



*Indeed, has*

# *Paul*

*Really Said?*

*A Critique of  
N.T. Wright's  
Teaching on Justification*

*Michael John Beasley*



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## *A Critique of N. E. Wright's Teaching on Justification*

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## ***Dedication***

***To Miss Betty***

*Whose godly example is a reminder that no  
matter what one's age, training, or  
experience may be, the child of God will  
always be a humble student of Scripture.*

***Isaiah 66:2***

*“...to this one I will look,  
to him who is humble and contrite of spirit,  
and who trembles at  
My word.”*

*Jeremiah 23:5-6 5*

*5 "Behold, the days are coming," declares  
the Lord, "When I shall raise up for David  
a righteous Branch; And He will reign as  
king and act wisely And do justice and  
righteousness in the land.*

*6 "In His days Judah will be saved, and  
Israel will dwell securely; And this is His  
name by which He will be called, 'The Lord  
our righteousness.'"*

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# *Introduction*



*A*

*Catastrophic*

*Conversation*

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By way of introduction to our review of N.T. Wright's theology, it is important to note that not all theological conversations are spiritually profitable, especially when they result in either spiritual compromise or doctrinal ambiguity. Sadly, a significant number of theological conversations found within the contemporary church are rendering much in the way of such compromise and ambiguity, and the end result is that many are slipping deeper into the morass of error. Despite this, today's religious culture continues to herald the importance of such ecumenical conversations – conversations that enable markedly diverse groups to find common ground. Now I must be clear and say that unnecessary division in the body of Christ is sin, however what is rapidly being lost in the modern day is this crucial reality: any *unity* which forsakes truth *is an abomination*. Compromising dialogue may give the appearance of unity; however, to the Lord Himself such lukewarm pursuits deserve to be spewed out and rejected.<sup>1</sup> I offer this as a necessary prelude to our examination of Mr. Wright's work, *What Saint Paul Really Said*; because any analysis of another man's published views must be conducted by the standards of Scripture. In fact, since the Apostle Paul will be central to our study, we should remember that he himself understood the principles that govern our public and private defense of the faith - a principle that he fought to defend to the very end of his life.<sup>2</sup> Paul comprehended, contrary to the

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 3:16.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 4:7.

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popular opinions of our own day, *that some doctrinal discourses do more harm than good*. This is most evident when Paul wrote to the church at Corinth as he gently, but firmly, rebuked them for their complicity with the errorists in their midst:

*2 Corinthians 11:1-4: 1 I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are bearing with me. 2 For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. 3 But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. 4 For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.*

Paul had a godly jealousy for the Corinthians because they were abandoning their simple devotion to the bridegroom of the church: Jesus Christ. And how was this happening? Paul supplies the details in our aforementioned text: *“if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.”* What Paul is describing here is the very same formula of disaster that was first concocted in the garden when Eve had her conversation with the serpent in the garden. The Apostle’s parallel between the Corinthian church and Adam’s bride is designed to remind his readers that they were engaging in a dangerous dialogue, just as the woman did with the serpent in Genesis 3. Consider the detail of the Apostle’s language: when Paul said that the Corinthians responded to error by bearing it beautifully, he was indicating that they were accepting as valid or true the precepts of the evil one *without a*

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*contest.* To be more specific, the word *bear* represents the Greek word *anexesthe* – i.e. *forbearance*.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, such a word as this can speak of ungodly compromise or godly endurance, depending on the context. In the case of the Corinthians, they were tolerating, forbearing, and patiently listening to those who should have been refuted. Just as the Serpent in the garden should have been rebuked for his error, so too should the leadership of Corinth have dealt with the errorists in their midst:

*2 Corinthians 11:13-15: 13 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. 15 Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds.*

Paul's warnings concerning the dark influences of those men who stood against the Gospel of Christ are both chilling and stark. By these ancient standards, we too are warned in the modern day. For the church to engage in friendly conversations with errorists is plainly dangerous; and those who observe the complicity of leaders who do so will be inclined to entertain dangerous doctrines themselves. But in all of this we should remember that there is a need to be balanced in our application of the Apostle's warnings. While the church must certainly guard against mindless dialogue, she must also be careful not to hide from the very real problems which exist within the world of popular theology. Like Paul himself, we too should be willing to confront and expose those teachings which stand opposed to

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<sup>3</sup> G. *anexesthe*; "...be patient with, put up with, endure..." Swanson, Dictionary of Biblical Languages: Hebrew Old Testament (Logos Research Systems), p. 462.

