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ABSTRACT

GOD'S MERCY AND JUSTICE IN THE CONTEXT  
OF THE COSMIC CONFLICT

by

Romero Luiz Da Silva

Adviser: Jo Ann Davidson

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Thesis

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: GOD'S MERCY AND JUSTICE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COSMIC  
CONFLICT

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Date completed: July 2019

Problem

When it comes to the right balance concerning God's character of mercy and justice in relation to His dealings with sin in its different manifestations, a number of theologians, as well as Christians in general, have struggled to harmonize the existence of these two attributes in all God's actions toward sinners. This difficulty has led many to think of divine mercy and justice as attributes that cannot fit together in what is called the cosmic conflict between good and evil. This, therefore, demands a theological study based on Scripture as a whole to draw solid findings in response to the problems related to God's character of mercy and justice in the unfolding of this cosmic conflict.

## Method

This research will first provide a survey of how divine mercy and justice have been handled by some theologians and philosophers, in general, throughout Christian history, plus an overview of how the problem of the existence of “evil” in opposition to God has been seen by recent and contemporary theologians. Next, it will bring a presentation of Hebrew and Greek terminologies related to the theme. In addition, an analysis of texts in which God is concomitantly stated as being merciful and just will be employed, also providing a brief presentation of other texts where God is exclusively declared to be either merciful or just. The topic will then be evaluated through major events in the unfolding of the interplay between good and evil as a metanarrative in Scripture. Finally, the ramifications of the research will establish some concepts for theological topics and Christian ethics.

## Results

By way of a systematic approach performed in this study, the biblical witness is coherent, for it points to a reality in which God has, indeed, acted mercifully and justly with His creatures in all circumstances since sin entered into this world, thus giving origin to what is called a cosmic conflict between good and evil.

## Conclusion

Scripture responds to the difficulty in harmonizing divine mercy and justice by showing that in all His actions amid this spiritual warfare, God has revealed these two attributes of His character. They are always present and united as representative of His love in saving humankind.

Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

GOD'S MERCY AND JUSTICE IN THE CONTEXT  
OF THE COSMIC CONFLICT

A Thesis  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Religion

by  
Romero Luiz Da Silva

July 2019

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APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vi
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. LITERATURE SURVEY .....	9
Theological Perceptions on God’s Mercy and Justice .....	9
Augustine (354-430) .....	9
Anselm (1033-1109) .....	11
Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) .....	12
Martin Luther (1483-1546) .....	14
John Calvin (1509-1564) .....	15
Karl Barth (1886-1968).....	16
Leon Morris (1914-2006) .....	18
Carl F. H. Henry (1913-2003).....	19
Vincent Brummer (1932).....	20
Thomas J. Oord (1965) .....	22
Perspectives of the Cosmic Conflict among Theologians .....	23
Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976).....	23
Edward Langton (1828-1905).....	25
C. Fred Dickason (Unknown).....	25
George M. Newlands (1941).....	26
Summary .....	28
3. THE BIBLICAL WITNESS TO GOD’S MERCY AND JUSTICE .....	30
Old Testament Terms.....	31
New Testament Terms .....	37
The Biblical Evidence.....	43
Systematization of Verses Dealing with the Thematic .....	49
For Mercy/Merciful .....	49
For Justice/Just.....	50
Salvific Justice .....	51
Summary .....	56



4. THE MACRONARRATIVE OF GOD’S MERCY AND JUSTICE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COSMIC CONFLICT .....	58
The Fall .....	59
The Flood .....	63
The Cross .....	65
The Final Judgment.....	69
Summary .....	71
5. RAMIFICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH FOR THEOLOGICAL TOPICS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS .....	73
Divine Election .....	74
Universalism .....	76
Legalism and Liberalism.....	80
Theodicy .....	81
Summary .....	83
6. CONCLUSION.....	85
Appendix	
A. NARRATIVES .....	88
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	92
CURRICULUM VITA .....	100

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>BDB</i>	<i>The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic.</i> Edited by Brown, F., with S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs. Peabody, MA, 2012
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LXX	Septuagint
<i>MAJT</i>	<i>Mid-America Journal of Theology</i>
NICOT	The New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NKJV	New King James Version
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philosophical Quarterly</i>
<i>NDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.</i> Edited by Gerhard Kittel. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, MI, 1964
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.</i> Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry. 16 vols. Grand Rapids, MI, 1986
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This research paper intends to clarify how the divine attributes of mercy and justice are related to each other in the context of the “cosmic conflict” between God and evil. In past and in contemporary times, many individuals, including theologians, have struggled over the subject of a “loving God”<sup>1</sup> who allows someone to be condemned in the final judgment. This results in a conflicting interpretation of the divine character because they do not grasp the idea of a just God: a God who will condemn those who openly refuse to accept the means provided by Him for their salvation. For them, it seems logical to think that everyone will be saved regardless of their decisions toward God made on a daily basis. After all, if God is a God of love, where love is found, “the order of justice is obsolete and invalidated.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In general, the differences concerning the understanding of God as a loving Being are mainly interpreted by conceptions of faith and a philosophical view of love, both from the Western world; the former is traced from Christianity, which emerged out of Judaism, and the latter is traced from the Platonic idealization of love. As a fact, Christianity throughout the ages shifted its comprehension of divine love as presented in the Scriptures. In various ways, it turned out to be a *humanization of Christian and Platonic view of love* mingled altogether. It has been acknowledged that the Middle Ages was a turning point in religious settings to establish this shift. The ancient philosophical idealization and the medieval world with its transcendental love were united towards a naturalistic view of the subject. As a result, love is translated in terms of humanistic romanticism. This mix of religion and humanization leaves no room for the concepts of mercy and justice as a display of God’s character of love. See Irvin Singer, *The Nature of Love 1: Plato to Luther*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 42-43.

<sup>2</sup>This notion that mercy cannot subsist with justice tends to present a disharmony between these two divine features as defended by some theologians. See Anders Nygren, *Eros and Agape*, trans. by P. Watson (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 89-90.

On the other hand, there are those who, defending the concept of a “just God,” cannot simply understand how God is able to manifest mercy to those who have blatantly shown to be transgressors of divine will. Consequently, it puzzles their minds, for they do not grasp the notion of God being both merciful and just in dealing with His sinful creatures.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, this puzzle about mercy and justice, according to Ned Markosian, leads some to argue that no act can be both of these features, whether it be divine or human.<sup>4</sup>

As Bruce Marshall asserted, Christians from the beginning have tried not to view justice and mercy as opposites, especially when each of the two is said of God. However, he also pointed out “how to understand the harmony and coherence of the two when each is seen as a divine attribute or characteristic.”<sup>5</sup> Some, trying to resolve this problematic dilemma, like Marcion, simply assume that the God of the OT is a wrathful God willing to bestow His just punishments, whereas the NT reveals a God who has a character of love and mercy. Tragically, this notion still has a powerful influence today.<sup>6</sup> Considering this last point, the present research can suggest a partial contribution since the divine attributes (mercy and justice) are recognized consistently in all of Scripture through a canonical perspective.

Other theologians notice that the relationship between divine justice and divine

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<sup>3</sup>This specific wrestling was faced by the Benedictine monk Anselm of Canterbury, who discussed this puzzle in regard to the difficulty of blending together the two divine attributes of mercy and justice. See Anselm *Proslogion*, Chapters 9-11. (This research will approach Anselm’s view in chapter 2.)

<sup>4</sup>Ned Markosian, “The Two Puzzles About Mercy,” *PQ* 63, no. 251 (April 2013): 270.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce D. Marshall, “Tolle Me Et Redime Te: Anselm on the Justice and Mercy of God,” *The Thomist* 81 (2017): 163.

<sup>6</sup>R. V. G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God* (London: Tyndale Press, 1951), 26.

justification through acts of mercy in contemporary theology is largely uncertain because it is remodeled only as “divine love or grace.” However, satisfactory clarification on this issue is not given. This theological deficiency thereby results in a misunderstanding of the correct emphasis on God’s salvific actions which satisfy divine justice, as well as manifest mercy.<sup>7</sup>

Mercy and justice are often thought of as opposites. In other words, there is an inclination to consider these two attributes as playing against one another—mercy translated into forgiveness and understood as a readiness to overlook or let go of what justice rightly requires, while justice reflects a readiness to demand punishment or penalty in a strict sense.<sup>8</sup> According to Stephen Moroney, these two opposite thoughts can be exemplified in practical terms through an analogy: some individuals paint God as an indulgent grandparent who approves of every act of the child with a smile, for God approves of whatever sinners do and never judges them (this is what mercy means in their view). Others picture God as a police officer with a radar gun ready to punish anyone who fails (this is justice).<sup>9</sup> These views of God’s mercy and justice are certainly at least unbalanced or tragically faulty for they do not reflect God’s character of love revealed in His actions.

In addition, there is the reality of a cosmic conflict between God and evil. Genesis 3 introduces a shift in God’s new perfect creation when a cunning serpent contradicts

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<sup>7</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: God Who Stands and Stays*, 6 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 6:410.

<sup>8</sup>Marshall, “Tolle Me Et Redime Te,” 161.

<sup>9</sup>Stephen K. Moroney, *God of Love and God of Judgment* (Eugene, OR: Wipe & Stock, 2009), vii.

God's commands to the new humans concerning the eating of the forbidden fruit. The Creator affirmed that the couple would certainly die if they ate the fruit (Gen 3:17), while the serpent countered God by insisting they would not die (Gen. 3:4). This is the first evidence found in Scripture that a conflict on this planet became the backdrop of human history since then.<sup>10</sup>

The biblical account portrays that this conflict was not intended by God, though He knew ahead of time that it would take place and would lead His creation into the devastation of sin. However, He devised a plan to deal with it by paying the price of sin that humans could never pay.<sup>11</sup> It is in the context of this cosmic conflict that God has been revealing His perfect character of love through acts of mercy and justice towards sinful creatures who live in a world affected by disease, natural catastrophes, accidents through the presence of Satan and his angels acting to obliterate God's plans for humanity. As a matter of fact, there are many theological discussions about God's character of mercy and justice, but these two divine attributes are not treated within the framework of the cosmic controversy that surrounds all human affairs.

Keeping all these considerations in perspective, it becomes relevant to investigate and systematize the concepts of a merciful and just God in view of the cosmic conflict: that is, the divine actions to treat humans fairly in a world where sin and evil reign, as taught in the Holy Scriptures (see 1 John 5:19). This present study seeks to answer the following questions: Has God been both merciful and just in dealing with sin in the

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<sup>10</sup>Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Creation, Christ, Salvation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012), 183.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 153.

unfolding of the cosmic controversy? How do divine mercy and justice fit together in the context of the cosmic conflict?

To achieve the main goal of this research, the present study has the following secondary objectives: (1) to present a brief survey of how justice and divine mercy have generally been handled by some theologians and philosophers throughout Christian history, plus a review of how the problem of the existence of “evil” in controversy with God has been seen by recent and contemporary theologians; (2) to present a concise explanation of the different terms used in Hebrew and Greek by which the notion of mercy and justice is delineated in Scripture., as well as a systematization of some biblical passages that declare that God is merciful and just—especially with attention to those texts that apply these two attributes concomitantly—thus exposing thus theological nuances with respect to mercy and justice which are possible to abstract from the texts commented, taking into consideration the context of the cosmic conflict; (3) to discuss the truth of a great conflict through major events in human history (such as the Fall, the Flood, the Cross, and the Final Judgment)—analyzed with a linear perspective—where God’s mercy and justice have always been the means by which He deals with humans to bring an end to this controversy and thus save His creatures as delineated in the whole biblical narrative; and finally; (4) to use the ramifications of the present research to understand how mercy and justice fit together in God’s actions related to the existence of this cosmic conflict on earth, showing their relevance to some theological topics and Christian ethics.

In order to reach the secondary objectives mentioned above, this investigation adopts a *phenomenological perspective* of the biblical text within the scope of the



traditional Protestant canon for the Holy Scriptures. A phenomenological perspective accepts the fact that the text in its final form is an authoritative compendium for the Christian community and is capable of generating faith.<sup>12</sup> It is obviously recognized that there are many aspects related to the formation and dating of the biblical text that are associated with the texts that will be approached. However, due to the scope of this work, the research will only focus on the scriptural text in its final form.

Concerning the approach of the biblical texts themselves, this study concentrates mainly on the narrative of them. Instead of observing them only as self-contained in terms of meaning as structuralist scholars do, this paper also engages in close readings of some external aspects of the texts seen in their narrative in order to comprehend them in their immediate historical and philological contexts. In this approach, due to the systematic nature of this study, along with the aid of biblical scholars' observations as found in commentaries and dictionaries, only the texts where God is treated as both merciful and just will receive the most attention. Other texts that bring one or the other attribute of God separately, for example, those which say that He is either merciful or

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<sup>12</sup>The "phenomenological approach assumed here considers the biblical witness as divinely revealed, inspired, and preserved by the Christian community in its final form. The author of this research accepts the canon of the "sixty-six OT and NT books" as authoritative and source for a better understanding of God's divine nature, as well as for Christian doctrines in any spiritual matters as defended by many scholars. See John C. Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of the Two Models of Canonicity," *TJ* 28, no. 2 (2007): 229-49; John C. Peckham, "Intrinsic Canonicity and the Inadequacy of the Community Approach to Canon Determination," *Themelios* 36, no. 2 (2001): 203-15; John C. Peckham, "The Analogy of Scripture Revised: A Final Form Canonical Approach to Systematic Theology," *MAJT* 22 (2001): 43-46. There are certainly many different approaches to Scriptures, but this work accepts a "canonical approach" which challenges the assumption that events throughout history played a determinative role in the ability of the Scriptures to have authority or to come true. Without denying the value of information obtained through any critical inquiry, this canonical approach seeks to give value to the biblical text as normative in various religious settings and to emphasize its function to bring answers to the questions related to human predicaments. See also Harry Y. Gamble, "Canonical Criticism," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:862.

just, will only be related in the systematization here, but primary attention will be given to the different Hebrew and Greek terminologies in relation to the topic for this study, which appear also in the texts analyzed. This study of terms will be the first step of chapter 3.

Finally, another aspect in this research that deserves clarification is the meaning of the term “cosmic conflict.” This terminology is used here as reference to the antagonism between God and the spiritual forces of darkness (Satan and demons), between God’s people (Israel/Church) and their enemies, which is perceptible throughout the biblical account.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in Genesis, it is already possible to observe that God distinguishes between “the serpent’s offspring and the woman’s offspring” (Gen 3:15). In addition, the entity “Satan” already appears recurrently in Job (cf. 1; 2, among others), which is perhaps the oldest book of the Bible according to very ancient traditions.<sup>14</sup> In 1 Chr 21:1, Satan stands against Israel, urging David to promote a census. In the Gospels, there are several mentions of Jesus refracting opposition from spiritual entities and

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<sup>13</sup>What could be added to the understanding of the “Cosmic Conflict”—also called the Great Controversy Theme—is similar to Herbert Douglass’ point of view: “This theme is more than a historical survey of the battle between Christ and Satan traced through the events of secular and biblical and secular history, more than overview of the cosmic conflict as unfolded in certain biblical passages such as Revelation 12, more than an awareness of that struggle within our own lives...it is the core concept that brings coherence to all biblical subjects. It transcends the age-old divisions that have fractured the Christian church for centuries. It brings peace to theological adversaries who suddenly see in a new harmony the truths that each had been vigorously arguing for.” In other words, the truth of a merciful and just God rests in its overall understanding of the central message of the Bible, which is governed by this seminal principal of the Cosmic Conflict Theme. Herbert E. Douglas, “The Great Controversy Theme: What It Means to Adventists,” *Ministry*, December 2000, 5.

<sup>14</sup>Rabbinic opinions concerning the origin and date of the book of Job vary from the era of the patriarchs to the Persian period (ca. 2100-1550). The oldest rabbinic tradition holds that Moses was author of the book of Job. The Rabin Bar Qappara suggested that Job lived in the time of Abraham. The apocryphal appendix to the LXX also identifies Job with Jobab the King of Edom, grandson of Esau (Gen 36:33) and great-great-grandson of Abraham. In sum, the patriarchal setting as presented in the Prologue-Epilogue of Job points to so many similarities found in the patriarchal narratives. Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 15 (AB) (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 30-31.

casting out “demons” or “unclean spirits” (see Luke 1:23, 26).

In fact, many other passages that illustrate a cosmic controversy between God and the forces of evil behind human affairs could be cited here. Nevertheless, because of space, two more examples that come from Revelation will be pointed out. First, Rev 12:7-9 mentions the mention of the fall of Satan and his angels from the heavens. He is called “that serpent of old”—as a reference to his disguise to deceive the woman—who “deceives the whole world.” Thus, Satan and his angels were cast to the earth where this spiritual warfare is happening. Second, near the end of this conflict, Rev 20:10 mentions that Satan together with the beast and its worshipers, as well as the false prophet, are cast into the lake of fire and brimstone in the final divine judgment. All this indicates a cosmic conflict that is behind the manifestation of God’s mercy and justice.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE SURVEY

The first section in this chapter is a brief survey regarding the different theological views of God's mercy and justice by various prominent theologians and philosophers throughout Christian history from the patristic period to the present time. Because of space limitations, the first section will only present the major viewpoints of each individual, not the final word concerning each particular view, but placing their contributions in Christian thought to give a basis for the development of the following chapters of this research paper.

The second section of the chapter will approach only recent understanding of the cosmic conflict theme in Christian thought from the late nineteenth century to present times. As this research seeks to delineate the divine features of mercy and justice in the scope of the cosmic conflict between good and evil, it will be useful to establish some perspectives about this topic in the post-modern theological setting. However, the theological conflict concerning the nature of divine mercy and justice in Christian history must first be reviewed.

