Definitions which are given are covered in nuance and verbose. For example, after explaining there are “many different kinds of things [that] are said to be just and unjust,” John Rawls then notes,

Our topic, however, is that of social justice. For us the primary subject of justice is the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation. By major institutions I understand the political constitution and the principal economic and social arrangements. Thus the legal protection of freedom of thought and liberty of conscience, competitive markets, private property in the means of production, and the monogamous family are examples of major social institutions. Taken together as one scheme, the major institutions define men’s rights and duties and influence their life prospects, what they can expect to be and how well they can hope to do. The basic structure is the primary subject of justice because its effects are so profound and present from the start. The intuitive notion here is that this structure contains

²⁶ “Social Justice Ministry,” *St. John the Baptist Catholic Parish*, accessed November 2, 2019, <https://www.sjbnewburgh.org/Social-justice-ministry>; “Social Justice Ministry,” *Christ the Redeemer Catholic Church*, accessed November 2, 2019, <https://ctrec.org/social-justice-ministry>; “Social Justice at UUCS,” *Unitarian Universalist Church of Savannah*, accessed November 2, 2019, <https://www.uusavannah.org/>.

²⁷ “Social Justice Issues,” *First Baptist Church*, accessed November 2, 2019, <https://www.firstbaptistithaca.org/socialjustice.html>; Ebenezer Baptist Church Atlanta, “Social Justice Ministry – Ebenezer Baptist Church,” n.d., accessed November 2, 2019, <https://ebenezeratl.org/social-justice-ministry/>.

²⁸ Robert C Fennell, “Theological Foundations for Social Justice: Another World Is Possible,” *Touchstone* 33, no. 2 (June 2015): 5–12; John D Delehanty, “Prophets of Resistance: Social Justice Activists Contesting Comfortable Church Culture,” *Sociology of Religion* 77, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 37–58; Alfonso Wieland, “Social Justice and the Mission of the Church,” *Journal of Latin American Theology* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 99–102.

various social positions and that men born into different positions have different expectations of life determined, in part, by the political system as well as by economic and social circumstances. In this way the institutions of society favor certain starting places over others. These are especially deep inequalities. Not only are they pervasive, but they affect men's initial chances in life; yet they cannot possibly be justified by an appeal to the notions of merit or desert. It is these inequalities, presumably inevitable in the basic structure of any society, to which the principles of social justice must in the first instance apply.²⁹

Several words in Rawls's definition require explanation. He defines the "major social institutions" as the "political constitution and the principal economic and social arrangements." Because that definition did not clarify much, he then clarifies further, "the legal protection of freedom of thought and liberty of conscience, competitive markets, private property in the means of production, and the monogamous family are examples of major social institutions." One is left to wonder how Rawls may define a minor social institution. Rawls theory of social justice concerns not only the competitive markets and private property, but also the monogamous family (perhaps non-monogamous families are minor social institutions?). According to Rawls, social justice concerns how these institutions "distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation." To simplify, social justice focuses on equal opportunity within competitive markets and social institutions (family, church, government, people groups, etc.). Anne Phillips argues that the only means of evaluating equal opportunity is by measuring the equality in outcome.³⁰ Thus, social justice includes not only equal opportunity but equal outcome (redistribution of wealth, equal pay based on gender, etc.).

²⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6–7.

³⁰ Anne Phillips, "Defending Equality of Outcome," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (March 2004): 1–19.

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The Messianic kingdom of God will be a place of justice and God’s righteousness, but, as will be demonstrated, it will not be a place of equal opportunity or equal outcome among social institutions and the distribution of wealth. Ontologically, there is not only equality in the kingdom of God, but there is equality even now (1 Cor 7:22). In Christ, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Economically, however, there is inequality now, and there will also be inequality in the kingdom of God.

This section examines two aspects in the kingdom of God that concern social justice: equal opportunity and the distribution of wealth. It will be demonstrated that the Messianic kingdom of God will be known for inequality—there will be a special, chosen, ethnic people of God. Furthermore, wealth and power will be distributed unequally. Instead of a redistribution of wealth to all, wealth will be consolidated in Jerusalem. As a result of this study, one will see that the Messianic kingdom of God is not socially just.³¹

Social Inequality

The social justice movement considers inequality unjust, but the God of the Bible does not. When Israel left Egypt, the Lord informed Israel that they were his chosen people, “a special possession above all the peoples who are on the face of the ground” (Deut 7:6).³² The other peoples were still cherished by God—a theme frequently forgotten by Israel (e.g., Jonah). Indeed, the whole earth and everything in it is the Lord’s (Deut 10:14), but Israel is his special possession. Furthermore, Israel’s description as a “special possession” (סגולה) includes ownership

³¹ Or rather, the social justice movement is not righteous according to God’s standard of righteousness.

