

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS AS GOD'S FAIRNESS IN
ROMANS 1:17: AN ANCIENT PERSPECTIVE
ON A SIGNIFICANT PHRASE¹

FRANK THIELMAN*

It would be hard to think of a text more important for understanding Paul's concept of justification than the sentence that makes up Rom 1:17. It is part of the pithy, programmatic two-sentence statement of the letter's theme and contains the letter's first use of righteousness language. Moreover, it connects this language with the gospel, salvation, faith, and life, all terms of critical importance as the argument of the letter unfolds. If we are to understand how justification functions within Paul's gospel, we need to understand how righteousness language functions in this verse.

The interpretation of this language in the critical phrase "the righteousness of God," however, is hotly contested, and a variety of explanations for it have been advanced over the nearly eighteen centuries of extant commentary on Romans.² In what follows, I would like to argue that part of the reason for this volatile interpretive history is that the phrase is polyvalent. Paul intended its meaning to be dense, and probably did not think it would be fully understood on a first hearing. I would like to argue further that the most obvious meaning of the phrase to its first hearers, a meaning that Paul probably knew it would have to them and therefore intended, is a meaning that has often been dismissed in recent interpretive disputes as surely incorrect. To put my thesis in a nutshell, "the righteousness of God" has three meanings in Rom 1:17. It not only refers to God's saving activity and to the gift of acquittal from sin before God on the basis of faith, but, from the perspective of its first readers and hearers in Rome, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ would have referred most obviously to a property of God's character, that he is fair, even-handed, and equitable in the way he distributes salvation.

The idea that "the righteousness of God" in Rom 1:17 referred to an aspect of God's character was common in the Middle Ages, particularly the view that it referred to God's strict justice in punishing the guilty and rewarding

* Frank Thielman is Presbyterian professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, 800 Lakeshore Drive, Birmingham, AL 35229. He originally delivered this paper at the annual meeting of the ETS in Atlanta, GA, on November 18, 2010.

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² Surveys of the phrase's interpretive history appear in many places. Most helpful to me in the preparation of this essay have been Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer (Röm 1–5)* (Zurich/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/Neukirchener, 1978) 223–33; Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Gospel and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 13–21, and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 258–63.

the virtuous.³ To Peter Abelard, writing in the twelfth century, for example, it meant that God gave “praise to the elect and punishment to the godless.”⁴

This was the understanding of “the righteousness of God” that had troubled Martin Luther until he realized it made no sense within its own literary context or the theological context of the whole Bible. Within its own immediate context in Romans, Paul explained the justice of God not as his consistent punishment of the sinner and praise of the righteous but as his salvation of sinners by counting them righteous and giving life on the basis of faith. The phrase “the righteousness of God,” Luther discovered, worked like other similar biblical phrases such as “the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God with which he makes us wise. . . .”⁵ The righteousness of God, then, was not a characteristic of God that drove him to punish the sinner, but a gift that God gives to the sinner who has faith.

From that time until the early twentieth century, the idea became increasingly dominant that “the righteousness of God” in Rom 1:17 meant God’s gift of righteousness to the person who had faith. Although Protestant and Roman Catholic interpreters disagreed on the nature of this gift, by the nineteenth century, both agreed that the phrase referred not to a property of God but to the gift of God.

The reasons for this rejection of the “divine property” approach to the phrase are understandable. Commentators who think that the righteousness of God is a gift from God to the believer reasonably point to Paul’s quotation of Hab 2:4 in the second part of the sentence. There, the one who is righteous is not God but the believer, and this implies that when Paul used the phrase “the righteousness of God” in the first part of the sentence he spoke of a righteousness that comes from God to the believer. In Rom 3:21–24, moreover, Paul explains “the righteousness of God” as “being justified freely by his grace,” a phrase that is itself further explained in 3:26 as God “justifying the one who has faith in Jesus.” Later, in Rom 10:3, Paul will contrast Israel’s “own righteousness” with “the righteousness of God,” implying that human righteousness needs to be replaced with divine righteousness, and this happens when God gives righteousness to people. In the analogous text, Phil 3:9, Paul uses a close cousin of the phrase to speak explicitly of the ἡ ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνη. Again, the contrast between Paul’s own righteousness and the righteousness from God implies that righteousness here is a gift God gives to Paul: the righteousness he has is not his own but comes from God. Finally, in 2 Cor 5:21 Paul explains God’s reconciliation of sinners to himself by saying that God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin and that this meant sinners became the

³ Fitzmyer, *Romans* 259–60.

⁴ Peter Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos: Römerbriefkommentar*, vol. 1 (trans. Rolf Peppermüller; *Fontes Christiani* 26/1; Freiburg: Herder, 2000) 1:138–39. Cf. Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (3d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 83–84.

