

Notes on Romans 3

This is a synopsis with minor modifications and additions of the relevant sections of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*: New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

4. Israel's Faithlessness and God's Faithfulness 3.1-8

We get the force of this section only when we appreciate the letter's 'symphonic' structure, in which themes are hinted at in advance of their full statement, and its underlying subject, which is God's faithfulness to the covenant and Israel's vocation to an answering faithfulness through which God's purpose for the world will be accomplished.

Paul is concerned here not so much with the sinfulness of all Jews, important though that is, as with Israel's failure to carry out the divine commission, to be the means of the world's salvation. Paul's point is that God remains faithful to the covenant plan even though Israel has failed in the covenant task.

But Israel's failure puts God into an apparently awkward position. Won't his faithfulness to Israel end up being just an example of playing favorites, unfair to the world he condemns, since they're no better? And if he executes judgment on all, what about his promise to Israel?

Paul rebuts these charges of injustice briefly without actually answering them for now; he will return to them in due course.¹ For the moment his aim is to assert that God is faithful, despite Israel's failure; this will clear the ground for the point (which many have assumed was the only one in the entire section) that Jews have joined Gentiles in the dock, guilty as charged.

a. What's the advantage of being a Jew? 3.1-2

If God is capable of calling 'Jews' from among the uncircumcised, what's the point of being Jewish, practicing Torah, or being circumcised in the first place? Two hundred years later, Marcion will answer, 'None whatever!', but Paul has no intention of doing so. The God unveiled in Jesus the Messiah, as he will make clear in the next two chapters, remains the God of Abraham, the covenant God. God does not go back on his word. But the way Paul words his answer clues us in to his real concern. The Jews were *entrusted* with God's oracles. (Paul says 'in the first place', but never gets round to saying 'in the second place'. Until, that is, Rm 9.)

'Oracles' (*logia*) is an unexpected word in this context, and in fact Paul uses it only here in all his writings. In the OT, it's used for Balaam's prophecies in Nm 24.4,16 and often for words spoken by God to Israel.² In pagan usage, *logia* often referred to oracles in the technical sense: short utterances given under inspiration at shrines such as Delphi. A ruler would send emissaries to an oracular shrine, the priest or priestess at the shrine would themselves be 'entrusted' by the god with the message for the emissaries, who would return entrusted with the words of the deity meant for their master. This explains Paul's comment well enough. The Jews were 'entrusted' with messages for the world; not just with Torah itself, but, through their living under Torah, with words of instruction, of life and light, for the Gentile world. They were to be God's messengers.

¹ All the questions in this section are rhetorical, made by imaginary objectors. Paul does not wish to press them on his own account. The NIV flags this up in 3.7 by adding 'someone might argue'.

² Eg Dt 33.9 and frequently in Ps 119; in the NT, see Ac 7.38; Hb 5.12; 1P 4.11

**b. Doesn't Israel's unfaithfulness
cancel God's faithfulness? 3.3-4**

Doesn't Israel's unfaithfulness then cancel God's faithfulness? (3.3). Paul's basic answer is the central point of the paragraph. Israel's faithlessness cannot nullify God's faithfulness. We should note, despite KJV's 'what if some did not believe' and NIV's 'What if some did not have faith?', that Paul is not so concerned with whether they 'had faith' in the sense of a personal trust in God or Jesus. What if some were not *faithful* to the commission to be God's messenger people. The Greek word *pistis*, used here for the first time in the body of the letter (i.e., since 1.17) encompasses the meanings 'trustworthiness' and 'loyalty' more than the 'religious' meanings we assign to it today— personal trust in, and knowledge of, God and belief in true statements about him. In its negative form (*apistia*, literally 'non-faith'; 'unfaithfulness, untrustworthiness'), it applies to Israel; in its positive form (*pistis*, 'faith, faithfulness, reliability, loyalty'), to God. 'God's trustworthiness' (*pistis theou*, 3.3b) is thus an aspect of and a way of referring to 'God's righteousness' (*dikaiosynē theou*) unveiled in the good news (1.17). God's covenant always envisioned Israel as the light of the world; Israel's untrustworthiness does not abolish God's intention to make it so. So all of this only sharpens up the question: What will God do, since Israel has failed?

Paul asked, What if some were faithless (3.3), and he answers from Ps 115.2: God will be true—

Ps 115.2 'Every human being is a liar'.

—God's words are true, even if all human words prove false. Paul backs up the point by quoting Ps 51.4 (50.6 LXX), the great prayer of repentance ascribed to David after his adultery with Bathsheba. The verse indicates the abject sorrow of the penitent, acknowledging that when God condemns this sin there will be no question about the rightness of the verdict. It is interesting to observe that when Paul alludes to or mentions David, here and in 4.6-8, it's in connection with sin and forgiveness.³ The psalm goes on, of course, to speak of the new heart that God will create within the penitent and the gift of the Holy Spirit— 'new covenant' themes, in other words, that tie in, via Ezekiel 36, with the close of Rm 2. The verse Paul quotes (Ps 51.4 / 50.6 LXX) stresses that sinful humanity, and sinful Israel, can have no claim on God.

**c. Isn't God's wrath
unjust, then? 3.5-6**

3.5-6. This raises an apparent problem, caused perhaps by the language of the psalm as much as anything else.

³ See 4QMMT C26. On other parallels with 4QMMT see esp. the Commentary on 10.5-8.

It might seem as though God were acting as judge and executioner in a case where the two parties at law were Israel and— God's own self! This would constitute flagrant injustice; how could the party on trial also judge the case fairly? But Paul is quick to point out that God is not actually at law with Israel; God is the cosmic judge, who must bring justice to the whole world. Some scriptural passages do speak of God having a lawsuit against Israel, but the more fundamental truth is that God is the judge of all.⁴

**d. Or shouldn't we just sin,
so God can show mercy? 3.7-8**

If God is true, even if all humans are false (3.4), and God's truth shines the more brightly ('has the more abounded', *eperisseusen*) when I prove false, 'why am I condemned' (3.7)? Paul slips into the first-person singular not because he is thinking of his own individual situation, nor just to make the argument sound more personal. He's anticipating 7.7-25, where saying 'I' is a way of talking about Israel while not seeming to stand apart from his 'kinsmen according to the flesh'— and indeed instead of staying on 'I' here, he moves back to treating Jews in general in 3.9. Surely 'I' should not be condemned— surely God cannot actually endorse 2.17-29 ('you dishonor God' 2.24), and especially 2.27 ('those who are uncircumcised by nature, fulfilling the Torah, will judge you, who by letter and circumcision are the Torah's transgressor'). For if God's glory is enhanced by this Israel's transgressions, surely God must be pleased? Why should 'I' then be condemned as though 'I' were a 'sinner' (*hamartolos*), like the lesser, pagan breeds outside of Torah?⁵ Why indeed should the pagans' condemnation fall on Israel as well?

Paul does not deign to answer this absurdity, but instead amplifies it by referring to an even more blatant attack on the integrity of his theology. Some, he says, have been insulting (*blasphēmoumetha*) him by reporting that he says, 'let's do evil that good may come.'⁶ For if the

⁴ There may be here an analogy with the book of Job. Job, assuming that he and God are adversaries at law, declares his innocence; Job's comforters, making the same assumption, declare Job guilty. In fact, Job's adversary is Satan; God remains the judge and in the end clears Job's name. God and Job *can* both be in the right simultaneously. The parallel is not exact, but the analogy holds to the extent that God appears unjust to those who assume that he is a party in the lawsuit, rather than the judge.

⁵ For the usage, see Ga 2.15. An *hamartolos*, from the Jewish point of view, was one who, not having the benefit of Torah, sinned as it were in the dark. When a Jew sins the result is 'transgression' (*parabasis*), breaking a known commandment. Note *parabatēs*, 'transgressor', at 2.25,27, and see also at 5.13-14.

⁶ The Greek could mean that there are two different groups making similar accusations, the former in a more slanderous fashion (reflected

'evil' of Israel's failure has brought the 'good' of the good news— 'by their fall, salvation has come to the Gentiles' (11.11)— why not apply the principle across the board?

Paul's only comment on this is heavily ironic: Here at least is someone whose condemnation is manifestly just! (3.8c). If no one else, God's judgment would certainly be deserved by anyone who could say such a thing!

Why does Paul even note these problems, especially without giving answers? Partly, he had to acknowledge them after what he had said in 2.25-29 (and indeed 2.13-15). But a further and deeper reason will emerge in 3.21-26: the good news itself unveils God's righteousness, precisely that righteousness that's called into question in the ways outlined so briefly here.

The fuller answer, though, comes in Rm 9-11, where the same questions recur:

- 3.1 'What is the point of being a Jew?' corresponds to 9.1-5 as a whole;
- 3.3 'Has Israel's failure impugned the faithfulness of God to the words previously issued?' corresponds to 9.6, 'It is not as though God's word had failed';
- 3.5 'Is God then unjust?' corresponds to 9.14, 'Is there injustice with God?';
- 3.7 'Why am I still condemned?' corresponds to 9.19, 'Why does God still find fault?'
- 3.9 corresponds in all sorts of ways to 9.30-10.21. In addition, the narrative logic of Rm 3, in which the failure of Israel leads to the fresh unveiling of God's righteousness (3.21-26), corresponds closely to the narrative logic of the whole of Rm 9-11, and especially of 10.1-4.

We should also note that 7.7-25 is a much fuller presentation of Israel's failure and of the strange way that the Torah was involved in it, which develops the thought of 2.17-29 and prepares the way for Rm 9-11. There, too, the first-order problem is not 'legalism'— 'law'— and especially not the Torah as 'law'— so much as law-breaking— and this in the specific sense of transgressing the Torah, not some general religious and/or social imperative. A second-order problem in 7.7-25 is the plight of Israel, called to live in Torah and yet discovering that it condemns rather than giving life— again, not too far from 2.17-29, and ending with a cry of frustration that bears some relation to the (admittedly more cynical) questions of 3.7-8. Again, the statement of the problem in 7.7-25 prepares for the statement of the solution in

8.1-11, just as the present passage prepares for 3.21-4.25 (on how God's covenant faithfulness played out), both 'solutions' hingeing on the death of Jesus. The present paragraph is thoroughly integrated into the rest of the letter, and it's important to grasp how so, if we want to grasp Paul's full picture. We have to look at all the places where the same theme is treated, as well as remember the role of the passage in its own context. Paul is not just rehearsing the same argument two or three times, in more detail perhaps, just for the sake of it; he is making different, but related points.

So what role does the rapid listing of questions in 3.1-8 play within 1.18-3.20? The paragraph is a vital part of three simultaneous themes.

1. *Universal human sinfulness* (see below on 3.19-20): If Jews are to be included in this indictment— the basic problem being not that they are legalists or moralists, as in most Evangelical readings, but that their boast is undercut by their own Torah-breaking— this raises questions that must be addressed, or at least noted, before the conclusion can be drawn (3.10-20). Thus the sequence of thought runs:
 - 2.17-29 Initial accusation against Israel;
 - 3.1-8 Weighty theological objections to such an accusation (if it's true, what does that do to your wider theology?);
 - 3.9-20 Confirming the truth of the initial accusation.
2. *Israel was disloyal to God and failed in its commission* to be God's messenger people, the light of the world. Since the commission was God's answer to the problem of idolatry and injustice (1.18-32), the problem might now seem insoluble. Paul asserts that God will remain faithful; despite Israel's failure, he will deal with the problem of universal sin.
3. *God's covenant faithfulness (righteousness) is unveiled in the good news.* God's character is a major theme here; within 3.2-7 alone Paul deals with God's oracles, God's faithfulness, God's truth (twice), God's justice, God's wrath, God's judgment, and God's glory. He has already argued in 1.18-2.29 that the good news unveils God's impartial judgment, enabling one to understand present moral chaos as an anticipation of the coming wrath. Paul notes objections to this in 3.1-8 (it seems to impugn God's character), and answers in a way that prepares for the description of

in the NIV). But the NRSV may be right to take the sentence as a hendiadys, a single point expressed in two parallel ways.

the unveiling of God's covenant faithfulness (righteousness) in 3.21–4.25. *If God is to be true to character, if the promises are to be fulfilled, what is needed is a faithful Israelite who will act on behalf of, and in the place of, faithless Israel.* Paul will argue in 3.21–26 that God has provided exactly that.

First, however, the lawcourt scene must be rounded off. The Gentile world has already been arraigned and found guilty (1.18ff), hinting at what Paul will now say openly—that all Jews belong in the dock as well, with nothing to say in their own defense. (See at 3.9–20.)

