

# Jesus ‘the Just’

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## Abstract

While praise of the righteous is endemic in both Jewish and Christian Scripture, its application to named individuals is remarkably rare throughout. In the New Testament, it is reserved for pre-Christian saints and especially for Jesus himself—most clearly in Acts. Responding to the suggestion (by Richard Hays and others) that ‘the Just’ was specifically a messianic title, the article shows instead that its application to figures like James the brother of Jesus and Simon the son of Onias II documents part of a development toward the rabbinic usage of the Tzaddiq. The Just is a typically retrospective honorific designating a rare observant and pious person, possibly suffering and persecuted but divinely vindicated and endowed with charismatic qualities, who facilitates mediation between God and human beings and helps sustain the world.

## Keywords

Habakkuk, James, Messiah, Qumran, Simon, Tzaddiq

Who is the Just? Scripture comments extensively on the righteous and the wicked in their character and their relationship with God. The righteous may be referenced either collectively or in the singular, although modern English translations tend to blur the difference. The Psalmist explicitly revisits this question over and over from the first Psalm all the way to the 146th; Proverbs too is preoccupied with it from beginning to end.

This concern remains equally alive and well in the New Testament, too. More than other Gospels, Matthew foregrounds righteousness from the infancy all the way to the passion. And Paul in particular is famously eloquent about the vital

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saving importance of *becoming righteous*: the incarnation shows that God himself *is just* and *makes just* those who live by the faith of Jesus (Rom. 3.26; ‘by the one man’s obedience the many will be *made righteous*’, Rom. 5.19).

Hard-wired into Christian Scripture and tradition is not only a basic distinction between the just and the unjust (Gen. 18.23, 25; Ps. 1.5–6; Mt. 5.45; Acts 24.15; Wisd. 5.2, etc.) but also the far more striking conviction that the merits of Jesus in particular can somehow effect a radical metamorphosis by which even the godless can be transformed and made righteous (Rom. 4.5; 5.6).

So far, so unremarkable. It is familiar fare—in fact, for purposes of this thought experiment, it is perhaps unhelpfully familiar. But it does return us to our opening question and, with it, to a disarming puzzle that leads on to my subject in this study. Who in fact *is* the righteous person? Lutheran palpitations notwithstanding, it seems there really are such people. Not many, to be sure: given the centrality and importance of this category, it is indeed notable quite how few named individuals in the Bible are actually identified as ‘just’ or ‘righteous’.

The question as such is in principle familiar to the Greek philosophical tradition, too. Plato famously has Socrates defining the just city as ruled by a Philosopher King, who embodies the required civic values.<sup>1</sup> That leader’s exemplary virtuous life as the just man appears to resemble above all perhaps the life of Socrates himself, who lays down his life in the defence of that cause.<sup>2</sup> The early fifth-century Athenian statesman Aristides (530–468 BCE) carried the epithet ‘the Just’ (ὁ δίκαιος). He comes in for high praise both in Plato and in Plutarch, who records a famous episode when public opinion in Athens turned against him and the citizens voted to banish him from the city:

As the voters were inscribing their *ostraka*, it is said that an unlettered and utterly boorish fellow handed his *ostrakon* to Aristides, whom he took to be one of the ordinary crowd, and asked him to write *Aristides* on it. He, astonished, asked the man what possible wrong Aristides had done him. ‘None whatever,’ was the answer, ‘I don’t even know the fellow, but I am tired of hearing him everywhere called “The Just”.’<sup>3</sup> On hearing this, Aristides made no answer, but wrote his name on the *ostrakon* and handed it back.<sup>4</sup>

For present purposes, however, I propose to return to the Scriptural examples and their reception. The righteous of biblical Israel, some of whom are only

1. *Republic* 473c-d: οἱ φιλόσοφοι βασιλεύσωσιν ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν.

2. This is well illustrated by Brann (2004: 140 and *passim*).

3. ἐνοχλοῦμαι πανταχοῦ τὸν Δίκαιον ἀκούων.

4. Plutarch, *Life of Aristides* 7.5 (323A), trans. B. Perrin (ed. LCL 1914).

explicitly identified as such in the New Testament, include Abel,<sup>5</sup> Noah,<sup>6</sup> Abraham,<sup>7</sup> and Lot,<sup>8</sup> as well as Daniel and Job (Ezek. 14.14, 20; cf. Job 27.6, 29.14). The deuterocanonical Book of Wisdom reaffirms Noah, Abraham, and Lot as righteous (Wisd. 10.4–6) but adds to their number Jacob (10.10) and, importantly, Joseph<sup>9</sup>—all of them unambiguously identified in this book without ever being actually named.<sup>10</sup> In later centuries, the rabbis supplied further Old Testament names including Moses, Aaron, and David—but also Leah, Miriam, and Esther.<sup>11</sup> Another theme is that of the unnamed righteous person or persons, eventually perhaps precisely 36 in each generation, whom the rabbis believed to guide Israel to the knowledge of Torah. These are points to which we will return.

