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Semantics of the Concept of Justice and Its Literary Representations

Abstract: A holistic perception of all dimensions of justice in its organic essence opens horizons of human life that lie beyond the scope of merely formal and legal justice. In this way we reach the basis of the highest ideals: love, solidarity, reconciliation, peace and longing for goodness. The dimensions of justice have to be investigated both in terms of its immense interrelated content and in terms of the representation of justice in literary sources, in philosophical and theological discourse and in various applications of justice in law, education and historical events. The paper focuses on semantics of basic terms that designate the concept of justice in the culture of the Ancient Near East and on the artistic, literary-poetical language that covers the dynamics of vital circumstances. Biblical literary-poetical speech reflects human comprehension and feeling in the range between the concrete and the abstract, the temporal and the infinite.

Key Words: justice, righteousness, semantics, arts, literary representations, ethics, philosophy, theology, law

Povzetek: **Semantika koncepta pravičnosti in njegove literarne reprezentacije**

Celostno dožemanje vseh razsežnosti pravičnosti v njenem organskem bistvu odpira obzorja človekovega življenja onkraj dometa zgolj formalne in pravne pravičnosti. Na ta način pridemo do osnove najvišjih idealov: hrepenenje po dobrem, ljubezen, solidarnost, sprava in mir. Razsežnosti pravičnosti je treba raziskovati tako glede njene brezmejne med seboj povezane vsebine kot tudi glede reprezentacij pravičnosti v literarnih virih, v filozofskem in teološkem diskurzu in v različnih aplikacijah pravičnosti v pravu, vzgoji in zgodovinskih dogodkih. Članek se osredotoča na semantiko osnovnih terminov, ki označujejo koncept pravičnosti v kulturi starega Bližnjega vzhoda, in na umetniški, literarno-poetski jezik, ki pokriva dinamiko vitalnih okoliščin. Svetopisemski poetični nagovor odraža človekovo dožemanje in čutenje v razponu med konkretnim in abstraktnim, časovnim in neskončnim.

Ključne besede: pravičnost, pravšnost, semantika, umetnosti, literarne reprezentacije, etika, filozofija, teologija, pravo

In the Bible, consideration of interrelation between personal, social and cosmic dimensions of justice is crucial for understanding the biblical conception of reali-

ty. Irena Avsenik Nabergoj states how various aspects of the concept of reality and truth are expressed in relation to cosmic and to personal realities: »Usage of the vocabulary from this semantic field shows that the concept of reality and truth in the broadest scope of meaning sometimes expresses a state in the order of creation. However, most biblical texts reveal an understanding of the concept of reality and truth in relation to man and God as personal beings in their reciprocal relationships« (Avsenik Nabergoj 2014, 29). This paper approaches biblical understanding of justice and righteousness in all relevant dimensions by considering the cosmic, social and personal presentation of justice in various literary types and forms. The focus is on the personal or ontological foundation, which is by far the most important dimension of justice in the Bible. Since biblical texts are literary in nature, all linguistic and literary means of expression have to be considered: semantics of relevant concepts, stylistics, rhetoric and literary analysis.

1. Semantics of the Concept of Justice in Its Cross-Cultural Relations

For clarification of the vocabulary used in the Bible it is important to investigate systematically the semantic field (*Wortfeld*) of the root *šdq* in relationship with its various forms and with other words from the roots *yšr*, *ḥsd*, and *špt* in a single sentence and literary structure. Antonyms are mainly derivatives of the root *rš'*, *ḥtt'*, and *'wn*. The corresponding semantic field in Greek, as used in the Septuagint, New Testament and many apocryphal writings, covers the derivatives of the root *dike*. In the sense of judgment the words *krima* and *krisis* are important. The Latin root for justice is *ius*, which became the basis for the concept of justice in all the Romance languages and also in English, besides the term *right* derived from Latin *rectus*. Of this root is reminiscent also the collective Germanic root *rehta*. The meaning of the original German base *rehta* and its derivatives in individual Germanic languages is very general and undefined, similarly to the Latin *ius*. The basic meaning clearly indicates only direction in communication. This basic meaning is associated also with the collective Slavic base with a very broad and indefinite meaning: *prav*. In this connection, mention may be made also of words designating justice in other ancient cultures: *me* (Sumerian), *kittu* (Accadian); *maat* (Ancient Egyptian); *r(i)ta*, *dharma* (Ancient Indian) (Krašovec 1988, 293–304; 2014 three articles).