5. The Torah shows that Jews are as guilty as Gentiles 3.9-20

'Whatever Torah says, it speaks to those under the Torah' (lit., 'in the Torah', 3.19). This is the clue to the present paragraph, with its string of scriptural quotations. Having already argued for the universality of Gentile sin and guilt, Paul now needs to emphasize that the Jews must be seen in the dock alongside the pagans. This has been where his argument has been going from the beginning, when the word 'became useless' (*mataiōthēsan*) in 1.21 alluded to Jeremiah's indictment of Israel⁷ in the midst of a general portrayal of paganism. Rm 2.17–29 (on the Israel's failure to live up to its claims) and 3.1–9 (does Israel's faithlessness cancel God's faithfulness, or is God's wrath unjust?) were not just part of the indictment; they were aimed at answering potential objections, at getting rid of excuses, before the final verdict.

Like 1.21, the biblical quotations in 3.9–20 come from Israel's Scriptures and are themselves indictments, not of pagans, but of Jews. Scripture itself, in other words, bears witness against those to whom it was entrusted, leaving the whole world accountable to God (cf 10.19–21). Paul sums up the problem in terms of the impossibility of anyone being justified by Torah, since all Torah can do is point to sin. This will enable him to move at once to demonstrate how the unveiling of God's righteousness in the good news has dealt with precisely this problem.

a. Are Jews any better off? 3.9

The word *proechometha* refers to position and status, not moral behavior, so 'Are we any better' (KJV, NIV) is not correct. It really means, 'Are we any better off?' (as in NRSV). Paul has been arguing that the privileges of the Jews are real, even though they have been squandered; he has answered his earlier question about whether the Jews enjoyed any advantage in 3.1 by saying, 'much in every way', most especially by being entrusted with God's oracles; but he now asks a different question: Does that put us Jews in a better position, in absolute terms?

⁷ Jr 2.5, 23.16; also 2Kg 17.15.

The answer is 'No, not at all', and he fills this out in the second half of 3.9b–20.

Paul now begins a lawcourt metaphor, which he will develop further in 3.19–20. He has already laid a charge against both Jews and Greeks ('Greeks' here, as usual, is a metonym for 'Gentiles in general'), alleging that they are both 'under sin' (3.9b). By 'already charged' (*proēitiasametha*) he is referring back to the argument that began in 1.18. And although he has used the verb form of 'sin' (*hamartanō*) in 2.12, first of Gentiles and then of Jews, and the substantive 'sinner' (*hamartōlos*), in 3.7, his first use of the noun 'sin', *hamartia*, introduces us to another major theme in the letter, that of 'Sin' as a personified force, and of the slavery of humankind to this force.

The way Paul speaks of it, 'Sin' is not just individual human acts of missing the mark (the basic meaning of the word); it has a malevolent life of its own, exercising power over persons and communities. It is almost as though by 'Sin' Paul is referring to what in some other parts of the Bible is meant by 'Satan' (though Paul can use that language too; eg, 16.20). This personification is particularly striking in 7.7–25. By analyzing the human plight in this way he is able to introduce the notion of enslavement to Sin (eg, 6.20) and thereby to clear the way for his own version of the story of the Exodus: for 'Sin', read Pharaoh; for death and resurrection of Jesus, read Passover and Red Sea; for Spirit, read the arrival at Sinai and the giving of Torah; and for inheriting the land, read renewal of all creation. The Exodus determines a good deal of the shape of Romans 5–8, and it will be anticipated in the dense description of the death of Jesus in 3.24–26.

b. Their Scripture itself indicts them 3.10-18

Paul arranges his string of biblical quotations quite carefully. He opens with the general charge that no one is 'righteous', anticipating the conclusion in 3.20. The rest of the description is framed by charges of impiety:

- 3.11 Nobody understands [truth], or seeks after God;
- 3.12 Going astray,
- 3.13–14 Wicked speech,
- 3.15–17 Violent behavior.
- 3.18 Nobody keeps the fear of God before their eyes.

As always, we need to examine the contexts of his 'string of pearls':

- 3.10b The opening line corresponds to Ps 14.1 and Qo 7.20.

- 3.11 Paul quotes at length from Ps 14 (13 LXX) and 53 (52 LXX), which ends with a prayer that God would deliver Israel out of captivity.
- 3.12 He then moves to Ps 5.9, 'their throat is an open sepulcher and who deceive with their tongue'; the previous verse prays that Yhwh would lead the psalmist 'in your righteousness'.
- 3.13 Ps 140.3 adds the theme of wickedness of mouth and tongue to Paul's list of charges; the unrighteous have adders' poison under their lips.
- 3.14 Ps 10.7 adds that their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Both Ps 140 (3.13) and Ps 10 (3.14) beseech Yhwh that he would act at last, to judge the wicked and establish his regime for ever.
- 3.15-17 The complaint that the wicked are swift to shed blood, bring ruin and destruction, and do not know the way of peace comes (some-what loosely) from Isa 59.7-8.
- Of all the chapters in the Hebrew Scriptures, this is the one that most strikingly depicts Yhwh finding that there is no righteousness in the world, and so putting on the clothes of righteousness and salvation to rescue the covenant people and judge their adversaries (59.16-18). The chapter ends with Yhwh coming to Zion as redeemer— a passage Paul will quote in 11.26— and establishing the divine covenant with Israel, putting the divine spirit within them.
- 3.18 Ps 36.2 ('there is no fear of God before their eyes') moves on to praise God's mercy and faithfulness (Ps 36.5), his righteousness and judgments (Ps 36.6), and ends with a prayer for his mercy and righteousness to abide with Israel and for the wicked to be judged at last (Ps 36.10-12).

Thus what looked at first like a repetitious list of biblical quotations, apparently belaboring the point that all are deeply wicked, turns out to be a subtle sequence of thought, linking in at virtually every point with the themes from Paul's surrounding argument. The surface meaning of the text is clear, that all who are 'under the Torah' are condemned as sinners; but the subtext is saying all the time, 'Yes; and in precisely this situation God will act, because of the divine righteousness, to judge the world, to rescue the helpless, to establish the covenant'.

c. The whole world is under judgment 3.19

To conclude the matter, Paul returns to his lawcourt metaphor. The Torah (here taken as the whole of the Jewish scriptures, not just the first five books) addresses 'those in the Torah, so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world be under judgment before God' (3.19). 'Stopping the mouth' by placing a hand over it was a conventional sign to indicate that one had no more to say in one's own defense; if an obviously guilty defendant continued to speak, the court might of course order that his mouth be stopped for him (cf Ac 23.2).⁸ The case has been heard; the defendants have no more to say; they stand in the dock awaiting the verdict, which can only go one way.

d. Torah brings recognition of Sin 3.20

The word (*dioti*) that opens 3.20 certainly means 'for' (NRSV) or 'because', not 'therefore'.⁹ This verse offers the logical ground for 3.19, not the other way around. The Torah speaks to those under the Torah, says Paul, with the result that every mouth is stopped, because (3.20a) nobody will be justified by works of Torah, because (*gar*, 3.20b) through Torah comes recognition of Sin.¹⁰ Run the sequence in the opposite direction: Torah brings recognition of sin, therefore no one will be justified by 'works of Torah', so when Torah speaks it leaves those 'under Torah' without defense.

In addition, 'becoming conscious of sin' is not quite the same 'recognition (*epignōsis*) of Sin' (see 7.7). *Epignōsis* is not just 'knowledge'; something has been understood. Paul has left this point about the role of Torah in the process until last, so that his next point in 3.21 will have maximum effect.

Rm 3.20 is one of those points in a Pauline argument where we need to weigh each phrase with particular care. To begin with the subject of the sentence: 'No human being' (NRSV) and 'no one' (NIV) do not capture the nuance of Paul's phrase. In alluding to Ps 143.2/142.2 LXX, it's striking that he says, literally, 'all flesh (*pasa sarx*) shall not be justified'. The LXX actually has *pas zōn*,

⁸ NIV and NRSV have 'silenced', describing the effect but losing the physical gesture.

⁹ Thus the NIV, showing remarkable disregard for Paul's connecting links. The penalty for this is to be forced to alter the next connective as well: *γάρ* (*gar*), introducing the last part of the verse, means 'for', not 'rather', as in the NIV.

¹⁰ The NIV's 'through the law we become conscious of sin' adds a first-person plural where Paul leaves the matter abstract. This sentence, a restatement of the Lutheran view of the 'preaching of the law', reflects Paul's meaning only if we remember that 'we' means 'those under the law' (7.1-12).

'every living man'. 'Flesh', as we saw at 1.3, is a heavily loaded term for Paul, and 'all flesh' takes the mind to Isa 40.5-6. It designates, not so much ordinary physicality as opposed to non-material existence, but rather human-kind seen as physically corruptible, morally rebellious, and heading for death. It can also carry the sense of Jewish 'flesh', sharing the problem of 'fleshly' humanity, with the 'fleshly' badge of circumcision only serving to emphasize this identification. That, indeed, is an important part of the argument of Galatians.¹¹ Although, therefore, Paul's 'all flesh' here means the whole of humanity, it's strikingly appropriate, within his wider theology, that he should use it when insisting that the Jews must join the Gentiles as guilty defendants before God's judgment seat.

Though Paul is not quoting the psalm verbatim, he clearly intends to refer to it, with the wider scriptural context in mind. Ps 143 is a prayer invoking Yhwh's faithfulness and righteousness (Ps 143.1), pleading for deliverance, not on the basis of merit (after all, as Ps 143.2 says, no one living is righteous before God), but just for the sake of God's name and his righteousness (3.11). Though the surface level of Paul's argument demands that he quote 3.2, the underlying theme of the section now drawing to a close, and of the one about to begin, is God's righteousness. Being righteous, God must judge the wicked; but those who are not righteous may still cast themselves on God's righteousness to find deliverance.

What, then, does Paul mean, 'by works of the Torah shall no flesh be justified before him'? How does this relate to 2.13, where 'the doers of the Torah' *shall* be justified?

The question can be answered fully only in relation to the many other passages where Paul speaks of 'works of the Torah'. But a preliminary answer may be given here, to be filled out as we progress and with additional side-long glances at parallel arguments in Galatians.

Justification, in this passage, is clearly a lawcourt term. We may remind ourselves that the Greek words 'justify' (*dikaioō*) and 'justification' (*dikaiōsis*) belong to the same root as 'righteous' (*dikaios*) and 'righteousness' (*dikaiosynē*). In addition, 'righteousness' has a persistent connotation, in the Bible, of 'covenant faithfulness'. Choosing either the 'just-' or 'right-' root and attempting to enforce it all the time doesn't prove satisfactory. And as we've mentioned in the Introduction, when Paul uses this language he has the lawcourt, God's covenant with Israel (through which, as though in a cosmic lawcourt, the world will be made right), and eschatology in mind. The point is that the final judgment has been brought for-

¹¹ And Paul quotes the same verse, with the same modification, in Ga 2.16.

ward into the present, and that God's 'righteousness' has been disclosed already in Jesus the Messiah.

So Paul's point here is that the court's— i.e., God's— verdict can't be that those who have 'works of Torah' on their record will receive the verdict 'righteous'. Again, he is not speaking of Gentiles, but of Jews; we already know, from 1.18–2.16, that Gentiles will not be justified as they stand. The Jew of 2.17 will come into court, 'rest in the Torah', produce 'works of Torah', and claim that these demonstrate that he or she is indeed a member of God's covenant. No, says Paul. Possession of Torah will not do. Torah just reminds you that you're a sinner like the Gentiles. That was the point of the hints in 1.18–2.16 and of the direct charge in 2.17–29— not, as is sometimes said, that the Jews are 'legalists', but that they have broken the Torah they were given. And transgression of Torah shows that Jews, like Gentiles, are 'under the power of sin' (3.9). To appeal to Torah is thus like calling as a witness for the defense one who the prosecutor's case. (This is the point that Paul will develop, via such apparent throwaway lines as 5.20, in 7.7–25; cf too 1Co 15.56.)

So, what are these 'works of Torah'? How does this indictment against those who have 'works of Torah' on their record square with what Paul says about himself in Ph 3.6, that concerning 'righteousness in Torah' he had become 'blameless'? How does it fit with wider, non-Christian evidence for Jewish beliefs about Torah in Paul's day?