Surprises do, however, multiply once we turn to the New Testament. Most intriguingly, the vast majority of those explicitly identified as ‘Just’ are saints of the *Old Testament*, not the New. Seemingly obvious figures like the Twelve Disciples or the Mother of Jesus *never* feature under this heading; neither does Paul in anyone else’s judgment, despite his self-certification as ‘without fault’ in Torah-based righteousness.<sup>12</sup> Named ‘righteous’ individuals of the New Testament period include John the Baptist and his parents (Lk 1.5; Mk 6.20)—John in fact is

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5. Mt. 23.35; Heb. 11.4; 1 Jn 3.12. Gen. 4.4 is silent (although *Targum Neofiti* on Gen. 4.10 envisages Abel’s blood as that of ‘righteous multitudes’ צדיקים זרעוֹתָיו of his lost descendants). Abel appears as righteous in Josephus *Ant.* 1.53 and he is one of seven righteous figures from Adam to Moses in a range of rabbinic texts including *Tanhuma* Balak 16 and *Tanh.* Buber Balak 16 (Num. 23.1); *Num. R.* 20.18. Righteous Abel is the heavenly judge and Enoch the ‘scribe of righteousness’ in the *Testament of Abraham* (*T. Abr.* A 13, B 11.2–3); Wisd. 10.3 calls Cain ἀδικος in implied contrast to Abel, whereas Philo stresses Abel’s superior ἀρετή, love of God, etc. (e.g., *Sacr.* 3, 14). Cf. *Asc. Isa.* 9.28.
  6. Gen. 6.9; cf. Ezek. 14.14, 20; 2 Pet. 2.5; Sir. 44.17.
  7. Gen. 15.6; Rom. 4.3, 13; Gal. 3.6; Jas. 2.23. Abraham in fact implores God as ‘Judge of all the world’ to uphold the distinction between the righteous and the wicked in his dealings with Sodom (Gen. 18.23, 25). Failure to do so would mean ἔσται ὁ δίκαιος ὡς ὁ ἀσεβής (v. 23). The relevance of this appeal for a kind of natural theology was nicely noted a generation ago by Barton (1979) and Rodd (1972).
  8. Most explicitly 2 Pet. 2.7–8; note Wisd. 10.6 below. Also in the church fathers, e.g., Chrysostom, *Hom. in Gen.* 35.12.
  9. Wisd. 10.13–14—Joseph may also be the primary scriptural archetype in 2.12–20.
  10. One might additionally include Tobit (1.3 ὁδοῖς ἀληθείας ἐπορευόμενῃ καὶ δικαιοσύνης πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς μου) and the mother and father of Susanna, who are described in terms very similar to those Luke uses for Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist (Sus. 3 [Theodotion], οἱ γονεῖς αὐτῆς δίκαιοι; Luke 1.6, ἦσαν δὲ δίκαιοι ἀμφοτέροι ἐναντίον τοῦ θεοῦ).
  11. Mach (1957: 244–45): Aaron, Abraham, Amram, Benjamin, Daniel, David, Eli, Elijah, Elkanah, Hezekiah, Jacob, Joseph, Isaac, Judah, Methuselah, Mordechai, Moses, Noah, Samuel, Shem, Zechariah, all variously bear the epithet דַּיָּקָא, as do Esther, Leah, and (most commonly) Miriam among Old Testament women.
  12. Phil. 3.8 (κατὰ δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐν νόμῳ γενόμενος ἀμεμπτος)—though NB Paul never uses the term δίκαιος for himself.

the *only* person identified as ‘righteous’ in Mark’s gospel! Matthew features Mary’s husband Joseph as just (Mt 1.19<sup>13</sup>), while Luke adds Simeon in the Temple (Lk 2.25) and Joseph of Arimathea (Lk 23.50) along with the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10.22<sup>14</sup>), all three of whom appear to be ‘righteous’ without reference to any prior adherence to Christ.

Strikingly, not one follower of the earthly Jesus is ever called ‘righteous’, either before or after Easter. (The disciple Joseph Barsabas, surnamed ‘Justus’ [Acts 1.23; cf. 18.7; Col. 4.11], might be deemed an exception, although his relatively common Latin name is unlikely to function in this sense and does not attract the Greek epithet *δίκαιος*.) This is despite the promise that those who welcome the just for the sake of the just will themselves receive the reward of the just.<sup>15</sup> While the gospels repeatedly acknowledge that righteous people *do* in fact exist (cf. also Mt. 10.41; 13.17, 43, 49; 25.37), apparently only the arrogant and conceited express any confidence that they themselves are among that number (Mt. 23.28–29; Lk 18.9; cf. 20.20).

And yet, for the New Testament, it is Jesus himself who uniquely bears this quality almost as a title: he is ‘*the Just*’ or ‘*the Righteous*’. This is particularly evident in Luke and Acts.

## Luke and Other New Testament Authors on Jesus ‘the Just’

Luke’s two-volume narrative features several notable Roman centurions, the first of whom is a benefactor who loves the nation of Israel and who built Capernaum’s synagogue (7.5). A second one supervises the crucifixion and is convicted by the death of Jesus to conclude that ‘surely this man was *δίκαιος*’, which might in theory mean either legally ‘innocent’ or more specifically ‘a just man’ (23.47). Either way, it is an observation without close parallel in the other gospels. For Luke at least, Jesus is not simply ‘innocent’, as many modern translations have it at 23.47,<sup>16</sup> but *righteous* or *just* in some more quintessential and distinctive sense.