³² The ׀ preposition is partitive here; Israel is God’s special possession out of all the nations. See James Robson, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 239. Cf. Exodus 19:5–6 and the discussion below.

and special prized status. In Ecclesiastes 2:8, Solomon describes his great possessions, “silver, gold and the special possessions (סגלה) of kings.” While silver and gold were valuable, these kingly treasures possessed much greater value because they were part of the king’s personal possessions.³³

Israel’s “special possession” status was directly connected to the covenant: “And now, if you will certainly obey my voice and keep my covenant; then you will be my special possession (סגלה) above all the peoples, for all the earth is mine” (Exod 19:5). Israel’s responsibility as a special possession included being a physical representation of the Lord to the other peoples on the earth (Exod 19:6).³⁴ Israel, however, failed in their mission and, according to Hans K. LaRondelle, God invoked a different plan:

God’s purpose in His election of Abraham and Israel to redeem the world and reestablish it under the kingship of God was, in principle, fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Messiah Jesus. Christ was the only perfectly obedient seed of Abraham, the only sinless Israelite who indeed deserved the endless blessings of God’s covenant with Israel. Christ now offers the blessing of God’s redemptive *reign* to all men, to Jews and Gentiles alike, without distinction (John 2:12; Galatians 3:14). . . . Christ has established His own *messianic Israel, His ekklesia or Church, His spiritual kingdom or rulership* in the present world (Matthew 16:18; 13:41).³⁵

Thus, according to LaRondelle, God’s plan was initially concerned with ethnic Israel but now God’s “kingdom” is “without distinction.” The Messianic kingdom of God is no longer physical, but spiritual. One could presume that there may be social equality within God’s spiritual Messianic kingdom.

³³ Cf. 1 Chronicles 29:3. See also Moshe Greenberg, “Hebrew Segullā: Akkadian Sikiltu,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 71, no. 3 (September 1951): 172–74.

³⁴ T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, *Apollos Old Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 367.

³⁵ Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 95–96 (emphasis added).

Concerning LaRondelle's exegesis, Brueggemann, however, explains, "Such a belief is a historical absurdity and a theological scandal."³⁶ Theologically, Israel was not only God's chosen people in Deuteronomy, they will be God's chosen people at the end of time as well (Isa 14:1; 41:8–9). Isaiah describes a second exodus when God again chooses his people (Isa 14:1), brings them back to the land (Isa 60:4–5), and blesses them (Isa 60:6–9).

The regathering of Israel before the Messianic kingdom of God reveals preferential treatment for Israel and actual enslavement of "peoples" (עַמִּים). In Isaiah 13–14, the oracle against Babylon describes the fall of Babylon (Isa 13:20–22) and consequential regathering of Israel (Isa 14:1–2).³⁷ These events transpire right before the establishment of the Messianic kingdom of God.³⁸ During this regathering, the "peoples" (עַמִּים) will take (לָקַח) the children of Israel and bring them back to Israel (Isa 14:2). Isaiah describes a reversed deportation. Instead of Israel being "taken" (deported) out of the land, they are "taken" and brought back into the land. This reversed deportation continues through v. 2 and describes Israel as possessing (נָחַל) the peoples (עַמִּים) upon the ground of the Lord as male (עַבָד) and female slaves (שִׁפְחָה). Just as Israel is God's chosen people in

³⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Chosen? Reading the Bible Amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 19.

³⁷ Isaiah 14:1–2 is poetry not prose. There are three points of continuity between Isaiah 13:20–14:2: (1) structure (12 cola each); (2) catchwords (in 14:1, רָחַם point back to the Medes in 13:18 and נָחַם points forward to 14:3); (3) contrastive כִּי. See Timothy A. Little, "The Identity of the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14:4b–21" (Ph.D. diss., Baptist Bible Seminary, 2018), 59–64.

³⁸ Isaiah 14 does not mention the Messianic kingdom of God, but other Isaianic texts connect an eschatological judgment, regathering, and establishment of the kingdom. The little apocalypse of Isaiah recounts an eschatological judgment and regathering (Isa 24–27). Isaiah 59:15–20 describes a Messianic judgment and a regathering follows in Isaiah 60 with the king established on his throne in Jerusalem. Isaiah 49:22–26 describes a similar regathering.

