Justice and Divine Judgement: Scriptural Perspectives for Public Theology

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Abstract
From Jewish and Christian Scripture this article retrieves conceptions of justice and divine judgement with the potential to contribute to the public good. Although justice is not a homogenous concept in Scripture, there is a justice-trajectory that is more restorative than retributive and, as such, has profound public import. Through the discussion of scriptural justice this article raises the question of the role of Scripture in public theology. While affirming that justice is a central scriptural concern and therefore indispensable to Christian faith and practice, in this article I also explore the nexus between justice and divine judgement, with a view to indicating by means of inner-biblical critique that divine judgement, no less than justice in the biblical tradition, leans towards restoration rather than (solely) retribution. Special attention is paid to the work of Karen Lebacqz and Dan Via, and Mt. 11:2–6 is also discussed.

Keywords
justice, divine judgement, Scripture and public theology, Mt. 11:2–6

In 1990, as part of his Australian New College lecture series, Stanley Hauerwas voiced the view that justice is a ‘bad idea’ for Christians. Writing in the wake of various forms of liberation theology, Hauerwas notes that among Christians generally there is a consensus that justice is integral to Christian faith. As he perceives things, however, Christian commitment to justice all too often buys into the presuppositions and thought-forms of post-Enlightenment liberalism, especially when justice is conceived predominantly in terms of...
‘rights’. His fundamental critique of Christian advocacy for justice is that it often lacks biblical and theological integrity because of its disconnectedness from Christian roots. There is no universally accepted theory of justice, so Christians fool themselves if they think that by advocating for justice they are necessarily acting out the implications of their faith and thereby witnessing to it. Indeed, according to Hauerwas, glib Christian concern for justice may well reveal an eliding of specifically Christian conviction and deliberation. He states:

There are no doubt many reasons why justice is so appealing to Christians; not the least of which is our increasing sense that the salvation wrought in Jesus is social and political in its very form. Jesus’ salvation does not have social and political implications, but it is a politics that is meant as an alternative to all social life that does not reflect God’s glory. Yet why should that politics be expressed in the language of justice? Part of the reason has to do with the church’s attempt to remain a societal actor in societies that we feel are slipping away from our control. The current emphasis on justice among Christians springs not so much from an effort to locate the Christian contribution to wider society as it does from Christians’ attempt to find a way to be societal actors without that action being colored by Christian presupposition.²

Hauerwas’ challenge is important, especially for public theology. I am less agitated than he by Christian advocacy for justice that is not explicitly grounded in specifically Christian convictions, since much good can be done by Christians’ involvement in justice advocacy on the basis of ‘thin agreement’ with others who do not share their faith commitments. Nevertheless, Hauerwas identifies something crucial in relation to Christian motivation for justice advocacy; that is, if Christians fail to advocate justice on the basis of resources at the well-springs of our faith, we will likely fail to contribute what only Christians are able to contribute with respect to the meaning of justice and the means to agitate for it.

The theme of justice daunts, not only because it looms large in western intellectual history but also because it is so momentous in moral and theological terms. Justice weighs heavily on the moral scales not so much because it has exercised the minds of the mentally mighty but because it bears directly on pressing social, cultural, political, economic and ecological concerns. Issues that exercise our collective conscience so often comprise justice matters. In biblical terms, justice might be said to be the moral equivalent of ‘holy ground’. Indeed, within the biblical tradition, justice can claim to belong to a group of

²) Ibid., p. 58.
concepts accorded ultimate value. The canonical record of the prophet Jeremiah is instructive in this respect. Echoing a particular trajectory found within the Deuteronomistic tradition, Jeremiah affirms a conception of justice centred on particular regard for society’s neediest—orphans, widows, resident aliens—and not only reiterates that acting justly and rightly complies with God’s will but goes further by contending that acting justly and rightly within a covenantal context constitutes knowing God (NRSV, Jer. 9:23–4, 22:3 and 15–16; cf. Deut. 24:19–22). In other words, Jeremiah not only ‘retrieves’ a notion of justice that surpasses and in some senses undermines another prominent trajectory within the Deuteronomistic tradition—strict ‘payback’ (reward and recompense)—but also renovates by associating justice with knowing and relating to God. To act justly and rightly thus belongs to the sphere of the ultimate, not merely the morally penultimate, by virtue of falling into step with God’s concern for those who are vulnerable. Although we discuss justice matters in ethical terms, it behoves us to recall that to wrestle with issues of justice is to trespass into a sphere of pressing concern to the God of biblical tradition, such that this wrestling transcends the purely ethical plane.

