

JUSTIFICATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Abstract: The term „justification” is a fundamental concept in Pauline theology, which took the term righteousness from the Old Testament. By righteousness and justification, the Old Testament means the divine evaluation of human conduct; as such, these concepts are concerned not so much with an ideal of human perfection as with the realization of personal choices in accordance with God’s plan and will. Righteousness is only that which JHWH has found to be so. Man becomes righteous only when he fulfills God’s will. This article is structured in three parts: in the first part, justification is briefly analysed from a dogmatic-theological point of view. The second section focuses on the Old Testament term justice, the background from which the Apostle Paul—and later the whole of Catholic theology—drew inspiration to define the concept of justification. Finally, in a third section, the key concepts in the Old Testament for the doctrine of justification are presented.

Keywords: justification, righteousness, Old Testament, theology, justice, doctrine, grace, hen, hesed, rahamim, s^odaqah.

Introduction

Justification is the work of the Holy Spirit, which separates man from sin that opposes the love of God, so that he acquires the forgiveness offered by God’s mercy. Reconciled to him, we receive God’s righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. When justification, faith, hope, and love are poured into our hearts, this enables us to obey God’s will.

Justification has been merited for us by the suffering of Christ, who offered himself on the cross as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, and whose blood paid the atoning price for all¹.

Justification is declaring someone right. It is a term borrowed from the legal environment and means „to acquit”, „to declare right”; it is the verdict of the judge in favor of one party or the other. It is therefore the action of a judge. From the point of view of the litigant, „to be justified” means „to receive a favorable verdict” (cf. *Is* 43,9.26). „To justify” is opposed to „to condemn” (cf. *Dt* 25,1; *Prov* 17,15; *Rom* 8,33).

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¹ Cf. E. FERENȚ, *Antropologia creștină*, Presa Bună, Iași 1997, III.

The term „justification” comes from the Hebrew word *sedakah* translated into Greek as *dikaiosyne* and later into Latin *justificatio*. The Hebrew term probably derives from an Arabic root meaning „right”, leading to the idea of action that conforms to a norm. There is, however, a particular richness in the biblical understanding of this term and it is difficult to render the Hebrew or Greek word with a simple English word².

The point of view from which the topic of justification is treated in this study is the dogmatic one, and the working method is that of analysis, comparison, and synthesis. The roots and meanings of the term „justification” as it emerges from the Old Testament will be analyzed.

The article is structured in three parts: in the first part, justification is briefly analyzed from a dogmatic-theological point of view. The second section focuses on the Old Testament term justice, the background from which the Apostle Paul, and later the whole of Catholic theology, drew inspiration to define the concept of justification. Finally, in a third point, the key concepts of the Old Testament for the doctrine of justification are presented.

1. Justification: a theological perspective

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, though testified to by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood, to prove his righteousness because of the forgiveness of sins previously committed (*Rom 3,21-25*).

In conclusion, just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all (*Rom 5,18*).

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (*Rom 5,1*).

Justification is the saving work of God, through Christ in the Holy Spirit, who, through grace and faith, frees man from sin and renews him from within. Thus, the justified or justified person opens himself to communion with God by performing good works and by communion with the Church.

The term justification is a fundamental concept in Pauline theology, which took the term righteousness from the Old Testament. For St Paul, all men are sinners and guilty before God (cf. *Rom 3,9,21; Gal 2,15-21*). Through Christ’s redemptive action they are justified by grace and faith and are transformed by the Holy Spirit into new people: „We were indeed

² Cf. J.I. PACKER, „Justificare”, în J.D. DOUGLAS, ed., *New Bible Dictionary*, The Intervarsity Fellowship 1962; trad. română *Dicționar biblic*, Cartea creștină, Oradea 1995, 728.

buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (*Rom* 6,4).

The first to deal with this problem, after St. Paul, was St. Augustine, in his *De gratia*. For him, justification is the grace given to the sinner by Christ, but it is also based on faith. It grows with the works that faith performs in charity.

