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0521533899 - Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, Third Edition

Alister E. McGrath

Excerpt

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1 Justification: the emergence of a concept

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century brought about many significant changes within the life and thought of the western churches. This volume concerns one of those – the reconceptualisation and reformulation of the traditional Christian vocabulary of salvation using the Pauline image of justification.¹ Up to this point, the western theological tradition had chosen to develop its thinking about how humanity is reconciled to God in terms of ‘salvation by grace’ (Ephesians 2:8). One of the defining characteristics of the Protestant Reformation is a decisive shift, in both the conceptualities and the vocabulary, of the Christian theological tradition. For a relatively short yet theologically significant period, the reconciliation of humanity would be discussed within the entire western theological tradition primarily in terms of ‘justification by faith’ (Romans 5:1).

As the Reformation and its attendant authority figures slowly receded into the past, the difficulties associated with this way of speaking became increasingly apparent. From the late nineteenth century onwards, growing doubts were expressed as to whether the New Testament, including the Pauline epistles, placed anything even approaching such an emphasis upon the concept of justification.² Influential New Testament scholars such as William Wrede and Albert Schweitzer argued that the origins of the concept were polemical, relating to the early tensions between Christianity and Judaism.³ Wrede insisted that the heart of Paul’s thought lay in the concept of redemption.⁴ For Schweitzer, the real focus of Paul’s positive thought lay elsewhere, in the mystical idea of ‘being in Christ’, not in this ‘subsidiary crater’.⁵ Although Catholic responses to the

¹ Subilia, *La giustificazione per fede*, 117–27.

² Söding, ‘Der Skopos der paulinischen Rechtfertigungslehre’.

³ See, for example, A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der paulinischen Forschung von der Reformation bis auf die Gegenwart*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1954, 132; F. Flückiger, *Der Ursprung des christlichen Dogmas: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Albert Schweitzer und Martin Werner*, Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1955, 52.

⁴ W. Wrede, *Paulus*, 2nd edn, Tübingen, 1907, 90–100.

⁵ A. Schweitzer, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*, 2nd edn, Tübingen: Mohr, 1954, 216–20.

Cambridge University Press

0521533899 - Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, Third Edition

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Justification: the emergence of a concept

Reformation, such as the Council of Trent, initially reflected its shift in vocabulary, the Catholic tradition gradually reverted to more traditional ways of speaking and thinking about the transformation of the human situation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The highly influential and authoritative *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), for example, retains the notion, while preferring to emphasise other Pauline images in its discussion of human salvation.

The rise of the ecumenical movement in the aftermath of the Second World War saw a new interest in the doctrine of justification. This did not, however, result from a new perception of the positive importance of this way of speaking, still less from a sense that the theological renewal of the West depended on a recovery of the specific conceptualities of justification. Justification was a problem, a barrier to church unity, which needed to be resolved. It was, in the view of many – but by no means all – an unwelcome relic of the past, which inhibited ecumenical collaboration in the present and future. The reconciliation of the churches demanded that the Reformation agendas, which originally led to their fissure in the sixteenth century, needed to be re-examined.⁶

One of the most important outcomes of this process of reflection was a new spurt of scholarly interest in the origins and significance of the doctrine of justification by faith, and its impact upon sixteenth-century western Christianity. This new ecumenical interest in the doctrine appears to have seen justification primarily as a problem from the past – a difficulty in the path of the reunification of the western churches, which needed to be neutralised, rather than something which was to be celebrated and proclaimed. A growing body of literature emerged, particularly within Lutheran circles during the 1960s, raising serious concerns about whether the notion of ‘justification by faith’ means anything to modern western secular culture.

