

ROMANS 3:21-26: TRADITIONAL AND “NEW PERSPECTIVE” INTERPRETATIONS

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21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all those who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely, by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forth as a propitiation through faith in his blood, for a demonstration of his righteousness, because he overlooked the sins that had been committed beforehand, in the time of his forbearance; 26 for a demonstration of his righteousness in this time, so that he can be just and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus.

In traditional treatments of Pauline theology, Romans 3:21-26 was often considered to be the heart of Paul’s thoughts, or at least of the Epistle to the Romans. In his commentary on Romans, John Stott writes, “Verses 21-16 are six tightly packed verses, which Professor Cranfield rightly calls ‘the centre and heart’ of the whole main section of the letter, and which Dr. Leon Morris suggests may be ‘possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.’”¹ Luther called this paragraph “the chief point... of the whole Bible.”² It is interesting, therefore, to see how this passage is understood by three representatives of the so-called “New Perspective” paradigm.

It is impossible to do full justice to either traditional interpretations or revisions of the “Old Perspective” in such a short paper. My goal has to be much more modest. After outlining the traditional interpretation of Romans 3:21-26, I will simply summarize the comments of E. P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N. T. Wright, respectively, on the same passage. When presenting their views, instead of repeating all common features, I will focus primarily on points of departure from the traditional interpretation.

1. AN OUTLINE OF THE “OLD PERSPECTIVE” INTERPRETATION³

Let me begin with a brief outline of how these dense verses have been interpreted in the Augustinian-Lutheran-Reformed⁴ tradition. Stott’s headline well captures

¹ John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England: IVP, 1994), 108-109.

² Douglass J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 242.

³ I realize, of course, that there have always been variations and slight differences in the interpretation of this rich text. However, there have been constant elements in these interpretations that still allows us to speak of *the* traditional exegesis.

⁴ Despite the obvious differences among these theological traditions, even in questions closely related to the “New Perspective” controversy, I find Westerholm’s decision to speak of one “Lutheran” approach more or less justifiable. Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004).

the main focus of traditional interpretations of the passage: “God’s righteousness revealed in Christ’s cross.”⁵ In order to depict the “Old Perspective” approach in broad brushes, it seems helpful to follow Stott’s thematic arrangement in his commentary.

a. *The source of our justification: God and his grace.* Traditional interpretations of the passage have emphasized the contrast between righteousness by the law (3:20) and the righteousness manifested in the gospel, apart from the law (3:21). Stephen Westerholm sees in this contrast the distinction between what he calls *ordinary* “dikaiosness”⁶ required by God’s righteous character, and *extraordinary* “dikaiosness” given to believers as a gift. Ordinary “dikaiosness” is not possible because of sin (3:23), but God gives his own righteousness to everyone who believes in Jesus (3:22). It is a free gift (3:24), not the result of keeping the law. When commenting on 3:21, Luther quotes Augustine about this extraordinary righteousness: “[Paul] does not speak of the righteousness of God, by which God is righteous, but of that with which He clothes a person when He justifies the ungodly.”⁷ Justification is God’s gracious act in which he gives righteousness to those unrighteous sinners who have faith in Jesus. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it, “The term ‘righteousness of God’, already used in 1:17, means a righteousness provided by God, a righteousness prepared by God, a righteousness that is made available by God. Therefore the Gospel is entirely God’s.”⁸

b. *The ground of our justification: Christ and his cross.* Traditional interpretations have pointed out that the basis of extraordinary righteousness is the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross. There are three words in the passage that show the ground of the free gift of justification: redemption (avpolu, trwsij) in 3:24, propitiation (i`lasth, rion) and blood (ai[ma] in 3:25. Ordinary “dikaiosness” cannot be dispensed with, and the punishment for the lack of such righteousness must be meted out (6:23). Simon Gathercole emphasizes “the crucial background to Paul’s discussion of atonement in 3:21-26, namely, *God’s infallible punishment of sin* as delineated in Romans 1-2.”⁹ The gospel, however, is about the demonstration of God’s righteous character (3:21, 25, 26) in a saving way: he meted out the punishment that we deserved by punishing Jesus Christ on the cross (3:24). His blood is the blood of his propitiatory sacrifice that redeems believers from the wrath of God. With the words of Thomas Schreiner, “God himself took the initiative to satisfy and

⁵ Stott, 108.