The Book of Acts on three occasions calls Jesus not by his name but quite specifically by the epithet ‘the Just’ (*ὁ δίκαιος*), deployed in a titular form using

13. He is explicitly called ‘Joseph the Just’ in the apocryphal *History of Joseph the Carpenter* 2.5 and *passim*.

14. This nuance is arguably missed by RSV/NRSV, ESV, NAB, NJB, etc. in translating ‘upright’.

15. *ὁ δεχόμενος δίκαιον εἰς ὄνομα δικαίου μισθὸν δικαίου λήμψεται*, Mt. 10.41.

16. Amplified Bible, ESV, God’s Word Translation, NAB, NASB, NET Bible, New Living Bible, NRSV, RSV, The Message, Weymouth New Testament, etc.

the definite article. (The Syriac Peshitta interestingly already places this titular form in the mouth of the centurion at 23.47.<sup>17</sup>)

Firstly, having healed a paralytic at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, Peter speaks to the crowd about God's 'servant' Jesus, given up and rejected by the citizens of Jerusalem before Pilate: they 'disowned the Holy and Just One'<sup>18</sup> and instead secured a murderer's release. The context makes explicit that this 'Holy and Just One' is Jesus the author of life who was killed but whom God has raised and exalted to heaven.

Next, Stephen's provocative defence before the Sanhedrin in chapter 7 famously rehearses a potted history of Israel up to the end of the wilderness Tabernacle. The Sanhedrin and their ancestors are lumped together as opponents of the Spirit of God and persecutors of the prophets and their promised Messiah. Just as the ancient Temple authorities killed those who prophesied 'the coming of the Just one',<sup>19</sup> so their successors at this present time (*νῦν*) have become the betrayers and killers of that figure himself. 'The Just' is clearly the one who was predicted by the prophets, although interestingly Stephen nowhere names him in his remarks to the Sanhedrin. His accusers had associated Stephen with the alleged threat of Jesus the Nazarene to 'destroy this place' (6.14), and the circle is closed with Stephen's concluding vision of 'the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God' (7.56).

Thirdly and finally, in Acts 22 Paul recites his apostolic call experience before a public audience in Jerusalem. Following his life-changing encounter outside Damascus, the devout Ananias came to heal his blindness and interpreted for him the meaning of his vision. The God of Israel chose Saul of Tarsus 'to know his will and to see the Just One (*τὸν δίκαιον*)', allowing Paul to hear his very voice because he would be his witness to all the world (22.14–15).

Given the singularity of this quasi-titular usage, it seems sure to carry important honorific significance. But what is that, and how might it function? The term features exclusively in speeches addressing Jewish audiences in Jerusalem. It appears to need no explanation, but nor is it a Lucan creation (in which case we might expect to see it more often).<sup>20</sup>

Similar usage resurfaces briefly elsewhere in the New Testament, albeit in a less clearly titular sense. In the place of Luke's centurion, Matthew's passion narrative features Pilate's wife with her dream about Jesus as 'that Just one'.<sup>21</sup> In the Catholic Epistles, 'Jesus Christ the Righteous' is the one who acts as

17. Lk 23.47: ܡܫܝܚܐ i.e., 'the Just one'.

18. τὸν ἅγιον καὶ δίκαιον ἠρνήσασθε, 3.14.

19. περὶ τῆς ἐλεύσεως τοῦ δικαίου, 7.51.

20. Cf. similarly Hays (2005: 126–27), who rightly concludes that 'there is no reason to regard it as a Lukan theologoumenon'.

21. μηδὲν σοὶ καὶ τῷ δικαίῳ ἐκείνῳ, Mt. 27.19.

interceding Paraclete with the Father and as atoning sacrifice for all sin.<sup>22</sup> His death ‘for sins’ is as ‘the just for the unjust’.<sup>23</sup> The murdered and condemned ‘just one’ (τὸν δίκαιον) in James 5.6 could be a more generic figure, but analogies with the Joseph-like suffering righteous individual in Wisdom 2 make it difficult to rule out a Christological *double entendre* for a Christian readership. The rich have murdered the Righteous One in particular.

‘Jesus the Just’, then, seems to be an established tradition across diverse New Testament authors. Might other Jewish or early Christian sources help clarify its meaning?

### ‘The Just’—a Messianic Title? In Conversation with Richard Hays

An excursus at this point will serve to rule out one influential suggestion based on Paul’s reading of the prophets and certain Jewish texts. During the early 1980s heyday of the so-called New Perspective on Paul,<sup>24</sup> as forensic accounts of justification fell out of fashion in favour of participatory themes of union and identification with Christ, the Apostle’s talk of salvation by faith ‘of Christ’ seemed to a growing school of interpreters to require reorientation as a subjective genitive: it is by his faithfulness that believers are justified. The name most formatively associated with this reading at the time was that of Richard B. Hays<sup>25</sup>; he was widely followed and multiple publications for and against his reading continue to appear every year.