#### **Theological Perceptions on God's Mercy and Justice**

Augustine (354-430)

Augustine described the concepts of divine mercy and justice on the basis of his

*predestinarian* view, which denies the existence of human *free will*.<sup>1</sup> Regarding his thoughts on divine mercy towards sinners, Augustine argued that God has mercy on those who were first called by Him. To enhance this point, Augustine quoted Rom 9:16 which says that “it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (NKJV). According to Augustine’s interpretation of Rom 9:15, it is clearly vain for sinners to have the will to decide to accept the gift of mercy unless God first has mercy in calling them.<sup>2</sup> He declared that “because the good will does not precede calling, but calling precedes the good will, the fact that we have a good will is rightly attributed to God who calls us, and the fact that we are called cannot be attributed to ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> In short, the divine will to predestinate some for salvation makes the case for God to have mercy on whom He will, and others, on whom He has no mercy, he “hardens,” not bestowing His “justifying mercy” on them.<sup>4</sup>

Augustine did not see divine justice as a virtue that gives to each his own.<sup>5</sup> In his arguments, Augustine refused such a reality of justice because man has no free will to act rightly, and God would be unfair in giving to every person what he or she deserves on the basis of personal decisions towards Him, when mankind does not have any power in

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<sup>1</sup>John H. S. Burleigh, ed., *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, Library of Christian Classics 6 (LCC) (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 135, 394.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 394.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 394-95.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 397-98. It seems that to justify the unfair aspects of this understanding, Augustine affirmed that “human standards of measurement cannot grasp the hidden equity that belongs to the thought presented by the apostle Paul in this verse, though its effects are to be observed in human affairs and earthly arrangements.”

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 128.

themselves to do so. Thus, it seems difficult to accept God's justice concerning righteous acts when sinners are bound to their fallen nature, unable to do what is right.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, Augustine had a different thought about divine justice that rendered that position somewhat ambiguous. When he reflected on man's source of sins, either spontaneous or external, Augustine said that "the justice of the Lord in punishing both kinds of sin are preserved" and "it is mad to have any doubt of the justice of God" in imposing His penalties on sin. Man's penalty, therefore, "is just and is recompense for sin."<sup>7</sup>

#### Anselm (1033-1109)

Unlike Augustine who dealt with the concepts of God's mercy and justice separately, Anselm confronted these two divine characteristics together by recognizing the existence of them working in harmony throughout the Bible.<sup>8</sup> It seemed obvious to him that God's mercy and justice are not opposite, but coterminous in the sense that no divine action is more merciful than it is just or vice versa. However, what puzzled Anselm was the mix of these two features regarding the forgiveness of sin (atonement) by which God grants eternal salvation to undeserving sinners.<sup>9</sup> For him, if God is supremely merciful, He will spare at least some of the wicked, and in forgiving sins, Anselm argued that "God would be avoiding the just punishment. And what sort of justice is it to give

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<sup>6</sup>Burleigh, *Augustine*, 128.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 189, 201.

<sup>8</sup>Saint Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1033-1109, "Proslogion 11," in *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1946), 1:109-16.

<sup>9</sup>Anselm *Proslogion*, Chapter 9 (1:106-7). See also Daniel Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 81-97.

everlasting life to someone who deserves eternal death?”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Anselm did not see how Scripture speaks of divine mercy and justice coexisting together as rendering to every person what he or she deserves when the issue is salvation. He left the discussion of this subject categorically open-ended because of the lack of harmony between these two concepts in his theological reflections on atonement.<sup>11</sup>

#### Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

By considering God’s mercy and justice in his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas clearly derived his interpretations on each one of them through his adapted philosophical science of metaphysics following the model of Aristotle.<sup>12</sup> A summary of Aquinas’ views on mercy and justice discloses his complete denial of these attributes in God. He asserted that neither mercy nor justice can be attributed to God.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Aquinas argued that “mercy is a kind of misery...and there is not misery in God. Neither, then, is there mercy in God,”<sup>14</sup> whereas “justice is condivided with temperance, and temperance is not in God. Neither, therefore, is justice in God.”<sup>15</sup> To enhance his points about why he contested these two features related to God, Aquinas went a little deeper in his reasoning:

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<sup>10</sup>Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 81-97.

<sup>11</sup>Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams, eds., *Anselm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 108.

<sup>12</sup>Stephen L. Brock, *The Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas: A Sketch* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 2.

<sup>13</sup>A. M. Fairweather, ed., *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, LCC 11 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 86-89.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 86.

Again, mercy is the mitigation of justice. But God cannot rescind what his justice requires, for it is said in II Tim. 2:13: “If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful; for he cannot deny himself,” and God would deny himself if he were to deny his own words, as the gloss says. We cannot therefore attribute mercy to him. On the other hand: it is said in Ps. 111:4: “the Lord is gracious, and full of compassion.” I answer: mercy is pre-eminently attributed to God, albeit as an effect, not as the affection of a passion. In evidence of tis we may reflect that one is said to be merciful when one has mercy in one’s heart, grieving for the misery of another as if it were one’s own, and consequently striving to dispel it as if it were one’s won. This is the effect of mercy. God does not grieve over misery of another, but he pre-eminently does dispel the misery of another, whatever be the defect for which this word may stand.<sup>16</sup>

Again, a just act consists in giving to someone his due. But God owes nothing to any man. It follows that Justice is not applicable to God... On the other hand: It said in Ps. 11:7: “the righteous Lord loveth righteousness.” I answer: there are two kinds of justice. On kind has to do with giving and receiving in return, with buying and selling, for example, and the other kind of transaction and exchange. The philosopher calls this commutative justice, or the justice which regulates transactions and exchanges... This justice does not apply to God, for “who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?” as the apostle says in Rom. 11:35.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, these two quotations from Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* suggest that God does not have any kind of feeling or affection<sup>18</sup> which makes Him work on behalf of His sinful creatures by showing mercy in face of their misery, whereas that justice cannot be attributed to God when He deals with them, for God owes nothing to anyone. Everything comes from Him, for He is the originator and mover of all things.

Dealing with these two divine attributes together in God’s work, Aquinas also denied that mercy and justice are present in every work of God, for some works are attributed to His mercy in justifying the ungodly, while others are ascribed to his justice

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<sup>16</sup>Fairweather, *Nature and Grace*, 89-90.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>18</sup>John Peckham discusses the lack of passion, feelings, and affections in God’s love as posited in Aquinas’ systems to exemplify the concept of God being self-sufficient and utterly immutable, the One who moves, but remains unmoved and passionless in Thomistic thought. See John C. Peckham, *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 19.



in condemning the wicked.<sup>19</sup> One of Aquinas’s points of view in refuting the unity of divine mercy and justice states that because many just men are afflicted in this life, which is unjust, “hence mercy and justice are not present in every work of God.”<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, therefore, did not see any possibility of mercy and justice playing a role in God’s treatment of His creatures in this world.

#### Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Martin Luther’s view of divine mercy and justice was similar to Augustine’s, especially his comprehension of the human condition—without free will and enslaved to sin—and human works compared to the righteousness of God.<sup>21</sup> Concerning mercy, Luther saw it as an act that God performs on behalf of sinners who live in the realm of helplessness in a world where sin reigns.<sup>22</sup> For him, this merciful act caused God to bring Christ to this world to save sinners.<sup>23</sup> Luther also pointed out that we, as sinful beings, “escape His condemnation because of His mercy and not because of our righteousness,” for sinners have nothing to boast about.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, Luther interpreted mercy as a prior action when God chooses some

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<sup>19</sup>Peckham, *The Love of God*, 90.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>21</sup>See Marco Barone, *Luther’s Augustinian Theology of the Cross: The Augustinianism of Martin Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation and the Origins of Modern Philosophy of Religion* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2017), 13-72.

<sup>22</sup>James Atkinson, ed., *Luther: Early Theological Works*, LCC 16 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 341.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 301.

for salvation, namely, predestination. He affirmed that God “is merciful to one on whom he bestows the gift of grace.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, like Augustine, Luther advocated a call that precedes divine mercy. To make this point, Luther used Rom 9:16 just as Augustine did: “So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy (NKJV).”<sup>26</sup>

Justice, for Luther and for his time, was defined as having the meaning of giving to each person what he or she was entitled to. “The influence of Roman law over the world in which early theology of the Latin-speaking church was forged [certainly] made Luther reject this word.”<sup>27</sup> In his lectures on Romans, Luther even declared that he hated the word justice.<sup>28</sup> The reason for this rejection lay in his understanding of the human incapacity to render anything good to God, for sinners have nothing good in themselves—a viewpoint shared by Augustine as well: nobody can boast of his or her own righteousness and thereby receive what is just from God.<sup>29</sup>

#### John Calvin (1509-1564)

Once predestination was foundational to Calvin’s theology, his view on that eventually affected his understanding of divine mercy and justice. Calvin said, “By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself

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<sup>25</sup>Wilhelm Pauck, ed., *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, LCC 15 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 269.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 136-37.

<sup>28</sup>Pauck, *Luther*, 329.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are created on equal terms, but some are predestined to eternal life, others to eternal damnation.”<sup>30</sup> Although it is very hard to see God’s mercy and justice acting together when He chooses some for eternal life and others for damnation, Calvin would claim a “hidden decree” which is too difficult for humans to comprehend.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, Calvin spoke of justice related to God as a “supreme standard” in His actions, but again, he stated that humans cannot grasp God’s actions when it comes to the divine will.<sup>32</sup> Thus, for Calvin, God exerts justice in dealing with sinners, but judging whether an act is either of justice or mercy as a display of His love is something impossible for humans to comprehend: it is precluded to God’s decree. As a matter of fact, Calvin did not understand the issue of God’s mercy and justice in the context of a cosmic controversy where God’s character is called into question. Though he assumed at least divine justice, he did not delve into it.

#### Karl Barth (1886-1968)

Barth’s exposition of God’s mercy and justice is best delineated in his understanding of the death of Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup> First, Barth’s definition of justice can be summed up in the justification of sinners. In other words, God’s act of giving up His Son to die as a substitute for sinners makes the case for both mercy and justice being united

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<sup>30</sup>Calvin *Institutes* 3.20.36 (2:185).

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.23.12 (2:235)

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.23.5 (2:229).

<sup>33</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.1.

without conflict. In this sense, Barth underscored the fact that God's justice is a "development or repetition" of His mercy, for God suffered in Jesus to offer free and gracious deliverance to sinners, revealing an integration of mercy and justice.<sup>34</sup> In his description of divine love, Barth saw an agreement between these two features to affirm that God's mercy is just, for He did not allow sin to go unpunished. Father and Son, Barth said, decided to carry out a plan to justify those who, by faith, accept the divine exchange.<sup>35</sup>

Second, Barth also described the sacrifice of Christ in the sinner's place as a united covenant between God and creature, which constitutes a divine perfection of mercy and justice, which God grants the needy sinners. In sum, God's mercy consists of empathetic agony when Jesus suffered in our stead. His justice simply is the ratification of "that empathy in righteous anger, punishment, and self-offering toward the ungodly."<sup>36</sup>

In addition to Barth's view on the death of Christ, there is his elucidation of grace and holiness in comparison to the pair (mercy and justice) of divine attributes. For Barth, both mercy and justice together constitute the essence of God. Just as grace and holiness function as concepts in the human understanding of God, both mercy and justice develop what grace and holiness have already accomplished to formulate God's identity.

However, in Barth's view, mercy and justice are seen throughout Scripture in constant

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<sup>34</sup>Katherine Sonderegger, "Divine Justice and Justification," *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie*, Supplement Series 6 (2014): 174.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

association with God's confrontation with His sinful creatures and the implications originated from this tension.<sup>37</sup>

Leon Morris (1914-2006)

Reflecting on the problem of man's sin, Leon Morris established his general comprehension of divine love as a revelation of mercy and justice.<sup>38</sup> First, he affirmed that Scripture bears witness to God's strong opposition to what is sinful. This truth, he said, can be confirmed by the sacrificial system of the OT and plainly through the cross of Christ in the NT when Jesus died to atone for sin and appease God's wrath.<sup>39</sup> In other words, Jesus died to offer mercy to the repentant sinner. Second, Morris asserted that the just punishment for sin is biblical language to represent God's wrath, and when this aspect is avoided, God's anger in response to sin is undermined.<sup>40</sup>

He also seemed to unite the two aspects of mercy and justice by stating that "men were the objects of God's wrath because of their sin, but that Christ's death delivered them—in this very act God was merciful and just. It is only as we see the spotless Son of God crucified... that we can see what agape means."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Robert B. Price, *Letters of the Divine Word: The Perfections of God in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 66.

<sup>38</sup>Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love: A Study of Love in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 129-130. Like other theologians, Leon Morris picked up God's mercy and justice by proposing a biblical model of love to discuss several nuances of how the Bible interprets love in its different features.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 130. John Stott commented, "It is divine judgment upon human rebellion which makes the barrier to fellowship with God; and there can be no expiation of man's sin without a propitiation of God's wrath. God's holy antagonism to sin must somehow be turned away if sin is to be forgiven and the sinner restored." See John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 87.

<sup>41</sup>Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 131.

In brief, Morris saw God's way of dealing with sin as a perfect demonstration of His love for sinners. This kind of love was portrayed when Jesus offered a spotless sacrifice which brought justice and mercy together in a single act—justice because He died to pay the penalty of transgression, and mercy, because the sinner no longer needed to die since for Christ died in his place. One thing that is clear in Morris's model of love is that mercy and justice are implicitly present, but is not applied in all situations of sin.

Carl F. H. Henry (1913-2003)

Discussing divine character, Carl Henry alleged that the God of the Bible is a God of acts of both mercy and justice; these aspects can be verified in both Testaments.<sup>42</sup> He primarily endorsed the term "mercy" as a translation of God's offer of salvation and justification to those who enter into a covenantal relationship with Him. He pointed out that God's righteousness in the Old Testament "inheres in His covenant faithfulness and His merciful faithfulness concerning Israel. That is why He is a 'just God and Savior'" (Isa. 45:21, KJV).<sup>43</sup> Concerning "justice," Carl Henry stated that the Bible depicts God's justice or righteousness in two different ways: first, as His active mercy toward the redeemed; second, as a vindication of His people from their oppressors (Deut 32:4, 5; Hos 2:19; Mic 7:9).<sup>44</sup>

In general terms, Carl Henry saw God's mercy and justice working with each other "in the rescue of fallen mankind." This theological concept of God's being both

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<sup>42</sup>Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6:410.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

merciful and just, as Henry explained, finds its plain exposition through the forensic atonement revealed in the New Testament through the cross of Christ: “God enables the sinner to be declared righteous before Him.”<sup>45</sup> He went further by declaring that

divine justification of the sinner does not flow from the justice of God as an inner necessity of God’s nature. Justification is a voluntary act of mercy; it is consistent with God’s character only in view of the substitutionary role of Jesus Christ Jesus, the messianic Savior, “whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith... to prove at the present time that he is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:24).<sup>46</sup>

It is noteworthy that Carl Henry also correlated mercy and justice with divine judgment when God will bring eternal punishment to impenitent mankind. Because God hates corruption and iniquity, He will bring His eschatological punishment on the unrepentant and disobedient sinners who despised His call to a covenant through the merits of a Savior. Mercy was offered, but they refused it.<sup>47</sup>

#### Vincent Brummer (1932)

The theologian Vincent Brummer made his contribution on the subject by arguing that the notion of God’s love, translated in mercy and justice toward mankind, should be discussed in terms of *atonement* and *satisfaction*. In other words, by transgressing the law of God, humans live contrary to His will, thus deserving punishment for breaking the covenant between Him and them. Yet Jesus took upon Himself the penalty of all

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<sup>45</sup>Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6:410. Henry cited Psalm 85:10—“mercy and truth are met together; and righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (KJV)—as an allusion to what will happen in the NT when this theological concept is brought into reality by the Redeemer-Substitute, which, for Henry, represented divine justification.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 6:350-52.

transgressions when He died in our stead, bringing satisfaction to the infinite price required for the redemption of transgressors and restoring the relationship between God and ourselves. Thus, because of what Jesus did on the cross, God's justice protects us from condemnation. Our part is to appeal to God's mercy so that we might appease Him through Jesus' merits.<sup>48</sup>

Still, Brummer elucidated that mercy, either divine or human, towards an offender through forgiveness "is not possible unless justice is done."<sup>49</sup> For him, forgiveness does not weaken the search for justice, for true justice is done when punishment fits the crime adequately. Nevertheless, he pointed out the necessity of justice based on reconciliation, rather than pure retribution, which, according to him, might not restore fellowship.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that Brummer did not see this conceptual model simply as an agreement of rights and duties between God and sinful beings. His concepts of mercy and justice related to salvation were substantially applied only to a fellowship of love: that is, an intent to restore a broken relationship.<sup>51</sup> However, he made no reflection on how divine action in destroying sinners who rejected His gift of salvation is ultimately

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<sup>48</sup>Vincent Brummer, *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 191-205. The idea defended here by Brummer is similar to what Hodges argued as a model for understanding atonement and satisfaction. See H. A. Hodges, *The Pattern of Atonement* (London: SCM, 1963), 45-54.