With Hauerwas’ challenge in mind, it is noteworthy that justice is a prominent concern in the Torah, in decisive prophetic traditions and in early Christian traditions. Further to Jeremiah’s coupling of knowledge of God with justice for the vulnerable, Isa. 28:17 signals that justice is the criterion of divine judgement: ‘I will make justice (משׁפט) the rule, right-dealing (צדקה) the plumbline’ (Hebrew Bible, my translation). This announcement reverberates through the prophetic tradition, especially in Amos and Micah (Amos 5:24; Mic. 6:8), and the Gospel traditions reveal that a central dimension of Jesus’ proclamation/enactment of the reign of God was an indebtedness to the prophetic conception of justice. Hauerwas’ concerns notwithstanding, one must surely affirm that justice is a central scriptural concern and therefore indispensable to Christian discipleship. To his question, ‘Yet why should that politics [of Jesus’ salvation] be expressed in the language of justice?’, one may reply that the politics of the reign of God displayed in the Jesus story is incoherent and incomprehensible apart from justice, biblically construed. Further, as John Donahue contends, ‘the contemporary realization that faith must be involved in the quest for and expression of justice, far from being foreign to

3) It is widely accepted that the book of Jeremiah underwent Deuteronomistic redaction.
biblical thought, recovers a core of the biblical heritage which, when neglected, brings the danger of reducing this heritage to a manual of personal piety.\(^5\)

Despite its moral and theological gravity, however, the precise meaning of justice is elusive, as Karen Lebacqz notes.\(^6\) After exploring and critiquing six theories of justice, from the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill to the libera-
tionist perspective of Jose Porfirio Miranda,\(^7\) Lebacqz can legitimately contend that 'there is no single agreed standard for justice in our contemporary world. All the talk about justice today may not bring us any nearer to making justice a lived reality'.\(^8\) Here Lebacqz makes two crucial observations: first, that there are competing conceptions of justice, which compete because theorists do not agree on what constitutes justice; secondly, that discussing justice, even if full agreement could be reached concerning that which comprises justice, does not necessarily lead to justice being implemented. Within the context of public theology, Lebacqz's first point can be taken as given; public theologians appreciate that while their deliberations about justice might (but also might not) be given a hearing, their perspectives will necessarily have to jostle with other competing viewpoints. However, her second point poses a more important challenge to public theology. If, as public theologians generally agree, theology no longer holds a privileged position in the public sphere, what will gain the-
ology a hearing in public is not whether it deliberates about justice and other matters of public import but whether what it has to say about such matters effects change for good, especially with respect to determinative social, politi-
cal, economic and, perhaps most importantly, ecclesiastical structures. Here careful discernment is imperative, because in order to gain a hearing public theology might easily be tempted to express what suits those with power and prestige; yet, gaining a hearing for this reason would not serve the public good. Instead, a measure of the value of public theology might well be the


\(^{7}\) Karen Lebacqz, Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986). Her two books on justice remain benchmark works in theological discourse on justice.

\(^{8}\) Lebacqz, Justice in an Unjust World, p. 7. Standard analyses of justice speak of distributive, retributive and commutative forms of justice, with 'social justice' used to designate that which contributes to the common good. Commutative justice concerns fairness in agreements and exchanges between persons. See Lebacqz, Six Theories of Justice, p. 73.
extent to which its voice challenges and unsettles entrenched structures that make injustice systemic and thereby endemic.

**Scripture, Justice and Public Theology**

In theological discourse, we have learned to acknowledge that perspective depends on vantage point, especially social location. In a world scarred by injustice, it makes a significant difference that the deliberations on ‘restoring justice’ in this issue of *IJPT* occurred within a context of privilege. Many in the western world cannot help but view matters of justice from the heights of advantage. That might make for comfortable conversation, but that situatedness also restricts vision. In such circumstances, we should consider what resources are available to counter our blinkered perspectives and open our eyes to reality as it is experienced in the wider world. Perhaps the most important resource today is the collective voice of the poor and powerless, those whose lives are diminished and abbreviated by systemic injustice. Lebacqz, cognizant of her own position of (relative) privilege and recognizing that ‘oppressors and oppressed do not inhabit the same world’,9 devotes considerable space to stories about and perspectives from those who inhabit the underside of history. When she comes to reflect ‘on ethical method in an unjust world’,10 however, she turns, carefully and with some trepidation, to Scripture as locus of revelation.