All the above-mentioned roots and their derivatives reflect the primeval adjustment of the human being to communication and harmony. However, it is precisely here that actual problems begin in the evaluation of the word-stock within the framework of different cultures and religions and the interpretations of these word-stocks. The question is raised whether the vocabulary only covers the meaning that is an expression of the universal feature of human existence and its fundamental adjustment to some order, of natural and social law, or whether it is something more specific and more radical in existential terms. Only a total eva-

luation of individual religions and cultures shows that the dimensions of justice are not the same in all respects. In comparison with the dimensions of justice in the Hebrew, the decisive difference lies in the fact that the Sumerian and Accadian, Egyptian, Ancient Indian, Greek and Roman roots and their derivatives within their cultures did not rise above the framework of cosmic and collectivist social laws. The great advantage of the biblical understanding of justice is that it conceives of justice in terms of interpersonal relationships between God and humans as well in mutual human relationships.

In accordance with postulates of Hebrew religion the words derived from the Hebrew root *šdq* and equivalents in the Greek Bible derived from the root *dike* occur very often in synonymous combination with some other related words or in contrast patterns such as »righteous« and »unrighteous,« »faithful« and »unfaithful,« »salvation« and »condemnation,« etc. Words are basic units of semantics, but their meaning cannot be stated in isolation, only in relation to other words, to the whole sentence proposition and even sometimes to the whole literary structure. The grammatical and literary structure tells us little about the underlying fundamental understanding of the world, of the value of interpersonal relations and of the ultimate purpose of human life. Since the conception of righteousness of God is based on the dynamic of a relationship between God and humans, there is an existential basis available for the consideration of how righteousness of God definitely outweighs evil manifested by antagonists to God's authority and sanctity. Close correspondence between the meaning of linguistic and literary forms and truth conditions in which God manifests his power turns our attention to the passages dealing with the effective ways of God's righteousness in favour of the righteous people by subjugating hostile subjects and forces.

The distinction between the passages dealing with God's righteousness and those dealing with human righteousness is of utmost importance, because the concept of the righteousness of God is the origin, ontological norm and the basic model for the concept of human righteousness. Since God is the centre of admiration, reflection and prayer for refuge or deliverance from the enemies, formulaic compositions using synonyms and antonyms is much more characteristic of passages dealing with God's righteousness than in those dealing with human righteousness. The search for the meaning of the root *šdq* and Greek *dike* in relation to God shows that the meaning of the term covers such aspects as God's fidelity to the faithful people, God's steadfast love, saving help and victory against oppressors. Righteousness of God is an expression of God's loving attitude towards individuals, the covenant people and the entire world, an attitude which is based on God's sovereignty and is independent of human norms, knowledge and merit. Righteousness of God means the very best fruits of God's self-revelation and actions among humans. In the final analysis, righteousness of God is the distinctive mark of the Creator and the Redeemer, who is indisputably the beginning and the end of the whole of history. In view of all this, the semantic range of *šdq* vocabulary is extremely broad and yet indefinite. In different contexts it expresses various aspects of one and the same truth about God and of the constant hope of

humans in expectation of manifestation of God's righteousness. The absolute supremacy of God means that God is the only object worthy of returning human righteousness.

2. Interpersonal Communication and the Ways of Literary Representation of Justice in the Bible

It is obvious that in literary structures synonyms and antonyms expressing the concept or symbol of justice help to determine the meaning of individual words. On account of the prevailing expressions in *parallelismus membrorum*, the Hebrew Bible offers a possibility for investigating words according to the principle of semantic fields. Almost all the synonyms and antonyms frequently form parallel phrases or parallel formulas in different literary genres and structures. The frequent combination of synonyms and antonyms in the same syntagma in the form of parallelism confirms the validity of the theory of semantic fields. The limited feasibility of the theory must, however, be complemented by consideration of the context of passages containing the word-stock of the semantic field. In order to determine the meaning of a passage, all grammatical, stylistic and structural elements must be taken into consideration in their correlations and interactions. Representation of truth in literature helps us to penetrate beyond a semantic field of words to a deeper layer of human experience. A comparative literary approach helps to disclose the complex relationships between the reality of the world and life, language, culture, belief and truth. Irena Avsenik Nabergoj explains advantages of literary representations of reality and truth: »Immersing oneself in the nature and purpose of literature shows that all writers try, in the most varied of ways, to depict reality when they choose their subject matter, themes, and motifs from their material, cultural, and spiritual environments and from history, and when they endeavour to show man in his intellectual and spiritual state and in his relations with others« (Avsenik Nabergoj 2013, 208).

