

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS IN PSALM 103<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This article investigates the relationship between justice and the forgiveness of injustice in Psalm 103. A point of confusion in the structure of the entire Psalm is the position of verse 6. This article argues that verse 6 may be called a transitional verse which forms a bridge between the first strophe (v. 1-5) and the main strophe (v. 6/7-18) of the Psalm. Psalm 103 therefore describes the relationship between justice and forgiveness in two ways: 1) Righteous deeds and justice for the oppressed may be seen as the demonstration of God's forgiveness; 2) God's righteous deeds and justice may also be seen as the basis for His steadfast love and forgiveness. Psalm 103 emphasises that God's steadfast love, forgiveness and righteousness is for 'those who fear him' (vv. 11, 13 and 17) and for 'those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments' (v. 18). This may be understood in two ways: 1) God cannot demonstrate His love, forgiveness and justice to people who do not fear Him; 2) God demonstrates His love, forgiveness and justice in order that people may emulate it.*

## 1. Introductory remarks

In the present South Africa we have different groups of people: people who were seen as the oppressors in the previous dispensation and people who experienced oppression. Some say that justice and forgiveness are the two most important things which must be done in South Africa, but there are different associations of meaning to these concepts. Scholars have different opinions concerning the relationship between justice and forgiveness. The following quotations emphasise the divergent opinions:

'One of the most burning issues is the question how the wrongdoings of the past should be dealt with: justice versus reconciliation. Those arguing for justice will argue that, should amnesty for the past deeds be granted now, the next government could do likewise after having committed similar crimes' (Louw 1996:383).

'Justice must be the prerequisite for forgiveness or else forgiveness becomes nothing more than a convenient pardon and toleration of the crimes committed' (Snook 1985:19).

'Forgiveness does not suddenly become conditional, posterior to the satisfaction of the requirements of justice in the socio-political context but must be there from the start as the ground in reference to which true repentance can come about, such that justice can be done in the spirit of openness and acceptance of the other. If the forgiveness of God is integral and essential to his love, which is unconditional, then it must also be so for man created in the image of God' (Torrance 1986:55).

One of the reasons why many people in South Africa cannot practise justice and forgiveness is because they do not experience God's justice and forgiveness. This is one of the problems in the reconciliation process. This study of Psalm 103 tries to illuminate the

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relationship between God's justice and forgiveness. Psalm 103 is one of the few references in the Old Testament where the terms סלח (forgive) and משפט (justice) are used in the same literary context (cf. Ps.25; Dan.9:4-19). This article will not be an in depth study of the entire psalm. We shall focus on the form and structure, the theological themes of justice, righteousness and forgiveness, and the relationship between them.

## 2. Form and structure of Psalm 103

There are different opinions concerning the form and structure of Psalm 103.<sup>2</sup> Willis (1991:525-537) argues that none of these are based on a thorough rhetorical analysis of the Psalm.<sup>3</sup> He recognizes that Allen (1983:21) took the first steps toward such a rhetorical analysis when he stressed the need to use both thematic and stylistic evidence in analysing this Psalm, particularly its main section (vv. 6-18/19). Most commentators discuss the structure of the Psalm solely in terms of the impressions they have as to the development of certain ideas or themes in the Psalm. Willis makes a rhetorical analysis where he takes both poetic style and the development of themes in consideration. He divides Psalm 103 in the following five strophes: 1) vv.1-5; 2) vv.6-10; 3) vv.11-14; 4) vv.15-19; 5) vv. 20-22

Burden (1991:40)<sup>4</sup> believes that Psalm 103 also shows a chiasmic pattern which is marked by inclusion:

|        |                |  |
|--------|----------------|--|
| 1a     | A              | Praise the Lord, O my soul                     |
| 1b-5   | B              | The Lord provides in all (לְכָל) my needs      |
| 6      | C              | The Lord does righteousness and justice        |
| 7      | D              | He made known his ways to the people of Israel |
| 8-9    | E              | The steadfast love of Yahweh                   |
| 10     | F              | What the Lord cannot do                        |
| 11-14  | G              | A comparison of the Lord's goodness            |
| 15     | G <sup>1</sup> | comparison of man's frailty/weakness           |
| 16     | F <sup>1</sup> | What man cannot do                             |
| 17a    | E <sup>1</sup> | The steadfast love of Yahweh                   |
| 17b    | D <sup>1</sup> | His righteousness to children's children       |
| 18     | C <sup>1</sup> | To those who do his commandments               |
| 19-22a | B <sup>1</sup> | Everyone (לְכָל) must praise Him               |
| 22b    | A <sup>1</sup> | Praise the Lord, O my soul                     |