Lebacqz opens her discussion of ethical method in relation to justice by drawing attention to a potentially insurmountable hurdle: ‘theory itself is developed by oppressors and therefore tends to exhibit an oppressor mentality’.11 In certain respects she anticipates Alasdair MacIntyre’s interrelated questions, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*,12 by reminding readers that long-held tools of ethical enquiry such as logic, rationality and consistency were developed within privileged contexts and sustained by those with education, wealth and power, making it largely impossible for the perspective of the poor and powerless to find representation. Within the western tradition(s) of ethical enquiry, therefore, theories of justice do little to disturb the advantaged because they have been constructed according to the rationality of the advantaged.

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11) Ibid., p. 51.
Lebacqz is not opposed to the rigorous exercise of reason. She argues, rather, for alternative forms of rationality and logic both attuned to the inherent bias and value-ladenness of so-called objective ethical analysis and sensitive to the passion and pain of those whose lives are overwhelmed and undermined by injustice. ‘Instead of taking reason as the starting point or as an adequate tool for ethics’, she writes, ‘a new kind of logic is required… a historical logic that attends to the history out of which current patterns of distribution and current decisions about action are taken’. As already indicated, one way towards new forms of rationality and logic is to listen-in to different conversations by consciously attending to voices marked by pain and poverty caused by injustice. Yet in her quest for an alternative logic, Lebacqz also turns to Scripture as locus of divine revelation, although her understanding of Scripture as revelation is nuanced.

At times Lebacqz comes close to equating revelation with Scripture, but she makes the same point with respect to revelation/Scripture as with reason, stating:

Revelation, like reason… is fraught with difficulties. As there is no neutral rationality, so also there is no neutral reading of a text and therefore no neutral reading of Scripture. Revelation is always God’s self-disclosure to humans. It is mediated through human language and thought forms and it is therefore limited by human culture.14

From this well-established hermeneutical insight, Lebacqz makes the further point that readers of Scripture encounter a ‘different reality’ within its pages depending on whether their experience is that of oppressor or oppressed. Not only has Scripture been interpreted in ways that serve the interests of oppressors, but Scripture itself is the repository of recorded experiences of divine encounter shaped by cultural biases that inscribe, so to speak, those very biases, some of which are oppressive, as revelation. Thus, for Lebacqz, Scripture is both indispensable for a Christian approach to justice and suspect, because it contains within it the biases of oppressors, and down the centuries has been used to support oppressive practices and perpetuate unjust structures and institutions.

Despite initially suggesting that one possible way of gaining an alternative logic is ‘to turn to revelation’,15 Lebacqz’s suspicion of Scripture as implicated
in the history of oppression seems to discount turning to Scripture as a means towards what she deems to be necessary new forms of rationality and logic. 'Nonetheless', she avers, 'however suspect the Bible may be because of the biases built into it by the human communities that formed it, it remains necessary for any Christian approach to justice'. Here we are inclined to ask why and how so. For Lebacqz, the answer to 'how so' seems easier to articulate than the answer to 'why'. In her view, Scripture contributes positively to a Christian approach to justice, provided it is read from the perspective of the poor and powerless. Thus, for Lebacqz, Scripture remains necessary for a Christian approach to justice on the grounds of a 'given' relating to her faith tradition and journey as a Christian believer. In accordance with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s remark: ‘We must not seek an increase in antiquarian information but an increase in historical consciousness and biblical remembrance’, Lebacqz associates the voices of the poor and powerless with ‘historical consciousness’ and writes:

These stories [of the oppressed] must now be combined with ‘biblical remembrance’—with an appropriation of the ‘Story’. We reflect on our experiences not out of a vacuum but out of convictions and presuppositions of how things ought to be. For me, as a Christian, a significant part of this reflection must be rooted in Scripture.

We might ask, then, what we are to make of these remarks, especially Lebacqz’s apparent equation of ‘biblical remembrance’ with appropriating the ‘Story’. It cannot be the biblical story in its totality, because so much of that larger story is implicated in oppression. Perhaps it is a story or collection of stories within the larger biblical record that is not implicated in oppression, but if so this is not clearly stated. It would seem that Lebacqz simply cannot detach herself from Scripture, because her ‘convictions and presuppositions of how things ought to be’ have been shaped by Scripture, or parts thereof. For better or worse, it is a determinative part of the tradition within which Lebacqz finds herself and apart from which she would not know herself as one with her particular convictions and presuppositions, which she continues to affirm. This suggests that despite Scripture’s (partial) implication in oppression, Scripture also provides the criterion or norm for renouncing oppression as unjust.