<sup>49</sup>Vincent Brummer, *Atonement, Christology and the Trinity: Making Sense of Christian Doctrine* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 47.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Brummer, *The Model of Love*, 33-34. In his understanding of love, Brummer's major concern lay in the fact that relations have been "infected by ontological prejudice," in which they are translated only through "substances and attributes." As a result of that, relational love is seen as types of these two realities, making it harder to figure out the relations in an appropriate way. See also Philip Clayton, "The Case for Christian Panentheism," *Dialog* 37 (Summer 1998): 201-8.



an act of mercy and justice at the same time.<sup>52</sup>

Thomas J. Oord (1965)

Thomas Oord described mercy and justice in view of the primacy of love throughout the Bible, presenting Jesus as the center and example for any theology that makes love pivotal.<sup>53</sup> Although Oord did not discuss mercy and justice as a display or translation of divine love in itself, he assumed that these two components were present in what the Bible calls love. First, God's interest is to promote an overall well-being toward humans. That is why He is acknowledged as a merciful and gracious God who acts mercifully for the benefit of His creatures, but also wishes that they would be merciful like Him (see Exod 34:6; Luke 6:36).

Second, Oord stated that "justice plays an important role in love," for "justice and love are not enemies . . . justice does not oppose love; it is a dimension of love."<sup>54</sup> This justice related to love is described by him in terms of fairness: our attempt to seek the

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<sup>52</sup>Although it is unusual to speak of love as an act of annihilation, the biblical concept of divine love does not undermine the reality of ultimate destruction for those who turn their back on salvation purchased on the cross. Jesus paid the price to atone sins, giving to each human the opportunity to receive forgiveness, but if they reject this gift, nothing else can be done to restore them to the divine favor; eternal death is their fatal destiny (see John 3:16; Rom 6:23; Isa 28:21).

<sup>53</sup>Oord's major concern can be described by the neglect of some theologians in formulating their "theologies with love as an afterthought," when for him, many verses throughout the Scriptures suggest the "primacy of love." Although theologians affirm love as a central feature of God's nature (what results in His acts of mercy and forgiveness), according to Oord, they do not place love as the fundamental criterion for their theological systems. He says that "despite insights each theologian provides, love plays a secondary role in his or her theologies." He numbered some typical topics that get more attention in theological systems such the sovereignty of God, faith, church, eschatology, and so on. As a result, in his perspective, "many Christian dogmas are inconsistent with love." In other words, "between the Christian experience and formal theologies there is a discrepancy." Thomas J. Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2010), 1-5.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 20.

overall well-being of others—an aspect highlighted by other authors, as well.<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, Oord seemed to see no relationship of mercy and justice in terms of divine actions in regard to the existence of sin and how a loving God deals with it.

### **Perspectives of the Cosmic Conflict among Theologians**

After a long period of acceptance concerning the existence of a cosmic conflict involving forces of good and evil over the ages in human history, the post-modern theology setting, as well as the popular worldview seem to point to a shift in which the reality of angels, or supernatural intervention in human affairs in constant battle to dominate men's hearts, is denied. Although a few theologians<sup>56</sup> and Christians in general still hold the position that there is a controversy going on in this world, many others, as it will be presented next through some particular views, refuse to believe in the presence of such a thing with direct influence on them. This denial certainly has an impact on how men understand God's character and actions in this warfare.

#### **Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)**

Bultmann interpreted the activities of evil, supernatural forces battling against God's kingdom as mythological conceptions and presuppositions which, though portrayed mainly in the synoptic gospels, have been refuted throughout the course of

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<sup>55</sup>This view about justice is similar to what other theologians have to say. See P. Jackson, *The Priority of Love: Christian Charity and Social Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>56</sup>Norman Gulley as well as Carl Henry have dedicated a significant portion of their writings to discussing the reality of this battle as demonstrated in the biblical account. Acceptance of this concept by these two theologians is first traced from the beginnings of human history as portrayed in Scripture (Gen 3) with the direct influence of an enemy who used a serpent as his medium to deceive man. From then on, the background of everything on earth is surrounded by the conflict between God and Satan. See Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), 416-52. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6:229-83.

history, specifically through the rise of modern science.<sup>57</sup> He advocated that “modern men take for granted that the course of nature and of history, like their own inner life and their practical life, is nowhere interrupted by the intervention of supernatural powers.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, in Bultmann’s view, the accounts of demons and Satan, which are considered in the Scriptures as the source of all evil, sin, and diseases (see, for example, Gen 3; Job 1, 2; 1 Chr 21:1; Luke 8:26-39), must be seen as “a mythological description of a person’s existential need to transcend the oppressive systems of evil in the world.”<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, Bultmann saw the activities of good and evil forces in constant conflict with each other throughout human existence. That is why the world and human life are in constant struggle, demonstrating their limits to control and overcome these boundaries.<sup>60</sup> Thus, it has nothing to do with a conflict that influences the destiny of individuals: whether it be God working to save His creatures from sin or Satan and his

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<sup>57</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 14-15. In this book, specifically chap. 4, Bultmann clarified his proponent method of “demythologizing” the whole content of the New Testament, proposing an existentialist interpretation developed especially by Martin Heidegger. He also argued that demythologizing is a hermeneutic method to approach exegesis with principles and conceptions that elucidate the backdrop of the New Testament.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>59</sup>Joanne K. Kuemmerlin-McLean, “Demons in the New Testament,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:142. Not only Bultmann, but other modern interpreters of the Bible also treat the manifestations of evil possessions in the 1st century as what nowadays is known as simply psychological problems. In their understanding, there is no supernatural conflict exercising its influence to control the minds of individuals. See also James Kallas, *The Significance of the Synoptic Miracles: Taking the World View of Jesus Seriously* (Woodinville, WA: Sunrise Prints, 2010).

<sup>60</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 19.

agencies leading human beings to everlasting ruin.<sup>61</sup>

#### Edward Langton (1828-1905)

Conducting a study of ancient traditions about the teaching of good and evil spirits in their warfare to affect the lives of humans, Langton brought to an end this discussion by proposing that natural causes are the main reason for what the Bible and other religious writings call demon possessions and interactions with supernatural forces. He stated that “these phenomenal activities can largely be explained as being of the nature of hysteria or ecstasy, what conjoined with the influence of a rampant belief brings into reality the existence of such beings.”<sup>62</sup>

While the Bible clearly reveals the action of evil agencies in fierce fighting against the progress of the gospel on earth (Luke 4:31-37; Luke 8:26-39; Matt 17:14-23), Langton pointed out that cases related to supernatural manifestations, for example, possessions, can be diagnosed as psychological problems in past and present times. Thus, like Bultmann, Langton advocated a view that the account of supernatural entities in the Bible is a product of ancient worldviews which are no longer suited to modern societies.

#### C. Fred Dickason (Unknown)

Although Fred Dickason seems not argue for the existence of evil agencies in

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<sup>61</sup>With respect to the presence of God in the world, Bultmann held true that the mythological thinking of God found in the Bible affirms that God is transcendent, having His domicile in heaven. He is beyond the world. According to him, this thinking of transcendence puts God “at an immense spatial distance, far above the world.” Consequently, this manner of seeing God as a transcendent Being without emphasizing His immanence in creation reinforces the idea that God is not involved with human affairs. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 20.

<sup>62</sup>Edward Langton, *Good and Evil Spirits: A Study of the Jewish and Christian Doctrine, Its Origin and Development* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), 63.

their warfare against God’s agenda for mankind as the backdrop that affects the human life on earth since the fall into sin, he testified that there is a conflict between spiritual forces on the basis of the overwhelming evidence found in the Bible. According to him, this strife has continued throughout the “church age” and every Christian believer is engaged in this battle.<sup>63</sup>

Speaking about the activities of evil angels, Dickason reinforced the biblical idea that Satan and his allies are organized to accomplish their common, unrighteous purposes to secure men in their allegiance. In his view, Satan’s main work is to “promote rebellion against God among men.”<sup>64</sup> The results of this rebellion are guilt, death, and degradation by which the human race will not be able to receive salvation provided in Jesus Christ.

Finally, even acknowledging the weight of biblical evidence to support the reality of spiritual warfare, Dickason maintained that the concept of evil forces and their action is not acceptable to modern cosmology. He asserted that humanism is the cause of the denial of all that is invisible and incomprehensible for the human mind, leaving men unprotected against Satan’s snares to influence them to unite with him in his rebellion against the kingdom of God.<sup>65</sup>

George M. Newlands (1941)

George Newlands tackled the problem of evil by interpreting it first as opposition

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<sup>63</sup>C. Fred Dickason, *Demon Possession & the Christian: A New Perspective* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 21-23.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

against the love of God.<sup>66</sup> Although Newlands was perfectly aware of certain types of evil, he treated evil simply as “a tension between the goodness of God’s creation and the reality of contradiction, disaster, and evil.”<sup>67</sup> In the second instance, the existence of evil, suffering, and deficiency in the world are merely understood by him as a condition of the human heart, what the cross can engage with to bring healing and inner renewal, opening up a new dimension of love.<sup>68</sup>

In analyzing Newlands’ view of evil, Brian Hebblethwaite pointed out that persistent evil such as the abuse of power, endemic poverty, exploitation, and racism are problems highlighted by Newlands. Yet “Newlands has little to say why the world is so full of suffering and evil, and so much in need of redemption,”<sup>69</sup> once he emphasized the fact that Jesus became flesh to save His creation.

In addition, in his book *God in Christian Perspective*, Newlands’ hints about the problem of evil in the world seem to be ambiguous. On one hand, he endorsed the mystery of suffering as a means by which true human goodness can flourish. That is, God uses evil to create “loving sympathy and compassionate self-sacrifice.”<sup>70</sup>

He said,

God is ultimately responsible for all that happens in the natural order, yet without this environment human life as we know it could not flourish. We may feel that one who acts in love would surely have constructed a less harsh and unequal human

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<sup>66</sup>George M. Newlands, *The Theology of the Love of God* (London: Collins, 1980), 56.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 87, 133, 197.

<sup>69</sup>Brian Hebblethwaite, “Evil and the God of Love,” in *The God of Love and Human Dignity: Essays in Honor of George M. Newlands*, ed. Paul Middleton (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 156.

<sup>70</sup>George M. Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 166-67.

environment, without the sickening ransom catastrophes which blight so much human existence. Here perhaps is process on a time scale beyond our comprehension.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, he denied that God does permit evil and its consequences “to provide opportunities for moral virtues.”<sup>72</sup> Newlands had no concern about the victory of evil according to a theoretical theodicy. For him, understanding God’s own way of working with this sinful world through the incarnation and the cross of Christ is the solution for human predicaments. However, he did not offer an answer for the origin of all maladies that are seen everywhere. In short, Newlands’ perspective of evil can be portrayed through human misuse of freedom, without acknowledging a spiritual battle going on between two antagonistic forces. His view, thereby, falls short because it does not capture the entire picture of what Scripture presents as the cause for the problem of evil.

### **Summary**

As reviewed, there have been many different approaches to God's mercy and justice throughout Christian history. Without again mentioning each view above, these two divine attributes are generally not seen as working together for most theologians or philosophers and are even completely denied by others. On the other hand, atonement and satisfaction are discussed as the means by which God reveals His mercy and justice toward human beings, though some still do not see how they can be united in the act of salvation of sinners, for they do not grasp the reality of God’s being both merciful and

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<sup>71</sup>Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, 173-74.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 174.

just when dealing with His sinful creatures. Finally, the concept of mercy is simply discussed in terms of grace and love, leaving justice to the realm of fairness in the human sphere of relationships.

Concerning the cosmic conflict theme, contemporary theological discussion points to a denial of the biblical account about the existence of two antagonistic forces battling against each other to control the minds and lives of each person living on earth since the fall. This interpretation poses that angels, either good or evil, are products of a mythological mindset in ancient cultures and that supernatural manifestations delineated in the Scriptures can be interpreted as psychological diseases. Finally, others interpret the presence of evil as just moral weaknesses and misuse of freedom, without acknowledging the truthfulness of cosmic conflict in this world on which the destiny of every person hangs.

With all of this in perspective, the following chapter seeks to address the issue of God's mercy and justice in the context of the cosmic conflict by way of a systematic exposition to bridge the gap present in the various views discussed so far and to answer the questions that have been raised.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

#### TO GOD’S MERCY AND JUSTICE

Understanding God’s character as merciful and just is the source for many discussions in theological and philosophical settings as the second chapter of this research has shown. However, the problem lies in the fact that the study of God’s nature in many instances is not conducted by taking into account only His own witness as found in Scripture to draw any conclusion about it. In other words, there is a blend of faith and philosophy that causes confusion regarding the correct way to define the personhood of God and His dealings with mankind, especially related to His acts of mercy and justice.<sup>1</sup>

As Norman Gulley pointed out, “Our understanding of God must not be tied to any passing cultural considerations, whether Platonic, Aristotelian, patristic, medieval, modern, or post-modern. It must be based on Scripture.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, to comprehend the divine

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<sup>1</sup>As a result of this mix of faith and philosophy, God’s loving character is misunderstood because people firmly hold that their particular viewpoint on this subject is really what Scripture teaches, whereas they are accustomed to false concepts that they impose into the Bible without testing whether these conceptions about the divine character of love, mercy, justice, and truth are aligned with what the word of God really reveals. Contemporary debates on this subject among Christians focus on how to interpret the Bible correctly without establishing one’s preconceived ideas into the text in order to define any matter concerning the personhood of God and His dealings with mankind. For more on this discussion, see Christian A. Schwarz, *The 3 Colors of Love* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2004), 16.

<sup>2</sup>Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: God as Trinity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011), 41. The point made here by Gulley refers especially to the biblical affirmation that God is love and how His nature of love must be understood in unfolding the cosmic controversy when God needs to send His judgments, which were never used before and will never be used after this conflict.

attributes of mercy and justice, it is necessary to approach these issues by looking at what God reveals about His nature and actions toward His creatures as found throughout the Bible. This aspect will be the next step of this research. However, it is essential first to present an overview of the various terms in Hebrew and Greek, which are translated into English as “merciful/mercy” and “just/justice” with their various theological nuances.

### Old Testament Terms

Merciful is one of the most emphasized descriptions of God’s character in the OT, but it must be said that divine mercy as well as justice are paired with God’s חַסֵּד (*hesed*), His steadfast love, which leads God’s to act so towards humans as highlighted in the OT.<sup>3</sup> The most common terms used in Hebrew for “merciful,” “gracious,” and “compassionate” are רַחֻם and חַנּוּן (*rahûm* and *hannûn*), which come respectively from the roots רָחַם (*rḥm*)<sup>4</sup> and חָנַן (*hnn*). The former, רָחַם (*rḥm*),<sup>5</sup> often has the person of God Himself as the subject in its verbal forms. He is recognized as the One who acts to

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<sup>3</sup>Jason Byassee, *Psalms 101–150*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2018), 19.

<sup>4</sup>The root רָחַם (*rḥm*) is recurrent in all Semitic languages. In Akkadian, it means both “compassion” and “womb.” The verb of this root denotes the idea of “being devoted,” “attached,” “love,” “loyal.” Occasionally the notion of “being merciful” or “benevolent” is not associated etymologically with *rḥm*. In Ugaritic, *rḥm* in its verb form, “show compassion”—or a substantive used attributively, “compassionate,” “loving”—appears rarely. In Aramaic with all its different dialects, the form *rḥm* transmits the sense of “love,” “accept” someone, “be thankful,” “be satisfied” with someone, “be kind,” “compassionate,” “pleasing,” “acceptable.” The biblical version of the Aramaic, *rḥmyn* (plural) means “mercy,” “pity.” In short, all these Semitic languages reflect the same meaning for *rḥm* as found in Hebrew. See H. Simian-Yofre, “רָחַם,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)*, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 13:438.

<sup>5</sup>The Hebrew nouns רַחֲמִים (*rahîmim*) and רֶחֶם (*reḥem*) are also derived from the root רָחַם: the former meaning “compassion,” and the latter, “womb.” The verb רָחַם (*raḥem*), denoting the act of having compassion or love, appears in most cases in its *Piel* form. This root also appears in a few texts that express God’s own nature (cf. Exod 34:6-7; Ps 78; 103). F. Brown, with S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic (BDB)*, based on the lexicon of William Gesenius (2012), s.v. “רָחַם.”

display “mercy” (רַחֲמִים, *rah<sup>a</sup>mim*) to His people amid their shortcomings and failures, which constitutes an act in accordance with His love (*hesed*).<sup>6</sup> Concerning the adjectival form רַחוּם (*rahûm*), that occurs 13 times, and 11 times in combination with *hannûn* in the Hebrew Bible. רַחוּם [*rahûm*] expresses one of the foundations of God’s character throughout the OT – *Yahweh rahûm w<sup>e</sup>hannûn* – as a merciful or compassionate God (Exod. 34:6; Pss. 86:15; 103:8). The OT writers, therefore, attribute to God the characteristic of being a merciful God because He has a salvific will to show *rahûm* in order to restore the broken relationship between Him and Israel once they repent of their apostasy.<sup>7</sup>

The other Hebrew adjective חַנּוּן (*hannûn*) has the basic meaning of its root חָנַן (*hnn*)<sup>8</sup> as “grace.” “It denotes an aesthetically pleasing feature of someone and represents the quality someone or something possesses.”<sup>9</sup> The verb from this root, *hanan*, can be translated as someone who is “gracious,” “acts graciously,” and “shows favor.” However, the verb can also have an aesthetic sense when an individual makes a pleasing impression upon another (see Prov 26:25).<sup>10</sup> The adjective חַנּוּן (*hannûn*) in itself, which means “gracious,” is “always used of Yahweh,” with one exception found in Ps 112:4; it is in its

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<sup>6</sup>Brown, *BDB*, s.v. “חָסַד.”

<sup>7</sup>Simian-Yofre, “רחם,” 13:450.

