

Jesus the Martyr (Rom 3:21–26)

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The traditional interpretation of Paul has interpreted the death of Jesus within the context of the Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement. That understanding has been under attack for some time. This paper will explore a suggested alternative of the Jewish martyrs in 4 Maccabees as the proper context. I will explore the *locus classicus* for this position in Rom 3:21-26.

Untangling the Text

Two problems obscure Rom 3:21–26 in translations.¹

- The grammar of this passage is a bit unclear and ambiguous.

This is one of those passages whose structure is easier to see (and in the ancient world to *hear*) than it is to read silently in a printed text (which no one in the ancient world was doing).

- The division into verses obscures the underlying pattern both in Greek and English translations.

As Leander Keck has said, “Paul’s Greek is not as clear as translations try to make it” (110). This is one of the tradeoffs in translation and makes using a standard translation for our purposes difficult.

Douglas Campbell in his study *The Rhetoric of Righteousness in Romans 3.21–26* (83–101) offers a convincing way through this twisted grammar. The passage offers a number of clear structural clues, often obscured by translations and versification. So I will employ my own translation that clarifies the structural clues and ignores the versification.

1. The word “righteousness” (*dikaiosynē*) occurs four times, and in the concluding verse 26 two more words, “righteous” and “makes-righteous” (with the *dikai-* stem), appear.
2. “Faithfulness” (*pistis*) occurs three times and “one who is faithful” (*pisteuontas*) once.
3. Three clauses introduced with the preposition “through” (*dia*) occur in rapid succession.

¹ Much of this paper is from chapter 8 of my *The Real Paul*.

4. Two clauses of demonstration conclude the passage.
5. Finally, the passage begins and ends with a reference to the present time.

If we lay all this out in a visual, graphic translation, it quickly appears that the passage's grammar is interrupted by a parenthesis.

Now apart from the law the **righteousness** of God is made manifest, having been born witness by the law and the prophets that is, God's **righteousness** through the faithfulness of Jesus Anointed for all who are faithful (for there is no distinction, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, being made **right** as a gift of his graciousness) through the deliverance which is in the Anointed Jesus whom God has put forward as a means of propitiation through the faithfulness in his blood to demonstrate his **righteousness** through the passing over of previously committed sins in the forbearance of God, to demonstrate his **righteousness** in the *now time* so that he might be **righteous** and make **righteous** the one who lives out of the faithfulness of Jesus. (BBS)

The grammar unsnarls itself once we see that Paul is stacking phrases together in an effort to build up an impression of God's righteousness, which is the passage's theme as clearly announced in the first line (3:21) and by frequent repetition. After the initial statement, "Now apart from the law ..." Paul repeats "God's righteousness" in apposition to the first statement, as though he wants to emphasize the passage's topic for his audience. Then three through-clauses appear, followed by two demonstration clauses drawing a final conclusion. That makes the structure clear, but the meaning still appears to be tied in knots. With a clearer understanding of the passage's rhetorical structure, we can now analyze the passage. We will move through it phrase by phrase.

Righteousness

Since righteousness is the passage's theme, we should be clear about its meaning. As a translation of *dikaïosynē* it is perfectly adequate, except for that worrying feature that in English, righteousness has an overtone of self-righteousness, which is a negative term. Some of that negatively washes into a contemporary English translation. What is a positive word in Greek has in the English translation a potentially negative overtone. The fundamental sense of the Greek root *dik-* is custom, usage, order, what is right, judgment or lawsuit (*LSJ*). It concerns justice. The

goddess *Dike* is the goddess of justice, identified with the daughter of Zeus. So the underlying sense of *dikaiosynē* as righteousness is justice, rightness, rectitude. God's justice comes about by setting matters aright.

Psalm 97 LXX (Psalm 98 in Hebrew and English translations) provides a helpful background for understanding Paul's usage.

