6

atonement in romans 3:21-26

"God Presented Him as a Propitiation"

D. A. Carson

Romans 3:21-26 has for a long time been a focal text for debate about the atonement. With the rise of the "new perspective" on Paul, some of the parameters of these debates have shifted. Within the constraints of this essay, I cannot attempt the full-blown interaction that the subject demands. My aim is more modest. I intend to discuss ten of the turning points in the text that affect the outcome of one's exegesis and briefly indicate at least some of the reasons why I read the text as I do.

The Significance of the Preceding Passage, Romans 1:18—3:20

Disputants are unlikely to agree on the solution to a problem if they cannot agree on the nature of the problem. Today's disputes focus on whether or not the situation envisaged in Romans 2:5-16 is real or hypothetical; the extent to which Romans 2:17-28 focuses on the failure of the nation of Israel rather than on the individual; the extent to which Paul's theology, which on the face of it runs from plight to solution, betrays his own experience, which was (it is argued) from solution to plight; the nature and focus of his rhetoric; the extent to which covenant categories control this section; and much more. Each of these topics could call forth a very lengthy chapter.[1]

[1]Apart from the major commentaries, see the admirable treatment by Andrew T. Lincoln, "From Wrath to Justification: Tradition, Gospel, and Audience in the Theology of Romans 1:18—4:25," in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 3, *Romans*, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 130-59.

However such matters are resolved, the framework must not be forgotten. The section opens with the wrath of God being revealed from heaven "against all the godlessness and wickedness of men" (Rom 1:18), and ends with a catena of texts to prove that no one is righteous, not even one (Rom 3:9-20). Jews and Gentiles are alike condemned. Nor will it do to make the failure exclusively national (though it is not less than national): if it is true to say that Jews and Gentiles collectively are alike under sin, Paul carefully goes farther and specifies that they "alike are *all* under sin" (Rom 3:9, italics added). Indeed, *every* mouth is to be silenced on the last day, and there is *no one* righteous (Rom 3:19, 20).

What these observations establish, then, is the nature of the problem that Romans 3:21-26 sets out to resolve. The problem is not first and foremost the failure of Israel (national or otherwise), or inappropriate use of the law, or the urgency of linking Jews and Gentiles (all genuine themes in these chapters), but the wrath of God directed against every human being, Jew and Gentile alike—a wrath elicited by universal human wickedness. This is not saying that human beings are incapable of any good. Clearly, even those without the law may do things about which their consciences rightly defend them (Rom 2:15). But the flow of argument that takes us from Romans 1:18-32 to Romans 3:9-20 leaves us no escape: individually and collectively, Jew and Gentile alike, we stand under the just wrath of God, because of our sin.[2]

Moreover, the closing verses of this section establish two other points that support this analysis and help to prepare for Romans 3:21-26. First, the second half of Romans 3:19 paints a picture that is unavoidably forensic; and second, the slight modification of Psalm 143:2 (142:2 LXX) in Romans 3:20 by the addition of the phrase "by the works of the law" establishes (1) that although the indictment of Romans 1:18—3:20 embraces all of humanity, there is special reference to Jews, precisely because to them were given the oracles of God (as Romans 9 puts it); (2) that in the light of the forensic catastrophe summarized in

[2]Surprisingly, B. W. Longenecker, *Eschatology and Covenant: A Comparison of 4 Ezra and Romans 1—11* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 175-81, argues that Paul's indictment, especially in Romans 1:18-32, is rhetorical polemic typical of the technique of ethical denunciation, but without any empirical correspondence. Not only does this argument presuppose that polemic cannot have pedagogical purpose, but it presupposes that rhetoric cannot be deployed to make points about empirical reality. That would cut the ground out from Paul's conclusion in Romans 3:9-20.

the preceding verse the expression "works of the law" cannot easily be reduced, in this context, to boundary markers such as laws relating to circumcision, kosher food and Sabbath, for in fact these "works of the law" by which one cannot be justified must be tied to the judgment according to works (Rom 2:8), to the unyielding principle of performance (Rom 2:13);[3] and (3) that therefore the law itself was not given, according to Paul, to effect righteousness, for even "if the deeds by which one hopes to be justified are deeds laid down in the law, this fails to alter the universal indictment that no one passes the judgment, no one is righteous."[4] This does not mean the law is intrinsically evil, of course (Rom 7:12); it does mean that Paul adopts a certain salvation-historical reading of the law's role, and according to that reading, the law (by which he here means the law-covenant), while it enabled human beings to become conscious of sin and doubtless performed other functions described elsewhere, could not, in the nature of the case, justify anyone (Rom 3:20).

Νυνὶ δέ (**"But now"), Romans 3:21**

Although this expression can signal a logical connection, here it is almost certainly temporal,[5] indeed salvation-historical. But granted the contrast between the old era of sin's dominion and the new era of salvation or between the old era of the law covenant and the new era that Jesus Christ has introduced (these most basic of contrasts in Paul's eschatology), what is the precise nature of the temporal contrast here? If Romans 3:21-26 is contrasted with all of Romans 1:18-3:20, then it is possible, with Moo, to say, "As the 'wrath of God' dominated the old era (Rom 1:18), so 'the righteousness of God' dominates the new."[6] But perhaps that is not quite Paul's focus. In general terms, the NT writers, including Paul, do not encourage us to think that God pre-

[3]For the narrower view that connects "works of the law" to ethnic boundary markers, see, inter alios, B. W. Longenecker, *Eschatology*, 200-202, 206-7; and James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1—8*, WBC no. 38a (Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1988), 153-55. For the broader view espoused here, see, e.g., Ulrich Wilckens, "Was heisst bei Paulus: 'Aus Werken des Gesetzes wird kein Mensch gerecht'?" in *Rechtfertigung als Freiheit: Paulusstudien* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974), 77-109; idem, *Der Brief an die Römer*, EKKNT vol. 6 (Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1978), 1.130-31, 145-46, 175-76; and especially Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 204-17.