Exodus and Deuteronomy, so also will they be placed above other peoples in God's Messianic kingdom.

Some may find enslavement in the Messianic kingdom of God odious and argue the male and female slaves in Isaiah 14:2 are really servants. Ringgren explains that "the subst. *'ebed* refers to a person who is subordinated to someone else. This subordination can manifest itself in various ways, however, and *'ebed* accordingly can have different meanings: slave, servant, subject, official, vassal, or 'servant' or follower of a particular god."³⁹ While the individuals in Isaiah 14:1–2 could be servants, they are likely slaves because they are a possession (נָחַל). When the direct object of נָחַל involves people, the meaning is slavery (Lev 25:45–46).⁴⁰ Isaiah 14:1–2 describes a reversed deportation. Just as the children of Israel are possessed (נָחַל), so also will the peoples be possessed. Israel's enslavement of their masters reveals an aspect of God's justice present throughout the Old Testament. Exodus 4:22–24 states, "Then you will say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, "My first-born son is Israel. Now I say to you. Send my son that he may serve me and do not refuse to send him. Look! I will slay your son, your first-born."'" God's retributive principle of justice is clear. Victor Hamilton explains,

God's declaration that he will slay Egypt's firstborn as a just response to Pharaoh's refusal to release his stranglehold on Israel, God's firstborn, may be an illustration of the talionic principle throughout Scripture. There is often a correspondence between the nature of the punishment and the nature of the trespass that generates the punishment. Take an eye, you lose an eye. Take a tooth, you lose a tooth. Persuade Adam and Eve to eat something they should not eat, and you eat dust for the rest of your existence

³⁹ Ringgren explains, "The subst. *'ebed* refers to a person who is subordinated to someone else. This subordination can manifest itself in various ways, however, and *'ebed* accordingly can have different meanings: slave, servant, subject, official, vassal, or 'servant' or follower of a particular god" ("עֶבֶד," in TDOT, 10:397).

⁴⁰ Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2:686.

(Gen. 3). Suck the life out of my firstborn, and you lose your firstborn.⁴¹

Upon their release, the remnant of Israel will enslave their enslavers, take captive their captors, and rule over their oppressors. This is justice according to God.

Parallel Isaianic texts reveal the pitiable condition of Israel upon their return. Isaiah 27:12–13 explains they will be regathered from Assyria to Egypt (location); one by one (אחד לאחד); and they will be almost dead (physically): “the ones *perishing* (אבד) in the land of Assyria; and the ones banished in the land of Egypt.”

The returnees are in such frail health that Isaiah 49:22–26 describes them as being carried: “Then they will bring your sons in *their* arms; and your daughters upon shoulders they will be lifted.” This personal escort back to Israel corresponds to Isaiah 60:4, “Your sons from a distance they will come; and your daughters upon a side (צד) they will be looked after (אמן).”

When Israel is regathered, they are physically close to death and are escorted back to the land of Israel by the peoples who enslaved them. Israel then enslaves these peoples. While the severity of this enslavement would be regulated by God’s law, the duration is unspecified. These slaves may be the agents who build and beautify Jerusalem (Isa 60:10–11). This inequality among peoples in the Messianic kingdom of God is at severe odds with the current social justice movement. One must conclude that according to contemporary social justice standards, the Messianic kingdom of God will not be socially just.

Unequal Distribution of Wealth

The social justice movement promotes a redistribution of wealth. The kingdom of God will include prosperity for all, but a consolidation of wealth in Jerusalem. As the peoples escort the children of Israel back to the land of Israel, they bring with them the wealth of the nations with which Zion is beautified (Isa 60:5–9). “Sons of foreigners” (בני־נכר) build the walls and their kings

⁴¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 79.

serve Israel (60:10). There will be so much wealth coming into Jerusalem that the gates must remain open all day long (60:11).⁴² This wealth will be used to beautify the Lord's habitation (60:7, 13).

