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THE PROBLEM OF THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MATTHAEAN CONCEPT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

1 The state of the question

The controversy regarding the meaning of the Matthaean concept of righteousness has revolved primarily around the following question: Does the term 'righteousness' (*dikaïosynē*) refer to God's gift to man or God's demand upon man? This question has basically been answered in four different ways; that is, two diametrically opposed positions and two mediating views have been presented.

The positions of G. Strecker¹ and M. J. Fiedler² are representative of the diametrically opposed views. Strecker asserts that in all seven *dikaïosynē*-passages, righteousness refers to *Rechtschaffenheit*.³ It is always seen as a demand upon man; never as the gift of God.

Fiedler, on the other hand, claims that in all seven *dikaïosynē*-passages in the Gospel of Matthew, righteousness is both the eschatological gift and the demand of God. The gift, however, precedes the demand. Accordingly, Fiedler views righteousness essentially as the gift of God.⁴

The two other views are essentially attempts at finding a mediating position between the two extreme views just expressed. These two mediating views are similar insofar as they both acknowledge that the term *dikaïosynē* does not have the same meaning in each occurrence. In some cases it refers to the gift of God while in others it refers to the demand made upon man. The point of contention between these two views stems from the relative importance assigned to these two aspects of righteousness.

In one mediating view greater significance is assigned to those passages in which *dikaïosynē* is interpreted as referring to the gift of God. For example, J. A. Ziesler comes to the conclusion that in Mt 5:20 righteousness refers to the demand made upon man while in 5:6 it refers to God's gift. With respect to the significance of these passages he concludes: 'It is probably no accident that 5.6 precedes 5.20: human righteousness is inadequate, and what is needed is not only a more thoroughgoing kind, but one which comes as God's gift to those who long for it.'⁵ This view differs only mini-

mally from the extreme position taken by Fiedler. While the interpretation of some passages differs, the end result is identical. Essentially the significance of the Matthaean concept of righteousness is seen in the fact that it refers to the gift of God.

The second mediating view does not gravitate toward either of the extreme positions. Such commentators as E. Schweizer⁶ and E. Lohmeyer,⁷ for example, treat each *dikaiosynē*-passage on its own merit. Some passages are seen as reflecting the meaning of righteousness as the gift of God; others, the demand made upon man. No attempt is made to subordinate one meaning to the other. The tacit assumption appears to be that Matthew simply does not use the term *dikaiosynē* consistently.

Despite wide disagreement as to the meaning of the Matthaean concept of righteousness, there is a scholarly consensus that this is an important concept in the Gospel of Matthew.⁸ It is especially argued that the concept of righteousness plays a crucial role in determining the Matthaean view of the nature of salvation. Actually, irrespective of their views as to the meaning of the Matthaean concept of righteousness, scholars claim that the relative degree of agreement and disagreement between the Matthaean and Pauline concepts of righteousness is directly reflected in their respective views of the nature of salvation. The conceptual language employed in the scholarly discussion of the relationship between the Matthaean and Pauline views of salvation is that of righteousness by faith as the gift of God and/or righteousness by works as man's ability to meet the demand of God.

According to Fiedler's interpretation, the Matthaean and Pauline concepts of righteousness are essentially in agreement; both Matthew and Paul view righteousness as *Heilsgabe*.⁹ It should be noted that in his introduction Fiedler shows obvious satisfaction in being able to claim that Matthew holds a Pauline understanding of righteousness.¹⁰

Exegetes who hold the view that not all *dikaiosynē*-passages in the Gospel of Matthew refer to righteousness as the gift of God, but who at the same time claim that the Matthaean and Pauline views of salvation are compatible, are confronted by a problem. This difficulty is generally solved by subordinating the demand to the gift. Kertelge, for example, argues that although the Jewish understanding of righteousness in terms of works still seems to be visible in the Gospel of Matthew, it is in fact fundamentally, i.e. christologically, broken.¹¹

Scholars who do not subordinate one aspect of the Matthaean teaching regarding righteousness to the other, or who claim that righteousness refers solely to the demand of God upon man, acknowledge that the Matthaean view of salvation differs from the Pauline one. For example, P. Stuhlmacher points out that owing to the imbalance between the aspects of righteousness

as gift and demand, it is impossible for Matthew to give expression to a view of salvation which is *sola gratia*.¹²

2 The method of the present study

The present study takes for granted that the final redaction of the Gospel of Matthew did not take place in an intellectual vacuum. By employing the concept of righteousness, Matthew intended to communicate a specific message to a particular audience. Since the Gospel of Matthew does not identify its audience, the exact nature of the audience may in fact never be known with any degree of certainty. It is plausible, however, that through a study of background literature the general intellectual milieu can be identified in which the Matthaean concept of righteousness is intelligible. Once such relevant literature has been found it can then be utilized to corroborate and in some instances even to clarify Matthaean usage.