The Lord has made known his deliverance (*lit*: salvation);
 before the nations he revealed his righteousness.
 He remembered his mercy to Iakob
 and his truth to the house of Israel.
 All the ends of the earth saw
 the deliverance (*lit*: salvation) of our God. ...
 Let the sea shake, and all that fills it,
 the whole world and those who live in it.
 Streams will together clap their hands;
 the mountains will rejoice
 because he has come
 to judge the earth.
 He will judge the world with righteousness
 and the peoples with uprightness. (Ps 97:2–3; 7–9 LXX)²

Paul associates God's righteousness with God's faithfulness. This is very clear in Rom 3:1–9. Paul is engaging with an imaginary dialogue partner envisioned as a fellow Jew. This literary convention, called a diatribe, is common in the ancient world. In order to understand this section of Romans it helps to differentiate when Paul or his dialogue partner is speaking.

Interlocutor: What's the advantage in being a Jew? Or what's the benefit of circumcision?

Paul: A great advantage with many benefits. Above all, the Jews were entrusted with the words of God.

Interlocutor: So what if some of them were unreliable (*lit*: unfaithful)? Surely, their unreliability (*lit*: unfaithfulness) doesn't invalidate God's reliability (*lit*: faithfulness), does it? (Rom 4:1–3)³

Verse three contrasts the faithfulness or reliability of God with the unfaithfulness of the Jews. This is a good example of where *pistis* could not be

² Translation *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*.

³ Unless otherwise noted, translations of Paul are from *The Authentic Letters of Paul. A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning*.

translated faith in the sense of belief. The belief of God simply does not make any sense. God's faithfulness is at question. Paul responds to his questioner as follows:

Paul: Absolutely not! Surely God must be true even if everyone else is false, so that, as scripture says, "in all you say your justice shows and when you are accused you win your case." (Rom 3:4)

Paul completely agrees with the logic of his questioner and equates God's faithfulness with God's justice, but he makes this equation by quoting the scriptures, the very words of God (Ps 51:4). God's faithfulness and his justice, which are now intertwined, cannot be invalidated by any human treachery.

Interlocutor: [Well, Paul,] if our misdeeds (*adikia*) highlight God's reliability (*dikaiosynē*), dare one conclude that God who punishes us is unjust—if one may speak irreverently?

Paul: Absolutely not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? (Rom 3:5–6)

The SV translators in my judgment have cleaned up verse 5 a little too much and in the process have hidden an important aspect of Paul's apocalyptic scenario. More literally, the interlocutor's question could be translated:

But if our unrighteousness commend the righteousness of God, what shall we say? *Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance?* (I speak as a man). (Rom 3:5 KJ)

The unrighteous or wicked have earned God's vengeance or anger (*orgē*). His righteousness or justice could demand such a punishment, but his righteousness is merciful. Stowers explains this sense of *dikaiosynē* in this fashion:

Thus, righteousness here does not signify strict justice but quite specifically a redeeming merciful justice. In some places, the phrase could be translated as "the merciful justice of God." Romans associates this merciful justice with a promise to Abraham and the good news. (195)

The reference to Abraham reminds us of the scenario that backs up Paul's understanding. In that apocalyptic story the promise God made to Abraham that he should be the father of all nations is now being redeemed in the faithfulness of his Anointed one. Paul is willing to allow a sense of God as unjust to creep into his argument. Not strict justice but merciful justice (righteousness) characterizes God for Paul.

Robert Jewett in his Hermeneia commentary on *Romans* has accentuated a missional facet to the righteousness of God. The good news of the Anointed “equalizes the status of Greeks and barbarians, wise and uneducated, Jews and Gentiles, which offers new relationships in communal settings to all on precisely the same terms” (142). This re-enforces the point that Paul’s concern is not the individual but the nations and the community (*ekklēsia*) as the way in which the nations are redeemed. “This missional context makes it highly likely that *dikaïosunē tou theou* should be taken as a subjective genitive referring to God’s activity in this process of global transformation, rather than as an objective genitive that would refer to the human righteousness bestowed by God” (Jewett, 142).

