

THEOLOGY & CULTURE

Romans 3:21-26: The Meaning of the Gospel as the Revelation of God's Righteousness

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Introduction

According to his Letters and to the Acts of the Apostles, prior to his encounter with the Risen Lord, Paul was a very zealous Jewish person who observed the Torah with fervour. Out of his zeal, he persecuted the members of the fledgling Christian community, even to the point of trying to destroy it (cf. Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9; Phil 3:6). Paul probably participated in the persecution of early Christians in the area of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 8:3; 9:1-2; 22:3-5, 19; 29:9-11). The First Letter to the Thessalonians 2:14 attests to Christian persecutions in Jerusalem. However, Paul's life changed completely after he had an experience of a theophany at or near Damascus. This incident is recounted in both Paul's Letters and Acts. In Galatians 1:13-17 and Acts 9:1-9, we read that the Risen Lord appeared to Paul (see also 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8). This incident consisted of a theophany, a visible manifestation of the Divine by means of a great light and a voice from heaven.

Paul characterized this encounter as an appearance of the Risen Lord, a continuation of a whole series of Resurrection appearances (cf. 1 Cor 15:8; Gal 1:15-16). Through this encounter, Paul came to believe in Jesus as the Christ and as the Risen Lord. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI states, in this incident, "the Risen Christ appears as a brilliant light and speaks to Saul, transforms his

thinking and his entire life.”¹ Through this encounter, Paul received his mission in life, namely, a call to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul will ground his Christian faith, his mission and his message in this encounter.

According to Pope Benedict XVI, “Saint Paul was transformed not by a thought, but by an event, by the irresistible presence of the Risen One whom subsequently he would never be able to doubt, so powerful had been the evidence of the event, of this encounter. It radically changed Paul’s life in a fundamental way; in this sense one can and must speak of a conversion.”²

In this encounter, Paul received, by means of revelation, the Gospel he was to preach. Paul insists on several occasions that he received the Gospel he was to preach through a revelation, and not from human beings: “For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:11-12).

Regarding the content of that Gospel, Paul describes it as follows: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’” (Rom 1:16-17). Thus, Paul characterized the Gospel that he preached as a revelation of God’s righteousness through the passion and death of Christ. This is the Gospel that Paul expounds in his Letter to the Romans.

One key text that summarizes this Gospel is Romans 3:21-26.

The present essay critically discusses the text of Romans 3:21-26, which is the core of Paul’s teaching of the Gospel as the Revelation of God’s Righteousness.

In the first part, this essay shall offer the background to the text. Accordingly, it shall situate the text within its broader and immediate contexts of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, as an attempt

¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Saint Paul: General Audiences July 2, 2008–February 4, 2009*, San Francisco: Ignatius 2009, 22.

² BENEDICT XVI, *Saint Paul*, 22.

to show that the text under study is at the centre of Paul's thought throughout the letter. By means of a literary analysis, the essay shall present the critical text, its stylistic characteristics, its form and its structure. Then the article shall attempt an exercise in redaction criticism to show that Paul incorporated a pre-existent formula into this text.

In the second part, this work shall offer an exegesis of the text of Romans 3:21-26 in an attempt to establish the meaning of the revelation of God's righteousness, a righteousness that carries with it the implication of salvation for all.

In the third part, the work shall synthesize our findings, presenting Paul's teaching about the triune God, about the incarnate divine person Jesus, and about human beings.

1. Background to Romans 3:21-26

Paul had been intending to visit Rome in order to get the support of the Roman Christians for his mission plans of reaching Spain (Rom 15:24). Jerome Neyrey suggests that since he had an unfavorable reputation and therefore anticipated opposition in Rome, he wrote the Letter to the Romans in order to recommend himself to the Church there.³ In the letter, he systematically presented his "Gospel of God" in order clear all the accusations which had been circulating against him, and hence to convince the Christians in Rome of the orthodoxy and legitimacy of the Gospel he was preaching.⁴ Romans 3:21-26 is the core of this message.

1.1 Remote/Broader Context of Romans 3:21-26

The text under study expounds Paul's thesis in the Letter to the Romans, that is, that God's righteousness has been revealed through the expiatory death of Jesus Christ. His righteousness is now accessible to all who have faith in Jesus. Paul introduces this theme in 1:16-17, i.e., at the beginning of the doctrinal section of

³ Cf. J. NEYREY, *Render to God: New Testament Understandings of the Divine*, Minneapolis: Fortress 2004, 107-108.

⁴ K.P. DONFRIED, ed., *The Romans Debate*, Peabody: Hendrickson 1991, 333.

the letter 1:16–11:36, as a *propositio*:⁵ “For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” Then he develops his theme both negatively and positively as follows:

- In a negative way, Paul explains what happens to humanity without the Gospel (1:18–3:20). Without the Gospel, all humanity, both the Jewish people and the Gentiles, are under the influence of sin; God is just in punishing. Here is what Byrne has to say: “What will be required at the eschatological judgment is righteousness. ... 1:18–3:20 has shown the complete lack of righteousness on the human side, even for those [the Jews] who possess the law. The entire world (Jewish as well as Gentiles) stands unrighteous before God, a situation which ‘establishes’ rather than derogates from God’s own righteousness.”⁶
- In contrast, in 3:21–11:36, Paul explains positively how in the Gospel, God’s righteousness has been manifested through Christ, a righteousness which is accessible to all, for it is no longer based on the law but on faith. Paul presents the ‘Gospel of God’, which – according to Fitzmyer – is “salvation for all human beings by grace through faith in

⁵ Paul organizes Romans in a logical manner, with the beginning, middle and the end. Scholars have discovered that, rhetorically, it can be divided as follows: 1. Romans 1:1-12 is *exordium* (the author establishes relationship with his audience). 2. Romans 1:13-15 is *narratio* (background to the argument). 3. Romans 1:16-17 is *propositio* (short statement of the thesis). 4. Romans 1:18–11:36 (or 15:13) is *probatio* (the main section of the letter; the body, where the author argues his thesis, presenting proof for the thesis. This is where our text falls). 5. Romans 15:14–16:23 is *peroratio* (conclusion, which appeals to the audience to accept the viewpoint of the author). 6. Romans 16:25-27 is the final doxology. Cf. R. JEWETT, *Romans*. HCHCB, Minneapolis: Fortress 2007, 29.

⁶ B. BYRNE, *Romans*. Sacra Pagina 6, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996, 122.

Christ Jesus and what he has achieved for humanity.”⁷ Thus, the passage under study is “the key to the structure and thought of the letter.”⁸ It not only repeats the theme stated at 1:16-17 in v. 21 but also expands it. It summarizes the whole of 1:18–3:20 in vv. 22d-23; and the rest of the letter grows from it.