[4]Lincoln, "From Wrath to Justification," 146.

[5]Its customary meaning, e.g. Romans 6:22; 7:6.

[6]Moo, *Romans*, 222.

sents himself in the old covenant as a God of wrath, and in the new as a God of grace (justifying grace?). Although the point cannot be defended here at length, it would be truer to say that just as the portrait of God as a God of justifying grace is ratcheted up as one moves from the old covenant to the new, so the portrait of God as a God of holy wrath is ratcheted up as one moves from the old covenant to the new. Moreover, in this very paragraph, the *earlier* period is characterized as the time of God's "forbearance."[7]

A closer contrast lies at hand, one that nevertheless presupposes the shift from the old era to the new. On this reading, Romans 3:21-26 is tied more tightly to the immediately preceding verses. If, in the nature of the case, the law covenant could not effect righteousness or ensure that anyone be declared righteous—I leave the expression open for the moment—then, granted the universality of human sin, under the new era what is needed is righteousness that is manifested apart from the law.

Χωρὶς νόμου ("apart from law"), Romans 3:21

Should this phrase be read with δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ("But now a righteousness from God apart from law, has been made known") or with πεφανέρωται ("But now a righteousness from God has been made known apart from law")? The matter cannot be decided by mere syntactical proximity; it is not uncommon in Greek for a prepositional phrase to modify a verb from which it is somewhat removed. The question must be resolved by appealing to context. If the first interpretation were correct, "a righteousness from God apart from law," the phrase "apart from law" would most likely mean "apart from doing the law" or the like, or perhaps "apart from the works of the law," referring back to Romans 3:20. But despite the popularity of this view,[8] by itself it is not quite adequate. It is quite correct to observe that God's righteousness is attained without any contribution from the "works of the law." But to say that it is *now* obtained without any contribution from the "works of the law" would be to imply that it was *once* ob-

[7]Romans 3:26 in the Greek text; Romans 3:25 in the NIV.

[8]E.g., Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1949), 148; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975-1979) 1.201 (though he finds this meaning present even while holding, rightly, that the prepositional phrase modifies the verb); Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, SP (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1996), 129; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 180.

tained with (at least some) contribution from the "works of the law"—and that is precisely what Paul has ruled out in the previous verses. So if the temporal contrast embedded in "But now" is taken seriously, then it is contextually inadequate to think that "apart from law" is really a shorthand for "apart from the works of the law" or "apart from doing the law" or the like. After all, as Paul himself will point out in Romans 4, justification has always been by faith and apart from law.

In fact, if, as most sides agree, the prepositional phrase is connected with the verb πεφανέρωται, then another reading is possible: "a righteousness from God has been made known apart from law" focuses attention not on the *reception* of righteousness, since it is received by faith, but on the *disclosure* of this righteousness, since it has been made known apart from law. In that case, the expression "apart from law" most probably means something like "apart from the law-covenant." The issue is not whether or not people can do the the law (the previous verses have insisted that they cannot: all are sinners), but "law" as a system: this side of the coming and death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, God has acted to vindicate his people "apart from the law," apart from the law as an entire system that played its crucial role in redemptive history.[9]

But this does not mean that what has been inaugurated in Christ is utterly independent from what has preceded; Paul is not antinomian. Far from it: he insists that this newly disclosed righteousness is that "to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (Rom 3:21). In other words, according to Paul God gave the law not only to regulate the conduct of his people and, more importantly, to reveal their sin until the fulfillment of the promises in Christ,[10] but also because the law has a prophetic function, a witness function: it pointed in the right direction; it bore witness to the righteousness that is *now* being revealed. It is not simply that the national identity markers are now obsolete; there is a sense in which the entire law-covenant is "obsolete"[11]—or, more precisely, its ongoing validity is in that to which it bears witness, which has *now* dawned.[12] There is a dramatic shift in salvation history.

---

[9]In fact, since νόμου is anarthrous, there may be a hint not only of the Mosaic law-covenant, but of the "law" known even to Gentiles (Rom 2:13-16): the entire demand structure could not justify men and women in the past, and now God has acted to justify men and women "apart from" it.

[10]Cf. Romans 4:13-15; 5:20; Galatians 3:15—4:7.

[11]To use the language of Hebrews 8:13.

[12]This is, as I have argued elsewhere, the argument of Jesus himself in Matthew 5:17-20.

δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ("righteousness from God") and Cognates, Romans 3:21

This expression clearly dominates the passage. It occurs four times,[13] the cognate adjective "just" (δίκαιος) occurs once,[14] and the cognate verb "to justify" (δικαιόω) twice.[15] Probably no NT word-group has elicited more discussion during the past century than this one. Few doubt that the noun and adjective cover a range of meanings in the NT, so that any particular usage is largely determined by context. Arguably, Paul always uses the verb in the forensic sense, "to justify."