It is difficult to come to a conclusion in the light of all the different opinions. Before coming to any conclusions we want to discuss a few other opinions or hypotheses. Most commentators make a division between verses 1-2 and 3-5. The words 'Praise/bless the Lord, O my soul' serves as an introduction<sup>5</sup> and conclusion of Psalm 103. In verse 2 God is

2 The different opinions may be summarized as follows: Vv. 1-5, 6-18, 19-22 (Allen 1983:21); vv. 1-5, 6-9, 10-14, 15-18, 19-22 (Fohrer 1993:47-53); vv. 1-5, 6-10, 11-18, 19-22 (Dahood 1970: 24; Mays 1994:326-327); vv. 1-5, 6-12, 13-18, 19-22 (Lamparter 1959:177-183); vv. 1-2, 3-5, 6-18, 19-22 (Anderson 1977:712; Kraus 1988:290); vv. 1-2, 3-5, 6-14, 15-18, 19-22 (Ridderbos 1958:478-481; Weiser 1965:658; Kidner 1975:363-367; Bratcher & Reybun 1991:870); vv. 1-2, 3-5, 6-9, 10-14; 15-18; 19-22 (Van Grol 1981:375); vv. 1-2, 3-6, 7-8, 9-14, 15-18, 19-22 (Brueggemann 1984:160-161; Burden 1991:40-42); vv. 1-22, 3-5, 6-7, 8-18, 19, 20-22 (Westermann 1989:238); vv. 1-2, 3-5, 6-7, 8-9, 10, 11-12, 13-14, 15-18; 19-22 (Briggs & Briggs 1907:324-327).

3 Willis (1991:525-537) does not mention the syntactical analysis of Van Grol (1981:374-378).

4 Cf. extern parallelisms described by Van Grol (1981:375-376).

5 Reventlow (1986:111) indicates that the formula 'Praise, O my soul, the Lord' are seldom used as an introduction of a Psalm (cf. Ps.103 and 144). It appears more frequently in the end of the psalms (cf. Pss. 18:47; 28:6; 31:22; etc.).

praised for all his benefits. After this one finds five participles standing in apposition to verse 2. This series of participles summarize God's characteristic action (Seybold 1973:143; Brueggemann 1984:160):

- 'who forgives all your iniquity'<sup>6</sup>
- 'who heals all your diseases'
- 'who redeems your life from the Pit'
- 'who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy'
- 'who satisfies you with good as long as you live'

A problem is the position of the participle עָשָׂה (v. 6). Most commentators believe that verse 6 forms the beginning of another strophe. According to Brueggemann (1984:160) and Burden (1991:41) verse 6 forms the last element in this list of participles: Yahweh doing righteous deeds and justice for all the oppressed. This last verb is a reminder that Israel always keeps the goal of justice visible. Scullion (1992:733) argues that verse 6 forms the climax of the series of participles describing God in action.

Although verse 6 begins with a participle there is a slight difference in stylistic features in comparison to the previous verses. The participles in verses 3-5 have definite articles but the participle עָשָׂה (v. 6) has no definite article. The shift to an unarticulated article at the beginning of verse 6 may serve as a nice transition to the next strophe.

Verses 6-18 are characterized by triadic groupings: חָסֵד (steadfast love) in verses 8, 11 and 17; רַחֵם (compassion) in verses 8, 13a and 13b; עַל-רָאיוֹ (toward those who fear him) in verses 11, 13 and 17; three terms for sin in verses 10 and 12; the stem עָשָׂה (to do) in verses 6, 10 and 18 which corresponds with the threefold use in verses 20-22. Another feature is the sevenfold occurrence of כֹּ (v. 10-15) along with a fourfold use of כִּי in verses 11, 14 and 18 (Allen 1983:21). The above mentioned stylistic features and chiasmic pattern of Allen and Burden may refer to an inclusio between verses 6 and 17/18: Yahweh *doing* righteous deeds and justice (v.6) // To those who *do* his commandments vv. 17-18).<sup>7</sup> Willis (1991:529) differs from their opinion. He also bases his opinion on the use of the root עָשָׂה but believes there is an inclusio between verses 6 and 10. In verse 6 God is *doing* deeds of righteousness and justice and in verse 10 He *does not do* to us according to our sins. These two ideas complement one another. The fact that God does righteous and just deeds is demonstrated by the fact that he does not punish Israel according to their sins. Both opinions can be accepted. A combination of positive and negative statements of what God does for his people (vv. 6 and 10) forms an inclusio as well as a combination of statements of what God *does* for his people (v. 6) and how his people *do* his commandments (v. 18).

