

## Are All Our Righteousnesses Like Filthy Rags?

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### ABSTRACT

Prophet Isaiah asserted that all our righteousness is like filthy rags. This paper argues with Isaiah's own over 60 examples to the contrary. In particular, it is seen in the light of hyperbole which means much extravagant exaggerations. Examples are given of this phenomenon in the Holy Bible. Therefore, it is propounded that, just as there is "gospel truth," there is "hyperbole truth." In conclusion, the Almighty so appreciates righteousness that the elect will be clothed not in "filthy rags" but in "white garments."

**Keywords:** Isaiah, righteousness, filthy rags, language, gospel truth, hyperbole truth, white garment.

### INTRODUCTION

English language patently plays a decisive role in the world's literature, including the *Holy Bible*. Consider the visionary Book of Isaiah. It was in this Book that the Prophet proclaimed clearly what I have, for emphasis, italicized in the Title of this paper thus:

But we are all like an unclean thing, and  
*all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.*<sup>1</sup>

### Examples of Righteousness in the Book of Isaiah

Theologically, even Isaiah's Chapter 1 positively mentioned righteousness **thrice**. Thus, verse 21 contains how "*righteousness* lodged in"<sup>2</sup> the faithful city. Next, there was hope that, when the restoration of that city would occur, it will be "called the city of *righteousness*, the faithful city."<sup>3</sup> Also, that future was predicted thus:

Zion shall be redeemed with justice,  
And her penitents with *righteousness*.<sup>4</sup>

Righteousness appears also in a hopeful statement in Chapter 3. Note its rendition as follows: Say to the *righteous* that it shall be well with them,

For they shall eat the fruit of their doings.<sup>5</sup>

Doings of the people may, of course, be disappointing to God. As it was put, "He looked for justice, but behold oppression; for *righteousness*, but behold, weeping."<sup>6</sup> In principle, "God who is holy shall be hallowed in *righteousness*."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, woe to men "who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away justice from the *righteous* man!"<sup>8</sup>

Man, whose own woe will be declared upon him, was identified among the many others of his ilk thus: Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees."<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, in this context, when the decree is from God, "The destruction decreed shall overflow with *righteousness*."<sup>10</sup>

Righteousness was prophesied for the Reign of Jesse's Offspring, i.e. Jesus Christ. For one thing, "with *righteousness* He shall judge the poor."<sup>11</sup> For another thing, "*Righteousness* shall be the belt of His loins."<sup>12</sup> Christ was presented also as the one "Judging and seeking justice and hastening *righteousness*."<sup>13</sup> Righteousness, which will pervade the world itself, was heralded with songs. Thus, as it was written, "From the ends of the earth we have had songs: Glory to the *righteous*!"<sup>14</sup> Concerning the song of salvation, there was: "Open the gates that the *righteous* nation which keeps the truth may enter in."<sup>15</sup> It was hoped that, in time, "The inhabitants of the world will learn *righteousness*."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, even if grace is shown to the wicked, "Yet he will not learn *righteousness*."<sup>17</sup>

Righteousness was actually ordained by God. Thus, concerning Zion, which God laid as a foundation stone, it was even decreed that "Also I will make justice the measuring line, and *righteousness* the plummet."<sup>18</sup> No wonder that, it was foreseen that, "Behold, a King will reign in *righteousness*, and princes will rule with justice."<sup>19</sup>

Justice was harped upon among the other essentials of righteousness. Thus, consider the following fully framed facts:

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Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,

And *righteousness* remains in the fruitful field.

The work of *righteousness* will be peace,

And the effect of *righteousness*, quietness and assurance forever.

My people will dwell in a peaceful habitation.<sup>20</sup>

Habitation here conjures up, among other things, dwelling peacefully. Little wonder that we are assured that “The Lord is exalted, for He dwells on high; He has filled Zion with justice and *righteousness*.”<sup>21</sup>

Righteousness, as it has appeared already, was certainly hoisted high repeatedly. In contrast, there was the conjectural question: “Who among us shall dwell with the devouring burnings?”<sup>22</sup> To escape from it, we have the answer: “He who walks *righteously* and speaks uprightly.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, those, who will not be destroyed by such a fire, were more than assured by God as follows:

Fear not, for I am with you;

Be not dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you,

Yes, I will help you,

I will uphold you with my *righteous* right hand.<sup>24</sup>

Hand was unfortunately being used to make idols by man. Isaiah berated this. In this context, Isaiah said of God that “He is *righteous*.”<sup>25</sup> Other statements foretold the coming of Christ in the Old Testament. As Isaiah put it, “I, the Lord, have called you in *righteousness*.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, “The Lord is well pleased for His *righteousness*’ sake; He will magnify the law and make it honourable.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, there is the following passage:

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.<sup>28</sup>

It was in this context that God used the foreigner, Cyrus, to subdue Israel’s enemies, and set the exiles free as predicted thus: “Who raised up one from the East? Who in *righteousness* called him to His feet? <sup>29</sup> The Almighty God made other pronouncements thus:

• I, the Lord, speak *righteousness* declare things that are right.<sup>30</sup>

• I have sworn by myself; The word has gone out of my mouth in *righteousness* shall not return.<sup>31</sup>

• He shall say, Surely in the Lord I have *righteousness* and strength.<sup>32</sup>

Strength, it should be observed, was apparent in the above statements on righteousness. Indeed, the Almighty did link it up with “Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, who are far from *righteousness*.”<sup>33</sup> He added: “I bring my *righteousness* near; it shall not be far off.”<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the people were reminded that, they “make mention of the God of Israel, but not in truth or in *righteousness*.”<sup>35</sup> Actually, the Lord God lamented thus:

Oh, that you had heeded my commandments!