Within the somewhat self-contained steam room of Anglophone Protestant exegesis, advocates of this view have at times pressed its merits with grandiosely totalizing self-assurance.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, I can claim no stake in heated contentions about genitival astrology, let alone in the kabbalistic certainties that surround debates about participation in Christ versus justification by faith, whether of the self-styled ‘apocalyptic’ sort or not. Some readers will find such agnosticism to lack linguistic or theological seriousness. But the debates in question have long struck me as majoring on deeply implausible dichotomies and, to

22. 1 Jn 2.1–2 (Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν δίκαιον).

23. 1 Pet. 3.18 (Χριστὸς ἅπαξ περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἔπαθεν, δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων). In 1 Pet. 4.18 (quoting Prov. 11.31 LXX), ὁ δίκαιος functions generically, as Hays (2005: 125–26) also acknowledges (while noting Jesus as a possible prototype).

24. See, e.g., Bendik (2010); Du Toit (2017); Dunn (1983, 2005); Thompson (2002); Yinger (2011).

25. Hays (1983, 2nd edn 2002).

26. For example, ‘a subjective construal of the contested πίστις Χριστοῦ genitive in Rom. 3:22, coupled with a messianic construal of Habakkuk 2:4 in Rom. 1:17b, explains the entire data set with all its subtle correlations in an integrated and plausible manner. We should now consider that it is the only interpretation that can do so...’ (Campbell 2009: 66) (ital. mine).

quote Celsus, as disputes about the shadow of an ass.<sup>27</sup> I struggle, for example, to imagine with a straight face that Paul's Roman readers tossed sleepless on their beds in anguish lest they hit upon the wrong sort of genitive.

What matters for present purposes is that in this context Richard Hays also picked up and greatly strengthened occasional earlier arguments for a *messianic* understanding of the epithet ὁ δίκαιος: specifically, 'the Just' who, according to Rom. 1.17 and Hab. 2.4, lives by faith is for him first and foremost Christ himself.

On this account, Rom. 1.17 cannot be a general statement that 'anyone who is righteous shall live by faith.' Instead, Hays follows A. T. Hanson's argument that ὁ δίκαιος is for Paul 'a designation ... for the Messiah.'<sup>28</sup> The arguments are balanced, but he concludes that the 'strongly apocalyptic theological context' of this passage in Romans predisposes the interpretation in favour of reading Hab. 2.4 messianically.<sup>29</sup> Hays invokes additional support from C. H. Dodd, Nils Dahl, and others in extending the argument to Galatians 3,<sup>30</sup> and he believes that Luke too accepted ὁ δίκαιος as 'a messianic title that would have been used by first-generation Jewish Christian preachers in speaking to Jewish audiences about the Messiah'.<sup>31</sup>

Hays reaffirmed these themes in revised editions of his previous work in the early 2000s.<sup>32</sup> While he now accepts that Acts may prove only that *Luke* believed ὁ δίκαιος to be a messianic title,<sup>33</sup> Hays nevertheless continues to stand by the view that it was a standard epithet for the Messiah in early Jewish Christian circles and that Paul's reading of 'the just' in Hab. 2.4 presupposes 'an apocalyptic/messianic interpretation of that text'.<sup>34</sup> He reads Acts, 1 Pet. 3.18 as well as Jas. 5.6 and 1 Jn 2.1 as part of the same tradition.

27. ὄνου σκιᾶς μάχης, *C. Cels.* 3.1.

28. Hays (2002: 134–35) citing Hanson (1963: 6–9); Hanson (1974: 42–45) and others, including already Haußleiter (1891: 212–13).

29. So Hays (2005: 140). Hays notes the importance of the passages in Acts (3.14, 7.52, 22.14) as well as others in 1 Pet. 3.18, 1 Jn 2.1 and stresses the likely importance of Isa. 53.11 and 1 En. 38.2, concluding about the Greek text of Habakkuk that 'whether the LXX translators intended it or not, they produced a text that is readily susceptible to messianic interpretation' (Hays 2002: 135).

30. Here too 'the Messiah is ὁ δίκαιος, the Righteous One who shall live ἐκ πίστεως, whose faith becomes the means whereby others may live' (Hays 2002: 135–37, citing Dodd 1952: 51; Dahl 1977: 130–31; for others, see Hays 2002: 137 n. 67).

31. Hays (2002: 127). Hays further detects 'allusions' to Hab. 2.3–4 and Isa. 53, as well as 'points of contact' with ideas in 1 Enoch and Galatians.

32. Hays (2005: 119–42) (here revised under the title 'Apocalyptic Hermeneutics: Habakkuk Proclaims "The Righteous One"', the essay originally appeared as Hays 1989).

33. Hays (2005: 127).

34. Hays (2005: 119–20), here citing additional early 20th-century scholars like H. Dechent and H. J. Cadbury, in addition to Hanson (1974: 39–45); Johnson (1982: 90) and others as in Hays (2002: 137 n. 67).



insufficiently distinctive or exalted Christology.<sup>40</sup> My own view on this question, to which we will return, is that the term's demise is due instead to the declining influence of its Jewish setting, within which in fact it holds considerable potential to mark an *exalted* view of the humanity of Christ.