⁵ LW 34:337. On this, see Fitzmyer, *Romans* 261.

righteousness of God. Elements of this statement are obscure, but it seems to imply that God reconciled sinners to himself by giving righteousness to them.⁶

The idea that δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ referred to an attribute of God, however, received renewed energy in the early and mid-twentieth century with the thesis that the phrase referred to the saving power of God. Already in 1903, James Hardy Ropes argued in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* that the proper background for the phrase was the concept of God's righteousness in Isaiah, where it often means the vindicating power of God on behalf of his oppressed and needy people. The closest analogies to Paul's use of the phrase, Ropes pointed out, were such expressions as, "My righteousness is near, my salvation has gone forth" in Isa 51:5.⁷ By 1932, Charles Harold Dodd was disseminating this view widely in his popularly written commentary on Romans.⁸ In Germany two years later, Adolf Schlatter also argued that in Rom 1:17 "the righteousness of God" referred to God's powerful, saving activity.⁹ Ernst Käsemann adopted a form of this interpretation in a widely hailed lecture on "'The righteousness of God' in Paul," delivered and published in 1961. Käsemann then placed his view on a firm scholarly footing in his magisterial commentary on Romans, published in 1973.¹⁰ Although Käsemann's claim that the phrase was a technical term within first-century Judaism did not survive, and his view that God's righteousness is both gift and power is still controversial, his argument for the idea that the righteousness of God refers to God's saving activity has been widely accepted. By 1993, Joseph Fitzmyer could say that it is "debatable . . . whether the gift idea of *dikaiosunē theou* is suitable anywhere in Romans."¹¹

Here, too, the arguments for reading the phrase this way, at least in Rom 1:17, are strong. As Schlatter pointed out, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ in 1:17 is sandwiched between the syntactically identical phrases δύναμις θεοῦ in 1:16 and ὄργη θεοῦ in 1:18, and both those phrases refer to something that belongs to God.¹² It only makes sense that δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, then, would also refer to something that belongs to God. In addition, as later interpreters have pointed out, Rom 1:16–17 contains rich echoes of Ps 98:2–3 where the righteousness of God is interpreted as God's saving power displayed for his people and with reference to the nations:

⁶ See, e.g., Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Romans* (trans. William P. Dickson; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884) 50 and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001) 200–201.

⁷ James Hardy Ropes, "'Righteousness' and 'the Righteousness of God' in the Old Testament and in St. Paul," *JBL* 22 (1903) 211–27, esp. pp. 225–26.

⁸ C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (MNTC; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932) 11. Thanks to Hultgren (*Paul's Gospel* 17) for bringing both Ropes and Dodd to my attention.

⁹ Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 20–21.

¹⁰ Ernst Käsemann, "'The Righteousness of God' in Paul" in *New Testament Questions of Today* (trans. W. J. Montague; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 168–82; idem, *An die Römer* (HNT 8a; Tübingen: Mohr, 1973); idem, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 24–30.

¹¹ Fitzmyer, *Romans* 262.

¹² Schlatter, *Romans* 20.

² The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. ³ He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. (ESV)

The language here is so close to Rom 1:16–17 that it is difficult to think it has not exercised some influence over the way Paul formulated the letter's thesis.¹³ The righteousness of God in Psalm 98 is, without doubt, something that belongs to God and that God uses for the salvation of Israel and the revelation of himself to the nations. The righteousness of God in Rom 1:17, then, is likely to have the same connotations.

In recent years, the debate over the use of the phrase in Rom 1:17 has taken place primarily in terms of these two options: the righteousness of God is a gift of God to the one who has faith, or the righteousness of God is God's saving power, and this power becomes effective for the one who has faith. Often, it is said, Paul meant to communicate both ideas.¹⁴

Early in its history, then, the debate left behind the idea that Paul used the phrase to refer to what has been called a "property" of God. The resurrection of the thought that it meant a righteousness of God's own in the twentieth century was carefully articulated in terms of the OT and Jewish background of the expression rather than any Greek notion of God's innate character, particularly any characteristic of distributive justice.¹⁵

If we are thinking strictly in terms of God's righteousness as God's distributive justice this may be right, but it is important to keep in mind that although Paul was clearly indebted to the OT for his concept of "the righteousness of God," he was also writing to Christians in Rome, most of whom were probably not literate, but were bilingual in Greek and Latin, and who had varying degrees of knowledge of the OT. It seems improbable that when the apostle wrote to them he intended for them to exclude from their thinking specifically Greek and Roman notions of righteousness. A similar point has been made with respect to Romans generally in the interesting little book by Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level*.¹⁶ Oakes reminds interpreters of Romans that the first audience of Paul's letter would have been similar to the artisans, shop owners, freedmen, and slaves in Pompeii in AD 79 whose daily lives were tragically interrupted and frozen in time by the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius. These were hard-working, busy people trying to survive in a highly class-conscious society and who had been brought together by the gospel across the firm social boundaries that

¹³ Cf., for example, Fitzmyer, *Romans* 257 ("significant echo"); Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress) 143 ("important parallel").