Why is there wide scholarly disagreement regarding the meaning of the concept of righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew? It will be argued in the present study that the absence of consensus is largely due to the fact that scholars have misjudged what in fact constitutes the appropriate background literature for the Gospel of Matthew. After all, when an incompatible background literature is posited as governing Matthaean usage, it is to be expected that various views would result on how to harmonize conflicting types of usage. Specifically, it will be demonstrated that the Matthaean concept of righteousness does not become intelligible when viewed in terms of Pauline usage or in terms of undifferentiated Old Testament usage.

It will be argued that scholars who have used Pauline thought as the basis for their interpretation of the Matthaean concept of righteousness have essentially imposed a mode of thought foreign to the Gospel of Matthew. The Pauline categories of righteousness by faith versus righteousness by works are not applicable to the Gospel of Matthew. In comparison to the Pauline literature, the concept of righteousness has an entirely different function in the Gospel of Matthew.

The situation with respect to the use of the Old Testament as pertinent background material for understanding the Matthaean concept of righteousness is more complex than in the case of the Pauline literature. Since passages from the Old Testament are quoted in the Gospel of Matthew, it is obvious that the Old Testament forms part of the relevant background literature for this gospel. However, before Old Testament usage with respect to the righteousness terminology can be viewed as governing Matthaean usage, it has to be demonstrated that there was in fact such a direct influence; that is, in view of the significant time lag between the composition of the various Old Testament writings and the time of the final redaction of

the Gospel of Matthew, it cannot be taken for granted that there had been no development in the usage of the righteousness terminology.

The present study will demonstrate that the influence of Old Testament thought upon the Matthaean redaction is primarily of an indirect nature. This conclusion is based on the two following findings. (1) The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Tannaitic literature clearly show that there was in fact a significant development in the usage of the righteousness terminology from Old Testament times to the period of the composition of these bodies of literature. (2) The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Tannaitic literature in fact provide an intellectual milieu in which the Matthaean concept of righteousness is intelligible. Indeed, these two bodies of literature are invaluable for the purpose of corroborating and clarifying Matthaean usage of the righteousness terminology.

This does not mean that the Old Testament is dispensable as far as the study of the background literature is concerned. On the contrary, the usage of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Tannaitic literature and the Gospel of Matthew is more readily understood when its proper relationship to the Old Testament is brought into focus. After all, the Old Testament provides the point of departure for the development in the usage of the righteousness terminology exemplified in the later literature.

At this point the reader may be concerned with a number of methodological questions pertaining to the use of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Tannaitic literature as background literature for the Gospel of Matthew. Can it be demonstrated that the relevant passages in the Tannaitic literature are pre-Matthaean? What geographical implications are involved in positing these bodies of literature as background material for the Gospel of Matthew? Is a detailed analysis of the concept of righteousness in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Tannaitic literature not simply duplication of previous work?

Let us deal with these possible objections. It should be noted first of all that in this study the background literature is not investigated with the intention of identifying literary sources of which Matthew was necessarily aware. Rather, the primary purpose in the discussion of the background literature is to gain a general perspective, that is, to identify the general intellectual milieu in which the Matthaean concept of righteousness is intelligible.

With respect to the dating of the background literature the present approach attempts to avoid the following pitfall. Often, when it has been shown that a body of literature predates a specific writing, the meaning of specific terms and concepts in the former is imposed upon the latter. The possibility is lost sight of that the meaning of a term can change in even a relatively short time or that at any one time specific terms can have divergent meanings and/or functions in contemporaneous systems of thought.

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In the present study the meaning and function of terms and concepts found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Tannaitic literature are not simply imposed on the Gospel of Matthew. Rather, every attempt is made to discuss the meaning and function of terms and concepts in the Gospel of Matthew on the basis of the gospel itself. Once this process has been completed, the background literature is used for the purpose of corroboration; that is, the plausibility of the Matthaean usage is established on the basis of corresponding usage in other bodies of literature.

Once such correspondence of meaning and function has been demonstrated between two bodies of literature, then, and only then, are ambiguous passages interpreted in terms of the usage in the background literature. Care is taken, however, to utilize this procedure rarely and only in dealing with concepts of relatively minor significance.