Only Now

Now apart from the law the *righteousness* of God is made manifest, having been borne witness by the law and the prophets. (3:21, emphasis added)

In Rom 3:20 Paul concludes the discussion begun at the letter’s beginning (1:16–3:20). He has shown that both the nations and Israel have disobeyed and have found no way, by their own efforts, to rectify the situation. He concludes: “Therefore, no human being will be acceptable in God’s sight on the basis of traditional religious observances” (Rom 3:20). All humans deserve divine judgment, but “only now” (3:21) God’s righteousness or God’s setting matters aright has been made manifest “apart from law” (NRSV) or “independent of the tradition from the law” (SV). It is not quite clear whether the phrase “apart from law” refers to law in general or to the Jewish law. It ought not to be viewed as shorthand for “works of the law” which had been mentioned in the previous verse (Rom 3:20). Since there is no article used in the Greek, many commentators see it as a reference to law in general, and not to the Torah of Israel. This is reinforced by the immediate reference that “the law (with an article) and the prophets have borne witness” (BBS) to God’s righteousness. Law in this case equals Torah, since the law and the prophets is referring to the twofold division of the Jewish scriptures.

God’s solution to the problem of human sin is to set the world aright, which Paul says is happening now in the preaching of the good news. This good news is set in the context of the problem facing the nations, their status as conquered. Both Rome and God have a gospel with the same promise—peace and liberty—but with radically different outcomes and values.

Having stated his thesis about God’s righteousness, Paul begins, in disjointed grammar, stacking up phrases. He relates how God’s righteousness comes about with three “through” (*dia*) clauses, almost like three bullet points:

- Through the faithfulness of Jesus Anointed for all who are faithful

- Through the deliverance which is in the Anointed Jesus whom God has put forward as a means of propitiation
- Through the faithfulness in his blood (Rom 3:22, 24 BBS)

Moving from the general to the specific, all three clauses elaborate how righteousness comes to be.

Through the Faithfulness of Jesus

through the *faithfulness* of Jesus Anointed for all who are *faithful* (3:22a, emphasis added)

First, God's righteousness, God's making things right, is made evident through the faithfulness of Jesus for all who are faithful. Jesus' faithfulness is the model for the faithfulness of others.⁴ The King James translation makes little sense: "by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe." The NRSV takes the genitive as objective: "through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." In both these translations the repetitive word play in the Greek gets lost since the translation must switch from "faith" to "believe." But more seriously "faith in Jesus" tends to mean belief, so that faith or belief in Jesus, with Jesus as the object, is the prior act, clearly against Paul's intentions. As Richard Hays in his pioneering study, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, argues,

It is very difficult to see what possible sense this could make if the phrase is translated as "through believing in Jesus Christ." On the other hand, it makes very good sense to say that the righteousness of God is manifested "through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ." (172)

The subjective genitive makes much more sense. "Through the faithfulness of Jesus Anointed for all who are faithful" (BBS) or in the more expansive translation of the SV: "through the unconditional confidence in God of Jesus, God's Anointed, for the benefit of *all* who come to have such confidence."

The objective genitive, faith in, implies a creedal understanding, even though there is no creed in Paul's time. In the traditional understanding belief about Jesus matters. But the shift from objective genitive to subjective, from faith in to faithfulness of, indicates that for Paul the issue is really behavior. Jesus becomes the model of faithfulness, indicating a new way of living in and resisting the empire. That new way of living is the righteousness of God. God is setting the world aright.

⁴ In the debate concerning whether the genitive in the phrase *pistis tou christou* is objective or subjective, I side with those who think it is subjective. See my *The Real Paul*, pp 91-94.

Parenthesis

(for there is no distinction, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, being made *right* as a gift of his graciousness) [3:22b–24a, emphasis added]

As we saw above, Campbell’s analysis makes clear that a parenthesis interrupts the careful construction of the three through-clauses. This really helps clarify the grammar and makes the passage much more intelligible. While the parenthesis reiterates Paul’s point about righteousness, the question remains, why the insertion of the parenthesis? Why break up this elegant structure?

The parenthesis clarifies the meaning of “all” in the phrase “all who are faithful.” Neither Israel nor the nations can claim a special privilege for two reasons.

- All have sinned, picking up on the all who are faithful.
- All are made right by a gift of his gracious righteousness.

Righteousness is given to those who have fallen short, who have sinned, as a free gift. It is not earned.