¹⁴ See, for example, Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 74–75.

¹⁵ Ropes, for example, insisted that Paul's understanding of righteousness followed no "processes of the Greek mind" ("Righteousness" 221), and Käsemann dismissed the "divine property" view of God's righteousness as "Greek theology" foreign to Paul's background in "the Old Testament and later Judaism" ("Righteousness of God" 174).

¹⁶ Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009). On the methodological issue of determining what the letter means by thinking about what it probably meant to its first hearers, see Oakes's comments on p. 98.

divided them. Whatever we may think of Oakes's interpretation of specific texts in Romans, it is difficult to see how his overall point can be faulted. Paul is unlikely to have written a letter that he knew would be unintelligible to most of his audience. It is worth asking, then, how the shop owners and slaves in the house churches of Rome would have heard the phrase "the righteousness of God" in Rom 1:17. This will probably let us know at least part of what Paul intended them to hear.

We can, I think, come very close to listening to the text with the ears of the first readers of Romans by listening to Origen of Caesarea's commentary on Romans, the earliest extant interpretation of the whole letter. Now made available in English by Thomas P. Scheck, this commentary is an extraordinarily valuable resource for understanding Romans.¹⁷ It was written in AD 246, and therefore at a time before sweeping changes had taken place either to the culture of the Roman empire in which both Paul and Origen lived or to the Greek language which both Paul and Origen spoke. Origen, then, is likely to provide insights into the idiom, both cultural and linguistic, in which Romans was first produced that may help us nearly eighteen centuries later understand what Paul intended to communicate.

It is true that Origen's commentary is only preserved in a few Greek fragments and in Rufinus's fifth-century Latin translation, and this must be taken into account. According to Scheck, Rufinus changed passages in the commentary that he thought were unorthodox, expressed Origen's thoughts in his own idiomatic Latin, and lowered the intellectual level of the whole work. Nevertheless, after a careful comparison of the commentary with Origen's other writings, Scheck concludes that it is on the whole a reliable guide to Origen's interpretation of Romans. "It is to Origen's interpretations we are listening in the *Commentary*," says Scheck, "not to Rufinus's."¹⁸

When Origen is mentioned in discussions of the "the righteousness of God" in Rom 1:17, he is almost always credited with having said that the phrase referred to God's "distributive justice," the view that Martin Luther rejected with good reason when he had his hermeneutical breakthrough in reading the letter.¹⁹ Although this is certainly true of Origen's explanation of righteousness language at other places in Romans, it is only true in a positive sense of his comments on God's righteousness in Rom 1:17. In Rom 1:17, Origen takes "the righteousness of God" to refer not to a distribution of rewards and punishments according to works, but to God's impartiality in distributing

¹⁷ Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1–5* (trans. Thomas P. Scheck; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001); and idem, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 6–10* (trans. Thomas P. Scheck; Catholic University of America Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Scheck in Origen, *Romans, Books 1–5* 19.

¹⁹ See, for example, A. Tholuck, *Kommentar zum Briefe Pauli an die Römer* (Halle: Eduard Anton, 1842) 68; William G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary upon the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1879) 17; Meyer, *Romans*, 49, n. 2. Wilckens (*An die Römer [1–5]* 223–24) gives a much more careful assessment of Origen's view which, he says, is indebted to the Greek philosophical tradition and interprets God's righteousness as his *ισότης*, one of the four cardinal virtues.

salvation to everyone who has faith, whatever their ethnic origin or social standing.²⁰

By the time Origen arrives at the word δικαιοσύνη in verse 17, he has been following Paul's argument closely from 1:14 to 1:16 and has noticed that it emphasizes God's fairness, equity, and impartiality to all human beings. Paul is obligated to Greeks and barbarians, to wise and to foolish, to Jew and to Greek. The salvation that the gospel makes available knows no social boundaries but cuts across such boundaries to treat everyone alike, as human beings. Origen moves directly into verse 17 from this line of thought. As Rufinus and Scheck have translated him, Origen explains verse 17 this way:

The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel through the fact that with respect to salvation no one is excluded whether he should come as a Jew, Greek, or barbarian. For the Savior says equally to all, "Come to me, all you that labor and are burdened."²¹

The Latin word that stands behind the term "equally" is the adverb *aeque*. Perhaps Origen's original Greek was the adverb ἴσως. The righteousness of God, then, is God's fairness and impartiality, his unwillingness to exclude anyone from salvation on the basis of his or her social standing.