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the core tenants of the Gospel. And when genuine Christians observe others drifting towards such catastrophic conversations, they should be filled with the same passionate jealousy that filled the heart of Paul. For a Christian to feel any other way means that he is content to watch others be drawn into spiritual adultery. *May it never be.*

I fear that Eve's example of deception is not only fitting for that ancient church at Corinth, but that today, through theological movements like the *Emergent Conversation* along with the advocates of the *New Perspective on Paul*, contemporary Christianity has been drawn towards several forbidden fruits of false teaching. From the doctrine of hell, the law, Christ's resurrection, the atonement, and justification by faith, many today are *bearing well* teachings that have nothing to do with biblical exposition. It is within this broader scope of concern that I write this critique of N.T. Wright's book *What Saint Paul Really Said*. He and others in the modern day are generating a seismic shock wave within the contemporary church, and one can only wonder what effects this will have in the near future, as well as on subsequent generations. It is for this reason that I have decided to direct my attention towards one of the gravest errors being perpetuated today that has to do with the nature and work of *God's justification of the sinner*. Therefore, in order to make this my focus, I have chosen to critique the teachings of N.T. Wright on this matter, knowing that he is perhaps the most outspoken and the most read on this subject in recent years.

In introducing this material, it seems that N.T. Wright requires very little introduction at all. Most people reading this book will already be familiar with the teachings and background of Mr.

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Wright. Wright holds doctorate degrees from Merton College, Oxford University, along with several other honorary doctorate degrees from other institutions. Since 2003 he has served as the Bishop of Durham for the Church of England and has become very popular here in America, mostly due to his published books and other literature. Perhaps he is best known for his part in advancing the theological movement known as *The New Perspective on Paul*, in keeping with men like E.P. Sanders and James Dunn. The most significant impact of *The New Perspective on Paul* has to do with its transformation of the doctrine of justification and imputation. Note that I do not say the *doctrines* of justification and imputation – but *doctrine* of justification and imputation. My use of the singular reference to *doctrine* is intentional as it recognizes the fact that God’s work of *justifying* the sinner is indelibly linked to the concept of *imputation*. Therefore it is my conviction, and will be the argument of this book, that to separate these concepts is to gut justification of its crucial meaning. Prior to the publication of this book, I sent Mr. Wright a copy of my work in order to give him a chance to critique and evaluate my own analysis. His response to me is addressed in the appendix of this book.

All in all, I have to say that the popularity that surrounds Wright and his teachings has given me the sense of urgency to offer this public review. The impact that this man is having on the church cannot be ignored - it is already effecting how people think about the doctrine of justification and imputation.

## *The Spirit and Intent of This Work*

To this date, I have never before written a book that focuses on an individual and his theology. Because of this, I feel a bit like a fish out of water. The tone of this work is something that I have been praying about and it is my desire to be appropriate regarding my topic and the polemic that is here employed. As to the matter of tone, let me refer you to another doctrinal controversy in history that involved Dr. Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. Their spat over the doctrine of the nature of man's will stands within history as perhaps one of the greatest theological contests ever conducted in the public eye. I offer you just one small sample that is representative of much of the rhetoric of that debate, where Martin Luther critiqued the teachings of Erasmus in the following manner:

*"What shall I say here, Erasmus? You ooze Lucian from every pore; you swill Epicurus by the gallon. If you do not think this topic a necessary concern for Christians, kindly withdraw from the lists; we have no common ground; I think it vital...this is weak stuff, Erasmus; it is too much. It is hard to put it down to ignorance on your part, for you are no longer young, you have lived among Christians, and you have long studied the sacred writings; you leave me no room to make excuses for you or to think well of you."<sup>4</sup>*

By mentioning Luther's rebuke of Erasmus, it is my hope that you will view this critique of N.T. Wright in an appropriate light. In this day of hyper-genteelism, most people expect a milder form of banter which is less alarming to the senses. Many today have no desire to be startled by controversy, but I

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will, trans. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston (Fleming H. Revell, A Division of Baker Book House Co, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997), p. 74.



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would submit that much of the modern church is asleep and needs to be *alarmed* and *startled* concerning those who are creeping in unnoticed, *and in droves*. While in our weakness we might prefer a *quaint conversation* with others, we must remember that it is often necessary to engage in public *confrontations* for the sake of God's truth. All in all, it is not out of a love of controversy, but out of a love for Christ, for His glory, and for the eternal truth of His redemption that I do write.