With respect to the question of dating, this study therefore does not stand or fall on the basis of previous results as to the chronological relationship among the Dead Sea Scrolls, Tannaitic literature and the Gospel of Matthew. Instead, by demonstrating that the concept of righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew *in fact* becomes intelligible when viewed against the backdrop of the thought expressed in these two bodies of literature, new evidence is provided for the dating of these ideas. Specifically, with respect to the Tannaitic literature it becomes obvious that certain concepts predate the Gospel of Matthew even though the specific sayings in which these concepts are embedded may not do so.

These qualifications made, it should be noted that the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Tannaitic literature are not so far removed in time from the final redaction of the Gospel of Matthew as to warrant skepticism. The question of dating will be discussed in more detail in the introductions to the respective chapters dealing with these bodies of literature.

With reference to the geographical relationship between the Gospel of Matthew and the Dead Sea Scrolls and Tannaitic literature it is important to note that the two latter bodies of literature can be classified as being Jewish-Palestinian. This does not imply that all non-Jewish-Palestinian writings are necessarily irrelevant to this investigation. Yet the fact that these Jewish-Palestinian writings are adequate to provide the background against which the Matthaean concept of righteousness becomes intelligible must be taken into account in the continuing debate concerning the Jewish-Christian versus the Gentile-Christian character of the Gospel of Matthew.¹³ For example, a major weakness in Strecker's study is that he has not systematically considered the meaning of the concept of righteousness in the Jewish-Palestinian writings.

Even if it is granted that the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Tannaitic literature

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are important for understanding the concept of righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew, is a new study of the righteousness terminology in these two bodies of literature warranted? The answer to this question is a definite yes. It is specifically these writings which have received very haphazard treatment in previous research.

For example, Ziesler and Fiedler are foremost among the scholars who have attempted to deal with all possible materials which might elucidate the meaning of the concept of righteousness in the New Testament. Their treatment of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Rabbinic literature, however, is the weak point in their investigations.

In dealing with the Dead Sea Scrolls they have failed to grasp significant variations in the use of the righteousness terminology that exist among the various writings. In this study special attention will be focussed on these variations.¹⁴

In dealing with the Rabbinic literature the investigations of Ziesler and Fiedler have two major flaws. Like many other New Testament scholars, Ziesler and Fiedler have failed to apply the same critical methods of evaluation to Rabbinic texts as they have applied to early Christian texts. For example, sayings from the fifth- and sixth-century Talmuds have been applied indiscriminately to New Testament times. As a partial remedy to this situation, the present study will focus exclusively on the Tannaitic literature rather than on the Rabbinic literature as a whole. This focus is desirable, since it introduces a reasonable restriction on the time span to be covered. As was noted above, more precise dating of usage within the Tannaitic period is not strictly necessary, nor is it, at the present stage of research, possible.

The second flaw in Ziesler's and Fiedler's treatment of the Rabbinic literature is that they simply have not treated the vast majority of the most significant passages dealing with the concept of righteousness in the Tannaitic literature. Ziesler acknowledges that because of the 'sheer vastness of the material'¹⁵ he has simply attempted 'to indicate the range of meanings without pretending to thoroughness'.¹⁶ As a matter of fact, Ziesler has made a more exhaustive analysis of only two samples: Genesis Rabbah and the Targum Onkelos.

The choice of these two particular writings is unfortunate. Genesis Rabbah was compiled very late, probably no earlier than the Palestinian Talmud.¹⁷ Although Targum Onkelos may possibly date from the second or third century A.D., its usefulness to the investigation at hand is limited. Since it is an Aramaic translation of the Pentateuch it is very limited in its ability to express Rabbinic thought.

Ziesler's acknowledged lack of thoroughness is especially evident with

respect to the Tannaitic midrashim. For example, in Sifre on Deuteronomy there are a total of seventeen relevant passages containing a total of 41 occurrences of the nouns *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah*. Ziesler refers to only one of these passages and even this one reference is not discussed in the section dealing with the Rabbinic writings¹⁸ but is merely referred to incidentally as one of the passages which Bultmann cites.¹⁹ Ziesler makes no reference whatsoever to Sifre on Numbers and Sifra. Consequently, Ziesler's study is of little value as a word study of the righteousness terminology with respect to the Tannaitic literature.

Fiedler's analysis of the meaning of righteousness in the oldest Rabbinic literature²⁰ is beset with even greater problems than that of Ziesler. Fiedler, like Ziesler, treats only relatively few passages, but even the passages he does treat are not gleaned directly from the Rabbinic literature but indirectly from Strack and Billerbeck.²¹

In contrast to these studies, the present study intends to be exhaustive. All references to the nouns *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah* in the Tannaitic literature will be discussed.²²

In addition to the nouns *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah*, this study will also deal with the adjective *tsaddiq* in the background literature. Fiedler dealt only with the nouns and not the adjective.²³ This omission has had negative consequences. Having looked only at *righteousness* and not at *the righteous*, Fiedler has failed to grasp the full significance of the use of the Matthaean concept of righteousness.