According to Neyrey, both the negative and positive expositions of the theme are based on the understanding of the two attributes of God in the Letter to the Romans: God as the Just One who punishes sinners and God as the One who is Merciful.⁹ Neyrey says:

‘But’ says Paul, ‘the righteousness of God has been manifested’ (3:21). What follows stands in opposition to what preceded it: since ‘all sin and fall short of the glory of God,’ the only exit from this impasse can be a display of the attribute of mercy. In my view the argument in Romans from 3:21 through 8:39 proclaims and explains the character of this attribute of mercy, and thus tells us about the nature of God.¹⁰

Thus, in the first part (1:18–3:20) the emphasis is on God’s just judgment; and in the second part (3:21–8:39) the emphasis is on God’s mercy, i.e., God’s action in Jesus Christ to justify all who believe. Reumann proposes that the text under study “is related to the theme at 1:16-17; it is contrasted to the long section on the sinfulness of all humanity (1:18–3:20); and it is a section out of which the rest of the epistle grows (cc 4–11) or on which it depends (12:1f).”¹¹

The theme of justification by faith apart from the law, is Paul’s concern in Galatians. In a polemical way, Paul states there that God justifies human beings through faith in Jesus, and not through the

⁷ J. FITZMYER, *Romans, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB 33, New York: Doubleday 1993, 341.

⁸ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 342. ‘Faith in Jesus’ or ‘faith of Jesus.’ We shall treat the problem in the second part of this work.

⁹ NEYREY, *Render to God*, 113.

¹⁰ NEYREY, *Render to God*, 120.

¹¹ J. REUMANN, “The Gospel of the Righteousness of God: Pauline Reinterpretation in Romans 3:21–28”, *Interpretation* 20 (1980) 432.

works of the law (Gal 2:16-20, 3:1–4:7).¹² Thus in Galatians, Paul has a more negative understanding of the law. In Romans, however, where Paul systematically develops the theme of justification through faith in Jesus, he ends up taking a more positive approach to the law.

1.2 Immediate Context of Romans 3:21-26

In the passages that precede 3:21-26, that is to say, 3:1-8 and 3:9-20, Paul contrasts human sinfulness with God's justice. God relates to the sinners as a judge. In Byrne's words, "Human sinfulness served only to enhance the righteousness and fidelity of God (3:3-6)."¹³ The implication is that, by virtue of God's justice, all humanity deserves punishment; God's judgment is an act of a righteous judge upon sinful humanity.

Byrne notes, however, that in 3:21-26, "God is displaying righteousness in a way that saves rather than condemns, and He does so without any injury to the principle that righteousness on the part of human beings is required for the establishment and salvation of the eschatological people of God."¹⁴

Verse 21 marks this shift from the focus on human sinfulness to the focus on God's action on behalf of sinful humanity. According to J. Dunn, the shift in the argument is decisive: the point of concentration is now "the eschatological state of affairs brought about by Christ."¹⁵ The reference to the law in both vv. 20 and 21 not only connects the two parts, but also brings out this contrast

¹² R. HAYS, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2002, 157.

¹³ BYRNE, *Romans*, 123.

¹⁴ BYRNE, *Romans*, 123. The editor notes that Paul never used the expression "eschatological people of God". Later in this article the author will offer the very important observation that for Paul the "righteousness on the part of human beings" is a graced righteousness. This is to say that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit renders the People of God to be a universal sacrament of salvation (cf. Rom 5:15-19; LG 48). In her identity as a universal sacrament of salvation the People of God, i.e., the Church, lives not according to the flesh but in the grace of the Holy Spirit and so may be conceived as eschatological by nature in her pilgrim path on earth unto eternity (cf. also LG 9).

¹⁵ J. D. DUNN, *Romans 1–8*. WBC 38A, Dallas: Word Books 1988, 161.

with clarity. 'No one will be justified ... *by works of the law*' (v. 20) is a declarative statement that concentrates on the futility of the law for those who seek justification by works of the law. The clause 'God's righteousness is revealed ... *apart from the law*' (v. 21), on the other hand, alludes to the fact that the law does not have the final word about the revelation of God's righteousness.

Dunn suggests that in vv. 21-26, Paul is conveying the doctrine that "Jesus' sacrificial death provides a different criterion for the understanding of God's righteousness; the one God must by definition be concerned for Gentiles as well as Jews."¹⁶ In relation to the subsequent passage (3:27-31), Paul continues to expound the thesis by repeating its basic ideas but in a diatribe style and in a polemical way.

In 3:21-26, Paul explains that, while the justification in Christ is not based on the law, the law bears witness to it (v. 23). Paul will take up the notion of the scriptural witness to righteousness by faith and develop it in chapter 4, where he will show that the law and the prophets all give witness that Abraham received the promise containing salvation for all on the basis of righteousness through faith rather than through obedience to the law.¹⁷ Hays points out that Paul is thinking in terms of a chronology of events: "Abraham received circumcision after faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6), not before, in order that he might be the symbolic father figure both of Gentile believers and of circumcised believers (Rom 4:9-12)."¹⁸

From this survey of scholarly opinions on the part of those who have examined the text, we see that the text under study stands at the centre of Paul's thought and articulated convictions. Given this fact, we expect Paul to formulate the text in a manner that cultivates and fortifies the convictions of his audience(s). This we shall examine in the next section.

¹⁶ DUNN, *Romans 1-8*, 161.

¹⁷ BYRNE, *Romans*, 124.

¹⁸ R. HAYS, "Pistis (Faith) and Pauline Christology", in E. Johnson – *al.*, eds., *Pauline Theology IV*, Minneapolis: Fortress 1997, 48.

1.3 Literary Analysis, Form and Structure of Romans 3:21-26

1.3.1 Literary Analysis

^{3:21} But now the **righteousness of God** has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, ²² **the righteousness of God** through faith of Jesus Christ for **ALL** who believe. For there is no distinction; ²³ since **ALL** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ they are **justified** by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, by virtue of his own faith. This was to show **God's righteousness**, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; ²⁶ it was a manifestation at the present time that **he himself is righteous** and that he **justifies** him who has the faith of Jesus.¹⁹

Since Romans is a work of Christian rhetoric, a work that aims to persuade, this text uses many rhetorical techniques. There is a frequent occurrence of the term ‘righteousness of God’ (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) or its variants, (6 times)²⁰ and ‘faith in (faithfulness of) Jesus Christ’ (3 times). These concepts will be the major focus of Paul’s argument. Repetition of words not only gives emphasis, but also implicitly contains a commentary and augments the shades of meaning. Besides that, Paul expresses himself antithetically (righteousness of God vs. law), and plays on various meanings of the word ‘law’ (v. 21).²¹

This text has a unique literary style. According to Jewett, it “departs from the immediate style of the preceding sections of Romans and moves into the grand or elegant style with ‘extended periodic syntax’ that fuses the entire pericope into a single sentence.”²² Byrne points out that the only genuine declarative statement is in verse 21: “But now the righteousness of God has

¹⁹ Our critical text is adapted from RSV, FITZMYER (*Romans*, 341) and NEYREY (unpublished materials).

²⁰ This rhetoric feature called *paronomasia*, means recurrence of the same word/word stem in close proximity. JEWETT, *Romans*, 269.

²¹ In the first instance ‘law’ means the deeds prescribed by the law, while in the second he refers to the Pentateuch/Torah.