Granted the complexity of the discussion, I shall venture only a few observations and claims, with minimal argumentation. In part, the force of the expressions in this passage must be teased out in conjunction with the delineation of the flow of the argument. (1) The preceding section (Rom 1:18—3:20) has established the need for this righteousness. That need is bound up with human sin and the inevitability of universal human guilt before God. That already constitutes some support for the view that this "righteousness from God" is God's eschatological justifying or vindicating activity. (2) Despite the extraordinary popularity of the view that the expression actually means something like "God's covenant faithfulness" or the like, recent research is making such a view harder and harder to sustain. The history of the interpretation is itself suggestive; more important yet is the fact that in the Hebrew Bible the terms בְּרִית ("covenant") and צְדָקָה ("righteousness"), despite their very high frequency, almost never occur in close proximity.[16] In general, "one does not 'act righteously or unrighteously' with respect to a covenant. Rather, one 'keeps,' 'remembers,' 'establishes' a covenant, or the like. Or, conversely, one 'breaks,' 'transgresses,' 'forsakes,' 'despises,' 'forgets,' or 'profanes' it."[17] Righteousness language is commonly found in parallel with terms for rightness

[13]Romans 3:21, 22, 25, 26—though the last two are "his righteousness."
[14]Romans 3:26.
[15]Romans 3:24, 26.
[16]On both points, see the excellent discussion by Mark A. Seifrid, "Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism,* vol. 1, *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien and Mark A. Seifrid (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001), 415-42. See further, Moo, *Romans*, 70-90; and, more briefly, Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary,* trans. Scott J. Hafemann (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 61-65.
[17]Seifrid, "Righteousness Language," 424.

or rectitude over against evil. The attempt to link "being righteous" with "being in the covenant" or with Israel's "covenant status," especially in Qumran and rabbinic literature, does not fare very well either. (3) Even at the level of philology, the δικ- words are so commonly connected with righteousness/justice that attempts to loosen the connection must be judged astonishing. (4) Not least in this paragraph, but also elsewhere, there is a dual concern that God be vindicated and that his people be vindicated.[18] So also here at the beginning of the passage: this is a righteousness "from God," that is, it is first and foremost God's righteousness (Rom 3:2), but it is precisely *this* righteousness from God which comes to all who believe (Rom 3:22).[19]

Διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ("through faith in Jesus Christ"), Romans 3:22

Traditionally, this phrase has been understood to establish Jesus Christ as the object of faith, the objective genitive reading. More recently, influential voices have argued for either a possessive genitive, "through the faith of Jesus Christ," or, more commonly, a subjective genitive, taking πίστις to mean "faithfulness," that is, "through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ."[20] Even if the subjective genitive were to prevail, the traditional interpretation of the paragraph as a whole remains plausible: after all, some NT writers, especially John and Hebrews, make much

[18]Romans 3:26; see below.

[19]*Pace* N. T. Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," in *Pauline Theology,* vol. 3, *Romans*, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 38-39, who claims that "righteousness" means "covenant faithfulness," and therefore that this "righteousness" is "not a quality or substance that can be passed or transferred from the judge to the defendant" (39). The righteousness of the judge is simply the judge's "own character, status, and activity" (39), demonstrated in doing various things; the "righteousness" of the defendants is their status when the court has acquitted them—and obviously this righteousness must not be confused with the latter. "When we translate these forensic categories back into their theological context, that of the covenant, the point remains fundamental: the divine covenant faithfulness is not the same as human covenant membership" (39). Wright's errors here can be traced first of all to a misunderstanding of δικαιοσύνη, and second (as we shall see), to a less plausible reading of the passage at hand.

[20]E.g., Luke T. Johnson, "Rom 3:21-26 and the Faith of Jesus," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 77-90; Bruce W. Longenecker, *Eschatology,* 149-50; G. Howard, "'The Faith of Christ,'" *ExpTim* 85 (1973-1974): 212-14; D. W. B. Robinson, "'Faith of Jesus Christ'—A New Testament Debate," *RTR* 29 (1970): 71-81; Richard B. Hays, "ΠΙΣΤΙΣ and Pauline Christology: What Is at Stake," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1991 Seminar Papers*, ed. E. H. Lovering Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 714-29; idem, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1—4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

of the obedience, and thus the faithfulness, of Jesus Christ in accomplishing his Father's will, even though they *also* insist that Jesus is the object of our faith. But the subjective genitive reading can be used to support a "new perspective" interpretation of this passage in a way that the objective genitive cannot: the "covenant faithfulness" ("righteousness" on this reading) of God is revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah for the benefit of all. Indeed, N. T. Wright goes so far as to say that "the success of this way of reading this passage is the best argument in favor of the subjective genitive (faith 'of' Christ) in some at least of the key passages."[21]

The linguistic arguments, though complex, are usually judged to be far from conclusive.[22] Perhaps the one exegetical argument that carries an initial weight against the objective genitive is something that is lost in English, the apparent tautology generated by the objective genitive in Greek: διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας ("through *trust* in Jesus Christ to all who exercise *trust*" or "through *faith* in Jesus Christ to all who have *faith*"). The apparent tautology is lost in most of our English translations because of the difference in root behind our noun "faith" and our verb "believe" ("through *faith* in Jesus Christ to all who *believe*"). Yet closer inspection discloses that there is a profound reason for this repetition, namely, the prepositional phrase "for all." The point may be demonstrated by the somewhat paraphrastic rendering, "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ—to *all* who have faith in him."[23] The advantages of this explanation of the repetition are many. (1) It takes the crucial expressions, including "righteousness" and "faith," in their most natural ways. For instance, πίστις almost always means "faith" in Paul; it takes strong contextual support to permit "faithfulness," and such support is lacking here. (2) Moreover, although, as we have seen, other NT writers develop the theme of Christ's obedience or

[21]Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," 37 n.9.