The only pre-Christian Jewish text we possess that uses the phrase 'works of Torah' is a Dead Sea Scroll known as 4QMMT.¹² The 'works' spoken of there are (a) post-biblical rulings concerning temple purity, aimed at (b) defining one group of Jews over against others, whereas it's clear from Romans and Galatians, as we shall see, that when Paul speaks of 'works of the Torah' he is thinking rather of (a) biblical rules that (b) defined Jews (and proselytes) over against pagans. However, this Qumran text shows how 'works of the Torah' were related to 'justification'. The third and final section of MMT tells the story of Israel, from the promises and warnings of Deuteronomy up to the writer's own day. Deuteronomy 30 promised a historical sequence: covenantal blessing, curse, then blessing again. The initial blessing and curse, says the text, came upon Israel in the time of the monarchy, with the curse being, more or less, the exile. Now, however, the second blessing promised by the same text has come upon Israel, precisely in the life of the sect, the

¹² 4QMMT seems to be a letter, written in the mid-100s BC, from the leader of the Qumran group to the head of a larger group, of which the Qumran sect was once a part; see Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996) 358–64.

secretly inaugurated new covenant people, yet to be finally and publicly vindicated. The members of the sect are already marked out as the eschatological Israel, ahead of the time when they will be vindicated as such. The thing that marks them out in the present is precisely the specific 'works of the Torah' that the text urges upon its readers— detailed post-biblical regulations deemed necessary by the sect. These 'works of Torah', then, were the sign that the future verdict (God's vindication of the sect) was anticipated in the present; the sect could be confident now of their membership in the renewed covenant, the community of fresh blessing, the 'returned-from-exile' people spoken of in Deuteronomy 30. When we widen the horizon from the sectarian 'works' mentioned in the scroll to the more fundamental biblical 'works' Paul has in mind, the position he is *opposing* can be stated thus: 'works of Torah' are the sign, in the present, of that membership in Israel, God's covenant people, which will be vindicated in the future when the long-awaited 'righteousness of God' is finally unveiled in action.

It is vital to keep our balance at this point. One of the great gains of the last quarter of a century in Pauline scholarship has been to recognize that Paul's contemporaries— and Paul himself prior to his conversion— were not 'legalists', if by that we mean that they were attempting to earn favor with God, to earn grace as it were, by the performance of Torah-prescribed works. Paul's fellow Jews were not proto-Pelagians, attempting to pull themselves up by their moral shoelaces. They were, rather, responding out of gratitude to the God who had chosen and called Israel to be the covenant people and who had given Israel the Torah both as the sign of that covenant membership and as the means of making it real. Paul's critique is not that the Torah was a bad thing that the Jews should not have followed, nor that their Torah-observance was done in order to stake a claim on God that God had not already granted in the covenant. His point, rather, was that *all who attempted to legitimate their covenant status by appealing to possession of Torah would find that the Torah itself accused them of sin*. If the Jew appealed to Torah to say 'This shows that I am different from the Gentiles', Torah itself would say 'No, it doesn't; it shows that you are the same as the Gentiles'.

The 'works' that were regarded in Paul's day as demonstrating covenant membership were, of course, those things that marked out the Jews from their pagan neighbors, not least in the diaspora: the sabbath, the food laws, and circumcision. A strong case can therefore be made for seeing 'works of the Torah', in Romans and Galatians, as highlighting these elements in particular.

This case rests on the larger thrust of Paul's argument, in which the Jew is appealing not to perfect performance of every last commandment, but to possession of Torah as the sign of being God's special people. *They are special, but also sinners; and sin means that the specialness is of no ultimate avail.*

Why, then, could Paul say of himself, in Ph 3.6, that concerning 'righteousness under the Torah' he was 'found blameless'? Or, in 2.13, that 'the doers of the Torah' *shall* be justified? Presumably he meant that, as a good Jew, he regularly used the means of forgiveness and purification offered in the Temple, and that he took part in the great fasts and feasts through which the devout Jew was assured of God's forgiveness and favor. Thus at any moment he was a Jew in good standing; not that he had always done what Torah prescribed, but that he had always repented and sought God's forgiveness through the appropriate methods. Torah, he might have said, can show me that I am a sinner and can also show me the way of forgiveness. Someone who followed this path would consider themselves 'blameless according to the Torah'.

Further discussion of this point must be postponed until we arrive at 7.7-25, since that passage needs to be factored into the argument in various ways. But one major difference between what Paul says in Philippians and what he says in Rm 3 is that in the present passage his primary concern is not to analyze every single individual and to demonstrate somehow that he or she really is sinful, but rather to show that possession of Torah itself cannot sustain the claim that the Jew is automatically in covenant with God, automatically a cut above the Gentiles. And, in referring to those (like his own former self) who are 'in the Torah', he looks at them in their totality, sin included. Just as Israel cannot be affirmed in the present as the inalienable covenant people of God because of the presence, within Israel, of various kinds of sin that demonstrate the failure of the national vocation (2.17-24), so no Jews, however blameless in terms of current status, can be affirmed as they stand as complete and adequate human beings, since all alike commit sin. If God is the righteous judge, God cannot allow particular members of that nation to escape if they incur the judgment that Gentiles do.

But if God is truly 'righteous' in the sense of keeping the promises he made long ago, how can he put that 'righteousness' into operation without contradicting himself? This question was raised extremely sharply for Paul's near-contemporaries by the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. For Paul, it was already answered in the events concerning Jesus of Nazareth.

Some Reflections on Rm 3.9-20

1. Before we 'translate' or 'apply' these severe and often dense verses to our own day, we must consider the relevance of their own unique meaning in Paul's own time. Part of the burden of eschatology— part of the problem, that is, of believing in a God who (though always active within the world in various ways) acted uniquely and decisively at one moment in history, and part of the problem of living on the basis of that one-off action— is that one is committed to getting inside that historical situation in all its differentness to our own day, to understanding what it was that God was up to then. If we believe in the good news, we can't escape the task of being, in some way, 'ancient historians'. The alternative is shallow, sentimental, and anachronistic misunderstanding.

Paul insists that God will be just and faithful, despite the faithlessness of the particular humans to whom the divine oracles had been entrusted. In the post-Enlightenment world, ironically, the goodness and justice of God are often called into account precisely because of the suggestion that God might act in a particular and decisive way, in one place and time rather than at another. The rhetoric of the last two hundred years has been in favor of broad general truths, timeless and abstract religious or ethical norms or guidelines. Projecting our hard-won (and often deeply ambiguous) democracy onto the heavens, we demand that all humans should have the same vote and voice. How, we ask, can a unique act of God be fair?

This question is, at one level, a manifestation of the old discussion, associated with Barth and others, as to whether Christianity is a 'religion' or rather a 'revelation'. In these debates, however, it was often assumed that the Jews followed a 'religion', and were indeed the archetypical manifestation of *homo religiosus*, religious humanity. (This is a major theme in the great commentary of Ernst Käsemann.) We have learned, painfully enough, the danger of such caricatured generalizations. What Saul of Tarsus and his contemporaries were longing for, in any case, was a revelation, an unveiling, the fresh action of their God within history. That was *how* wrongs would be put right, how justice would come at last. The irony of our changing points of view, the transformation of assumptions between Paul's day and ours, is that this idea of a specific and decisive act of God, in one place and time beyond all others, is itself now felt to be wrong or unjust. We here reach basic questions of worldview, and choices have to be made. The whole New Testament witnesses to a unique act of God, such as Saul of Tarsus had expected, but at a different level, of a totally different kind. Yes, says Paul the Apostle, God has acted in

history to unveil that faithfulness of which Scripture spoke. But no, the action was not what Israel, Saul of Tarsus included, had expected.

The 'modern' objection to the idea of God's acting decisively and uniquely is based, it seems, on a false impression about what such actions mean. If the main purpose of divine revelation were to convey information to humans, or to give a set of rules to be kept, then it would seem unfair and arbitrary to give these to some and then to judge the others despite their disadvantage. If the main purpose was to straighten out a few design faults in creation, to perform 'miracles' that helped certain people out of insoluble or life-threatening situations, this too would seem grossly unfair; why would a good God, capable of doing this sort of thing, not do it at other times, when faced (for instance) with the chance to prevent genocide?

These are, however, by no means the only possible models of divine action in the world. All analogies are imperfect; but we can conceive of other, better, ways of looking at the question. An architect has to produce a single blueprint at one time and place, so that the building may be constructed for the benefit of all. A medical researcher has to produce medications at one time and place, so that all may eventually be cured. A gardener has to plant a fruit tree in one place and at one time, so that there may be fruit for all. God, in the Jewish thought that Paul reflects, needed to act decisively at one time and in one place, so that there might be salvation for all. We should not allow the rhetoric of modernity to rob us of the glory of the good news: a God with muddy boots and dirty hands, busy at the center of the mess so that all may be cleaned up and sorted out.

2. The question of the point of being Jewish, once its own unique dimensions have been grasped, broadens out in our own day to the question of the point of being human. This has been asked in the twentieth century over and over, as philosophers, writers, and artists, as well as theologians, have reflected on the horrors of our 'civilized' world, producing ever more cunning machines for making war but still unable to invent one that will make peace. Just as the Jewish vocation was to bring God's light to the Gentiles, so the human vocation was to reflect God's image into the world. Manifest human failure to do this could lead to the equivalent, for this question, of the Marcionite rejection of Judaism as a whole, i.e., a denial of the entire God-given human vocation. This, indeed, is what we find in some New Age thinking today, with humans being regarded as simply part of the world's problem, rather than potential contributors to the solution.

But Paul would be as adamant on this point as he is on his own topic: Let God be true, though everyone should prove false. God has created humans to reflect the divine image in worship and service, and God will be true to that promise. 'God's saving justice' can be called upon to fulfill the purpose of creation, not just of Israel. How this will happen, Paul will work out from 3.21 through to the end of Rm 8. To claim that it will happen is the equivalent, for these questions, of Paul's brief and clipped responses in 3.1-8. That it has already happened is the burden of his song in 3.21-4.25, summed up in 5.12-21: God has provided an obedient human being, in whom the original purpose of Gn 1 has at last been fulfilled (see also 1Co 15.20-28; Ph 3.20-21; and, further afield, the whole argument of Hb 2.5-10).

3. The charge of universal human sinfulness is of course as controversial today as ever. Nobody, almost by definition, likes the humiliation of recognizing their sinful condition (or, if they do, we may raise questions about their balance of mind). Just as much psychology tacitly avoids the category of 'evil', preferring to see varieties of human behavior in less threatening terms, so many Christians, eager for the great acceptance, the astonishing welcome, of the good news, use this as a reason for denying human sinfulness. But, of course, if humans are not deeply sinful the good news is no longer astonishing; indeed, it's not good news at all, since there was no problem to which it was the shocking, startling answer. Tragically, just as those who do not understand history are condemned to repeat it, so those who turn a blind eye to wickedness are always in danger of perpetrating it. If there is no disease, why worry about precautions, let alone cure? If the human race is morally sound (no doubt with a few glitches here and there), we should eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall live. Oddly enough, at the same time as post-modernity is urging us to be suspicious of every action, every word, and every motive, the imperative it sanctions— to be true to oneself, even though 'oneself' may be constantly changing—is itself deeply suspect. Tyrants, bullies, extortioners, adulterers, and murderers are all being true to themselves. And those who look at such activities and thank God that they are not like that need once more to go deeper (2.1-16), to examine the secrets of their own hearts.

4. There is much to learn from how Paul has pulled together the awful catalog of sin in 3.10-18. Under the surface-level indictment there is hope, precisely because this wickedness is shown up by God's righteousness, which can then be appealed to for mercy. How easy it is for preachers either to denounce wickedness in a dualistic fashion, or to abstain from such denunciations be-

cause they sound too depressing, too dismissive. Paul's denunciations, for those with ears to hear, are always hinting at the solution. His robust faith in God's forgiving faithfulness enables him to call a spade a spade.

5. The dismissal of 'works of the Torah' as the means of justification has all kinds of overtones. Paul's fundamental meaning is that no Jew can use possession of the Torah, and performance of its key symbolic 'works' of ethnic demarcation, as demonstration in the present time that they belong to the *eschatological* people of God, the people *who will inherit the age to come*. Torah is incapable of performing this function: When appealed to, it reminds its possessors of their own sin.

This Israel-specific and context-specific argument and meaning, vital though it is, must send off warning signals in other spheres as well. To the Roman moralist of Paul's day, it might have said that clear thought and noble intention were not enough; the clearer the thought, the nobler the intention, the more this clarity and nobility would condemn the actual behavior. To an anxious monk (eg, Luther) of the early sixteenth century, fretting about his own justification, Paul's words rang other bells. Performance of Christian duties is not enough. In the post-Enlightenment period, many, including many Christians, assumed that 'the Torah', here and elsewhere, referred to the Kantian idea of a categorical *moral* imperative suspended over all humans, and have preached this 'Torah' to make people recognize their guilt, in order then to declare the good news to them.

