

Article

Is God's Moral Perfection Reducible to His Love?

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Abstract: Defenders of the identity thesis maintain that God's moral perfection is reducible to and identical to His love. Unfortunately, this thesis overlooks the fact that, biblically, God's righteousness comprises both His love and justice. Moreover, divine justice is, in some significant measure, retributive in nature. This is especially evident in God's eschatological punishment of the wicked, which can be justified only on retributive grounds. Such a retributive punishment cannot be attributed to love but is the just desert of the wicked.

Keywords: moral perfection; retributive justice; divine love; identity thesis; punishment; consequentialist justice

Believers in the monotheistic tradition have always held that God is perfectly good, and Christian theologians have thought of God as the fount of all varieties of goodness, whether moral, metaphysical, esthetic, or any other. Here, my primary interest is in God's moral goodness from a Christian perspective. Obviously, God, as a being worthy of worship, possesses moral attributes. A being that is very good but morally imperfect might be worthy of admiration or respect, but only a being that is morally perfect could be worthy of worship.¹ Indeed, perfect being theology entails, by definition, that God is morally perfect since to be morally imperfect or morally flawed is inconsistent with perfection. Hence, God must be perfectly good.

An important question arises in connection with God's perfect goodness; namely, what is the content of God's perfect goodness? In order to answer this question, let us first look to the biblical data concerning divine goodness.

1. Biblical Data Concerning Divine Goodness

The Bible ascribes to God a wealth of moral properties, including holiness, righteousness, love, grace, mercy, long-suffering, loving kindness, and faithfulness.² We might think that the goodness of God is a general moral property designating God's moral perfection and comprising His righteousness, love, grace, mercy, and long-suffering,³ but, biblically speaking, this would be, in fact, incorrect. Rather, as John Feinberg explains, the Hebrew words for goodness *tôb*/*tûb* have, like the English word, a breadth of meanings: (1) practical, economic, or material blessing; (2) abstract properties such as desirability, pleasantness, and beauty; (3) quality or expense; (4) moral goodness; and (5) *eudaimonia* (the "good life") (Feinberg 2001, p. 366). When the biblical authors speak of God's goodness, what they typically have in mind is not God's moral goodness but God's beneficence or generosity. Thus the Psalms are filled with grateful praises for the goodness of the LORD (Ps 34.8a; 100. 5; 106.1; 107.1; 118.1, 29; 135.3; 145.7, 9; cf. I Chron 16.34; II Chron 5.13; 7.3). Feinberg concludes, "When we look at the biblical concept of divine goodness, one major idea stands out. It is that God is concerned about the well-being of his creatures and does things to promote it. Of course, God is interested in doing what is morally good and right, but biblical writers capture that idea by referring to his *righteousness* and *holiness*" (Feinberg 2001, p. 366; my emphasis). Since our interest is in God's moral goodness, we are, therefore, better advised to look more closely at the biblical data concerning God's righteousness, rather than His goodness.



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The Hebrew word *ṣedeq* (righteousness) and the Greek expression *dikaioσynē theou* (the righteousness of God) are Janus-faced terms used to denote, among other things, God's moral character.⁴ That is to say, God's righteousness in Scripture looks in two directions, as it were, covering both God's love and His justice.⁵ Feinberg observes that there is a wealth of biblical material concerning the righteousness of God. Words deriving from the root *ṣedeq* occur 523 times in the OT. The nominal forms fall mainly into three groups: legal righteousness (123 times), ethical righteousness (114 times), and correctness (26 times). The NT has 92 examples of the noun *dikaioσynē*, 39 of the verb *dikaioō* (to justify or reckon righteous), 81 of the adjective *dikaioσ* (just or righteous), ten of the noun *dikaioσma* (ordinance or sentence of justification), and five of the adverb *dikaioσ* (justly or righteously) (Morris 1983, p. 181).

