

SUN MYUNG LYU

Righteousness in the
Book of Proverbs

Forschungen
zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe

55

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

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Ann Arbor, Michigan
U.S.A.
October 2010

Sun Myung Lyu

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
AEL	M. Lichtheim, <i>Ancient Egyptian Literature</i> . 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California, 1973, 1976, 1980.
AUUS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford, 1907.
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Edited by K. Elliger and W. Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983.
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester</i>
BKAT	Biblicher Kommentar: Altes Testament
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
COS	<i>The Contexts of Scripture</i> , Edited by W. W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2000.
DISO	<i>Dictionnaire des inscriptions sémitiques de l'ouest</i> . Edited by Ch. F. Jean and J. Hoftijzer. Leiden: Brill, 1965.
DNWSI	<i>Dictionary of the North-west Semitic Inscriptions</i> . J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1995.
EncJud	<i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>
ET	English translation
EWL	Egyptian wisdom literature(s)
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2 nd ed. Oxford, 1910.
HALOT	Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stam, <i>The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated and edited by M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999.
HS	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by G. A. Buttrick. 4 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.
IBHS	<i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> . B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990.
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
JANES	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>

<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
<i>NIB</i>	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i>
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NIV	New International Version
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OTG	Old Testament Guides
OTL	Old Testament Library
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SPAW	Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>THAT</i>	<i>Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament</i>
<i>TLOT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten Testament
<i>ZAH</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Althebräistik</i>
<i>ZÄS</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZBK	Zürcher Bibelkommentare

Chapter One

Introduction

1. Rationale and Plan of the Study

The concept of righteousness is vitally important for understanding the ethical dimension of the Hebrew Bible, and it provides the foundation for examining the complex issue of social justice. As an inalienable attribute of God and a moral obligation of the highest order levied on human society, it has been the object of extensive research in the past. This study probes the biblical book of Proverbs to elucidate how it presents the concept of righteousness. There are several factors that invite such an undertaking as this one.

First, much of the previous study has approached the issue predominantly from the perspective of social justice and has not probed adequately the concept of righteousness. In a peculiar way, the rubric of social justice can be a disservice to the study of righteousness, and the real significance of righteousness can be better appreciated when it is examined detached from the context of social justice. After all, though closely related, ‘righteousness’ and ‘justice’ are not synonymous.¹

Still others frame the inquiry too strictly from a Christian doctrinal perspective. The prevalence of the soteriological inquiry of righteousness is understandable in light of the historic significance of the doctrine of justification in Protestantism and its subsequent theological development, and such theological inquiry has enriched our understanding of righteousness and left an indelible mark in biblical and theological disciplines. However,

¹ Synonymy can be partial (when multiple words refer to the same conceptual entity in *some* contexts) or total (a situation that never really occurs according to Bloomfield: see L. Bloomfield, *Language* (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1961), 145; Ullmann allows limited applicability of synonymy (*Semantics* [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1962], 128–54). Silva rules out true synonymy because “no two words are fully interchangeable in *all* the contexts where they may appear.” His concession for “practical purpose” is that “distinction between *any* synonyms may be fully neutralized in *some* contexts.” (emphasis original) See Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1983), 121. For our purpose, however, the conceptual proximity of righteousness and justice *in some contexts* is not the issue; what interests us is *how* they differ from each other when they differ.

its continuing dominance in the discussion of righteousness makes it difficult to understand righteousness in the Hebrew Bible in its own right.²

Moreover, most scholarly attention in the past has been disproportionately focused on the prophetic literature while ignoring to a large extent what the wisdom corpus says about righteousness. This is an unfortunate situation because biblical wisdom literature offers much for reflecting on the subject. The paucity of substantial studies of wisdom literature in regard to the concept of righteousness reflects the marginal status of wisdom literature in numerous presentations of “Old Testament theology.”³ It has been claimed that the biblical wisdom corpus is a somewhat “alien” body of literature within the Hebrew Bible.⁴ Nevertheless, the ostensible peculi-