These are perhaps *overtones* of Paul's statement here, but they are not its fundamental note. If we play an overtone, thinking it to be a fundamental, we shall set off new and different sets of overtones, which will not then harmonize with Paul's original sound. Sadly, this has occurred again and again, not least within the Reformation tradition, which, eager for the universal relevance and the essential 'for me' dimension of the good news ('apply it to my everyday life'), and regarding Israel mainly as a classic example of the wrong way of approaching God or 'religion', has created a would-be 'Pauline' theology in which half of what Paul was most eager to say in Romans has been screened out.

We must be careful to tell again the unique story of Israel and Jesus, not as an example of something else but as the fundamental truth of the good news. If we do that, many of the things we have also wanted to insist on can be retained and, indeed, enhanced, but they will take their place in their proper perspective.

C. God's righteousness and covenant faithfulness unveiled

3.21-4.25

It should be clear by now that the great theme Paul will unveil in the new section is 'God's righteousness', meaning by that his faithfulness to the promises he made long ago. Called into question by Israel's failure to be the light for the Gentiles, its true meaning has now been unveiled through the faithful Israelite, Jesus the Messiah. The plan has not failed; rather, it's focused on, and accomplished through, one person. Through him, God has kept the promise he made to Abraham.

Paul is speaking of the covenant, without using the word. As in Galatians 3, he's evoking Genesis 15, where God established a covenant with Abraham, promising both that he would have countless descendants and that his seed would attain their inheritance by passing through slavery to freedom (Gn 15.5,13-16). *God has done in Jesus the Messiah is the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham.* This, indeed, is the answer, or at least the initial answer, to the string of questions in 3.1-8 ('hasn't their faithlessness canceled God's faithfulness?' 3.3; 'is God unrighteous who brings down wrath?' 3.5; 'if God's truth has abounded through my falsehood to his glory; why yet am I even judged a sinner?' 3.7).

In the argument of the present section, and its partial parallel in Ga 3, Abraham is far more than an 'example' of someone who was justified by faith, as is still commonly supposed. Paul is doing something much more large-scale, much more intricately crafted, than 'stating a doctrine' about 'how we get saved' in 3.21-31 and then offering Abraham as a 'proof from scripture' in Rm 4. Abraham's faith isn't even the sole or central feature of Rm 4; indeed, by making it so, as we shall see, commentators introduce puzzles that disappear once the larger theme is grasped.

Since at least the time of Luther, most readers have come to the text with questions other than Paul's. In particular, the broad questions of human sin and of justification by faith have dominated the discussion, so that Paul's own much more specific questions in Romans, not least those of the coming together of Jew and Gentile in Christian faith, and of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, have been marginalized, to the detriment both of exegesis and of the church.

Exegesis has been hampered in particular by a misunderstanding of 'God's righteousness' (*dikaiosynē theou*) in 3.21-26 (on 'righteousness' language, see the Introduction). Once the wider context (of 3.1-8, on the one hand, and of 4.1-25, on the other) is appreciated, and the specific argument of 3.21-26 itself fully grasped, it's quite

impossible that this phrase should mean, as NIV, 'a righteousness from God', that is, a righteous status that believers enjoy as a gift from God and in God's presence. Paul does indeed hold that those who believe the good news are reckoned 'righteous' (eg, 3.26,28), and he calls this 'righteousness from God' (*hē ek theou dikaiosynē*, Ph 3.9), in the sense of a status of having been declared righteous. But this status, which Paul describes in that significantly different way, is not the same thing as God's own righteousness or covenant faithfulness. The 'righteousness' we receive 'from (ek) God' results from the unveiling of his own righteousness or saving covenant faithfulness; the present passage is, in fact, the fullest statement of this. An alternative technical term for God's 'righteousness', with all its attendant puzzles and possibilities for misunderstanding, is perhaps that of the NJB: 'God's saving justice'.

Paul declares (3.21) that the Torah and the prophets bear witness to this saving justice. What did the Torah and prophets say, to which God has now been faithful?

The main subject Paul expounds in this section is God's creation of a single worldwide family, composed of believing Jews and believing Gentiles alike. In doing so, he is going back to the original promises God made to Abraham. It's worth reviewing these, and since I suspect you won't look them up, I'll quote them more or less in full, here:

Gn 12.2-3 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you will be a blessing, and I will bless those who bless you, and curse him who curses you: and in you shall all families of the earth be blessed.

Gn 15.5-7 Look now at the sky, and count the stars, if you can number them: and he said to him, So shall your seed be. And he believed Yhwh; and he counted it to him for righteousness. And he said unto him, I am Yhwh who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land, to inherit it.

Gn 17.4-8 As for me, behold, my covenant is with you. You will be the father of a multitude of nations... I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you. Kings will come out of you. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your seed after you. I will give to you, and to your

seed after you, the land where you are traveling, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession. I will be their God.

Gn 22.17-18 In blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand that's on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed my voice.

In fewer words: 'I will make you the father of a great nation, and indeed the father of many nations; all the nations will be blessed in you and in your seed; and I will give you the land'— in other words, God promised to create for Abraham a single worldwide family, composed of believing Jews and believing Gentiles alike.

The main obstacle to God's purpose is human sin, and the paragraph describing how God has finally accomplished it focuses on the way God has dealt with sin, through the death of Jesus.

'Justification', in its Pauline contexts, regularly includes the rescue of sinners from their sin, and the creation of the worldwide family of forgiven sinners. The weakness of most readings of Paul is that it leaves out the second of these aspects, to focus exclusively on individual salvation.

But Paul emphasizes the universal scope of the family God is creating for Abraham when he says 'all have sinned' in 3.23, and in his sustained arguments in 3.27-30; 4.9-12; 4.13-15; and 4.16-17. Paul does not show that 'faith'— taken to be his main topic— incidentally happens to bring different ethnic groups together; rather, he stresses the coming together of Jew and Gentile in the Messiah and demonstrates that this comes about through faith. God's aim in calling Abraham in the first place was to put the world right. Only through the creation of a single forgiven family, comprising Gentiles as well as Jews, can that purpose be fulfilled. Or rather, *in* that family, the purpose is fulfilled.

Paul is not offering a full 'doctrine of atonement' here (i.e., specifically in 3.24-26). Instead, he is summing up a much larger train of thought, which we can observe at various points in his letters, in order to use it in his present argument. When we allow Paul to develop his own thinking in his own way will we understand him.

The centrality of the Jew/Gentile question explains Paul's running sub-theme, 'apart from the Torah' (3.21). Despite the fact that Torah and prophets bear witness to God's

faithfulness, Torah itself sustains the division between Jew and Gentile, now overcome in the Messiah, and it condemns those 'in the Torah' by showing them up as sinners. Both these themes are present in 3.21-4.25 (eg, 3.27; 4.13-17).

Paul emphasizes throughout this section that this single worldwide family is 'justified' in the present time. Thinking within the same overall frame of thought as 4QMMT (see above at 3.20), he looks ahead to the future when God will finally make all things new and unveil once and for all who his people are. He has already spoken of this in 2.1-16; failure to factor that passage properly into the argument has led to the ignoring of the eschatological dimension of his teaching on justification. The whole point is this:

The verdict 'righteous', to be issued in the future on the basis of the totality of the life led, is brought forward into the present.

4QMMT regarded the performance of certain specific post-biblical purity regulations as the badge of those whose future justification is thereby assured. Paul regarded faith, specifically faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, as this badge (see 4.24-25; 10.8-10).

Justification in the present is possible, Paul argues, because God has dealt with the sins of his people through Jesus' death. His people are thus a *forgiven* family (4.5-8). The covenant with Abraham existed from the first to deal with the problem of Adamic humanity. 'All sinned and fell short of God's glory' (3.23)— this summarizes Paul's whole discussion of human sin in 1.18-3.20, and anticipates 5.12-21, that 'as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, even so death passed upon all, since all have sinned' (5.12). But God's faithfulness, when met with answering human faithfulness, creates the genuine humanity that idolatry so cruelly distorts, as he shows in Abraham (4.18-22), reflecting and reversing 1.18-25. Thus 'as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous' (5.19). Moreover, in view of God's wider purpose, the promise to Abraham and his seed was that they should inherit (not the land, but) the *world* (4.13); this will blossom fully in 8.18-25, where '*creation* waits with eager expectation for God's sons to be unveiled.... creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of decay into the liberty of the glory of God's children' (8.19,21).

God has, then, been faithful in Jesus the Messiah to the promises he made to Abraham, to the covenant established with the Jewish people and, through them, with humankind and the entire creation. The short, straightforward way of saying this is: 'God's saving justice has

been unveiled'. Chapters 5–8 will show how the unveiling of this righteousness works for the wider circles of humankind and creation as a whole, laying the foundations for Paul's arguments in Rm 9–11 and 12–16. God's saving justice, Paul declares, has been unveiled in and through the Messiah, Jesus, for the benefit of all who believe.

In the dense and unusual language of 3.24–26, Paul is briefly summarizing an argument he could have spelled out far more fully, which he alludes to in many other places in Romans and elsewhere. Paul's purpose in 3.21–26 is not to give a full 'doctrine of atonement', a complete account of how God dealt with the sins of the world through the death of Jesus. Rather, as one part of his argument that on the cross God's righteousness was unveiled, he is content to state, not completely *how*, but just *that* this had been accomplished. Fuller statements elsewhere indicate that for Paul the resurrection of Jesus was also significant in God's dealing with sins (eg, 1Co 15.17). Had crucifixion been the end of Jesus' story, no one would ever have ascribed saving significance to the event. The resurrection casts a retrospective coloring over the crucifixion, unveiling it to be the decisive, heaven-sent saving act of God. That is presumably why, when Paul spells out the nature of Christian faith in 4.24–25, he describes it as faith 'in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification'.

Jesus did what Israel should have done but failed to do (see 3.2–3). He was, or rather is, the light of the world, through whom God's saving purpose has been unveiled. Through him God has at last dealt with the world's sin, which was why he made a covenant with Abraham in the first place. Paul summarizes what Jesus did in shorthand as 'the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah' (3.22).

When Paul summarizes the present train of thought in 5.12–21, he uses the term 'obedience', and means something very similar there to what he says here. The Messiah's 'obedience unto death' (cf Ph 2.6–8) is the critical act— an act of Jesus, and also in Paul's eyes an act of God— through which sins are dealt with, justification is assured, and the worldwide covenant family is brought into being. In making this point it's important to be clear what is not being said. Paul is not speaking of Jesus' 'faith' either in the sense of the things Jesus believed (how silly!), or Jesus' exemplary trust in God (though that's close), or Jesus' religious experience (it's not about 'religion'). Nor is he suggesting that Jesus' 'obedience' was somehow *meritorious*, so that by it he earned 'righteousness' on behalf of others— though this is often how people explain the matter, especially in Reformed theol-

ogy.¹³ Rather, he is highlighting Jesus' *faithful obedience*, or *obedient faithfulness*, to what *Israel* was to accomplish, by which God would save the world. On the cross Jesus accomplished what God had always intended the covenant to achieve. Where Israel as a whole had been faithless, he was faithful: 3.22 answers to 3.2–3.

Jesus' faithfulness unto death is here, as in some other Pauline passages, described in sacrificial terms (for the details, see the comments below). This is one of the trickiest passages in Paul in terms of precise nuances, but Paul is appropriating the temple/sacrifice language of Leviticus 16 (on the Day of Atonement) in particular, as we also find, for instance, in 4Mc 17.22, where (1) great wrath hangs over Israel (or, in this case, the world), because of sin; (2) the death of the martyrs somehow deals with that wrath on behalf of God's people; and (3) liberation from wrath comes as a result. And, like the Maccabean passage, this one carries overtones also of that other great reworking of Levitical themes, the fourth Servant Song of Isaiah (Isa 52.13–53.12). Paul is drawing together several rich biblical and post-biblical strands of thought to make the point that Jesus completely fulfilled God's saving plan, in his death. Through his death, sin and its results have been dealt with. Wrath has been turned away from God's people. Jesus' death, therefore, unveils God's righteousness. The questions of 3.1–8— What's the advantage of being a Jew? (3.1–2); Doesn't Israel's unfaithfulness cancel God's faithfulness? (3.3–4); Isn't God's wrath unjust, then? (3.5–6); or shouldn't we just sin, so he can show mercy? (3.7–8)— are thus resolved, at least in preliminary form. God has been faithful to his promises, while remaining impartially the God of Jews and Gentiles alike; God has dealt with sin as it merited, and now rescues those who cast themselves on his mercy. This grateful trust in the God who raised Jesus is the characteristic Christian 'faith', or rather, the 'obedience of faith', the proper response to grace that God always sought.

When Paul says 'faith', he's not talking about just being aware of God's presence and love, or just believing that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead, or even casting oneself on God's mercy. The word has the same meaning for us as for Jesus: *faithfulness*. Paul does not so easily distinguish, as we do, between believing in God and being loyal to God. Notice how closely verbal confession and belief in the heart are linked in 10.9–10.