In recent decades, a debate about the expression *dikaioσynē theou* has arisen as a result of the so-called "new perspective on Paul," some proponents of which construe God's righteousness to be His covenant faithfulness. This construal is not itself new but goes back to German theologians like Hermann Cremer in the late 19th century.⁶ Cremer believed that the righteousness of God is not a normative concept but rather a relational concept involving persons. He claimed that God's righteousness has only to do with God's saving activity. Cremer did not deny that God's salvation of the righteous entails His punishment of the wicked, but he insisted that God's righteousness finds expression only in His saving action. Proponents of the new perspective followed Cremer in thinking God's righteousness to be a relational, not a normative, concept, and they identified it with God's being faithful to His covenant people.

The claim here seems to be implausible on the face of it, for it amounts to nothing less than the claim that teams of English translators, not to mention non-English translators, have for generations actually mistranslated the expression *dikaioσynē theou*, since the English word "righteousness" does not mean *faithfulness*.⁷ Proponents of the new perspective would have us believe that the meaning of NT Greek *dik-* words, under the influence of the LXX, were fundamentally changed so as to introduce covenantal ideas not present in extra-biblical Greek. The Hebrew word *ṣedeq* (also, in effect, mistranslated by "righteousness") is also said not to express a normative concept like *moral goodness* but rather a relational concept like *faithful to*.

The implausibility of the new perspective's reductionism is perhaps best seen by asking what Paul holds the opposite of righteousness, that is, unrighteousness, to be.⁸ It is not unfaithfulness, but wickedness and ungodliness (Rom 1.18) or lawlessness (II Cor 6.14). Faithlessness is one of a litany of sins listed by Paul, resulting in God's just condemnation (Rom 1.29-31; 2.2). Righteousness is a broad moral property that entails faithfulness since to break one's word is wrong but is not reducible to it. As Mark Seifrid puts it, "All 'covenant-keeping' is righteous behavior, but not all righteous behavior is 'covenant-keeping.' It is misleading, therefore, to speak of 'God's righteousness' as his 'covenant-faithfulness.'" (Seifrid 2001, p. 424). Seifrid points out that righteousness language in the OT has primarily to do with God's role as the Judge and Ruler of creation. As such, it is normative, having to do with God's establishing the correct moral order in the world. It takes on a positive or salvific sense because biblical writers expect God to intervene to reinstate the correct order when it is usurped by evil in the world. It takes on a negative or punitive sense because biblical writers expect the reinstatement of correct order to involve the punishment of the wicked. As Seifrid so aptly puts it, "Retribution remains on the 'backside' of divine acts of righteousness".⁹ So while there are 64 instances of God's saving righteousness in the OT, Seifrid counts as well 15 cases in which God's righteousness is conceived in retributive or punitive terms (Exod 9.27; Ps 7.10; 7.12; 11.5-7; 50.6; Is 1.27; 5.15-16; 10.22; 28.17; Lam 1.18; II Chron 12.1-6; Neh 9.33; Dan 9.7; 9.14; 9.16). God's righteousness comprises both aspects.¹⁰

Fortunately, proponents of the new perspective have now backed away from the overly simplistic, one-sided conception of God's righteousness. For example, J. D. G. Dunn, in response to his critics, acknowledges that the Hebrew concept of righteousness

cannot be reduced to covenant faithfulness or salvation. The righteousness language in the Hebrew Scriptures also involves punitive divine justice, according to which righteousness is “understood as measured by a norm, right order, or that which is morally right”, with the qualification that “the norm is not seen as some abstract ideal. ..., but rather as a norm concretised in relation” between God and creatures.¹¹ So when we come to Romans, “That God’s righteousness towards the peoples he has created includes wrath and judgment as well as faithfulness and salvation is clearly implicit in the sequences Rom. 1.16–18 and 3.3–6” (Dunn 2008, pp. 64–65).