The priority of understanding God as person and the supreme authority of law over the cosmic and formalist social dimensions of justice discloses the centrality of the covenant in the Bible. The covenant relationship between God and Israel should not be considered as a formal norm but as a symbol of the close and intimate society of the family, mutual family life and emotional bond of friendship. Existential grounds and the bonds of interpersonal relations automatically include the requirement of faith, hope and love towards God and towards fellow human beings, extended to the sphere of humanity as a whole. The intentions and aims of elementary existential unity and of mutuality of interpersonal relations are beneath and beyond any legal and formal social norm. God manifests his righteousness by nature on the stage of the entire world, and hence it is not dictated by stipulations of the covenant. On the contrary, the righteousness of God is the content of his covenant, the foundation of the inherent principle of mutuality and the ultimate criterion of the attitude of humans towards God and fellow people.

Since God has granted fellowship with him to his people and to all mankind, he is also the only justifiable challenger of the whole world. On this theological ground we may conclude that cosmic, social and personal spheres should not be conceived as separate domains but rather in their organic interaction in relation to fulfilment in love union of persons. Matthew W. Levering deduces from the characteristic teleological biblical conception of interpersonal relations his unifying concept of »natural law,« and concludes: »From a theocentric perspective attuned to human creatureliness, natural law doctrine highlights the teleological attraction of the good, and thereby makes clear that human fulfilment is found in going outside oneself rather than in self-seeking actions« (Levering 2008, 224).

The nature of mutual righteousness between family members means that an intimate relationship is based on unexpected acts of goodness, kindness, righteousness and love and cannot be defined in terms of legal obligations. Given the fact that God as Creator infinitely surpasses humans in strength and power, it is all the more clear that in relation to him mutuality of righteousness cannot be presupposed or automatically expected. It is natural that God expects from humans loyalty, faithfulness and truthfulness towards him and constant mutual kindness in interpersonal relations among people. The only possible reason for the break-up of intimate common life and mutuality of relations is refusal to return to God and to humans acts of goodness, faithfulness and love. Disloyalty is therefore the most reprehensible sin Israel and nations could commit.

Since infidelity, ingratitude and obduracy in interpersonal relations among humans is a permanent state of affairs, the antithesis between God's saving and punitive acts manifests itself as a permanent crisis. When we see God as analogous to a judge in a criminal case it seems to be impossible to attribute both justice and mercy to him. But God has »many rights with respect to His creatures. Thus His mercy may be viewed as His deciding, out of love or compassion, to waive certain rights that He has – not to violate certain obligations that He has« (Hampton 1988, 177). God considers human frailty on the one hand and his final purpose of creation on the other. This helps to explain theologically why God manifests forgiveness and mercy in most situations of his dealing with humans (Lim 2002). The concept of righteousness of God expresses only generally the extent of divine grace, faithfulness and mercy. Hence it is understandable that the concept occurred in a set of related and to a great extent polysemous words that share a common semantic property yet have multiple meanings. It is therefore necessary to consider words that are in any sense related to the same semantic field.

The ideal is not to define the meaning accurately at any price: most often we must be content with only an approximate definition of the notion of God's righteousness. Passages dealing with the righteousness of God show the actional nature of *šdq* and its great semantic range as a part of a larger semantic field. In relation to recipients of God's righteousness the following designations are possible: goodness, fidelity, truthfulness, correctness of God's acts, deliverance, redemptive deeds, victory success, good fortune and mercy. The »negative« reason

for manifestation of righteousness of God shows itself in expression of divine mercy towards transitory mortal and sinful people (cf. Pss 51 and 103). Regarded from God's side, righteousness of God expresses itself as a promise or assurance; seen from the human perspective it is perceived as hope, frequently as hope against hope. There are two main circumstances stimulating hope against hope: firstly, oppression by adversaries; secondly, confronting one's own sinfulness. When oppressed by wicked adversaries, the righteous people hope and beg for deliverance; in cases of affliction caused by their own guilt and the guilt of their father, they beg God to bear with them and proffer them his redemptive grace. Since righteousness of God is by its very nature a redemptive concept, it cannot mean God's judgment according to strict justice. The holier and the more faithful God reveals himself to be, the more the gravity of human sinfulness enters the consciousness of the covenant people. In this relationship God is by definition a merciful redeemer, in spite of the people's sinfulness.