## Jesus the Just and James the Just

The argument for a Christological reading of Rom. 1.17 by Hays, Campbell, and others has been extensively engaged and subjected to careful critiques by a number of scholars including Francis Watson and Debbie Hunn.<sup>41</sup> But even when the term is read from a purely Christian perspective, one fairly obvious fly remains in the messianic ointment. Not only Jesus but his brother James too was famously called 'the Just', which immediately renders this epithet less than unique in its application for Christians. In the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea extensively quotes the second-century writer Hegesippus, apparently a Palestinian Jewish Jesus-believer knowledgeable in Hebrew sources, in support of a series of folkloric affirmations about the quasi-Nazirite and quasi-priestly brother of Jesus:

The government of the Church passed to James, the brother of the Lord, together with the Apostles. *He was called [the] 'Just' by all from the time of the Lord even to our own* (ὁ ὀνομασθεὶς ὑπὸ πάντων δίκαιος ἀπὸ τῶν τοῦ κυρίου χρόνων μέχρι καὶ ἡμῶν), since many were called James, but this man was holy from his mother's womb. He drank no wine nor strong drink, nor did he eat flesh; no razor passed over his head; he did not anoint himself with oil, and he did not use the bath. To this man alone was it permitted to enter the sanctuary, for he did not wear wool, but linen. He used to enter the Temple alone, and be found resting on his knees and praying for forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became as hard as those of a camel because of his constant bending forward on his knees in worshipping God and begging for forgiveness for the people. Because of his excessive righteousness *he was called the Just and Oblias* (ἐκαλεῖτο ὁ δίκαιος καὶ ὠβλίας), which in Greek is 'Bulwark of the people' and 'Righteousness' (περιοχὴ τοῦ λαοῦ, καὶ δικαιοσύνη) as the prophets disclose about him.<sup>42</sup>

A few paragraphs later, Eusebius's extended quotation from Hegesippus recounts the martyrdom of James, in which he is repeatedly called 'just', 'the Just', and 'James the Just' (2.23.10–18). If this testimony is correct, then James, like Jesus, bore this epithet and his role was interpreted in the light of prophetic writings.

Quite what the scriptural Prophets had to say about James is admittedly more debatable. Isa. 3.10 is explicitly said to be fulfilled in his martyrdom,<sup>43</sup> while the

40. Hays (2005: 14).

41. See, e.g., Hunn (2012) (and a series of related studies); Watson (2009: 155–59).

42. Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 2.23.4–7; trans. Deferrari (1953).

43. 2.23.15: LXX Δῆσωμεν τὸν δίκαιον, apparently reading ירשא in place of MT מרוש.

Rechabites's intervention on his behalf is noted for their link to Jeremiah (*Eccl. Hist.* 2.23.17). On a related note, an interesting link of *Oblias* with the figure of Obadiah has recently been proposed by Roland Deines.<sup>44</sup>

The implications are obvious: if both Jesus and James are the Just, then that title's unique designation of the Messiah is significantly mitigated. The only alternative would be to allow either that James 'inherited' the messianic role or perhaps that his supposed priestly attributes were understood and promoted in terms of a priestly alongside a royal messiah figure (as at Qumran) and thus James and Jesus. Although neither of these are in my view probable, nevertheless both ideas do seem at least discussable. The fact that Joseph was already deemed *δίκαιος* before them (Mt. 1.19) raises the question of whether this rare designation may run in this family as it possibly did in a high priestly line to which we will return later.

For Hays, the resolution is simpler: it is that in Acts 15 and elsewhere Luke knows about the importance of James but never calls him 'the Just' or implies any such title, which is instead reserved for the Messiah Jesus. The same seems to him true for Paul, the Epistle of James, and Josephus (*Ant.* 20.200). The implication, Hays believes, is that the title was unknown until it became just one more unreliable 'embellishment' in Hegesippus's 'account heavily embroidered with legendary hagiographic motifs'.<sup>45</sup>

But in fact there are good reasons for caution. Hegesippus deploys his references to James as 'the Just' not casually or piously but embedded in a way that suggests a prior tradition rather than innovation—not least when it is paired with the rather more mysterious title 'Oblias'. Luke for his part might indeed be eloquent in his silence but perhaps not in the way Hays assumes. Hegesippus retrospectively deploys this title in a hagiographical account specifically concerned with the martyrdom of James. Might Luke be similarly deliberate in calling Jesus 'the Just' only in a volume set *after* his death but *not once* in the Gospel (at least prior to 23.47<sup>46</sup>)? If this Lucan observation is pertinent, this is of a piece with titular silence about the living James. As for Josephus, as an outsider he is no more likely to call James by that reverential epithet than Jesus—and yet his description of Torah-observant objections to the execution of James makes the narrative at least tolerant of such a title.<sup>47</sup> If the Epistle of James is written not by

44. Cf. Bockmuehl (2022) on Deines (2017: 319–23).

45. Hays (2005: 127–28).

46. Compare the Peshitta on Luke 23.47, as noted earlier. Cf. Watson (2009: 157–58), who rightly notes the epithet's connection with the death of Jesus in Acts.