Through the Deliverance

through the deliverance which is in the Anointed Jesus whom God has put forward as a means of propitiation (3:24b–25a)

A number of scholars have argued that embedded in verses 25–26a is an early Jesus movement hymn beginning with “whom God put forward” and ending with “in the forbearance of God.” For our purposes we do not need to resolve this issue except to notice that the language used in these verses is not Pauline.⁵

This through-clause has had a long and tangled history in the understanding of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice. It has been a linchpin for the doctrine of the sacrificial and vicarious substitutionary atonement. That understanding of this verse has been severely challenged in recent years to the point that I think it is no longer sustainable. The Greek words *apolytrōsis* and *hilastērion* lie at the heart of the issue. The former is dealt with more easily than the latter.

Apolytrōsis

Apolytrōsis is translated as redemption (KJ, NRSV, NIV, NAB). This translation is adequate except that it makes Paul’s statement sound more theological than it sounded originally. Redemption in English is primarily a theological term, whereas in Greek the word is associated with the slave trade. It denotes the ransom or payment for the freedom of the slave. A modern reader needs to remember the

⁵ For details see Jewett, 270.

ubiquitous character of slavery in the ancient world.⁶ In his authentic letters Paul does not use the technical term for ransom (*lytron*) to apply to the death of Jesus, although it does occur in the gospel of Mark (10:45, parallel Matt 20:28) and in 1 Tim 2:6.

The Greek root *apoluein* means to loose from or set free, and the noun form *apolytrōsis* used here has the primary sense of release or deliverance, by extension the payment that buys back a slave. Deliverance would be a good English translation, but it is important to remember that Paul is using this term metaphorically, not realistically. He does not ask to whom a payment is paid. He is only interested in the redemption of a slave as a metaphor for understanding what has happened in the crucifixion of Jesus. He does not think it is a literal ransom.⁷

hilastērion

The second term *hilastērion* presents a more complicated problem. This word occurs only here in the New Testament and is not a common word in Greek, although its Greek root is easily understood. The word is variously translated:

- propitiation (KJ)
- expiation (RSV and NAB)
- a sacrifice of atonement (NRSV and NIV)
- the means of expiating sin (REB)
- as the one who conciliates (SV)

Quite a range of proposed translations! These variations indicate the level of difficulty or range of disagreement over this word.

To get at the meaning of this word we must first undo an old misunderstanding and tackle a false identification of this word with the Christian doctrine of Jesus' death as a sacrificial substitutionary atonement.

A Mistranslation

The Hebrew *kapporeth*, translated in the LXX by *hilastērion*, referred to the gold cover of the ark, the place where the high priest sprinkled blood on the Day of Atonement. Traditionally in English this was translated as the mercy seat. "And thou shalt make a mercy seat of pure gold: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof" (Exod 25:17 KJ). William Tyndale (1494–1536) was the first to employ this translation. He in turn was influenced by Luther's

⁶ This is often obscured by translating *doulos* as "servant" rather than "slave." See Glancy's excellent *Slavery in Early Christianity*.

⁷ Vawter, *This Man Jesus*, p. 75, is especially good on this issue.

translation of the Hebrew word into German as *Gnadenstuhl* which literally means “seat of grace.”

The mercy seat interpretation still has its modern defenders (e.g., Jewett, 284–86, strongly in support of this position). As Stowers summarizes, “those who favor this interpretation of *hilastērion* have imagined [Romans] 3:25 saying that God put forth Christ as a once-and-for-all place where atonement is made: Christ replaces the temple cult” (209). Robert Jewett in his Hermeneia commentary *Romans* supports such an interpretation:

Prior to the cross event, God had merely shown forbearance for sins not covered by Temple rites, which would have included all transgressions outside Israel’s ethnic boundaries. The situation was finally overcome by Christ’s death, which replaced the Temple as a means of conciliation with God. (290)

There are several convincing objections to this interpretation. First, this understanding of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice replacing the Temple does not fit with the Jewish understanding of what happens in Temple sacrifice. Christians have forced their later understanding of the sacrificial death of Jesus onto the sacrificial system of Second Temple Judaism. The sprinkling of the blood had to do not with atonement, but with cleansing and purifying the Temple. Atonement was more closely associated with the scapegoat. Secondly, Paul is living while the Jewish Temple is still in force. There is no evidence that he envisions its replacement. To view the death of Jesus as a replacement for the Temple requires a perspective only available after the Temple’s destruction in 70 CE. Such a position assumes Christian supersessionism. Not only does this position demand Christian supersessionism, but, if this were really Paul’s position, would he not have mentioned it somewhere else in his letters?