⁶ Westerholm coined the term from the Greek δικαιοσύνη. See the discussion on the two kinds of “dikaiosness” in *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, 263-284.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1954), 60.

⁸ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3.20-4.25* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 32.

⁹ Simon J. Gathercole, “Justified by Faith, Justified by Blood: The Evidence of Romans 3:21-4:5,” in D. A. Carson, P. T. O’Brian, and M. A. Seifrid, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 168.

appease his own wrath.”¹⁰ “This is the righteous basis on which the righteous God can ‘righteous’ the unrighteous without compromising his righteousness.”¹¹ God cannot justify the sinner without propitiation, because sin cannot remain unpunished. But God demonstrated his righteousness when he punished Christ for our sins, so he can be both just (righteous) and the justifier of the ungodly (3:26). This demonstration of his righteousness was especially called forth because God overlooked the sins of Israel (and possibly even those of the nations)¹² in the time of his forbearance (3:25). John Piper emphasizes the significance of 3:25: “What this enormously important text shows is that God’s righteousness was called into question by God’s ‘passing over sins’ (th.n pa, resin tw/n... a`marthma, tw’n).”¹³ Or as Calvin says, “Paul teaches simply that until the death of Christ there had been no price for placating God, and that this was not performed or accomplished by legal types – hence the truth has been suspended until the fullness of time came.”¹⁴ The fact that God did not punish the sins seriously questioned his “dikaiosness,” therefore the public display of this “dikaiosness” was needed in the punishing of sin in Jesus.

c. The means of our justification: faith. The third aspect of the traditional interpretation of Romans 3:21-26 is that the gift of righteousness is freely given to all those who believe (eivj pa, ntaj tou.j pisteu, ontaj). “Three times in this paragraph Paul underlines the necessity of faith: *through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe* (22); *through faith in his blood* (25)...; and *God justifies those who have faith in Jesus* (26).”¹⁵ From the context it is apparent that faith is the opposite of “works” (3:27-28). Faith does not work but simply receives the gift of God’s righteousness. Faith is a reliance on Christ and his propitiatory sacrifice (3:24). Because faith is the opposite of works, belief in Christ excludes all boasting in human achievement (3:27). Moreover, Simon Gathercole emphasizes that Paul’s teaching on faith as a sole means of justification for both Jews and Gentiles implies that not even Jews should try to keep the law in order to become righteous.¹⁶ All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:23), therefore all need the justifying grace offered to sinners freely (3:24).

To summarize the main thrust of the traditional interpretation, we can say, that the passage speaks about God’s gracious gift of justification, received by faith, and based on the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This redeeming

¹⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998), 191.

¹¹ Stott, 115.

¹² John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2007), 68.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1960), 76.

¹⁵ Stott, 117.

¹⁶ Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002), 224-225.

sacrifice is also a demonstration of God's righteous character, who, when he justifies sinners, does not leave sin unpunished.

Let us now examine how the passage has been reinterpreted by E. P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N. T. Wright.

2. E. P. SANDERS' INTERPRETATION

Unlike Dunn and Wright, E. P. Sanders does not offer a detailed, verse-by-verse commentary on Romans 3:21-26. In his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*,¹⁷ and in his *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*,¹⁸ Sanders makes only occasional references to the passage. We can nevertheless get a strong impression about how Sanders understands Paul's reasoning in these verses.

In *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, he gives us two important interpretative clues to the passage. First, Sanders says, that, according to Paul, "the death of Christ was for the purpose of making salvation available on the basis of faith."¹⁹ He calls it "the atoning death of Jesus."²⁰ Secondly, he emphasizes that the atonement ends Jewish exclusivism. If there is a center in this passage, it is probably 3:22, where Paul essentially claims that "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek."²¹ "Faith in the atoning death of Jesus... is available to all without distinction."²² The boasting in the law, that faith in Jesus excludes (3:27), is the Jewish boasting in their national privileges. "It is faith in Jesus Christ, which is available to all, which excludes boasting in privileged status."²³ Verse 22 (together with 3:9, 3:29, 10:12, and Galatians 3:28) shows "a very energetic denial of Jewish superiority within the eschatological people of God."²⁴

We learn more about Sander's understanding of the passage in his earlier volume. In *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* he makes it clear that Romans 3:22b-25 expresses Paul's view that Christ's death was substitutionary. "It is well known that Paul inherited the view that Christ died for trespasses. The general Christian view was presumably that by his death he achieved atonement for the trespasses of others, so that they would not be reckoned to those who accepted his death as being for them. This is the view which Paul repeats without hesitation."²⁵ This perception of Paul's teaching is in harmony with traditional interpretations. There are two new elements, however, in Sanders' book.