Ziesler has treated not only the noun and adjective but also the verb. Since Ziesler's aim is to deal with the meaning of righteousness in Paul, where the verb plays a significant role, this is indeed necessary. On the other hand, in the Gospel of Matthew, the verb does not play a significant role.²⁴ It does not form an integral part of the Matthaean concept of righteousness. As the study of the background materials is not an end in itself but is undertaken for the purpose of comparison, the verb related to the root *ts-d-q* has not been included in this investigation.

In the study of the Gospel of Matthew it is imperative that stress be placed not only on determining the meaning of the righteousness terminology but on determining the overall significance of the use of the concept of righteousness in the gospel. In order to provide a valid basis of comparison, the twofold approach of determining specific meanings of various terms and their overall significance or function will also be applied to the study of the background literature. This approach has largely been neglected; that is, previous studies have concentrated on meaning rather than on relative significance.

It is for these reasons that approximately half of this study is devoted

to the investigation of the meaning and significance of the terms *tsedeq*, *tsedaqah* and *tsaddiq* in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Tannaitic literature. After all, while these sources appear to be the most important for understanding Matthew's concept of righteousness, they have in the past been the sources least often and least adequately examined.

3 The Old Testament as the point of departure

Having clarified the rationale behind the treatment of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Tannaitic literature, let us now consider the appropriate treatment of the Old Testament. As was noted above, for the purpose of the present study the Old Testament essentially has significance as a point of departure; that is, the usage of the righteousness terminology in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Tannaitic literature and the Gospel of Matthew should be viewed as the end-product of a process of development that had Old Testament usage as its point of departure. Since this process of development was marked by both continuity and discontinuity, it is clear that the Old Testament *per se* has only a very limited direct relevance as background literature for the Matthaean concept of righteousness. At this point it should also be noted that in contrast to the rather inadequate treatment of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Tannaitic literature, there have been a number of comprehensive and insightful studies of the righteousness terminology of the Old Testament.²⁵ When these observations are taken in conjunction with the methodological principle that the study of the background literature is not an end in itself but should be undertaken for the purpose of providing a basis of comparison with the Gospel of Matthew, it becomes evident that a new, detailed analysis of all aspects of the concept of righteousness in the Old Testament is not essential in the context of the present study.

What is essential is a general outline of those aspects of Old Testament usage which are pivotal for gaining insight into the primary points of continuity and discontinuity between this usage and that of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Tannaitic literature and the Gospel of Matthew. In addition to this general outline, detailed discussions will be limited to those Old Testament passages which are quoted or presupposed in the bodies of literature under discussion. These discussions will be found in relevant contexts in the following chapters. The general outline, on the other hand, will follow immediately so as to serve as a convenient reference point for the discussion of the righteousness terminology in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Tannaitic literature and Gospel of Matthew. Since the following remarks are not innovative but based primarily on the research of others, it seems appropriate to include them in this introductory chapter.

The following description of the Old Testament righteousness terminology

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is restricted to the relevant Hebrew terms. The Greek translation equivalents in the LXX already show signs of a development from the earlier usage in the Hebrew Old Testament. The relevance of Septuagintal usage for the understanding of the Matthaean concept of righteousness will be discussed in sections 1 and 3 of chapter 5.

Let us begin our discussion of the Old Testament righteousness terminology by summarizing Ziesler's analysis of the nouns *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah* and the adjective *tsaddiq*.²⁶ According to Ziesler's count there are 115 cases of *tsedeq*, 158 of *tsedaqah* and 208 of *tsaddiq* in the Kittel edition of the Hebrew Old Testament.²⁷ Ziesler discusses this total of 481 cases from the perspective of man's activity, God's activity and the righteousness of things.