²² JEWETT, *Romans*, 296. Most of this style is lost in English translation.

been manifested apart from law.” Apart from vv. 22d-23 (which sum up 1:18–3:20), everything else is appended to it either as participles or infinitive clauses.²³ This unique style catches the attention of the reader; it is a proper style for the vivid exposition of an elevated subject matter.

Paul appeals to traditional faith by quoting a Christological formula in vv. 24-26. In a book edited by Donfried, one reads that it is a kerygmatic style, through which “Paul expounds the meaning of the Christ–event as he understands it in the light of earlier Christian traditions.”²⁴ By appealing to the traditional faith confession, Paul means to convince the Romans of the orthodoxy of ‘his Gospel,’ which he elaborates in this text.²⁵ Therefore, all these stylistic rhetorical features in one passage highlight the significance of what Paul is saying.

1.3.2 Structure and Form of the Text

Paul uses a chiasmic structure in 3:21-26. B. Byrne discerns this distinct structural pattern in the text: “Double assertions of the ‘revelation (vv. 21-22c) or ‘demonstration (vv. 25b-26) of God’s righteousness ‘frame’ a central proclamation of God’s justification of the believer in virtue of the death of Jesus Christ, operative as a ‘means of expiation (vv. 24-25a)’”²⁶ This forms a chiasmic pattern as follows:

²³ BYRNE, *Romans*, 122-123.

²⁴ DONFRIED, *The Romans Debate*, 253. The editor notes that some students of Scripture use the term “Christ-event” in their books and articles, but it is technically not a biblical term, and Paul certainly would never have used it. Paul experienced and preached Jesus Christ crucified – and risen – as a person, not as an event.

²⁵ According to Jewett (*Romans*, 24), the citation of creedal formulations is one of the rhetorical devices found in Romans: “These citations reveal the rhetorical effort to find common ground with various groups of believers in Rome, and to avoid the impression that Paul’s theology is eccentric in comparison with the faith held in common by other believers”. Similarly, Paul appeals to the Scriptures in v. 21.

²⁶ BYRNE, *Romans*, 123.

- A 21-22c *revelation of God's righteousness*
 [22d-23] summary of 1:18–3:20 (all are sinful)
 B 24-25a **God justifying** through expiatory death of Christ
 A¹ 25b-26 *demonstration of God's righteousness*

From this structure, God's initiative on behalf of the sinful humanity (God's righteousness) stands out as the central argument of the text. This is the essence of Paul's 'Gospel of God's righteousness.'

As to the form of the text, it is part of the *probatio*, a part of the middle section/body of the letter. In it, Paul expounds his theme and provides the evidence for the case he is discussing.

1.4 Source/Redaction Analysis

Most scholars agree that in Romans 3:21-26 Paul incorporates an earlier Christian tradition.²⁷ However, there is a dispute as to whether this formula starts from vv. 24-26, or from vv. 25-26.²⁸ It is Paul's method throughout his letters to quote a traditional formula known to his readers, and then reinterpret it or formulate the expression of his personal convictions upon it (see 1 Cor 15:3-5, 1 Thess 4:13f; 4:14). This is what Paul does here. We take the view that the pre-Pauline formula is found in vv. 24-26, because there are many features indicating so, as follows:

Verse 24 does not continue from verse 23; it starts abruptly with a participle (*δικαιούμενοι*) without any conjunction at all, instead of a coordinated indicative, as if from another context.²⁹ The passage contains many terms which are found only here in Pauline letters (Pauline *hapax legomena*).³⁰ Other indications for pre-Pauline composition are repetition of phrases that are redundant

²⁷ Some scholars, on stylistic grounds, think that the text is more of Pauline composition, while some others argue for a wholly Pauline composition, which uses traditional language. But so far, the commonly held view is that of a pre-Pauline formula. FITZMYER, *Romans*, 343.

²⁸ DUNN, *Romans 1-8*, 164.

²⁹ REUMANN, "The Gospel of the Righteousness of God," 435.

³⁰ These words are; *προτίθεμαι* (found also 5:13 but with a different sense), *ἰλαστήριον*, *ἔνδειξις*, (found also in 2 Cor 8:24) *πάρεσις*, *προγίνομαι*, and *ἀμάρτημα*, all in v. 25, and *ἀνοχη*, in v 26. DUNN, *Romans 1-8*, 164.

like ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ in vv. 25 and 26, and in v. 24 we have δωρεάν (free gift) and τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι (by his grace), both of which carry the same meaning.

Thus, apparently Paul took a formula which reflected the early Christian claim that “Christ’s death, a sacrifice for sins provided by God in accordance with the Law, is God’s means of extending his righteousness to all who believe (including those outside the Law).”³¹ Paul then, modified this formula by “insertion of the phrases ‘through faith’ in v. 25b and ‘in order to demonstrate his righteousness’ in v. 25c.”³² This is what makes the text such difficult reading, as we shall see in the exegesis, which follows.

2. Exegesis of Romans 3:21-26

2.1 Revelation of the Righteousness of God (Rom 3:21-22c)

V. 21–22c Νυνὶ δὲ χωρὶς νόμου δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν ²²δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς πάντα τοὺς πιστεύοντας. (But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, ²² the righteousness of God through faith [in] Jesus Christ for all who believe).

‘But now’: In Paul (cf. 7:17, 1 Cor 12:18), this phrase marks a logical contrast, with a temporal reference. It marks a significant textual transition point, for it contrasts what is to be said with what has been said in 1:18–3:20. It marks also a new stage in salvation history, a new aeon of divine righteousness which replaces the old aeon characterized by the law and the promises, divine wrath and humanity under the reign of sin. It is a boundary marker of ‘God’s map of times.’³³

³¹ DUNN, *Romans 1–8*, 164.

³² JEWETT, *Romans*, 271.

³³ According to Neyrey, in Romans, time is divided as follows: the time of the First Adam (creation until the Fall, in which Adam enjoyed immortality and friendship with God), the time of the Second Adam (from the Fall until the coming of Christ, in which humanity was characterized by sinfulness and death) and the time of the New Adam, (the coming of Christ, humanity

χωρὶς νόμου is variously translated as ‘independently from the law’ or apart from the law.³⁴ It is synonymous with χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου – apart from deeds of the law (3:20, 28; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10), thus ‘without any recourse to the deeds prescribed by the law.’ Paul speaks of the law in so far as it acts as “a boundary marker (those within the law), where ‘works of the law’ is the distinctive pattern of religion and lifestyle demanded of those marked out by the law.”³⁵ Paul affirms that ‘now’ God has revealed his righteousness outside these boundaries.

δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται, i.e., God’s righteousness (in contrast with the wrath of God in 1:18) has been revealed – made public, made known – in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It has “become visible historically in the Christ event.”³⁶

The meaning of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ is much debated. The phrase is a *crux interpretum*. The genitive θεοῦ can be translated as subjective, i.e., a possessive that may refer to God’s own righteousness, a quality of his being, or of his activity. It can also be an objective genitive, referring to a status given by God, the righteous status of human beings that God grants them, a status given by God to human beings as a grace, or righteousness as a state of validity before God.³⁷ Grammatically, each of the meanings is possible. However, which one did Paul intend here? Various authors opine that in Romans 3:5, Paul intends a subjective sense; and they render the opinion that he probably intends the same sense in 3:21, 22, 25, 26, and indeed, the rest of the Letter to

restored to righteousness). For parallels in Galatians, see NEYREY, *Render to God*, 103.