The righteousness of God, therefore, seems to be the relevant biblical concept for God’s moral perfection and comprises both His love and justice. On the one hand, the Scriptures famously assert that “God is love” (I Jn 4.8) and even ascribe relationships of love to the eternal Trinitarian persons (Jn 3.35; 14.31; 17.22–26). At the same time, the Scriptures are replete with references to God’s hatred of sin, jealousy, wrath, and vengeance, which are manifestations of His justice.¹²

2. The Content of God’s Moral Character

A number of contemporary philosophical theologians sought to reduce the content of God’s moral character to His *agape* love. Jordan Wessling dubbed this claim the Identity Thesis. The thesis is that “God’s love is identical to His moral goodness”, such that “God possesses no moral attribute that is not essentially and most fundamentally a matter of love”.¹³ This superficially appealing thesis seems to be the lingering vestige of classical liberal theology, which eschewed the justice and wrath of God in favor of His love. Despite the eclipse of classical liberal theology in the early twentieth century, it has become almost an axiom among contemporary theologians that God does not need to be reconciled to sinners; the entire obstacle lies on our side. It is said that because the NT authors use *katalassō* (reconcile) and its cognates only with respect to human beings, not God, we may infer that God does not need to be reconciled to humanity, but only humanity to a welcoming God. Our hearts need to be changed so that our hostility to God evaporates and we embrace His love. However, such an argument from silence overlooks the abundant scriptural testimony to God’s justice and wrath, which may demand satisfaction and propitiation.¹⁴ In contrast to classical liberal theology, neo-liberal theology, if we may coin a term, affirms God’s wrath but sees it wholly as a manifestation of His love aimed at the reformation of sinners.

Wessling adduces two lines of New Testament evidence in support of the Identity Thesis. First, Jesus, as well as various New Testament authors, teaches that love fulfills the law. Second, Jesus, as well as certain biblical authors, ground this completed human ethic of love in God’s nature. These considerations do not, however, bear the theological freight that Wessling would lay upon them. The appeal to Jesus’ aphorism about love’s fulfilling the law’s positive demands overlooks what those who break the law are said to deserve, which is punitive justice. That the law reflects God’s loving character most certainly does not imply that God’s righteousness does not comprise justice as well as love or that His justice is reducible to His love.

We have seen that, biblically speaking, justice, as well as love, belongs to God’s righteousness. But what sort of justice is this? Theories of justice may be broadly classified as either *retributive* or *consequentialist*. Retributive theories of justice hold that punishment is justified because the guilty deserve to be punished. Consequentialist theories of justice hold that punishment is justified because of the extrinsic goods that may be realized thereby, such as deterrence of crime, sequestration of dangerous persons, and reformation of wrongdoers. Retributive theories are often said to be retrospective, imposing punishment for crimes committed, whereas consequentialist theories are prospective, aiming to prevent crimes from being committed.

Retributivism may be further distinguished as either positive or negative. While negative retributivism holds that the innocent should not be punished because they do not deserve it, the essence of retributive justice lies in positive retributivism, which holds that

the guilty should be punished because they deserve it. What distinguishes retributivism as a theory of justice is the positive thesis that the punishment of the guilty is an intrinsic good because the guilty deserve it. The intrinsic goodness of punishment of the guilty does not preclude that there are also extrinsic goods that might be achieved by giving people their just deserts. But what ultimately justifies punishment is that it is the just desert of the guilty.

In the Bible, God is described as a positive retributivist “who will by no means clear the guilty” (Exod 34.7). In the biblical view, the wicked deserve punishment (Rom 1.32; Heb 10.29), and the Bible ascribes to God retribution (Heb. *gemûl* Is 59.18; *neqamah* Jer 50.15; 51.6; Grk. *ekdikēsis* Rom 11.9; *avtapodoma* Rom 12.19) for sins so that God’s justice must be in some significant measure retributive.¹⁵ The God of the Bible is not just a benevolent father figure but, as Hugo Grotius emphasized in his critique of Faustus Socinus, God is the impartial Ruler and Judge of the creation, responsible for maintaining its moral order (Grotius 1889, II).

Indeed, it is plausible, I think, that retributive justice belongs essentially to God. The more central and prominent an attribute is in the biblical picture of God, the stronger the case for taking it to be an essential attribute of God rather than accidental to Him. It is hard to think of an attribute more central and prominent in the biblical picture of God than His righteousness, which comprises His justice. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen 18.25). “Is there injustice (*adikia*) on God’s part? By no means!” (Rom 9.14). It would have been inconceivable to the biblical authors that God might act unjustly.