47. Ananus executed James and his companions for lawbreaking (*ὡς παρανομησάντων κατηγορίαν ποιησάμενος*), but this distressed precisely those of Jerusalem's citizens who were most fair and most careful about Torah observance (*ὅσοι δὲ ἐδόκουν ἐπεικέστατοι τῶν κατὰ τὴν πόλιν εἶναι καὶ περὶ τοὺς νόμους ἀκριβεῖς βαρέως ἤνεγκαν ἐπὶ τούτῳ*).

the brother of Jesus but by an admirer, then it seems worth speculating with Ralph Martin if the readers' exemplar of the falsely accused and murdered  $\acute{\omicron}$   $\delta\acute{\iota}\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\varsigma$  of 5.6 might be relevant to James as much as to Jesus.<sup>48</sup>

### Who, Then, Is 'the Just'?

So we return once more to the biblical question: if not a title for the Messiah, then who is 'the Just'? As we noted at the beginning, the first point is that very few people are—and perhaps that positive identifications tend to pertain either to earthly figures from the past or to heavenly figures in the present or future. The Scriptures are consistently clear about the nature of the righteous and the wicked in general but rather more reticent about actual named figures called the Just. Nevertheless, what marks such people out is that they stand the test of time: Proverbs affirms that the wicked are quickly swept aside by the storms of the day but the Just one is the foundation of the world (or perhaps: an eternal foundation).<sup>49</sup> But who is the Just, the *Dikaios* or *Tzaddiq*, more concretely?

In the Tanakh, the individual most commonly identified as Just or even 'the Just', *ha-Tzaddiq*, is the God of Israel himself: so already on the lips of Pharaoh in Exodus,<sup>50</sup> with similar resonances in the Prophets and Writings.<sup>51</sup> The Scriptural reluctance about naming living human beings as Just remains unquestioned in later Jewish discourse: *Genesis Rabbah*, for example, identifies God as uniquely 'the Just One of the world'—an idea in common with other rabbinic sources.<sup>52</sup>

The Dead Sea Scrolls offer limited additional insight, but here too the designation 'the Just' is used sparingly and exceptionally. In the Hodayot, the righteous person has been created by God alone and set apart from birth to keep and walk in all God's covenant.<sup>53</sup> Given the long-running controversies about Paul's argument from Habakkuk in Rom. 1.17, it is interesting to note the treatment of the same passage in the Dead Sea commentary on that prophet. Early on, the Pesherist interprets the *Tzaddiq* attacked by the Wicked in Hab. 1.4 as the Teacher

48. Martin (1988: 181–82): 'It cannot be coincidental that  $\acute{\omicron}$   $\delta\acute{\iota}\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\varsigma$  became the standard designation by which James was known to posterity; and we may offer the submission that 5:6 is a tribute paid to the historical James whose martyrdom is recalled by his followers who in turn look on themselves as part of the afflicted and righteous remnant.'

49. צַדִּיק יְסֻד עוֹלָם Prov. 10.25.

50. יְהוָה הַצַּדִּיק Exod. 9.27.

51. E.g., Lam. 1.18 (הַיְהוָה הוּא הַצַּדִּיק); Dan. 9.14 (צַדִּיק יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ); cf. 9.7); Neh. 9.33 (2) (צַדִּיק יְהוָה); Chr. 12.6 (וְאַתָּה הוּא הַצַּדִּיק עַל כָּל־הַבָּא עֲלֵינוּ); cf. Isa. 41.26.

52. *Gen. Rab.* 49.9 (אמר רבי יהודה ברבי סימון לא את הוא צדיקו של עולם של עולם); cf. *b. Yoma* 37a (צדיק עולמים). See further Marmorstein (1927: 1.95–97).

53. 1QH<sup>a</sup> 7.17–8 (רק אתה [ברא]תה צדיק ומרחם הכינותו למועד רצון להשמר בבריתך ולתהלך בכול).

of Righteousness (*moreh ha-tzedeq*) opposed by the Wicked Priest.<sup>54</sup> This in turn matters when we get to the phrase ‘the Just will live by his faithfulness’ in 2.4.<sup>55</sup> This ‘faithfulness’ of the *Tzaddiq* is here taken to be loyalty to the *moreh ha-tzedeq*, the Teacher of Righteousness:

Interpreted, this concerns all who keep the Torah in the House of Judah, whom | God will save from the house of judgment because of their labour *and their faithfulness* | in the Teacher of Righteousness.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, Torah-observant Jews are here saved by their faithfulness to the Just One, who is also the Righteous Teacher.<sup>57</sup>

Despite their exposition of Habakkuk 2.4 and their exalted view of the Teacher of Righteousness, the Dead Sea Scrolls do not in fact appear to develop a pre-Christian type or epithet of ‘the Just’. For this, I would like briefly to consider two further sources before concluding with one or two comments on relevant early rabbinic developments of this ideal.