The contents of verses 6-10 are possibly derived from the account of the proclamation of God's name in Exodus 33:12-34:7 (Weiser 1965:661; Willis 1991:528; Weinfeld 1995:184). The words 'He made known his ways to Moses' in Psalm 103:7 is a possible allusion to Exodus 33:13 where Moses said to the Lord: 'Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways ...' Psalm 103:8 is an almost verbatim quote of a clause from Exodus 34:6. The above mentioned similarities illustrates that Psalm 103:7-10 is partially a quotation of and partially an allusion to Exodus 33:12-34:7.

Verses 11-14 are supplementary to verses 6-10 providing an expansion of one major idea of the previous passage, namely God's forgiveness. Verses 11 and 14 use the particle כִּי (for) to state the reason why God forgives. The greatness of God's love and forgiveness

6 Quotations are taken from the NRSV unless mentioned otherwise.

7 Burden (1991:40) only refers to v.18 while Allen (1983:21) includes v.17 in the inclusio.

is contrasted with the frailty of the people: 'For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust' (v. 14). Verses 12 and 13 use two metaphors describing God's forgiveness.

The idea of human mortality (v. 14) is closely linked with verses 15 and 16, but one still finds the theme of God's love and forgiveness. Verses 15 to 18 complete the contrast between the frail and mortal man and the steadfast love of God. Verse 17 uses the fourth reference to God's steadfast love (חסד). This is a bit surprising because one expects God to judge according to human standards, but these are not God's ways (Brueggemann 1984:161; Kraus 1988:293; Burden 1991:42). The humans considered in verse 14 are 'we' the members of the covenant community while verses 15-16 refer to humanity in general.

Apart from verse 6, verse 18 is the only other place in Psalm 103 using the term צדקה (righteousness). Verse 18 contains the singular form in contrast to the plural form in verse 6. One can probably agree with most commentators<sup>8</sup> portraying verse 19 as an introduction to verses 20-21. Thematically it is linked with verses 20-22. Verses 19-22 also form a syntactic unit by using the words בכל (vv.19, 22) and כל (vv.21, 22). Psalm 103 begins by calling the self. But in verses 19-22 it is all creation, earthly creatures and heavenly angels who must praise God.

## 2.1 Conclusions concerning the relationship between justice and forgiveness

The study of the structure has direct implications for the understanding of the relationship between justice and forgiveness. In the light of the previous discussion one can derive a few hypotheses:

- a) Verse 6 uses the participle עשה linked to the other participles in verses 3-5. The reference to God doing righteous deeds and justice for all the oppressed may serve as the last element of the list. The list then begins with the reference to divine forgiveness and ends with the climax: justice for the oppressed (cf. Brueggemann 1984:160; Burden 1991:41; Scullion 1992:733).
- b) Verse 6 forms part of the main strophe stretching from verse 6-18 (cf. Anderson 1977:712; Allen 1983:21; Kraus 1988:290; Westermann 1989:240). At verse 6 the Psalm develops into a communal hymn of praise, describing God's revelation of himself to Israel and using first plural pronominal suffixes at verses 10, 12 and 14.<sup>9</sup> The righteousness and justice of God (v.6) may be seen as the *basis* of God's steadfast love and forgiveness described in verses 7-18.
- c) There is an inclusio between verses 6 and 10 emphasising the unity of it as an independent strophe. In verse 6 God is *doing* deeds of righteousness and justice and in verse 10 He *does not do* to us according to our sins. The two ideas complement one another. The fact that God does righteous and just deeds is demonstrated by the fact that he does not punish Israel according to their sins (Willis 1991:529).
- d) The last hypothesis is that verse 6 may be called a transitional verse which forms a bridge between the first strophe (vv. 1-5) and the main strophe (vv. 6/7-18) of the Psalm<sup>10</sup>. Verse 6 therefore forms a relationship with both the first strophe (vv. 1-5) and the main strophe (vv. 7-18). This hypothesis may be supported by four motivations:

8 There are also a few other viewpoints. Westermann (1989:242-243) treats v. 19 as an independent strophe while Willis (1991:531-533) reckons that v. 19 must be treated together with vv. 15-18.

