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The “Way of the Lord”: Biblical Roots of Engagements for Human Rights and Human Dignity

Dennis Solon

Introduction

Modern references to “human rights” and “human dignity” may not have direct literal equivalents in the Bible, but the sense of these expressions is traceable in Jewish-Christian texts, even if the line, to borrow from James Barr, is neither “straight” nor “easy.”¹ It is worth noting that dedicated Christian leaders and representatives played an important role in many human rights–related conventions during the early 1940s, which later led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.²

While we think of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as essentially universal in scope, we turn to its contextual peculiarity based on some biblical proclamations. It must be noted that the relevant concepts that can be gleaned from the biblical texts are particularly situated, although they have some universal accents, such as can be seen in the writings of Paul. This chapter assumes close affinity between human rights and human dignity; or, more specifically, the concept of human rights stands on the concept of human dignity and argues that today’s Christian engagement for human rights and human dignity is in line with the biblical mandate to keep the way of the Lord—the way of righteousness and justice. Generally, biblical ethical commands concerning the rights and dignity of humankind especially take consideration of the weak and vulnerable in the society.

1. James Barr, “Ancient Biblical Laws and Modern Human Rights,” in *Bible and Interpretation: The Collected Essays of James Barr*, vol. I, ed. John Barton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 470–80, 471. Worth mentioning also is the work of Eckart Otto, “Human Rights: The Influence of the Hebrew Bible,” *JNSL* 25 (1999), 1–20, which traces the conceptual influence of the Hebrew Bible on modern human rights. Drawing on the book of Deuteronomy, the work introduces a principle of flat solidarity (among all human beings) under the divine reign of Yahweh.

2. See Robert Traer, *Faith in Human Rights: Support in Religious Traditions for a Global Struggle* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 172ff.

The “Way of the Lord” as Protecting the Weak and Vulnerable

Righteousness and justice are biblical social norms that have affinities to today’s ethic of human rights and human dignity. This twin ethical demand of Yahweh is especially manifest in the Book of Laws (the Pentateuch) of the Hebrew Bible. For instance, the story of three men visiting Abraham, as narrated in Genesis 18, emphasizes the divine election of Abraham toward a community that demonstrates the way of the Lord characterized by “righteousness and justice” (*tsidaqah umispat*, Gen. 18:19). This displays a particular moral connection between Yahweh and the people. Activities that are contrary to the “way of the Lord” are generally referred to in the story as sin (Hebrew *chattat*, Gen. 18:20) performed by the wicked, which results in a great outcry (Hebrew *ze’aqah*) of the victims that has reached the Lord.³ The Hebrew *ze’aqah* (“cry,” “outcry”) primarily implies a cry for help from a subject who experiences distress or oppression.⁴ Indeed, the Old Testament depicts in many places God’s mindfulness of the plight of those victimized by evil deeds (e.g., Ex. 3:7; Lam. 3:34–36).

The ensuing dialogue between Abraham and the Lord in Genesis 18:22–32 reveals that not even a handful of righteous can be found in Sodom. These places are practically saturated with injustice, resulting in the divine indictment “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah. . .” (Gen 18:20) that reminds of God’s protest against human wickedness, such that God decided to wipe out humankind from the face of the earth (Gen. 6:5–7). Nahum Sarna is therefore right when he says that Sodom’s sin is “heinous moral and social corruption, an arrogant disregard of elementary human rights, a cynical insensitivity to the sufferings of others.”⁵

The way of Yahweh that consists in righteousness and justice, as indicated in the laws stipulated for the people, especially affirms and protects the basic rights of humankind and their dignity. The Decalogue (Ex. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:6–21), for instance, implicitly serves as a guide for keeping the way of the Lord “so that you do not sin” (Ex. 20:20). The structure and contents of the Decalogue show the interconnectedness of devotion to Yahweh and justice toward humankind. The latter may also be referred to as active affirmation of

3. See Ecclesiastes 3:16, where wickedness is placed in contrast with righteousness and justice.

4. See G. Hasel, “רָצַח,” *TDOT* 4:112–22.

5. Nahum Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 132.

human rights and dignity.⁶ The command “not to kill,” for example, affirms an inherent right of every human person to live and not to be killed. While this command conveys care or protection for potential victims, it especially discourages (thus the prohibition) the use of whatever means within one’s capacity or power that could cause the death of the other.