<sup>8</sup>The noun חֵן (*hen*), which occurs 67 times in OT, is also derived from the root חָנַן. It has two basic meanings: “grace” and “favor.” The latter is the more important aspect in the OT, referring to the positive attitude one person has toward another. In addition, the concept of *hen* is not as profound as חֶסֶד (*hesed*, covenant love), even though both can be translated as “kindness” and “mercy.” The reason for that is because *hesed* presupposes rights and obligations in its meaning of “covenant love,” which presents a positive disposition from both parties to a relationship. See H.-J. Fabry, “חן,” *TDOT*, 5:22-25.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 5:22.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

entirety about mankind.<sup>11</sup> Just as רַחֻם (*rahûm*) appears in most occurrences with *hannûn*, *hannûn* also occurs with *rahûm* referring to God—*rahûm w<sup>e</sup>rahûm* (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Pss 111:4, 112:4; 145:8, 2 Chr 30:9; Neh 9:17, 31). In absolute terms, God is *hannûn* in His capacity as Father (Exod 22:27), for He shows compassion as portrayed in the idea of motherly or fatherly love.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, *rahûm* and *hannûn* reflect a compassionate disposition to forgive someone or to offer aid, assistance, and help in time of need. These terms are closely connected with the concepts of grace, goodness, love, patience, lovingkindness, and compassion.<sup>13</sup> Thus *rahûm* and *hannûn* are used essentially as a quality of God in His covenant of love with Israel throughout its history, and in a broader sphere, as the representation of the relationship between Him and humanity.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, two other adjectives in Hebrew associated with the same theme of mercy are חַסִּדִּים (*hasid*) and סָלַח (*salah*), but do not have many occurrences in the OT compared to *rahûm* and *hannûn*. חַסִּדִּים (*hasid*)<sup>15</sup> – “merciful,” “kind,” and “loyal” –<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Fabry, “5:25”, 77.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Edward P. Myers, “Mercy,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 885.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>The term *hasid* was used to refer to certain Jewish communities. “For earlier students of the Psalms, who considered a large number of the Psalms to be Maccabean, *hasid* was a term for the strict religious party that opposed to Hellenists. Scholars see *h<sup>a</sup>sidim*, a term that comes *hasid*, as the circle of those “leaving quietly in the countryside,” or devout people who had the reputation of being upright and honest.” According to them, these two Hebrew terms were related to cultic communities that took on religious, ethical coloration. See discussion in H.-J. Fabry, “חַסִּדִּים,” *TDOT*, 5:79.

<sup>16</sup>David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield, 2009), 126.

comes from the noun חֶסֶד (*hesed*) which renders the meaning of “steadfast love,” “charity,” “kindness,” and/or “lovingkindness.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, *hasid* can designate a wanted quality that is displayed in a mutual relationship between God and mankind; starting from the root *hesed*, this word can derive the meaning of “gracious.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, סָלַח (*salah*)—“forgiving,” “ready to forgive”—refers to the readiness to forgive someone, to pardon sin.<sup>19</sup> This adjective appears only in Ps 86:5, when the psalmist affirms that God is ready to forgive those who call upon Him.<sup>20</sup> The root סָלַח (*slh*) appears in other cases as the verb meaning “forgive” and “pardon of sin.” There is no evidence of the secular usage of סָלַח (*slh*). In other words, the One who grants סָלַח (*slh*) is God. For this reason, the root is not used in reference to forgiveness among human beings.<sup>21</sup>

In regard to the “just” aspect of God’s character, this divine attribute receives prominence in the OT, as well. The Hebrew term for just or righteous is שָׁדִיק (*saddiq*), associated with the noun שְׁדָדִיק (*seddeq*), usually translated as “righteousness” or “justice.” The root שָׁדַק (*sdq*) occurs 523 times in the OT and generally has two different understandings debated by scholars.<sup>22</sup> One view presents the notion of “legality,” as it understands *sdq* with a standard or norm. The other one understands *sdq* as virtually synonymous with deliverance and salvation. In other words, God performs a saving

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<sup>17</sup>Hayim Baltzan, *Webster’s New Word: Hebrew Dictionary* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1992), 208.

<sup>18</sup>Fabry, “5:32” ,ןָ.

<sup>19</sup>Clines, *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 298.

<sup>20</sup>Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 5 vols. (Boston: Brill, 2001), 1:756.

<sup>21</sup>Brown, *BDB*, s.v. “סָלַח.” See also J. Hausmann, “סָלַח,” *TDOT*, 10:259.

<sup>22</sup>B. Johnson, “שָׁדַק,” *TDOT*, 12:243.

intervention that is an expression of His *šdq*, thus describing it as being in a relation with God, rather than as a norm established by Him.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, other scholars focus on both aspects mentioned above to defend a dual meaning in *šdq*. In order to defend this dual understanding, Alan Groves pointed out that *šēdāqâ* (שֶׁדָּאָה), a noun that also originated from the root *šdq*<sup>24</sup> which means “justice” or “righteousness,” “reflects God’s righteousness in moral character and His covenant of love and faithfulness, as well as the legislative, judicial, and administrative aspects of His actions in the world.”<sup>25</sup>

Another noun that reflects significant aspects of the biblical concept of justice is *mišpāt* (מִשְׁפָּט). From the root *špāt* (שָׁפַט) and occurring 422 times, *mišpāt* is closely associated with justice and law.<sup>26</sup> It emphasizes God’s role as lawgiver and just judge as well as the attribute of rectitude. Together with *šēdāqâ*, *mišpāt* also reflects social justice throughout the OT. For instance, *šēdāqâ* and *mišpāt* allude to the character trait of justice granted to the king by God for the purpose of judging the people rightly, especially the poor and lowly (Ps 72:1-2), and are found in relationship with the term of “equity”

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<sup>23</sup>Johnson, “קִדְשׁ,” 12:243-45. In addition, scholars have emphasized that קִדְשׁ [*šdq*] must underscore the character of righteousness in the OT as a positive, salvific activity; that is, it always reflects an understanding of a gift, rather than punishment. On the other hand, others advocate the idea that one’s actions produce well-being or misfortune, which must be understood as the just fate or reward that each person receives from a just God.

<sup>24</sup>Related terms which often appear together with קִדְשׁ [*šdq*] are אֱמֶנֶת [*āman*], חֶסֶד [*hesed*], and לְשָׁלוֹם [*šālôm*]: with these three terms, *šdq* designates a positive, communal relationship or fellowship in God’s dealings with human beings: (a) *āman* gives the idea of faithful, firm, morally true or certain. With *šdq*, it establishes a correct relation between a superior and a subject, referring to the positive expectations and actions from just persons who present just weights; (b) *hesed*--kindness, merciful, pity, favor, good deeds—when used with *šdq*, emphasizes a situation of generosity; (c) and finally, *šālôm*—peace, prosperity, welfare—is the element of harmony. When together with *šdq*, the meaning presents the idea of just satisfaction that results in peace. Ibid., 12:246.

<sup>25</sup>J. Alan Groves, “Justice,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 415.

<sup>26</sup>B. Johnson, “מִשְׁפָּט,” *TDOT*, 9:87.

(Ps 99:4).<sup>27</sup> As a social ideal, *ṣ<sup>e</sup>dāqâ* and *mišpāt* are seen along the lines of kindness, mercy, and truth, and are further considered practically in conjunction with *Derek*—“way” of life.<sup>28</sup> To walk in the right way, in a straight and right path, is to practice justice and righteousness in the establishment of laws (Ps 99:7), the proper execution of justice, and the institution of social equity in favor of the poor, the orphan, and the widow.<sup>29</sup>

Talking specifically about *צדק* (*ṣaddiq*)—just, righteous—this adjective involves actions in which God reveals His righteousness. This character trait makes God intervene in His beneficence to bring evil to an end and to exalt the righteous (Pss 7:9-12; 11:7; 129:4; Jer 20:12). In this sense, *ṣaddiq* reveals that the just God acts righteously when He punishes the wicked, but also tries to prompt them to repent (Zeph 3:5).<sup>30</sup> As a result, people should confess and praise God because He is “just” and “upright” (Deut 32:4; Ps 119:137; Isa 41:26).

An additional aspect of *ṣaddiq* involves the covenant relations between God and His people in the OT. God is just in His character and He expects that the covenant community emulates this trace of character by upholding the moral standards established by Him. His just and righteous actions are, therefore, revealed when He deals with innocent and guilty parties among His people.<sup>31</sup> However, when it is mentioned that God wants His covenant community to acquire this specific character, an important point to

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<sup>27</sup>Groves, “Justice,” 415.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Johnson, “צדק,” 12:257.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 12:260.

remember is that God's justice is far greater than human beings can be or do. Apart from Him, there is no *ṣaddiq*, whether it is the state of being or doing. Sinners depend on God to be righteous and just (see Pss 32; 51).

In short, biblical justice found in the OT is more than a philosophical sense that understands it as fairness, correct treatment, equitable distribution of resources, or even a mathematical distribution of goods. Justice goes far beyond, for “it is a chief attribute of God and inextricably tied to God's mercy in His relationship with humankind.”<sup>32</sup>

### New Testament Terms

Just as divine mercy receives attention in the OT, in the NT it is not different. The Greek term used most in reference to mercy is ἔλεος (*eleos*), which means “mercy,” “compassion,” and “empathy.” This term refers to an emotion awakened by contact with an affliction that comes on someone else.<sup>33</sup> Thus, in many cases, *eleos* portrays God's mercy toward sinners in various circumstances of their lives “in the sense of God's pity for human woe which manifests itself in His will for man's salvation” (Rom 15:9; Titus 3:5).<sup>34</sup> In connection with ἀγάπη (*agapē*) and χάρις (*charis*)—“love” and “grace”—*eleos* denotes God's free disposition to offer grace through His love revealed in the forgiveness

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<sup>32</sup>Michelle Tooley, “Just, Justice,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 757.

<sup>33</sup>In the LXX ἔλεος (*eleos*) is normally used for ἠσέδ ( *hesed*). In the OT, the latter denotes an attitude of love out of a mutual relationship between God or man. By using *eleos* in place of *hesed*, it can denote a disposition and a helpful act to correspond to a relationship of trust and love, not implying just a demand. This aspect reveals how God is interested in offering help to sinners who enter into a relationship of love (covenant) with Him. See Rudolf Bultmann, “ἔλεος,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:477-79.

<sup>34</sup>Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), 563.



of sins to help sinful and needy beings, thus bringing salvation and identifying the free nature of this salvation as an unmerited gift (Eph 2:4-5; Heb 4:16).<sup>35</sup>

Another Greek noun in the NT that gives the meaning of “mercy,” “compassion,” and “sympathy” is οἰκτιρμός (*oiktirmos*). Unlike *eleos* that has several occurrences, *oiktirmos* appears only five times (Rom 12:1; 2 Cor 1:3; Phil 2:1; Col 3:12; Heb 10:28). Although *oiktirmos* can refer to God as the Father of mercies (2 Cor 1:3) showing His character, it does not portray a feeling as strong as *eleos*.<sup>36</sup> However, both *eleos* and *oiktirmos* are used in allusion to a good Christian behavior and attitude, as well (see Luke 10:37; Col 3:12).

Concerning the state of “being merciful,” the NT’s writers use four different adjectives to describe this aspect of God’s character: The first of these, ἐλεήμων (*eleēmōn*)—“merciful,” “pitiful,” and “sympathetic”—has two occurrences in the NT (Matt 5:7; Heb 2:17). This is an old Greek word which is fairly common in the LXX, mostly for God. In the NT, it does not refer to God the Father, but to Christ.<sup>37</sup> Hence, Jesus is portrayed as the One who became flesh to be “like His brothers in every aspect,” so He might become merciful (*eleēmōn*) when making “propitiation for the sins of the people” (see Heb 2:17).

The second, ἵλεως (*hileōs*), in addition to “merciful,” can also mean “propitious,”

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<sup>35</sup>Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 563-65.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 1034.

<sup>37</sup>Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 223.

“favorable,” “gracious,”<sup>38</sup> This adjective is used twice in the NT: the first in reference to Jesus (Matt 16:22), and the second, to the Father (Heb 8:12). In the LXX, *hileōs* is only used as a predicate of God, mostly as a substitute for the Hebrew term *נָחַם* (*salah*), “forgiving” or “ready to forgive.” The passage of Heb 8:12 is exactly a quotation from Jer 31:34 as a demonstration of understanding God’s merciful character that is present in both Testaments.<sup>39</sup>

The third, *οἰκτίμων* (*oiktirmōn*), which means “merciful” or “compassionate,” is used for God on both occasions in the NT to describe what God is like (Jas 5:11) and for the divine admonition to humans in order for them to show this same attribute (Luke 6:36).<sup>40</sup>

Finally, *πολύσπλαγχνος* (*polysplagchnos*)—“extremely compassionate,” “very pitiful,” “very merciful”—occurs only in Jas 5:11 to affirm that God is very compassionate towards sinners as a reminder of what they should know about Him.<sup>41</sup> In short, these four different terms demonstrate that the authors of the NT maintained the same idea or frame of reference from the OT in which God is considered merciful and displays mercy to sinners.

When it comes to the other side, namely, the aspect of divine justice in the NT, the Greek word that stands out is *δικαιοσύνη* [*dikaïosunē*] – translated as “righteousness”

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<sup>38</sup>William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 252.

<sup>39</sup>Friedrich Büchsel, “ἕλεως,” *TDNT*, 3:300-01.

<sup>40</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, “οἰκτίμων,” *TDNT*, 5:161.

<sup>41</sup>Franco Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of the Ancient Greek* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 690.

and “justice.” Scholars assert that on one hand, *dikaiosunē* in the NT refers to the mission of the Messiah when He met the righteous requirement of God’s law in order to die and bring about salvation for sinners, thus exemplifying justice for those who would follow him.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, *dikaiosunē* also talks about eschatological justice when God will establish His reign in full. Although this kingdom is yet to come, its inaugural presence reveals not only that believing sinners are saved, but also that through the practice of justice exhibited by God’s new covenant people, they can have a glimpse of the future.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, it should be mentioned here that while *dikaiosunē* describes justice in a spiritual sense, other Greek nouns in the NT such as δίκη (*dikē*) and κρίσις (*krisis*)<sup>44</sup> are used mostly in reference to “distinction,” “discrimination,” “legal,” “judicial,” and “punitive” contexts (see Matt 5:21; John 8:16; 2 Thess 1:9; Jude 7).<sup>45</sup>

The adjective δίκαιος (*dikaios*), which renders the meaning for “just,” “right,”

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<sup>42</sup>In regard to the fact that *dikaiosunē* can mean in the NT both justice from accepting Jesus’ sacrifice in sinner’s place and justice through a holy living in Jesus Christ, these two meanings of this term are seen in Paul’s and James’ use of it: while Paul uses *dikaiosunē* in the light of the saving work of Christ on the Cross by which He imputes righteousness on sinner’s account, James undoubtedly uses *dikaiosunē* to present the holy and right conduct of the Christians, which is also the salvific result of the work of salvation accomplished in their lives by indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. See Gottlob Schrenk, “δικαιοσύνη,” *TDNT*, 2:200-03.

<sup>43</sup>Groves, “Justice,” 416.

<sup>44</sup>The LXX uses *krisis* for the “right” of the oppressed (Ps 101:1) to refer to the right decision or judgment that must be taken concerning the needy. This explains its use in Matt 23:23 and Luke 11:42 when Jesus reproves the Pharisees because they neglected the rights of the poor, but were meticulous in judging others. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 473. In addition to that, *krisis* corresponds to the Hebrew word *mišpāt* in the OT, whose meaning lies in the realm of justice, judgment, and law. That is why the LXX uses *krisis* most of the time when translating *mišpāt*. In sum, both terms demand decisions and behaviors, either divine or human, in positive ways on behalf of what is just. See Friedrich Büchsel, “κρίσις,” *TDNT*, 3:941.

<sup>45</sup>Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, 148.

“righteous,” or “fair,” is entirely linked with its noun *dikaioσunē*. In a broad sense, *dikaioσ* denotes at least two aspects of practical living: (a) It denotes a connection with custom and tradition, which implies a person who is in conformity with his civilized setting and (b) it denotes obligations to men and to God, thus referring to an individual who fulfills his duties towards others and towards his religious obligations.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the meanings mentioned above, *dikaioσ* involves the whole life which engages virtues by which a just person does more than simply observe the requirements of a society. Hence, *dikaioσ* becomes a leading term in ethics, for it refers to someone who incorporates this virtue into his or her very being.<sup>47</sup>

In Scripture, there are some examples of people who are considered *δίκαιοσ* (*dikaioσ*) patriarchs, prophets, disciples, and so on. In the OT, patriarchs and prophets are considered *dikaioσ* because they adopted a faithful attitude towards God by their obedience to the law through a relationship of love with Him.<sup>48</sup> Similarly in the NT, the disciples are considered *dikaioσ* because they accepted Jesus as their personal Savior and truly kept the law or did God’s will based on the love that they had for Jesus (John 14:15). In an ultimate sense, they are *dikaioσ* due to their separation from the wicked—*πονηρόσ* (*ponērouσ*)—(Matt 13:49), not because they have no sin.<sup>49</sup>

It is also crucial to stress that the Greek adjective *δίκαιοσ* (*dikaioσ*) has its use drawn on the OT and differs sharply from classical Greek usage simply based on the idea

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<sup>46</sup>Gottlob Schrenk, “*δίκαιοσ*,” *TDNT*, 2:182.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>Groves, “Justice,” 416.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

of virtue, for the NT writers applied to the word *dikaios* the concept of just or righteous from the OT.<sup>50</sup> As *dikaios* in the content of the NT draws its meaning largely from the OT, God is considered *dikaios* in His judgments (cf. Rev 16:5; 1 Pet 2:23; John 17:25) and His law as the basis for His judgment, is also just because it reflects His character (Rom 7:12).<sup>51</sup>

Finally, another Greek term in the NT which renders the meaning as consistent with just, righteous, fair, legitimate, is ἔνδικος (*endikos*).<sup>52</sup> This adjective appears only in Rom 3:8 and Heb 2:2. This word probably comes from the combination between the proposition ἐν (*en*)—"in," "at," "on," "by" and the noun δίκη (*dikē*)—"justice," "judgment," "punishment," "vengeance."<sup>53</sup> Although there are not as many occurrences of *endikos* as of *dikaios* with different nuances throughout the NT, its usage presents the idea of a just action versus evil (cf. Rom 3:8 and Heb 2:2). The point is that those who live in open transgression and disobedience while doing evil will receive their just (*endikos*) retribution or reward.<sup>54</sup> Certainly, the only One who is able to bring final and just punishment on evil is God. He is, therefore, just and displays justice—once His

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<sup>50</sup>Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 170. The LXX translates the Hebrew term for just, שׂדִּיק (*šaddiq*), as δίκαιος (*dikaios*) (see one example in Gen. 6:9). However, "in spite of all similarities of the two terms, the LXX attests a decisive change in the use of δίκαιος under the influence of the OT motifs." In other words, God is the major figure in the OT who is exalted as *šaddiq/dikaios*, for the fundamental belief of God's law and judgment is linked with His just nature. Thus, δίκαιος in the LXX use, is related to the man who fulfills his duties towards God because he lives in a theocratic society that claims a relationship with Him, having the background that God Himself is δίκαιος. See Schrenk, "δίκαιος," 2:185.