Kevin Kinghorn, like Socinus, disputes that retributive justice belongs to God’s essence. For God, existing alone, sans creation, would not exhibit retributive justice in intra-Trinitarian relationships: “because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could never wrong one another, retributive justice would never be operative” (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 30). He concludes, “God’s attribute of justice is not essential to God’s nature in the way that his attribute of love is essential. God’s justice is only needed in the world (such as ours) where there are imperfections and shortages. God’s essential nature is therefore not just” (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 35). But this objection is misconceived. God can have the property of giving every person his due without the existence of created persons. Moreover, God sans creation exhibits negative retributive justice among the persons of the Trinity in that He does not punish the innocent. Kinghorn is right that, sans creation, God is not wrathful, just as He is not wrathful in possible worlds in which created persons never sin, so that wrath is not an essential property of God.¹⁶ But God, though wrathless, is in such circumstances still essentially righteous and perfectly just.

In any case, in relation to created persons, the God of the Bible exhibits retributive justice. Wessling notwithstanding, there is no *prima facie* incompatibility between God’s valuing the flourishing of people and valuing friendship with them, even though He sentences them to their just desert with no expectation of reform. Retributivism is perfectly compatible with God’s ongoing love for those He punishes, even the damned in hell, just as it is possible for a judge to personally love and forgive someone brought before his bar, even as he declares him guilty and sentences him to severe punishment. God can personally will the good of sinners and desire their union with Him without waiving the demands of retributive justice. In short, God’s giving the guilty their just desert does not preclude His loving them.

During the first half of the twentieth century, under the influence of psychologists and social scientists, retributive theories of justice were frowned upon in favor of consequentialist theories. Fortunately, there has been, over the past half-century or so, a renaissance of theories of retributive justice, accompanied by a fading of consequentialist theories,¹⁷ so that the Christian theologian working within the mainstream position need not be diverted by the need to justify a retributive theory of justice.

It is striking that proponents of the Identity Thesis tend to endorse, explicitly or implicitly, a consequentialist theory of divine justice; for they insist that God’s sole purpose in punishing wrongdoers is reformatory rather than retributive. So, for example, Kinghorn

says that God's administration of justice will ultimately be for the same reason that we need rules of law in the first place, namely, the "benevolent goal that people flourish".¹⁸ In response to Arthur Holmes' critique of Christian consequentialism, Kinghorn does not address the shortcomings of consequentialist theories of justice but simply doubles down in affirming a sort of Christian utilitarianism.¹⁹ He appeals to God to direct our efforts to ensure that acts of beneficence are also equitable, which only pushes the problem upstairs, so to speak. Does God direct His acts in accordance with justice? Kinghorn responds, "I find no reason for thinking that justice must be added . . . to God's love in order to give God's actions direction" (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 78). Given a consequentialist theory of justice, God's love suffices to motivate His harsh treatment of sinners aimed at their reformation. Kinghorn declares, "God's expressions of wrath are not vindictive or emotional outbursts aimed at the punishment of unrighteous people as an ultimate goal" (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, pp. 142–43). This characterization of retributivism is, of course, a straw man since the retributivist would agree that God's expressions of wrath are not vindictive or emotional outbursts but may nonetheless be aimed at the punishment of unrighteous people as the ultimate goal. God's wrath is an affective expression of God's retributive justice so that the issue is not ultimately wrath but the nature of God's justice.²⁰ Kinghorn's endorsement of consequentialism is clearly in view when he affirms, "Expressions of divine wrath must . . . be for the ultimate, benevolent purpose God has of drawing people into relationship with himself, thereby bringing fullness of life to them".²¹

Not only is pure consequentialism at odds with the biblical view of divine justice, but consequentialism seems, in any case, ill-suited to serve as the justification for divine punishment because God's judgment is described in the Bible as ultimately eschatological. The ungodly are "storing up wrath" for themselves for God's final day of judgment (Rom 2.5). The punishment imposed at that point could seemingly serve no other purpose than retribution.²² For all hope of reform is gone. But the damned are punished nonetheless because they deserve it. God, in effect, carries out what Kant deemed to be necessary for a just society about to dissolve: to execute any prisoners condemned to death (Kant 1999, p. 140).