While the wealth of the nations consolidates in Jerusalem, the nations will be blessed. Isaiah 27:6 explains that when Israel and Jacob "blossom and bud," then the "face of the world (פני־חבל)" will be filled with fruit (תנובה).⁴³ The blossom and bud are metaphors for flourishing, but they describe only the beginning. The ripe fruit that fills the earth is the culmination of the blessing. This fruit is not in Israel alone, but in the whole world.⁴³

Just as there is inequality with the *national* distribution of wealth, so also is there inequality with the *individual* distribution of wealth. One characteristic of the kingdom of God is the possession and enjoyment of one's own personal property. Alva J. McClain even describes this as social justice:

In Old Testament prophecy of the Kingdom a large place is given to social justice. In that day, Isaiah writes very specifically, "They shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat" (65:21–22). . . . The wastrels and parasites will not be living at the expense of others, and labor will acquire a new dignity and worth.⁴⁴

⁴² Gary Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 620.

⁴³ Gary Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 461. Wildberger correctly explains, "One would expect that there would be some mention of Israel in connection with the fruitfulness of the land of Israel, but the phraseology פני־חבל (lit.: the face of the world) does not permit this interpretation. Therefore, this is what it intends to say: when Israel flourishes again, at that very time the whole earth will be full of good gifts, with material goods being the first to come to mind. The use of חבל (world) clearly has the end of time in view: when everything is in order in Israel once again, then the affairs of the whole world will be in their proper place." See Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp, *Continental Commentaries* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 594.

⁴⁴ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2007), 226.

Social justice meant something different in 1959 when McClain penned these words. Micah 4:4 also describes the Messianic kingdom as a time when “each man will sit under his vine and under his fig tree.”⁴⁵ The third-person pronouns are possessive, indicating that in the Messianic kingdom, individuals will possess personal property.⁴⁶

Not only will people have personal property, but some will have more dominion, authority, power, and/or wealth than others. In the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30), certain individuals are given more talents than others.⁴⁷ When the king returns, an individual committed to contemporary social justice might expect a redistribution of wealth, but instead the unprofitable servant’s talent is given to the one who has ten talents (Matt 25:28). Jesus’ proverbial final statement seems unjust: “For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance. But to the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.” Jesus repeated the kingdom principle previously given in Matthew 13:12.⁴⁸ The Messianic kingdom of God will contain national and individual inequalities in the distribution of dominion, authority, power, and wealth and, therefore, will not be socially just.

Implications

The Messianic kingdom of God will be characterized by God’s righteousness and justice. Any movement that ascribes to “justice” must be evaluated by God’s standard of justice which is always defined by God’s righteousness. As demonstrated in

⁴⁵ Cf. Isaiah 65:21–22,

⁴⁶ Charles Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1990), 169; Robert B. Chisholm, *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 145.

⁴⁷ The opening Matthew 25:1, “The kingdom of heaven will be like . . .” extends to the parable of the talents as well making it a Messianic kingdom text. See Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980), 283.

⁴⁸ Jesus here enforces the “kingdom rule” which he introduced in Matthew 13:12. See D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 518.

this article, God’s righteousness is directly connected to what is not only true, but what is true in one’s heart. McClain writes,

The moral virtue of *truth* will be exalted in every phase of the Kingdom. In contrast to the average ruler of today—who is able to justify almost any story of an untruth on the ground of ‘political expediency’—the coming King will ‘bring forth justice in truth’ (Isa. 42:3, ASV). According to Scripture, there is no deeper form of immorality than untruth.⁴⁹

Two of the abominable sins which the Lord hates are a lying tongue and a false witness who speaks lies (Prov 6:16–17). The eschatological kingdom which the Lord overthrows will be known for injustice, unrighteousness, and dishonesty (Isa 59:4, 9, 14). God’s righteousness will be the justice in the kingdom of God, and this justice is very different from the social justice movement which uses lies, disinformation, and deceit to accomplish its societal goals.

Palestinian Christian and liberation theologian Naim Stifan Ateek seeks to establish “justice” for Palestinian Christians through misinformation and lies. Concerning the Israeli conquest of Deir Yasin, he writes, “Deir Yasin was a small town on the outskirts of Jerusalem. When the soldiers occupied it, they massacred 254 persons, including women and children and threw their bodies in a well.”⁵⁰ Although the events and casualties of Deir Yasin are a matter of discussion to this day, 254 persons were not “massacred.” A battle transpired at Deir Yasin and some of the Arab casualties were fighting back. Palestinian survivors also claim the number of casualties was much lower.⁵¹ Ateek has

⁴⁹ McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 222.

⁵⁰ Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 8. Ateek provides an endnote to the comment, “See chapter 2, p. 31” which does not verify his claim.