<sup>51</sup>Schrenk, "δίκαιος," 2:185.

<sup>52</sup>Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of the Ancient Greek*, 690.

<sup>53</sup>Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 585.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

mercy was offered in face of the manifestation of sin—when dealing with His sinful creatures as shown in the biblical account.

### **The Biblical Evidence**

Besides the study of different Hebrew and Greek terms for mercy/merciful and justice/just, especially having the focus on the person of God as seen previously, it is also necessary to identify these two concepts in various passages to affirm what has been proposed in this study. With that in view, this section brings an analysis of some major passages throughout Scripture where God proclaims Himself or is declared to be “merciful” and “just” in the unfolding of this cosmic conflict.

According to Carl Henry, “God’s justice and mercy coalesce in the rescue of fallen mankind.”<sup>55</sup> This assertion leads to the realization that God is working through actions of mercy and justice to solve the problems that sin caused since its entrance in God’s creation on earth. In other words, God’s dealings with mankind on the basis of His mercy and justice must be seen as a means by which He intends to save them.

In fact, Scripture portrays the Lord as a merciful and just God who works out of love for His creatures by laying out these two features of His attributes. There are four texts in the OT, in the Psalms and in the prophetic writings,<sup>56</sup> which present this idea of

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<sup>55</sup>Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6:410. In next chapter, this topic about mercy and justice related to divine actions to rescue fallen mankind will be discussed again having in view the history of salvation when God interposed to bring about solution for human predicaments since the fall.

<sup>56</sup>For Farnell, the theological view of God’s character as merciful and just can be found in the prophetic writings and the Psalms, which give often deep and beautiful expression to the idea of God being both merciful and just. Nevertheless, the dominant attribute in Farnell’s view on God’s character is mercy. See Lewis R. Farnell, *The Attributes of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), 178-180.

Yahweh as being merciful and just or revealing His mercy and justice toward the sinner at the same time:

1. In Ps 116:5, the psalmist declares that “gracious [חַנּוּן] is the LORD, and righteous [צַדִּיק]; our God is merciful [רַחֵם]” (Ps 116:5 ESV). The perfect character of the Lord is highlighted by the psalmist, who sees God’s attributes of mercy and justice as a description of who He is. This verse opens with word *ḥannûn* (gracious, full of favor); then the psalmist adds more on character by saying that He is also *ṣaddiq* (just, righteous) and *m<sup>e</sup>rahēm* (compassionate), recalling for those listening to the Psalm the words of Moses in which he describes who God is in Exod 34:6 (this verse will be discussed further on): “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful (*rahûm*) and gracious (*ḥannûn*).”<sup>57</sup>

Psalm 116 shows that God is the only One who is able to do something to deliver the psalmist from that condition. Although the psalmist does specify the nature of the great trouble that he is facing, this Psalm—as an individual thanksgiving hymn to accompany ritual action in the temple—thanks God for deliverance in time of distress or impeding death. Analyzing the whole structure of Ps 116, it presents two major motifs suggested by several repetitions throughout its content: (a) thanksgiving (vv.1-2, 12-14, 17-19) and (b) deliverance (vv. 3-4, 7-11, 15-16). The pivotal point in this Psalm is the confession of who the Lord is: a Deliverer who is merciful and just (vv. 5-6).<sup>58</sup> This

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<sup>57</sup>Nancy deClassé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (NICOT) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 860-61.

<sup>58</sup>Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds. *Psalms*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary 5, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 843-44.

deliverance is based on God's "merciful" and "just" character, which is the reason for thanksgiving.<sup>59</sup>

2. Psalm 145:17 says, "The LORD is righteous [קִדְמוֹן] in all His ways, gracious [רַחוּם] in all His works" (NKJV). The psalmist witnesses that the Lord is *ṣaddiq* (just, righteous) and *ḥasid* (gracious, merciful, compassionate) in all His dealings with mankind. This verse in its context is a description of God. The larger context declares the attributes of God and the words also describe God's actions on behalf of humanity.<sup>60</sup> These two aspects, attributes of God and actions on behalf of His creatures, can be proved by "a series of active participles when the psalmist outlines God's generous care for creation throughout the Psalm: God *supports* (v. 14), *lifts up* (v. 14), *gives food* (v. 15), *opens His hand* (v.16), *satisfies desires* (v. 16), is near (v. 18), *fulfills desires* (v. 19), and *watches over* (v. 20)."<sup>61</sup>

Verse 17 comes right in the middle of God's actions on behalf of His creatures to demonstrate that in all of this, He has been "merciful" and "just." Though this verse must be seen in its whole context with the personal understanding of God by the psalmist, it proves the reality of human life with a realization of God's care for what He has created and His compassion toward "the sinful, the fallen, the bowed down, the all who cry to Him for help."<sup>62</sup> In short, this verse, as part of a poetic hymn, affirms that God has been

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<sup>59</sup>Longman III and Garland, *Psalms*, 846.

<sup>60</sup>deClassé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 993.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Commentary on the Bible Based on the NIV* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1989), 397.



“merciful” and “just” toward His creatures amid their trials, difficulties, and failures in a sinful world.

3. Isaiah 30:18 reads, “Therefore the LORD will wait, that He may be gracious [הַגִּן] to you; And therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy [רַחֵם] on you. For the LORD *is* a God of justice [מִשְׁפָּט]; Blessed *are* all those who wait for Him” (NKJV). This verse opens with the word “therefore” that connects it with the preceding pericope in which there is disapproval of the people of Judah because they were looking for alliances to protect themselves from the Assyrians. Egypt is mentioned as one of the nations from whom the leadership of Judah was seeking for help to solve their problems (30:1-7).<sup>63</sup> Thus, relying on Egyptian help rather than on God Himself is considered an act of disbelief and rebellion against the Lord (cf. 30:8-9).

Thus, v. 18 comes “with the purpose of explaining how God will show favor and have compassion and why it is worthwhile to wait for God, as God Himself waits.”<sup>64</sup> The prophet is aware of who God is, of His character, and what He will do for those who wait for Him. He says that the Lord will act graciously or mercifully (*hnn* in its verbal form) and will have mercy (*rhm* in its verbal form too). Then he closes by stating that “Yahweh is a God of *mišpāṭ* (justice),” a God whose actions are always in harmony with His mercy and justice. As asserted by Joseph Blenkinsopp, God’s justice in union with His mercy

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<sup>63</sup>Scholars add that besides Egypt, as declared in chapter 30, the background of this chapter, as well as chap. 31, “lies in the diplomatic mission to the Ethiopian ruler, Shabaka, who extended his rule as far as the Nile Delta. Because of the increase in Shabaka’s power, the Judean aristocracy considered the possibility of an alliance between Shabaka, Hezekiah, the Philistines, and the Phoenicians against the Assyrian King, Sennacherib (705-701 B.C.).” Elwell, *Baker Commentary on the Bible Based on the NIV*, 494.

<sup>64</sup>Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 19 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 420.

“is an essential postulate for maintaining faith in God at all therefore for having a reason for waiting.”<sup>65</sup>

4. Hosea 2:19 says, “And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness [צְדָקָה] and in justice [מִשְׁפָּט], in steadfast love [חֶסֶד] and in mercy [רַחֲמִים]” (ESV). This text, where the Lord reveals Himself as a God acting in mercy and justice, comes from a prophecy that grows from a marriage. This marriage became the oracle to recapitulate Israel’s infidel conduct with Yahweh in the covenant.<sup>66</sup> Summing up the account of the book, God called Hosea to marry a woman who would eventually repeat the same behavior of His people toward Him (cf. 1:2-8). Thus, the misconduct of God’s people, as well as Hosea’s wife, was in one and the same act both infidelity and apostasy against both Hosea and Yahweh respectively, since sexual immorality and Baal cult were involved (cf. 2:13).<sup>67</sup>

Although there is a debate about whether Gomer was or was not promiscuous before Hosea married her, something definite in this story is that the Lord’s identification of Hosea’s intended wife as a promiscuous woman anticipated the way He wanted to use the life of His prophet to illustrate the image of a Redeemer God who was willing to unite Himself with what was unholy in order to save Israel from the snare of pagan worship.<sup>68</sup>

With this image in view, v. 19 reinforces God’s desire to be engaged with His

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<sup>65</sup>Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 420.

<sup>66</sup>Francis I. Anderson and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 24 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 166.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 165.

apostate people and, thus renewing the covenant between both parts, presents the Lord as One who takes the first step toward this renewal: The Lord will betroth Israel to Himself forever.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the terms “righteousness” (*ṣeddeq*), “justice” (*mišpāt*), “steadfast love” (*hesed*), and “mercy” (*raḥ<sup>a</sup>mim*) present in this verse are known as “covenant words to designate the character of this covenant: They point to the Lord as the ruler who makes correct decision to regulate and correct this relationship with His flawed people.”<sup>70</sup>

In sum, these four verses presented above show that God’s mercy and justice are active components in His dealings with humans. On the one hand, the mercy of God denotes His ready disposition to relieve the misery of fallen creatures, for His mercy is not restrained to feelings or merely the awareness of the human situation. It leads Him to act in order to relieve the misery.<sup>71</sup> Mercy thus presupposes the existence of sin, which leads God to act on behalf of helpless sinners who need His mercy to receive forgiveness and salvation.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, God will not neglect His justice in order to show mercy; they will be working together to fulfill His plans, even though it seems impossible to hold this concept. Therefore, these verses corroborate the assertion that “divine justice

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<sup>69</sup>The divine attitude in the book of Hosea to restore the broken relationship between the Creator and His creatures parallels what happened to Adam and Eve when they fell into sin. It was not the man who came to God seeking for pardon, but rather God who sought that couple, aiming to bring restoration for a relationship marred by sin (Gen. 3:8-9). This pattern of a God who seek sinners was and has always been throughout the history of salvation (Luke 19:10; John 3:16).

<sup>70</sup>Elwell, *Baker Commentary on the Bible Based on the NIV*, 607.

<sup>71</sup>Richard L. Strauss, *The Joy of Knowing God* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1984), 142.

<sup>72</sup>Arthur Pink suggested a threefold distinction in regard to God’s mercy: First, there is a *general* mercy, which is extended to believers and unbelievers alike as well as to all creation. Second, there is a *special* mercy of God, which is exercised to help men in their various dilemmas on earth, regardless of their situation as sinners. Third, there is *sovereign mercy*, which is communicated to those who are in a covenant of love with their Creator, through a Mediator (emphasis added). See Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975), 72-73.

neither stands in contrast with His mercy nor divine mercy obliterates justice.”<sup>73</sup> On the contrary, they are synonymous with his steadfast love (*hesed*). As Robert Reymond pointed out, “The manifestation of God’s justice is often at the same time the showing forth of His grace as an act of mercy.”<sup>74</sup>

### **Systematization of Verses Dealing with the Thematic**

Besides the texts examined above where God is considered to be both merciful and just, there are a number of others throughout Scripture in which one or the other feature receives emphasis. Space does not allow me to present all these texts, but some will receive attention here as they are categorized into two divisions with an emphasis on mercy/merciful and justice/just as follows:

#### **For Mercy/Merciful**

1. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful [רחום] and gracious [חנון], longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy [חסד] for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation” (Exod 34:6-7 NKJV).

2. Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say,

“Return, faithless Israel, declares the LORD.

I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful [חסיד], declares the LORD;

I will not be angry forever (Jer 3:12 ESV).

3. ...and rend your hearts and not your garments.”

Return to the LORD your God,

for he is gracious [חנון] and merciful [רחום],

slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;

and he relents over disaster (Joel 2:13 ESV).

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<sup>73</sup>Robert L. Reymond, *What is God? An Investigation of the Perfections of God’s Nature* (Scotland, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), 211.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

4. So he prayed to the LORD, and said, “Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You *are* a gracious [חַנּוּן] and merciful [רַחוּם] God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm (Jonah 4:2 NKJV).

5. Therefore be merciful [οἰκτίρων], just as your Father also is merciful [οἰκτίρων] (Luke 6:36 NKJV).

These five texts have, in common, an essential attribute of God’s character: mercy (“mercifulness”). Observed in their immediate contexts, they display His character in situations that involve apostasy, open transgression, and failures by God’s covenant people (cf. Exod 34:6-7; Jer 3:12; Joel 2:13), as well as the divine desire to save those who were living in rebellion against Yahweh, the God of Israel, who showed mercy in response to repentance (cf. Jon. 4:2) and finally, an admonition to emulate this divine attribute (cf. Luke 6:36). These five texts, therefore, portray an overall understanding of God’s character that permeates the whole Scripture: God is merciful. They also reveal much about God’s merciful attitudes amid human weaknesses and shortcomings in unfolding this conflict between good and evil.

#### For Justice/Just

1. Then the princes of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, “The LORD is righteous [קִיָּץ]”  
(2 Chr 12:6 ESV).

2. O LORD, the God of Israel, you are just [קִיָּץ], for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this” (Ezra 9:15 ESV).

3. However You *are* just [קִיָּץ] in all that has befallen us;  
For You have dealt faithfully,  
But we have done wickedly (Neh 9:33 NKJV).

4. The LORD within her is righteous [קִיָּץ]; he does no injustice; every morning he shows forth his justice [צִדְקָתוֹ]; each dawn he does not fail; but the unjust knows no shame (Zeph 3:5 ESV).

5. And I heard the angel of the waters saying:  
“You are righteous [δίκαιος], O Lord,  
The One who is and who was and who is to be,  
Because You have judged these things (Rev 16:5 NKJV).

At the heart of these texts lies the remarkable affirmation of divine justice. Although the Bible presents God's mercy as a revelation of His grace, as we have noted, it also presents His acts as patterned so that divine justice is not neglected. The first three verses above (cf. 2 Chr 12:6; Ezra 9:15; Neh 9:33) are in contexts in which God's covenant people acknowledged the divine judgments upon them as a result of their transgressions against Him. That is why, as presented in the fourth text, He does justice in the midst of Jerusalem (cf. Zeph 3:5). In other words, they recognized that God was "just" in the way that He had handled their apostasy and rebellion. Finally, Rev 16:5 occurs in the context of God's just punishments on the wicked world, when the natural elements on earth will be used by God to bring judgments on evil. An angel in charge of the waters acknowledges this cosmic righteousness of God's judgments on evil as their just reward due to unjustly shedding the saints' blood.<sup>75</sup>

### **Salvific Justice**

In fact, the Bible portrays both God's character and actions as merciful and just as seen in survey of the previous sections. However, this chapter would not be complete without approaching a special theological aspect of divine justice: its salvific aspect.

First, God's justice or righteousness is not only portrayed in Scripture as retribution for sin and evil, but justice also has a salvific side in which sinners can acquire what they do not have on their own in order to be accepted by a holy God.

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<sup>75</sup>Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 186.

According to Donald Macleod,

The retributive aspect of righteousness has obviously figured prominently in traditional theology. Indeed, it has often been the only aspect to receive attention. But it is only half the truth, if that. In Scripture the main emphasis falls on *remunerative* righteousness, this is a righteousness [or justice] contemplated not as a reason for terror and alarm but as a ground of confidence and hope.<sup>76</sup>

Like Macleod, Reymond recognized that many Christians are not aware of salvific justice, namely, *remunerative*.<sup>77</sup> In the same vein, Herman Bavinck affirmed that the punishment of the wicked is derived from God's wrath upon sin—the retributive sense. On the other hand, justice brings salvation for God's people—the remunerative sense. He added that this remunerative aspect in God's justice “is an attribute by which God justifies the righteous, and exalts them to glory and honor.”<sup>78</sup> That is why Scripture depicts divine justice or righteousness as His active mercy toward the redeemed. For God's people, therefore, justice does not simply mean retributive punishment, but relief for the oppressed and needy.<sup>79</sup>

As understood by the theologians mentioned above, both Old and New Testaments relate God's mercy and justice, which brings salvation to mankind, but salvation is not only portrayed in Scripture through a means of grace and mercy, but also

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<sup>76</sup>Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God*, rev. and expand. ed. (Scotland, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1995), 101. For Macleod, divine justice or righteousness seems to have two sides: retributive and remunerative. The former means that God reacts to human conduct, both good and evil, with absolute propriety. In a basic understanding, retributive justice is related to God's actions to bring punishment over wrongdoings, starting with Adam. It presents the idea that the sons of Adam are not mere innocents who share his guilt; on the contrary, they act out their disobedience for themselves, thus receiving punishment for their own sins. On the other hand, remunerative justice reacts to the gift originating from what Jesus did and is for mankind. *Ibid.*, 93-94.