Potential victims are normally vulnerable, while offenders usually have the ability and means at their disposal to commit the crime. The murder of Abel by his older brother, Cain (Gen. 4:1-10), is a classic example of a human being exercising power over the other toward committing murder, against which the victim’s blood cries for vindication. The story of Naboth and his vineyard (1 Kings 21) betrays a systemic deprivation of right to life and property committed by no less than the king, who is supposed to be the guardian of the people’s rights and wellbeing, according to the way of Yahweh (righteousness and justice; see also 1 Kings 10:9; Is. 5:1-7; Jer. 23:13-17). For the commoner Naboth, his ancestral inheritance is neither negotiable nor alienable, and keeping it signifies his devotion to Yahweh: “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance” (1 Kings 21:3). All this turns to nought against a powerful king, as revealed in his wife’s orchestration of Naboth’s (extra)judicial execution, which now facilitates a royal takeover of the victim’s property (1 Kings 21:7-16).⁷

Engagement for Human Dignity as a Task for God’s Loyalists

The way of the Lord motivates God’s loyalists to engage themselves to uphold human dignity. We see this in the life of Job. In Job’s poetic recollection of his prime, he saw himself as a man of dignity who was also able to uphold the dignity of his fellow beings:

I put on righteousness (*tsedeq*), and it clothed me; my justice (*mishpat*) was like a robe and a turban.

I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame.

6. Walter Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), makes a strong case for the human rights aspects of the decalogue. See also the relevant article by Barr, “Ancient Biblical Laws.”

7. For a Filipino contextual treatment of the Naboth story, see Noriel C. Capulong, “Land, Power and People’s Rights in the Old Testament: From a Filipino Theological Perspective,” *EAJT* 2 (1984), 233–43.

I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger.

I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made them drop their prey from their teeth. (Job 29:14-17)

In line with God's righteousness and justice, Job cared for the weak and protected the oppressed. However, Job's seeming honorific stature turned upside down with his ordeal (Job 1:13–2:10). On account of his integrity (Hebrew *tummah*, also “innocence”), he protests against God's apparent absence while suffering undeservedly (Job 30:20–31:6). The terrors, personified in the book as the demonic elements of the underworld (Job 18:11, 14; 24:17; 27:20⁸), which cause sufferings and which he now experiences, are threatening the very core of his being—his dignity (*nedība*; Job 30:15b). Referred to here by *nedība* is not merely the dignity that Job used to enjoy as a public, social individual but more “his inner sense of nobility, his self-assurance, his sense of importance.”⁹ The root of this word, *ndb*, which connotes freedom to act or move according to one's will, especially for service,¹⁰ indicates Job's being rendered unable to serve and to be in solidarity with people in need. Job's feeling of utter loss of dignity results from abuses of his being (Job 30:1-15), in which he perceives God as an active antagonist (e.g., Job 16:11; 19:6; 30:11, 19, 21) who allegedly has taken away his right (*mishpat*; Job 27:2).

This example of human experiences in the character of Job, whose rights and dignity are under attack, reveals nevertheless a faithful one's resolve to keep the way of Yahweh, despite the many aporias (contradictions or doubts) of life's circumstances. In the end, Job can openly declare with complete surrender that “the Almighty . . . is great in power and justice, and abundant righteousness he will not violate” (Job 37:23).

Engagement for Human Rights and Human Dignity as Actively Preparing the Way of the Lord en Route to God's Reign

The ethical aspects of the way of the Lord, just as what we have seen above in some Old Testament passages concerning the ethical demands of

8. See David J. Clines, *Job 21–37*, WBC 18A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 1004.

9. Clines, *Job 21–37*, 1004.

10. See *DCH* 5:618; *BDB*, 621.

righteousness and justice, are implicitly pronounced in the gospels (and Acts). In the Gospel of Luke, for instance, John the Baptist's sermon of repentance for salvation (Luke 3:1-14; see also Luke 1:76-77) is situated within an unfavourable socio-political context of 1st-century Palestine. He calls for an abolition of social oppression as a concrete expression of preparing the way of the Lord. Here, the social dimension of repentance—that is, moral transformation through active amends for social injustice committed—is exemplified:

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." (Luke 3:10-14)

John's call to repentance seeks to secure once again the very basic human needs for all: food, clothing, and economic subsistence. As a concrete manifestation of repentance, the haves and those in authority are obliged to put an end to the adverse plight of the have-nots by stopping every form of violation and abuse of privilege.¹¹ It is noteworthy that John's reference to Abraham corrects every wrong assumption of privilege on account of being "descendants of Abraham." Exactly on this basis are Abraham's descendants indicted with God's wrath for failing to pursue God's way of justice and righteousness as God has envisioned (see Gen. 18:20-21). The positive command to share basic commodities in such a "limited good" society¹² of Palestine (as an advanced agrarian and peasant society) is especially crucial toward minimizing social and economic disparity, and the failure to do so further exacerbates the dehumanization and loss of dignity of the disenfranchised.¹³

11. See Jeremiah 5:1-5, esp. vv. 4-5, in which the rich are held responsible for upholding the dignity of their lowly fellows.