¹⁷ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

¹⁸ E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

¹⁹ Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

²² *Ibid.*, 33

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁵ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 463. See also 470.

First, Sanders reverses the order in which plight and solution follow each other. In the traditional picture, the death of Christ is the answer to the problem of universal sin. Plight is followed by the solution. According to Sanders, “for Paul, the conviction of a universal solution preceded the conviction of a universal plight.”²⁶ He disagrees with Bultmann’s discussion of Paul’s conception. In Bultmann’s opinion “the view that all men are sinners, which he develops at length in Rom. 1.18-3.20, is a basic one for his doctrine of salvation.”²⁷ Sanders does not think so. Paul’s mind did not progress from an understanding of human plight to divine solution. In Sanders’ opinion this is proven by the fact that Paul does not speak at all about the expiatory system in Judaism. When in 3:25 he says that God “passed over former sins,” he does not grab the opportunity to talk about ways of atonement in Judaism.²⁸ “Rom. 1-3 argues the case for the universality of sin ‘without recourse to the events of Old Testament history’.”²⁹ It is the revelation of Christ that made Paul believe that all men are transgressors.

The second novelty in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in connection with our passage is Sanders’ understanding of the righteousness of God and the righteousness of man. His view of the righteousness of God is somewhat complex. In the book he approvingly quotes an entire essay by Manfred T. Brauch, who understands the righteousness of God as “the redemptive action of God, not a description of divine essence, nor of man’s essence before God.”³⁰ Sanders emphasizes that in Romans 1-4, “righteousness” does not have any one fixed meaning. “The righteousness of God is the *power* and *action* of God which are manifest in both wrath and grace (1.16-18; 3.21), as it is also his *rightness* and *fidelity* to what he promised and intended.”³¹ The novelty in Sanders’ approach lies in his separation of the righteousness of God from the righteousness of men *in light of the Qumran literature*. He plainly says that the meaning of the righteousness of God in Romans 3:21-26 is “rooted in pre-Christian Judaism.”³² For example, 1QH 4.30f says, “Righteousness, I know, is not of man, nor is perfection of way of the son of man; to the Most High God belong all righteous deeds.” The same idea is found in 1QS 11.12 (“my justification shall be by the righteousness of God”), and in 1QS 11.14 (“In his faithful righteousness he has judged me”). Sanders agrees with Burrows’ conclusion on these texts: “The point of prime importance here is that while man has no righteousness of his own, there is a righteousness which God, in his own righteousness, freely confers.”³³

Since Sanders maintains that Christ’s death is a solution to the universal plight of the sinfulness of men, even if he reverses the logic of how Paul arrived at

²⁶ Ibid., 474.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 499.

²⁹ Ibid., 474n2.

³⁰ Ibid., 540.

³¹ Ibid., 491.

³² Ibid., 305.

³³ Ibid.

this conclusion, I do not think his interpretation of Romans 3:21-26 significantly deviates from the traditional interpretation. Most Reformed theologians would gladly welcome pre-Christian expressions of an understanding of justification by faith (like in 1QH and 1QS), since it has always been believed that not justification by faith itself, but the demonstration of its ground (the manifestation of God's righteousness in the death of Christ) is the new thing. What Sanders says about Romans 3:21-26 basically concurs with the traditional view, albeit his focus shifted from the traditional emphasis on universal plight to the twofold emphasis on the revelation of Christ and the inclusion of the Gentiles. This shift makes the passage fit better into Sanders' more general agenda of acquitting Second Temple Judaism from the charge of legalism,³⁴ but it does not question the traditional interpretation of the passage.