As we focus on Wright's treatment of the doctrine of justification, my objective will be to keep matters as simple as possible. If you are not aware of Wright's beliefs regarding justification, then here is a sample of where Wright is coming from on this subject:

*"Many Christians, both in the Reformation and in the counter-Reformation traditions, have done themselves and the church a great disservice by treating the doctrine of 'justification' as central to their debates, and by supposing that it described the system by which people attained salvation."*<sup>5</sup>

This quote is reflective of several statements made by Wright where he denies that justification is a concept which explains how a person is saved. In the following pages I will address N.T. Wright's approach to the term "*righteous*," as well as the expression "*the righteousness of God*," in *four categories of thought* -

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<sup>5</sup> N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997), pp. 158-59.

## *A Catastrophic Conversation*

**1. A Lexical Analysis:** *Wright's presentation of the expression "righteousness of God" as well as the term "justification" lacks a proper lexical analysis. Since this is the most elemental aspect of our study, we will begin by looking at the background and semantic domain of the term - righteousness.*

**2. The Forensic Context:** *The very concept of God's righteousness has an important, forensic (judicial) context. Therefore, in his book, Wright labors at length to establish a contextual framework for the concept of God's justification of the sinner, and this he does by presenting his own understanding of God's judiciary. It will be up to the reader to determine whether Mr. Wright has established a valid context for this discussion, or not.*

**3. Paul's Apostleship:** *Another core argument of Wright's has to do with the Apostle Paul's pedigree as a Pharisee. In this section the reader will be challenged to compare the Word of God with the testimony of Mr. Wright. Here, we will explore the question: "Was Paul's background as a Pharisee a significant factor concerning his theology as an Apostle of Jesus Christ?"*

**4. The Whole Counsel of God:** *In this section, we will consider the broader ramifications concerning N.T. Wright's argument as it relates to the rest of Holy Writ since the foundation of prophetic/apostolic revelation is a cohesive and unified one. By adjusting the meanings of one Apostle, Wright (whether intentionally or unintentionally) unveils much more than a new perspective on Paul.*

It is my prayer that the reader will not only become more informed regarding the teachings of N.T. Wright – but most importantly, that the glorious doctrine of justification and imputation would be heralded for the glory of our *Advocate with the Father* – Jesus Christ *the righteous*. Much is at stake

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here. Without a right understanding of justification, the church will fall prey to the serpent's deceptive whispers. May the Lord, by His precious grace, protect and preserve His people from such dainty morsels.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 18:7-8.

# *Chapter 1*



*The Righteousness  
of God:  
A Lexical Analysis*

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This chapter will present a lexical analysis of the term *righteous*, because if we are to learn about the subject of *the righteousness of God*, as well as the concept of *justification*, then we must begin with a primitive analysis of the word's meaning. However, for the sake of contrast, we will first consider Wright's own lexical *conclusions* concerning the term *justification* and the expression *the righteousness of God*. By doing this, we can address the most important question that emerges from Wright's own writings: *Are his definitions of righteousness and justification valid?* Ultimately, every aspect of our study will converge on this crucial query because it is central to Wright's perspective on Paul. I will summarize his views as follows:

**The Righteousness of God:** Wright repeatedly insists that the central notion of *God's righteousness* is that of *His covenant faithfulness*. For example, he says: "...'the righteousness of God' would have one obvious meaning: God's own faithfulness to his promises, to the covenant."<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, he summarizes his definition as follows: "When Paul uses the phrase 'the righteousness of God' he does not mean a quality or status which is attributed to human beings, but God's own faithfulness to the covenant and thereby to putting the whole world to rights (with human beings as the pilot project)."<sup>8</sup>

**Justification:** Consistent with his emphasis on God's covenant faithfulness, Wright emphasizes that justification points to the outworking of His covenant – not in terms of the salvation of sinners, but in terms of the eschatological confirmation of His people: "'justification' in the first century was not about how

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<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Saint Paul*, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Wrightsaid Question and Answer Session, March 2004 ([http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wrightsaid\\_March2004.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wrightsaid_March2004.htm)).

### *A Lexical Analysis*

someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. In Sanders' terms, it was not so much about 'getting in', or indeed about 'staying in', as about 'how you could tell who was in'. In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church."<sup>9</sup> Thus, he separates justification from the Gospel itself and concludes that "the Gospel' creates the church; 'justification' defines it."