Origen seems to have understood "righteousness" here not only in accord with its literary context in Rom 1:14–17 but in accord with the Greco-Roman cultural context that he shared with Paul. In this context, the word could mean the quality of treating people fairly, at least as established law and custom defined fairness. According to the ancient lexicon of Greek terms handed down in the Platonic tradition, δικαιοσύνη is

The state that distributes to each person according to what is deserved; the state on account of which its possessor chooses what appears to him to be just; the state underlying a law abiding way of life; social equality; the state of obedience to the laws.²²

The phrase "social equality" here represents the Greek expression ἰσότης κοινωνική.

But would Paul and his first readers in Rome have understood "the righteousness of God" in this way? Is this not simply the learned Origen interpreting Paul's description of God in terms of fairness (ἰσότης), one of the four

²⁰ Tholuck, *An die Römer* 68, claimed that Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791) interpreted the expression this way. This is apparently a reference to Semler's *Paraphrasis epistolae ad Romanos* (Halle: Carol, Herman, Hemmerde, 1769) 8. In recent times, Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), has also taken this view. He says that the noun δικαιοσύνη in Rom 1:17 is "polyvalent" and that "Paul's readers . . . could correctly hear him as discoursing about God's virtue or attribute of being 'just.' . . . Indeed, God's 'fairness' is an important part of Paul's argument, spelled out in terms of God's being 'without favoritism' in judging humans (see 2:11; 3:22; 11:33–36)."

²¹ Origen, *Romans, Books 1–5* 87.

²² "Plato," *Def.* 411d–e on "Justice" (δικαιοσύνη); Plato, *Complete Works* (ed. and trans. John M. Cooper, D. S. Cooper, et al.; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997) 1679. Closer to the time of Paul, see Arius Didymus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics* (ed. Arthur J. Pomeroy; SBLT 44; Greco-Roman Series 14; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999) 50–51. Paul was no philosopher, but he would have been aware that this understanding of "justice" was widespread.

cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy?²³ I believe Origen was not speaking as a philosopher when he said that God's righteousness in Rom 1:17 was his fairness but was instead using the everyday idiom of the Greek speaking Roman Empire. Evidence for this comes from a surprising source: the coins that people carried in their purses, used to make change in their shops, and stored under their floors.

In John Reumann's substantive *Anchor Bible Dictionary* article on "Righteousness" in the Greco-Roman world he says that the image of the goddess "*Dikaiosynē* with scales appears on Alexandrian coins of the time of Claudius, and on Roman coins as an attribute of *Aequitas*, equality/fairness/justice personified."²⁴ This is a very perceptive and useful comment, but it needs some adjustment.²⁵

First, I have not been able to locate the Alexandrian coins from the time of Claudius to which Reumann and his source, Martin Nilsson, refer. The third-century emperor Claudius II produced many surviving coins that depict and label personified *δικαιοσύνη*, but there do not appear to be examples of this kind of coin from Paul's contemporary, the first century emperor Claudius I. Second, coinage for which there is clear evidence does not reveal that "righteousness" becomes on some coins an *attribute* of personified "impartiality," rather "righteousness" and "impartiality" are represented as the same goddess. In other words, *δικαιοσύνη* and *aequitas*—righteousness and impartiality—seem to be interchangeable concepts on these coins.

From the early first century BC, Roman rulers began to identify themselves with the personification of various virtues on their coinage.²⁶ Pompey minted coins identifying himself variously with Piety and Victory; Julius Caesar added Mercy, to the list; coins from the time of Augustus identify him with Harmony, Fortune, Peace, Providence, and Victory, and during the Empire the list of virtues on coins grew.²⁷ The purpose of this was to instill within the common people who handled these coins the idea that the emperor was himself the embodiment of these virtues and that people should trust him to administer the affairs of Rome for their welfare. Coins were an ideal tool for this sort of propaganda. The Roman historian M. P. Charlesworth put it this way:

[Coins] passed through the hands of the highest and lowest, into the coffers of the rich and under the country farmer's hearthstone, might be stored in imperial

²³ Wilckens, *An die Römer* [1-5] 223.

²⁴ *ABD* V:743.

²⁵ As Reumann duly notes, this information appears in a footnote in Martin P. Nilsson's definitive work, *Geschichte der Griechischen Religion*, vol. 1: *Bis zur Griechischen Weltherrschaft* (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft 15.2.1; Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1941) 343, n. 1 (not 341, n. 1, as Reumann's article has it).

²⁶ On this, see F. Genecechi, *The Coin Types of Imperial Rome* (trans. Emily A. Hands; London: Spink & Son, 1908); M. P. Charlesworth, "The Virtues of a Roman Emperor: Propaganda and the Creation of Belief," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 23 (1937) 105-33; Shelagh M. Bond, "The Coinage of the Early Roman Empire," *Greece and Rome*, 2d series, 4 (1957) 149-59; and Barbara Lichočka, *Iustitia sur les Monnaies Impériales Romaines* (Travaux du Centre D'Archéologie Méditerranéenne de L'Académie Polonaise des Sciences 15; Warsaw: Editions Scientifiques de Pologne, 1974) 13-20.