Then your peace would have been like a river,

And your *righteousness* likes the waves of the sea.

Your descendants also would have been like the sand.<sup>36</sup>

Sand was, of course, used in its multitudinous comparison with the children of Israel. Concerning them, the future would be better when “the captives of the righteous (are) delivered.”<sup>37</sup> However, there was a proviso from God twice as follows: (i). “Listen to me, you who follow after *righteousness*,”<sup>38</sup> and (ii) “Listen to me, you who know righteousness.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, the Almighty showed word nuances when dealing with righteousness in that, in the above two sentences, there are (i) “follow after” righteousness, and (ii) “know” *righteousness*. Furthermore, if the people listened, there would be three nuances of God’s own responses:

• “My *righteousness* is near”<sup>40</sup>

• “My *righteousness* will not be abolished.”<sup>41</sup>

• “My *righteousness* will be forever.”<sup>42</sup>

Forever was what God envisaged for the reign of Christ and beyond. As He was envisioned, “By His knowledge my *righteous* Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.”<sup>43</sup> As for the generality, the promise continued: “In *righteousness* you shall be established.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, as was stressed, “And their *righteousness* is from me, says the Lord”<sup>45</sup>

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Lord Almighty did continue as follows:

Keep justice, and do *righteousness*.

For my salvation is about to come,

And my *righteousness* to be revealed.

Blessed is the man who does this . . .<sup>46</sup>

This was not all. There were paradoxes as well thus:

The *righteous* perished

And no man takes it to heart;

Merciful men are taken away,

While no one considers

That the *righteous* is taken away from evil.

He shall enter into peace;

They shall rest in their beds,

Each one walking in his *uprightness*.<sup>47</sup>

Uprightness is part and parcel of righteousness. However, there was an ironical twist also.

According to the Almighty, “I will declare your *righteousness* and your works, for they will not profit you. When you cry out, let your collection of idols help you.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the general advice was to act “As a nation that did *righteousness* and did not forsake the ordinance of their God.”<sup>49</sup> God listed the essential conditionality’s for fasting properly and ended as follows:

When you see the naked,

That you cover him,

And not hide yourself

From your own flesh?

Then your light shall break forth like the morning,

Your healing shall spring forth speedily.

And your *righteousness* shall go before you;

The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.<sup>50</sup>

Guard against injustice. If the people did so, *righteousness* would reign among them.<sup>51</sup>

Otherwise, as it was lamented, “Justice is turned back, and *righteousness* stands afar off.”<sup>52</sup>

However, the Redeemer of Zion was described pointedly:

And His own *righteousness*, it sustained Him.

For He put on *righteousness* as a breast-plate,

And a helmet of salvation on His head . . .<sup>53</sup>

Head in human affairs is important. The Almighty God did speak in terms of “I will also make your officers peace, and your magistrate’s *righteousness*.”<sup>54</sup> The good news was crystal clear and should be heard.

It is that God’s wishes stand thus: (i). “Also your people shall all be *righteous*,”<sup>55</sup> and (ii). “That they may be called trees of righteousness.”<sup>56</sup>

Righteousness has so far been ringing the bell of the good news of man’s salvation. Let us continue to listen more. We hear that “He has covered me with the robe of *righteousness*.”<sup>57</sup>

In addition, there is the hope that “So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, futuristic felicitation was announced with concrete clarity thus:

And for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest,

Until her *righteousness* goes forth as brightness.

And her salvation as a lamp that burns.

The Gentiles shall see your *righteousness*,

And all kings your glory.<sup>59</sup>

Glory is to God. Please note that God was described as “I who speak in *righteousness*, mighty to save.”<sup>60</sup>

Yes! God is there to “meet him who rejoices and does *righteousness*.”<sup>61</sup> In sum, I have so far collected in structured sequence some dazzling data from the Bible. At this stage, are pertinent patterns recognizable for apt analysis from the Bible?

### Biblical Analysis

Analysis of righteousnesses can be undertaken under five categories.

- The “filthy rags” expression explicitly occurred but **once**. Incidentally, it was in chapter 64, i.e., the last chapter containing any mention of righteousness!
- At the opposite pole, there are “*righteousness*” simplicities which appeared 53 times.
- Frequent references were made to the Almighty God, 20 times.
- Coming to mankind proper, there are 14 relevant references.
- A motley miscellaneous group remains. It even included the poetic imagery of attributing righteousness to inanimate objects.