Alongside increasing anxiety about the ‘secular meaning of the gospel’ (at least, as articulated in the notion of justification), a new issue emerged after the Second World War – a growing concern that traditional Protestant teachings on justification misrepresented the place of the law in Jewish life and thought. The Jewish theologian Claude G. Montefiore (1858–1938) argued that rabbinic Judaism did not hold – as Paul seemed to suggest – that Jews were self-righteous people who believed that they could earn their way into heaven. Judaism affirmed the graciousness of God, not human merit, in determining the destiny of Israel.⁷ Others

⁶ See Pannenberg, ‘Die Rechtfertigungslehre im ökumenische Gespräch’; Hövelmann, ‘Die ökumenische Vereinbarung zur Rechtfertigungslehre’.

⁷ C. G. Montefiore, ‘Rabbinic Judaism and the Epistles of St Paul’, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 13 (1900–1), 161–217.

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Alister E. McGrath

Excerpt

[More information](#)

began to take up this criticism. With the publication of W. D. Davies' *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (1948), a new challenge to the western reading of Paul emerged. 'The gospel for Paul was not the annulling of Judaism, but its completion, and as such it took up into itself the essential genius of Judaism.'⁸ The emergence of this 'new perspective' on Paul was given a decisive new impetus in 1977 with the publication of E. P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. From this point onwards, the plausibility of traditional Protestant formulations of the doctrine of justification, especially those following Luther's antithesis of law and gospel, were regarded with growing scepticism by biblical scholars. The debate continues, and it is unclear where it will end.

The history of the doctrine of justification primarily concerns the western, Latin-based theological tradition. The Orthodox emphasis upon the economic condescension of the Son leading to humanity's participation in the divine being is generally expressed in the concept of deification (*theosis* or *theopoiesis*) rather than justification. This is not, of course, to say that the western church was ignorant of such notions, at least one of which plays a significant (though, until recently, neglected) role in Martin Luther's soteriology,⁹ nor is it to suggest that Orthodoxy neglected the Pauline image of justification in its theological reflections. Still less does it exclude the possible integration of the notions within a suitably comprehensive theological anthropology.¹⁰ The issue concerns where the emphasis is placed, and which soteriological image came to dominate. Given the early church's relative lack of interest in the concept of justification, it is the western church's emphasis on justification, rather than the eastern church's emphasis on deification, which requires to be explained.¹¹

This volume seeks to tell the story of the rise and fall of this highly significant development in western Christian thought, and to explore its implications for an understanding of the development of Christian doctrine. How is this refocussing of vocabulary and conceptualities of the Christian tradition to be explained? What is its significance? To what extent is this development foreshadowed in earlier Christian thinking? The only way in which such questions can be answered is by rigorous scholarly investigation of the development of the doctrine of justification

⁸ Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 323.

⁹ See S. Peura, *Luther und Theosis: Vergöttlichung als Thema der abendländischen Theologie*, Helsinki: Luther-Akademie Ratzeburg, 1990; R. Flogaus, *Theosis bei Palamas und Luther: Ein Beitrag zum ökumenischen Gespräch*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997.

¹⁰ As pointed out by Hinlicky, 'Theological Anthropology'.

¹¹ For the role of the concept of deification in the two traditions, see A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Cambridge University Press

0521533899 - *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, Third Edition

Alister E. McGrath

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Justification: the emergence of a concept

within the first two thousand years of the western theological tradition, without any apologetic agenda. It is such an investigation that this new edition of this work seeks to offer.

The consolidation of the concept of justification as a means of articulating Christian insights into the economy of salvation as a whole takes place during the Middle Ages, a period of remarkable theological creativity and systematisation. Although significant differences emerge within the theological traditions of this period, a number of commonalities can nevertheless be discerned, particularly the virtually universal consensus that the term 'justification' designates a process of being 'made righteous'. In part, this reflects the high esteem placed on the works of Augustine of Hippo, whose influence over the theological renaissance of the twelfth century and beyond was immense. By far the largest section of this volume is thus dedicated to the documentation and analysis of the development of the doctrine of justification during the Middle Ages. Particular attention is paid to exploring why the image of 'justification' was found so useful as a means of articulating the Christian vision of the reconciliation of humanity to God, without achieving the conceptual dominance that is associated with the theology of the Protestant Reformation.