The distilled reality of what Mr. Wright is teaching is this: when Paul refers to *justification*, he is not referring to *the basis of our salvation as established by the righteous merit of Jesus Christ; instead, Paul is speaking of God's covenant faithfulness and eschatological victory as displayed among His people*. As he said, *it is not so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology*. Let me add one more observation before we examine Wright's definitions of justification and righteousness. Wright's climactic application of this new perspective on Paul renders a very broad-based ecumenism:

"Paul's doctrine of justification by faith impels the churches, in their current fragmented state, into the ecumenical task. It cannot be right that the very doctrine which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong at the same table (Galatians 2) should be used as a way of saying that some, who define the doctrine of justification differently, belong at a different table. The doctrine of justification, in other words, is not merely a doctrine which Catholic and Protestant might just be able to agree on, as a result of hard ecumenical endeavor. It is itself the ecumenical doctrine, the doctrine that rebukes all our petty and often culture-bound church groupings, and which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong

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<sup>9</sup> Wright, *Saint Paul*, p. 119.

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together in the one family...the doctrine of justification is in fact the great *ecumenical* doctrine.”<sup>10</sup>

This point is crucial, especially if you missed the significance of his definitions of *the righteousness of God and justification*. Clearly, Wright’s proposition is no small one. By transforming *justification* from a soteriological concept to that of an ecclesiastical one, Wright effectively eliminates the relevant distinctions between the doctrine of *infused righteousness* versus that of *imputed righteousness*. In Wright’s understanding of what he has presented, a “...detailed agreement on justification itself, properly conceived, isn’t the thing which should determine Eucharistic fellowship.”<sup>11</sup> If what he is teaching is true, then the distinctions between Rome and Protestantism are “petty” ones. He promises that if Christians “could only get this right, they would find that not only would they be believing the gospel, they would be practicing it; and that is the best basis for proclaiming it.”<sup>12</sup>

All of this is presented at the outset of our study so that the reader can better appreciate what is at stake. Wright is in no position, especially after these bold assertions, to say that his argument is somehow a non-essential one – *something with which the reader can disagree with no serious consequences*. According to Wright, if one’s view of justification leads him away from a Catholic-Protestant ecumenism, then such a belief is petty and should be seen as that which belies the message and practice of *the true Gospel*. With such an assertion as this, let no

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

one assume for a moment that this matter is *non-essential*. Let us be very clear here - Mr. Wright's lexical, historical, and grammatical analysis of *the righteousness of God*, and *justification*, has led him to some rather dangerous theological territory, and we would do well to proceed with caution. In this chapter, our study will be limited to the question regarding Wright's definition of *the righteousness of God* and *justification*. *Our primary investigation will therefore center on whether or not it is valid for Wright to isolate a word's meaning in such a monolithic way, understanding that most words have a semantic domain of denotative and connotative meaning and use.* Because of this, the student of Scripture will do well to allow the context of any Scripture to determine a particular word's use and meaning. Other considerations will be examined in the subsequent chapters to resolve whether or not there is any validity to his limited definitions of righteousness.

The central word of interest in our study is, in the Hebrew - *šedeq*, and in the Greek - *dikaios*. Of course, there are several variants of these words, but for now we will examine the root meaning of the term *righteous* from its Hebraic foundation. Lexically speaking, *šedeq* speaks of a *canonical standard or a measuring rule*.<sup>13</sup> Implicit within this thought is the idea of something that is straight<sup>14</sup> (i.e., a *reliable* measuring rod).

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<sup>13</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996, c1989), 1:743.

<sup>14</sup> *šādāq* - to be right, straight, i.q. *yāšār* as of a straight way (see *šedeq* Ps. 23:3) Gesenius, W., & Tregelles, S. P. (2003). Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures. Translation of the author's Lexicon manuale Hebraicum et Chaldaicum in Veteris Testamenti libros, a Latin version of the work first published in 1810-1812 under title: Hebräisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch des Alten Testaments.; Includes index. (702). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.