### The Explanatory Hyperbole theory

Objects of righteousness are what this paper in the Humanities is about. So far, I have presented the permutations and combinations of the word, “righteousness.” It has appeared some 60 times. Hence, I need to ask one quintessential question, namely, “Why is there the enigma that one statement out of sixty or so has over the years become a puzzling problem?” In short, why is there this oddity, if not absurdity, that “all our righteousness’s are but filthy rags” in the sight of God?

God, be it noted, created language itself. The story goes back to the famous tower of Babel,<sup>62</sup> wherein “its name is called Babel because there the Lord **confused** the language of all the earth.” In fact, is there even some **confusion** about “all our righteousness’s” being but “filthy rags”? Yes! If so, is there a language solution?

Solution is available as I see it. We need but turn to what has been described as America’s Best Selling Dictionary. It is *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*.<sup>63</sup> In it, there is an unusual but captivating word called “Hyperbole.” It is defined as “extravagant exaggeration.” A good example given is “mile-high ice-cream cone.” Wonders! Can we have ice-cream that is one mile high? No! The next question arises. Since God created the hyperbole, does He use it? It was used definitely when He promised Abraham with these words: “in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven.”<sup>64</sup> Surely, it is common knowledge that stars are regarded as being inconceivably great in number.

Therefore, since Israelis cannot be numbered like stars, the hyperbole concept was definitely involved. Involved in God’s promise also was Jacob, the grandson of Abraham.

What was the language which God used? This time, it went thus: “I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and Kings shall come from your body. The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land.”<sup>65</sup> Land was demarcated descriptively this time unlike the earlier dangling donation.

On appeal to logic, which is also a gift from God, we have God as the constant factor, while Abraham and Jacob are the variable subsets. Clearly, the gifts to Abraham and to Jacob were **equal**. In other words, God spoke hyperbolically

to Abraham but ordinarily to Jacob. Indeed, what He poured down from Heaven to each of them was one and the same heritage! Heritage in the above hyperbolic setting was actually not just a bolt from the blue.

Fortunately, that Prophet did not stop with the filthy rag saga. He made other hyperbolic statements. They really ought to be individually itemized for the sake of recognizing how extravagant exaggerations occurred elsewhere as follows

1. “Those who come, He shall cause to take root in Jacob; Israel shall blossom and bud, And fill the face of the world with fruit.”<sup>66</sup>
2. “All the host of heavens shall be dissolved, And the heaven shall be rolled up like a scroll; Their entire host shall fall down...”<sup>67</sup>
3. “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, And look on the earth beneath. For the heavens will vanish away like smoke.”<sup>68</sup>
4. “For the Lord will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, And her deserts like the garden of the Lord.”<sup>69</sup>
5. “Behold, I will make you into a new threshing sledge with sharp teeth; you Shall thresh the mountains and beat them small, and make the hills like Chaff. You shall winnow them; the wind shall carry them away.”<sup>70</sup>

### DISCUSSION

Away with more examples of the manifest meanings of the place of rigorous righteousness in the Bible! It is to be noted that The Revelation, the last Book of the Bible, is accepted as **Gospel truth**, i.e., an unquestionably true statement. Accordingly, I am proposing here that **Hyperbole truth** also stands. If granted, explaining hyperbolic statements in the *Holy Bible* would become easy. In fact, when this becomes the vogue, Christ’s own teachings will be better appreciated. Thus, many of His parables were hyperbolic. Take the instance of the famous Lazarus with all his sores and the “certain rich man” who went to Hades and Lazarus to Heaven. Listen as the rich man begged Abraham to send to him Lazarus with just dwarf materials, namely, (i) tip, (ii) one finger, (iii) a drop of water, and (iv) cooling of the tongue because of the giant problem of being “tormented in this flame”! Incidentally, problems of hyperboles adorn the Synoptic Gospels, especially St Luke’s.



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I found none of them in the account of St John. However, consider his last verse: “And there are also many other things that Jesus did which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written?”<sup>71</sup> Surely, this assertion must be acclaimed as the hyperbole of hyperboles!

### CONCLUSION

Hyperboles constitute what I have used in order to answer the curious “filthy rags” question. The plea is for the hyperbole theory to be enthroned. I have not found it in three heavyweight Bible commentaries.<sup>72-74</sup> my plea is that a journal in the field of Bibliology, i.e., the study of the theological doctrines of the Bible, should publish it. Such a publication will no doubt become fruitful.

Thereafter, the extraordinary hyperbolic and the ordinary typical Bible statements would automatically become meaningful. I add only that, as Apostle James put it,<sup>75</sup> all of us should be “doers of the word, and not hearers only.” Definitely, the Almighty appreciates righteous actions. Indeed, note what He prefers: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the *unrighteous* man his thoughts.”<sup>76</sup>

Thoughts of all, in conclusion, should remain **not** with “filthy rags” **but** with the glowing garments indicative of rigorous righteousness. Thus, as The Revelation has it, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments.”<sup>77</sup>

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