Wessling defends God's ongoing punishment of the damned aimed at persuading them "to start down the path of spiritual transformation" but only at the admitted expense that one "is willing to allow for post-mortem opportunities for salvation in hell," (Wessling 2021, p. 152) a consoling but unbiblical view (Mt 25.46; II Thess 1.9). Moreover, Wessling's view either must deny God's omniscience so that He continues to pursue a pointless action that only perpetuates suffering or, in effect, transforms hell into purgatory and results in *apokatastasis*, the restoration of all things, a universalistic doctrine that is both unbiblical and condemned by the Church.²³

No universalist, Kinghorn struggles to justify God's punishment of the damned on consequentialist grounds as an act of His benevolence aimed at their reformation. He recognizes that "We can use our God-given freedom to place ourselves eternally under God's wrath by decisively rejecting his offer to participate in the fellowship of self-giving love" (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 148). Indeed, at some point, the opportunity for repentance will be gone: "the time for possible repentance will have passed" (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 150). So why does God continue to punish people beyond that point? Kinghorn's answer seems to be: He does not. "For those in hell, God does not persist in pressing on them the truth about themselves," which Kinghorn interprets as the essence of divine wrath.²⁴ With no consequentialist justification for punishment, God ceases to punish the damned in hell, though they may (mistakenly) think themselves to be under God's wrath.²⁵ Rather, He simply leaves them alone. Hell, then, is not a punishment for sin, rather, "Hell is just a natural consequence of life apart from God" (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 145). Citing Peter Geach to the effect that "God does allow men to sin; and misery is the natural, not the arbitrarily inflicted, consequence of sin to the sinner," (Geach 1977, p. 138) Kinghorn claims that "The alternative to Geach's position is to suggest that there is something of value, something good, about God devising an extra form of

punishment for people in hell, over and beyond what they are naturally experiencing apart from him” (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, pp. 145–46). This is a misunderstanding of the retributivist position. The alternative to Geach’s position is that the harsh treatment is not arbitrarily inflicted by God but justly inflicted and, therefore, something of value, something good. The punishment need not be something over and above the damned’s being eternally separated from God; rather, that separation is their just desert.

Wessling calls Geach’s position “the *natural consequences view*” (Wessling 2021, p. 151). It must not be confused with a consequentialist view of divine justice. On consequentialism, God does punish the damned in hell for their sin with a view toward some extrinsic benefit. But on the natural consequences view, hell is not a punishment of sin flowing from divine justice but simply a natural consequence of sin. Curiously, Kinghorn offers no biblical justification for so remarkable a thesis as the claim that hell is not divine punishment for sin. To the contrary, Wessling points out that the natural consequences view “certainly does not sit well” with texts like I Cor 11.27–31; II Pet 2. 1–16; Rev 16), which speak of divine wrath, judgment, condemnation, and punishment.²⁶ In any case, on Kinghorn’s natural consequences view, it remains mysterious why God does not simply annihilate the damned and put them out of their misery rather than allowing them to suffer interminably and undeservedly what Kinghorn calls “*the worst possible situation for humans*”.²⁷

In general, the natural consequences view of God’s response to sin is biblically inadequate.²⁸

Certainly, sin is regarded in the Scriptures as self-destructive in its consequences, but God’s response to sin is not reducible to permitting sin’s natural consequences. Rather God imposes justly deserved punishments in response to sin. Already in the story of the fall in Gen 3, the words “you shall surely die” (*mōt̄ tāmūt̄*) occur repeatedly in the legal collections of the Pentateuch condemning criminals to death (Matthews 1996, p. 211). Victor Hamilton notes that all of the *mōt̄ tāmūt̄* passages in the OT deal with either a punishment for sin or an untimely death as the result of punishment so that in the story of the fall, the expression clearly conveys the announcement of a death sentence by divine or royal decree (Hamilton 1990, pp. 173–74). In the NT, the forensic language is pervasive, especially in Paul’s treatment of condemnation and justification in Romans. Recall Dunn’s conclusion “that God’s righteousness towards the peoples he has created includes wrath and judgment as well as faithfulness and salvation is clearly implicit in the sequences Rom. 1.16–18 and 3.3–6” (Dunn 2008, pp. 64–65). Those who deny that *dikaioσynē* is a forensic term pay insufficient attention to Rom 4.4–5, “where the forensic background is clear in the allusion to the legal impropriety of a judge ‘justifying the ungodly’”.²⁹

3. Conclusions

In sum, it is unbiblical and misguided to try to reduce the entire moral character of God to His love. God’s moral perfection is most adequately conceived as His righteousness, which is a complex attribute comprising both His *agape* love and His retributive justice, both of which are plausibly essential to God.