¹³ See Moo, *Romans*, 225; R.N. Longenecker, 'The Obedience of the Messiah in the Theology of the Early Church', in *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology Presented to L.L. Morris on his 60th Birthday*, ed. R. Banks (Exeter: Paternoster, 1974) 142–52, available at biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/rh/chapter09.pdf.

This faith then becomes the sign that identifies, in the present time, the members of God's people. This is the meaning of Paul's doctrine of 'justification by faith'. The verdict of the last day has been brought forward into the present in Jesus the Messiah; in raising him from the dead, God declares that in him (not in Jewish ethnic nationalism, or in Roman imperialism, or in Hellenistic cultural universalism) has been constituted the true, forgiven worldwide family and people.

Justification, in Paul, is not the process or event by which someone becomes a Christian; it's the declaration that they are, in the present, a member of God's people. This is controversial to those who grew up with a Reformation background, but careful study of the relevant texts makes the point abundantly.¹⁴ Paul's 'righteousness' language has three layers of meaning: The *covenant declaration*, seen through the metaphorical and vital lens of the *lawcourt*, is put into operation *eschatologically*. The verdict to be announced in the future has been brought forward into the present. Those who believe the good news are declared to be 'in the right'.

Christian faith, the constituting sign of membership in God's renewed people is accessible to all, not restricted to Jews only, like the Torah. It perfectly expresses both that self-abandonment that refuses to claim anything as of itself, but just casts itself on God's mercy, and, paradoxically, that genuine humanness that honors God, trusts God's power to raise the dead, and so truly worships the true God and is remade as a true human being in God's likeness. That is the point, made finally in 4.18-22, toward which the present discussion is moving.

- 1. God's saving justice and covenant faithfulness have been unveiled through Jesus' faithfulness 3.21-26**
 - a. God's saving justice is now unveiled through Jesus' Messiah's faithfulness 3.21-24**
 - 1. God's saving justice now unveiled through Jesus' Messiah's faithfulness 3.21-22a**

'But now' (3.21)— these words carry all the flavor of Paul's inexhaustible excitement at what God had done in

¹⁴ See also, eg, Ga 2.15-21, where the question of justification is not 'how to become a Christian' but 'whether Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians can share table fellowship'.

On how confusion then arises through subsequent Christian theology using the term in a sense significantly different from that of Paul, see AE McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: James Clark, 1986) 1.2-3; NT Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), chap. 7.

Jesus the Messiah. Paul is proclaiming good *news*: not good *advice*, not a new *religion*, or a new *ethic*, but an *event* that has changed the world, Paul himself, and the situation described in 3.19-20, forever. The new wine has burst the old bottles once and for all.

Rm 3.21 continues with a summary of the unveiling of God's righteousness. The initial mention is flanked by carefully balanced statements about the Torah ('outside the Torah' but 'witnessed by the Torah'), and gives rise to a fuller proposition: God's righteousness is unveiled through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah and is for the benefit of all who believe.

The Torah was the main theme of 3.19-20. Paul now has to emphasize the *newness* of the good news, and to stress that this new unveiling has taken place 'apart from Torah'. This performs two functions. Since the Torah has pronounced the Jews guilty and stood them in the dock alongside the pagans, a new word from God will be good news for the Jews. And, since Torah is a barrier against Gentiles, a new word from God may be good news for Gentiles as well. This double meaning also corresponds to Paul's emphatic and repeated, 'to the Jew first and also the Greek' (1.16; 2.9-10).

The unveiling has taken place 'apart from Torah', but it is 'witnessed by the Torah and the Prophets'.¹⁵ It's what God promised beforehand (1.2; cf the final theological summary of the whole letter at 15.7-13). Paul is not just 'proving' the good news from the Jewish scriptures. He is pointing to the continuity and reliability of God's purpose, which is part of what 'covenant faithfulness' means.

'God's righteousness'— his 'saving justice'— 'is now unveiled'. NIV and other translations say that a 'righteousness from God' is being unveiled, which (as they indicate) we can have for ourselves if we believe in Jesus. This is the standard story told in the Evangelical churches to which NIV is aimed, but it is not what Paul says.

What the prophets (particularly Isaiah) and the psalmists longed for has come to pass. God has unveiled the covenant plan, drawn back the curtain on the grand design; and done this, not as new information, but in a new *action*, as always promised. 'Revelation' here means more than just the passing on of knowledge; it means the self-disclosure of God himself through a historical event. It would not be a very great hyperbole to say that, for Paul, 'God's righteousness' or 'saving justice' was in fact a title of Jesus the Messiah himself; cf Mt 1.21, 'call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins' (and 'Jesus', Hebrew *Yehoshua* or 'Joshua', means precisely

¹⁵ 'Torah and Prophets' is a regular way of summarizing the whole Jewish scripture (cf Mt 5.17; 7.12); the full phrase is 'the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings'.

'the Lord saves'). God's saving justice walked around Galilee, announced the kingdom, died on a cross, and rose again. God's plan of salvation had always required a faithful Israelite to fulfill it. Now, at last, God had provided one.

God's righteousness, his saving justice, his world-righting covenant faithfulness, has been unveiled 'through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah (*pistis Iēsou christou*)' (3.22). Though the phrase is translated 'through faith in Jesus the Messiah' in modern bibles (but not KJV), the entire argument of the section shows that it's Jesus' own *faithfulness* that Paul is talking about here. Paul does not envision him, as Hebrews does, as the 'pioneer' of Christian faith, the first to believe in the way that Christians now believe (Hb 12.1-3). Nor is his 'faith' a kind of meritorious work, an 'active obedience' to be then accredited to those who belong to him. To be sure, Paul would have agreed that Jesus believed (trusted) in the one he called *Abba*, Father, and that this faith/trust sustained him in total obedience; but that's not the point he's making here. The point here is that Jesus has offered to God, at last, the faithfulness Israel had denied (3.2-3).

If we mistake *pistis* here as referring to the faith *Christians* have in Jesus, the immediately following phrase, 'for all who believe', becomes redundant, adding only the (admittedly important) 'all'. But the train of thought is clearer if we read it as 'Now God's righteousness is revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, for the benefit of all who believe'. This then corresponds closely to the reading suggested above for 1.17, from God's faithfulness to answering human faith. (It is also very close to Ga 3.22.)

The paragraph's opening statement, then, declares that God's long-awaited faithfulness has been newly disclosed in the events concerning Jesus the Messiah. His faithfulness completed the role marked out for Israel and did so for the benefit of all, Jew and Gentile alike.

2. Explanation: Both the plight and the solution in the Messiah are universal 3.22b-24

Paul's explanation focuses on the universality of both plight and solution. 'For there is no distinction' (3.22b). NIV, as usual, omits the logical connector, but Paul starts with one: 'for, because' (*gar*) signals that he will now explain, in 3.23, what he has just said. And his explanation summarizes 1.18-3.20 (cf 1.23, where 'they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man'), emphasizing that human rebellion led to the loss of *God's glory* (3.23).

'For all sinned' (3.23)— the tense is aorist, indicating a single moment, despite the almost universal perfect

tense in the translations ('all have sinned'). Paul is thinking of Adam, who as we saw was hiding under the argument of 1.18-25; he will emerge into daylight in 5.12-21, but be standing in the background again in 7.7-12.

This is confirmed by the next clause, 'and they come short of God's glory'. Here the tense is present, the continuing result of a past event. In Jewish literature of the period, losing God's glory is closely associated with Adam's fall, and regaining Adam's glory is a key feature of the expected redemption. God's 'glory' is one of the six things Adam forfeited in the Fall (*Gn Rab* 12.6). In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the restoration of this lost glory is said to be one of the eschatological gifts: 'For God has chosen them for an everlasting covenant, and all the glory of Adam is theirs' (1QS 4.23); 'You will raise up [a Savior] to give them a share in Adam's glory and abundance of days' (1QH 17.14); 'theirs shall be the glory of Adam' (CD 4.20).¹⁶

Paul does not at once announce that the glory has been restored, that humans are as it were re-humanized in the Messiah (he will come to that in Rm 5). Instead, he announces the necessary step toward it: They 'sinned' (3.23), but now are 'justified' (3.24). Note that 8.30 will take that extra step: 'those God justified, he also *glorified*'.

Among translations, only KJV keeps the participle ('being justified', 3.24), but the participle refers back to 'they sinned' (3.23a). Thus in Paul's mind 3.24 continues the main theme that began in 3.21-22a and is now to be developed in detail. The subject of 'being [now] justified' is scarcely the 'all' who 'sinned' (3.23), but rather the 'all who believe' of 3.22, 26, 28-30.

Paul speaks of God's future final verdict in 2.1-11. But 'justification' here is the surprising anticipation of the final verdict spoken of in that passage, and carries both lawcourt (3.9, 19-20) and covenantal meanings (2.17-3.8)— these two being dovetailed in Paul.

'Justification' is God's declaration that those who believe are in the right; their sins have been dealt with; they are God's true covenant people, God's renewed humanity.

This astonishing declaration needs explaining. How can the righteous judge, spoken of at the start of the chapter, make such an announcement about people who were just now standing in the dock, guilty and without defense?

Paul offers three explanations, developing the third at greater length. Justification is given 'freely'; it's neither

¹⁶ See also, on loss of glory, *Life of Adam and Eve* 21.6. On regaining it, see 1QS 4.23; CD 3.20; 4QpPs37 3.1-2.

deserved nor paid for, but is *dōreán*, pure gift.¹⁷ More particularly, it's 'by God's grace'— the first mention of 'grace' since the introduction (1.5,7), but another theme that's now going to dominate, particularly in Rm 5–6. 'Grace' is one of Paul's most potent shorthand terms, symbolizing the entire story of God's love, acting in Messiah and Spirit to do for humans what they could never do for themselves. This, indeed, is what he now explains with the last phrase of 3.24: 'through the redemption that's in the Messiah, Jesus'.

About this there are three things to grasp:

- What happened in the Messiah was the gift of God's grace. Some theologies present a stern Father on a throne with the Son pleading with him to exercise clemency against his better judgment, as it were. But for Paul, what takes place in Jesus and supremely on the cross is *all* from God's side. As Paul will insist in 5.6-10, the death of Jesus unveils God's love. God does not have to be persuaded that Jesus' death makes a good enough case for sinners to be justified. God initiated the movement in the first place.
- 'Redemption' is a metaphor from the slave-market, but as with the lawcourt setting of 'justification', Israel would scarcely hear the word without thinking of Egypt, Passover, Red Sea, wilderness wanderings, and promised land. Paul has already hinted that the whole human race languishes in the Egypt of sin (3.9— a point he will develop more explicitly in chapter 6); what such people need is a new Exodus, the cosmic equivalent of what God did for Israel long ago. As we shall see, the Exodus is the key to a good deal of the rest of Romans, especially chapters 5–8.¹⁸ 'Redemption' stands at the head of the dense statement that follows, affording a biblical lens through which to view all that Paul is about to say. In particular, we may notice again that in Gn 15, which Paul will expound in Rm 4, God promised Abraham that his seed would dwell as slaves in a foreign land and would be rescued at the proper time (Gn 15.13-16). 'The redemption that is in Messiah Jesus' is thus the final fulfillment of God's cove-

nant promise to Abraham. This is how God's covenant faithfulness is unveiled (3.21,26).¹⁹

- Redemption happens 'in the Messiah, Jesus'. This is where Paul makes explicit the compressed point of 3.22, that when Jesus acts in faithfulness and obedience he does so as the Messiah, Israel's representative, the one 'in whom' Israel is summed up. Paul is stating how the world has been brought from guilt to grace. What it needed (3.2) was a faithful Israelite, to carry out God's saving purpose. God has now provided one. And, because Israel itself has joined the rest of the world in the dock, this Messiah is also God's Israel *for Israel*. All have become disobedient, that mercy might be shown to all (11.32).

3. Why sinners are now justified 3.25-26

Every word and phrase in these two verses has been the subject of intense scholarly debate. It is vital to keep our bearings and remind ourselves, before examining the trees, of the shape of the forest. Paul's overall point is that Jesus' death demonstrates God's righteousness, being the reason why sinners are now justified.

For Paul, God's covenant faithfulness was not a reaffirmation that the Jews were his special people; nor did it mean that salvation-history proceeded in a smooth developmental line. Rather, God was fulfilling his promise that Abraham would have a faithful family composed of Jews and Gentiles alike. We are right, then, to see these verses as expressing the heart of what Paul began to say in 3.21.²⁰

The covenant was put in place precisely to deal with sin. God called Abraham so that through he might undo the problem of Adam— which he set out extensively in 1.18–3.20— through Abraham's family. In exactly this sense, 3.21–4.25 replies to 1.18–3.20. If God has been faithful to the covenant, sins have indeed been dealt with. God's justice *includes* the covenant. The creation of a new Jew-plus-Gentile family was his aim all along; forgiveness was the necessary means.