²⁷ See Genecechi, *Coin Types* 25-29.

Rome itself or in some hut among the mountains of Lusitania, and upon these coins were placed words and symbols that could be understood by the simplest.²⁸

Personified *aequitas* is readily identifiable on Roman coinage as a woman holding a balance in her outstretched right hand.²⁹ She already appears on coins from the time of the Roman republic identified with the gens Caecilia, a family that produced a number of high officials. On this coinage, she appears with her trademark balance and two other symbols: she holds a cornucopia, or horn of plenty, and is seated on a *sella curulis*, or chair of state. There can be little doubt about what all of this means: the coin proclaims that the Roman official in charge of the distribution of grain conducted his office with complete equity. No partiality affected his decisions about the distribution of food, and he gave to everyone their fair share.

It is important to observe that the symbol did not communicate something negative—that people were justly punished or rewarded according to their deserts—but something entirely positive—life sustaining grain was distributed equally to all with no partiality. We can already see that Origen’s understanding of “the righteousness of God” in Rom 1:17 is not off the mark from the perspective of Roman culture. Just as food came equally to all through the benevolent and conscientious execution of the office of the Aedile, so God makes salvation available to everyone without prejudice.

Aequitas also appeared without a label on coins minted in Asia Minor from the time of Tiberius, and she is clearly labeled *aequitas* by AD 69 on a coin from Rome during the brief rule of Vitellius.³⁰ She was not confused with *iustitia*, or personified justice, because her balanced scales distinguished her from justice, at least until the late second century when *iustitia* began occasionally to adopt some of the characteristics of *aequitas*.³¹ It is precisely the image of *aequitas*—the woman holding an outstretched balance—that begins to appear in the third Egyptian year of Nero’s reign, or AD 56–57, on coins minted in Alexandria.³² Nero’s right-facing bust appears on one side, and the modestly dressed young woman with outstretched balance appears on the other side. Now, however, the woman is clearly labeled in large Greek letters, ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗ.³³

Here is a definition of δικαιοσύνη that is about as clear as we could hope for, a visual representation of what the common people who handled these

²⁸ “Virtues of a Roman Emperor” 110.

²⁹ In this paragraph I am heavily dependent on Wilhelm Koehler, *Personifikationen abstracter Begriffe auf Römischen Münzen*, part 1 (Königsberg, Prussia: Hartungsche Buchdruckerei, 1910) 17.

³⁰ H. C. Ackerman and J.-R. Gisler, eds., *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* (Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1986), vol. 3, pt. 2, pp. 279–80, and the interpretation of the imagery in Jean Ch. Balty, “Dikaiosyne,” *idem*, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 388.

³¹ Genecci, *Coin Types* 37; Lichocka, *Iustitia* 48–50.

³² The image continued, frequently with the explanatory legend in Greek, until the reign of Diocletian. See J. G. Milne, *Catalogue of Alexandrian Coins* (Oxford: University of Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1971) xxxi.

³³ Milne, *Catalogue of Alexandrian Coins* 5 (nos. 135–37). See also, Reginald Stuart Poole, *A Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum*, vol. 16: *Catalogue of the Coins of Alexandria and the Nomes* (London: The British Museum, 1892), 18 and plate VII, no. 146; M. Sadek, “On the Billon Output of the Alexandrian Mint Under Nero,” *Phoenix* (1966) 133, 137 (nos. 4, 12, 18, and 26).

coins in the mid-first century thought the word meant. They identified her not so much with *iustitia* as with *aequitas*, not so much with “justice” as with “equity.” In light of the association of this coinage with the Egyptian grain supply, it seems likely that Nero wanted these coins to communicate to his subjects that he would distribute grain from Alexandria with equity. But even if he meant something else—that his economic policies generally were equitable, or that the coin was actually worth what it was valued, or that he was the embodiment of fairness and impartiality—the general meaning of the term $\delta\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta$ on the coin is not in doubt.³⁴ The level scales on the balance that the goddess holds tell the story: there is no partiality with her. This impartiality, or fairness, could no doubt be conceived negatively in terms of the impartial distribution of punishment to law-breakers, but it could certainly also be understood positively as the equal distribution of a blessing, such as food.

Alexandria was allowed to circulate its own coinage during Paul’s time, and so we should not think of coins labeled $\delta\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta$ as circulating widely outside of Egypt, but these coins do provide evidence of what the term $\delta\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta$ would have meant to many Greek speakers in the eastern Mediterranean region at exactly the time when Paul was composing Romans.³⁵ It seems likely that they would have associated “the righteousness of God” with, among other things, his impartiality and fairness, and that Origen’s interpretation of the phrase in this way in Rom 1:17 is accurate as far as it goes.