The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries may be regarded as the 'high noon' of the fortunes of this concept within western Christianity, including both the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic responses to this development. A major section of the work explores the emergence of the Protestant approach to the doctrine. This critically important section attempts to account for the new interest in the concept of justification, and especially for the manner in which Protestantism came to focus so heavily on this one Pauline image of salvation as a means of both articulating its own distinctive insights into the redemption of humanity and distinguishing itself from its ecclesiological rivals. The distinctive features of the Protestant conception of justification are noted, and the continuities and discontinuities with earlier ways of thinking identified.

This leads on to a consideration of the Catholic response to the Reformation, supremely the Council of Trent's celebrated 'decree on justification' (1547). This involves a detailed examination of the background to this debate, careful identification of the positions represented during the Tridentine debates on justification, and their apparent influence on the final document. There is no doubt that Trent's decision to use the imagery and language of 'justification' was a direct response to the challenge of Protestantism. In a sense, it was a forced rather than a natural development, which was of decisive importance in consolidating the conceptual dominance of justification within western Christianity in the

Cambridge University Press

0521533899 - Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, Third Edition

Alister E. McGrath

Excerpt

[More information](#)

second half of the sixteenth century. Yet this proved to be a temporary development; within a hundred years, Catholicism had generally reverted to more traditional ways of conceptualising the economy of salvation, with the concept of 'justification' gradually giving way to a retrieval of older patterns of thought, which had been temporarily suppressed on account of the tactical need to respond to the Reformation on – and in – its own theological terms. The retrieval of more traditional ways of articulating the economy of salvation is a telling sign of the growing theological confidence of Catholicism in the seventeenth century.

Yet within the intellectual culture of western Europe, a series of developments took place which began to erode the dominance of justification as the preferred mode of discourse concerning the acceptance and transformation of humanity through Christ. The growth of rationalism in late seventeenth-century England catalysed similar developments throughout western Europe, particularly in Germany and France, which led to many of the central features of the doctrine of justification being undermined. Alongside this, New Testament scholarship began to question whether Luther's reading of Paul was quite as reliable as many had thought. Although German Lutheran scholars tended to remain fiercely loyal to their distinguished forebear, elsewhere growing anxiety was expressed. Did Paul's theological emphasis *really* fall on justification? That might well have been Luther's personal judgement; yet it seemed curiously inattentive to other soteriological conceptualities within the Pauline corpus. Despite these concerns, the modern period also witnessed some important attempts to retrieve and restate the traditional doctrine, with the concerns and agendas of the modern world in mind. Although widely regarded as a period of decline of interest in the doctrine of justification, the last three hundred years have given rise to some highly significant reappropriations of the doctrine.

Yet although the story of the doctrine of justification really begins in the Middle Ages, the foundations for this development were laid much earlier. Our account opens by documenting the emergence of the concept of justification, and identifying the foundational resources that would be deployed during the great period of medieval synthesis. A close reading of the medieval discussions of justification leaves no doubt as to the two primary sources on which they drew: the Vulgate translation of the Bible, and the works of Augustine of Hippo.

Three points are of particular importance in relation to the dogmatic positioning of the concept of justification within medieval theology.

1. The remarkable growth in Pauline scholarship during the theological renaissance of the twelfth century, and particularly the use of Pauline commentaries as vehicles of theological speculation.

Cambridge University Press

0521533899 - *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, Third Edition

Alister E. McGrath

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Justification: the emergence of a concept

2. The generally high regard for classical jurisprudence within the western church.
3. The semantic relationship between the Latin terms *iustitia* and *iustificatio*, which allowed the theologians of the medieval period to find in the cognate concept of justification a means of rationalising the divine dispensation towards humankind in terms of justice.

In this opening chapter, we therefore turn to consider these fundamental elements of the Christian understanding of justification, and how they shaped the western tradition at this point.