One of the first-century BCE *Psalms of Solomon* extensively characterizes the Just, first in the plural and then in the singular ὁ δίκαιος: the righteous always remember the Lord and praise his judgments, graciously accepting his discipline and waiting for him even when one stumbles or falls. Strikingly, it is a trait of the Just to ‘examine his house continually in order to remove the injustice caused’ by his transgression (3.8). It means to atone for one’s ignorance with fasting and humility and to be accepted by the Lord who purifies every holy one and their house (3.9–10). These actions of the Just person (δίκαιος) are explicitly contrasted with those of the sinner (ἁμαρτωλός) who curses his life when he stumbles and whose wickedness causes eternal destruction (3.11, 13).

The *Wisdom of Solomon*, composed perhaps in Alexandria around the turn of the era, speaks variously of the righteous in general terms.<sup>58</sup> But rather more important for early Christian purposes is the *individual* figure of the Just in Wisdom 2. In a statement that replicates Isa. 3.10 (LXX), the wicked lie in wait to entrap ‘the Just’ (τὸν δίκαιον, 2.12) because he inconveniently opposes their plans—a text that came to be taken by Christians as prophetic and indeed Christological since at least the second century.<sup>59</sup> Given the Book of Wisdom’s

54. 1QpHab. 1.12–13 (פשרו הרשע הוא הכוהן הרשע והצדיק] הוא מורה הצדק).

55. Hab. 2.4 באמונתו יחיה 2.4.

56. 1QpHab. 8.1–3 (my trans.) וואמנתם במורה הצדק.

57. But one easily overlooked corollary is that for Qumran and arguably for Habakkuk, faithfulness is that in and by which the *Tzaddiq* lives, not the means by which he becomes *tzaddiq* or δίκαιος.

58. E.g., the people of Israel plundering the Egyptians as the righteous despoiling the godless: 10.20 δίκαιοι ἐσκόλευσαν ἄσεβεῖς.

59. E.g., Barn. 6.7; Justin Dial. 17.

tendency to anonymize well-known biblical figures, it makes sense to ask if chapter 2 also envisages a particular scriptural archetype. Scholarly suggestions tend to range from the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 to Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37, although no particular interpretation has won the day. The link with Isa. 3.10 and perhaps 53 may suggest a more generic reference to the ideal type of the suffering righteous; indeed it may be significant that the *Tzaddiq* features explicitly in Isa. 53.11.<sup>60</sup> In any case, ‘the Just’ is a mediating figure of exceptional piety and quasi-filial relationship to God.

## Jesus the Just and Simon the Just

Much more could be explored along these lines and rich thematic treatments have been developed in works by Rudolf Mach, Ephraim Urbach, and others.<sup>61</sup> My argument here amounts to a plea for a more modest and generic interpretation of the epithet under consideration. For all that proves unambiguously and indeed messianically distinctive about Jesus as the Righteous One, it seems worth contextualizing that title in relation to another pre-Christian figure who was also known as ‘the Just’ and who became particularly important in rabbinic Judaism. In what Amram Tropper has called the ‘rabbinization of a Second Temple High Priest’,<sup>62</sup> Mishnah *Aboth* 1.2 designates Simon the Just as one of the survivors of the Great Synagogue and transmitter of oral Torah to the rabbis, including his famous saying that

Upon three things the world is based: upon the Torah, upon worship, and upon the practice of kindness (*gemilut ḥasadim*).<sup>63</sup>

His identity appears to be multiply confused in the ancient sources. Josephus mentions a Simon called ‘the Just’ (Simon I) who was High Priest under Alexander the Great<sup>64</sup> but must in the view of many scholars be distinguished from the figure here in view, most likely Simon II son of Onias II (219–199 BCE). This Simon II is also usually thought to be the figure praised in exalted terms by Ben Sira:

The leader of his brothers and the pride of his people was the high priest, Simon son of Onias, who in his life repaired the house, and in his time fortified the temple. ... How glorious he was, surrounded by the people, as he came out of the house of the curtain.

60. בְּדַעְתּוֹ יִצְדִּיק צְדִיק עֲבָדֵי לְרַבִּים.

61. Mach (1957); Urbach (1975).

62. Tropper (2013: 214).

63. על שלשה דברים העולם עומד, על התורה ועל העבודה ועל גמילות חסדים.

64. Σίμωνος υἱὸς ὧν τοῦ δικαίου αὐλοθένης, *Ant.* 12.157.