This understanding of *hilastērion* demands a Christian typological understanding of the Septuagint which views Jewish Temple ritual foreshadowing Christian understandings that we find nowhere else in Paul. And finally, such an interpretation would have demanded that Paul’s readers make a reference to an obscure text in Exod 25:17 referring to a ritual no longer practiced in the Second Temple. All of this seems highly problematic. The modern translations of “a sacrifice of atonement” in the NRSV and NIV are a direct descendent of this mercy seat interpretation, and attempt to maintain, in a modern translation, the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. These translations should be rejected as going well beyond Paul and projecting a later doctrine into Paul.

Correct Translation

This Greek word group *hilas-* is easily understood. BAGD defines the verb *hilasomai* as “to cause to be favorably inclined or disposed,” with the glosses to propitiate or conciliate, while defining the noun *hilastērion* as “means of expiation” or “place of propitiation.” Here the sense would seem to be “means of expiation or propitiation.”

4 Maccabees 17:22 presents a striking parallel to Paul’s language in this verse. The narrator is describing the effects of the martyrdom of the seven sons.

These then, having consecrated themselves for the sake of God, I now honored not only with this distinction but also by the fact that through them our enemies did not prevail against our nation, and the tyrant was punished and our land purified, since they became, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. *Through the blood* of these righteous ones and to the *propitiation* of their death the divine providence rescued Israel, which had been shamefully treated. (4 Macc 17:20–22; translation from Charlesworth, 563)

The Greek of 4 Macc 17:22 shows a clear resemblance that of Rom 3:24. I have italicized the similar phrases in the above English translation.

A second passage from 4 Maccabees bears scrutiny. As Eleazar is dying under torture, he prays:

“Be merciful to your people and let our punishment be a satisfaction on their behalf. Make my blood their purification and my life as a ransom for theirs.” (4 Macc 6:28–29; translation from Charlesworth, 552)

The view in these two passages of the death of the Maccabean martyrs parallels that of the death of Jesus. The death of Jesus is interpreted within the same tradition. Sam K. Williams concludes, “No more probable background to *hon proetheto ho theos hilastērion* [whom God has put forward as a means of propitiation] can be discovered in pre-Christian literature than IV Mac. 17:21a read in light of [4 Macc] 6:29” (248). There is no doubt that the parallel to 4 Maccabees is very strong, suggestive, and convincing, but the dating of 4 Maccabees remains controversial. It may be contemporary with Paul or even a little later. Nevertheless Williams’ basic point is correct—the tradition of the suffering noble death as exemplified in 4 Maccabees is the context for this language in Romans.

While the language is not Paul’s, its sense fits well with his understanding. In other places Paul speaks of reconciliation in a way that strongly parallels the sense of this clause:

For if while we were living as if we were rebels against God's rule, our relationship with God was changed through the death of God's son, now that we have been reconciled we can be even more assured that we will be spared [from, facing condemnation] through his life [as the risen lord]. (Rom 5:10)

We have reached an important conclusion. Contrary to the traditional understanding of Rom 3:25 as seen in the NRSV or NIV, Paul does not view the death of Jesus as sacrifice of substitutionary atonement. Rather he views the death of Jesus within the tradition of suffering noble death as seen in 4 Maccabees. After all, Paul was a Jew and we would expect him to view Jesus' death with the martyr tradition of Judaism, not a later Christian context developed only after the destruction of the Temple.

Through the Faithfulness in His Blood

through the *faithfulness* in his blood (3:25a, emphasis added)

Once again Campbell's rhetorical analysis helps clarify the structure. The traditional versification lumps this through-clause with the previous phrase, and most translations follow suit. Tying together expiation (*hilastērion*) and the phrase "in his blood" supports the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. For example, the NRSV takes verse 24 through 25a as part of a single sentence.