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Therefore, it is no surprise that the word is often used to speak of “the act of doing what is required according to *a standard*.”<sup>15</sup> Even in the English language, the historic use of the word righteous<sup>16</sup> (Old English: *rihtwis*) is self descriptive in that the transitive-verbal use of *righteous* denoted the thought of “to set right; to justify; to do justice to; to make righteous.”<sup>17</sup> As well, the ethical connotation of *rihtwis* described the man who walks in *right wisdom* according to God’s standard, rather than the *crooked standard* of this world. In many respects, the semantic domain of our own English word is illustrative of the idea of *ḡedeq/dikaïos* in its historic form and use. At the core of it all is the notion of God’s infallible standard, whether by itself or as imitated by men. By contrast we should consider this: the mutable standards of men are no match for the unalterable standard of God Himself. As one whose background is in physics, I can’t help but to think of the illustration found in the SI system of units.<sup>18</sup> From 1791 to 1983, the French Academy of Sciences attempted to achieve an unailing standard of measurement found in what we call the meter. Their search for such a standard definition began with a fraction (1/10,000,000<sup>th</sup>) of the Earth’s meridian (from the equator to the North Pole), to the path-length of light as it travels in a vacuum in the time interval of 1/299,792,458<sup>second</sup>. The progression of these standards marks great improvements in defining the unit of

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<sup>15</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* : Based on Semantic Domains, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996, c1989), 1:743..

<sup>16</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary (unabridged) lists righteous as being used, historically, as an adjective, an adverb, a noun and as a verb. Though this last use is now obsolete, it is clear that it contained thought of distributive righteousness/justice. The Oxford English Dictionary 2nd Edition (Oxford University Press), Electronic Edition.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> SI: F. Le Système international d’unités.

### *A Lexical Analysis*

measurement known as the meter, and yet despite all these improvements over the years, there will always be an associated measure of error with this “standard.” It is an amazing point to consider: with all of the refinements that can be introduced into the methods of establishing an absolute standard, there will always be an associated uncertainty simply because of the involvement of fallible men in what is a fallen and decaying world. I offer this to you as a contrasting illustration to the concept of God’s righteousness. The *denotative* reality of *şedeq/dikaios* is that God’s righteous standard is *immutable, holy, and perfect*. There is no associated uncertainty with His standard – because He is the *sine qua non* of all that might ever be called *righteous*. In view of this, the concept of mankind’s ethical righteousness is always limited for the very simple reason that God’s righteousness is infallible, perfect, and completely devoid of impurity.<sup>19</sup> When we consult lexical works on this subject, as in the case of The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, we find that the term *righteousness* reveals at least three *main* categories of thought within its semantic domain: 1. ethical, 2. forensic and 3. theocratic:

**Ethical:** This use of the word *şedeq* focuses on a horizontal application of thought as it relates to man’s fallible pursuit of God’s righteous standard found in His Word. Therefore “the man who is righteous tries to preserve the peace and prosperity of the community by fulfilling the commands of God in regards to others.”

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<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 64:6 For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

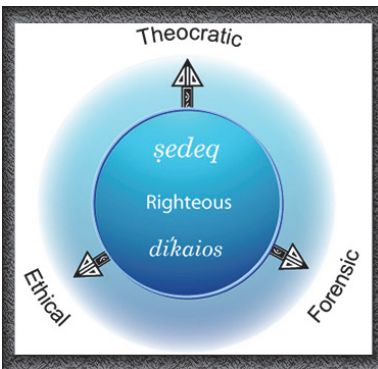
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It is this aspect of righteousness in which we see man's "conformity to the standards set out in the word of God."<sup>20</sup>

**Forensic:** In many contexts we see the term righteousness being used in terms of the judiciary of God. "The forensic aspect of *ṣedeq* applies to the equality of all, rich and poor, before the law. The righteous one, the *ṣādiq*, is not to be put to death (Ex 23:7) for the law does not condemn him."<sup>21</sup> Noah, Daniel and Job are identified as righteous men (Ezek 14:14, 20), but antecedent to these declarations, we have the example of Abraham: "Gen 15:6 teaches that Abraham received Isaac as his heir because his trust in God's promises was accounted as righteousness."<sup>22</sup>

**Theocratic:** Here we have *ṣedeq* being used to speak of God's own kingdom rule. Of course, it is this category of thought which formulates the basis for the *ethical and forensic* uses of the word. God's own essential righteousness, His prerogative of eschatological judgment, and His covenant faithfulness as displayed in His deliverance of His people,<sup>23</sup>

are all thoughts that are variously supplied in this use of *ṣedeq*.



It must be noted that in every one of these categories of genuine righteousness there is an implicit notion of God's ontological nature of

<sup>20</sup> Harris, R. L., Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., & Waltke, B. K. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (Electronic Edition Moody Press, Chicago, 1999, c1980) p. 753.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 754.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.