

Ad Kugler: Like yours, my reading of the NT has been influenced by N. T. Wright. Recognizing the centrality of Jesus' aim of leading Israel to a new—*God's*—way of being Israel, in contrast to its hopes in ethnic privilege, political vindication, moral superiority, and religious purity, leads us away from the implausible idea that Jesus had a conception of eschatological perdition akin to what the Church later devised. The fact that so many Christians find it *obvious* that Jesus' often hyperbolic and parabolic teachings, teachings that serve various rhetorical purposes distinct from theological construction, amount to the traditional doctrine of Hell, while ignoring or discounting universalist assertions plainly made with theological intent (e.g., St. Paul's "As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive" 1 Cor. 15), suggests that something other than a desire to take Scripture seriously is in play. One fears that that might be desire to see God justly smite the wicked essentially similar to that which motivated so many to reject Jesus' claim to being Israel's Messiah.

You rightly resist construing Jesus as portraying a cosmic eschatological reality, but what I regard as a principal "take home" lesson from Wright is that when Jesus speaks of a coming day of judgment he's speaking principally of the dark future Israel faces vis-à-vis the nations should it not accept its Messiah, and continue to seek its identity in its own righteousness rather than in the grace of YHWH, not of what becomes of individuals after death. *Prima facie* the hellish futures of which Jesus warns were realized in AD 70, not in anyone's *post mortem* disposition. Though this is complicated by the fact that Jesus apparently expected the final revealing of God to the world to be concurrent with his vindication as God's Messiah, and the last judgment.

Your paper raises the question of how to conceive the relation of God's "upside down" justice to our quotidian ideas of justice. My starting point is the assumption that *iustitia Dei*—the righteousness of YHWH—is God's faithfulness to his covenant, his commitment to his creatures even in the face of their unfaithfulness. This is at the very least in tension with the abstract notion of justice derived from the Greeks, viz., everyone gets what he deserves. I'm not sure we can hear Jesus' "rhetoric of comfort and persuasion" as the promise (or threat) of a "balancing of affairs." The application of this idea of justice, where the rich are sent away hungry, the wicked punished, the poor lifted up and comforted, i.e., where everyone gets what they deserve, depends upon stable categorizations: we need to know who's wicked, who's rich, who's poor, etc. in the ways that matter to the coming judgment—who's a goat, who's a sheep—but I think it's precisely these taxonomies that God's justice deconstructs.

One small point (which I take from Tom Talbott) is that it is not clear that we should read what's translated in Matthew 25:46 as "eternal" (or "everlasting") punishment of the 'goats' and reward of the 'sheep' as denoting endless temporal duration. The term *aionios* appears elsewhere, e.g., in Romans 16:25, Jude 7, and in the Septuagint, where it can't mean this, as opposed to a *very long time*.

Ad Berntson: I wonder whether you implicitly see God facing a dilemma, one in which he must either, in virtue of his respect for us as free moral agents, let us do ourselves irreparable harm, or intervene in ways that render us less than fully free in order to save us from the consequences of our free choices. *We* sometimes face such dilemmas and, as you say, sometimes rightly choose to subvert the beloved's freedom. But sometimes we evade the dilemma because we are able to *persuade* the beloved to refrain from the destructive choice and freely make a better choice. Shouldn't we assume that God's persuasive powers, unlike ours, are reliably efficacious? Shouldn't we challenge the assumption that God can't get what he wants: universal salvation freely chosen?

A natural extension of your closing remarks about God not allowing us to make ultimately self-destructive choices on the basis of false beliefs might be to say not that in such circumstances God would intervene and force us to act in better ways, but that he would disabuse us of those false beliefs. Disabusing someone of her false beliefs, so that she chooses well on the basis of true beliefs, rather than badly on the basis of false beliefs, need involve no trespass on her free agency; indeed, it's the sort of thing that we see as enhancing free agency.

Ad Pendell: I suspect that in this context what's valuable in the idea of *restorative* justice is better conceived as forgiveness and reconciliation than as *restitution*. The idea of an eschatological making of restitution strikes me as no more consistent with central Christian claims about Jesus dying for the sin of the world than traditional ideas of eschatological *retribution*, whether for sin in general or for the rejection of Christ in particular. If in the eschaton restitution is made then justice is thereby done and the Cross is not necessary. *We* are commanded to forgive others, not because they make restitution, but because God has forgiven us. In fact, Scripture appears to teach that we *can't* know ourselves as forgiven unless we also forgive those who have wronged us. We cannot make restitution to God for wronging him, and we should not expect others to make restitution to us. The dominant image of the eschaton is forgiveness, reconciliation, and celebration. The prodigal son returns not, as it turns out, to make the restitution that a minimal commitment to justice calls for, but to a father who throws a party on his behalf, and who thus throws justice to the wind. The lost son is restored to his family yet no restitution is made. The only "justice" in the story is the father's outlandish love for his sons.

What properly takes the place of acts of restitution called for by a justice that insists on things being put back in place, are acts of loving gratitude. (This connects to questions that arise for me from your "Art and Gratitude" blog on [Kicking the Gourd](#); e.g., should we understand Christian *sanctification* as a matter of inculcated gratitude, rather than as the restructuring of the personality in accord with justice?)

Ad Trapp: At some risk of promoting a 'Whig interpretation' of our moral history, I'll say that the level of moral concern in this country has increased a great deal since, say, the mid-nineteenth century, and that we are generally more sensitive to, and less willing

to tolerate, cruelty and oppression than our forebears were. Yet theirs, in contrast to ours, was a society in which belief in the traditional eschatological hell of retributive punishment was widespread, and readily available as a motivation for decent behavior. (Similar contrasts might be made between the moral behavior of contemporary secular western Europeans and their religious, hell-believing counterparts in the USA.) In general, is it plausible that belief in Hell is a deterrent to the making of hell on earth?

A hypothesis in keeping with your conclusions might be that the traditional mythological picture of Hell tends to trivialize the real hells we make for ourselves and others, so that avoiding—or even noticing—they becomes unimportant in contrast to avoiding personal damnation in the hereafter. Horrendous as they are, what is Stalin's *Gulag* or Pol Pot's Cambodia in comparison to the real thing? This will be exacerbated when, as is perhaps inevitable, the avoidance of Hell takes the form of adherence to a conventionalized morality and moralistic religiosity oblivious to the real evil in the world, and even complicit in it.