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16) Ibid., p. 59.
and anti-human, thereby making it (or parts of it) the Christian’s resource *sine qua non*.

To put it philosophically, it would seem that Lebacqz views the role of Scripture in just ethical method as necessary, but not sufficient.\(^{19}\) Hence, Scripture is not only necessary for a Christian approach to justice but, with respect to Christian ethical method attuned to injustice, Scripture must be read from the perspective of those whose lives are marked by injustice. Moreover, the goal of interpreting Scripture from such a perspective is not simply to comprehend Scripture differently or more profoundly but to lead towards social transformation in the direction of justice. Thus, for Lebacqz:

> The proper starting place for a theory of justice is therefore the juxtaposition of historical consciousness that hears the voices of the oppressed and biblical remembrance that recaptures the meaning of Scripture as understood by the oppressed . . . Historical consciousness illumines biblical remembrance, and biblical remembrance in turn illumines historical consciousness.\(^{20}\)

What Lebacqz claims for Scripture in developing a theory of justice has profound implications for public theology. While speaking from the perspective of Christian faith, by juxtaposing historical consciousness and biblical remembrance she places the reading of Scripture within a wider socio-historical context than solely that of the church. This implies that biblical remembrance serves the cause of justice not only by conscientizing persons within the church but also by representing the voices of oppressed peoples wherever they might be and whatever their faith stance might be. For Lebacqz, this dynamic role granted to or acknowledged to be held by Scripture in the construction of a theory of justice seems to be a function primarily of scriptural interpretation on behalf of the poor and powerless. While readings from the perspective of those deprived of justice bring to light understanding and possibilities for change that readings from the perspective of the privileged cannot offer, this is not because the voice of the oppressed is absent from Scripture. There is much in Jewish and Christian Scripture that is written from the perspective of the underside of history so that, once seen, this dimension of Scripture serves to foster momentum towards a more just future. Indeed, Lebacqz allows that ‘Scripture provides roots for a different Christian approach than that found in

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the history [of Christian interpretation and appropriation] that provides cause for rue. Thus, while a different reading perspective is necessary, Scripture itself is an indispensable resource for authorizing the claim before the world's wealthy and powerful that God, according to Jewish and Christian lights, is preferentially committed to those experiencing injustice. Historically, this has not been the church's strong point. Yet were the church to become known in public for its commitment to and agitation for justice on biblical-theological grounds, this would undoubtedly have revolutionary consequences; socially, culturally, politically, economically and even ecologically. Although justice, biblically understood, is tradition dependent in the sense that it is grounded in a particular faith stance that associates concern for justice with divine initiatives in human history, such as the exodus from Egypt; nevertheless biblical witness to justice has what might be described as ‘reach’ well beyond the tradition with which it is associated and of which it is a part. Furthermore, that ‘reach’ might well impact on wider social mores, cultural values, political and economic structures, ecological commitments, national aspirations and hence public policy initiatives.

Justice and Divine Judgement in Biblical Tradition

‘To examine justice and injustice in abstraction from the issue of judgment would be to rupture an integrated biblical construct’, according to Dan Via. Although people exercise judgement and might even do so with reference to concepts of justice, the judgement of which Via speaks is divine judgement. It is not self-evident that divine judgement should necessarily correlate to justice, but in Jewish and Christian Scripture the creator of the cosmos is, for that reason, its judge and judges in accordance with divine attributes that serve as

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21) Ibid., p. 67. ‘Rue: Christian Complicity’ is the title of Lebacqz’s second chapter, in which she documents ways in which the Christian church has been complicit in injustice and argues towards the conclusion that ‘it is only from a stance of rue that the Christian can begin to ask about justice in our ruptured world’ (p. 50).

22) As discussed in the next section, justice in Jewish and Christian Scripture is a heterogeneous concept, not all strands of which cohere neatly together. A hermeneutical privileging of one or more strand(s) is therefore inevitable.

moral norms. One such attribute is justice or righteousness. Human behaviour that falls short of divine justice is subject to divine judgement.

The biblical writers only rarely challenge the divine prerogative to judge, but much biblical literature wrestles with the mystery of what constitutes divine judgement and what comprises its rationale. Via asserts that ‘social injustice in ancient Israel brought judgment’, but it would be equally true to say that social injustice in ancient Israel (and elsewhere) brought no judgement, for often the biblical record indicates that divine judgement is brought against Israel or some other group of people after injustice has prevailed for some time, often measurable in generations. Hence, the precise nature of the nexus between human injustice and divine judgement is difficult to discern.