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Notes

- ¹ Laura Garcia reports that most theists would therefore sooner give up omnipotence or omniscience than God’s moral perfection, which is taken to be the attribute most essential to God (Garcia 2009, p. 218).
- ² The biblical data are meticulously surveyed by John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Feinberg 2001, chp. 8).
- ³ Herman Bavinck, while acknowledging that the Scriptures rarely call God good in this “absolute sense,” nevertheless thinks that God’s goodness is manifested as these other properties (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003], 2: 213–14, 223–24), thereby making goodness more fundamental.

- 4 Classically, there has been a debate among Protestant theologians whether the expression *dikaiosynē theou* refers to an attribute of God Himself or to the righteousness which He reckons to believers. Lutheran theologians were especially insistent on the latter understanding. This is a righteousness which is given to us, not a property inhering in God Himself. It is clear, I think, that biblically the expression *dikaiosynē theou* is multivalent. “The righteousness of God through faith” (Rom 3.22) clearly refers to reckoned righteousness, since God’s attribute is not “through faith”, nor is it “for all who believe”. God’s inherent righteousness, like His power or wisdom, is an essential property of God which He has objectively and independently of whether any human beings at all exist, much less have faith in Him. So the righteousness referred to in v22 is a righteousness from God which believers possess. But then just as clearly, “he himself is righteous” (Rom 3.26) designates a property that God Himself has. Here we do have reference to a property possessed not by believers but by God, akin to His wisdom or power. At least three times in the Pauline corpus, Paul uses *dikaiosynē theou* to refer to God’s inherent righteousness (Rom 3.5, 25–26).
- 5 Bavinck provides a clear discussion of both of these aspects of divine righteousness (Bavinck 2003–2008, vol. 2, pp. 221–24). While “God’s righteousness is most often conceived in a favorable sense and described as the attribute by virtue of which God vindicates the righteous and raises them to a position of honor and well-being,” nonetheless “the punishment of the wicked is often ascribed to God’s righteousness” (pp. 222–23).
- 6 See brief background in (Seifrid 2001, pp. 417–19).
- 7 See Carson’s incredulity that anyone should think that the *dik-* words have nothing to do with justice or righteousness (Carson 2004, p. 51). Henri Blocher draws attention to the combination of such words in II Thess 1.5–9: “Apart from 2 Timothy 4:8 (recompense awarded by the Righteous Judge), 2 Thessalonians 1: 5–9 is most remarkable: the unfolding of God’s ‘righteous judgment’ (v. 5, *dikaias kriseōs*) implies that it is ‘just’ (v. 6, *dikaion*) for God to requite (*antapodounai*) persecutors, thereby achieving ‘vengeance’ or satisfaction of justice (v. 8, *ekdikēsōn*) in flaming fire, the punishment (v. 9, *dikēn*) of everlasting ruin” (Blocher 2004, p. 475).
- 8 In any case, the reductionistic interpretation of *dikaiosynē theou* as covenant faithfulness has been shown to be lexicographically untenable. Charles Lee Irons’ *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation*, (Irons 2015), is the definitive work on this expression and a convincing refutation of the reductionistic interpretation of the new perspective. According to Irons, in the OT. “Righteousness is a *Normbegriff* [normative concept], and the norm is God’s own moral law, which is grounded in his unchanging nature as a God of perfect holiness, justice, and truth” (p. 340).