3. Limits of Judicial Symbolism and Polyphonic Representation of Justice in Literature

The most impressive texts dealing with the issue of justice and righteousness in literature, including the Bible, are not explained by words but by themes, motifs, symbols, characters, literary figures and structures. The same is true for all later poets and writers that reveal a profound need to reveal all dimensions of the secret of the human soul in interpersonal communication. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, one of the most influential philosophers of language and literary modes of representation, explained the essential role of dialogue in his influential works: *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*; *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*; *The Dialogic Imagination*; *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (see references). In his *Philosophy of the Act* he acknowledges the uniqueness of one's participation in Being. In interpersonal communication our irreplaceable uniqueness is expressed by means of the uniqueness of the dialogue between persons.

In *The problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin introduces three interrelated concepts: the concept of unfinalizable self, the relationship between the self and others, and the polyphony of many voices that speak for an individual or groups. His ideas are based on the fact that truth and justice can be distinguished from untruth and injustice only in mutual engagement and commitment to the context of real-life events. The dialogue between persons creates communication in which individuals hear the voices of others and mutually shape the characters. In *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin defends primacy of context over text, the hybrid nature of language (polyglossia) and the relation between utterances (intertextuality). In his work on speech genres he deals with language as a living dialogue (translinguistics). He indicates that genres exist not merely in language, but rather in communication. Bakhtin acknowledges extra-literary genres and makes the distinction between primary genres that are acceptable in everyday life and secon-

dary genres that are characterized by various types of text, such as legal, scientific, etc.

Bakhtin's views are wholly applicable to our innovation of the ways of literary representations of dimensions of justice in the Bible and in the rest of ancient and of later literature, especially in religious and ethical domains. A genuine dialogue becomes possible where regular conventions are broken or reversed. Insight into the modes of dialogue in literature represents a substantive shift from views on the nature of language and knowledge by rejecting the separation of language and content. The dialogic nature of human communication inspires creation of verbal dialogue or literary representation of reality, especially of dimensions of justice (cf. the book of Job). In order to do justice to literary modes of representation of dimensions of justice one must take all forms of communication into account. Basic literary forms (such as parable, fable, moral tale and story) express unique meaning based on experience and understanding of the world. Colin McGinn states the utmost importance of basic literary forms in literature:

»In reading a novel we have ethical experiences, sometimes quite profound ones, and we reach ethical conclusions, condemning some characters and admiring others. ... Our ethical knowledge is aesthetically mediated. There is a clear interplay between art and ethics in moral education: the artistic and the ethical are processed simultaneously and in complex interpenetrating ways. ...« (McGinn 2007, 174)

Literature aims at a search for symbolic understanding of both meaning and expression of truth and justice through what is regular or irregular in human experience – in literature, world, mind, and word; in the structure of the world, the ordering power of thought, and the articulation of language; in truth, beauty and virtue interact companionship in the search for justice within the healing powers of nature. This explains the range of meaning of »poetic justice« in literature. The scope of poetic justice is to show how justice, law, and literary forms intersect through their conflicting appeals to nature and human nature in order to create logical, ethical, and emotional satisfaction for readers. The demand of satisfaction implies the belief that there must be an intrinsic capacity to distinguish between good and evil. In his study *Poetic Justice and Legal Fictions*, Jonathan Kertzer claims that »there must be some working model of human deeds, desires, powers, virtues, and frailties in order to formulate an authoritative system to judge and regulate conduct« (Kertzer 2010, 71).

Gustave Flaubert expressed his »devotion to justice as the supreme literary value« in his explanation of the »just word« (*le mot juste*). According to Flaubert »the right word appears when the idea is true, but only the right word will express its truth« (Kertzer 2010, 1).¹ Flaubert believes that »language may be not only eloquent and accurate, but just;« ... »when words are beautiful in their precision

¹ Kertzer explains: »*Le mot is juste* when it contributes to a justice of expression, thought and judgment. It permits a fusion of aesthetic and ethical values.« (1–2)

and precise in their beauty, they reveal that the world, the ordering power of the mind, and the structure of language are congruent« (Kertzer, 2). Flaubert praises »art for rendering justice in an unjust world« (Kertzer 2010, 3). The awareness of an intrinsic capacity to distinguish between good and evil implies a healthy awareness of the darker side of human nature, reflected in the deep and the widespread disorder among human beings. There is an evident gap between inclination to good ends and rebellion, between natural and positive law, and between the natural and rational demands of natural law. In our life situation, a clear vision of »the whole truth« comes after a trial of error.