9 The Gattung of Psalm 103 may be described as a mixture of a hymn and a song of thanksgiving (cf. Mowinckel 1962:38; Weiser 1965:658).

10 The division of verses in the NIV indirectly supports this hypothesis. Verses 1-5 and 7-18 are grouped together while verse 6 stands on its own.

- There is a relationship between the participle עָשָׂה (v. 6) and the other participles in verses 3-5, but the definite article is left out in verse 6. The shift to an unarticulated participle (v. 6) serves as a nice transition to the next strophe.
- Verse 6 forms a bridge between the references to the individual (vv. 1-5) and the people of Israel (vv. 7-18).
- Verse 6 is a general statement which is linked with the historical circumstances of Moses and the Exodus (v. 7) (cf. Van der Ploeg 1974:182; Allen 1983:18).
- The contents of verses 6-10 are possibly derived from the account in Exodus 33:12-34:7. There is a problem with the positioning of verse 6 because the themes of righteousness and justice (v. 6) are not found in Exodus 33:12-34:7 (cf. Willis 1991:528).

It is difficult to make a decision because important elements are found in all these hypotheses. Emphasising one hypothesis will have definite implications for the understanding of the relationship between justice and forgiveness. The fourth and last hypothesis may be the best solution for the problems stated, but some elements in the other hypotheses must also be taken in consideration.

In the light of the above discussion one can suggest the following structure:

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| I. Verses 1-5    | Hymnic call and summary of God's attributes                   |
| II. Verse 6      | Transitional verse: God doing righteous deeds and justice     |
| III. Verses 7-18 | The love and forgiveness of God contrasted with man's frailty |
| IV. Verses 19-22 | Praise to God by all heavenly and earthly creatures           |

### 3. The centrality of forgiveness in Psalm 103

Psalm 103 may not be labelled as a penitential Psalm, but is one of the most important Psalms emphasising God's forgiveness (McKeating 1965:73). The entire Psalm praises God's love and forgiveness. Yahweh is a God who will not keep his anger forever (v. 9). He does not deal with man according to his sins and his goal is not to repay us according to our sins (v. 10). The reason why God does not destroy his people is because He is a forgiving, graceful and loving God who has compassion for his children (vv. 3-5, 8-12, 17). The worshipper experienced this loving God in creation (v. 14-16; 19-22) and in the salvation history (v.6-7) (O'Kennedy 1994:71).

The concept of divine forgiveness in the Old Testament has different dimensions and is expressed by many Hebrew terms and phrases (cf. Stamm 1940:47-87; O'Kennedy 1994:13-15). Psalm 103 uses the following terms, phrases and metaphors referring to God's forgiveness:

- סָלַח (forgive) in verse 3
- רָפָא (heals) diseases in verse 3
- רַחֵם (compassion, compassionate love) in verses 8 and 13.
- 'He removes (הִרְחִיק) our transgressions from us' (v. 12)
- 'He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities' (v. 10).

There is also a relationship between references to God's grace and forgiveness. Preuss (1991:195) believes that the Hebrew term חַן (v. 8) refers to God's forgiveness. In spite of the relationship between forgiveness and grace there is a slight difference. Forgiveness may be seen as the result or consequence of God's grace (O'Kennedy 1994:277).

The relationship between grace and forgiveness points to a relationship between forgiveness and steadfast love (חסד). In the confession of faith in Exodus 34:6-7, it has the connotation of deliverance or forgiveness. One finds a direct reference to this confession in Psalm 103:8 (Jepson 1961:261-265; Kselman 1992:833). The terms סלח and חסד are also used in relationship to one another. Psalm 86:5 says: 'For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving (סלח), abounding in steadfast love (חסד) to all who call on you.'

The series of participles in verse 3-5 does not speak of an abstract forgiveness of sins but of the whole man, redeemed and renewed in body and soul (Westermann 1989:239). Psalm 103:3 may be seen as a synonymous parallelism<sup>11</sup>: 'who forgives (סלח) all your iniquity, who heals (רפא) all your diseases' (Bovati 1994:149). The Old Testament themes of healing, forgiveness and salvation cannot be separated. Healing involves not merely physical restoration; it includes the deeper dimension of forgiveness and restoration into fellowship with God (Hasel 1983:201).