[22]Among the better treatments, see Moo, *Romans*, 226-28; Schreiner, *Romans*, 181-87; Dunn, *Romans* 1.166-67; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans,* AB no. 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 345-46; and the literature cited in these works. From a linguistic perspective, the most penetrating treatment is that of Moisés Silva, "Faith Versus Works of Law in Galatians" in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul,* ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien and Mark Seifrid (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, forthcoming).

[23]Similar arguments can be mounted in other passages where a charge of tautology is leveled, e.g., Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:19.

faithfulness, this is not, demonstrably, a theme that Paul develops, even, as in Romans 4, where he might have had an excuse for doing so.[24] (3) More importantly, this reading ties the passage to the preceding section. Romans 1:18—3:20 demonstrates that *all,* Jews and Gentiles alike, are guilty before God; but now, Paul argues, a righteousness from God has appeared that is available to *all* without distinction, but on condition of faith. The connection is explicit in the text, highlighted by the repetition of the word "all" and by two logical connectors. We might continue our rendering: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ—to *all* who have faith in him. For [γάρ] there is no difference, for [γάρ] *all* [πάντες] have sinned[25] and come short of the glory of God." (4) This reading also prepares us for the last clause of Romans 3:26, and for Paul's argument in Romans 3:27-31, with its massive emphasis on faith.

To summarize the argument so far: Paul has established that all are condemned, Jew and Gentile alike, apart from the cross of Christ; all stand under his judicial condemnation and face his wrath. But now, he says, a new righteousness has appeared in the history of redemption to deal with this. Paul first relates this righteousness to OT revelation (Rom 3:21). Then he establishes the availability of this righteousness to all human beings without racial distinction but solely on condition of faith. He now turns to the source of this righteousness from God. It is nothing other than the gracious provision of Jesus Christ as the propitiatory sacrifice for our sin.

διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως ("through the redemption"), Romans 3:24

Paul says that the "all" who have faith are "justified[26] freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ, whom God presented as a propitiation."[27] Thus, three images are deployed, and these three correspond to the different ways that sin itself may be viewed. First, justification, grounded in the imagery of the law court, continues. Lincoln writes:

---

[24]A point shrewdly made by James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* 1.167.

[25]I would here prefer to see what traditional grammarians would call a "global aorist," i.e., "for all sin"—but that is another issue.

[26]Gk. δικαιούμενοι, the participle of the verb: there is no reason to doubt the verb's forensic force.

[27]Where the English translation departs from the NIV, it is mine.

> God's righteousness is the power by which those unable to be justified on the criterion of works are set right with him and being set in a right relationship with God involves his judicial verdict of pardon. It is not that people are deemed innocent of the charges in the indictment against them. Their unrighteousness has been clearly depicted in Paul's argument. But he believes the righteous judge has acted ahead of time in history and in his grace has pronounced a pardon on those who have faith in Christ, so that their guilt can no longer be cited against them.[28]

This language, then, answers to the controlling theme of Romans 1:18—3:20: all human beings stand under God's judicial condemnation; all are guilty; all deserve his wrath. And this is God's provision for our plight.

Second, God's justification of sinners is "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." One might say the *origin* of this justification is God's grace, δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι, "by his grace as a gift"; the *historical basis* of this gift is "the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." All sides recognize that this imagery is tied, both in the Greco-Roman world and in the Jewish world, if we may indulge in the distinction, to freedom from slavery. But there are also roots in Scripture beyond the world of the slave market: God liberated his people from slavery in Egypt and from exile in Assyria and Babylon.[29] So also here: sin, Paul has already said, has not only made all human beings judicially guilty before God, but it has enslaved them. It has unleashed God's "giving them over" to the chaining degradations of the human heart; all are imprisoned "under sin" (Rom 3:9). To meet this need, we must have redemption—emancipation from slavery.

The third imagery is drawn from the cultic world and will be taken up in the next section. But before turning to it, we should remind ourselves that the redemption (ἀπολύτρωσις) that is effected is accomplished by the payment of a price or a ransom (λύτρον). Leon Morris argued decades ago that "the LXX usage is such as to leave us in no doubt that λύτρον and its cognates are properly applied to redemption by payment of a price."[30] More recent writers have tended to confirm that conclusion.[31] In the passage at hand, the price in view is Jesus'

---

[28]Lincoln, "From Wrath to Justification," 148.
[29]Cf. Deuteronomy 7:8 and Isaiah 51:11.
[30]*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1965), 27.
[31]E.g., Dunn, *Romans* 1.169, 179-80.

death,[32] which frees us from death that is nothing other than sin's penalty.[33] "With his redemptive act in Christ, God has acted to free us from the penalty he himself imposed."[34]

ἱλαστήριον ("propitiation," NIV "sacrifice of atonement"), Romans 3:25

Here the imagery is drawn from the cultus. Yet before we briefly unpack this expression, we should observe that the three images are not parallel metaphors that one may cherry-pick according to personal preference. Each is essential if the paragraph is to be understood and if a full-orbed Pauline theology of the cross is to be sustained; more importantly, they are not strictly parallel. The historical basis of the justification, we have seen, is "the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Now Paul unfolds the *means* inherent in this redemption: this redemption comes about by the will of God the Father, who "presented" Christ—that is, he set forth or publicly displayed[35] Christ—as a ἱλαστήριον. What does this mean?[36]

There is fairly widespread recognition that the OT background is the "mercy seat," the cover of the ark of the covenant over which Yahweh appeared on the Day of Atonement and on which sacrificial blood was poured. The one other NT occurrence of the word (Heb 9:5) certainly refers to the mercy seat, and so do twenty-one of the twenty-seven occurrences in the LXX.[37] It follows, then, that Paul is presenting Jesus as the ultimate "mercy seat," the ultimate place of atonement, and, derivatively, the ultimate sacrifice. What was under the old covenant bound up with the slaughter of animals, whose most crucial moment was hidden behind a veil, and whose repetition

---

[32]Cf. Romans 3:24-25.