The doctrine of justification was later taken up in the Middle Ages by Peter Lombard, St Thomas Aquinas, and Luther. The *Decree on Justification* of 1547 is one of the most important doctrinal documents of the *Council of Trent*³. He attempts to respond to the prospect of the Protestant Reformation while rejecting the accusations against Tradition.

The Council of Tridentine, being a predominantly pastoral council, preferred a clear exposition of the Church’s doctrine to discussion: „exponere intendit omnibus christifidelibus veram sanamque doctrinam ipsius iustificationis”⁴. Thus, justification is the work of God’s love, manifested in Christ and communicated to us through the Holy Spirit. Justification „is not only the forgiveness of sins, but also the inner sanctification and renewal of man through the voluntary reception of grace and gifts”⁵. Against the Reformers who held that justification is only a non-imputation of sins because of the merits of Christ, a purely external and juridical declaration by which we are declared righteous, the Council teaches that justification is the outpouring of sanctifying grace which inwardly penetrates the soul permanently.

In this wonderful work of God, man cooperates because “the one intercession of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather brings about in creatures a varied participatory cooperation which comes from the one source” (*LG* 62). Justification is God’s free gift because „nothing that precedes justification, both faith and works, merits the grace of justification”⁶. Christ is the only meritorious cause of justification, and by faith, man gives himself totally to his Savior. The faith that is required for justification is not that *fiducia*, trust, a sentimental faith, but faith must be a total adherence to God who reveals himself: „the instrumental cause of justification is the sacrament of Baptism, which is the sacrament of faith, without which

³ CONCILIIUM TRIDENTINUM, „Decretum de Justificatione” (13.01.1547): DENZINGER – SCHONMETZER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum et Declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (DS), Dehoniana, Bologna 1975³⁷, 1520.

⁴ CONCILIIUM TRIDENTINUM, „Decretum de Justificatione” 1520.

⁵ CONCILIIUM TRIDENTINUM, „Decretum de Justificatione” 1528.

⁶ CONCILIIUM TRIDENTINUM, „Decretum de Justificatione” 1532.

no one acquires justification”⁷. The sacraments, as acts of Christ, communicate the Holy Spirit to us leading to justification.

This gift of God’s righteousness, however, does not call us to passivity, for faith grows by the good works that the believer does.

This teaching was taken up and continued by the *Second Vatican Council*. God, in his boundless love, wants all people to share in the divine life, and this despite humans’ repeated refusal to accept this invitation: „The eternal Father, by a free and hidden plan of His own wisdom and goodness, created the whole world. His plan was to raise men to a participation of the divine life. Fallen in Adam, God the Father did not leave men to themselves, but ceaselessly offered helps to salvation, in view of Christ, the Redeemer” (LG 2).

2. God’s justice and man’s participatory justice in the writings of the Old Testament

In Holy Scripture, God is „the Judge of all the earth” (*Gen* 18,25) and his relations with people are always described in legal terms. Righteousness, that is, conformity to his law, is what he requires of men, and he shows his righteousness as judge by taking vengeance on those who do not fulfill it (cf. *Ps* 7,11; *Is* 5,16; 10,22; *Rom* 17,31 etc). There is no hope for a man if God’s verdict is against him⁸.

Since God is king, the idea that he justifies people can have both an executive and a legal aspect. As the ideal king in Israel, he will not only give a verdict in favor of the accused, but he will also enforce the verdict by showing favor to the accused, and publicly vindicating him. The verb „justify” can focus on any of the aspects of God’s action. For example, the justification of Israel and the servant of the Lord, described in *Is* 45,25; 50,8, is a public rehabilitation since it changes their fate. The justification of sinners of which Paul speaks, however, is the issuing of a favorable verdict. Paul believes, of course, that God gives favor to the one he has acquitted, but he uses other terms to describe this: adoption, beatification, etc⁹.