#### 4. The object of forgiveness: Sin and injustice

Psalm 103 does not only stress the magnanimity with which forgiveness is offered but also recognises the need for forgiveness (McKeating 1965:75). There are a few Hebrew terms used to describe the object of divine forgiveness:

- a) The first Hebrew term is עון found in verses 3 (sing.) and 10b (pl.). Though the etymology of the root is disputed, the general meaning of the noun 'iniquity, error' is accepted (cf. Knierim 1976a:244). The Hebrew term עון is almost always used to indicate moral guilt or iniquity before God. The use of עון in the Old Testament does not distinguish between the nuances of sin, guilt and punishment (Cover 1992:32). The 1933/53 and 1983 Afrikaans translations translate עון with the word 'ongeregtheid' which literally means injustice, but other translations fail to communicate this connotation.
- b) The term חטאת occurs in verse 10a and is normally translated by the word 'sin'. The primitive sense of the Hebrew חטא is simply 'to be mistaken, to be found deficient or lacking, to be at fault, to miss a specific goal or mark.' (Koch 1980:311; Cover 1992:32).
- c) The noun פשע (v. 12) is translated as 'transgression' in some modern versions of the Old Testament, but this rendition fails to communicate the idea of 'rebellious deeds' which is probably to be understood (Knierim 1976b:488-495; Cover 1992:32).

It is important to realise that the ground for forgiveness is not the sinful or unjust Israel, but the will of a loving father. Although Psalm 103 refers to the sin of the people, it does not describe the injustices of the oppressors (v. 6) in detail. It rather focusses on God who forgives and do justice to the oppressed.

#### 5. Righteousness/righteous deeds and justice for the oppressed

##### 5.1 The terms משפט and צדקה

The Hebrew root שפט and especially the word משפט yields a variety of meanings such as justice, judgement, rule, govern, rights, vindication, deliverance, custom, norm, etcetera. It is therefore impossible to determine a 'Grundbeteutung' of משפט (cf. Liedke 1976:999-1009; Johnson 1986:93-107). Although some contexts of משפט show that the root שפט and

<sup>11</sup> This is not the only place in the Old Testament where one finds this synonymous parallelism referring to divine forgiveness. Cf. also Deut.13:9; 2 Chron.7:14; Neh.3:37; Isa.43:25; Jer.31:34; Mic.7:18; Dan.9:24; etc (Bovati 1994:149).

the noun משפט were also use in a forensic sense, there is strong evidence that attests that originally משפט referred to the restoration of a situation or environment which promoted equity (מישרים) and harmony (שלום) in a community.<sup>12</sup> When referring to purely legal matters the Hebrew root דין (to judge) is normally used (Mafico 1992:1128).

The Hebrew root צדק and its derivatives are translated by a wide variety of terms: righteousness (most common); righteous deeds; salvation; justice; judgement; right; vindication; integrity; etcetera (Scullion 1992:724). Scholars differs in their discussion of the range and meaning of the words derived from the root צדק. One can just mention three examples: 1) community loyalty, to be 'heilvoll' (Koch 1976:507-530); 2) Yahweh's action toward Israel, toward the individual in distress and His saving action in future (Crüsemann 1976:427-450); 3) legal order, proper order in community, saving and liberating order (Scharbert 1984:404-411). Although there are differences most scholars underscore the notion of saving action toward the people of Israel and the helpless individual.

The terms משפט and צדקה occur frequently used in the Psalms<sup>13</sup>. Some scholars even refer to it as the 'Prayerbook of the righteous' (cf. Levin 1993:355)

## 5.2 Justice for the oppressed

When the prophets refer to משפט and צדקה, they do not mean merely that the judges should judge justly. They mean primarily that the officials and landowners should act on behalf of the poor. Psalm 103 does not refer to the משפט and צדקה of people but refer to God. Divine משפט and צדקה are likewise help for the poor and the oppressed, for the stranger, orphan and widow. He does justice to them 'who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing' (Deut.10:18). Psalm 146:7 like Psalm 103:6 refers to God's justice for the oppressed: 'who executes justice (משפט) for the oppressed and; who gives food to the hungry' (Weinfeld 1992:245). There is a slight difference between Psalm 103 and Psalm 146. Psalm 103 refers to the justice God has done by means of his saving acts in Egypt (cf. v. 7). Psalm 146 links justice for the oppressed to the food God gives to the hungry.