With respect to man's activity or behaviour, Ziesler draws attention to the following categories of meaning: 'legal activity' in the sense of 'the activities of judging and establishing justice in the community, as against the *status* of being in the right' (14 cases each of *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah*, none of *tsaddiq*);²⁸ 'governing, ruling activity . . . with the emphasis less on legal than on administrative functions' (3 cases of *tsedeq*, 10 of *tsedaqah*, 5 of *tsaddiq*);²⁹ 'general or undefined ethical uprightness' in the sense of 'the opposite of a word for "wickedness, evil, wicked" or as general terms for doing what is right in God's eyes, being faithful to him, not in some "spiritual" sense, but in the conduct of life and society' (22 cases of *tsedeq*, 56 of *tsedaqah*, 108 of *tsaddiq*);³⁰ 'referring to the life of the covenant people' not with primary reference 'to the perfect moral uprightness of the people, but essentially to their keeping the covenant' (one case of *tsedeq*, none of *tsedaqah*, 51 of *tsaddiq*);³¹ 'obedience to the law' (one case of *tsedeq*, 5 of *tsedaqah*, one of *tsaddiq*);³² 'gracious activity, reflecting God's own', approximating the 'meaning of "almsgiving" or "benevolence" for *tsedaqah* among the Rabbis' (one case each of *tsedeq*, *tsedaqah* and *tsaddiq*);³³ 'good speaking, telling the truth' (4 cases of *tsedeq*, 2 of *tsedaqah*, one of *tsaddiq*);³⁴ 'man's forensic or relational righteousness' having 'to do with man as not guilty before, or in a right relationship to, a human or divine tribunal, or else in a right relationship that is not specifically forensic' (3 cases of *tsedeq*, 5 of *tsedaqah*, 19 of *tsaddiq*).³⁵

With respect to God's activity, Ziesler draws attention to the following categories of meaning: 'legal activity' in the sense of 'judging and lawgiving' (18 cases of *tsedeq*, 4 of *tsedaqah*, 6 of *tsaddiq*);³⁶ 'gracious, saving activity' in the sense that 'the nouns are virtually equivalent to "salvation"' (14 cases of *tsedeq*, 34 of *tsedaqah*, 5 of *tsaddiq*);³⁷ 'vindicating, giving victory or prosperity' (18 cases of *tsedeq*, 21 of *tsedaqah*, one of *tsaddiq*);³⁸ 'acting reliably, trustworthily, faithfully' (no cases of *tsedeq*, 5 of *tsedaqah*, 7 of *tsaddiq*);³⁹ 'right speaking' (2 cases of *tsedeq*, one of *tsedaqah*, none of

tsaddiq),⁴⁰ ‘God’s forensic or relational righteousness’ (no cases of *tsedeq* or *tsedaqah*, 3 of *tsaddiq*).⁴¹

With respect to the righteousness of things, Ziesler notes 14 cases of *tsedeq*. Ten times *tsedeq* refers to correct weights and measures, three times to peace-offerings and once to right paths.⁴²

With special reference to Ziesler’s analysis let us now make a few general observations concerning the Old Testament concept of righteousness. The main function of the adjective *tsaddiq* can be ascertained without difficulty. Out of a total of 208 occurrences of this term, 186 refer to man while only 22 refer to God. Thus it can be concluded that the adjective *tsaddiq* is used primarily to refer to man. With respect to the 186 references to man it should be noted that 108 are used in a general way to designate man’s conduct insofar as it coincides with what is right in God’s eyes and as such is opposed to what is wicked, and 51 are used specifically with reference to keeping the covenant.⁴³ Conduct which is right in God’s eyes can hardly be opposed to keeping the covenant. Consequently, in 159 out of 186 cases the adjective *tsaddiq* appears to be used to designate proper religious conduct. Since this adjective is often used substantively to refer to ‘the righteous’, it appears that the latter are the ones who are properly religious. Since Ziesler’s analysis shows that the meanings of the adjective *tsaddiq* overlap with the meanings of the nouns *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah*, the further generalization can be drawn that ‘the righteous’ are the properly religious because their conduct is governed by righteousness (*tsedeq/tsedaqah*). While it is evident that the foregoing description of the adjective *tsaddiq* does not exhaust the meaning of this term, it should be clear that this description isolates the primary meaning of *tsaddiq* in the Old Testament. In other words, with respect to the adjective *tsaddiq*, it is possible to speak in terms of a primary meaning and various secondary meanings.

The Old Testament usage of the nouns *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah* is more complex than that of the adjective *tsaddiq*. Let us first of all consider the relationship between the masculine noun *tsedeq* and the feminine noun *tsedaqah*. Some scholars have attempted to differentiate between these two terms with respect to meaning and/or function. Knight, for example, has proposed that ‘The noun *tsedheq* is most frequently used of the righteousness of God; the feminine *tsedhaqah* is its effect in man. The former is the divine “right” which establishes salvation, the latter the human order which is an element of it.’⁴⁴ Ziesler’s statistical analysis shows, however, that there is no such difference of meaning.⁴⁵

It appears that the only distinction in usage between these two nouns is of a grammatical nature. As G. Quell has noted, *tsedeq*, because of its brevity in comparison to *tsedaqah*, is ‘favoured as a gen. epexegeticus in the sense of *tsaddiq*’.⁴⁶