<sup>77</sup>Reymond, *What is God?*, 209.

<sup>78</sup>Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 216-17.

<sup>79</sup>Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6:410.

through justice. For instance, passages in the OT such as Isa 42:6; 45:8; 46:13; and 51:6 link salvation to God's justice or righteousness:

I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness,  
And will hold Your hand;  
I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people,  
As a light to the Gentiles (Isa 42:6 NKJV).

“Rain down, you heavens, from above,  
And let the skies pour down righteousness;  
Let the earth open, let them bring forth salvation,  
And let righteousness spring up together.  
I, the LORD, have created it (Isa 45:8).

I bring My righteousness near, it shall not be far off;  
My salvation shall not linger.  
And I will place salvation in Zion,  
For Israel My glory (Isa 46:13).

Lift up your eyes to the heavens,  
And look on the earth beneath.  
For the heavens will vanish away like smoke,  
The earth will grow old like a garment,  
And those who dwell in it will die in like manner;  
But My salvation will be forever,  
And My righteousness will not be abolished (Isa 51:6).

As Macleod pointed out, “All these passages are quite astonishing. Israel is building its confidence not on what we call grace but on what we call the righteousness of God.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, Israel is building its confidence on salvific justice or righteousness that comes from God Himself.

Although justice in many circumstances implies “final and absolute juridical norms” because God is straight and wants His people to do right, it is also a promise to

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<sup>80</sup>Macleod, *Behold Your God*, 101-02.



bring satisfaction or salvation for what sin has made.<sup>81</sup> In looking at the history of Israel, it is noticeable that they failed many times in fulfilling their part as a chosen people and received punishment as a result, yet God kept His promises amid the failures and shortcomings of His covenantal people. Thus, the main point for God's promises is the coming of a Savior who would eventually bring righteousness for Israel and for the entire world.

The prophet Jeremiah testifies about the same truth when he points to a branch of David who will bring righteousness or justice upon the earth:

“Behold, *the* days are coming,” says the LORD,  
“That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness;  
A King shall reign and prosper,  
And execute judgment and righteousness in the earth  
In His days Judah will be saved,  
And Israel will dwell safely;  
Now this *is* His name by which He will be called:  
THE Lord OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS (Jer 23:5-6 NKJV).

“In those days and at that time  
I will cause to grow up to David  
A Branch of righteousness;  
He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.  
In those days Judah will be saved,  
And Jerusalem will dwell safely.  
And this *is the name* by which she will be called:  
THE Lord OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS (Jer 33:15 NKJV).

In these texts, Jeremiah presents a messianic dimension which envisions a golden age, an indication of a future King who would be wholly unlike all succeeding descendants of David. In looking at the immediate contexts of these texts, we see that there is an oracle of judgment upon the sons of Josiah, the last kings of Judah, and upon

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<sup>81</sup>Macleod, *Behold Your God*, 101-02.

Jerusalem for their iniquity; both rulers and subjects were guilty before God.

Nevertheless, these prophecies of Jeremiah secure a King who would perform all the requirements expected from a ruler: to do justice and righteousness. Beyond that, He would be the embodiment of true righteousness. His righteousness would be accounted on behalf of those who believe in him, thus pointing to the future.<sup>82</sup>

In the NT, this promise becomes reality. The NT writers also see the justice of God represented through the understanding of what Jesus performed at the Calvary.<sup>83</sup> In Rom 3:26, Paul says: “To demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (NKJV).” This verse asserts that God’s justice is an offer of grace in terms of what the believer can obtain through Jesus’s righteousness. That is, God is just when He justifies those who believe in Jesus as their Savior.

As a matter of fact, John states that God is “faithful and just” to forgive the sins of those who confess them (see 1 John 1:9). This assurance of forgiveness is totally based on the righteousness of Jesus, who is the “propitiation” “for our sins” and “for the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Because God sent Jesus for the atonement for sin, “John declares the impossibility of the confessor being turned away because God is faithful and righteous to his purposes in the atoning work of Jesus Christ.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, the justice or righteousness of

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<sup>82</sup>Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21–36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 21B (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 174.

<sup>83</sup>In the next chapter, I will discuss more on the cross of Calvary as a historical event when the mercy and justice of God are completely displayed in the unfolding of the cosmic conflict. For now, the objective is only to point out that divine justice also finds meaning as redemptive grace.

<sup>84</sup>Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 71.

God becomes a means by which salvation is accomplished on man's behalf.

In sum, whereas divine justice is an expression of God's essential nature that leads Him to visit sin with retribution because He hates it and His nature does not conceive it, God's justice has a salvific element present in it, which leads Him to save those who believe in His Son as their Redeemer. In giving them salvation, God is acting mercifully and justly.

### **Summary**

The various Hebrew and Greek terms studied in this chapter shed light on the semantics of divine mercy and justice throughout Scripture. The word "merciful" in Hebrew, as well as in Greek, convey feelings of "pity," "sympathy," "graciousness," "compassion," and "affection," whereas that the word "just," sometimes translated as "righteous" in both OT and NT has to do with God's actions, for they are always right and fair. Hence, God's mercy and justice (or righteousness) are a natural expression of His perfect character of love when dealing with sin and evil.

Psalms 116:5, Ps 145:17, Isa 30:18, and Hos 2:19, analyzed in their respective contexts, demonstrate a theological emphasis throughout Scripture that points to a better understanding of the relationship of the two divine features: mercy and justice. Examined from the backdrop of the cosmic conflict, all these texts, along with others that were brought up in the discussion, could affirm that God has been both merciful and just in His dealings with the various manifestations of evil as a result of the existence of sin.

Finally, the justice of God is also delineated in salvific terms in Scripture, not only as a means of punishment. In Jesus Christ, sinners have the assurance of acceptance

before God because He became their justice or righteousness, which is united to His mercy as a gift of salvation.

Although terms and texts were relevant to substantiate a position in this research that puts divine mercy and justice in harmony with each other, the subject matter must be also studied through the lens of a metanarrative of this conflict as presented in Scripture through a linear sequence of divine interventions to save mankind by mingling mercy and justice. This scriptural narrative will be the topic for the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MACRONARRATIVE OF GOD’S MERCY AND JUSTICE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COSMIC CONFLICT

Although the terms-study approach, along with the analysis of some biblical passages, are adequate to understand the various nuances of God’s mercy and justice with their theological implications about the divine character throughout Scripture. As seen in the previous chapter, it is also important to look at historical events in which these same truths are expressed without mentioning the words “mercy” and “justice.” As expressed by Geoffrey Grogan, the role of systematic theology goes beyond a word study or proof texts to affirm eternal truths, but these eternal truths are also taught and demonstrated in and through historical events.<sup>1</sup> This assertion makes it necessary for this paper to be a delineation of a theology which is also grounded in history.

Since this research concerns God’s merciful and just actions within the unfolding cosmic conflict, this fourth chapter will discuss the macro-understanding of God’s dealings in human history to bring about salvation for sinners. Because of space limitations, the focus will be on four major events in the history of salvation: (1) the *Fall*, (2) the *Flood* (3) the *Cross*, and (4) the *Final Judgment*. However, four more stories as

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<sup>1</sup>Geoffrey Grogan, “A Biblical Theology of the Love of God,” in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 49.

narratives of divine mercy and justice in the context of the cosmic controversy are found in Appendix A.

### **The Fall**

First John 4:8 declares that “God is love.” As a loving God, all divine acts are rooted in His character of love, which notably includes the creation of mankind to populate the earth. Douglas Morgan averred, “God created mankind not only because is creative, but because is love . . . the Bible’s very first love-teaching, the is the act of creation itself: God our Father made this world and saw that everything in it was good, and blessed it, in act of transcendent love for that which he had made was good.”<sup>2</sup>

However, as soon as man decided to do what was contrary to God’s plans (Gen 3:6; cf. Gen 2:16-17), the beauty of creation as found in Gen 1 and 2 was marred by sin. Man was lured away from God by the deceptive scheme of the devil who used a serpent as his channel to deceive mankind (Gen 3:1-5). The account of man’s creation, called “very good” by God Himself on the sixth day (cf. Gen. 1:31), became a story of tragedy; the cosmic conflict now came to the earth.<sup>3</sup> Man freely disobeyed God by trying to become like God, committing what is considered by theologians as the original sin and

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<sup>2</sup>Douglas N. Morgan, *Love: Plato, the Bible, and Freud* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 49-50.

<sup>3</sup>The focus of this section is exclusively on the metanarrative of the cosmic controversy in human history since the fall of Adam and Eve, keeping in view divine actions to solve the problem of sin. However, this battle between Christ and Satan has its origin in heaven as portrayed in Rev 12:7-12. What has been happening on earth is simply a continuation of a battle started in heaven when a heavenly being corrupted himself and decided to obtain for himself the honor and glory which belonged to God as the Creator, thus bringing disorder to what was perfection until then (cf. Isa 14:12-15; Ezek 28:11-19). As the biblical narrative shows, this conflict was transferred to this world when Adam and Eve made the wrong choice in listening to Satan’s deceitful suggestions (Gen 3).

“from a plausible point of view, the only ultimate sin.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, “he cast himself forever apart from perfect happiness here on earth, isolating himself from his divine origin and earning eternal condemnation and punishment.”<sup>5</sup>

Discussing what God needed to do after the fall of man, Willing Dean pointed out that “God had to apply His principles of love to confront what had gone wrong, to overcome it, and to return humanity to its primal tranquility.”<sup>6</sup> What was the state of life on earth before the fall took a turn toward a previously unknown dimension. God also had to condemn and punish man as a just God, but God also pitied him. It has always been the case since then.<sup>7</sup> God has revealed His mercy and justice to solve what sin has caused.

Starting with the divine judgment, Norman Gulley asserted that

Christ judged all three, and curses entered the world (Gen. 3:14-19). Christ acted responsibly. He called sin by its right name. The judgment was absolute and immutable. The judgments could no more be changed than God’s law could be changed. God’s warning of death for disobedience could not be changed, for God does not change (Mal. 3:6). He is not only the God who is “abounding in love” but also the God who “does not leave the guilty unpunished” (Exod. 34:6-7). He is “slow to anger” but “will not leave the guilty unpunished” (Nah. 1:3).<sup>8</sup>

Gulley also emphasized that “only after the judgment did Christ introduce the gospel, ‘God made tunics of skin, and clothed them’ (Gen 3:21, NKJV) to replace their

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<sup>4</sup>Morgan, *Love*, 49-50.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>William D. Dean, *Love Before the Fall* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976), 13.

<sup>7</sup>Morgan, *Love*, 49-50.

<sup>8</sup>Gulley, *Systematic Theology: God as Trinity*, 46-47.

fig leaves. This suggests an animal or animal were sacrificed.”<sup>9</sup> These are words that translate the assurance of mercy toward man. God thus acted in justice and mercy with His recent fallen creatures, showing that as a just God, He will not neglect man’s sin. Their sin received its immediate punishment, but mercy was also offered to Adam and Eve through the promise of a coming Redeemer, a Messiah who would perform a supreme sacrifice to unite God’s mercy and justice in a single act. In an ultimate sense, sin would receive its just punishment and mercy would be offered to man through the substitutionary death of this coming Savior.

In addition, something extremely crucial at the center of man’s fall, which should not go unnoticed, is the perennial validity of God’s law. The divine command to man concerning eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was explicit: “You shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen 2:17 ESV). Thus, Adam and Eve were put in a condition where they could exercise their free will. Unfortunately, they used this gift to choose what was contrary to God’s plan for them when, as already mentioned, they believed Satan’s words rather than God’s (cf. Gen 3:4-6). However, by appearing in the Garden of Eden first, to judge man’s actions and then, to make a promise of a descendent from the woman’s seed who would come to destroy Satan (Gen 3:15), God was revealing that His law would not be changed to meet man’s necessity. The sacrifice of an animal in Eden, implicit in the act of making tunics of skin to clothe the fallen couple (cf. Gen 3:21), demonstrates that God will by no means change His law to mitigate the consequences of transgression. Just as God’s character does not change (Mal 3:6), His holy, just, and good law does not either (Rom 7:12). Instead, God Himself

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<sup>9</sup>Gulley, *Systematic Theology: God as Trinity*, 46-47.



would offer a supreme sacrifice to atone for man's sin and to validate His law, the foundation of His throne.

Commenting on both the fall of Adam and Eve and its results because of the transgression of God's command and on the promise of a Savior to atone for mankind's sin, Ellen White signaled something crucial:

If the law could be changed, man might have been saved without the sacrifice of Christ; but the fact that it was necessary for Christ to give His life for the fallen race, proves that the law of God will not release the sinner from its claims upon him. It is demonstrated that the wage of sin is death... The very fact that Christ bore the penalty of man's transgression is a mighty argument to all created intelligences that the law is changeless; that God is *righteous*, *merciful*, and self-denying; and that infinite *justice* and *mercy* unite in the administration of His government (Italics added).<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the whole narrative of man's fall shows that divine providence had been working to bring a solution to what was a deviation from God's purpose in creation.

Bruce Reichenbach stated that "although providence literally means to foresee, as applied theologically to God, it refers more broadly to God's active loving care for, beneficial actions on behalf of, and guidance of His creation than to any passive observation or witnessing."<sup>11</sup> This point is an affirmation that divine providence works for the good of mankind in all its actions in the cosmos, "more especially in the affairs of humanity," in order to bring everything back to its initial order.<sup>12</sup> Although humans may choose to do what is contrary to the divine plans at certain point of their lives like Adam and Eve did,

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<sup>10</sup>Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 70.

<sup>11</sup>Bruce R. Reichenbach, *Divine Providence: God's Love and Human Freedom* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 3.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

God's actions always aim for the good of all who love Him and accept His plans for them (Rom 8:28).

In summary, God's providence led Him to provide a sacrifice by which His character of mercy and justice as a revelation of His love would be shown in its fullness, proving that His law is as eternal as Himself. No change, therefore, would be made in His law to save mankind, but at Calvary, a sacrifice was made to unite mercy and justice.

### **The Flood**

Another event in the history of salvation in which God's mercy and justice are called into action is the account of the flood in Gen 6-8. Tracing the narrative of Genesis from chaps. 4-6, a full cycle of decay is expressed. First is the crime of Cain in murdering his brother Abel (Gen 3:8). Next, one of Cain's descendants, Lamech, boasted about the fact that he had killed two men in retaliation, crimes that were added to his introduction of polygamy (Gen 4:19-24).<sup>13</sup> Then, after the life spans of the descendants of Seth, seen as a reflection of God's blessings on his seed, as opposed to the seed of Cain (Gen 5), the account of mankind's decay reached such a proportion that it led God to declare that His "Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh" (Gen 6:3 ESV).

Regardless of the varied interpretations of the "sons of God" and the "daughters

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<sup>13</sup>Victor Hamilton says something crucial about polygamy as a deviation from God's purpose for man: "For the first but not the last time God's patten of one man for one woman and one woman for one man breaks down. No particular verse in the Old Testament prohibits polygamy, but the crucial point that there is hardly any polygamist whose life is not extremely complicated and bruised." The stories of Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon prove this tragic fact according Hamilton. See Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 60.

of men,”<sup>14</sup> the narrative of Gen 6:1-3 signals a moral decline with a larger meaning of the disaster of sin.<sup>15</sup> No wonder the biblical account of Genesis asserts that the divine “impetus for the flood comes from sin of humankind.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, God needed to operate “in order to give mankind a new beginning. This new beginning is about finding a way out of the legacy of sin.”<sup>17</sup>

The Bible says,

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Gen. 6:5-8 ESV)

As a result of the moral decline seen in the passage above, God had to act in both justice and mercy to preserve His creation on earth—in justice, because He saw that sin needed rapid judgment that time, and in mercy, because He spared a “righteous and blameless man” who walked with Him (Gen 6:9). In summarizing this biblical account, we see that the way God decided to put an end to the course of iniquity in Noah’s time was through a deluge, by providing an ark to save His servant and his family, along with a diverse number of living things to be preserved with them.

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<sup>14</sup>Without mentioning other interpretations for the identity of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” in Gen 6:2, my position is with a number of modern and ancient exegetes that see in the “sons of God” a reference to the descendants of Seth, and the “daughters of men,” a reference to the descendants of Cain. Clear evidence for this position lies in the narrative of chaps. 4 and 5, in which the line of Cain is contracted with the line of Seth. See more on this discussion in Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 61-64.

<sup>15</sup>R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 114.

<sup>16</sup>Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 67.

<sup>17</sup>Reno, *Genesis*, 112.

Although many may suggest that it was on the basis of favoritism that Noah and his family were saved, Scripture shows that the character of Noah determined his destiny, as well as that of his family.<sup>18</sup> He was a man of righteousness before God in his generation (Gen 7:1; cf. 2 Pet 2:5). This righteousness of Noah was acquired by faith (see Heb 11:7). The faith that Noah had in God made Him act in accordance with all God's commands (Gen 6:22), another reason by which God established His covenant with that man of faith and his descendants (Gen 6:18; 9:9).

In conclusive terms, the story of Noah's deluge stands in the Bible as a small picture of this greater metanarrative that translates to the reality of God's providential actions in face of the existence of evil in His creation. For the antediluvian world which increased in wickedness, the "divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah" until the day when the ark was prepared and God had to bring judgment upon them through the flood (see 1 Pet 3:20). For Noah and his family, the ark was a means that God provided to show mercy, prefiguring the greatest deliverance performed by Jesus on Calvary to save man from sin.