6 Like the morning star among the clouds, like the full moon at the festal season... (50:1–6 NRSV).

That said, James C. VanderKam has mounted a compelling counter-argument in favour of Josephus's identification of Simon I on the premise that Ben Sira's Praise of (ancient) Fathers should be read to comprise chapter 50 along with 44–49, while rabbinic attestations are late and ambiguous.<sup>65</sup> Although Ben Sira does not explicitly identify Simon as 'the Just', he does celebrate this High Priest specifically for his glorious offering of sacrifices (50.12–21), perhaps at Yom Kippur.<sup>66</sup> At 32.8–9, interestingly, it is precisely the sacrifice of 'the Just' that 'anoints' (λιπαίνει) the altar and which, like Abel's, is both acceptable and will never be forgotten.<sup>67</sup>

The multilayered mix-up over this Simon continued in later centuries when Christians further confused him with Simeon in the Temple, whom Luke also identified as δίκαιος (2.24). On the South side of modern Jerusalem, one finds to this day the medieval 'San Simon' monastery commemorating the tomb of Luke's Simeon. But that 'Simon', who lent his name to the local neighbourhood named after the monastery (Katamon, *kata monén*), in turn encouraged the 20th-century construction of the Shimon ha-Tzaddiq Synagogue.<sup>68</sup>

## Jesus the Just Then and Now: Concluding Observations

'The Just' is therefore an honorific and reverential title since pre-Christian times. It becomes in due course a kind of technical term to mark out a rare observant and pious person, often with charismatic qualities. And this term comes in rabbinic times to identify someone able to facilitate mediation between God and human beings and indeed to sustain the world, as Rudolf Mach documented 70 years ago in an eccentric but still unsurpassed monograph on the topic.<sup>69</sup> The Tosefta reckons that when the righteous enter the world, goodness comes in and punishment is taken away.<sup>70</sup> While the emphasis may sometimes be on the Torah faithfulness of the saint, in fact there is often considerable overlap between the terms *tzaddiq* and *hasid*.<sup>71</sup>

65. See discussion in VanderKam (2004: 137–57).

66. Thus, e.g., VanderKam (2004: 156).

67. It may be significant that the death of Jesus 'the Just', too, is specifically linked with the (Yom Kippur?) sacrifice of atonement at 1 John 2.1–2; cf. Rom 3.25.

68. Cf. Tropper (2013: 2).

69. Cf. Mach (1957: 124–33) (p. 126 'er ist nicht nur der Wiederhersteller der Verbindung Gottes mit der Welt, sondern auch ihr Urheber. Erst durch die Wirksamkeit eines Zaddik konnte diese Verbindung überhaupt zustande kommen').

70. *T. Sotah* 10.1 בזמן [שהצדיקים] באין לעולם טובה באה לעולם ופורעניות מסתלקת מן העולם.

71. Mach (1957: 5–6).

The *Tzaddiq* in subsequent development always remained an exceptional figure, whether male or female.<sup>72</sup> In fact, one could not know a person to be truly righteous until their death.<sup>73</sup> The *Tzaddiq* is typically hidden from the world, and rabbinic thought speaks of the *Tzaddiqim nistarim*, the hidden righteous. Only one righteous person or a limited number of the righteous are in the world at any one time, but even that one person is worth the whole world.<sup>74</sup> Since the fourth century, one finds the suggestion that there must be exactly 36 specially privileged *Tzaddiqim* in every generation who receive the *Shekhinah* or divine presence; this was in keeping with Isaiah's prophecy (30.18), 'happy are all they who wait לְ for him', a word with the *gematria* numerical value of 36.<sup>75</sup> This number (i.e., 'lamed-vav') led in Hasidic Judaism to the description of the hidden Righteous as *lamed-vavnikim*; they possess mystical powers and through their humility and observance they uphold the world. Yet nobody knows who they are: they are unknown to each other and even to themselves, though their disciples may well speculate.

Although not a messianic title, 'the Just' is identifiable as among the most ancient Jewish Christian names for Jesus.<sup>76</sup> Jesus the Just was disowned and persecuted by his contemporaries but God raised him up from the dead. 'Jesus the Just' is today a designation forgotten by Jews and Christians alike, and its use even among Jewish believers in Jesus seems more subdued than one might have expected. This nomenclature's ancient and scriptural pedigree suggests considerable promise for historical, exegetical, and Christological study—and perhaps even for contemporary conversations about Jesus between all three of these groups.

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72. Esther, Rebecca, and Sarah are all called הצדקת or צדיקתא in rabbinic literature. Cf. further Mach (1957: 244–45).

73. 'Doubts with regard to a man's complete righteousness remain unchanged until his last day' (Urbach 1975: 487).

74. Cf. already Sir 16.3, where MSS of the Lucianic recension and others amend the difficult *κρείσσων γὰρ εἶς ἢ χίλιοι* ('for one is better than a thousand') to *κρείσσων γὰρ εἶς δίκαιος ἢ χίλιοι* (cf. Ziegler 1980: 196).

75. *B. Sanh.* 97b (also quoted in *b. Suk.* 45a-b), citing Isa. 30.18, 'Abbaye said: in every generation the world has not less than 36 Righteous who receive the presence of the Shekhinah; as it is said, "blessed are all who wait for him". *Lo* ['for him'] is 36 by *gematria*' אמר אביי לא פחות עלמא מתלתין ושיתא צדיקי דמקבלי אפי שכינה בכל דרא שנאמר אשרי כל חובי לו ל' בגימטריא תלתין ושיתא. Cf. further discussion in Urbach (1975: 490–91 and n. 12).

76. Lake and Cadbury (1920: 104) suspect it may be 'the oldest title given to Jesus'.

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