Bovati (1994:309) emphasizes that besides Psalm 103:6 the passive participle עשוקים (who are oppressed) only occur in Psalm 146:7, Ecclesiastes 4:1 and Jeremiah 50:33. The condition of the oppressed comes out above all in the description of the adversary as an oppressor (cf. Pss.35:10; 72:4; Isa.3:14; Jer.22:17; etc.). Psalm does not directly refer to the oppressor, only to God who freed Israel from oppression. The Israelites experienced God's justice for the oppressed in the time of Moses. He acted in His holy righteousness and turned to the oppressed and helped them. God showed that He is a gracious and forgiving God because He helped the oppressed (Fohrer 1993:50).

## 5.3 Justice, mercy and steadfast love (חסד)

Weinfeld (1992:237) argues that the term משפט וצדקה implicitly refers to steadfast love. He based his argument on the following facts: 1) Instead of the biblical term משפט וצדקה,

12 According to Seebass (1981:355) righteousness in the Old Testament is not a matter of actions conforming to a given set of absolute legal standards, but of behaviour which is in keeping with the two-way relationship between God and man. Thus the righteousness of God appears in his God-like dealings with his people, that is in redemption and salvation. Weinfeld (1992:246) summarizes his opinion as follows: 'My contention, however, is that 'justice and righteousness' is not a concept that belongs to the jury alone, but is more relevant for the social-political leaders who create the laws and care for their execution'.

13 According to Koch (1976:511) the root צדק with its derivatives occur 139 times in the Psalms. Of the 34 occurrences of צדקה in the Psalms, 29 refer to God's צדקה (Scullion 1992:732).

rabbinic Hebrew uses the hendiadys צדקה וחסד (righteousness and steadfast love<sup>14</sup>) or גמילות חסדים (performing loving acts); 2) the establishment of a throne with משפט and צדקה is synonymous with its establishment with חסד (steadfast love), or חסד and אמת (steadfast love and truth) (Isa.16:5; Prov.20:28). Similarly one finds חסד in conjunction with משפט and צדקה, or in parallelism with them: 'He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord' (Ps.33:5); 'Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you' (Ps.89:14 [15]) (Scullion 1992:732).

חסד (steadfast love) is identical with goodness and mercy, but is not congruous with the strict justice applied in court. Steadfast love would interfere with the execution of justice, which must be untempered by bias. Weinfeld (1992:237) therefore conclude that the word משפט and especially the phrase משפט וצדקה does not refer to the proper execution of justice, but rather expresses, in a general sense, social justice and equity, which is bound up with steadfast love and mercy.

Psalm 103 does not use the terms משפט and צדקה in parallelism with חסד. However there is a definite relationship between 'Yahweh doing righteous deeds and justice' (v. 6) and 'Yahweh abounding in steadfast love' (v.8). In contrast to Psalm 89:15-17 (14-16) the literary context of Psalm 103:6 does not say that Yahweh's righteousness and justice is preceded by His steadfast love.

#### 5.4 The meaning of צדקה and משפטים in Psalm 103:6

The concept of social justice in the Old Testament was expressed by means of the hendiadys משפט וצדקה (justice and righteousness) or צדקה ומשפט (righteousness and justice) (Weinfeld 1995:25). This word-pair does not occur in Psalm 103, but one finds the plural forms of these words used in the same sentence (v. 6).

Many occurrences of the Hebrew roots שפט and צדק refer to humans. Psalm 103:6 and 17 refer to God as the subject of צדקה (צדקה in v. 17) and משפטים. Psalm 103:6 is the only reference in the Old Testament where one finds both plural forms. Niehr (1986:287) thus argues that we have a 'Mischform' in Psalm 103:6.

When the plural משפטים is used together with Yahweh as subject (this is the case in almost all the plural references), it may refer to a casuistic lawsuit in which Yahweh is the judge (Liedke 1976:1009). Yahweh's משפטים refers to individual commandments as well as the summary of all the commandments. Moses or God Himself has given these commandments (cf. Neh.9:13; Ps.72:1; Ez.20:25) (Johnson 1986:103).

Psalm 103:6 does not only refer to the judging God in His righteousness but also to the saving God in His saving power (Lampartner 1959:180). The plural form (צדקות) expresses God's great saving acts in history which are to be understood as an expression of covenant faithfulness and steadfast love (cf. Judg.5:11; 1 Sam.12:7; Ps.11:7; Mic.6:5; Dan.9:16). When Israel praises the justice of God in history, she thanks Him that He stands on Israel's side and in His action avows Himself to her (Von Rad 1979:372; Allen 1983:18; Scharbert 1984:410; Kraus 1988:292).