⁵¹ Catrina Stewart, “A Massacre of Arabs Masked by a State of National Amnesia,” May 10, 2010, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/a-massacre-of-arabs-masked-by-a-state-of-national-amnesia-1970018.html>. For additional information see Paul Richard Wilkinson, *Israel Betrayed: History of Replacement Theology* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2018), 271–73.

created a narrative that supports his social agenda. Details that may detract from the narrative are removed.⁵² Ateek has spoken lies (רָקַרַק) and babbled injustice (Isa 59:2).

Not only does Ateek speak outright lies, he also trusts in empty words (תְּהוֹ) and has worthless speech (שׁוֹא) (Isa 59:4). He writes, “It is important to point out that Jesus never quoted from the Book of Numbers that sanctions the expulsion of the indigenous people of Canaan, nor did he quote from Joshua and Judges, which glorify ethnic cleansing of people. Jesus was very selective in his use of scripture.”⁵⁴ Ateek’s argument is clear. Jesus supposedly did not quote from certain biblical books because they contained bad language, so we should not either. Two pages later, Ateek quotes Deuteronomy 7 and 23 which also describe the ethnic cleansing of the inhabitants of Canaan. Is Ateek unaware that Jesus frequently quoted Deuteronomy? Ateek seems to be using misinformation to accomplish his social justice goals and misrepresents Jesus. Walter Lippmann writes, “There can be no liberty for a community which lacks the means by which to detect lies.”⁵⁵ These instances of misinformation (lies) are detectable, but how many other lies has Ateek uttered which are undetectable? The use of deceit, lies, and disinformation has become the common parlance of not only the social justice movement, but the far right, media, and every fabric of our society.

God’s righteousness as defined in Psalm 15 also does not include slander, evil to others, and sharp criticism. These are also characteristics of our modern culture. Christians should not become participants of any social organization which uses these methods to accomplish their social agenda, regardless of how

⁵² Important details may include the following: (1) There was a battle at this location in the middle of a war. (2) Determining the number of combatants/civilians is impossible. (3) Palestinian retaliation killed seventy-eight Jews in a medical convoy.

⁵³ Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 4:1425.

⁵⁴ Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 49.

⁵⁵ Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2012), 21.

ideal that agenda may be. As pilgrims of this world and citizens of the coming Messianic kingdom of God, Christians should live righteously, worthy of the Messiah's kingdom, and not become entangled with the deceitfulness of this world.

Second, belief in a physical Messianic kingdom of God guards one from many errors. Some proponents of a spiritual kingdom claim the king is currently on the throne and we are living in the kingdom or will usher in the kingdom. As a result, proponents can easily confuse the believer's current pilgrim status (1 Pet 1:2) and engage in societal reforms which are truly outside the mission of the church (Matt 28:19–20).⁵⁶ Believers who purport a non-dispensational theology can easily confuse the gospel with social justice.

Furthermore, without the presence of the Messianic king, any attempt for true justice on earth will fall. The king establishes justice in the land (Isa 9:7, H:6). The King is the light in Isaiah 60:1, and his light transfers to his people in Isaiah 60:3. True biblical social justice is not possible until the king returns and establishes the Messianic kingdom. One needs a king who can see the heart and judge based upon one's thoughts, not upon one's actions. This king of judgment should also spur true believers to not only speak the truth, but speak the truth in one's heart (Ps 15:2).

Third, the social justice movement seeks to usurp one's divinely appointed placement of a person in a society. If an individual is called to the Lord while in a disadvantageous social situation, Paul admonishes that person to stay in the situation where he or she has been called [saved]. In 1 Corinthians 7:21, Paul admonishes the slave to not be concerned about their slavery. If the individual has an opportunity to be free, Paul recommends they take that opportunity, but it should not be a significant concern of the person. One should remain in the situation where they were called (1 Cor 7:24). Before the Lord,

⁵⁶ For a dispensational explanation of the church's involvement in culture see Scott Aniol, "Polishing Brass on a Sinking Ship: Toward a Traditional Dispensational Philosophy of the Church and Cultural Engagement," *Master's Seminary Journal* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 129–46. A revised version of this article is published in this issue of JMAT.

every slave is the Lord's freedman, and every freedman is the Lord's slave (1 Cor 7:22). The social justice movement is inordinately concerned with an individual's placement in society. Attempting to create an equal opportunity society is directly contrary to Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 7:21–24. Rather, Paul exhorts slaves to use their freedom in the Lord for the glory of God, and the freedman must use their freedom to enslave themselves to Christ.