They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. (3:24–25 NRSV)

Campbell's analysis indicates that this final through-clause parallels the other two and is yet another explanation of how the righteousness of God is manifest:

- Through the faithfulness of Jesus Anointed for all who are faithful
- Through the deliverance which is in the Anointed Jesus whom God has put forward as a means of propitiation
- Through the faithfulness in his blood. (Rom 3:22, 24 BBS)

His blood is not the point but is rather a metonym employing a part (blood) for the whole (death). In sacrificial systems the shedding of an animal's blood serves to purify the sacred space. The animal's death is an unintended consequence. In this case "in his blood" signifies the manner of his death, a bloody death, a shameful death on the cross (Rom 1:16). The final through-clause indicates that in his death Jesus was faithful. Jesus' death, his crucifixion, is the manifestation of God's righteousness; it is how God is setting the world aright.

Demonstrations

to demonstrate his righteousness through the passing over of previously committed sins in the forbearance of God,

to demonstrate his righteousness in the now time so that he might be righteous and make righteous the one who lives out of the faithfulness of Jesus. (3:25b–26)

Paul concludes with two demonstrations of God's righteousness. The first demonstration indicates that God demonstrates his righteousness by passing over previously committed sins. This is not a matter of forgiveness, but rather God has been holding back his punishment. This implies Paul's apocalyptic scenario. The nations deserve God's wrath, but God has been withholding that wrath. Now he has passed over or foregone his wrath.

The final demonstration returns to language that is strongly Paul's and marks his summary for the passage.

This shows God's reliability at this decisive time, namely, that God is reliable and approves the one who lives on the basis of Jesus' unconditional confidence in God (Rom 3:26).

To demonstrate his righteousness in the now time so that he might be righteous and make righteous the one who lives out of the faithfulness of Jesus. (3:26 BBS)

"The now time" echoes the reference to the present time with which this passage began, while turning attention back to righteousness and faithfulness, which is described by the preposition *ek* in the sense of "out of" or "from," even in the sense of "born from." The one who is made righteous is the one who is out of, comes out of, or born out of Jesus' faithfulness. His faithfulness is the source of the righteousness or the being made right of the one who lives by that faithfulness.

Postscript: After Paul

While Paul views Jesus' death through the prism of the suffering noble death, Paul's own death appears to be a problem for his later followers. Understandably the pseudepigraphical Colossians and Ephesians do not refer to Paul's death since they must maintain the illusion that he is still alive. Yet they make reference to his being in prison, although it is not at all clear where that imprisonment might be imagined. For these two letters the critical point is that Paul is *the* apostle.

The Acts of the Apostles notoriously does not relate the death of Paul, although it is almost certain that the author is aware of Paul's death at the hand of the

Roman imperium. The narrative structure of Acts leads a reader to expect that narration of Paul's death. Yet as the *Acts Seminar Report* relates:

These earlier allusions lead the reader to expect the story of Paul's death once he is a prisoner in Rome. Yet it is a story Acts refuses to tell, even though it has been implicitly promised. Ironically, in this case Acts in its final scene becomes a potentially reliable historical source based on what it does not say. (p. 326)

Acts wants to end on a happy ending and so avoids the story of Paul's death at the hands of the Empire.⁸

One has to wait until the Acts of Paul (chapter 14) for an account of Paul's martyrdom. Probably compiled in the last half of the-second century in Asia Minor, it recounts Paul's martyrdom by beheading under Nero. Recent scholarship on the Acts of Paul is divided about whether chapter 14 had a separate existence prior to the Acts Paul (so Snyder, pp, 55-66) or is a composition of the author (so Pervo, 2014: pp. 303-4). Regardless it circulated later separately from the Acts of Paul as the Martyrdom of Paul which was read during the monastic office in celebration of that feast. So Paul is at last incorporated into the martyrdom tradition of early Christianity.

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⁸ See Pervo, 2009: pp. 688-90.

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