The use of both plural terms in Psalm 103:6 points to a link between law and salvation.<sup>15</sup> Justice and righteous deeds are rendered to all the oppressed, and are therefore considered as salvation deeds. However, in the cause of the reference to justice and righteous deeds, the worshipper immediately thinks of Moses. He includes in his petition

14 Weinfeld (1992:237) translates חסד with kindness. The author of this article prefer the translation 'steadfast love'.

15 Ps.103:17-18 refer to a relationship between law, steadfast love and righteousness.



the characteristics of God as these were revealed to Moses. In Exodus 33:13 Moses asks Yahweh to let him know His ways, and Yahweh, in response, causes all His goodness to pass before him (Ex.33:19). In Exodus 34:6-7 Yahweh called out all His attributes. The author of Psalm 103 alludes to these words which occur in Exodus 33:12-34:7 (Weinfeld 1995:184).

The question still remains: what is the meaning of these words used together in verse 6? Niehr (1986:287) believes that the plural combination of *צדקה* and *משפטים* points to the classical meaning of the hendiadys *משפטים וצדקה* because of the occurrence of the verb *עשה* (cf. Deut.33:21). The abnormal form of these words have led to different translation possibilities.<sup>16</sup> In the light of the above discussion and all the translation possibilities we can suggest the following translation of verse 6: Yahweh doing righteous deeds and justice for all the oppressed.

## 6. The Relationship between righteousness, justice and forgiveness

The discussion of the form and structure (cf. 2.1) suggests two possible ways in which the relationship between justice and forgiveness can be understood. We shall therefore focus on the two possibilities.

### 6.1 Righteousness and justice: demonstration of God's forgiveness

Justice for the oppressed is one of the ways in which God demonstrates His forgiveness. God cannot merely say that He is a forgiving God. His words and deeds must correspond. The prayer of Solomon (1 Kgs.8:22-53) is a proof of this viewpoint. 1 Kings 8:46-51 refers to Israel who has been taken captive by an enemy (oppressor). Then the text refer to a prayer for forgiveness: 'And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgiven all the offences they have committed against you, and cause their conquerors to show them mercy, for they are your people and your inheritance, whom you brought out of Egypt, out of that iron-smelting furnace' (1 Kgs.8:50-51). The worshipper asks God for forgiveness because He has already demonstrated His mercy and forgiveness in Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

The list of participles (vv. 3-5) outlines the course of a forgiveness that heals, redeems life from threatening death, so adorning life with steadfast love and compassion, and making it possible to experience life as good, with the result that life is renewed. All the items in this song of thanksgiving begins with and is based on forgiveness (Mays 1994:329).

Many scholars exclude verse 6 from the list of participles because verse 3-5 refers to the individual (singular) and verse 6 to the oppressed people (plural). On the contrary one may argue that the climax of these participles is the demonstration of justice for the people as a whole. Justice for the oppressed may be seen as the ultimate proof of God's forgiveness.

Verse 17 indirectly supports this viewpoint: 'But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's

16 Cf. the following translations: 'Yahweh performs saving deeds, winning justice for all victims of oppression' (Allen 1983:17); 'The Lord works saving acts, and justice for all who are oppressed' (Westermann 1989:237); 'Doing righteous deeds is the Lord, and just deeds for all the oppressed' (Willis 1991:527); 'Yahweh executes righteous acts and judgements for who are wronged' (Weinfeld 1995:184); 'The Lord works/executes righteousness and justice for all the oppressed' (1983-AV; NKJV; NIV); 'The Lord is righteous in his acts; he brings justice to all who have been wronged' (NEB); 'The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed' (NRSV).

17 This is not the only place in the prayer of Solomon where God demonstrated His forgiveness. 1 Kings 8:35-40 emphasise that Yahweh must prove His forgiveness by giving rain on the land (vv. 35-36) and keeping plagues and pestilences from the land (vv. 37-40) (O'Kennedy 1996:232-233).

children'. God's righteousness to children's children may be seen as a demonstration of His steadfast love and forgiveness. The phrase 'children's children' (v. 17) does not directly refer to 'justice for all who are oppressed' (v. 6). But, if one accepts Allen's (1983:21) inclusio between verses 6 and 17-18 there may be a link between these two phrases.