1.1 Semantic aspects of the concept of justification

'I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith . . . for in it the righteousness of God is revealed' (Romans 1:16–17). For Paul, the Christian gospel is in some sense constituted by the revelation of the righteousness of God.¹² But what is this tantalizing 'righteousness of God'? As the present study will make clear, the interpretation of the 'righteousness of God' within the western theological tradition has been accompanied by the most intractable exegetical difficulties. The concept of *justification* (Latin, *iustificatio*) is inextricably linked with that of *righteousness* (Latin, *iustitia*), both semantically and theologically.¹³ Central to the Christian understanding of the economy of salvation is the conviction that God is righteous, and that he acts in accordance with that righteousness in the salvation of humanity. It is clear, however, that this conviction raises certain fundamental questions, not least that of which concept of 'righteousness' can be considered appropriate to a discussion of the divine dispensation towards humankind. The relationship between God and humanity, according to the Christian understanding, may be characterised in three propositions:

1. God is righteous.
2. Humanity is sinful.
3. God justifies humanity.

The quintessence of the Christian doctrine of justification is that these three propositions do not constitute an inconsistent triad. God, acting in righteousness, justifies the sinner. The proclamation of the actuality of such a justification to those outside the church has always been accompanied by speculation within the church as to how it is actually possible for God, being righteous, to justify sinners in the first place. It is therefore of

¹² The issues are regularly surveyed in the literature; see, for example, P. Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus*; H. Brunner, 'Die Gerechtigkeit Gottes', *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 39 (1987), 269–79.

¹³ See McGrath, 'Justice and Justification'.

Cambridge University Press

0521533899 - Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, Third Edition

Alister E. McGrath

Excerpt

[More information](#)

great importance to consider the various understandings of the concept of 'righteousness' or 'justice' which have been employed in the articulation of the doctrine of justification.

Modern theological vocabularies contain a host of Hebrew, Greek and Latin words, most of which possess, in their original contexts, a richness and depth of meaning which cannot possibly be conveyed by the mere translation of the word into English. Such an enterprise involves, not merely the substitution of a modern word for the original, but the transference of the latter from its own proper conceptual framework to one in which its meaning is distorted.¹⁴ This problem has long been recognised. Jesus ben Sirach, presumably in an attempt to divert attention from the absence of a Hebrew original, complained that 'things originally spoken in Hebrew do not have the same force when they are translated into another language . . . with the law, the prophets and the rest of the writings, it makes no small difference when they are read in their original language'.¹⁵ The conceptual foundations of the Christian doctrine of justification may be sought in the Old Testament, in a milieu quite different from that of western Europe, where it received its systematic articulation. The transference of the concept from this Hebraic matrix to that of western Europe has significant consequences, which we shall explore in the present section.

The primary source for Christian theological speculation is Holy Scripture; indeed, Christian theology may be regarded as an extended commentary upon the biblical material.¹⁶ It is therefore evident that Christian theology will contain a number of important concepts originating from a Hebraic context, and that the transference of these concepts from their original context may result in a shift in meaning with unacceptable theological consequences. In particular, it must be pointed out that the equation of Hebraic and western concepts of 'righteousness' is frequently implicit in theological works, so that western concepts of justice are employed in the articulation of the Christian doctrine of justification. A study of the classic western understandings of justice suggests that these are essentially *secular* and *practical*, and therefore potentially quite unsuited to a discussion of the 'righteousness of God'. The present section, dealing with the Hebrew, Greek and Latin understandings of 'righteousness', is therefore intended as a prolegomenon to the study of

¹⁴ See W. Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation: Some Reformation Controversies and Their Background*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

¹⁵ Sirach, prologue.

¹⁶ This is true throughout the medieval period, despite the important debates of the era concerning the role of tradition: see H. Schüssler, *Der Primat der Heiligen Schrift als theologisches und kanonistisches Problem im Spätmittelalter*, Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1977.