The term „to justify” is also used to attribute justice in non-legal contexts. People are said to justify God by declaring that he is just (*Lc* 7,29; *Rom* 3,4 which quotes *Ps* 51,4) and justify themselves when they declare themselves right (*Iob* 32,3; *Lc* 10,29)¹⁰.

⁷ CONCILIUM TRIDENTINUM, „Decretum de Justificatione” 1529.

⁸ E. FERENȚ *Declarația comună despre justificare a Bisericii Catolice și a Federației Luterane Mondiale*, (pro manuscripto), ITRC, Iași 23-32.

⁹ E. FERENȚ *Declarația comună despre justificare a Bisericii Catolice și a Federației Luterane Mondiale*, 320.

¹⁰ Cf. J. I. PACKER, „Justificare”, 728.

By righteousness and justification, the Old Testament means the divine evaluation of human conduct; as such, these concepts are concerned not so much with an ideal of human perfection as with the realization of personal choices in accordance with God's plan and will. Righteousness is only that which JHWH has found to be so. Man becomes righteous only when he fulfils God's will: „if he walks by my statutes and is careful to observe my ordinances, that man is just, he shall surely live, oracle of the Lord God” (*Ez* 18,9)¹¹.

Although we find a systematic and explicit doctrine of justification only in the writings of St. Paul, we also find in the Old Testament several terms that refer to this concept¹².

2.1. The state of justice

The Old Testament abounds in words of praise for the righteous and justice. The state of righteousness is framed in a positive religious economy with a supernatural underpinning, to which it is intimately linked.

Inaugurated in the earthly paradise, this economy of justice took its own form beginning with the call of Abraham, and found its complete organization in the Mosaic legislation. Thus, the Israelite is introduced into the state of righteousness, becomes righteous before JHWH by circumcision and by keeping the laws given by him.

In this state, the Jew becomes heir to the promises made to Abraham, thus receiving his faith:

I swear by my very self, oracle of the Lord, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your son, your only one, I will bless you and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants will take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth will find blessing, because you obeyed my command (*Gen* 22,16-18).

As a member of the Chosen People, a Jewish person must obey the Mosaic law, thus receiving special care from God. By adhering to and obeying the Mosaic law, the Jew moves towards the realization of the Messianic promise as the object of his hope. According to these conditions, which are found in the Mosaic law, the Jew acquires the state of righteousness¹³.

¹¹ Cf. E. FERENT, *Antropologia creștină*, 32.

¹² Cf. H. GROSS, „La Grazia nell'Antico Testamento”, în J. FEINER – M. LÖHRER, ed., *Mysterium salutis*, IX, Queriniana, Brescia 1975, 21-24.

¹³ Cf. *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, Libraire Letouzey et Ané, Paris 1923, 2044-2045.

2.2. Adherence to the state of justice

The Old Testament does not make a clear distinction, as we will find in the Pauline conception, between the acquisition of righteousness and its maturation by works, but approaches the problem in a general way. In order to acquire the righteousness of JHWH, the Israelite people show their adherence to the law promulgated on Mount Sinai („all the people answered together, “Everything the Lord has said, we will do.” Then Moses brought back to the Lord the response of the people”, *Ex* 19,8), keep the commandments given by the Lord („Keep, then, my statutes and decrees, for the person who carries them out will find life through them. I am the Lord”, *Lev* 18,5), and observe the law while living in expectation of salvation¹⁴.

All this assures the circumcised Israelite of God’s goodwill, the justification that makes him a sharer in his salvation. But to make him a partaker of salvation requires free adherence. In this way, one can benefit from God’s righteousness through a personal response to the Mosaic law. A concrete testimony to this is found in the patriarch Abraham: „Abram put his faith in the Lord, who attributed it to him as an act of righteousness” (*Gen* 15,6). Because of his faith, Abraham became a righteous man. And the book of the prophet Habakkuk tells us: „ but the just one who is righteous because of faith shall live” (*Hab* 2,4).