It is important to say that what the first century Roman emperors and the average Roman shop owner of AD 55 understood as “fairness” and “impartiality” did not amount to “social equality” in modern terms. Dealing justly with people was instead a matter of treating them according to the worth that custom and law assigned them. It was thought to be perfectly just, for example, to imprison the slave of someone who had defaulted on a debt in the place of the debtor himself.³⁶ Origen, however, has correctly picked up the Pauline idea that Paul uses the word to speak of the equality of every human being in God’s eyes: God treats all alike, disregarding the barriers between them that human society has imposed. That is why Paul can do the unthinkable from the perspective of Roman social consciousness and equate the cultured Greek with the barbarian and the learned with the unschooled in the sight of God. The really radical idea that emerges when Rom 1:17 is read in terms of Rom 1:14–16 is not that God is righteous, but that his righteousness cuts across all social boundaries and puts everyone in the same social class: all human beings are created by God, are rebellious against God, and are the proper object of evangelization by God through Paul, his apostle.

³⁴ It is not immediately clear why Lichocka (*Iustitia* 52) includes in her list of suggestions about what the symbolism might mean the idea that it referred to a balance of power between the princes and the senate or the princes and the army.

³⁵ On Egypt’s circulation of its own currency, see Stefan Skowronek, *On the Problems of the Alexandrian Mint: Allusion to the Divinity of the Sovereign Appearing on the Coins of Egyptian Alexandria in the Period of the Early Roman Empire: 1st and 2nd Centuries A.D.* (trans. Victor A. Daszewski; Travaux du Centre D’Archéologie Méditerranéenne de l’Académie Polonaise des Sciences, vol. 4; Warsaw: Editions Scientifiques de Pologne, 1967) 6. On the date of Romans, see the concise survey of opinion in Jewett, *Romans* 18.

³⁶ Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 11.

Origen was a careful enough interpreter, moreover, to realize that God's righteousness in this phrase was not simply a matter of God punishing people equally for their sin. At least in this verse, he recognized what Luther, Ropes, Dodd, Schlatter, Käsemann, and others since have recognized, that God's righteousness is in some sense his saving power. The equity and fairness of God here, then, is not equity in meting out justice but in saving everyone who believes no matter what their social group.

If this is correct, then it is appropriate to speak with New Perspective scholars of the "social" dimension of justification. One of the New Perspective's earliest voices, Markus Barth, back in 1968, had already interpreted Paul's rebuke of Peter in Gal 2:15–21 to mean that "[n]o Jew will be justified without the justification of Gentiles because there is no justification which does not involve God's impartial judgment of Jews and Gentiles."³⁷ As N. T. Wright has emphasized, moreover, Paul received this perspective from the story line of the Bible itself, which begins with Adam, continues with a promise to Abraham that God would bless all the families of the earth through him, and is fulfilled in the incorporation of Gentiles into the people of God through Israel's Messiah.³⁸ In his Romans commentary, Wright has also helpfully shown how Paul redefines Roman ideas of justice in biblical terms.³⁹

Paul explains justification, then, in terms that imply the equality of all human beings before God and God's fair, impartial offer of salvation to human beings from every social group. This approach makes sense when we set Romans both within its first century Greco-Roman context and when we think of its emphases in terms of biblical theology.

Does this mean, however, that the other readings of the phrase, canvassed earlier and seemingly quite plausible, are in error? It seems to me likely that, instead, all three readings are implied by Paul's use of the phrase. "The righteousness of God" means that God is impartial in saving people from many different social groups. It also means that God gives righteousness to those who do not have it and in this way counts them righteous and gives them life. It means, in addition, that God is actively and powerfully saving those who believe the gospel.

Two problems with this dense reading of the phrase immediately come to mind. First, and most serious, is the objection that this reading imagines Paul to be using righteousness language in two different ways within a single sentence. How can Paul use the noun "righteousness" in the first clause of Rom 1:17 to mean "fairness" but then use the adjective "righteous" in the last clause to mean something like "acquitted" or "in the right"? Surely Paul does not intend to say that God somehow communicates to believers his own characteristic of "fairness" or "impartiality." This drastic reduction of salvation to the communication of a single virtue to the believer would be a comical parody of what salvation and life actually involve according to the rest of Romans: the rescue of sinners from God's justified wrath and the all-encompassing shift of loyalty from self and sin to God. The one who is righteous, then, in the second

³⁷ "Jews and Gentiles: The Social Character of Justification in Paul," *JES* 5 (1968) 250.

³⁸ See, for example, N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 21–26.