[33]Romans 5:12; cf. Romans 6:23.

[34]David Peterson, "Atonement in the New Testament," in *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today*, ed. David Peterson (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 41.

[35]This is the most likely meaning of προέθετο in this context.

[36]For a good history of interpretation, see Arland Hultgren, *Paul's Gospel and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 47-72; and especially Daniel P. Bailey, "Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul's use of *Hilasterion* in Romans 3:25" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 1999).

[37]For a detailed defense of this view, see, in addition to the major commentaries, the references to Hultgren and Bailey in the previous note and such works as those by T. W. Manson, "ἱλαστήριον," *JTS* 46 (1945): 1-10; L. Sabourin and S. Lyonnet, *Sin, Redemption and Sacrifice: A Biblical and Patristic Study* AnBib no. 48 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970), 157-66.

almost invited reflection on the limitations of such a system to "cover" sin,[38] is now transcended by a human sacrifice, in public, once for all—and placarded by God himself.

Granted this background, one must still ask what Jesus' antitypical sacrifice accomplishes. As is well known, C. H. Dodd set off a lengthy debate on this subject in 1931 by arguing that "means of atonement" is an "expiatory sacrifice" or an "expiation," that its object is to cancel sin.[39] The notion of "propitiation," where the object is not sin but God, is too pagan to be appropriate: there, human beings offer sacrifices to their gods in order to make them "propitious," or favorable, and the sacrifices are propitiations. But how can one think that the God of the Bible must be made propitious, when he himself is the one who sends forth his Son and publicly displays him as the needed sacrifice? He has demonstrated his love toward us precisely in this, that while we were still enemies, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8).

Today it is widely recognized that in his central contentions Dodd was wrong. Certainly the OT commonly connects the "covering" or forgiving of sins with the setting aside of God's wrath.[40] Certainly when Josephus uses ἱλαστήριον and cognates, propitiation is bound up with his meaning.[41] None of this denies that it is simultaneously true that sin is expiated, indeed must be expiated. It simply means that ἱλαστήριον includes the notion of propitiation.

Certainly that makes sense in the context of Romans 3:25. For the preceding section, as we have seen, sets the problem up in terms of the wrath of God. Now God has taken action to turn that wrath away. To

---

[38]The reference, of course, is to the verb כִּפֶּר, with which כַּפֹּרֶת, "mercy seat," is cognate.

[39]Dodd, "ἱλαστήριον, Its Cognates, Derivatives and Synonyms in the Septuagint," *JTS* 32 (1931): 352-60; reprinted in idem, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), 82-95.

[40]The honoree of this volume presented much of the evidence half a century ago: see Roger R. Nicole, "C. H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation," *WTJ* 17 (1954-55): 117-57; cf. Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 136-56. Although the meaning of כִּפֶּר is disputed, a solid case can be made for the view that the notion of propitiation is bound up with the verb when the cultus is the matrix where it is used: see P. Garnet, "Atonement Constructions in the Old Testament and the Qumran Scrolls," *EQ* 46 (1974): 131-63, who argues that the verb in such contexts is tied to the removal of guilt or the punishment of sin and that this inevitably brings with it a change in God's attitude toward the sinner—or, otherwise put, propitiation. See further, Bernd Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen: Studien zur Sühne–theologie der Priesterschrift und zur Wurzel KPR im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament*, WMANT no. 55 (Neukirchen/Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 15-102.

[41]E.g., *B.J.* 5.385; *Ant*. 6.124; 8.112; 10.59.

put it this way, of course, simultaneously succeeds in doing two things. First, it distinguishes this notion of propitiation from pagan notions of propitiation. In the latter, human beings are the subject of the action, the ones who are offering the propitiating sacrifice, while the gods receive the action and are propitiated. All sides agree, however, that God is the subject of the action here. Certainly human beings are not turning aside God's wrath by something they offer. Nor is it right to imagine in this context that Christ is well-disposed toward guilty sinners, while his Father is simply at enmity with them until Christ intervenes and by his own sacrifice makes his Father favorable, or propitious. In this passage, God himself is the subject.[42] But that raises the second point: Is this manner of speaking, in which God is both the subject and the object of propitiation, coherent?

Many do not think so. How can God be simultaneously loving toward us and wrathful against us? Dodd himself put forward a solution: he depersonalized God's wrath, arguing that "wrath" terminology applied to God is merely a colorful way of speaking about the inevitable outcome of sin's nastiness. Travis argues that God's wrath must be understood in a nonretributive sense,[43] which surely makes little sense in the light of Romans 2:5-9: on the last day, the day of God's wrath, God himself personally "gives to each person according to what he has done" (Rom 2:6). One suspects that part of the problem is the failure to perceive that the Bible can speak of the love of God in diverse ways,[44] with the result that love and wrath are set over against each other improperly. If love is understood in an abstract and fairly impersonal way, then it becomes difficult to see how, in the same God, such love can co-exist with wrath. But the Scriptures treat God's love in more dynamic ways, in diverse ways that reflect the varieties of relationships into which God enters. Thus the Bible can speak of God's providential love, his yearning and inviting love, his sovereign and elective love, his love conditioned by covenant stipulations, and more. Moreover, the same Scriptures that teach us that God is love insist no less strongly that God is holy—and in Scripture, God's wrath is nothing other than his holiness when it confronts the rebellion of his crea-

[42]Romans 3:25: προέθετο ὁ θεός.
[43]Stephen Travis, "Christ as Bearer of Divine Judgement in Paul's Thought About the Atonement," in *Atonement Today*, ed. John Goldingay (London: SPCK, 1995), 29.
[44]Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000).

tures. It is far from clear that any biblical writer thinks God's love is personal while his wrath is impersonal.