12. See George Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965), 293-315, esp. 296; Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds: Social-scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1994), 34: "From the Mediterranean perspective, since all goods were limited, a person could only increase his or her supply of them at the expense of someone else."

13. See David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 291.

John's citing of Isaiah's prophetic pronouncement of the way of the Lord (Is. 40:3-5) connects repentance with active performance of social justice.¹⁴ The offer of salvation in Luke reminds of Isaiah's message of Judah's restoration in righteousness and justice on account of repentance (Is. 1:27).¹⁵ Thus, John's sermon in the wilderness in anticipation of Jesus Christ's ministry is a message of justice in its wider sense—an invitation to join God's cause in upholding every person's dignity and right to life. Indeed, the gospels do not fail to show Jesus' ministry of solidarity and protest as a ministry that in many ways promotes the dignity of the downtrodden and marginalized—a ministry which his loyalists are invited to emulate (e.g., Mark 10:45; Matt. 25:31-46; Luke 4:18-19; John 10).¹⁶

The Way of the Lord as the Way of Peace

Paul's "way of peace" offers a hermeneutical key to understanding the "way of the Lord" as a Christian ethic that upholds human rights and human dignity. The expression appears in Romans 3:17 as Paul presents his message of God's salvation in Christ (Rom. 1:16–3:26), given the prevalence of impiety and injustice as the *conditio humana* that manifests humankind's failure to know the "way of peace" (*hodos eirēnēs*). This expression intensifies the ethical dimension of the way of the Lord. The "way of peace" is in the main walking in justice through active upholding of human dignity. The justice theme is emphasized in the overall message of the letter, as well as in that passage of Isaiah (Is. 59:8) from which Paul picks up the notion of the "way of peace."

In Romans 3:9-20, Paul expresses his indictment against humankind's incapability to uphold the dignity of their neighbour. Citing a series of Old Testament texts, especially Psalms, Paul issues a sweeping negative description of humankind: there is no one who is righteous (*dikaïos*) . . . there is no one who understands (*syniēmī*) . . . there is no one who seeks (*ekzēteō*) God, a

14. This text in Isaiah gave impulse to a civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. See Eric J. Sundquist, *King's Dream* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 16; See also Bo H. Lim, *The 'Way of the Lord' in the Book of Isaiah*, LHBOTS 522 (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 1.

15. The thematic parallel in Psalm 5:8 (9) conveys a somewhat different accent: in the Psalm, the victim's plea is for God to make the way straight; in the synoptics, it is the people who are, in repentance, to make God's way straight.

16. For a treatment of Jesus' engagement for human dignity, see Dennis Solon, "Diaconia and Human Dignity: Asian Theological Considerations," in *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diakonia*, ed. Godwin Ampony et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021), 317–23.

statement he rephrases by saying that “there is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:18). The emphasis on the offense of inflicting violence on others in this passage also has an indirect affinity to the prophetic indictment in the book of Habakkuk against such forms of human rights violations, which are in essence contrary to the demands of *mishpat* on account of not fearing the Lord (Hab. 1:1–4¹⁷).

Paul’s point is that everybody turned away from God (*ekklinō*¹⁸) by turning against their neighbour—as opposed to doing what is useful *chrēstotēs*, that is, performing service or help: Rom 3:13–16¹⁹—and in so doing have been rendered useless (Rom. 3:12; *achreioō*; Vulg. *inutilis*). As Paul describes it (Rom. 3:13–16), the extent of injury inflicted upon their neighbour ranges from treachery (“they use their tongues to deceive”) to violent speech (“their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness”) and even murder (“their feet are swift to shed blood”). Then Paul ends his indictment by saying that “the way of peace they have not known” (Rom. 3:17).

For Paul, sinful activities that injure other beings have led to damage of human dignity as a whole. Then, the essential beauty and goodness of humankind exhibit the glory of God, the creator (see Gen. 1:26–27; Ps. 8:5). With this sense, the Greek phrase *hysterōntai tēs doxēs tou theou* can be translated by “they lack the glory of God,” whereby *doxa tou theou* is understood as a *genitivus subjectivus* (thus, “glory that comes from God”). In this light, not only victims of human rights violations suffer loss of human dignity, but also perpetrators of injustice, in that they have lost the sense of humanity that supposedly reflects God’s glory.²⁰

Paul’s pronouncement of God’s salvific act in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21–31) seeks to explain the benefits of God’s justice (*dikaioσύνη του θεού*), especially the restoration of God’s glory in humankind, which in turn enables the justified to follow the way of peace. The ethical aspects of peace are scattered in Paul’s letters. Romans 5:1, for instance, contains a direct correlation

17. See Mária Eszenyei Széles, *Wrath and Mercy: A Commentary on the Books of Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, trans. George A. F. Knight (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1987), 11.