## 6.2 Righteousness and justice: basis for God's forgiveness

The structure and content of Psalm 103 also suggest that God's righteousness and justice may be seen as the basis for His forgiveness. The possible inclusio between verses 6 and 10 supports this hypothesis. In verse 6 God is *doing* righteous deeds and justice and in verse 10 He *does not do* to us according to our sins. These two ideas complement one another. The fact that God does righteous and just deeds is demonstrated by the fact that he does not punish Israel according to their sins (i.e. forgiveness) (Willis 1991:529).

The inclusio between verses 6 and 10 is not the only proof for this viewpoint. The entire main strophe (vv. 6/7-18) portraying God's steadfast love and forgiveness may be grounded in verse 6. The righteousness of God represents itself to the Psalmist as steadfast love and forgiveness (Weiser 1965:661).

God's righteousness (or righteous deeds) and justice may be seen as a general term which includes mercy, forgiveness and steadfast love (cf. Reventlow 1992:172). Righteousness is therefore no static attribute of God, but it manifests itself in such acts as forgiveness, help, deliverance, etcetera (Anderson 1977:714).

Daniel 9: 16 refers to God's righteous acts which manifests itself in forgiveness: 'O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts (צדקות), let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbors.' The allusion of His righteous acts recalls Judges 5:11, 1 Samuel 12:7, Isaiah 45:24, Micah 6:5 and Psalm 103:6. These righteous acts are His acts on behalf of Israel attacked or afflicted by oppressors in Egypt, in the wilderness period, in the time of the judges and in exile (Goldingay 1991:243).

## 6.3 Pre-condition for righteousness, justice, steadfast love and forgiveness?

The question is: Does Psalm 103 portray any pre-condition/s for God's righteousness, justice, steadfast love and forgiveness? Psalm 103 says that the steadfast love of God, which issues in forgiveness, is only for 'those who fear him' (vv.11, 13, 17) and for 'those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments' (v. 18). Yahweh is marked by righteousness, justice, steadfast love and forgiveness, as long as the partner keeps the covenant (Brueggemann 1984:161; Mays 1994:329).

The phrase 'those who fear the Lord' is a description used in the Psalms along with the righteous, the faithful and the servants of the Lord. It refers to those who seek to make God the center of their lives (e.g. Pss. 25:12, 14; 31:19; 34:9; 85:9) (Mays 1994:329). The righteous and just deeds of God (v. 6) must find and echo of obedient deeds from his people (cf. possible inclusio between vv. 6 and 17-18). חסד is essentially a two-way relationship of obligation (Allen 1983:22).

The question is: does the Old Testament portray 'fear of the Lord' as a pre-condition for righteousness, justice and forgiveness? The text of Psalm 103 may emphasise that people can only experience God's righteousness, justice, steadfast love and forgiveness *if they fear the Lord*. There is also another answer to this question. Those who sing Psalm 103 know themselves to be forgiven sinners. They do not receive steadfast love because they fear the Lord; they fear the Lord because they have been forgiven and experienced God's steadfast

love. Psalm 130:4 supports this idea: 'But there is forgiveness (סלח) with you, so that you may be feared (איר) (own translation).

## 7. Conclusion

The study of Psalm 103 comes to the following conclusions:

- a) God's justice and forgiveness are not opposite attributes. There is a definite relationship between them.
- b) The text of Psalm 103 describes this relationship in two ways:
  - Righteous deeds and justice for the oppressed may be seen as the demonstration of God's forgiveness.
  - Righteousness and justice may also be seen as the basis for God's steadfast love and forgiveness.
- c) Psalm 103 emphasises that God's steadfast love, forgiveness and righteousness are for 'those who fear him' (vv. 11, 13 and 17) and for 'those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments' (v. 18). This may be understood in two ways:
  - God cannot demonstrate His love, forgiveness and justice to people who do not fear Him.
  - God demonstrates His love, forgiveness and justice in order that people may emulate it.

These conclusions have definite implications for our situation in South Africa:

- It is difficult for people in South Africa to practise justice and forgiveness if they do not experience God's justice and forgiveness. Therefore it is more difficult for people who do not fear the Lord to demonstrate justice and forgiveness.
- One cannot talk about justice without mentioning forgiveness and vice versa. It is therefore significant that we in South Africa have a Truth *and* Reconciliation Commission. Justice is an important element in searching for truth while forgiveness is indispensable to the reconciliation process.
- People cannot simply say: 'Justice must be the prerequisite for forgiveness'. A relationship between justice and forgiveness does not refer to pre-conditions but rather to the way in which they complement and correct one another.
- God wants the people of South Africa (especially Christians) to react to His steadfast love, forgiveness, righteousness and justice.

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