3. JAMES DUNN'S INTERPRETATION

Dunn wants to see the entire passage in the light of the special historical situation of the Jewish nation. "For the brief central section of the argument (3.21-26) is bracketed by sections dealing with the implications of Paul's gospel for Jews (2.1-3.20 and 3:27-4.25)."³⁵ The purpose of 3:21-26, according to Dunn, is to make Jewish boasting in their status impossible. He disagrees with C. E. B. Cranfield, who, in his commentary on Romans, criticizes Dunn for limiting the theme to a Jewish problem (in Cranfield's opinion it would be "an intolerable anticlimax"), and argues that the boasting that 3:27 refers to (and 3:21-26 excludes) is "all human boasting before God."³⁶ Contrary to Cranfield, Dunn emphasizes that "*it is precisely Jewish boasting in the law which is ruled out by the gospel stated in 3.21-26; that is, Jewish assumption of privileged status over against the Gentile, Jewish assumption that the law provided an effective safeguard, for those within its bounds and doing its works, against the very sins which would result in Gentile condemnation and destruction.*"³⁷ "I have no desire to question the theological weight which has properly been placed upon Rom. 3.20... But it still seems important to me not to lose sight of the specific situation which gave rise to this crucial theologoumenon: that it was motivated by and included reference to Israel's pride in its privileged status."³⁸

How does Dunn interpret the specific issues in the passage? First, he takes *cwri.j no,mou* in 3:21 as a synonym for *cwri.j e;rgwn no,mou* in 3:28. According to Dunn, Paul understands the law here as a Jewish boundary marker. "'Without the law' then means outside the national and religious parameters set by the law,

³⁴ Ibid., 33-59.

³⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), 221.

³⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, vol. 1. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 96.

³⁷ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 222.

³⁸ Ibid., 46.

without reference to the normal Jewish hallmarks."³⁹ Since the righteousness of God has "heavily covenantal overtones,"⁴⁰ it must have been shocking to Jewish ears that Paul juxtaposes the two phrases: "the righteousness of God" and "apart from the law." Second, Dunn takes *dia. pi, stewj Vh sou/ Cristou/* as "through faith in Jesus Christ," contrary to "a wave of renewed support"⁴¹ for the "through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ" interpretation. N. T. Wright names this as one of the main differences between his perspective on Paul and Dunn's version of the "New Perspective."⁴² For Dunn, the main difference of the new epoch is that which demarcates the people of God: the contrast between Jewish boundary markers and simple faith in Jesus Christ. In the new era "faith in Jesus as Christ becomes the primary identity marker which renders the others superfluous."⁴³ Thirdly, Dunn gives a fairly traditional interpretation of the *i`lasth, rion* in 3:24 as referring to "Jesus' death as a sacrifice" "in specifically Day of Atonement terms."⁴⁴ Like Sanders, Dunn also uses substitutionary language to describe the role of Christ's death in redemption. There is a "'sacrificial interchange'... which seems to be a fundamental feature of Paul's understanding of Jesus' death: the sinner lives, the sinless dies. The implication is that as the sinner's sin was transferred to the spotless sacrifice, so the spotless life of the sacrifice was transferred (or reckoned) to the sinner."⁴⁵ Fourthly, as mentioned above, Dunn understands the righteousness of God in 3:21-26 in covenantal terms. "The exegesis of *dikaiousu, nh* should again not be forced into the either/or of righteous status given by God, or God's own righteousness... The sense is still that of God's action on behalf of those to whom he has pledged himself."⁴⁶ The shameful death of Christ is "an expression of God's saving grace."⁴⁷ But how does Dunn interpret the reason given in 3:26 for the demonstration of God's righteousness? He understands the phrase *dia. th. n pa, resin* as a reference to the fact that God left sins of Israel unpunished. For Dunn, the main question, however, is not how this is a problem for the righteousness of God (which is difficult to answer if the righteousness of God is his covenant faithfulness). The main question for Dunn is whether this means that judgment was suspended till the coming of Christ or that sins were not even atoned for by the old testament sacrificial system.⁴⁸

To sum up Dunn's approach, we can say the following. Most importantly, Dunn left the heart of traditional exegeses of 3:21-26 untouched, in that he still holds to a substitutionary interpretation of the death of Christ. On the other hand,

³⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1988), 165.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴² N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009), 28-29.

⁴³ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 113.