³⁴ Law has many meanings, and Paul moves from one meaning to another quite often. It can mean the Pentateuch (3:21), the whole Scripture (3:31), or even the book Genesis (4:1-25), ‘works of the law,’ that is, the system of the 613 laws. It can refer to the principle, rationale for how the world works (3:27, 7:23), among others (Neyrey, unpublished materials), among others.

³⁵ DUNN, *Romans 1–8*, 165.

³⁶ JEWETT, *Romans*, 273.

³⁷ D. MOO, *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996, 71, FITZMYER, *Romans*, 105-107, 257-264, esp. 105.

the Romans.³⁸ A common opinion is that elsewhere (e.g., 2 Cor 5: 21f; Phil 3:9) Paul intends the objective sense.

If we agree that Paul intends the subjective sense in Romans, particularly in 3:21-26, then one can feasibly place the phrase within the literary milieu of the OT. In the pre-exilic OT, God is considered *saddiq* (upright, just as in Deut 33:2): "*Sedeq or sadaqah* express the quality whereby the Lord, involved in a lawsuit (*rib*) with the rebellious Israel, judges it and displays his 'uprightness' in doing so (cf. Isa 3:13; Jer 12:1; Hos 4:1-2; 12:3; Mic 6:2)."³⁹ It is a quality of God manifested in judicial activity: God judges with uprightness i.e., justly. However, in post-exilic times, *sedeq* is portrayed as a divine quality whereby God acquits his people, manifesting towards them a gracious, salvific power by means of a just judgment that finds its *raison d'être* in his divine mercy (cf. Isa 16:13; 51:5, 6, 8; Ps 40:9-10).

It is suggested, therefore, that Paul adopts this post-exilic understanding in Romans—δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ. Taken subjectively, it denotes an attribute, a quality, a property of God. It brings to light an attribute of God's power:⁴⁰ God is a just judge, who exercises his judgment in acquitting, not punishing. "God manifests it towards humanity when through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ he brings about the vindication and acquittal of sinful human beings. It is a manifestation of God's saving and acquitting power."⁴¹ This is mercy. Thus, forensically speaking, the term has strong legal and judicial connotations that unavoidably lie

³⁸ For example, Byrne, Dunn, and Fitzmyer espouse this opinion.

³⁹ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 106

⁴⁰ NEYREY, *Render to God*, 115-120

⁴¹ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 106-107. The editor notes that when the scholar turns his or her attention to the authoritative interpreter of Scripture one finds the following brief commentary on the judgment that vindicates and acquits through Jesus' death and resurrection: "The divine justice revealed in the cross of Christ is "to God's measure," because it springs from love and is accomplished in love, producing fruits of salvation. The divine dimension of redemption is put into effect not only by bringing justice to bear upon sin, but also by restoring to love that creative power in man thanks also to which he once more has access to the fullness of life and holiness that come from God. In this way, redemption involves the revelation of mercy in its fullness" (John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 7).

embedded in divine mercy.⁴² We take this as the meaning of the phrase throughout 3:21-26.

μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν. By ‘law and prophets,’ Paul refers to the OT, that is to say, to the Scripture as a whole.⁴³ The OT is the witness, as it prepared for the new disclosure of God’s righteousness (cf. Gal 3:23-25). The OT inclined prophetically towards the announcement that God would fulfill his salvific promises; and it looked forward to the day when they will become a reality. Here Paul rhetorically plays on different meanings of ‘law.’ Accordingly, Byrne suggests that “in referring ‘law’ now to a portion of Scripture (the Pentateuch) whereas earlier in the sentence it clearly designated a way of life or prescribed code of behavior, Paul is exploiting the ambiguity of the term *nomos* (see 3:27; 7:21-23).”⁴⁴

⁴² Historically, this phrase has been a bone of contention, both in translation and interpretation. In the Vulgate it is translated as *iustitia Dei*, and the English translations which follow the Vulgate render it as ‘justice of God.’ According to FITZMYER, (*Romans*, 257-264), some have understood this to mean God’s distributive or retributive justice, especially his punitive or vindictive justice. Augustine spoke of both a subjective and objective sense: “*Iustitia Dei*, not only that justice by which he himself is just, but also that which he gives to a human being, when he justifies the impious” (*ibid.*, 259). The understanding of this term was at the centre of arguments between the Protestants and Catholics during the Reformation. Luther understood it in objective sense, that is to say, the righteousness of God as the righteousness that a human being enjoys as a gift from God, while the Council of Trent took up the Augustinian view, embracing both the subjective and objective meaning. These understandings have persisted up to the modern times.

⁴³ Paul affirms that the Scriptures bear witness to the truth of what he is saying – a rhetorical device by which a proclaimer incorporates into his affirmations an authoritative source as a witness. Earlier on, Paul had quoted Habakkuk 2:4 (in 1:17) in connection to the revelation of God’s righteousness. But he will show clearly how the Law and the prophets witnessed to God’s righteousness apart from the Law in chapter 4. DUNN, *Romans 1–8*, 165. Some modern authors (MOO, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 74) still hold that Paul intends both senses in Romans; thus, ‘righteousness of God’ brings together the aspects of God’s activity and a status in human beings.

⁴⁴ BYRNE, *Romans*, 130.

διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ literally 'through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.' This is another *crux interpretum*. There is a dispute as to the sense of the genitive (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). It can be translated subjectively as 'faithfulness of Jesus Christ' or objectively as 'faith in Jesus Christ.'⁴⁵ Most commentators take the objective interpretation of the phrase (also in vv. 25 and 26). J. Fitzmyer represents this position and he argues as follows:

Paul does not draw attention to Christ's faithfulness elsewhere in the extended exposition of Romans, even where it would have been highly appropriate, especially in chap. 4, where Abraham's *pistis* is the model for the believer. Paul is not thinking of Christ's fidelity to the Father; nor does he propose it as a pattern for Christian conduct. Rather, Christ himself is a concrete manifestation of God's uprightness, and human beings appropriate to themselves the effects of that manifested uprightness through faith in him. Indeed, that divine uprightness is apprehended only by those who have the eyes of faith.⁴⁶

Other scholars, however, understand the genitive as subjective for the following reasons. Constructions which have πίστις and a genitive of person always refer to the faithfulness of the individual, and not faith in the individual.⁴⁷ For example, in 3:3 πίστις τοῦ θεοῦ means 'faithfulness of God' and not 'faith in God', and in 4:12, πίστεως τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ means 'faithfulness of our father Abraham' and not 'faith in ...' This should also apply to 3:22, 26 and its variant in v. 25. Therefore, a subjective reading [of πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ] is deemed appropriate in vv. 22, 26.⁴⁸

Another reason is that, in 3:21-26 and elsewhere, an "objective interpretation is superfluous in a number of verses (3:22; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9)."⁴⁹ If the phrase were to be translated objectively in v. 22, we would have a redundancy: Why should Paul add 'to all those

⁴⁵ English Bible translations (RSV, NRSV, NAB, JB, NJB etc) render the phrase as 'faith in Jesus,' just as many scholars have. The majority of the scholars we have consulted take this stand. But the subjective reading has gained a strong following recently, as we shall explain below.