Cambridge University Press

0521533899 - Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, Third Edition

Alister E. McGrath

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Justification: the emergence of a concept

the doctrine of justification. Although not strictly a part of the history of the doctrine itself, the question exercised such an influence over the subsequent discussion of justification that its omission at this stage is impossible.

The etymology of the two Hebrew terms *sedeq* and *sedaqa*, both of which are usually translated as ‘righteousness’, is generally accepted to be obscure, and it is quite possible that the original meaning of the grapheme *sdq* is lost beyond recovery. The fact that there are two Hebrew words usually translated as ‘righteousness’, the masculine *sedeq* and the feminine *sedaqa*, has been the subject of much speculation. Although it might be supposed that these two terms are synonymous, this has been called into question for two reasons.¹⁷ First, it is philologically improbable that two different words should bear exactly the same meaning at the same time. Second, *sedeq* is used as a characterising genitive, especially for weights and measures, as in Leviticus 19:36. *Sedaqa*, however, is not used in this manner. It is difficult to know how much can be read into this distinction. It is certainly possible to argue that the feminine form tends to refer to a concrete entity, such as a righteous action or a vindicating judgement, whereas the masculine form tends to be associated with the more abstract idea of ‘that which is morally right’ or ‘right order’. Yet it is unclear quite how this impacts on our investigation.

Recent theories of the historical background of the Hebrew language have tended to divide the Hamito-Semitic languages into two groups: the archaic southern Cushitic and Chadic languages, and the more progressive northern group of languages, including the Semitic languages, the Berber languages of north Africa, and ancient Egyptian and Coptic.¹⁸ The triliteral root is a conspicuous feature common to all the languages of the northern group, and it is possible to argue that at every level – whether semantic, grammatical or phonological – features of these languages are theoretically derivable from a common source. When the etymology of the grapheme *sdq* is examined, using other ancient near-eastern languages as models, a spectrum of possible meanings emerges, of which the most fundamental appears to be that of *conformity to a norm*.¹⁹ This observation is confirmed by the fact that the dominant sense of the

¹⁷ A. Jepsen, ‘*sdq* und *sdqh* im Alten Testament’, in H. G. Reventloh (ed.), *Gottes Wort und Gottes Land*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965, 78–89.

¹⁸ A. Saenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

¹⁹ For example, the use of the Canaanite term *saduk* in the Tel el-Amarna texts to indicate that the king had acted ‘correctly’ when dealing with the ‘Kasi’ (= Cushite?) people. See D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, 82–98, especially 82–6. The following

Cambridge University Press

0521533899 - Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, Third Edition

Alister E. McGrath

Excerpt

[More information](#)

terms *sedeq* and *sedaqa* appears to be that of ‘right behaviour’ or ‘right disposition’.²⁰ The world is understood to be ordered in a certain way as a result of its divine creation; to act ‘rightly’ is thus to act in accordance with this patterning of structures and events. Emphasis has often been placed on the idea that the divine act of creation involves the imposition of order upon chaos;²¹ such ideas can be found throughout the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East.

The validity of such an appeal to etymological considerations has been criticised by James Barr,²² who illustrates the alleged inadequacy of the tool with reference to the English word ‘nice’. The etymology of the word indicates that it derives from the Latin *nescius*, presumably via the Old French *nice*, thereby suggesting that its meaning should be ‘silly’ or ‘ignorant’ – which is clearly of little use in determining its usage today. Barr neglects, however, to point out that etymological considerations can give an indication of the early meaning of a term, despite the connotations it may develop later as a consequence of constant use. While the derivation of ‘nice’ from *nescius* does not allow its modern meaning to be established, it is perfectly adequate to allow its *sixteenth-century* meaning to be established, it then bearing the sense of ‘silly’ or ‘ignorant’. As the enterprise in question is to establish the meaning of the term in texts of widely varying age, etymological arguments are perfectly acceptable in an attempt to establish its *early* meaning; the later meaning of the term, of course, cannot be determined by such considerations, as nuances not originally present make their appearance. Thus, in later Hebrew, *sedaqa* came to mean ‘almsgiving’, a meaning that cannot be derived from etymological considerations alone. Here, as elsewhere, the semantic connection between a grapheme and the meaning of a word appears to have eventually become so strained as to have almost snapped completely. However,