With respect to the question of the relation between justice and divine judgement, Via accepts ‘the prophetic understanding of God’s judging action in history as a hermeneutical lens that is still valid for Christian theology’. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that such a perspective does not necessarily bring perspicuity to the relation between divine judge and judgement as historical event. At times the prophets speak of divine judgement as intrusions into Israel’s history; whereas at other times they perceive divine judgement within or alongside immanent socio-political processes.

There is a further complication; namely, the ambiguity of the two terms, ‘justice’ and ‘judgement’, even if both are often used synonymously to signify (tempered) vengeance or retribution. Since clarity is not served by simply assuming commonplace conceptions and since one cannot take as given universally accepted ideas of justice or judgement, a Christian perspective on these interrelated concepts can hardly avoid turning to Scripture, which all churches acknowledge as authoritative in some sense despite the kind of concerns articulated by Lebacqz and others.

With respect to the Hebrew Scriptures, Via finds the ground, authority and model of the Israelite conception of justice in the exodus ‘event’. In Israelite experience, this event became paradigmatic for understanding God’s justice and righteousness (cf. Ps. 99:4; Isa. 5:16 and 61:8), which was understood to form the basis for a covenant relationship with Israel (Exod. 6:2–8, 19:4–5 and 34:27; Deut. 6:20–25 and 7:7–9) and in turn served as the model for just relations in Israel’s communal life (see Exod. 22:21; Amos 5, 7, 15 and 24; 24) Ibid., p. 3.
25) Ibid., p. 4.
26) Ibid., pp. 13–14. Via does not question the event character of the exodus; neither does he consider aspects of the exodus narrative that militate against a justice perspective.
Isa. 5:7). The gracious, liberating action of God on behalf of those at the bottom of the social scale—slaves—entrenched those most disadvantaged in Israel’s social order at the heart of Israel’s sense of just community relations. Since God’s initiative occurred on behalf of slaves, rather than in support of those in the upper social echelons, Israelite justice centred on those most likely to be ignored or disadvantaged by standard social processes. In this respect, the Israelite sense of justice was grounded in a conception of divine grace, actualized in a covenant relationship, that gave particular stress to the poor and powerless within the covenant community (Exod. 22:21–2; Deut. 10:18; Pss. 10:18 and 94:3–6; Isa. 1:23 and 3:15; Jer. 5:28). In other words, the Israelite conception of justice is clearly interrelated with notions of grace or mercy, covenant accountability, fairness (as we might construe justice today, especially in the wake of the influential work of John Rawls), and special regard for those most vulnerable in society, even those perceived to stand outside the covenant community.27 As Donahue affirms, albeit with some hyperbole, ‘Characteristic of all strands of Israel’s traditions is concern for the widow, the orphan, the poor and the sojourner in the land’.28

It is noteworthy and indeed pivotal for my argument that although more restrictive (‘to each his or her due’) and retributive notions of justice are represented in Scripture, what is said about the biblical notion of justice in the paragraph above supersedes strict conceptions of justice; hence, scriptural justice in its truest and deepest sense may be said to be restorative, rectifying or transformative, reflecting the divine commitment to, concern for and intent towards the created order.29 Thus, we find helpful distinctions made by Paul Tillich between ‘tributive’ or proportional justice (whether distributive or retributive) and transforming or creative justice (which Tillich finds classically expressed in Scripture), and also by E. Clinton Gardner between preserving justice and reconciling justice (which Gardner grounds in scripturally construed covenantal justice).30

In view of Klaus Koch’s influential argument that the Hebrew Scriptures do not contain the notion of retributive justice, Via devotes considerable space

to defending the view that both distributive and retributive justice are to be found within the Old Testament. Indeed, for Via, retributive justice is the necessary concomitant of distributive justice. He states:

In any human society there will always be injustices in the distribution of the community’s goods; therefore, if the community is serious about distributive justice—and both ancient Greece and ancient Israel were—it will have to be just as serious about retributive justice, correcting inequality in distributing goods.

This seems unobjectionable, so long as being ‘just as serious about retributive justice’ implies that retributive justice serves the common good fostered by distributive justice, not that retributive justice per se is seen as a social good equal in importance to distributive justice. Via also makes the more absolute claim that distributive and retributive justice ‘are logically and necessarily connected to each other and that together they constitute the whole of justice’. This would seem to overlook restorative justice, although Via points out that within the Old Testament:

The purpose of retributive justice is to restore equality in Israel when it has been violated. But there is also a contrary strand in which, although distributive justice is based on unmerited favor, retributive justice becomes a matter of reward for obedient performance and punishment for the lack thereof.