⁴⁴ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 171.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

he significantly reinterprets the context, from the general problem of human sin to the specific problem of Jewish exclusivism. Douglass Moo, with many other contemporary advocates of the traditional interpretation, is unhappy about this reinterpretation. "I think this general tendency both exegetically indefensible and theologically dangerous."⁴⁹ Dunn's interpretation of Paul in social terms is very attractive in our era that has a deep concern for social issues. "But for all Paul's very vital interest in the unity of the people of God, he is even more vitally concerned about the relationship of the individual Jew or Gentile to the Lord of history."⁵⁰ Not less problematic is Dunn's understanding of the righteousness of God as his covenant faithfulness to Israel. When Dunn comments on the demonstration of the righteousness of God, he fails to explain how the passing over of sins in 3:25-26 makes this demonstration necessary. I shall say more on this in connection with Wright.

4. N. T. WRIGHT'S INTERPRETATION

N. T. Wright wrote two commentaries on Romans, one for *The New Interpreter's Bible*,⁵¹ and one for his *Paul for Everyone* series. In order to understand how Wright approaches the passage, first of all it is worth quoting his paraphrased translation in his *Paul for Everyone* series.

But now, quite apart from the law (though the law and the prophets bore witness to it), God's covenant justice has been displayed. 22 God's covenant justice comes into operation through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, for the benefit of all who have faith. For there is no distinction: 23 all sinned, and fell short of God's glory - 24 and by God's grace they are freely declared to be in the right, to be members of the covenant, through the redemption which is found in the Messiah, Jesus. 25 God put Jesus forth as the place of mercy, through his faithfulness, by means of his blood. He did this to demonstrate his covenant justice through the passing over (in the divine forbearance) of sins committed beforehand. 26 This was to demonstrate his covenant justice in the present time: that is, that he himself is in the right, and that he declares to be in the right everyone who trusts in the faithfulness of Jesus."⁵²

⁴⁹ Moo, 243.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ N. T. Wright, "Romans," in Leander E. Keck, ed. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10. (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2002), 395-770.

⁵² Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone, Romans Part 1* (London: SPCK, 2004), 51, 55.

It is crucial to understand that Wright sees the meaning of 3:21-26 (as well as the whole of Romans) through an entire narrative structure. This narrative structure is about God's saving plan through Abraham and his family. "God called Abraham... to undo the problem caused by the sin of Adam... and to get the original project... back on track."⁵³ God's purpose is to put the world to rights through Abraham's covenant family, Israel. Wright calls this divine plan elsewhere "the single-plan-of-the-creator-through-Abraham-and-Israel-for-the-world"⁵⁴ The plan got stuck, however, because Israel as a nation was unfaithful to her calling. "[T]he covenant people themselves have let him down completely, and are revealed as simply part of the world that needs saving."⁵⁵ How can then God remain faithful to his covenant? How can he remain righteous, still fulfilling his "single-plan-through-Abraham-and-Israel-for-the-world"?

The answer is given in Romans 3:21-26! "The faithful death of the Messiah unveils, before an unready and shocked world, the way in which the one true God has been true to the covenant and has thereby provided the answer to a world gone wrong, and to humans lost in sin and guilt."⁵⁶ Israel failed to offer God the faithful obedience needed to save the world, so God sent a faithful Israelite, Jesus the Messiah, as a representative of Israel, and this faithful Israelite saves the world. "The covenant purpose is accomplished, being turned into the single-plan-through-Israel's-faithful-representative-for-the-world."⁵⁷ Wright consistently interprets *dia. pi, stewj VIhsou/ Cristou* as "through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah." "Faithfulness' highlights Jesus' role in fulfilling Israel's commission."⁵⁸ Whoever believes in Jesus the Messiah, benefits from his saving work.⁵⁹ According to Wright, salvation through the Messiah's faithfulness is compared by Paul to the exodus, when God redeemed Israel from Egypt. The sacrificial death of Jesus "is at the very heart of God's saving plan."⁶⁰ The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 is in Paul's mind when he speaks about redemption through the blood of Jesus. This is "the way in which the God of Israel has now at last been faithful to his age-old covenant plan ('God's righteousness')."⁶¹

There is another underlining theme in Wright's narrative structure, not shared by Sanders and Dunn,⁶² the "exile" motif. Wright demonstrates that Second Temple literature, and especially Daniel 9, speaks about Israel's exile and

⁵³ Ibid., 52.