³⁹ "Romans" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 10; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 405.

clause of Rom 1:17 must be the one to whom God has given righteousness in a different, more profound, sense that Paul will flesh out in the subsequent argument.

Is such a shift in meaning likely? Romans 3:26 hints that it is. There, too, Paul uses righteousness language repeatedly within a single verse, and within the space of a few words he uses the language in two different ways. Paul says that God put Christ forward as a sacrifice of atonement in his forbearance, “as a proof of his righteousness in the present time, in order that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Here Paul uses the noun “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη) and the adjective “just” (δίκαιος) to refer to the character of God, but then immediately uses the verb “justify” (δικαιόω) to refer to an activity by which God gives righteousness to the believer.

The dense, three layered, reading of righteousness in Rom 1:17 encounters a second problem. Is it likely that Paul would utter a phrase as simple as “the righteousness of God” and intend for it to have three meanings? In a recent essay in *New Testament Studies*, F. Gerald Downing has argued persuasively that ancient writers and speakers thought of themselves as communicating certain ideas that were then described with a number of different words and figures.⁴⁰ The words themselves were intended to suggest to hearers and readers a wide variety of shared experiences but were not used in a very precise way. Individual words were used in a broad rather than a narrow sense, and both authors and their audiences expected that these words would have more than one connotation. Precision came in the use of many sorts of utterances to communicate the idea the speaker or writer had in mind. “The pragmatics of ancient rhetoric,” says Downing, “was discursive. It shows no sign of normally relying, let alone normally insisting on fine distinctions of meaning.”⁴¹ If that is correct, and if Rom 1:16–17 constitutes the thesis sentence of Romans, then we should not expect Paul to use the phrase δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ with one precise meaning. Instead, the phrase has a richness that allows Paul to highlight one aspect in some contexts and another aspect in other contexts in order to contribute to the total idea that he is trying to communicate when he defines the gospel. The surrounding literary context, then, will define which aspect of the expression’s total range of associations Paul wants to communicate.

We have already seen that he does this with respect to the two fairly standard interpretations of the phrase in Rom 1:17. Equally reasonable cases can be made for understanding the phrase to refer to a gift that God gives and to God’s own active, saving power. These readings are equally reasonable because both are so strongly supported by the surrounding context.

Does the surrounding context also support the idea that Paul uses the phrase to refer to God’s fairness? We have already seen that this understanding of the phrase makes good sense within the immediately preceding context with its emphasis on the gospel’s salvation of Greeks, barbarians, Jews, wise, and unlearned. A straightforward reading of the material preceding the phrase led Origen to explain “the righteousness of God” as God’s equity. Paul’s subsequent argument, however, also supports this interpretation of the phrase.

⁴⁰ F. Gerald Downing, “Ambiguity, Ancient Semantics, and Faith,” *NTS* 56 (2010) 139–62.

⁴¹ Downing, “Ambiguity, Ancient Semantics, and Faith” 155.

The unrighteousness of human beings, described in Rom 1:18–32, contrasts with the reasonableness and fairness of the punishment that God metes out to them on the basis of “just decrees” that are easily perceived through observation and common sense (cf. Rom 2:26). In Rom 2:4–6, we learn that he will pour out his wrath on the final day only after rendering a just judgment tempered by forbearance, kindness, and patience and yet fairly applied to each person according to his or her deeds (cf. Prov 24:12; Ps 62:12). In Rom 2:13, God does this without taking the privileges of ethnicity or education into account. His justice, then, will be perfect according to Rom 3:4–5: everyone else might lie, but God is just and true. Every use of righteousness language from Rom 1:18–3:5 brings out the fairness of God in the sense of his impartiality. It would be very odd, then, if the phrase “the righteousness of God” in Rom 1:17 did not include this element within it.

Defining the righteousness of God in Rom 1:17 by the subsequent use of righteousness language in Rom 1:18–3:5, however, introduces a significant problem. In Rom 1:17 the righteousness of God was displayed in God’s willingness to make salvation available to every social group impartially and equally on the basis of faith. In Rom 1:18–3:5, however, Paul uses righteousness language to show the impartiality of God in judging all people, whether Jew or Greek, according to their works (Rom 2:6). “It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law will be justified” (Rom 2:13). Faith is never mentioned in Romans 2, and now God’s righteousness is displayed not in saving people from various ethnic and social groups but in alternately justifying or condemning people impartially on the basis of their works without regard to their ethnic or social status. “There will be affliction and distress on the life of every human being who works at what is evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does what is good, the Jew first and also the Greek, for there is no partiality with God” (Rom 2:9–10).