² Due to its singular importance in the history of the Christian movement and succeeding church history, the discussion of righteousness has become enormously complex. For a concise yet thorough discussion of this issue, see Alister McGrath, “Justice and Justification: Semantic and Juristic Aspects of the Christian Doctrine of Justification,” *SJT* 35 (1982): 403–28. A fuller treatment by the same author of the doctrinal development surrounding justification is found in *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

³ Many Old Testament theologians (Eichrodt, von Rad, and more radically, Preuss) achieve their consistency partly by allowing only a minuscule role for the wisdom texts in constructing their theological systems. Murphy notes that “[a]s far as Old Testament wisdom is concerned, the treatment of it has ranged from benign neglect to opposition.” (*Proverbs*, 271) Reventlow summarizes the state of the matter well: “The incorporation of wisdom into Old Testament theology remains a still unresolved task for the future to deal with.” (*Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 184)

⁴ The “alienation” has grounds on the fact that the wisdom corpus is almost completely silent about the themes – patriarchal promises, the liberation of Israel from the bondage of Egypt, the Sinaitic covenant, Jerusalemite and Davidic coloring of Israelite history – that are so prominent in other parts of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, its worldview suggests significant extent of autonomy for humans independent of divine authority and revelation, in the form of its emphasis on human pursuit of wisdom and cultivation of character. Although the tendency to minimize the role of wisdom literature in the theology of the Hebrew Bible is an old one, Preuss takes a particularly extreme stance when he states: “Wisdom also exhibits here an ethos that, in terms of its particular interests, does not conform fully to the rest of the Old Testament.” (*Old Testament Theology* 2:206) He even argues that Christian theology “must refuse to give Old Testament wisdom a place in its thinking” (“Alttestamentliche Weisheit in christlicher Theologie?,” *Questions disputées*, 165–81). Reventlow rightfully criticizes Preuss’s proposal as “a curtailing of the Old Testament witness” and rejects it (*Problems*, 184). It is true that wisdom literature has its idiosyncrasies, but non-wisdom books like Jonah, Song of Songs, and Esther are also peculiar in their own ways. The very notion that certain biblical books can legitimately be labeled as *fremd* is based on a largely unproven premise of the conceptual or theological unity of the canon. The issue here is not that one cannot meaningfully discuss the overall cohesiveness of the Hebrew Bible. Rather, it is the arbitrary nature of argumentation, namely how one can define parameters on such an issue and make fair judgments. For a systematic and cogent rebuttal of Preuss’s position see F-J Steiert, *Die*

arity of the wisdom literature – its subject matter, its construction of reality, its diagnosis of human predicament, and its distinct solutions for the problems – deserves more thorough investigation.

This study aims to delineate the concept of righteousness as found in Proverbs, situating it in the context of the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and the Hebrew Bible. The study will proceed as follows. Chapter 1 explains how the previous studies have been ineffective in elucidating the meaning of righteousness as related but separate from the “meanings” of the Hebrew *words* צדק and צדקה.⁵ As it turns out, the semantic range of the צדק words is quite broad and includes much that is unrelated to what the English word ‘righteousness’ represents. Imposing the full semantic range of צדק-words upon the concept of righteousness resulted in treating righteousness either as an amazingly versatile concept that covers salvation, victory, and covenantal loyalty among others, or as a pitifully vague concept like “what is proper for a relationship.”

We redefine the inquiry by showing that a concept of righteousness presented in the Hebrew Bible, even when allowing its own peculiarity, is not necessarily exotic or primitive. The peculiarity is to be found in the specific notions or *conceptions* held by the Israelites, the prophets, or the sages, with regard to issues like how one can attain righteousness and cultivate it, and whether it is compatible with wealth and power. For this reason, a working definition of righteousness is given as a reference point to which the nuances and *differentia* Proverbs presents can be compared later.