⁵⁴ Wright, *Justification*, 97.

⁵⁵ Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 52-53. See also *Justification*, 68.

⁵⁶ Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 53.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Justification*, 206.

⁵⁸ Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 54.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 57.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "One of the rhetorical pleasing features of my insistence on this 'return from exile' motif is that it puts a lot of clear water between me and Ed Sanders, who does not reckon with the idea, and particularly Jimmy Dunn, who has never been able to see what I am talking about. See the new perspective falls apart at this point!" Wright, *Justification*, 61.

its end as signs of God's righteousness.⁶³ The curse of the exile is God's punishment on Israel, a sign of his faithfulness to his covenant promises. The end of the exile is similarly a fulfillment of his covenant faithfulness. The demonstration of God's righteousness in the death of Jesus (3:24-26) is the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy and the end of Israel's exile.⁶⁴ "As we saw in Daniel, 'God's righteousness' includes his duty to punish sin in line with the covenant provisions of Deuteronomy 27-29."⁶⁵

There is not enough space in this short paper to adequately reflect on Wright's complex vision, so I will restrict myself to a few short comments. Most traditional interpreters, at least in the Reformed tradition, can appreciate Wright's covenantal approach to Pauline theology,⁶⁶ and would not even object to the *theological* ramifications of translating *pi,stij VIhsou/* as the faithfulness of Jesus.⁶⁷ Robert W. Yarbrough provides ample evidence that a salvation-historical interpretation of Paul has had many advocates in the past.⁶⁸ However, Wright's strong emphasis on Israel's role as a means of putting the world to rights, and the appearance of the Messiah as a sort of "second solution," is troubling. Has Israel ever really had a mission to the nations that, had Israel obeyed, would have made the coming of the Messiah unnecessary?

Secondly, Wright's terminology appears to be somewhat elusive. He argues at more than one place that the righteousness of God has one obvious meaning: his "covenant faithfulness."⁶⁹ "In the Septuagint, the phrase means, most naturally, God's faithfulness to his covenant with Israel, as a result of which he saves her from her exile in Babylon."⁷⁰ Wright strongly opposes the translations that render *dikaiousu,nh qeou* as "God's justice."⁷¹ However, when he discusses Romans 3:21-26 in his commentaries, he translates the "righteousness of God" as the "covenant justice of God"⁷² or the "saving justice of God."⁷³ Now, he apparently understands God's covenant justice as an *aspect* of God's covenant

⁶³ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Michigan: Fortress Press, 1992), 299-301.

⁶⁴ Wright, *Justification*, 62-62.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁶ Westerholm in his *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics*, representing a Lutheran interpretative tradition, is less happy with importing covenantal language into the text.

⁶⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner gives a helpful summary of the arguments both for the "faith in Jesus" and the "faithfulness of Jesus" interpretations of the phrase in his *Romans*, 181-186. He favors the "faith in Jesus" rendering.

⁶⁸ Robert W. Yarbrough, "Paul and Salvation History," in D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brian, and M. A. Seifrid, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2., 297-342.

⁶⁹ "For a reader of the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Jewish scriptures, 'the righteousness of God' would have one obvious meaning: God's own faithfulness to his purposes, to the covenant." N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 96.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Wright, *Justification*, 202.

⁷² Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 51 and 55. See also above.

⁷³ Wright, *Romans*, 473.

faithfulness,⁷⁴ but the language (and the concept behind it) then becomes so elusive that it rightly invites criticism.

Thirdly, the second half of 3:25 causes a serious problem for Wright's exegesis. This is a problem not just for Wright but for all those who take the "righteousness of God" in Romans 3:21-26 as God's "covenant faithfulness." Piper points out that "God's righteousness was called into question by God's 'passing over sins.'"⁷⁵ "Wright's most common definition of God's righteousness – God's covenant faithfulness – does not, it seems, fit easily into Romans 3:25-26. On the contrary, in these verses God's righteousness creates a problem for covenant faithfulness and must be satisfied in order that his covenant faithfulness may continue."⁷⁶ Piper is aware of Wright's solution, that God's covenant justice is one aspect of his covenant faithfulness, but he does not think the problem is thus solved,⁷⁷ nor do I think so. "God's passing over sin would seem not to be a *problem* for God's covenant faithfulness, but an *expression* of it."⁷⁸ Wright explicitly states that God's covenant faithfulness would be called into question if God did not put Jesus forward as a display of his righteousness.⁷⁹ But the demonstration of God's righteousness was necessary on account of (dia th,n) the overlooking (or passing over; not punishing) of sins, not because God's covenant faithfulness was doubted. This questions whether the righteousness of God can be interpreted here as his covenant faithfulness.