⁴⁶ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 345.

⁴⁷ T.R. SCHREINER, *Romans*, BECNT 6, Grand Rapids: Backer 1998, 181.

⁴⁸ SCHREINER, *Romans*, 181.

⁴⁹ SCHREINER, *Romans*, 181.

who believe' (εἰς πάντα τοὺς πιστεύοντας) if he has just said 'through faith in Jesus?' On the other hand, a subjective reading would make these two phrases distinct, "with the righteousness of God being revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus, the emphasis of God's gift is maintained."⁵⁰ R. Hays argues that, in 3:22, Paul states that God's righteousness is manifested διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. So "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."⁵¹

Moreover, in v. 25, διὰ τῆς πίστεως is better explained by Christ's faithfulness. Its placement between ἰλαστήριον and ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι, though it makes an extremely difficult reading, favors 'Christ's faithfulness. According to T. R. Schreiner,

The words cannot refer to the faith of Christians because they are bounded on both sides by references to Christ's propitiatory work and his blood. Since both of these describe what Christ has done, it would be awkward to insert a reference the faith of Christians in the middle. The whole unit must refer to what Christ has accomplished on our behalf. Moreover, the objective interpretation faces the daunting task of explaining how the righteousness of God (vv. 21-22) has been manifested through human faith.⁵²

Therefore, we hold that most probably Paul meant 'faithfulness of Jesus Christ' in the three instances in 3:21-26. Paul implies that the righteousness of God has been manifested through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, his fidelity and obedience to the Father, as J. Hays says:

God has solved the problem of human unrighteousness and Israel's unfaithfulness by putting forward as [expiation] the one perfectly faithful human being [who is also the divine Son of God], Jesus, though others rebelled and refused to give glory to God, he

⁵⁰ L.T. JOHNSON, "Romans 3:21-26 and *Pistis Christou*", *CBQ* 44 (1982) 78.

⁵¹ HAYS, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 158.

⁵² SCHREINER, *Romans*, 182.

remained faithful. His death is an act of πίστις—the counterweight to Israel’s ἄπιστία (unfaithfulness)—because it is an act of perfect obedience through which many will be made righteous (5:19), and divine πίστις because it affirms God’s unbreakable love.⁵³

Therefore, the faithfulness of Jesus means that Jesus showed fidelity to the Father by “trusting absolutely Him ‘who gives life to the dead and calls into being what does not exist’ (Rom 4:17).”⁵⁴

εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας (for all who believe). The human response to the Gospel is faith. This is the new way of partaking of God’s righteousness, which is open to all; it is no longer confined to the boundaries of the Law. There is no distinction but there is equal opportunity for all human beings. This manifests God’s inclusivity. While in the old aeon, God’s impartiality was manifested in his wrath (1:16), in the new aeon, God’s righteousness is accessible to all who are faithful as Jesus was. To have faith is to be faithful in the same way as Jesus, i.e., by obedience even unto death.

2.2 Summary of 1:18–3:20: All Are Sinful (Rom. 3:22d-23)

V. 22c–23 οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολή,²³ πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ (For there is no distinction;²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God)

This sentence paraphrases all that Paul has explained in 1:18–3:32: the reality of the universality of sin and God’s impartiality in judging sinful humanity. By repeating it here, Paul intends to heighten the contrast between God’s wrath and what is to follow: God’s righteousness. Human beings are all sinners, rebels against God; and their condition can only be cured by God. Dunn contends that Paul’s object was “to destroy the Jewish presumption of special prerogative and defense even before the faithful covenant of God (v. 23). If that special claim on God is not allowed, the way is open for Paul to expound faith as the only means and everywhere, to receive God’s righteousness.”⁵⁵

⁵³ HAYS, “Pistis (Faith) and Pauline Christology”, 45.

⁵⁴ S.K. WILLIAMS, “Again *Pistis Christou*”, *CBQ* 49 (1987) 439.

⁵⁵ DUNN, *Romans 1–8*, 167.

ὕστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ – Fall short; i.e. arrive too late, fail to reach, lack, go without, fail to obtain a goal. Because of sins, human beings have failed to attain the goal that God intended for them—glory (δόξα). In the OT, glory (*kabod*) referred to the beauty, truth and goodness of the Lord’s self–manifestation and the radiant splendor of his presence. Fitzmeyer suggests that in relation to human beings, it is “the enhancing quality of a creature of God as well as the eschatological condition destined for human beings. It is thought of as being communicated to them as they draw close to God (5:2; 8:18, 21, etc.). Estranged from the intimate presence of God by sin, they have been deprived of that enhancing quality which they should have in this life as well as that for which they are destined eschatologically in the presence of God.”⁵⁶ This is the characteristic of humanity after the Fall, which has been reversed ‘now,’ with the coming of Christ.⁵⁷

2.3 God Justifying Action through the Expiatory Death of Christ (Rom 3:24-25a)

Vv. 24-25a ²⁴δικαιούμενοι δωρεάν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.²⁵ ὃν προέθετο ὁ θεὸς ἱλαστήριον διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι (²⁴ they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, by [virtue of his own] faithfulness)

δικαιούμενοι: Paul presents the central theme of the text under study, indeed of the whole letter here, as he expounds the nature of God’s initiative to remedy the sinful condition of humanity. Justification is the first specifying term that Paul uses to describe the transformative effect of Jesus’ expiation on humanity. God declares an acquittal—humanity is both declared and made righteous (cf. 5:19).⁵⁸ Humanity is ascribed the status of

⁵⁶ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 347.

⁵⁷ In other words, human beings may now enter into the beatifying power of God’s glory (ed.)

⁵⁸ Does God’s acquittal mean that God ‘covers’ our sins, so that we remain ‘just and sinners at the same time,’ or does it involve ‘inner transformation’ and new life? This question was at the heart of the reformation debate, marking a sharp difference between the Reformers and the Catholic Church.

righteousness before God's tribunal. This is not the status human beings can achieve by their own power or their merit. God himself takes the initiative; it is an unmerited dispensation on the part of God (δωρεάν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι). It is free, *gratis*, given for nothing. It excludes the possibility of meriting it by one's own efforts (like observing the 'works of the law').⁵⁹ It is God's benefaction to humanity, his altruistic generosity.

διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρόσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. Redemption (ἀπολύτρωσις) is the second term that Paul uses here to specify the transformative effect of Jesus' crucifixion on humanity. It literally means deliverance, liberation. In secular Greek and extra biblical literature, it referred to ransoming from slavery of the captives of war and prisoners of war.⁶⁰ In the NT, it refers to the release from the bondage and captivity created by sin. Thus, by his death on the cross, Jesus Christ has delivered/liberated/emancipated humanity from its sins. This is the early Christian traditional confession which Paul has adopted here.