### **The Cross**

This study about the merciful and just character of God could not ignore the essential implications for theology described uniquely in the events surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These events display the Christian assertion that God has a loving nature. As seen in the previous section, God's love is first revealed in creation. Nevertheless, it is plainly disclosed in the work of salvation. No wonder Jesus

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<sup>18</sup>Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 68.

Himself affirmed that “God so loved the world” that He was willing to give up his only begotten Son to die in man’s stead (John 3:16). On the other hand, this verse also points to a reality that God’s love can be translated by the disposition to sacrifice Himself in order to bring satisfaction to what the transgression of divine will caused. Thus, God would be dealing with His creatures in just measure by punishing their sin through His Son, but also by offering mercy to those who believe in Him as their substitute.

Tony Lane, in his essay on the wrath of God as an aspect of His love, said that “in salvation history, in Christ, and in Scripture we see God acting both in justice through judgments and in mercy through forgiveness. Though these two aspects differ and are in some sense contrary to one another. Yet both originate from the one holy, loving God.”<sup>19</sup> Divine wrath through just judgments upon sin is for Lane another side of the same coin called “love.” However, how could love be merciful and just at the same time?

Scripture delineates that Christ came into this world not to condemn it, but that through Him, the world might be saved (John 3:17). In other words, Jesus came to take upon Himself the just punishments that God’s law requires for transgression, an aspect already emphasized. His vicarious sacrifice worked as a means by which sin would receive its due reward, but mercy would be offered, as well. Stephen Charnock proposed that “the bowels of mercy are wound about the flaming sword of justice, and the sword of justice protects and secures the bowels of mercy.”<sup>20</sup> Charnock’s thought points to a

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<sup>19</sup>Tony Lane, “The Wrath of God as an Aspect of the Love of God,” in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 163.

<sup>20</sup>Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1840), 362.

solution for the theological puzzle in regard to God’s mercy and justice by suggesting that the atoning sacrifice of Jesus is an effective answer to those who think of mercy and justice as two separate things. The cross thus becomes the point of congruence where these two aspects of character work out for the same purpose: to reveal who God is in the unfolding of the cosmic conflict.

Theologically speaking, the argument made here concerning Christ’s sacrifice argues for a penal substitution,<sup>21</sup> which sees that from the foundation of the world, a lamb was appointed to take man’s place (Heb 9:26). The spotless life of Christ and His obedience unto death show that He came into the world to carry out the supreme sacrifice by which the justice of God upon sin would be carried out; mercy would also not be left out of the scene of this cosmic conflict.

The words of Richard Strauss enhance the point made here when he said that “justice allows for one person to substitute for another, so long as no injustice is done to the rights of any person involved. So, God provided a substitute. When His Son voluntarily offered Himself to die in our place, our sin was punished, God’s justice was forever satisfied, and mercy was offered to sinners.”<sup>22</sup> This truth is proclaimed as an anticipation throughout the Old Testament—especially in the sacrifices of lambs as symbols or antitypes of a future event—and finds its full realization on the cross. As Ellen White pointed out,

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<sup>21</sup>In the current theological setting, there is a great debate concerning what exactly happened on the cross. This has caused many splits and disagreements among Christians, in general. The goal of this section is not to dive deeply into the matter of *Penal Substitution* with its different theories, but simply to portray the reality of Jesus’ sacrifice as a substitution for man when both divine mercy and justice were implemented in one single act as presented in Scripture (see Rom 1:16-18; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13).

<sup>22</sup>Strauss, *The Joy of Knowing God*, 142.

Through Jesus, God's mercy was manifested to men; but mercy does not set aside justice. The law reveals the attributes of God's character, and not a jot or tittle of it could be changed to meet man in his fallen condition. God did not change His law, but He sacrificed Himself, in Christ for man's redemption. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself." 2 Cor. 5:19.

God's love has been expressed in His *justice* no less than in His *mercy*. Justice is the foundation of His throne, and fruit of His love. It had been Satan's purpose to divorce *mercy* from truth and *justice*. He sought to prove that the righteousness of God's law is an enemy to peace. But Christ shows that in God's plan they are indissolubly joined together; the one cannot exist without the other. "mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." Ps. 85:10.

By His life and His death, Christ proved that God's *justice* did not destroy His *mercy*, but that sin could be forgiven, and that the law is righteous, and can be perfectly obeyed. Satan's charges were refuted. God had given man unmistakable evidence of His love (Italics added).<sup>23</sup>

Psalm 85:10, as cited by Ellen White—"righteousness and peace will kiss each other"—is a demonstration of this theological concept that finds its fuller exposition in the NT through the Redeemer-Substitute who would offer justification by enabling the sinner to be declared righteous before God because of His voluntary act of mercy: His perfect sacrifice to save men from condemnation.<sup>24</sup>

The cross of Calvary, therefore, became of utmost importance to all Christians in this cosmic conflict "with its realization of eternal salvation and the final judgment of Satan and end of the controversy."<sup>25</sup> It assured Christ the right to become the divine-human Judge, who is able to judge men rightly, thus defining the destiny of every human being according to his/her acceptance or denial of His supreme sacrifice. This event, namely, judgment, will take place right before Jesus' Second Coming.

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<sup>23</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 762.

<sup>24</sup>Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6:410.

<sup>25</sup>Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena*, 430.

## The Final Judgment

One reality for Christians is that they live between the two events—“between the time of Calvary and the Second Advent.”<sup>26</sup> These two events are inextricably linked in human history to reveal to the whole universe how God has dealt fairly with sin in the unfolding of the cosmic conflict. First, Calvary assured mercy for humans, but also assured total annihilation of what is evil. Second, the return of Jesus to this world is the awaited moment for His children to be received into His everlasting kingdom, while the wicked will have divine judgment executed upon themselves due to their ungodly deeds when Jesus comes (see Jude 14-15).

Although Scripture emphasizes both events of salvation as present both now and eschatologically—it can also be described theologically by the “now” and “not yet”—the theme of judgment is not as much appreciated among Christians as is the message of Calvary. It seems that the former is neither understood in the light of the vindication of God’s loving character, nor evaluated as the necessity to put an end to this conflict that has been raging throughout ages. Keeping that in mind, the reality of a judgment is the good news which God will use to conclude His work to save mankind in an ultimate sense. As Savior and Judge of mankind, Christ has power to accomplish all the promises of God on behalf of His people (2 Cor 1:20). In Jesus, every Christian has the assurance that God’s judgment is for the good of those who have entrusted their lives into His care and that the punishment of evil is rightly due.

Just as divine mercy is perfect, so is justice. God’s judgments upon sin show His

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<sup>26</sup>Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: The Church and the Last Things* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2016), 689.



displeasure of all unrighteousness. Divine wrath is stirred into activities against evil in all its manifestations, as depicted in Scripture, with the aim of bringing a solution for human predicaments in ways of perfect actions that leave no doubt concerning the attributes of God.<sup>27</sup>

In discussing the character of God in His judgment, it is important to explain what judgment means here. As represented in the Bible, the divine judgment has three phases: (1) the pre-advent: according to Dan 8:11-14 and Rev 14:6-7, this pre-advent judgment would happen before the second coming of Jesus as an answer to the activities of Satan's allies on earth and for the vindication of God's people. Unfortunately, the pre-advent judgment is not accepted by many Christians nowadays; (2) the millennial: this phase occurs in heaven after the second coming of Jesus when the saints will be with Jesus in heaven for a thousand years and they will have the chance to understand how God dealt fairly with sin in this cosmic conflict (Rev 20:4-6; cf. 1 Cor 6:2-3); and (3) the postmillennial: this postmillennial judgment portrays the moment when the whole wicked world will stand before God's throne to receive their just punishment according to their works as written in the book of records, thus putting an end to Satan and his rebellion (Rev 20:7-15).

These three phases or judgments carried out by God in face of the cosmic controversy respond to the question concerning the difficulty of harmonizing divine mercy and justice. Once God's mercy and justice as a representation of His love have been called into question, divine judgment will settle the matter in conclusive terms by showing that His criteria to decide the end of each individual is totally based on what

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<sup>27</sup>Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 83.

Christ accomplished in past history. In other words, the criteria to define who will be saved or lost is made by the acceptance of what Jesus did on the sinner's behalf: "The saved are those who accept Christ's death judgment in their place and the lost are those who never accepted Christ's death judgement to save them."<sup>28</sup>

In addition, the fact that God will not save those who rejected Jesus as their Savior is another revelation of His mercy and justice. They had the chance to be saved, but chose not to. What else could heaven do for them apart from what Jesus did? Through Jesus's sacrifice, mercy was offered to them. In their lifetime, they had the opportunity to make moral choices in regard to whom they would follow in this warfare. Thus, not only the saved, but also the lost will bow down to God (Rom 14:11) and along with whole universe, they will acknowledge that God's dealings with sin and evil in the different periods of the history of salvation were entirely a reflection of His love through acts of mercy and justice. The entire universe will finally proclaim:

The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.<sup>29</sup>

### **Summary**

Throughout human history, God has been merciful and just toward sinners. The fall of Adam and Eve show that God dealt in ways of mercy and justice with the fallen couple. Because of their disobedience, God had to curse the entire world and cast out

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<sup>28</sup>Gulley, *Systematic Theology: The Church and the Last Things*, 656.

<sup>29</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 678.

Adam and Eve from Eden; death was their fate. However, the divine act of clothing the fallen couple with tunics of skin revealed to them a provision to punish sin in an ultimate sense, but also to offer grace to His fallen creatures through the promise of a Redeemer.

God's actions in the narrative of the flood exhibit the concepts of mercy and justice in the way He dealt with the antediluvian world. God had borne for a long time with the sins of those people when the time came for Him to execute judgment upon the whole world. However, His mercy was not left out. Noah and his family found grace in God's sight and received salvation, which is a prefiguring of what sinners find in Jesus alone.

Jesus Christ became flesh in order to fulfill this promise by giving to men one way of escape through His atoning sacrifice. This sacrifice stands as a means through which God reveals His mercy and justice in one single act. In Christ, sin received its just punishment as required by God's law, and mercy was accessible to humanity.

The final judgment, in its various phases, will display to the entire universe how God dealt mercifully and justly with all human beings according to the personal decision they made in view of what Jesus accomplished for them. The saved and the lost will be able to recognize God's perfect character of love in all His merciful and just actions in order to bring this cosmic conflict between good and evil to an end.

The last chapter of this research will suggest some ramifications from this study with the purpose of bringing theological insights into disputes that always arise when God's love, through mercy and justice, are in view. These ramifications will especially reflect on the implications for some theological topics and for the Christian way of life through understanding God as being merciful and just in His dealing with sinners.

## CHAPTER 5

### RAMIFICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH FOR THEOLOGICAL TOPICS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

As Joel Green said, “The church that turns to the Bible as Christian Scripture does so on account of its belief that the Bible is authoritative for faith and life, for what we believe and what we do.”<sup>1</sup> This assertion by Green establishes a close connection between what it is believed and what is put into practice. Going a bit further, any topic related to God’s character or attributes inevitably makes a huge impact on our lives as Christians and brings implications concerning the way we live our lives on earth. This is the reason why the biblical authors in different circumstances drew a close connection between God’s attributes and their impact on the lives of those who seek a better understanding of who God is and how this knowledge should lead them to a new way of life.<sup>2</sup>

Since this research is about God’s character in regard to His mercy and justice in face of a cosmic conflict, the reality of an ongoing battle between good and evil forces, what has been presented so far could not disregard ramifications of this study for some theological discussions and for the ethics of Christian living. Thus, the purpose of this

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<sup>1</sup>Joel B. Green and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *The Old Testament and Ethics: A Book-by-Book Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), xv.

<sup>2</sup>Moroney, *God of Love and God of Judgment*, 62.

last chapter is to make an application from what has been said with the aim of relating this study to some topics that always arise when God's mercy and justice are taken into consideration. Three of the many issues that this study could be applied to were selected for discussion: (1) divine election, (2) universalism, and (3) theodicy.

### **Divine Election**

The first theological feature involving God's mercy and justice that this research contributes to is divine election. As discussed in the second chapter, various theological views—especially reformed theology—see divine mercy and justice in regard to election as a predestinarian way to bestow some the gift of salvation, while for others this gift is denied.<sup>3</sup> However, looking at biblical data as a whole with the backdrop of the cosmic conflict, it is possible to affirm the contrary. First, God loves all men and wants to save them. John 3:16 shows that God's love was poured out on every human being in the world—past, present, and future—without distinction, in order to bring about salvation.<sup>4</sup> His love is the basis for Him to act in mercy and justice toward every single person who does or does not accept His gift through Jesus Christ in this spiritual warfare. Thus, there is no arbitrary decision on God's part to offer mercy to some people, while denying it to others, thus leaving them in the realm of His just wrath.

Second, although some Bible verses may apparently suggest an arbitrary decision and are used to prove that the divine decrees determine to whom mercy (to save) or

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<sup>3</sup>Calvin *Institutes* 3.21.1 (2:203).

<sup>4</sup>Although many people in different branches of Christianity see the death of Christ unlimited in its extent, "Calvinists believe that it is limited (or definite) in its extent or in its nature." That is, Christ's death on the cross saved the elect, it was not performed in behalf of everyone. See Michael Horton, *For Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 80.

justice (to condemn) will be bestowed (cf. Exod 33:19; Rom 8:29; 9:14-18), they can be understood in the light of God's calling to mission, not election to destiny.<sup>5</sup> In this aspect, the concept of covenant is involved again. As Skip MacCarty said, "God did select (elect) certain individuals and make covenants with them and their descendants in order that they may fulfill specific roles."<sup>6</sup> Similar to Emil Brunner's endorsement that "election constitutes the center of the Old and New Testament" as a means by which all individuals are called to salvation in Christ,<sup>7</sup> MacCarty pointed to a reality in which God's election through covenants were "designed to be inclusive, not exclusive."<sup>8</sup> As pointed out in John 3:16 in a universal way that embraces every individual in this world, mercy was offered to everyone. In the sacrifice of Christ, the full potential for sinners to have their sins pardoned is offered in this single gift. In Christ, all are targets of the salvation accomplished by Him. Obviously, not all will be saved, but it does not mean He arbitrarily chooses some and rejects others.

Returning to the issue specifically involving God's mercy and justice in regard to

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<sup>5</sup>See Norman Gulley' discussion on Calvin's definition of predestination, election and foreknowledge with their various implications. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: God as Trinity*, 486-491.

<sup>6</sup>With other terms, theologians define divine election in two ways: vocational and salvific. The former refers to "God's choice of individuals or groups for a specific role in the plan of salvation." Skip MacCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained? What the Old and New Covenants Reveal about the Gospel, the Law, and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007), 13. It is another way, in reference to the covenants, that God made with individual in the different periods of salvation history with the aim of revealing His character to them and through them to the whole world, for instance, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the people of Israel, David. The latter is a description of what Scripture calls the saved as the "elect." (e.g., Mt 24:24; Mk 13:22). In other words, this salvific election describes the potentially that every human has in Jesus to be saved. See Peckham, *The Love of God*, 101-02.

<sup>7</sup>Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 303. Brunner rejects the doctrine of election, also called by Calvinists as double predestination or double decree because he sees that this doctrine is not scriptural but philosophical.

<sup>8</sup>MacCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained?*, 13.

election, when one says that God selects certain individuals to bestow mercy on them and separates others for damnation, a huge problem concerning God's attributes arises from this position. If God is merciful and just in all His actions as presented previously in chapters 3 and 4, He cannot save or destroy any person without giving to that person the opportunity to choose whom he or she wants to serve in this spiritual battle—Christ or Satan. Otherwise, no mercy or justice would exist in Him.

Therefore, the perspective assumed through this study points to a divine election in which both mercy and justice are exercised in right measure without selecting or rejecting any person. By acting in mercy and justice to deal with evil in unfolding the cosmic conflict, God's election is not a *determinism* that anticipates human decisions in this warfare. It is an open door for salvation, but acts according to decisions made by individuals in their lifetime as a universal principle.

### **Universalism**

When the word *universalism* comes up, a number of issues can be implied in it. In this section, the intention is to discuss the aspects of universalism that are related to the research: universalism in salvation and ethical universalism. The former, namely universal salvation, is a theology focused on the belief that all human beings will ultimately be saved and restored to a right relationship with God. That is, no person will be condemned to eternal damnation by God, but all will be saved in the end.<sup>9</sup> The latter, universal ethics, points to moral standards, as found in Scripture, which are designed for

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<sup>9</sup>Mark W. Harris, *Historical Dictionary of Unitarianism and Universalism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), xix.

all humans in all societies regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, and so on.<sup>10</sup>

Approaching universalism first as a salvific view, this theology, per se, is both as similar and as dangerous as *predestination* in what it suggests about divine election. As pointed out by David Fergusson, “universalism appears to be committed to a theology that is as deterministic and destruction of human freedom as the doctrine of double predestination in hyper-Calvinism.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, this view does not allow any human being to say “no” to God.<sup>12</sup> In Fergusson’s words, universalism leads to a rejection of freedom in terms of what humans can do in response to God’s love for them. In Scripture, however, our loving God recognizes the possibility of our rejecting Him, for God Himself empowered humans with the capacity to make decisions and be accountable for them (see Gen 2:15-3:19). However, this doctrine of universalism denies the reality of a merciful and just God because there is no possibility for God to act in ways that His actions are based on decisions made by His creatures.

As set out in the previous chapters, both mercy and justice work as a means by which God reveals His love for humans when He deals with them. However, if universalism is the right way to interpret the work of salvation, God is only merciful, for

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<sup>10</sup>Although many people and societies might not accept the principles from the Bible as deriving standards of judgment upon behaviors and attitudes, the focus of this section is to approach this subject in a Christian way of thinking.