The righteous one is alive through a faith freely given by God, but one which requires man’s free adherence in order to acquire God’s righteousness. The most telling model, who acquires this righteousness by faith, is Abraham. So, we can see how faith plays an important role in the lives of the patriarchs and prophets. It is the foundation of man’s action before JHWH, who makes righteous the one who believes in his righteousness.

A synthesis of Old Testament thought on the faith of the patriarchs and prophets is found in the New Testament, in the *Letter to the Hebrews*:

Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen. Because of it the ancients were well attested. By faith Abel offered to God a sacrifice greater than Cain’s. Through this he was attested to be righteous, God bearing witness to his gifts, and through this, though dead, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and “he was found no more because God had taken him”. Before he was taken up, he was attested to have pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please him, for anyone who approaches God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

¹⁴ E. FERENT Declarația comună despre justificare a Bisericii Catolice și a Federației Luterane Mondiale, 321.

By faith Noah, warned about what was not yet seen, with reverence built an ark for the salvation of his household. Through this he condemned the world and inherited the righteousness that comes through faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise; for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God. (*Heb* 11,1-10).

3. Old Testament terminology of justification

The Old Testament translates the term justification as: right, justice, to justify. These terms belong to biblical language. The Latin term justice (*justitia*) comes from *justus*, which means right. In Hebrew, the term *sedāqah* (justice), translated into Greek as *dikaiosyne*, refers to justice as the virtue of giving to everyone what is his own¹⁵.

In the biblical context, the concept of justice has a different meaning than in the classical world, where justice meant the relationship between the person and his ideal of legal and moral perfection. By righteousness and justification, the Old Testament understands man's conformity to God's justice. Just is God alone: „You are righteous, Lord, and all your deeds are just” (*Tob* 3,2). In all his works God shows himself righteous, for he remains faithful to the works he has done: „The Rock, how faultless are his deeds, how right all his ways! A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he” (*Di* 32,4).

However, when speaking about righteousness in reference to humans, in the Old Testament the concept is used to describe man's relationship with God. For righteousness comes from God alone and he alone is the source of justice and mercy: „It was the LORD's will for the sake of his justice to make his teaching great and glorious” (*Is* 42,21).

3.1. Hen

The general meaning of the root has two meanings¹⁶: physically, to incline towards, and morally it shows condescension, goodwill, favor. The *hen* expresses the subject's supplication to a higher authority and even to God. The same term also indicates the concrete favor granted by the person signified and accepted by the supplicant. This root provides three main words¹⁷: verb *hanan*, noun *hen*, which can refer to both God and people: „ The Lord

¹⁵ Cf. R. LEMONYER, „La doctrine de la Justification dans la Sainte Écriture”, in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, VIII, Libraire Letouzey et Ané, Paris 1923, 2043.

¹⁶ Cf. P. BONETAINE, „Grace”, in *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*, L. PIROT, ed., XIII, Libraire Letouzey et Ané, Paris 1938, 727.

¹⁷ Cf. P. BONETAINE, „Grace”, 727-728.

indeed made the Egyptians well-disposed toward the people” (*Ex* 11,3). „The Lord said to Moses: This request, too, which you have made, I will carry out, because you have found favor with me and you are my intimate friend” (*Ex* 33,17). The third word, the adjective *hanun*, on the other hand, is applied particularly to God: „If you return to the Lord, your kinfolk and your children will find mercy with their captors and return to this land. The Lord, your God, is gracious and merciful and he will not turn away his face from you if you return to him” (*2Cr* 30,9).

3.2. Hesed

The verb *hasa* of this root is used only twice: it arouses the idea of pity, indulgence, mercy¹⁸. But the noun *hesed* is one of the most used terms in the Old Testament, being specific to religious language. It designates, at the same time, God’s relationship with people: „But the Lord was with Joseph, and showed him kindness by making the chief jailer well-disposed toward him” (*Gen* 39,21); man’s attitude towards God: „By steadfast loyalty guilt is expiated, and by the fear of the Lord evil is avoided” (*Prov* 16,6); man’s behavior towards his neighbor: „Thus says the Lord of hosts: Judge with true justice, and show kindness and compassion toward each other” (*Zah* 7,9).