studies should also be consulted: H. Cazelles, ‘A propos de quelques textes difficiles relatifs à la justice de Dieu dans l’Ancien Testament’, *Revue Biblique* 58 (1951) 169–88; A. Dünner, *Die Gerechtigkeit nach dem Alten Testament*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1963; O. Kaiser, ‘Dike und Sedaqa. Zur Frage nach der sittlichen Weltordnung: Ein theologische Präludium’, *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 7 (1965) 251–75; H. H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung: Hintergrund und Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Gerechtigkeitsbegriffs*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1968.

²⁰ W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., London: SCM Press, 1975, 1.239–49; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., London: SCM Press, 1975, 1.370–83.

²¹ See, for example, R. Rendtorff, ‘Die theologische Stellung des Schöpfungsglaubens bei Deuterjesaja’, *ZThK* 51 (1954), 2–13; M. Bauks, ‘“Chaos” als Metapher für die Gefährdung der Weltordnung’, in B. Janowski, B. Ego and A. Krüger (eds.), *Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalischen Kontexte*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001, 431–64.

²² J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, 107–60.

Cambridge University Press

0521533899 - *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, Third Edition

Alister E. McGrath

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Justification: the emergence of a concept

as we shall indicate below, this later meaning of the word *sedaqa* can be understood on the basis of its etymology if its theological associations are given due weight.

The *oldest* meaning of *sedaqa*, as judged by its use in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:1–31), appears to be ‘victory’.²³ This meaning appears to be retained in some later texts, such as 1 Samuel 12:7 and Micah 6:5, although it is clear that the nuances associated with the term have altered. In this early passage, which contains many unusual grammatical forms and rare words, God is understood to have acted in ‘righteousness’ by defending Israel when its existence was threatened by an outside agency. This use of the term allows us to appreciate that the term ‘righteousness’ can possess both retributive and salvific aspects, without being reduced to, or exclusively identified with, either concept. Thus God’s act of judgement is retributive with regard to Israel’s enemies, but salvific with regard to God’s covenant people.

Underlying this understanding of *iustitia Dei* is the conceptual framework of the covenant: when God and Israel mutually fulfil their covenant obligations to each other, a state of righteousness can be said to exist – that is, things are *saddiq*, ‘as they should be’. There is no doubt that much of the Old Testament thinking about righteousness is linked with the notion of a covenant between God and Israel, demanding fidelity on the part of both parties if a state of ‘righteousness’ is to pertain.²⁴ The close connection between the themes of creation and covenant in the Old Testament points to a linking of the moral and salvific orders.²⁵

Similar understandings of ‘righteousness’ were common elsewhere in the ancient world. For example, contemporary Assyrian documents suggest that the king was to be seen as the guardian of the world order, who ensured the regularity of the world through his cultic actions.²⁶ The kinship of these notions can also be seen from the close semantic association between the ideas of ‘righteousness’ and ‘truth’ in the Aryan *rtā*

²³ G. Wildeboer, ‘Die älteste Bedeutung des Stammes *sdq*’, *ZAW* 22 (1902) 167–9. For related use of the feminine plural, see 1 Samuel 12:7; Psalm 103:6; Isaiah 45:24; Daniel 9:16; Micah 6:5.

²⁴ See the study of R. C. Ortlund, *Whoredom: God’s Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996. Note how the terms ‘righteousness’ and ‘covenant’ are linked at Nehemiah 9:32–3; Psalms 50:1–6; 111:1–10; Isaiah 42:6; 61:8–11; Hosea 2:16–20.

²⁵ As pointed out by B. W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, 146–64.

²⁶ S. M. Maul, ‘Der assyrische König: Hüter der Weltordnung’, in K. Watanabe (ed.), *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999, 201–14.