This helps us to understand Paul's double statement about the demonstration of God's saving justice in 3.25b-26, which we can examine first, before taking on the difficult 3.25a. God has put Jesus forward (see below)

¹⁷ *Dōreán* is rare in the NT. It's the adverbial accusative of *dōreá*, 'gift' or 'bounty', which Paul uses as one way of referring back to this whole train of thought in 5.15,17.

¹⁸ See N.T. Wright, 'New Exodus, New Inheritance: The Narrative Substructure of Romans 3-8', in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. S.K. Soderlund and N.T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 26-35.

¹⁹ The 'redemption' of the individual is linked with God's 'righteousness' or 'saving justice' in Ps 71.19,23-24, for example.

²⁰ The NIV reveals the weakness of its mistranslation of 3.21 ('a righteousness from God', repeated at 3.22) when at 3.25-26 it's forced to translate the same word with 'justice' and to acknowledge that the justice in question is God's. All of this destroys the tight logic of 3.21-26.

in order to display, to prove, to demonstrate²¹ his covenant faithfulness, his saving justice, which would otherwise be called into question (3.1-8). In particular, God had passed over, that is, left unpunished, acts of sin committed in former times. He has been forbearing, patient, unwilling to foreclose on the human race in general or Israel in particular. Paul emphasizes this in 2.3-6, using the same word *anochē* ('forbearance'), and he now refers back to that point.²² The first question at issue, then—the aspect of God's righteousness that might seem to have been called into question and is now demonstrated after all—is God's proper dealing with sins— i.e., punishment. Whatever Paul is saying in 3.25a, it must lead to the conclusion that now, at last, God has punished sins as they deserved.

The second half of the double statement which occupies 3.26, repeats almost verbatim what Paul said about demonstrating God's righteousness (or covenant faithfulness, or saving justice), but this time takes it in a different direction. First, Paul adds 'in the present time'— this is like the 'but now' at the start of the paragraph—to emphasize both that the past problem has reached a present conclusion, and that the future verdict has been brought forward into the present time. One does not have to wait for a future judgment to see God's covenant people manifested (nor, as Paul will stress in 3.27-30, will one see this through works of Torah). Who God's people are is made clear in the present time by God's action in the Messiah.

This means that God is now seen to be 'just, and the justifier'. God, as both the covenant God and the 'righteous judge' in the lawcourt metaphor. He displays his 'righteousness', not just through dealing with sins as they deserve, but also, in finding in favor of this category of people. The declaration, the decision of the judge, is what constitutes people as 'righteous'. *The word is primarily forensic/covenantal and only secondarily (what we would call) 'ethical'*. God's justifying activity is the declaration that this people are 'in the right', in other words, his verdict in their favor. Calling them 'righteous' does not mean that God has finally recognized, by a fictitious 'imputation', that they are morally pure, so that he can give a favorable verdict. To say that they are 'righteous' means just that the judge has found in their favor— that they are vindicated— because the covenant God has declared them to be his covenant people.

²¹ *Endeixis*, 'demonstration' or 'proof', makes more emphatic 'is manifested' (*pephanerōtai*, 3.21) and 'is unveiled' (*apokalyptetai*, 1.16), stressing particularly God's answer to the possible charge of *adikia*, 'unrighteousness' or 'injustice', 3.3-5.

²² The phrase *en tēi anochēi tou theou*, 'in God's forbearance' opens 3.26 in the Greek editions, but rightly belongs with 3.25.

The display of God's saving justice in the death of Jesus is the basis for God's declaration.²³ As we come closer to the hardest part of the passage, 3.25a, we notice at this stage that Paul clearly intends it to prepare the way for this statement of God's justifying declaration. Whatever Paul intends to say, it will have to do with *how* the righteous God could, without compromising that righteousness, find in favor of the ungodly (4.5).

Paul's final description (3.26b) of the object of God's justifying declaration is very elliptical: 'the one out of Jesus' faith(fulness)'. (Compare the condensed descriptions in 2.29.) Here the referent is not in doubt; the person justified is a Christian. But does 'faith/fulness of Jesus' refer to the Christian's 'faith in Jesus' (as NIV), or, as in 3.22, to Jesus' own 'faith(fulness)'?²⁴

It could in principle be the former. Paul has already referred to Christian faith in 3.22 (and perhaps in 3.25a, on which see below). He is about to mount an argument in 3.27-31 in which the faith of Christians is central. But he normally speaks of the object of Christian faith not as Jesus, but as God— as, for example, in the striking phrase in 4.24, 'those who believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead'. Granted the importance of Jesus' faithfulness in the argument of this passage, stated ahead of time in 3.22 (see above), it's more likely that what he means here, stated still in condensed form, is that God justifies the one whose status rests on the faithful death of Jesus. The believer's faith precipitates God's announcement of the verdict. But the basis for God's pronouncement is precisely the faithfulness of Jesus seen as the manifestation of the covenant faithfulness he was seeking from Israel; and the basis for the faith of those he justified is the same faithfulness of Jesus, seen from their angle as the manifestation of God's own faithfulness to his covenant, in sending the Messiah.

²³ The meaning of *kai* in 3.26 (lit., 'that he might be just, *and* the justifier of the one [who lives] out of Jesus' faithfulness') is somewhat contested. (1) If it means 'and', Paul is making two statements: (a) God is just and (b) he God justifies the Jesus-faith people. (2) If it means 'even' or 'namely', Paul is saying that his justice in this case consists in his justifying activity (so most commentators). (3) If it means 'even though', Paul is emphasizing that God's punitive justice is satisfied by Christ's death so that now sinners can be justified. But the meaning of 'God's righteousness / saving justice' (*dikaïosynē theou*) elsewhere in the passage suggests that the first is most likely.

²⁴ The NRSV's note 'who has the faith of Jesus' takes the genitive as subjective but implies that Paul's point would thereby be that Jesus' own 'faith' is somehow either the model for Christian faith or even its substance (as though Jesus' own faith were somehow infused into the believer). It seems far more likely that, if the subjective genitive is the right reading, that *πίστις* (*pistis*) here means 'faithfulness'. In any case, to render *ton ek pisteōs* as 'who has the faith' seems to strain the meaning of the Greek almost intolerably.

So what Paul says in 3.25 is meant to explain how God has now dealt with sins on the one hand and declared 'the one out of the faithfulness of Jesus' to be in the right on the other.

Temple language has not obviously made its way into Romans up to this point, so it comes as a surprise that 3.25a is heavily sacrificial in content. God 'put Jesus forth', says Paul, using a quite rare verb whose LXX usage often has to do with the shewbread in the Temple (cf Ex 29.23; 40.4,23; Lv 24.8; 2Mc 1.8). Jesus was put forth as a *hilastērion*, a cultic term. And this was effective 'through his blood', again a clear sacrificial reference. How does this work? What is Paul's train of thought? Why does he here refer to Jesus' death in sacrificial terms? How does sacrificial language come together with the overarching exposition of God's righteousness? And how does the sacrifice of Jesus mean that sins have now been dealt with, creating a 'righteous' people and leaving God's righteousness unimpeachable?

The language Paul uses goes back to Leviticus. In Lv 16.2 the *hilastērion* was the 'mercy-seat', the lid on top of the ark of the covenant, the place where God appeared in the cloud to meet with Israel (cf Ex 25.17-22; 31.7; 35.12; 37.6-9 [38.5-8 LXX]; Nm 7.89; Am 9.1). In Lv 16, which prescribes the ritual for the Day of Atonement, the 'mercy-seat' plays a crucial role: It is the place where Aaron is to sprinkle the blood of the bullock and goat of the sin-offering (3.14-15), having first lit the incense to create a cloud around the mercy-seat, so that he may not die from being in God's presence (3.13). The sprinkling of the blood is to make atonement for the holy place, because of the Israelites' uncleannesses, transgressions, and sins (3.16). The LXX verb for 'make atonement for' (*exilasketai*) is from the same root as *hilastērion*.

Paul's other references to Jesus' death indicate that sacrificial ideas, though not his only grid of reference, were not far from his mind when he thought of the cross. In particular, elsewhere in Romans he refers to the crucifixion in terms of the sin-offering, in a context that makes it clear that he intends this precise reference to be heard (8.3, on which see below). But he does not elsewhere refer explicitly to the great Day of Atonement. He does not, for example, develop the idea of Jesus as sacrifice, or indeed as priest, as Hebrews does. However, a Second Temple Jew would certainly see God's faithfulness to Israel (and Israel's answering loyalty to God) as expressed through the temple cult; see God's righteousness expressed in the face of Israel's sins through the sacrifices in general and the Day of Atonement in particular. To put it another way, if Israel is in trouble because

of sin, the Day of Atonement will put things to rights.²⁵ Paul is saying that God has done the same thing on a once-for-all, grand scale; in that sense, Jesus is the place where the holy God and sinful Israel meet, in such a way that Israel, rather than being judged, receives atonement.

This does not plumb the full depths of what Paul is saying here. In particular, it does not provide an explanation of the intimate connection Paul is assuming between a human death and this sacrificial language; nor between this sacrificial death and God's dealing with Israel's sins such as would justify the immediate conclusion of 3.25b; nor between this whole complex of thought and 'God's righteousness'. What other contexts of meaning were available to a Second Temple Jew that might explain all this?

The most obvious answer can be found in the stories of the Maccabean martyrs (160s BC). As told in Paul's day, the story sometimes interpreted their deaths in sacrificial terms. 2Mc clearly regards their suffering as bound up with God's special purposes for Israel. Other nations, says the author, go unpunished, in God's patience, until finally they reach the full measure of their sins; but Israel's punishment is brought forward and visited on the righteous now, so that God's mercy might remain with Israel (2Mc 6.12-16). This is not exactly Paul's meaning, although there is some similarity with 2.3-6 and with the mention of God's patience in the present verse. In 2Mc, the youngest of the seven martyred brothers declares that their suffering will soon bring an end to the wrath of the Almighty that had justly fallen upon the whole nation (2Mc 7.38, the climax of the speech). 4Mc is even more explicit: As Eleazar is being martyred, he prays that the punishment they are enduring may suffice for the nation, that his blood may be their purification, and that his life may be received in exchange for theirs (4Mc 6.28-29). Their death, says the writer, purified the land; they became as a 'ransom' (*antipsychon*) for the sin of the nation. Through their blood and their death as a *hilastērion* (NRSV, 'atoning sacrifice'), Providence has preserved Israel.

But even this does not completely explain Paul's whole sequence of logic. In passages in the book of Daniel, such as 11.35 and 12.1-10, imagery from the temple cult is applied to human suffering. And behind Daniel itself, clearly alluded to there and in much other literature familiar in Paul's day, stands Isaiah, particularly Second Isaiah (Isa 40-55).²⁶

²⁵ See N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 272-79.

²⁶ See Wright, *JVG*, 584, 588-91.

Isa 40–55 is a sustained exposition of God’s righteousness, focused more and more tightly on a suffering figure who represents Israel and fulfills Yhwh’s purpose of being a light to the nations and whose sufferings and death are finally seen in explicitly sacrificial terms.²⁷ We have, that is, exactly the combination of elements that we find in Rm 3.21–26. In connection with the violent death of a righteous Jew at the hands of pagans, the sacrificial language of 3.25, makes sense within the context of the martyr stories; but those martyr stories themselves send us back, by various routes, to Isaiah 40–55; and when we get there we find the very themes that we find in Rm 3.

Neither in the fourth servant song (Isa 52.13–53.12) nor at other key points in the prophet do we find quite the same language that Paul uses in 3.25. However, Isa 52.13–53.12 (the fourth Servant Song) crops up at key points in Paul’s subsequent argument, so Paul clearly had this passage in mind. Thus in 4.25, summing up the entire train of thought from 3.21, Paul uses the verb *paredothē*, ‘he was given up’, which occurs twice in Isa 53.12, with the active form (‘the Lord gave him up’) in 53.6; in both cases this happened ‘for our sins’, as in 4.25.²⁸ And when in 5.15,19 Paul speaks of Jesus’ act of obedience availing to justify ‘the many’, this is a clear allusion to Isa 53.11–12 (some also see a reference to Isa 53.5 in Rm 5.1).