Here Via makes clear that he considers retributive justice to have potentially restorative effects, even as he identifies a significant strand within the biblical tradition that envisages this form of justice as reward or recompense. There is a significant problem, however, with Via’s claim (or at least with extrapolating from it) that ‘the purpose of retributive justice is to restore equality in Israel when it has been violated’. It might be possible to restore a poor person’s vineyard by retrieving it from a wealthy landlord, who somehow deprived the poor person of it, but there are certain kinds of violations whose injurious effects

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32) Via, Divine Justice, Divine Judgment, p. 15. Later Via emphasizes ‘the logical connection between distributive and retributive justice, which requires the latter if the former is taken seriously’ (p. 22).

33) Ibid., p. 15.

34) Ibid., p. 16.
cannot be undone, healed or made to dissipate by means of retribution, no matter how severe or seemingly beneficial to the injured person. Retribution may punish the murderer, the robber, the rapist, the batterer or the abuser, but no amount of punishment can undo the harm done. Material restitution is one thing; personal, social or cultural healing is quite another. Even material restitution falls far short of restoration, if in the process of being deprived of material goods one is psychologically traumatized by the experience. Moreover, if, as Via contends, divine justice and judgement set the standard for human justice and judgement, there is more to justice and judgement than distribution of social goods and retribution for failure to distribute equitably or fairly.

It is often taken for granted that judgement is equivalent to retributive justice. This might be challenged, however, if divine judgement is conceived as primarily restorative, rather than principally retributive, justice. As Donahue notes:

While Yahweh’s justice restores the afflicted and condemns the wicked, caution should be exercised in describing the Lord of the Old Testament as vindictive. Though Yahweh punishes sinners there is no text in the Old Testament where his justice is equated with vengeance on the sinner. Yahweh’s justice is saving justice where punishment of the sinner is an integral part of restoration.

In my opinion, divine judgement, especially when interpreted Christologically, is restorative justice with a retributive dimension rather than, as Via supposes, retributive justice with a restorative dimension. Divine judgement does condemn human pride, injustice and violence, but within the larger context of the divine befriending of humanity. The recollected words of Jesus in Mt. 11:2–6, which pertain directly to his sense of self-identity and mission and also signal something of his attitude towards justice and divine judgement, corroborate this perception. There is a certain fittingness about turning to Matthew’s Gospel in a study concerned with the relation between justice and divine judgement. Whereas Joseph Grassi characterizes Matthew as the ‘Gospel of Justice’, it might equally be dubbed the Gospel of Judgement; a

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35) See ibid., p. 27, where ‘retributive justice’ and ‘judgment’ are placed side by side as synonyms.
point crystallized in this perspicacious observation by the reluctant Monsignor Quixote: ‘I have always thought that the Gospel of St Matthew could be distinguished from the others as the Gospel of fear’. In any case, Jesus’ reported response to John’s question about whether he really is the ‘Coming One’ (ὁ ἐρχόμενος) sheds new light on both justice and judgement (Mt. 11:2–6).

In this opening section of a new phase in Matthew’s story of Jesus, the imprisoned John hears of ‘the works, or deeds, of the Messiah’ (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Χριστοῦ), which for Matthew sums up all that Jesus has done to this point in his public mission. Apparently the content of what Jesus is reported to be saying and doing causes John consternation. Since Matthew does not make explicit why John’s hearing about the works of the Messiah provokes him to pose the question he does, we must look to his account of John’s activity prior to Jesus’ public mission.

All four canonical Gospel writers link the beginning of Jesus’ public mission with the activity of John, albeit in different ways. Matthew alone records that Jesus’ public proclamation was no more and no less than a reiteration of John’s public proclamation: ‘Change, because the reign of the heavens is imminent!’ (Greek New Testament, Mt. 3:2 and 4:17b, my translation). In other words, according to Matthew, Jesus’ message was the same as John’s, but when we look more closely at the specifics of what John taught, as recorded by Matthew, certain differences emerge between his message and that of Jesus.