Kertzer states: »Literary justice is defined differently in different historical periods, but traditionally it is associated with the virtue of poetic thought to organize, interpret, and justify the chaotic misrule of experience« (Kertzer 2010, 4). Cultivation of *le mot juste* is, however, often confronted with deception, namely, of an illusory world of one's own devising. »In modernist writing, *le mot juste* is not regarded as an agent of transcendental or platonic insight, but as one of realism. It is 'just' in its ability to do justice to its subject, that is, to touch the world and render the intensity of its physical presence« (Kertzer 2010, 5).² Kertzer continues: »Poetic justice« in literature »assures readers that we can know exactly what characters deserve, because secure knowledge of motives, actions, and responsibilities, as well as faith in the moral standards by which to assess them, are readily available to us.« ... »Poetic justice« makes it possible that readers »agree about what characters deserve and feel satisfied when they are treated appropriately. Even more basically they agree, at least temporarily, about what *is* appropriate so that artistic and moral propriety can sustain each other. Such calculations seem no longer arbitrary, biased, or historically relative, but poetical and just« (Kertzer 2010, 11). The inner appeal of justice raises attention to Kertzer's explanation of the aim of poetic justice in terms of satisfaction:

»As my glance at Shakespearean comedy illustrates, the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of literary justice operates not only as theme but as form and audience response. Satisfaction is therefore a function of genre, which offers an imaginative sanctuary, a privileged space where rule can be legislated, enforced, relaxed, or even dispelled. Genres are characterized by the kind of satisfaction they define and provide, where satisfaction involves a vision of what is just and proper. ... Satisfaction is a matter of fulfilment, sufficiency, completion to exactly the right degree. There is nothing more to be done, because enough has been done, and done properly – the end. We feel satisfied when justice is satisfied, and it is satisfactory when it fulfils its own principles and formal procedures. This ideal may seldom be realized in everyday experience, but one of the joys of literature is that it convinces us at least for as long as we are reading, that we can know

² Kertzer explains further: »This survey shows that the justice of *le mot juste* may be formulated differently, but in each case it relates consciousness to the world by seeking higher forms of accommodation and satisfaction, both of which are implied in the notion of jurisdiction.« (6)

exactly what is sufficient, and be content when it is achieved.« (Kertzer 2010, 14)

4. Conclusion

Justice can be considered a cosmic system, a virtue of social institutions or practices, agreement among parties about common interest, or integral righteousness of persons discerned by intuition. This distinction is fundamental and far-reaching. The article aims at disclosing complementary and contrasting relationships between dimensions of justice in the span between the cosmic, social and personal domains and the way of expressing them in speculative and metaphorical literary terms. The Jewish-Christian understanding of justice in all its aspects goes beyond any formalistic, let alone pragmatist considerations. This understanding is based on grounds of existential interdependence between humans as persons. Biblical beliefs in creation, covenant, and redemption establish connections between family structures and the transcendental social order. Assuming justice as the principal virtue of institutions is supplemented by the belief that every human being has intrinsic value and positive purposes within the human family. God as a Person and humans as persons are authors of law, and therefore our systems have no higher authority or deeper basis than holistic relationships among persons. From this view follows the recognition of the primacy of the moral over the conventional, the personal over the impersonal, the existential over the merely stipulative. Human rights and retribution are equal to and existentially prior to any contract or convention. Our being is both common and unique, dignity belongs to everyone, and all our formal institutions must be held to moral purposes. Jewish-Christian belief assimilates justice to benevolence; the ideal is an association of saints who forego authority over one another and who work selflessly together for one end, the glory of God and salvation of humankind. The dignity of humans deepens understanding of guilt, making it a sickness to heal rather than a wrong to punish. Based on this belief, literary representations of dimensions of justice in actions transcend the force of »poetic justice« by correlating justice with compassion, love, and forgiveness.

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