

HUMAN RIGHTS RISE FROM SCRIPTURE AND FAITH

God's compassion lives throughout the word.

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Deadline for submissions is October 1

By the Human Rights Team and Theology Subcommittee
International Headquarters

The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

—Exodus 2:23–25 NRSV

Human rights might not be a scriptural term, but the foundations for human rights are found throughout scripture.

From our moral outrage at the story of Cain jealously killing Abel (Genesis 4:8–9) to Jesus’s healing of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter after she argued that even she and her daughter deserved crumbs (Mark 7:24–30), scripture witnesses to the struggle for human rights.

The foundations for human rights are found in the stories of scripture. They include the struggle for freedom, justice for the oppressed, peace (shalom), and mutual thriving.

EXODUS

Exodus is the central story of the Hebrew Bible. It’s not possible to separate God’s act of justice and liberation in the Exodus from the ongoing struggle for freedom and human rights in history. The struggle is ongoing.

The Exodus story tells of God’s compassionate justice at work in the world. God hears the crying of the people. God judges the oppressors. God hears suffering, remembers God’s promise, and God acts. This sets an example for the struggle for justice and human rights that is repeated throughout the Hebrew Bible.

O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.

—Psalm 10:17–18 NRSV

If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.

—Proverbs 21:13 NRSV

*Give the king your justice, O God...
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.*

—Psalm 72:1a, 4 NRSV

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

—Deuteronomy 10:17–19 NRSV

God’s compassionate justice moves through the entirety of scripture. But the struggle for God’s compassion and justice is not a perfect one.

God’s tumultuous relationship with Israel reveals God as a source of retribution and compassion in scripture. In Genesis alone, God is revealed as a God who moves from retribution (for example, in the Noah story) to compassion. The prophets’ message also moves actively between warning and promise, from judgment to restoration. In the ministry of Jesus, we see God in human form proclaim release to the outcasts, sick, marginalized, and sinner—even tax collectors. Scripture reveals God’s compassionate justice at work. God’s justice is a justice of righteousness and grace.

God’s compassionate justice moves toward the fulfillment of creation. The fulfillment is simply “life on earth as it is in heaven.” This what we also name shalom, Zion, and the peaceable kingdom.

The struggle for human dignity and human rights aims and serves this same purpose.