Contrary to its secular use, in the NT use, suggests Byrne, there is no evidence of 'paying a price.'⁶¹ "No connotation of the payment of a price in exchange of release is present in the NT

But Paul was using words to specify the transformative effects of Christ's expiatory sacrifice; transformation from a life of sin to a life in the Spirit.

⁵⁹ Grace is God's outreach in dynamic power, the unconditional gift of God's creative, saving and sanctifying action. Judaism also saw the covenantal relationship with God as given by grace, an emphasis which Paul does not dispute (11:5). Paul's emphasis here is to correct the overemphasis on law and works of the law, which had obscured this. By setting grace against the law, Paul develops a different understanding of God's covenantal choice and righteousness. DUNN, *Romans 1-8*, 169-169.

⁶⁰ BYRNE, *Romans*, 131. In the OT it occurs in LXX (Dan 4:34 only) and NT in Luke 21:28, 21:28, and Ephesians 1:14, 4:30. But in the OT, it is closely related to λυτῶσις (ransoming), which refers to God as the redeemer of his people from Egyptian slavery (Deut 7:8; 9:26; Ps 25:22, 26; Isa 41:14; 44:22-24). FITZMYER, *Romans* 348.

⁶¹ Against the 'satisfaction theory' that Jesus had to pay a price to God for our sins by his death, to satisfy the wrath of God. Some scholars, e.g., MOO, (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 229) hold this view: "Paul [presents] Christ's death as a 'ransom,' a 'payment' that takes the place of that penalty for sins 'owed' by all people to God."

usage, where the stress upon the divine initiative is so clear. ‘Redemption’ can, however, be presented as ‘costly’ in the sense of involving suffering for its ‘central instrument’ Jesus Christ (1 Cor 6:20, 7:23).⁶²

ὄν προέθετο ὁ θεὸς ἰλαστήριον διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι As we saw earlier on, Paul modified the traditional formula by inserting διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως. Thus, ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι μοδιφισ ἰλαστήριον. According to Johnson then, the sentence could be paraphrased to read: “Through his blood, by virtue of his own faith, God has presented him as ἰλαστήριον”. It would mean that both the faithfulness of Jesus [his obedience] and the pouring out of his blood (his death), together form the act of expiation (διὰ and ἐν are taken as both instrumental).⁶³

Προτίθεμαι literally means set forth, present, put forward publicly. It has both aspects of revelation (v. 21) and display. Christ’s death conformed to God’s intent and purpose.

The meaning of ἰλαστήριον is problematic. It is a Pauline *hapax*, (cf. Heb 9:5), part of the early Christian tradition. It is related to ἰλασκεσθαι which means to appease, to propitiate, and which, according to Fitzmyer, was “used of appeasing angry gods in classical and Hellenistic Greek literature.”⁶⁴ Thus, for a long time the meaning of the term was understood in this sense: “God has set for Christ as ‘appeasing or as a ‘means of appeasing his own anger or wrath.’”⁶⁵ This understanding is no longer held by many scholars, for it is not supported by the LXX OT, where it occurs (Exod 25; Lev 16; Amos 9:1; Ezek 43).

In the OT, it referred to the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, “the mercy seat” or the place of expiation.⁶⁶ Thus, Paul uses it here in connection to the ritual of the Day of Atonement (*Yom*

⁶² BYRNE, *Romans*, 131–132.

⁶³ JOHNSON, “Romans 3:21–26 and *Pistis Christou*,” 80.

⁶⁴ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 349.

⁶⁵ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 349. This is a classical ‘satisfaction theory.’ Some scholars still hold this theory: “God set [Jesus] forth as a propitiation to satisfy his wrath ...” SCHREINER, *Romans*, 195.

⁶⁶ The mercy seat was the gold cover (*kapporet*) which was placed over the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies (Exod 25:17–22).

hakkippurim).⁶⁷ Accordingly, Fitzmyer suggests that it depicts “Christ as a new ‘mercy seat,’ presented or displayed by the Father as a means of expiating or wiping away the sins of humanity, indeed, as the place of the presence of God, of his revelation, and of his expiating power.”⁶⁸ Thus, expiation is the third term Paul uses here to describe the dynamism actuated by Jesus’ crucifixion: through Jesus’ death, God wipes away our sins; we are purified, cleansed by his blood.

διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ ἁματι, i.e., Jesus’ faithfulness, his obedience in accepting death on the cross, his inner disposition as he was dying. L. Johnson understands that this was the disposition of obedience to the Father (cf. Phil 2:6-11),⁶⁹ his complete trust that according to the Father’s intention, just as he had the power to lay down his life so he would have the power to raise it up again (cf. John 10:18).⁷⁰

2.4 Demonstration of God’s Righteousness (Rom 3:25b-26)

Vv 25b-26 ²⁵εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων ²⁶ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ, πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον καὶ δικαιῶντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ. (²⁵This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; ²⁶it was

⁶⁷ This was the day when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies once per year to offer blood sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of all the Israel (Exod 28; Lev 16:3-10; Num 29:7-11). In this ritual, the High Priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat, for the forgiveness and reconciliation with God. This ritual “came to be seen as the focus of the cleansing and renewing presence of God, on the occasion when God ‘wiped away’ the stain of all the accumulated sins of the previous year, inaugurating a fresh epoch of covenant between Israel and her God (Lev 16:2-16).” BYRNE, *Romans*, 127.

⁶⁸ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 349.

⁶⁹ JOHNSON, “Romans 3:21–26 and *Pistis Christou*”, 87–90.

⁷⁰ NEYREY, *Render to God*, 121.

a manifestation at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.)⁷¹

ἔνδειξις here means manifestation, and not proof. The death of Jesus Christ was to reveal, to make known in a new way God's righteousness, the meaning of which we have seen earlier on. Fitzmyer makes the comment that Christ's expiatory death reveals "the Father's bountiful acquittal, and human uprightness flows from the uprightness of God himself."⁷²

πάρεσιν (he passed over the sins previously committed). This is another *hapax legomenon* (only here in the NT and nowhere in the LXX). In extra-biblical literature it refers to remission of debts or punishments. Taken in this way, it would mean that Christ's death would have demonstrated the divine righteousness in the fact that God has forgiven the past sins which waited for the great Day of Judgment. But, etymologically, the term is related to παράημι, which means let go, pass over (cf. Luke 11:42; Heb 12:12; Sir 23:2).⁷³ Thus, the phrase would read "for the sake of the passing over of the bygone sins." Taken in this way, Christ's death *now* demonstrates God's righteousness in *wiping away* sins, in contrast to the *forbearance* which he showed over human sins in the past.⁷⁴

ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ (divine forbearance, i.e., in the clemency of God, in the merciful delay of God); the fact that God did not punish previous sins was an act of restraint. Up to the coming of Jesus, humanity was under God's wrath, because of its sinfulness, but God did not always exercise his judgment in punishment. Fitzmyer: "God's tolerance was ultimately based on his plan of salvation, according to which he knew that these sins would be expiated through the death of Christ in due time."⁷⁵ With the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the time of God's restraint is ended.