Chapter 2 surveys the theories of righteousness from biblical scholarship. Despite the bewildering range of their proposals regarding the meanings of righteousness, they can be broadly categorized into two groups: theories that emphasize the norm and those that emphasize relationship. Comparing these scholarly constructs with our working definition will

Weisheit Israels – ein Fremdkörper im Alten Testament? (Freiburg: Herder, 1990) Steirt’s work takes an overly presuppositional and confessional stance of Christian persuasion, but he makes a strong case that Israelite wisdom thinking has its closest tie to the prophetic and legal traditions in the Hebrew Bible rather than other ancient Near Eastern cultures.

⁵ Ahuva Ho, *Sedeq and Sedaqah in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991) examines the commonly held view that צדקה and צדק are synonyms, and finds it incorrect. She concludes that צדק is more general and abstract term whereas צדקה is more concrete and specific with broader scope in meaning. Her conclusion is correct despite some flaws in her argumentation. Alfred Jepsen draws a distinction between צדקה and צדק this way: “Das Substantiv צדק bezeichnet ursprünglich die kosmische Ordnung, die sich in Weisheit, Recht usf. Konkretisiert und vom König im Rahmen des Irdischen gewährleistet wird, צדקה dementsprechend das in diesem Horizont ordnungsgemäße oder sogar ordnungsschaffende Verhalten oder Handeln.” See his “צדק und צדקה im Alten Testament,” in *Gottes Wort und Gottes Land* (ed. H. Graf Reventlow; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 80.

sharpen our understanding of what constitutes righteousness, and set the context for the ensuing chapters that explore both the concept of righteousness and the profile of the righteous person.

Chapter 3 is a synthesis of the ways צדִיק “the righteous person” is depicted in the book of Proverbs. This is instrumental for elucidating the concept of righteousness because a crucial facet of the rhetorical and pedagogical strategy of Proverbs is depicting the life of צדִיק rather than prescribing an abstract discussion of the concept of righteousness. The importance of צדִיק as a literary representation goes beyond the fact that it is the most frequently used word among the possible words and phrases that can represent the concept.⁶ In fact, shaping righteous character that embodies and materializes righteousness turns out to be one of the controlling purposes of the moral discourse of Proverbs.

Chapter 4 examines how the book of Proverbs envisions its reader to be formed into the character of righteous person through acquisition and praxis of wisdom. Those who pursue righteousness are urged to conform to the profile of the righteous person as the paradigm of life. Wisdom will actively guide and assist the journey, by utilizing every means to help those eager to learn. The formation process appeals to the emotion as well as intellect of the learner. Although Proverbs does not lay out its pedagogy in abstract terms, the categories of virtue ethics provide useful grids for understanding the pedagogical strategy of Proverbs.

Chapter 5 explores the ways Proverbs employs various literary devices to pass judgment on situations involving competing values. The evaluative discourses of Proverbs, especially the literary form called better-than proverbs, affirm what is permanent and transcendent over more tangible and immediate satisfactions the readers encounter in life. The evaluative discourse does not explain what righteousness is; it encourages, however, the readers to align their value systems to what it teaches, namely the supremacy of wisdom and righteousness.

Chapter 6 and 7 examine the Egyptian wisdom literature and the Psalms, respectively, to highlight what is distinct about the concept of righteousness held in Proverbs. The Egyptian material displays an interesting overlap with Proverbs in its approach to understanding humans. What makes Proverbs stand out is its emphasis on the importance of character formation. Although the concern for human character is not lacking in the Egyptian wisdom literature, Proverbs develops a sharply focused pedagogy and rhetoric to that effect. An inner-biblical comparison with Psalms underscores Proverbs’ emphasis on the *internalization* of righteousness vis-à-vis its social and cultic realizations. Some psalms display a distinctive

⁶ The expressions תם, ישר, and טהור לב, although capable of expressing the concept of righteousness, are never characterized in Proverbs in the way that צדִיק is.