How can God be the fair and equitable God of Rom 1:18–3:20 and yet simply give people salvation and declare them righteous on the basis of faith as Rom 1:16–17 implies? For the first time since Rom 1:17 and 3:5, Paul uses in Rom 3:21–26 the expression “the righteousness of God,” and, here too, one explanation for the phrase will not suffice. In Rom 3:21–26, the righteousness of God is certainly active in justifying those who have faith in Jesus Christ, and so it is a powerful activity of God, as many interpreters have recently maintained. It is also, however, a gift of God to the one who has faith since Paul says explicitly that those who believe are justified apart from works (Rom 3:27–28), which, in the context means in spite of their sin (Rom 3:23, 25; 4:5, 7–8). It is fair to conclude that those who are justified in this context can be described as “just” not because of any righteousness in themselves but because God has given them the gift of righteousness. Their righteousness is the righteousness of God in the sense that it comes from God to them.⁴²

But the righteousness of God in this passage is also the righteous character of God displayed in his fairness to humanity generally, across all social bound-

⁴² In 3:22, the *εἰς* in the phrase *εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας* seems to correspond to an implied *ἐκ* in the phrase *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*.

aries. Paul explains why he can say that the righteousness of God is revealed apart from the law and to all who believe with the statement, “for there is no distinction” (Rom 3:22)—*all* have sinned, and *all* are freely justified by God’s grace through the redeeming work of Christ Jesus (Rom 3:23–24). God will justify both circumcised and uncircumcised in the same way, Paul says in Rom 3:30. He will do this by faith.

If God is truly impartial, however, he cannot be impartial in one area but not in another. He cannot give salvation to people without regard to their ethnicity but then turn a blind eye to the unrighteousness and ungodliness of a select group of believers. As chapter two has clarified, God must impartially render to everyone what they deserve on the basis of their works. The way Paul speaks of the righteousness of God in Rom 3:21–26 shows that he thinks God’s gracious justification of all who believe threatens the impartiality of God. It was necessary for God to give “proof” of his righteousness according to Rom 3:25, and, in Rom 3:26, the purpose for the proof he offered was that he might be, at the same time, both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. The question that motivates Paul to explain how God proves his righteousness is this: how can a God who is fair and impartial justify those whose unrighteous actions clearly show them to be unrighteous?

The answer to this question lies in the atoning nature of Christ’s death. The blood of Christ Jesus, shed as a sacrifice, atoned for the sins of the wicked and permitted their justification. The death of Christ allows the three understandings of the righteousness of God that come together in Rom 1:17 to hang together logically. God proclaims the good news of salvation through his apostle Paul to everyone, regardless of their social standing because he is a righteous God who treats all human beings with equity. He exercises his saving power on their behalf because he is a righteous God who vindicates his people. And his people are worth vindicating not because they are righteous in themselves but because their sins have been removed through the atoning death of Christ. This is close to Tom Schreiner’s summary of how the righteousness of God functions in Rom 1:18–3:26:

All human beings have sinned and therefore stand before the divine judge as condemned. Nevertheless, because of the cross of Christ, God both saves and judges at the cross. In other words, both the saving righteousness of God (by which he declares sinners to be in the right in his sight) and the judging work of God (by which he pours out his wrath on Christ) meet in the cross of Christ.⁴³

The phrase “the righteousness of God” in Rom 1:17, then, is polyvalent. When Paul dictated it to Tertius, he intended to explain its meaning in several different but compatible ways. It refers to the gift of righteousness that comes from God to the one who believes the gospel. It refers to the powerful activity of God, so prominent in Isaiah and the Psalms, by which God saves his people from wicked oppressors. It also refers, however, to the fairness and equity of God as Origen, the first extant interpreter of Romans, maintained. As the surrounding context of Rom 1:17 shows, God is fair because he makes the good news of salvation by faith available to everyone, without regard to their

⁴³ Paul 202.

social standing. He is fair because he condemns everyone who is wicked and also does so without regard to their social standing.

Most importantly, and most central to the gospel, God is fair when he covers with the atoning death of Christ the gap between the reality of pervasive human wickedness and the declaration that his people are righteous. This last element of God's fairness is the essence of the gospel because it not only shows God's fairness but his grace and love. God would have remained perfectly righteous had he simply condemned everyone, the Jew first and also the Greek. Greeks had knowingly and irrationally turned their backs on their Creator to worship his creation instead (Rom 1:21–23, 25), and Jews had broken the covenant they entered with God at Sinai (Rom 2:17–24). At great cost to himself, however, God offered salvation to these wicked human beings and did this in such a way that he remained righteous. The death of Christ allowed him to remain just at the same time that he became the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:26).

Post-medieval interpreters of Paul are right when they emphasize that the righteousness of God in Rom 1:17 refers to the righteousness that he gives to those who believe, and when they say it refers to God's saving activity. The earliest extant commentator on Romans, Origen, is also correct, however, when he claims that the righteousness of God is the fairness of God in bringing salvation to all kinds of people regardless of their social standing or ethnic origins.