In Matthew’s summary of John’s teaching, the dominant note is one of retributive judgement (Mt. 3:7–12). The images are stark and dark: impending wrath (Mt. 3:7); an axe already at the roots of trees not producing good fruit, which will be cast into fire (Mt. 3:10); the strength of the Coming One (ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος) revealed in his immersion of people by a spirit of holiness and by fire (Mt. 3:11), which is the destination of the chaff separated from the grain by the Coming One’s winnowing fork (Mt. 3:12). According to Matthew, some of this same imagery recurs in Jesus’ teaching: the warning

38) Graham Greene, *Monsignor Quixote* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 74–5. Monsignor Quixote’s rational for this observation is that Matthew has fifteen references to hell, while Mark has two, Luke three and John none. His instinct is correct, because although Matthew contains only two references to Hades (11:23 and 16:18) and seven to Gehenna (5:22, 29, 39, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15 and 33), totalling only nine specific references to ‘hell’, his depictions of eschatological judgement are severely retributive.

of Jesus in Mt. 7:19 replicates exactly John's warning in Mt. 3:10b about the fate of every tree that fails to produce good fruit; while the image of the threshing place in Mt. 3:12 prefigures images of eschatological judgement in Mt. 13:24–30, 36–43, 47–50 and 25:31–46. At one level, then, Matthew suggests that Jesus' teaching merely reiterates John's dominant motif of retributive judgement.

In the story Matthew recounts, however, John seems not to recognize in the works of the Messiah what he envisaged of the Coming One. Hence he asks: 'Are you the Coming One or are we to await another?' (Mt. 11:3, my translation). In response to John's question, Jesus offers not a catalogue of anticipated catastrophe but a roll call of the good he has done and the good news that has been proclaimed to the poor.

The clue to Jesus' point in response to John lies in the details of his mission to date. Most of the messianic works listed in Mt. 11:5 have been either heard, in the Sermon on the Mount, or seen, in the cluster of astounding works recounted in Matthew 8–9: the blind being made to see (Mt. 9:27–31); the lame being made to walk (Mt. 9:2–8); lepers being cleansed (Mt. 8:2–4); the dead being raised to life (Mt. 9:18–26); the poor receiving the good news (the opening words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and, therefore, the opening words of Jesus' public mission are 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'). It is telling that in this list, the culminating work of Jesus is not the raising of the dead but the announcement of God's blessing on the poor.

Although specific instances of most of the works listed in Mt. 11:5 appear earlier in Matthew's Gospel, each also alludes to the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 29, which begins with a prophecy of Jerusalem's siege (Isa. 29:1–8) and continues with a prophecy of Israel's incapacity to hear God (Isa. 29:9–16), concludes on a note of restoration: 'On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see' (NRSV, Isa. 29:18, referring to the restoration of those adjudged blind and deaf in Isa. 29:9–12). The note of judgement is sounded again immediately thereafter in Isa. 29:19–20, against tyrants and those who thwart justice, but this note of judgement is not sounded in Jesus' list of his messianic works. Even more striking is the juxtaposition of promised vengeance and restoration in Isa. 35:4–6. In Mt. 11:5, the works of Jesus recall the promises of restoration in Isa. 35:5–6, but without reference to the promised vengeance in Isa. 35:4.

In Isa. 26:7–21, the God of Israel is characterized as the 'Just One' whose judgements teach righteousness. The Lord's punitive judgement is a dominant theme of this lament psalm (Isa. 26:11, 14, 20–21), but towards the end a note of hope is sounded: 'Your dead shall live, my corpse shall rise. O dwellers
in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to the shades’ (NRSV amended, Isa. 26:19; cf. 26:14). Again, Jesus’ roll call of messianic works alludes to the promise of restoration without reference to the dominant theme of judgement in Isa. 26:7–27.

Finally, the culminating work in Mt. 11:5 recalls Isa. 61:1–4, words of an anonymous but anointed prophet whose mission is to announce God’s favour to the oppressed, to proclaim the jubilee year of release from slavery, to reverse mourning into praise, but also to announce the day of God’s vengeance. Yet again, Jesus calls attention to those aspects of his mission that recall promises of restoration but without reference to divine retribution.40

In short, each Isaianic allusion recalls Scriptures that either relate to or are contiguous with anticipations of divine judgement. This is what John was expecting, but Jesus associates his mission solely with promises of restoration. Perhaps this is what perplexed John, leading him to doubt whether Jesus is truly God’s messiah, since the scriptural record holds restoration and retribution together. One might interpret Mt. 11:2–6 by contending that, although Jesus was concerned with acts of restoration to that point in his ministry, ultimately retributive judgement will fall like John’s proverbial axe. This is probably the majority Christian interpretation, which paradoxically finds support in Matthew’s parables of eschatological judgement. Another possible interpretation is that Jesus was niceness incarnate and that God is not, after all, a God of judgement.