And fourthly, as Moo remarks, "Evaluations of the 'return from exile' interpretation have varied from enthusiastic support to rather serious critiques."⁸⁰ M. A. Seifrid questions the validity of the exile schema, and the reading of all of Judaism in absolute terms with reference to the exile.⁸¹ My only question here is simply this: could that be the unspoken interpretative framework of Romans 3:21-26? Could the Roman believers who read the letter understand the sophisticated argument from Jewish background that, according to Wright, Paul is presenting to them? We see that Paul is generally sensitive in the way he presents his arguments to Jews and Gentiles (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:20-21), why would he write a letter to the church in Rome (which had a Gentile majority) that only Jews, well-versed in Second Temple literature, could properly understand? I think Seifrid is right when he emphasizes that "there is a substantial difference between detecting an allusion to a biblical narrative in a brief statement or phrase in Paul's Letters and proposing a sweeping narrative sequence which shapes the

⁷⁴ E.g., N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 271.

⁷⁵ Piper, 67.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, n17.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁹ Wright, *Romans*, 472.

⁸⁰ Douglass J. Moo, "Israel and the Law in Romans 5-11: Interaction with the New Perspective," in D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brian, and M. A. Seifrid, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2., 201.

⁸¹ Mark A. Seifrid, "Blind Alleys in the Controversy over the Paul of History," *Tyndale Bulletin* 45 (1994): 73-95.

interpretation of the whole of Paul's Letters. The larger claim demands stricter and more careful application of the criteria... The more far-reaching the claim, the more explicit that usage must be."⁸²

Paul's argument in Romans seems to be more transparent than Wright claims, and is focusing more on general human interest than the narrower focus of presupposed Jewish covenantal themes. When Paul mentions the manifestation of the righteousness of God in 1:17, and starts explaining why it is needed, he explicitly speaks about the universal wrath of God (1:18) and the sins of the Gentiles (1:19-32) as the first reasons for the need of God's saving righteousness. True, he also engages with specific Jewish sins (2:17-29), but the emphasis on the *general* plight of humankind is repeated in the immediate context of 3:21-26, both in 3:20 and in 3:23. The traditional interpretation, that points out this general emphasis, appears to make more sense than either Wright's, or, for that matter, Sanders' and Dunn's narrower framework.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above short assessment of the traditional interpretation and the interpretations of Sanders, Dunn, and Wright, we can make the following concluding remarks. First, both the traditional interpretation and the "New Perspective" interpretations that we have looked at agree that in Paul's view Jesus' death was substitutionary. God punished sins in Jesus Christ and those who believe in him are thus redeemed. Neither Sanders and Dunn, nor Wright questions this fundamental element of the traditional interpretation. They also continue to emphasize that faith in Jesus is the only condition for salvation both for Gentiles and for Jews.

The differences in interpretations are found in where the exegetes see the main emphasis of the passage. Traditional exegetes, both in the past and in the present, emphasize the universal nature of the problem. The background of the passage is universal human sin on the one hand, and doubts about God's righteousness for overlooking sins in the past on the other hand. The cross of Jesus is an answer to both problems. All three "New Perspective" interpreters see a specifically Jewish problem in the background. In the opinions of Sanders and Dunn, the problem that Paul is answering is Jewish boasting in their national status. While Wright accepts this framework, too, he puts more emphasis on the big narrative structure of salvation history, in which Israel failed in her commission and suffered the curse of the exile.

In my opinion, "New Perspective" interpreters have not been able to convincingly demonstrate that in the back of Paul's mind a narrower (Jewish) theme is more dominant than the universal problem of human sin. Both the

⁸² Mark A. Seifrid, "The Narrative of Scripture and Justification by Faith," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72 (2008), 27.

immediate and the larger context of 3:21-26 appear to me to favor the traditional interpretation.

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