⁷¹ Vulgate for verse 26: *in sustentatione Dei, ad ostensionem iustitiae eius in hoc tempore, ut sit ipse iustus et iustificans eum, qui ex fide est Iesu.* (Ed.)

⁷² FITZMYER, *Romans*, 351.

⁷³ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 351

⁷⁴ Those who hold the Satisfaction Theory interpret this verse to mean that God had to show righteousness (punitive justice) in the Passion of Christ because neglect of the previously unpunished sins "would seem to indicate divine casualness with respect to human sins." BYRNE, *Romans*, 133.

⁷⁵ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 352.

ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ: ‘At the present [right] time’ refers us back to v. 21, (also v. 25). καιρὸς refers to significant moment of time, right time, appointed time, time of opportunity, whose decisions and actions will determine the future. Byrne suggests that the whole phrase “denotes the present time in the sense distinctive of Paul’s eschatology: the time between the resurrection of Christ and the final consummation (cf. 1 Cor 15:23-28).”⁷⁶

Jesus Christ’s death manifested, revealed that God is righteous (εἶς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον). Fitzmyer suggests that through the manifestation of his divine Son Jesus on the Cross, the Father “has vindicated his claim to be the acquitter and saviour of his people (Isa 59:15-20). Thereby he brought humanity into a status of rectitude, innocence, and acquittal ...”⁷⁷ This process comes from what God is in himself—righteous, faithful. It is a revelation of the attribute of God as merciful.

δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ literally “and justifying him from/by/through/by virtue of faith in Jesus.” Elsewhere we have seen that ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ refers to ‘faithfulness of Jesus.’ God enables sinful humanity to share in His righteousness which has been manifested by Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection, through remaining faithful as Jesus has. Faith on our part is participation, sharing in the obedient, faithful response of Jesus Christ himself. Williams likes to put it this way: “By standing where Christ stood—before God in total trust and obedience – and by assuming [Jesus’] mode of personal existence, Christians are justified by that faith which derives its very character from his self-giving obedience, that faith which was first his and has now become theirs.”⁷⁸ This is the new criterion for righteousness, which is opened for all, whether Jewish people or the Gentiles.

⁷⁶ BYRNE, *Romans*, 134.

⁷⁷ FITZMYER, *Romans*, 353.

⁷⁸ WILLIAMS, “Again *Pistis Christou*,” 444. The editor notes a variant on the interpretation of faith that connects faith to the truth revealed in Jesus and so enriches the vocabulary of Sam Williams and his professors at Harvard Divinity School: “Faith is said first to be an obedient response to God. This implies that God be acknowledged in his divinity, transcendence and supreme freedom. By the authority of his absolute transcendence, God who makes himself known is the source of the credibility of what he reveals. By faith,

3. Interpretation of Romans 1:21-26

In Romans 1:18–3:20, Paul depicts the universal unfaithfulness or sinfulness of humanity. All, without exception, the Jewish people and the Gentiles alike, have sinned and have failed to give honor to God. This is in stark contrast with God’s righteousness; therefore, Hays makes the comment that “the whole world stands under the wrath of God, subject to God’s righteous judgment.”⁷⁹ By judging humanity, God is not acting unjustly (3:1-8), but He is acting according to his nature as a just Judge. Neyrey: “God’s judgment is just in rewarding the good and requiting the wicked; but it is also impartial in that God does not favour the Jewish people over the Gentiles. The scenario Paul envisions is that of the great judgment ‘when God will render to every man according to his or her works’ (2:6)–just, impartial judgment.”⁸⁰

men and women give their *assent* to this divine testimony. This means that they acknowledge fully and integrally the truth of what is revealed because it is God himself who is the guarantor of that truth. They can make no claim upon this truth which comes to them as a gift and which, set within the context of interpersonal communication, urges reason to be open to it and to embrace its profound meaning. This is why the Church has always considered the act of entrusting oneself to God to be a moment of fundamental decision which engages the whole person. In that act, the intellect and the will display their spiritual nature, enabling the subject to act in a way which realizes personal freedom to the full. It is not just that freedom is a part of the act of faith: it is absolutely required. Indeed, it is faith that allows individuals to give consummate expression to their own freedom... **Men and women can accomplish no more important act in their lives than the act of faith; it is here that freedom reaches the certainty of truth and chooses to live in that truth.... The truth of Christian Revelation, found in Jesus of Nazareth, enables all men and women to embrace the ‘mystery’ of their own life...** To those wishing to know the truth, if they can look beyond themselves and their own concerns, there is given the possibility of taking full and harmonious possession of their lives, precisely by following the path of truth” (JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, 13-14). Jesus, then, is faithful because in revealing the truth of who he is, the God crucified out of the greatest love for us, he obeys the Father. We are faithful, therefore, when we love as Jesus loved (cf. 1 John 3:16) and so live fully within the freedom of God’s sons and daughters. (The bold print is that of the editor.)

⁷⁹ HAYS, “Pistis (Faith) and Pauline Christology”, 44.

⁸⁰ NEYREY, *Render to God*, 138.

Thus, as we come to Romans 3:20, questions linger: will God exercise His prerogative as a just Judge and punish human beings as they deserve? What will happen to the promises that God made to Abraham and his descendants? It is here that Paul announces triumphantly his Gospel of God's power: "but now ..." (v. 21). The coming of Jesus Christ is an advent of a new aeon, it is a boundary marker between the time of the First Adam (marked by sin and death) and the time of the New Adam. In this new aeon, "balancing the attribute of God's impartial judgment is the attribute of impartial mercy, which is the thrust of 3:21–8:39."⁸¹ Having found humanity guilty, instead of pronouncing the sentence, God declares an acquittal, God declares humans righteous.

Neyrey imagines that the way God deals with the problem of human infidelity shows God to be a Patron who bestows gifts on His clients (humans).⁸² God reveals his righteousness, his salvific power, through the death and resurrection of Christ. This is a revelation of God's mercy: "in Paul's gospel of God, mercy can be pinpointed in the death of Jesus (3:21-26). Despite their sinfulness, for which all humankind deserves judgment, all are 'justified by his grace as a gift' (3:24), by mercy. This happened when 'God put forward Jesus Christ as expiation' (3:25), that is, when God took the initiative..."⁸³ God's attribute of mercy, in other words, revealed a new dimension to his attribute of judgment ... Paul uses various terms, replete with meaning, to describe the gifts of God to humanity through Jesus' death on the cross as follows:

3.1 Justification (3:24, 26)

From our analysis, God grants humanity the divine gift of justification: by grace, he transforms human beings to make them

⁸¹ NEYREY, *Render to God*, 138.

⁸² The patron–client image is a social relationship in antiquity (Greek and Rome), for example, a king and his subjects, lords and their vassals. Some scholars have affixed this image to their explanation of the God – human relationship in the NT. Cf. J.H. NEYREY, "God, Benefactor and Patron: The Major Cultural Model for Interpreting the Deity in Greco–Roman Antiquity", *JSNT* 27 (2005) 465-492.