We may usefully approach this matter another way. Holding that the Hebrew law court establishes the framework of what "forensic" means, Wright points out that in such a law court

> the judge does not give, bestow, impute, or impart *his own "righteousness"* to the defendant. That would imply that the *defendant* was deemed to have conducted the case impartially, in accordance with the law, to have punished sin and upheld the defenseless innocent ones. "Justification," of course, means nothing like that. "Righteousness" is not a quality or substance that can thus be passed or transferred from the judge to the defendant.[45]

This argument reminds me of the inappropriateness of the illustration used by some zealous evangelists: the judge passes sentence, steps down from the bench, and then pays the fine or goes to prison, in the place of the criminal. But neither Wright's argument nor the evangelist's illustration is convincing, and for the same reason: in certain crucial ways, human law courts, whether contemporary or ancient Hebrew courts, are merely analogical models and cannot highlight one or two crucial distinctions that are necessarily operative when the judge is God. In particular, both the contemporary judge and the judge of the Hebrew law court is an administrator of a system. To take the contemporary court: in no sense has the criminal legally offended the judge. Indeed, if the crime has been against the judge, the judge must rescue him- or herself; the crime has been "against the state" or "against the people" or "against the laws of the land." In such a system, for the administrator of the system, the judge, to take the criminal's place would be profoundly unjust; it would be a perversion of the justice required by the system, of which the judge is the sworn administrator. But when God is the judge, the offense is always and necessarily against him.[46] He is never the administrator of a system external to himself; he is the offended party as well as the impartial judge. To force the categories of merely human courts onto these uniquely divine realities is bound to lead to distortion. And this, of course, is precisely why idolatry is so central in the Scriptures: it is, as it were, the root sin, the de-godding of

[45]Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," 39.
[46]Recall Psalm 51:4.

God, which is, of course, Paul's point in Romans 1:18-25. This, in turn, is why God's "wrath" is personal: the offense is against him. Righteous Judge he doubtless is, but *never* a distanced or dispassionate judge serving a system greater than he is.

Precisely because God is holy, it would be no mark of moral greatness in him if he were dispassionate or distant or uncaring when his creatures rebel against him, offend him and cast slurs on his glory. Because he is holy, God does more than give sinners over[47] to their own deserts, a kind of pedagogical demonstration that the people he created, silly little things, have taken some unfortunate paths: this abandonment of them is judicial, a function of his wrath (Rom 1:18), an anticipation of the great assize (Rom 2:5-10; 3:19). But because he is love, God provides a "redemption" that simultaneously wipes out the sin of those who offend and keeps his own "justice" intact, as we shall see is the most plausible reading of Romans 3:25-26. God does not act whimsically, sometimes in holy wrath and sometimes in love. He always acts according to the perfection of his own character. As Peterson nicely puts it, "A properly formulated view of penal substitution will speak of retribution being experienced by Christ because that is our due. Moreover, the penalty inflicted by God's justice and holiness is also a penalty inflicted by God's love and mercy, for salvation and new life."[48]

Nor is this the only Pauline passage where such themes come together. Space limitations forbid even a survey of 2 Corinthians 5:14—6:2,[49] but it is important to see the place of 2 Corinthians 5:21 in the argument. Strangely, Travis writes, "But God's wrath is not mentioned in the context, and the focus is in fact on Christ's death absorbing or neutralizing the effects of sin. And that does not involve notions of retribution."[50] Yet already in Romans 5:10, Paul has established that all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive recompense for what has been done in the body. Certainly in a parallel passage that treats the theme of reconciliation (cf. Rom 5:1-11), wrath is not absent. The fact of the matter is that in Christ's reconciling work, God was "not counting men's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:19). Why not? Because he

[47]This is mentioned five times in 1:18ff.
[48]Peterson, "Atonement," 38.
[49]On which see, in addition to the major commentaries, Peterson, "Atonement," 36-39.
[50]Travis, "Christ as Bearer of Divine Judgement," 27.

simply wiped them out, in the sense that he treated them as if they did not matter? No, far from it: "God made [Christ] who had no sin to be sin[51] for us" (Rom 5:21). It is the *unjust* punishment of the Servant in Isaiah 53 that is so remarkable. Forgiveness, restoration, salvation, reconciliation—all are possible, not because sins have somehow been cancelled as if they never were, but because another bore them *unjustly*. But by this adverb "unjustly" I mean that the person who bore them was just and did not deserve the punishment, not that some moral "system" that God was administering was thereby distorted. Rather, the God against whom the offenses were done pronounced sentence and sent his Son to bear the sentence (Rom 5:8); he made him who had no sin to be sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). And the purpose of this substitution was that "in him we might become the righteousness of God."[52] In this context, "righteousness" cannot call to mind "covenant faithfulness" or the like, for its obverse is sin.[53] "The logic of 2 Corinthians 5 is that God condemns our sin in the death of his sinless Son so that we might be justified and reconciled to him (cf. Rom. 8:1-4, 10). This 'great exchange' is a reality for all who are 'in him,' that is, united to Christ by faith."[54]

---

[51]Even if one decides to render this "sin" by the paraphrastic "sin offering," the ideal of penal substitution remains inescapable. See Richard Gaffin, "'The Scandal of the Cross': The Atonement in the Pauline Corpus," chapter 7 in this volume.

[52]δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, 2 Corinthians 5:21b.