- 9 See (Seifrid 2004, p. 44). Or, more accurately, “of God’s saving acts of righteousness”.
- 10 According to Irons both vindication and punishment are expressions of divine righteousness. Proponents of the new perspective have focused solely on the positive role of God’s righteousness in vindicating and saving His people, when in fact the flip side of that vindication is the punishment of the wicked who are oppressing God’s people and opposing God. Irons counts 41 examples in the Old Testament and 35 in the Dead Sea scrolls where God’s righteousness is used in the sense of God’s judicial activity that results in the punishment of Israel’s enemies, thereby delivering and vindicating His people (Irons 2015, p. 296).
- 11 See (Dunn 2008, pp. 63–64). Cf. Seifrid’s comment: “Biblical usage of righteousness language is distinct from Greek thought *not* in the lack of the idea of a norm, but in that it does not *define* the norm it presupposes in terms of the *idea* of the good The Hebrew Scriptures operate with the simple but profound assumption that ‘righteousness’ in its various expressions is ultimately bound up with God and his working” (Seifrid 2004, pp. 43–44).
- 12 See (Bavinck 2003–2008, vol. 2, pp. 223) for many examples.
- 13 (Wessling 2021, p. 148). A sufficient condition of this thesis is said to be that “a complete understanding of God’s love, plus a complete description of the relevant circumstances (excluding additional moral premises), would in principle enable one to determine each actual or possible item of behavior (including behaviors of thought and character) that God would judge that He should do, is acceptable to do, or should not do”.
- 14 For an extended discussion see my *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2020), chap.4 (Craig 2020). In Rom 1.18–3.20 Paul describes the human predicament as a result of the universality of sin and our consequent condemnation before a just God. Not one of us, as lawbreakers, will be acquitted before the bar of God’s justice; the verdict of “guilty” is pronounced over every human being. Jew and Gentile alike are said to stand under the wrath of God. Any adequate interpretation of the succeeding passage Rom 3.21–26 must find therein Paul’s solution to the problem of man’s condemnation before a just Judge and the attendant dissolution of divine wrath.
- 15 On the Hebrew words and their significance, see *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, (Seybold 1978), sec. II.2.c *In Statements Concerning Divine Judgment*; *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, vol. X, trans. Douglas W. Scott, s.v. “*nāqam*,” (Lipiński 1999). When used by the prophets in connection with certain verbs like *sālam* (to repay), *gemūl* has the sense of “payment, reward, recompense, or revenge”. According to Seybold, Psalms of individual lament like Ps 28.4; Lam 3.64, in “complete harmony” with the prophetic oracles like Is 59.18, offer prayers for *gemūl* as “a judicial and retributive intervention of Yahweh”. The verbal root *nqm* expresses the notion of revenge, in Yahweh’s case in accord with retributive justice, the *lex talionis*. Similarly, “We speak today of ‘getting one’s just reward,’ meaning that one is getting due punishment” (Jack R. Lundbom 2004, p. 439). The Greek words are not only abundantly used in the LXX to translate the relevant Hebrew terms but are used in the NT to indicate, among other things, divine retribution and vengeance