⁸³ NEYREY, *Render to God*, 120.

righteous and declares them to be so. God ascribes to human beings, therefore, a new status and honour that correspond to their new state of being. The honour so ascribed is not something human beings can achieve by themselves. The observance of the law cannot make human beings righteous. God does the transformation and ascribes this status and honour freely, gratuitously. It is purely God's initiative, out of his mercy: because 'mercy' in all its fullness is God's benefaction, it must be accepted with gratitude as God's free gift and favour. It can only be received as benefaction, not earned or merited. To consider it otherwise is to shame the Justifier and diminish God's goodness.⁸⁴

3.2 Redemption (3:24)

Through the death of Jesus, humanity is freed from the slavery of sin. "God's redemptive act in Christ represents a snatching of human beings away from the captivity to sin and from the prospect of wrathful condemnation at the judgment (cf. 5:9) to which that captivity has exposed them."⁸⁵ Through God's initiative, we are free from sin and death, but this freedom does not imply lawlessness. This is freedom for a goal. Justified human beings are now slaves of righteousness, slaves of God, who are totally submitted to God in the status, honour and freedom of God's children (cf. 6:15-16; 8:14-17).

3.3 Expiation (3:25)

Through his death (his blood), Jesus is a new 'mercy seat', the new meeting point between sinful humanity and the merciful God. In this meeting, through the blood of Jesus, God wipes away the sins of the humanity, He cleanses and consecrates human beings, makes them holy, separated, set apart. This is God's benefaction: "benefaction of mercy consists of a cornucopia of blessings ... but certainly 'forgiveness of sins' ... stands out as the most significant one."⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Cf. NEYREY, *Render to God*, 143.

⁸⁵ BYRNE, *Romans*, 126.

⁸⁶ NEYREY, *Render to God*, 143.

3.4 Universality of God's Initiative

God grants these benefactions to *all*. All humanity is included. This has been possible because God has acted outside the boundaries of the law (and in acting so He has remained faithful to his promises and his covenant). The criterion for partaking of God's benefits is faith (in contrast with the deeds of the law in the time of the First Adam). Thus, God's attribute of inclusivity is shown: "All Israelites and Greeks impartially receive the attribute of mercy ... Paul makes it clear: 'no one who believes in him will be put to shame [Rom 10:11].' For there is no distinction between Judean and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For 'everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved' (Rom 10:11-13)."⁸⁷

3.5 Faith

Finally, the way through which all partake in God's benefactions is faith: "what is crucial about faith as the vehicle of human access to righteousness is that, unlike righteousness tied to the ... Law, it opens up the possibility of righteousness on the universal scale ..."⁸⁸ Paul has shown us in 3:21-26 and elsewhere that, *first of all*, faithfulness (fidelity) is primarily predicated of God—God is faithful, righteous. God remains true to his own nature, to his own promises. *Secondly*, Jesus Christ, true to his own nature as God, is faithful. He showed fidelity to the Father through obedience. Divinely faithful to his identity as the Wisdom and Truth of the Father, He remained faithful in his human nature. He obeyed and trusted the Father completely, maintained full communion with the Father, even at the most difficult moment, as he was dying on the cross, by trusting that just as he, Jesus, had the power to lay down his life, so he had the power to take it up again. By the power of the Holy Spirit and the unalterable will of the Father, he would rise again. His death then became an act of faithfulness, an act of obedience and fidelity. Through this act Jesus gave honor to the Father.

⁸⁷ NEYREY, *Render to God*, 139.

⁸⁸ BYRNE, *Romans*, 125.

In this regard, Jesus functions as our mediator, the carrier of God's benefactions to humanity: He is the unique and necessary mediator, because he is on good terms with both sides (the Benefactor and the Beneficiaries): "Jesus bridges the heavenly and earthly worlds. God, the heavenly Benefactor, has bestowed on us all benefaction *through Jesus* (e.g. Eph 1:1-10) ... Jesus mediates the heavenly patronage of God to us, even as he functions to mediate earthly petition and praise to the heavenly patron."⁸⁹

Thirdly, we have faith as long as we locate ourselves within Jesus' fidelity. We have faith as long as we have the same will to obey the Father as Jesus had, as J. Hays says: "Jesus' faithful endurance and obedience even to undeserved death on the cross (cf. Phil 2:8) has saving significance for all humanity; this is the righteous 'act' of obedience ... by which 'the many' are considered righteous, i.e., set in right relationship with God (Rom 5:15-19). The unfaithfulness of fallen humanity is counteracted and overcome by the representative faithfulness of Christ."⁹⁰

The grace of God and the free gift in the grace of Jesus Christ has abounded for many. Those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness are the ones who share in Jesus' fidelity and reign in life through Jesus Christ.

To live in the free gift of this grace is 'to be crucified with Christ' (Gal 2:20), so that it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God. And in this way, I live in the grace of communion with Jesus Christ and partake in God's righteousness.

This new status and honour, this grace that is freely bestowed on us by the Father through faith in Jesus Christ, has its implications, for it comes with new responsibilities. Christians must live in a certain way so as to honour their heavenly Father. This is the basis of Paul's ethics in Romans, which he treats in subsequent chapters of Romans. Faith as obedience, an inner attitude of fidelity to God's will, is a right behaviour, and it is a grace that saves. It is part of this ethic (cf. 4:23-25). Another element of this ethic is hope – steadfastness, perseverance and

⁸⁹ NEYREY, "God, Benefactor and Patron, 476.

⁹⁰ HAYS, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, 160.

endurance (cf. 5:3-5) – a hope anchored in the cardinal fact that God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Required is to ‘walk with the Lord’, that is, to do right things, right actions (cf. 6:12ff.). All these are rooted in Paul’s understanding of God’s righteousness which has been manifested to us through Jesus Christ’s faithful, expiatory death.

Conclusion

Romans 3:21-26 marks an important shift in the tone and thought of Paul, as he develops his theme. Paul shifts from the treatment of the Justice of God to the treatment of God’s Mercy. In it, Paul demonstrates how the gospel he is preaching “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (1:16). In order to present a strong argument, Paul incorporates into this text a Christological formula, well known to his audience; and he employs a complex style. Unfortunately, this has made it a notoriously difficult and ambiguous text in the Letter (and probably in the whole NT). Because of its difficulties, this text has been the centre of controversy, especially during the Reformation. Fortunately, in our modern times scholars have managed to recover what they suggest is its original sense.

In our work we have appreciated the intention of a man who walked not according to the flesh but according to the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 8:4). His name is St. Paul. Consequently, aided by the same Spirit who helps us in our weakness (cf. Rom 8:26), we are able to learn from the text the basic Pauline understanding of our Lord God Jesus Christ, of God our heavenly Father, and the human beings that they have created, redeemed and justified in the Holy Spirit.

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
HCHCB	Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary

<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NT	New Testament
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OT	Old Testament
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

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