The plural of this noun is the established term¹⁹ used to designate the manifestations of the grace of JHWH in the history of Israel:

Our ancestors in Egypt did not attend to your wonders. They did not remember your manifold mercy; they defied the Most High at the Red Sea (*Ps* 106,7).

The loving deeds of the LORD I will recall, the glorious acts of the LORD, Because of all the LORD has done for us, the immense goodness to the house of Israel, which he has granted according to his mercy and his many loving deeds (*Is* 63,7).

Hesed is related especially to the covenant; it characterizes the gifts that accompany the covenant and are obtained by one who is faithful to the covenant.

3.3. Rahamim

The root of this term expresses the idea of love²⁰, tenderness, compassion, but implies strong nuances of emotions and feelings²¹. The verb of

¹⁸ Cf. E. FERENȚ, *Antropologia creștină*, 35.

¹⁹ Cf. E. FERENȚ, *Antropologia creștină*, 36.

²⁰ Cf. Gabriel-Iulian ROBU, „Il modello fondativo-contestuale di teologia fondamentale in un’epoca visiva”, în *Dialog teologic*, 49 (2022), 113.

²¹ Cf. R. LEMONYER, „La doctrine de la Justification dans la Sainte Écriture”, în *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, VIII, Librairie Letouzey et Ané, Paris 1923, 2043.

this root is applied mainly to God (cf. *Ex* 33,9), but it can also refer to people (cf. *Ier* 42,12). The noun designates, in the singular, either the maternal breast (cf. *Os* 9,14), either a young girl conquered in war (cf. *Jud* 5,30), but most significant for our theme is the plural *rahamim*, which refers to the bowels, the viscera, considered as the seat of feelings²²: „Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your merciful love; in your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions!” (*Ps* 51,3).

3.4. S^edaqah

The most important term is *s^edaqah*, translated by LXX with *dikaio-syne* and in Latin with *justitia*. In Hebrew, *s^edaqah* refers to justice, which is the virtue of giving to each his due²³.

This term is closest to the reality of justification. By God’s righteousness is meant God’s way of working and behaving towards the covenanted people: JHWH is always faithful to his promises, to his saving will, regardless of the positive or negative response of the people. Faithfulness is expressed in concrete deeds; it is not merely a theoretical promise. God’s justice destroys sins²⁴: „Learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan’s plea, defend the widow. Come now, let us set things right, says the Lord: Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; Though they be red like crimson, they may become white as wool” (*Is* 1,17-18).

But the sinner is required to meet certain conditions: acknowledgement of guilt, the pain of having offended God, and the determination to change his life. This righteousness presupposes God’s initiative and his saving will and becomes synonymous with salvation²⁵: „I am bringing on that victory, it is not far off, my salvation shall not tarry; I will put salvation within Zion, give to Israel my glory” (*Is* 46,13).

The Old Testament abounds in words of praise for the righteous and justice. The state of righteousness is framed within a positive religious economy and as a supernatural support to which it is intimately linked²⁶.

Inaugurated in the earthly paradise, this economy of justice has taken its own form since the call of Abraham, which found its complete organization in the Mosaic legislation. Thus the Israelite is introduced into the

²² Cf. R. LEMONYER, „La doctrine de la Justification dans la Sainte Écriture”, 2042.

²³ Cf. R. LEMONYER, „La doctrine de la Justification dans la Sainte Écriture”, 2044.

²⁴ Cf. W. MAN., „Giustizia”, în *Dizionario Teologico*, I, Queriniana, Brescia 1972⁴, 750.

²⁵ Cf. R. LEMONYER, „La doctrine de la Justification dans la Sainte Écriture”, 2045.