Further afield, Paul quotes Isa 52.15 in Rm 15.21 and Isa 53.1 in Rm 10.16. The significance of Isaiah 40–55 lies in its ability to tie together and explain why Paul should imagine that the death of Jesus, described in sacrificial terms, should not only unveil God’s righteousness but also deal properly, i.e. punitively, with sins. This is exactly what Paul states, clearly and unambiguously, in 8.3, when he says that God ‘condemned sin in the flesh’— i.e., the flesh of Jesus.

So *hilastērion*, as we saw, meant ‘mercy-seat’, the focal point of the great ritual of the Day of Atonement; and, thence, the place and/or the means of dealing both with wrath (or punishment) and with sin. Dealing with wrath or punishment is propitiation; with sin, expiation. You propitiate a person who is angry; you expiate a sin, crime, or stain on your character. In 1.18–3.20 Paul declared that God’s wrath is being unveiled against all ungodliness and wickedness and that despite God’s forbearance it will finally be meted out; in 5.8, and in the

whole promise of 8.1–30, he says that those who belong to the Messiah are rescued from wrath; and he states the reason for the change in 3.25–26: God, allowing sins to go unpunished for a while out of forbearance, has at last unveiled his righteousness, his saving justice, by which he declares people ‘righteous’ even though they are sinners.

Hilastērion retains its sacrificial overtones (the place and means of atonement), but also carries the note of propitiation of divine wrath— with, of course, the corollary that sins are expiated. Of course, this in no way implies, as the start of the verse has already ruled out, that God is an angry malevolent tyrant who demands someone’s death, or someone’s blood, and is indifferent as to whose it is. The point Paul is making with the word *hilastērion*, is that Jesus’ death was God’s answer both to the plight of the world and to the problems outlined in 3.1–8— ‘hasn’t their faithlessness canceled God’s faithfulness?’ 3.3; ‘is God unrighteous who brings down wrath?’ 3.5; ‘if God’s truth has abounded through my falsehood to his glory; why yet am I even judged a sinner?’ 3.7–8— the problems, that is, for God’s own justice, truth, and faithfulness. Even though the sacrifices in Leviticus and other biblical texts do not seem to be aimed at *propitiating* a wrathful God, it is still the case that by Paul’s time, the language of sacrifice was used in exactly this way, precisely of righteous Israelites whose deaths somehow exhausted the wrath that was otherwise suspended over Israel. To see Jesus as the place where atonement is made (the narrow, focused meaning of the word) and hence as how atonement is made (in the broader context of the echoes set up by the word, and the entire passage) is exactly what is needed at this point in the passage.

Hilastērion is qualified: ‘through faith’ and ‘by means of his blood’. These are most likely intended as independent modifiers of the noun, rather than the former modifying the latter (‘through faith in his blood’, as though the blood of Jesus were itself the object of faith). Again, Jesus’ faithfulness (3.22,26) was how the act of atonement was accomplished. In it, there took place that meeting between God and the world of which the mercy-seat was the symbol. Furthermore, just as the mercy-seat fulfilled its function when sprinkled with sacrificial blood, so Paul sees the blood of Jesus as actually instrumental in bringing about that meeting of grace and helplessness, of forgiveness and sin, that occurred on the cross. Once again, the sacrificial imagery points beyond the cult to the reality of God’s self-giving act in Jesus.

Paul has here condensed three trains of thought into a single statement, to which he will then refer back, explaining himself more fully as he does so.

²⁷ For ‘God’s righteousness’ in Isaiah 40–55, see 46.13; 51.5–6, 8. The idea of God’s covenant faithfulness, through which Israel is redeemed and creation itself is renewed, is central to the whole section, both when the phrase occurs and when it’s assumed.

²⁸ Paul uses *paraptōma*, ‘trespass’, not *hamartia*, ‘sin’, Isa 53.5,12, but the allusion is clear nonetheless. *Paraptōma* never occurs in LXX Isaiah.

- God's righteousness, his saving justice, is unveiled in giving Jesus as the faithful Israelite, through whom the covenant plan to save the world from sin will be put into operation at last, despite universal failure.
- Jesus' faithfulness was precisely faithfulness unto death, a death understood in such sacrificial terms as would evoke not only the Day of Atonement but also the self-giving of the martyrs and, behind and greater than that, the sacrificial suffering of the Servant.
- Jesus' self-giving faithfulness to death, seen as God's act, not of humans operating toward God, turned away the wrath that otherwise hung over not only Israel but also the whole world. Thus is God's justice unveiled as *saving* justice in Jesus' death and resurrection: God has been true to the covenant, has dealt properly with sin, has come to the rescue of the helpless, and has done so with due impartiality between Jew and Gentile. Although Jesus' death is how God's righteousness is unveiled, and that righteousness is the main subject of the section, Paul does not supply a more extensive treatment of Calvary. But what he says here is one of the key foundations for what he will go on to argue. In order to expound his major themes, he needs a firm basis in what subsequent writers would call atonement-theology. This passage has now provided it.

Reflections

1. The most important point for all subsequent Christian generations to grasp from this dense but explosive paragraph is that the righteousness— the saving justice, the covenant faithfulness— of the creator God was unveiled once and for all in the death of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. This claim appears counterintuitive in the contemporary world, the usual reason given being the fact that the world, and often enough the church, does not look as if Jesus' death has made a dramatic difference to them. Justice has not come to the world. Regularly, therefore, the meaning of Jesus' death has been reduced to that of an example, albeit the supreme one, of the love of God— a general truth that happened to be exemplified in one specific instance, rather than an event through which the world become a different place. Or it has been used to construct a particular kind of 'atonement theology' that rescues souls out of the world while leaving this-worldly injustice unaffected. Either way, theology and exegesis have retreated from Paul's vision of God's justice unveiled on the cross.

There are, in fact, other agendas that press upon the contemporary world and insist that nothing significant can actually have happened when Jesus died. The Re-

naissance world saw itself as the new beginning— the revival of the best of the past, to be sure, but the new start through which everything would now be different. The Enlightenment swapped the idea that history had turned its critical corner in Palestine in the first century for the belief that the moment had happened instead in Western Europe in the eighteenth century. The tacit assumption of this point of view is the deeper reason why the Pauline claim sounds simply incredible to so many. It offers a rival eschatology to that by which our culture has lived.

The claim makes the sense it does, of course, within a broadly Jewish, i.e., biblical, worldview. It was first-century Jews like Paul who were expecting their God, the creator and covenant God, to act in history in such a way that the world might recognize the divine power and faithfulness. However, precisely because this Jewish/biblical worldview posited a God who was the creator of the whole cosmos and who intended to address all humans, neither the world view nor the Pauline claim could ever be conceived as mere private opinions. They were for all, and if they remained meaningless for all they might be thought to have failed. Hence Paul's Gentile mission, which is in view already in 3.23-24. Jew and Gentile alike sinned, but Jew and Gentile alike are now declared to be God's people as a free gift. The unveiling of God's righteousness is an event of cosmic significance.

The task of teaching Christian people to think and live on the basis of a unique event that happened in the first century, but that was the turning point of cosmic history, is therefore, hard though it may seem, one of the most serious tasks facing a preacher and teacher today. The resurrection (vital, though unmentioned, in the logic of this paragraph) is, of course, the event that anchors this eschatological belief; if the Messiah is not raised, as Paul says elsewhere (1Co 15.17), faith is futile and we are still in our sins. In other words, if the resurrection has not happened, God's new world has not begun. We could still use Jesus as an example, his teaching as a wonderful and teasing challenge. But none of Romans would make any sense.

2. God's covenant faithfulness, that saving justice of which Paul speaks, demands further exploration. The loyalty of God to promises made, the unbreakable commitment to working through Israel even when Israel became faithless, is a theme not sufficiently remarked on or thought through. But only in this light can we grasp the full meaning of Jesus' Messiahship. Only thus can we comprehend his taking on of Israel's vocation to be God's faithful partner in the project for which Abraham had originally been called.

The wider dimension at which this hints is God's faithfulness to the human project itself, and indeed to the whole cosmos. To this we shall return in chapters 5 and 8, and in the wider reflections on chapters 9–11. Because Paul eventually opens up these other dimensions, we do well to remind ourselves here that the present paragraph, though its prime focus is on how God was true to the promises made to Israel and through Israel for the world, points beyond itself to the promises and commands given by God to all humankind. The challenge is then to work out how the cross of Jesus unveils, in a decisive action, those promises as well; and how to live on the basis of the belief that it does so.

3. Within that, of course, the paragraph states in sharp and concise form the extraordinary and still earth-shattering proposition that the creator God has acted to provide the deeply costly remedy for the plight that hangs over all humankind. Not to be deeply moved by this is to fail to listen. 'Freely... by God's grace... God set him forth... that God might be savingly just and the justifier'. God's initiative, energy, and commitment to carrying through the project of the justification of sinners is at the heart of Paul's message and is the true source of all genuine Christian devotion. Rm 3.24-26 could stand as a heading over one good news passage after another, as though to say, 'This is what this story is all about'.

4. Within that again, these verses highlight one aspect of Paul's complex portrait of Jesus: his faithfulness. Given a vocation, he was true to it, though it cost him everything. This is not said in order to be an example, to make us feel guilty once more about our own faithfulness, our hardheartedness in pursuing our own tasks, though no doubt this may be an accidental side effect. It is a matter for awe and gratitude. Paul does not here note how this action of Jesus impinges on each believer personally, but those with ears to hear will detect, just below the surface of the paragraph, his words in Galatians: The son of God loved me and gave himself for me (Ga 2.20). It is this utter faithfulness, seen as an act of love, that will sustain the whole argument of Romans from this point to the end of the letter; and it can also sustain the believer and the Christian community through all the trials that beset them. It is significant that at the point where Paul says exactly this, his normal mode of speaking about 'the love of God' slips, and he speaks instead of 'the love of the Messiah' (8.35). It is that kind of subtle change that tells us where his heart really is.

**b. One God, one faith,
one people**

3.27-31

The connection of this paragraph to what precedes, and the internal logic within it, have both sometimes seemed

difficult. This is largely due to the interpretation within the Reformation tradition and elsewhere, that treats 'justification' as meaning 'how someone becomes a Christian', 'law' as a general moral code rather than the Jewish Torah, and 'boasting' as the activity of 'legalists' who, having kept whatever moral code they may be aware of, believe that they have thereby established a claim upon God, have somehow 'earned' their status of 'righteousness', their designation as 'righteous'. Within this, Paul's contrast of 'works of Torah' and 'faith' becomes more a matter of method than content: 'Works' have to do with achievement, and 'faith' is to abandon one's own efforts, and to trust in God instead. Paul is thus supposed to be standing alongside Augustine in his battle against Pelagius, and especially alongside Luther in his fight against Rome. And in this way, Paul ends up aligned with the Enlightenment elevation of 'faith' as a 'spiritual' matter over 'works' that have to do with material things; with the Romantic elevation of feeling over ritual, outward reality, and so on; and with the Existentialist elevation of inner motivation over outside constraint.

The battles of Augustine and Luther were not entirely mistaken. Paul's whole thought is characterized by God's free grace, and any suggestion that humans, whether Jewish or Gentile, might somehow put God in their debt would be anathema to him. This, however, was not the issue he was facing. Paul's contemporaries did *not* think like Pelagius or Erasmus; they were *not* bent on earning justification or salvation by performing the 'works of the law'. Torah-keeping was always all about covenant; living by Torah was a response to grace, rather than an attempt to merit it.²⁹ When taken to refer to the problem Luther thought Paul was talking about, his key arguments just don't work, and the present paragraph is a case in point. Much of Galatians could be called as further evidence.

The link between the foregoing 3.21-26 and 3.27-31, which we will not study, is made initially by a 'therefore' at the start of 3.27 ('then', NIV, NRSV). This tells us that Paul is drawing a conclusion from his brief and dense statement that God's saving justice has been revealed in Jesus' messianic faithfulness unto death. He is returning, in fact, to the question he raised in 2.17-24, that of the 'boasting' of 'the Jew', and ruling out the 'boast' whereby 'the Jew' maintained that he was better off than the Gentiles. Paul is not addressing the general 'boast' of a moral legalist whose 'salvation' is based on self-effort, but the ethnic pride of Israel-according-to-the-flesh, supported as it was by the possession of the Torah and the perfor-

²⁹ This is what Sanders has famously called 'covenantal nomism'. See esp EP Sanders' seminal book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).

mance of those 'works' that set Israel apart from the pagans.

This explains the crucial turn in the paragraph. If the statements of 3.27-28 are not true, then God is God of Jews only, not of Gentiles as well. The point of the whole paragraph, not just 3.29-30, is that, because there is one God—the central Jewish belief, of course—there must ultimately be one people of God; and, therefore, that this people must be marked out by something other than the Jewish Torah, because Torah is meant precisely to separate them. That will be the main thrust of Rm 4, to which the present paragraph points in several particulars, and also of Galatians 2-3, with which the present paragraph also has many points of overlap.