<sup>11</sup>David Fergusson, “Will the Love of God Finally Triumph?” in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 199.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.



all will be saved in the end.<sup>13</sup> Thus, divine justice must be excluded. Yet in excluding justice in God's dealings with humans, He cannot be considered fair if He saves those who reject His love, those who do not want to be saved.

In sum, considering what the Bible reveals as a whole, salvific universalism is a philosophical doctrine. It neglects the fact that many will not be saved as Scripture points out (Rev 20:7-15; cf. John 5:28-29). To be merciful and just, God must act according to the moral choices made by each individual in life in the unfolding of this cosmic conflict. This leads to the second topic proposed for discussion here: moral universalism.

Contrary to *utilitarianism* and *relativism*,<sup>14</sup> universal ethics (also called moral objectivism) holds that the Judeo-Christian system of morality is the best way to define principles, virtues, and behaviors in all societies around the world.<sup>15</sup> Established by God, these principles delineate His actions toward humans. In fact, "morality is ultimately grounded in the character of God" because He is the ultimate source for morality as found in His commands.<sup>16</sup> This concept of morality in God gives birth to deontological systems based on His commands as "moral absolutes and guiding principles."<sup>17</sup> In regard

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<sup>13</sup>Reflecting on the main points of universalism, Gerald McDermott declared that universalism "appears to be somewhat silly" because it brings many implications concerning the necessity of presenting Christ as the only way for salvation which all will eventually see. If this is so, there is no need of commitment to Jesus and the mission to proclaim His kingdom is not necessary, for this kingdom will be available for everyone. Gerald R. McDermott, "Will All Be Saved?" *Themelios* 38, no 2 (2013): 232.

<sup>14</sup>These two systems of ethics have different peculiarities: utilitarianism holds "that the action that produces the greatest good for the greatest number is the moral choice," whereas relativism "refers to an ethical system in which right and wrong are not absolute and unchanging but relative to one's culture." For more on that see Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 18.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

to this study, universal morality poses a truth that, in order to be merciful and just, God has to have a pattern to deal with His creatures and to indicate how they should live their lives on earth. This standard of morality is His Law.<sup>18</sup>

As the focus here, the theme of the cosmic conflict between good and evil lies in whether God is or is not moral when He acts in ways of mercy and justice. Discussed in chapter 4, the fall of mankind and all the disastrous consequences which originated from it made God act in moral ways due to Adam's and Eve's disobedience of His commands. They rejected God's law and had to suffer the results of this rejection, which points to divine morality in the treatment of fallen beings. Indeed, the way God dealt with that couple is the same way He has been dealing with all His creatures, including ourselves. However, morality is not restricted to God's actions; it is designed for us, as well.

Each one of us, as Christians, is enabled by the Holy Spirit with the capacity to choose what is right according to God's will. That is why He holds us accountable for our choices. God hopes that His children, saved by Jesus, will emulate His character by being merciful and just, attributes of His character (Luke 6:36; cf. Matt 5:6-7). This morality, through mercy and justice, starts at a personal level. In a general sense, in a world where these qualities are in shortage, these two divine attributes put into practice will make a huge difference in contemporary societies. Thus, being both merciful and just represents

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<sup>18</sup>Whereas in the Old Testament, the law of God is the tool which regulates the life of God's covenant people in every point and situation, in the New Testament, Jesus moral conduct and character are a living example of God's law in practical terms and the model to be followed. The fact that the principles of the law are applicable to both Israel and the foreign nations is crucial and is the reason why God's law is the pattern for judging every individual in this world. See Green and Lapsley, *The Old Testament and Ethics*, 2-5.

the way of life in this world. It translates true love for our neighbors as God's law points out (Mic 6:8; Mark 12:31).

### **Legalism and Liberalism**

When it comes to the right way of living, two traps surround Christians: legalism and liberalism. While legalism puts an emphasis on the law and tends to be minor in love, grace, and mercy, liberalism maximizes the latter aspects of Christian religion and rejects God's law. However, both of them are faulty because they do not represent the exact view of Scripture concerning right and holy living. To be honest, I do not know which is more dangerous.

Linking these two false systems with what this study has proposed, legalism distorts the goal of Christian life by putting the whole emphasis on human efforts to achieve God's will for them. First, legalism does not comprehend that what sinners are and have comes from God's mercy. He has been pouring out His mercy upon us every day (Lam 3:22). Second, when the Bible says that God is merciful and just in the absolute sense and that He wants us to strive to be better in these aspects and other areas of Christian experience, He does not expect us to do it on our own. On the contrary, Jesus invites His followers to be connected with Him, to abide in Him in order that they may bear fruit (John 15:1-8); without Him "we can do nothing" (John 15:5).

In addition, legalism does not see that the state of being merciful, righteous, and blameless is a result of walking with God day by day in order to be transformed. In fact, in the Bible, those who are considered just and perfect had been walking—the Hebrew verb *הלך* (*halak*)—with the Lord (Gen 5:22, 24; 6:9; 17:1), an expected attitude for all God's people (Mic 6:8). It is also worth remembering that righteousness is a gift from

God: it is *from* His gracious mercy and *for* those who have decided to walk with Him.

Legalism does not seem to grasp this truth.

This view of liberalism fits in the thoughts of those who do not understand God's just acts toward their sins. It leads people to think of God as an irresponsible Being who will never punish their iniquities, while Scripture points out that God does punish sins (Hos 8:13; 9:9) and will do that in an ultimate way in His final judgment. No wonder this theological system brings false assurance that everything will work out well in the end, while it neglects the commitment to serve the Lord daily.

Although sinners cannot surrender themselves to serve the Lord unless they receive grace from Him to do so (Phil. 2:13), God compels no one, against his or her own choice, to capitulate to a life of loving service. They must obey God through their own decisions; otherwise, they will reap the fruit of disobedience. However, from the liberalist perspective, punishment of sin seems unreal. This thought will fatally lead many to ruin.

In short, legalism and liberalism have a superficial concept of God's law and grace, which accompanies their superficial spiritual commitment to God.<sup>19</sup> People committed to one of these views tend to go to extremes and do not know how to balance divine mercy and justice in their understanding, thus leading to erroneous ethical practices.

### **Theodicy**

Theodicy, in a common definition, is "an attempt to defend divine justice in the face of aberrant phenomena that appear to indicate the deity's indifference or hostility

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<sup>19</sup>Weber, "Lurking Legalism and Liberalism," *Ministry*, May 1993, 14.

toward virtuous people.”<sup>20</sup> Although theodicy, as a process, counts events in history as they unfold,<sup>21</sup> the focus of this section is the eschatological conclusion of the great conflict when the character of God will be revealed in its fullness.

Looking at the eschatological aspects of theodicy, the theme of the Day of the Lord in Scripture stands as an awaited moment when God’s people will receive their reward and the wicked will receive their right punishment.<sup>22</sup> However, this day is not only for rewards, but also to clarify many things that happened in this world. In other words, the eschatological thought points to an understanding by which the suffering people of God will obtain all answers to their dilemmas in this evil world and will comprehend God’s actions to bring to an end the history of the “curse” and misery on earth.<sup>23</sup>

The final answers that God will give to His people have their place during the different phases of God’s judgment as discussed in the last section of chapter 4. In this

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<sup>20</sup>Dennis R. MacDonald, “Theodicy,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:444.

<sup>21</sup>According to Dennis MacDonald, “ancient Israel’s conviction that God shaped historical events to benefit a covenant nation exacerbated the issue, particularly in the wake of events associated with 722 and 587 B.C. In one sense the pitiful state of Yahweh’s worshipers during the Exile and the post-exilic Judah transformed theodicy into a question about history. For this reason, theodicy was never just a theoretical problem of the individual; divine justice involved society itself.” Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>The “Day of the Lord” or the “Day of Yahweh” is a central feature of the prophets’ message to their contemporaries. This phrase or closely related expressions occur over two dozen times in prophetic books pointing to a future when God will bring punishment upon all wrongdoings. These divine punishments were against foreign nations, as well as against Israel and Judah—God’s covenant people. In the NT, this term often refers to the future appearance of Jesus. Early Christians likely understood the “Day of the Lord” as pointing to Christ, the Son of Man, and His coming to bring about judgment upon the wicked world due to its rejection of salvation offered by Him. Richard H. Hiers, “Day of the Lord,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:82-83.

<sup>23</sup>As Newlands pointed out, “eschatology is not just part of Christianity, but it is precisely the center of the Christian faith, which affects all else. The God of hope is a God with future as His essential nature. It follows that the person who hopes in Christ can no longer be satisfied with reality as it is given. Peace with God implies dissatisfaction with the world.” Newlands, *The Theology of the Love of God*, 41.

sense, this study points to a theodicy that will reveal God's character of mercy and justice in dealing with evil and at the same time, vindicating His faithful and obedient people. On the one hand, a theodicy that considers the divine attributes of mercy and justice as working together is refutation of any misunderstanding of God's actions toward all human beings. On the other hand, a theodicy that puts emphasis only on one of these aspects, whether it be positive or negative, will certainly miss the point because it does not coordinate with what the Bible reveals about the subject.

Therefore, this research makes a simple contribution to the understanding of a theodicy that embraces both aspects of God's character, that is, mercy and justice. These aspects will give God the glory that He deserves, for only God can be altogether merciful and just. The whole universe will ultimately acknowledge it.

### **Summary**

Scripture functions authoritatively in theology and ethics as an expression of theology. The study done in this research about God's character through His attributes of mercy and justice sets out a better interpretation for various theological topics related to these aspects. Among them are predestination as divine election, universalism (in the salvific sense), legalism, liberalism, and theodicy. All of these have a common emphasis on extremes, or whereby they usually take parts of the whole matter to make it appear truth. These distorted theologies, therefore, do not represent the accurate way of interpreting the Bible and consequently, of doing sound theology.

Besides clarifying the distortions of these theological systems, the study of God's mercy and justice also points to a way of living that is influenced by understanding who

God is and what He expects from us as Christians. Thus, His merciful and just character that is portrayed and His law that is embodied especially in Jesus, set the example to be emulated in the life of those who have been saved by Christ.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the issue of God's mercy and justice in the context of the cosmic conflict is directly relevant to the understanding of God's character and His actions toward His creatures in this world affected by sin. The questions to be answered concerning whether God has been both merciful and just when He deals with sinners and how He has done this have been dealt with in this research through a systematic approach. First, the terms for "mercy," either in Hebrew or Greek, transmit the notion of divine actions in response to human misery. Thus, God is merciful because He acts in favor of His creatures in this world of sin. On the other hand, the terms for "just" can also be translated as "righteous" in both Testaments. This justice is portrayed in ways of punishment upon sin, but is also presented as a gift of righteousness for those who accept Jesus's sacrifice on their behalf. These two views of justice in Scripture allow God to be considered just.

Second, passages throughout Scripture affirm this reality with the use of the words "mercy" and "justice" (or their adjectives) in relation to God in contexts that involve the presence of sin and evil. The four verses analyzed (Pss 116:5; 145:17; Isa 30:18; Hos 2:19) show the overall understanding of God's being merciful and just at the same time when He deals with humans in their predicaments, proving that He indeed works in ways of both mercy and justice all the time. The brief systematization of verses



dealing with one or the other aspect in God's character enhanced the fact that He knows how to operate—with either mercy or justice—to bring solutions to what sin has caused at any given moment of salvation history.

Third, the biblical narrative points to the same truth when the subject is analyzed through the unfolding of major events in human history. God has displayed to the whole universe through the Fall of Adam and Eve, the Flood, the Cross, and the Final Judgment how His love for mankind does not neglect mercy and justice. As a reflection of His loving character, the law points to the truth of God's unchangeable personhood. He did not change and will not change His law to accommodate human beings' needs. On the contrary, He will offer them mercy through His Son and will judge them according to their answers in regard to the gift of salvation.

Finally, this study was applied to different systems of theology related to God's character, as well as extracting implications for Christian ethics. God's mercy and justice, as a biblical concept, deny the assumptions of divine election as a means of predestination. God neither offers mercy to selected people, nor acts in wrathful justice with others indiscriminately. This attitude is against His character of love.

In addition, God's mercy and justice refute the affirmation of universal salvation. Otherwise, by saving everybody, He would not be seen as a just God. Scripture, therefore, does not agree with this supposition of salvific universalism. What is universal is His merciful and just actions toward individuals in this world as a result of personal, moral choices made in their lifetime. In addition, the topic studied poses a reflection concerning views of legalism and liberalism in which these theological approaches fail in presenting the correct way to interpret God's actions toward sinners: the former puts

emphasis on justice as works of merits, neglecting the fact that humans have nothing of their own apart from God's mercy. The latter cannot envision the tragic results of a lack of commitment to God and His principles. Consequently, these two approaches have an impact on how legalists and liberalists live their Christian lives.

Philosophical tensions about God's mercy and justice have negatively influenced Christians, both theologians and lay people, to consider these two attributes as working separately in God's actions in dealing with His fallen creatures in what is called the cosmic controversy between good and evil. However, as discussed in this work, Scripture points to another interpretation of this matter. In the Bible, God is not seen as being either merciful or just, but being both at the same time and in the right measure. The biblical witness gives assurance for a position in which the love of God is portrayed through His acts of mercy and justice in the unfolding of the cosmic conflict between the spiritual forces. This warfare aims mainly at the eternal destiny of all human beings in this world. This thesis thus sought to demonstrate that there is no separation of these divine attributes in Scripture.

Therefore, the points made in this study refute the assumptions that God has worked in different ways throughout the different periods of the history of salvation, making it appear that the God of the OT is not the same One as presented in the NT. On the contrary, God has been merciful and just all time, and this truth was fully revealed in Jesus Christ's death on behalf of sinners. There, on Calvary, the God of mercy and justice displayed His character to the whole universe. There, "mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed" (Ps 85:10 NKJV).

## APPENDIX A

### NARRATIVES

To enhance the point specifically discussed in chapter 4, this appendix will present the stories of an individual and some nations not mentioned before. It will not be a long discussion, but brief addendums to what was already said as a narrative of God's action in ways of mercy and justice. The examples portrayed in this section are not in the exact chronology of facts in history, for their only purpose is to highlight the points made previously.

#### **The King Manasseh**

The first case is the story of King Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:1-9; 2 Chr 33:1-20). The story of this king shows mercy and justice working together in the face of evil. A summary of his life indicates that King Manasseh turned his back on God whom his father Hezekiah had served his entire life. Manasseh led the people of Judah to apostasy by doing what was evil in God's sight. Thus, divine justice on iniquity reached Manasseh through the hands of the Assyrians (2 Chr 33:10-11), people from whom God had delivered Hezekiah years before (2 Kgs 18:13-19:34; 2 Chr 32:1-23; Isa 36:1-22). The captivity of this king by the Assyrians proves the veracity of divine justice in action to punish him.

However, after being afflicted by God's providential actions upon his sins,

Manasseh “humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed to Him” (2 Chr 33:12-13a), and the Lord heard his prayer and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom (2 Chr 33:12-13b). This story also reveals mercy in action in the face of evil. Thus, God brought both just punishment on this wicked king, but at the same time, revealed His mercy on him.<sup>1</sup>

### **The People of Nineveh**

Another story that corroborates an understanding of mercy and justice in God’s dealings with sin and evil as a narrative is what happened to the people of Nineveh as recorded in the book of Jonah. The account of the divine action starts with God’s calling Jonah to preach against Nineveh due to its wickedness (Jonah 1:1-2). The narrative of the first chapter of this book shows that the prophet Jonah wanted to flee to Tarshish because he did not want to deliver God’s message to those wicked people. Jonah, like other prophets, struggled with the problem of understanding God’s attitude toward evil. “The issue separating Jonah and his Lord concerned divine justice: can a wicked city like Nineveh escape punishment by repenting? Jonah believed justice demanded punishment, whereas Yahweh thought a higher principle of mercy was operative, as well.”<sup>2</sup>

This argument places the issue of divine justice on a different level from that presupposed by the prophet Jonah. In fact, God would bring punishment upon the people of Nineveh unless they repented from their sins. This the prophet understood, which was why he decided to go in another direction. However, God met him on his way and

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<sup>1</sup>MacDonald, “Theodicy,” 6:445.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

brought him back to his mission. In the end, Jonah went to that city and fulfilled what he was supposed to do. The people of Nineveh repented of their sins and God spared the city, which displeased the prophet (Jonah 4:1). In the last chapter of his book, Jonah confessed that he already knew that “God is a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness” (Jonah 4:2).

Something also implicit in this account is the certainty that God was prepared to destroy the city and its inhabitants if the story had finished in a different manner. That is why Jonah fled the city, hoping to see the destruction of Nineveh. Mercy and justice, therefore, acted when God visited Nineveh.

### **The Captivity of Israel and Judah**

The biblical narrative traces the story of God’s people, specifically Israel, as an example of how He works with them in a fair measure. Different from the two stories mentioned above, which had good outcomes because of repentance, the stories of the captivities of Israel (the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 BC) and of Judah (the southern kingdom by the Babylonians in the total destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC) reveal that their apostasy reached a point where God had to be just in allowing them to suffer the consequences of their rebellion against Him.

Nevertheless, analyzed through a broad picture, God offered mercy to them at different times and circumstances. The books of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles narrate the life of different kings to demonstrate their departure from God’s principles as established in His covenant with them, and how God had been merciful toward them by sending His prophets to warn them of what the result of their rebellion would be. However, the time came to judge them.

This brief overview about God's covenant people shows that He did not forfeit mercy at any time in the history of both kingdoms of Israel and Judah. He allowed them to go into captivity simply because of the fact that His love does not neglect justice on sin, even if it is related to His own people. Thus, these two principles, mercy and justice, are the ways He has worked with humans throughout the ages of the history of salvation.

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