Perhaps another interpretation does greater justice to this text. To deny God the role of judge would be to usurp God’s prerogative as creator to judge whether or not we have lived up to the purpose of our creation. In addition, Thorwald Lorenzen’s article in this issue notes that to dispense with the notion of divine judgement is to allow history to be its own judge, with historical ‘winners’ determining what is right or wrong, just or unjust. Thus, I concur with Via, who writes: ‘I contend that the judgment theme is indispensable to a biblical Christian theology because such a theology thinks about God and history together, and because the biblical God demands justice’.41

On the other hand, we must guard against presuming that God’s judgement must mirror human standards of judgement. In Jesus’ response to John’s question, he separates scriptural promises of restoration and wholeness from scriptural warnings of punitive and destructive judgement. We might wonder,

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40 This same dynamic is even more pronounced in Lk. 4:16–21, which explicitly cites Isa. 61:1–2a, but not 61:2b, as being fulfilled in Jesus.
therefore, whether it is plausible to see Jesus’ enactment of restoration as the form of divine judgement; to see Jesus’ messianic works as divine judgement on the present shape of the world, with the additional inference that God’s judgement also rectifies and transforms. There is no doubt a punitive dimension to divine judgement, but what is important is that God’s judgement, as Jesus conceived it in relation to his own mission, is neither purely nor even primarily retributive; its intent is to refine. Seen in this way, divine judgement is the basis for hope.

If we are able to affirm this on the basis of Jesus’ public mission, it is worth considering whether we can affirm this in relation to eschatological judgement. It is disconcerting to find that the first and last books of the New Testament envisage eschatological judgement in retributive terms that seem at odds with the kind of justice-judgement proclaimed and enacted by Jesus. I am, therefore, seeking inner-biblical criteria for interpreting New Testament notions of eschatological judgement along the lines of restorative justice.42 In a similar vein, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm writes:

Recent theology has emphasized the need to rediscover the idea of the last judgement in a new way. This idea is not, as fundamentalist interpretations have tried to suggest, about making sure that ‘bad’ people definitely end up in eternal damnation. Rather it is about rectification; it is about the final and all encompassing flourishing of justice. This emergence of final justice in which the victims of history will be vindicated is not simply a lovely thing, at least not for many of us, since the blanket will be taken away from our eyes. We will finally understand ourselves and our relationships to others, which might be an experience of tremendous shame and therefore of hell. We can hope for the open arms of the loving God waiting for us, but because this loving God is a god of justice and a defender of the poor and powerless, there is no path to God’s open arms than through truth and justice.43

Concluding Remarks

Since justice is a central scriptural concern, it can hardly be marginal to Christian witness in public. This implies not only that the theme of justice stands at the centre of public theology but also that public theology cannot but wrestle with the scriptural construal of justice, which at decisive points transcends and transfigures notions of justice that feature strict reward, recompense or retribution. Furthermore, since Jewish and Christian Scripture preserves a holistic conception of justice with the potential to contribute something distinctive to public discourse regarding justice and its restorative implementation, Scripture and Scripture scholarship remain indispensable and, indeed, central to Christian public theology.

In a situation of competing conceptions of justice, Lebacqz reminds us that, although Scripture must be approached critically, because of some of its cultural biases and also because of its history of reception in support of injustice, it is nevertheless only within Scripture that Christian theology finds its indispensable criterion or norm for ascertaining dimensions to the meaning of justice that are deciphered nowhere else. Theologically and ethically, biblical conceptions of justice move beyond notions of strict distribution and retribution towards ideals of restoration and transformation. As a result, Christian public theology has a responsibility to reaffirm a scriptural conception of justice and to advocate on behalf of this perspective in public. Although the biblical construal of justice can claim to be no less tradition dependent than any other conception or theory of justice, both its orientation towards those experiencing injustice and its restorative intent imply a certain relevance and ‘reach’ well beyond the Jewish-Christian tradition. Paradoxically, it is precisely the distinctiveness of scriptural justice that grants it public pertinence.

Finally, in a world imbalanced by injustice, public theology can ill afford to dispense with the doctrine of divine judgement. In the absence of divine judgement, injustice not only reigns but threatens to become normative. Nevertheless, determinative dimensions of the biblical witness intimate that divine judgement, like divine justice, is ultimately restorative in intent and, therefore, for the world rather than against it.