(*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2d ed., ed. Moisés Silva, vol. I: A-Δ, s.v. “*didōmi* (*avtapodidōmi*, *avtapodoma*, *avtapodosis*)” and “*dikē* (*ekdikēō*, *ekdikēsis*)” (Silva 2014).

- 16 Kinghorn generally tends to conflate divine wrath and justice. He is correct in thinking that comparing God’s love and God’s wrath “is . . . in a sense like comparing apples to oranges” (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 35). But the relevant comparison is not between God’s love and God’s wrath but between God’s love and God’s justice, both of which are comprised by His righteousness.
- 17 See, e.g., (White 2011; Tonry 2011). Ironically, some theologians, unaware of this sea change in theories of justice, denounce in the strongest terms a God of retributive justice (Stephen Finlan 2007, pp. 97–98), not realizing that their objection to the justice of penal substitutionary atonement depends on a view of divine justice as retributive, lest God punish the innocent on consequentialist grounds.
- 18 (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 73). A problem here is that, as Garcia notes, flourishing or well-being is a type of non-moral good, and it seems wrong to treat moral value as simply a function of non-moral value (Garcia 2009, pp. 221, 229). She explains, by contrast, that on Jorge Garcia’s virtue theory the whole set of moral virtues can be reduced to one over-arching virtue, viz., genuine concern for the good of persons, so that the love of persons is both the root and key component of all the virtues (p. 229). Thus, divine moral perfection consists in “exemplifying perfect love” (p. 230). Perhaps Kinghorn means to endorse such a virtue theory, since he is thinking of persons’ good in terms of their relationship to God. Unfortunately, such a theory still neglects divine justice.
- 19 (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, pp. 75–78). Cf. Arthur Holmes (2007, p. 52), *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions*. In addition to Holmes’ concerns, one of the main criticisms of consequentialist theories of justice is the fact that on such theories it may be just to punish the innocent in view of the good consequences. On the horrendous impact of consequentialism on the American penal system, see the moving account of Kathleen Dean Moore, *Pardons: Justice, Mercy, and the Public Interest* (Moore 1989, chp. 5).
- 20 See (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, pp. 1–21). Biblical expressions of God’s wrath, he explains, are meant to convey both God’s anger at injustice in our world and His actions to set things straight, to settle accounts, to visit punishment upon evildoers. What Kinghorn seems to fail to appreciate is that the reason that God’s anger is not an “uncontrolled outburst” is because it is righteous anger, that is to say, guided by justice. Therefore in His role as Supreme Judge, God is, *pace* Kinghorn, most definitely like “a judge in a courthouse, suspending his personal feelings in order to act objectively” (p. 5). In denying that God’s acts of wrath are motivated by righteous anger, Kinghorn forgets that it is *righteous* anger, i.e., anger that is guided by divine justice that is at issue.
- 21 (Kinghorn and Travis, p. 80). God’s wrath “is intended by God to lead us in some way toward reconciliation with him. That is, divine wrath is a prodding of some sort, designed to lead us to repentance and eventual reconciliation” (pp. 88–89).
- 22 The Christian consequentialist could say that punishment in hell does have a consequentialist justification, namely, the sequestration of the wicked from the community of the redeemed, just as hardened criminals are removed from society. But since God could achieve this end by simply annihilating the damned, the consequentialist will need to find some non-retributive reason for God’s preserving them in existence.
- 23 See (Mullins 2021). Mullins errs, however, in thinking that “You cannot have an ultimate defeat of evil if you have a bunch of damned people in hell continuing to engage in a sinful rebellion against God”. *Au contraire*, in the biblical view of things God’s defeat of evil consists precisely in His punishing the wicked.
- 24 (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 144). Cf. his explanation:
 “Divine wrath is an intentional pattern of action from God, directed toward some individual or group of individuals, and intended for the purpose of some divine goal. . . . this goal will be a benevolent one, intended to further people’s long-term flourishing. . . . I arrive at the following definition of divine wrath. Our experience of God’s wrath toward us is *God pressing on us the truth about ourselves*”. (pp. 91–92)
- Wessling calls such a view “*divine communicative punishment*” (Wessling 2021, p. 152). Kinghorn differs from Wessling in that Kinghorn recognizes that there comes a point of no return at which, presumably, God as an omniscient being knows that further communication is pointless.
- 25 (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 145; cf. pp. 139, 142). Kinghorn inconsistently says, “They have become the kind of people who experience all of God’s actions as acts of wrath instead of as acts of love and care and faithful prompting” (p. 145). For on his view, God has ceased all such loving actions toward the damned, since He has ceased to press upon them the truth about themselves.
- 26 (Wessling 2021, p. 152). Kinghorn fails to take due cognizance of the passage he himself cites, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests (*menei*) upon him” (Jn 3.36).
- 27 (Kinghorn and Travis 2019, p. 147). I find incredible the fatuous claim by some like C. S. Lewis that God’s allowing the damned to persist in their misery is actually an expression of divine benevolence.
- 28 See Jay Sklar (2005, pp. 11–12) who shows, against those who think of death as merely the natural consequence of sin, that God’s response to sin is punitive judgment. See more broadly the classic treatment in Jonathan Edwards (1998, pp. 146–233).
- 29 (Dunn 2008, p. 64). See also Rom 5. 12–14, where the distinction between death as a consequence of sin and death as a penalty for sin becomes crucial in Paul’s thinking. Death from Adam to Moses was a consequence of sin, but after the giving of the law it became as well a penalty for sin.

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