²⁶ E. FERENT *Declarația comună despre justificare a Bisericii Catolice și a Federației Luterane Mondiale*, 324.

state of righteousness, becomes righteous before JHWH by circumcision and by keeping²⁷ the laws given by him.

In this state, the Jew becomes heir to the promises made to Abraham (cf. *Gen 22,16-18*) thus receiving its faith. As a member of the Chosen People, he must obey the Mosaic law, thus receiving special care from God²⁸. By adhering to and obeying the Mosaic Law, the Jew moves towards the realization of the Messianic promise which is his hope. According to these conditions found in the Mosaic Law, the Jew acquires the state of righteousness²⁹.

The righteous one is alive through faith freely given by God, but which requires man's adherence freely to acquire God's righteousness³⁰. The most telling model who acquires this righteousness by faith is Abraham: „Abram put his faith in the LORD, who attributed it to him as an act of righteousness” (*Gen 15,6*). Because of his faith, Abraham became a righteous man. So, we can see how faith plays an important role in the lives of the patriarchs and prophets. It is the foundation of man's action before the Lord's righteousness, who makes righteous who believes in his righteousness.

Conclusion

Justification means cleansing from our sins and communicating God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ and through Baptism. By the power of the Holy Spirit, by virtue of his working presence and love in us, we share in the paschal mystery of Christ the Lord: we die to sin and are born into the new life of the risen one, living as living members of his body, which is the Church.

In this process of our deification, the first fruit of the grace of the Holy Spirit is conversion, the renunciation of sin and, secondly, closeness and communion with God, from whom we receive forgiveness and divine justice, since “justification is not merely the forgiveness of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inner man, our bodily recreation according to the original prototype”³¹.

And the Old Testament presents righteousness before God as a state to be attained by man. God is just and this means that he is always right and

²⁷ Cf. CROSSAN D.M., „Justification” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, VIII, The Catholic University of America, Washington 1967, 82.

²⁸ Cf. E.G. BLACKMAN, „Justification”, in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, II, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1984², 1029.

²⁹ Cf. R. LEMONYER, „La doctrine de la Justification dans la Sainte Écriture”, 2044-2045.

³⁰ Cf. I. TAMAȘ, *Mic dicționar teologic*, Sapientia, Iași 2008, 195.

³¹ Cf. E. FERENȚ, *Antropologia creștină*, 3.

no one can defy him (cf. *Is* 29,16; *Ier* 12,1). But it may also mean that, knowing from what clay he has made us and for what communion he has created us, he does not renounce man, precisely in the name of his own righteousness. He also does so out of consideration for his creature, to make man capable of being exactly what he ought to be before the Lord, namely righteous³².

Justification is the eminent work of the love of God the Father, accomplished and manifested by Jesus Christ, communicated to us through the Holy Spirit. In presenting to us this excellent work of the Holy Spirit's love in us, in order to illustrate its divine value, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* turns to a text from St. Augustine: „Justification is a greater work than the creation of heaven and earth, for heaven and earth will pass away, while the salvation and justification of the elect will never pass away”³³.

Therefore, we can say that justification is a greater work than the creation of the universe because in creating the universe, the Creator did not encounter any obstacles, whereas man's justification often comes up against his rebellious will. Involving the sanctification of our whole being, justification remains the common and eminent work of the Most Holy Trinity ad extra, outside, in the history of mankind³⁴.

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³² J. GUILLET, „Îndreptățire”, în L.X. DUFOUR, ed., *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, CERF, Paris 1991⁷; trad. română *Vocabular de teologie biblică*, ARCB, București 2001, 317.

³³ *Catehismul Bisericii Catolice*, 1994.

³⁴ Cf. E. FERENȚ, *Antropologia creștină*, 5.

- LEMONYER R., „La doctrine de la Justification dans la Sainte Écriture”, in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, VIII, Libraire Letouzey et Ané, Paris 1923, 2060-2076.
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