[53]Part of the contemporary (and frequently sterile) debate over whether or not Paul teaches "imputation," it seems to me, turns on a failure to recognize distinct domains of discourse. Strictly speaking, Paul never uses the verb λογίζομαι to say, explicitly, that Christ's righteousness is imputed to the sinner or that the sinner's righteousness is imputed to Christ. So if one remains in the domain of narrow exegesis, one can say that Paul does not explicitly teach "imputation," except to say slightly different things (e.g., that Abraham's faith was "imputed" to him for righteousness). But if one extends the discussion into the domain of constructive theology, and observes that *the Pauline texts themselves* (despite the critics' contentions) teach penal substitution, then "imputation" is merely another way of saying much the same thing. To take a related example: as Paul uses "reconciliation" terminology, the movement in reconciliation is always of the sinner to God. God is never said to be reconciled to us; we must be reconciled to him. At the level of exegesis, those are the mere facts. On the other hand, because the same exegesis also demands that we take the wrath of God seriously, and the texts insist that God takes decisive action in Christ to deal with our sin so that his wrath is averted, *in that sense* we may speak of God being "reconciled to us": Wesley was not wrong to teach us to sing "My God is reconciled," provided it is recognized that his language is drawn from the domain of constructive theology and not from the narrower domain of explicit exegesis (although, we insist equally, the constructive theology is itself grounded in themes that are exegetically mandated). On the theme of penal substitution, it is still worth reflecting at length on J. I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution," *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974), 3-45.

[54]Peterson, "Atonement," 38.

In some such frame as this, then, it is entirely coherent to think of God as both the subject and the object of propitiation. Indeed, it is the glory of the gospel of God. But let Paul have the last word:

> You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been *justified* by his blood, how much more shall we be saved *from God's wrath* through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Rom 5:6-10, emphasis mine)[55]

Or, in terms of Lincoln's summary of Romans 3:21-25 thus far:

> Corresponding to the universal situation of guilt, bondage to sin, and condemnation under the wrath of God is a gospel of the righteousness of God, which is available universally to faith and which through Christ's death offers a free and undeserved pardon, liberates into a new life where the tyranny of sin is broken and righteous behavior becomes possible, and provides satisfaction of God's righteous wrath.[56]

ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι ("in his blood"), Romans 3:25

Several prepositional phrases are piled up in this verse, of which two draw our attention here. The first, "through faith" (διὰ τῆς πίστεως), probably does not modify the verb "presented" or "publicly displayed" (προέθετο), since faith was certainly not the instrument through which God publicly displayed Christ as propitiation. Rather,

---

[55]Ralph P. Martin, "Reconciliation: Romans 5:1-11," in *Romans and the People of God*, ed. Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), proposes, without any convincing exegetical evidence, that Paul moves from a focus on justification in Romans 1—4 to a focus on reconciliation in Romans 5 because he is dissatisfied with "the forensic-cultic idiom that limited soteriology to covenant renewal for the Jewish nation" (47). Martin thus limits and misunderstands the nature of justification in Romans 1—4 and then depreciates his misunderstanding, all in support of his preferred term "reconciliation." That sort of contrast introduces a further error of judgment: Martin is treating Paul's soteriological terms as if they are disjunctive options that one may pick and choose, or from which one might have preferences, being dissatisfied with this one in order to advance that one. In fact, even in this passage Paul interweaves several terms. As Romans 3 attests, Paul's rich and diverse atonement imagery is, in his own mind, profoundly interlocked. We cannot legitimately cherry-pick his "models" or his "images."

[56]Lincoln, "From Wrath to Justification," 149.

this phrase must modify ἱλαστήριον ("propitiation"). It signals the means by which people appropriate the benefits of the sacrifice. Moreover, the similarity between this expression and the fuller expression in Romans 3:22, "through faith in Jesus Christ," favors the reading of the objective genitive there: Paul is still talking about the faith of the believer, not the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

What the phrase "through his blood" modifies is harder to establish. The options are three: (1) It is the object of faith, that is, "through faith in his blood" (KJV). This is possible if we understand "his blood" to refer to Christ's life violently and sacrificially ended and thus a rhetorical equivalent to Christ's death, or Christ's cross. But Paul never elsewhere makes "blood" the object of faith, so this option remains unlikely. (2) It modifies the verb "presented" or "publicly displayed": "through his blood God has publicly displayed him" or the like. But the expressions are a long way apart, and so the third option is marginally to be preferred. (3) It modifies ἱλαστήριον ("propitiation"): "God has publicly displayed Christ as a propitiation in his [Christ's] blood." Paul means to say that Christ's blood, that is, his sacrificial death, is "the means by which God's wrath is propitiated. As in several other texts where Christ's blood is the means through which salvation is secured,[57] the purpose is to designate Christ's death as a sacrifice."[58]

εἰς ἔνδειξιν κτλ. ("to demonstrate etc."), Romans 3:25b-26

All sides recognize that this phrase introduces the purpose for which Christ set forth Christ as a propitiation. But the precise meaning turns in no small measure on how one understands δικαιοσύνη ("justice"). At the risk of oversimplification, there are two principal views, with many refinements that need not be explored here.