18. See J. P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, Vol. I, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 377.

19. See Louw and Nida, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 743.

20. For a discussion on the double dimension of Paul’s concept of justification in Romans as affecting both the victims and the perpetrators of injustice, see Dennis Solon, *Rechtfertigung der Sünder und Solidarität mit den Opfern: Eine befreiungstheologische Auslegung des Römerbriefs* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2015).

between the justification of believers and the ensuing ethical imperative of having peace with God.²¹ Such an imperative entails a radical transformation rooted in God's justice in Christ from a life marked by impiety (Greek *asebeia*; also "godlessness") and injustice (i.e., injuring others; Greek *adikia*) to faithful devotion to God and rightful care for the dignity of all humankind (cf. Rom. 1:18). Using the believer's baptism as metaphor, Paul describes such a social transformation as walking "in the newness of life" (Rom. 6:5) and, in line with God's way of righteousness and justice, as living "to God in Jesus Christ" (Rom. 6:10-11). Striking also is how the ethical aspect of God's justice in Christ addresses the issue of the use of human properties (Greek *hoplon*, "instrument," "weapon") in order to perpetrate injustice. Thus, Paul says, do not present your members to God any longer as weapons of injustice (*hopla adikias*) . . . but present your members to God as weapons of justice (*hopla dikaiosynēs*; Rom. 6:13).

Conclusion

In this brief chapter I have sketched some biblical concepts that could shed light on Christian understandings of human rights and human dignity. The Judeo-Christian notion of the "way of Yahweh," which puts emphasis on the ethical demands of justice and righteousness, as gleaned in the Abraham narrative (Gen. 18), is a key normative concept that can guide every Christian pursuit of the rights and dignity of all humankind. It serves as a scale on which loyalty to the reign of Yahweh—whether of kings or common citizens—is measured. Naboth and Job appear as implicit examples of such faithfulness to the way of Yahweh, while the figure of King Ahab exemplifies a royal failure of upholding the dignity of his subjects. In the gospels, John's prophetic message of repentance conveys the task of the privileged to protect the weak in the society and to provide for their needs. Finally, Paul's teaching on justification in Christ offers an invitation to take part in Christ's solidarity with all humankind in justice and loyal devotion to God as a way of peace.

These biblical roots of human rights and human dignity are especially instructive in markedly Christian countries and societies, such as in the Philippines, where human rights violations have almost become the order of

21. This reading is based on the textual variant of Romans 5:1, containing the subjunctive *echōmen*, which has an imperative effect, thus "let us have . . . peace with God." See also Dennis Solon, "The Mission of Advancing Peace Based on Justice by Upholding Human and People's Rights in These Critical Times: A Thematic Study of Romans 5:1," in *Human Rights Week Celebration Guide*, ed. Melinda Grace Aoanan and Zhara Jane Alegre (Manila: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 2017), 16–20.

the day, committed with much impunity and neglect of human dignity. The present regime’s war on drugs, for instance, has in many respects exacerbated the already worsening culture of impunity. Prophet Elijah’s indictment against a king who whimsically uses his political might to satisfy his caprices at the expense of the powerless effectively resonates well with many voices of resistance from many Indigenous peoples in the land against development initiatives that could destroy their land and culture. Noriel Capulong, in his 1984 article, contextually reflects on the Naboth story in view of the destructive Chico River dam project at the time.²² With the Philippine Mining Act of 1995, many of the most vulnerable Indigenous peoples continue to suffer from its devastating effects, such as displacements, killings, illegal detention, and many other forms of human rights violations, not to mention its adverse effects on the environment.²³

The discussions here are limited to the notions of justice and righteousness within the framework of the “way of the Lord” and their general ethical trajectories for human rights and human dignity. Exploring their political implications for active ethical engagements, for instance, in terms of advocacy and lobbying, could further enrich this present study. Worth considering for further reflection are the Pauline concepts of conscience (*syneidesis*; see Rom 13:5) and citizenship (e.g., Phil. 1:27) and their potential contribution to today’s biblical discourses on human rights and human dignity in political spheres.

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22. See Capulong, “Land, Power and People’s Rights,” esp. 233–34, 236–37.

23. See Marina Wetzlmaier, “Cultural Impacts of Mining in Indigenous People’s Ancestral Domains in the Philippines,” *ASEAS* 5 (2012), 335–44.