1. Boasting is excluded by the Torah of faith 3.27

Boasting is excluded. The unveiling of God's saving justice in Jesus' death shuts out once for all any suggestion that there ethnic Israel might have some special status. God has not unveiled his saving justice as expected, in a great victory in which Israel overcame her enemies and obtained national liberation. He did so when the Messiah died at the hands of those enemies, as the great act of atonement needed not only by Israel but also by the whole world. This is why a crucified Messiah is 'a scandal to Jews' (1Co 1.23) and why Paul can speak of his having been 'crucified with the Messiah' (Ga 2.19). A crucified Messiah is either an impossibility or, if he's real, spells the end of Israel's ethnic 'boast'. This, of course, will be followed up in a good deal more detail in Rm 9-11.

The means of the exclusion of boasting is then stated compactly. Israel's status depended on the gift and performance of Torah; how is the new arrangement undergirded? What sort of Torah sustains it? The Torah characterized by 'works'? No; the Torah characterized by 'faith'. A long tradition, represented by NIV, has taken *nomos* ('law', 'Torah') as 'principle' which then causes the mis-translation of 'works' as 'law', so that Paul's expression 'Torah of works' becomes 'the principle of observing the law'. Paul's point is more subtle and is once again so dense here that we need to call on the fuller statements later in the letter (in this case 8.16; 9.30-10.13) to come to our help.

He is already beginning a line of thought that will see Torah cleared of blame in 7.7-25, even if it is helpless to bring about justification or salvation, and that will also see Christian faith as that which really fulfills Torah, even where the believers, if they are Gentiles, have never heard it (Rm 10). Paul has already hinted at this in 2.25-29; 'uncircumcised people who keep the Torah's decrees' is an oxymoron, unless Paul is thinking of a deeper

'keeping of Torah', a 'fulfillment' of Torah (2.27, *ton nomon telousa*) that takes place not in works that distinguish Jew from Gentile, but in the heart (see also 1Co 7.19).

Paul is distinguishing between two ways of seeing the Torah. On the one hand, there is 'the Torah of works'—this is Torah as it defines Israel over against the nations, witnessed by the performance of the works that it prescribes—primarily sabbath, food laws and circumcision. On the other hand, there is the new category Paul is forging here: 'the Torah of faith', in a sense yet to be explained (like many things in Rm 3), gives the indication of where the true, renewed people of God are to be found. A God-given Torah does define God's people, but performing 'the works of Torah' that define Israel ethnically, is not the Torah's goal. Rather, the Torah is to be fulfilled through faith; in other words, where someone believes the good news, there Torah is in fact being fulfilled, even though in a surprising way (see at 9.30-10.13).

2. The 'Torah of works' and the 'Torah of faith' 3.28

Paul now explains the antithesis between 'the Torah of works' and 'the Torah of faith' by declaring that a person is 'justified by faith apart from works of the Torah'. This is not actually a conclusion for which he has argued in the present letter (despite KJV's 'we conclude' and NEB's 'for our argument is'); it's a further belief that he is just stating, as part of his present actual argument that Jewish boasting ('we possess Torah, therefore we are inalienably God's people') is excluded by the unveiling of God's covenant faithfulness. The actual argument for justification by faith comes in the next chapter. The word for 'we hold' (NRSV) or 'we maintain' (NIV) is in fact *logizometha*, 'we reckon', 'we calculate'. Paul is reporting on a calculation that has taken place, not in the present passage, but elsewhere, which he will shortly show.

The greatest problem facing the contemporary reader in understanding what Paul means by 'a person is justified' is that centuries of usage of the English word 'justify', and of its Latin root and its French and German equivalents, have assumed that 'to be justified' meant much the same as 'to be converted, i.e., 'to be born again', or 'to become a Christian'.³⁰ And then, starting from that misunderstanding, people have tried to distinguish the beginning of the process of becoming a Christian and the continuation of that to the end—the '*ordo salutis*' as it's called—the sequence of events that takes a person from outright unbelief through to final salvation. When Paul

³⁰ See NT Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) chap 7.

talks about what 'conversion' and 'regeneration', he speaks of God's 'call' through which, by the work of the Spirit, people come to faith. 'Those God called, God justified; those he justified, he also glorified' (8.30).

Of course, what Paul means by 'justification' is closely linked to the question of how people who start off as sinners end up being glorified; but the word 'justify' and its cognates do not refer to the event of 'conversion' or the process of Christian living, for which he uses other language (see, for instance, 1Th 1.5; 2.13). 'Justify' refers to God's declaration that someone is a member of his covenant people, and that their sins have been dealt with. When we understand the place of Israel within Paul's vision of God's purposes for the world, the relation of Jew and Gentile is hardly an incidental side-issue.

Anyway, Paul's point in the present passage is quite simply that what now marks out the covenant people of God, in the light of the unveiling of God's righteousness in Jesus, is not the works of Torah that demarcate ethnic Israel, but 'the Torah of faith', the faith that, however paradoxically, is in fact the true fulfilling of Torah. Luther, but before him even Aquinas, added the word 'alone' to the word 'faith'— 'a person is justified by faith [alone] without deeds of Torah' (3.28)— as long as we recognize what it means: not that a person is 'converted' by faith alone without moral effort (that's true, but it's not the truth that Paul is stressing here), nor that God's grace is always prior to human response (that's equally true, and equally not Paul's emphasis here), but that the badge of membership in God's people, the badge that enables all alike to stand on the same ground, is faith. That this is his meaning is at once demonstrated in the following verse. That those who insist on other meanings are not following his train of thought is demonstrated by the trouble they have with it.³¹

3. One God is God of all 3.29-30

If justification were through 'works of Torah', God would be God of the Jews only; but the One God is God of Gentiles also. If justification were through Torah, God's impartiality would be impugned (2.11), and the whole fabric of his saving justice and faithfulness would start to unravel. Here we are at the characteristic point of tension in all Paul's thought: God's faithfulness to the covenant with the Jewish patriarch, Abraham, and his descendants, must be fulfilled through the creation of a worldwide, Jew-plus-Gentile, family. The whole question of Paul and

the Law (or rather, Torah) can be comprehended only within this framework.

What Israel has always been tempted to forget, from Paul's point of view, is that the God who made the covenant with Abraham is the creator of the whole world and that the covenant was put in place precisely in order that through Israel God might address the whole world (cf 2.17-24; 3.2).

To make the point, Paul alludes to the most fundamental Jewish confession of faith, the *Shema*: 'since God is one'.³² What defines Israel at the deepest level is commitment to the one God of heaven and earth, and this itself points to the conclusion that there must ultimately be a single family of Jews and of Gentiles.³³ The *Shema* is itself the ultimate summary of Torah (as Jesus also believed, Mark 12.29), and this summary points away from Torah as a national badge, toward a different sort of fulfillment altogether. The very word *šama`* itself, meaning 'hear (and obey)', a meaning picked up in the Greek word for 'obey' (*hypakouo*, 'obey as a result of hearing'), points to the 'obedience of faith' (*hypakoē pisteōs*) to which Paul sought to bring the nations (1.5; cf 16.26). The 'faith' of which Paul speaks is the true 'obedience' that the Torah sought, responding of course to the 'faithfulness' and 'obedience' of the Messiah through which God's faithfulness was unveiled. God is one, and he recognizes as his true covenant family all who offer this 'obedience' to the good news, whatever their ethnic origin.

So then: God will justify circumcised and uncircumcised alike, on the basis of faith. Wherever this faith is found, God will declare the believer a true member of his covenant family. Only faith can have this role, not because faith is a superior type of religious experience to anything else, nor because faith is an easier than 'works', putting it within the range of the morally incompetent (people actually say that this is Paul's point), but because faith— this faith, to be defined in 4.24 and 10.9 as 'faith in him who raised Jesus from the dead'— is the appropriate human stance of humility and trust before the creator and covenant God. This is the stance that, only possible through grace, truly shows the new covenant membership that has been inscribed in the heart by the Spirit (2.29; cf 1Co 12.3; Ep 2.8-10).

³¹ The NIV's omission of ἢ ἔ ('or') at the start of the verse is a symptom of the (classical Protestant) misunderstanding that runs through its translation of the whole of 3.21-31. Fitzmyer's translation 'but' (*Romans*, 359) indicates the same misunderstanding, as does Barrett's suggestion that this is a different point to the previous verse. Barrett, *Romans*, 83.

³² The *Shema*, the Jewish daily prayer to this day, begins with the words of Dt 6.4: 'Hear, O Israel, Yhwh is our God, Yhwh is one', NIV's 'since there is only one God' fails to catch both the stark emphasis of the Greek and the echoes of Deuteronomy 6.

³³ For the similar argument of Col 3.15-22, see Wright, *Climax*, chap 8; and on the different, though related, use of the *Shema* in 1Co 8.6, see *ibid.*, chap 6. See also at Rm 5.5; 8.28.

Paul makes the slightest of distinctions in phraseology, suggesting that the circumcised are justified 'on the grounds of' faith and the uncircumcised 'through' faith (the NRSV and the NIV both have 'the same' faith, perhaps bringing out the fact that the second occurrence of 'faith' has the definite article in the Greek). If Paul intends any difference, it's that the circumcised are already, in a sense, within the covenant and now need to be declared true covenant members on the basis of faith, while the uncircumcised, being outside the covenant, need to come in through the doorway marked 'faith'. The distinction only applies to their starting-point, not to their destination or to the badge that demonstrates that they have arrived there.

4. We establish the Torah as it should be 3.31

The density of Paul's argument has led some of his readers to miss the hints he has been throwing out at various points about how, in this new covenant dispensation, the Torah is in fact fulfilled. What has been most striking, following 2.12-15, 17-20, 26-27; 3.19-20 (in all of which Paul is clearly affirming Torah as God's Torah and its verdict as true), is how, beginning with 3.21 'apart from Torah', he has now declared that 'the works of Torah' cannot be the badge of membership in God's people. Being an ethnic Jew, with Torah to prove it, does not establish a special inalienable status; being circumcised is neither here nor there when it comes to justification. The natural question that must follow is: Have we then abandoned the affirmation of Torah stated up to 3.20? Do we then abolish the Torah, make it null and void, through faith?

This is just the question some readers of Paul are waiting for. Those who follow an ultra-Protestant reading, in which 'the law' refers to legalistic, moralistic, or ritualistic practices designed to establish a claim on God, and those who follow an ultra-liberal (or ultra-Romantic) reading of Paul, in which it refers to any moral code imposed on human beings from without— and who have therefore celebrated the victory of televangelistic piety and spontaneity— will naturally want to answer 'Yes!' to this question of whether the Torah is abolished, made null and void, through faith. Paul's actual answer— 'On the contrary! We uphold the Torah' (3.31)— strikes them as illogical, and some have even said it represents the old Pharisee grabbing control of Paul's pen for just a moment. Or they water it down to, 'Well, I can prove the point from scripture; just watch me expound the Abraham story in the next chapter'. But that's to miss the inner logic and subtlety of Paul's actual argument.

Likewise, those in the Reformed tradition who are deeply concerned for the continuity of the new covenant with the old, for the abiding validity of the Old Testament, for the rejection of all that even smells of Marcion, will find that, while their sensitivities are much closer to Paul's, their emphasis, too, is not quite his, or not at this point. Paul's answer is completely genuine. We 'establish' (so NASB) Torah; that's perhaps better than 'uphold' (NRSV, NIV, REB). Paul is indeed concerned that what God said in the past is shown to be right and true; he will argue the point in detail in 7.7-8.11 and 9-11. But at the moment he is doing two rather different things. First, he is drawing out the significance of having the *Shema* itself point to the Jew-plus-Gentile quality of the new family (and, behind this, of the paradoxical 'fulfillment of the Torah' spoken of in 2.25-9, referring to those in whose hearts the Spirit has been at work). Second, he is pointing ahead to the dark and deep arguments yet to come, in which, through the fulfillment of God's overall purpose in the Messiah and by the Spirit, even the negative side of the Torah, will be seen to have accomplished its strange vocation.

The rhetorical force of the paragraph, and of 3.21-31 as a whole, is thus that God has unveiled in Jesus the Messiah, and supremely in his death, that covenant faithfulness, that saving justice, through which the outstanding problem of sin and wrath has been dealt with, so that now a new covenant family emerges, consisting of Jews and Gentiles alike, characterized by the faith that answers to the faithfulness of the Messiah.

This is offered as a summary statement; Paul now proceeds to the detailed argument (not merely 'proof from scripture') to back it up. What was the covenant with Abraham all about in the first place?