1. If God's "justice" or "righteousness" refers to his character, in particular to his covenant faithfulness, then the meaning is something like this: "in order to demonstrate God's saving, covenant faithfulness through his forgiving of sins committed before, in the time of his forbearance." But as popular as this view is today, it falters on three exegetical obstacles. First, it finds a meaning in δικαιοσύνη, "covenant

[57]Romans 5:9; Ephesians 1:7; 2:13; Colossians 1:20.
[58]Moo, *Romans*, 237.

faithfulness," that we have already found to be insufficiently warranted. Second, it understands the phrase διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων to mean "through his forgiving of sins committed before," and this is an unlikely rendering. The word πάρεσις means "overlooking" or "suspension" or "remission [of punishment]" or "postponement [of punishment]," especially in reference to sins or to legal charges; it does not mean "forgiveness." Third, it is difficult to justify rendering the preposition διά plus the accusative as "through."[59] In short, the rendering "through his forgiving of sins committed before" depends on too many philological or syntactical improbabilities. But if that rendering is rejected, there is little left to support "covenant faithfulness" as the appropriate translation of δικαιοσύνη in this context.

2. If δικαιοσύνη designates God's righteousness or justice, whether his impartiality, or his fairness, or all that is in accordance with his own character, then the entire phrase might be paraphrased as follows: "in order to demonstrate that God is just, [which demonstration was necessary] because he had passed over sins committed before." Here the previous disabilities are turned into strengths: δικαιοσύνη is read more naturally, πάρεσις is now rendered "passed over," and διά plus the accusative is translated "because." The expression "sins committed before" is explained in Romans 3:26. The phrase "in his forbearance"[60] must be connected with the "passed over": it refers to the period before the cross.[61] In other words, the sins committed beforehand are not those committed by an individual before his or her conversion, but those committed by the human race before the cross. This brings us back to the profoundly salvation-historical categories already manifest in Romans 3:21. As Moo nicely says,

> This does not mean that God failed to punish or "overlooked" sins committed before Christ; nor does it mean that God did not really "forgive" sins under the Old Covenant. Paul's meaning is rather that God "postponed" the full penalty due sins in the Old Covenant, allowing sinners

[59]In fairness, this usage is not unknown in Hellenistic Greek. But it is very rare, and therefore convincing reasons must be adduced for adopting this reading if a more common one is available.

[60]Lit. "in the forbearance of God," which in the Greek text occurs in 3:26, not Romans 3:25 as in NIV.

[61]Note Paul's other use of "forbearance" in Romans 2:4; cf. Acts 14:16; 17:30.

to stand before him without their having provided an adequate "satisfaction" of the demands of his holy justice (cf. Heb 10:4).[62]

And this, in turn, means that God's "righteousness" or "justice" must refer to some aspect of his character that, apart from the sacrifice of Christ, might have been viewed with suspicion had sinners in the past been permitted to slip by without facing the full severity of condemnation for sin. God's "righteousness" has been upheld by his provision of Christ as the propitiation in his blood.

This means, of course, that God's "righteousness" in Romans 3:25-26 does not mean exactly what it means in Romans 3:21. There, it refers to God's "justifying" of his sinful people; here, it refers to something intrinsic to God's character, whether his consistency or his determination to act in accordance with his glory or his punitive justice: these and other suggestions have been made. And this is in line with the broader observation that for Paul, justification is bound up not only with the vindication of sinners, but even more profoundly with the vindication of God.[63]

In short, Romans 3:25-26 makes a glorious contribution to Christian understanding of the "internal" mechanism of the atonement. It explains the need for Christ's propitiating sacrifice in terms of the just requirements of God's holy character. This reading not only follows the exegesis carefully, but it brings the whole of the argument from Romans 1:18 on into gentle cohesion.

The Significance of the Succeeding Passages, Romans 3:27-31; 4:1ff. Ideally, the bearing of this treatment of Romans 3:21-26 on the rest of Paul's argument in Romans should now be teased out. But here I must restrict myself to some cursory observations on the immediately succeeding verses.

Even a superficial glance at Romans 3:27-31 shows that the emphasis now falls on faith. In other words, these verses unpack emphases already made in Romans 3:22, 26, while developing the argument further by showing that when faith is properly understood, it simultaneously reinforces grace (cf. Rom 3:24) and provides the mech-

[62] Moo, *Romans*, 240.

[63] See, above all, Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification*, NSBT (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000).

anism by which Jews and Gentiles alike may be justified. Several scholars have also noted that the themes Paul sketches in Romans 3:27-30 are developed in various ways in Romans 4. In particular, Paul establishes three points in Romans 3:27-30, all of them paralleled in Romans 4:1ff: (1) Faith excludes boasting (Rom 3:27), a principle already observed in the life of Abraham (Rom 4:1-2). (2) Faith is necessary, apart from the works of the law, to preserve grace (Rom 3:28), once again observed in the life of Abraham (Rom 4:3-8). (3) Such faith is necessary if Jews and Gentiles alike are to be justified (Rom 3:29-30).[64] And this point, too, finds a curious warrant in the life of Abraham, in that it is said of him that his faith was credited to him as righteousness *before* he had received the sign of circumcision (Rom 4:9ff.).

Paul's closing verse, "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law" (Rom 3:31), should not be taken to mean that the apostle still wants to maintain the Mosaic covenant in full force after all, or to uphold νόμος ("law") as *lex*, as ongoing legal demand. Rather, Roman 3:31 is the unpacking of the last clause of Romans 3:21: the law and the prophets testify to this new "righteousness from God" that has come in Christ Jesus, and thus their valid continuity is sustained in that to which they point. If Paul's reading of the Old Testament, and of the Mosaic covenant in particular, is correct, then that ancient revelation continues in that for which it prepared the way, to which it pointed, and which fulfilled it. The law is upheld precisely because the redemptive-historical purposes and anticipations of the law are upheld.

[64] On these two verses, see especially Jan Lambrecht, "Paul's Logic in Romans 3:29-30," *JBL* 119 (2000): 526-28.