

Righteousness from God: A Call for a Review of Our Translations of Romans 1:17

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Abstract.

This article argues for a revision of our translations of Romans 1:17. My thesis is that the phrase commonly translated ‘in the gospel’, should rather be understood as referring to ‘everyone who believes’. The relevant issues of grammar and syntax are examined, to assess the plausibility of this translation. Also considered are the immediate and wider context in the letter. Key related themes such as ‘righteousness of God’ and the theme of ‘revelation’ are considered against their Old Testament backgrounds. The significance of the much-discussed $\gamma\omicron\rho$ in verse 18 is examined. It is concluded that the revised translation proposed is more likely to reflect Paul’s intended meaning, than the currently accepted versions.

Key words: believer, faith, righteousness, Romans, translation

This article is a plea for a review of our translations of Romans 1:17. There is an ambiguity in the Greek text which has been overlooked by the guild of New Testament scholarship. And the option taken by our current translations is, I will seek to demonstrate, not the most plausible reading of the text.

At stake is a right understanding of the grammar and syntax of a significant paragraph in Paul’s letter to the Romans. In fact, as will become evident, the decision made around this simple ambiguity significantly influences the reader’s understanding of the argument of the letter as a whole. This is because Rom 1:16-

17 is rightly understood as a statement of the overall theme of letter.¹

At the outset, let me point out the ambiguity, and give some initial evidence for preferring the reading advocated below. I will then lay out a process for assessing which understanding is more likely to be Paul's intended meaning.

The text is-

Romans 1:17. δικαιοσύνη γὰρ Θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ
ἀποκαλύπτεται

Here, the phrase ἐν αὐτῷ is, in current scholarship, understood as referring back to τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, in verse 16. So, all the English versions² translate along the following lines:

'For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed...' (NIV)

However there is a closer and equally grammatically correct referent, which is παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι. In this case we would translate-

'For in everyone who believes, the righteousness from God is being revealed..'

Before moving to the details of the analysis of these alternatives, it may help the reader if I here sketch how the alternative translation proposed fits within the logic of the paragraph. The exegetical decisions I make here will be defended in what follows. But in broad outline, such a reading of the grammar of the paragraph leads to the following.

¹ e.g D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 64. Also Robert

Jewett *Romans, A Commentary* (Fortress Press: Mineapolis, 2007) ,135.

² Also the other language translations that I have been able to check, including German and Arabic.

Paul has boldly declared that salvation is only achieved through the gospel message about Jesus the Messiah, which he is announcing (Rom 1:16). Then, he strongly asserts that this salvation involves the experience of a righteousness, which is known only by faith. But where is this righteousness being revealed? That is the key exegetical issue here. It is variously understood as being revealed in the gospel proclamation, the gospel events themselves, or in the character of God. But examining the parallel that Paul sets up in the verses that follow points in a different direction. This δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται is announced in parallel with the Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ. And this wrath of God is being revealed as God hands people over to sin, in response to their unbelief. (Rom 1:18-32). In other words, the public revelation of wrath is expressed in the ungodly character of the lives of those under this wrath. It is my contention that this supports the understanding that the righteousness from God is referring to a righteousness being revealed in the person, the believer. Further, I will show that this righteousness is, in direct contrast to the life of unrighteousness that God is handing unbelievers over to, an ethical righteousness of life.

Such a reading of the paragraph has huge implications for our understanding of this key paragraph, and so for understanding the letter as a whole.

While at odds with the current scholarly consensus this proposal is not without precedent.

One scholar writing last century has already raised the point I am making, but without much further discussion and investigation by the scholarly community that I could find. That scholar is the German writer Otto Glombitza, who in a paper in 1960 alerted his readers to this issue.³ It is also worth pointing

³ Otto Glombitza, "Von der Scham der Glaubigen. Zu Rom. 1:14-17", *Novum Testamentum 4* (1960): 74-80. My thanks go to Dr Brendan Byrne for alerting me to this article, and for his encouragement and patient advise

out that there is evidence that the translation being proposed was one of the accepted readings of the verse in earliest Christianity. The commentator commonly known as Ambrosiaster⁴ working from his (equally ambiguous) Latin version of Romans wrote as follows -

‘1:17 For the righteousness of God is revealed in him from faith to faith.’

And he then goes on to explain ‘(1) He (i.e Paul) says this because the righteousness of God is clearly evident in the one who believes, whether Jew or Greek.’

Ambrosiaster sees no need to debate this translation. Could this be because this was a commonly accepted reading? This could indeed be indicative of how Paul’s earliest readers understood his grammar here, as well.

But, were they correct? How can we assess this possible translation, and its significance? I will present the evidence for this translation in four stages.

First, the detailed syntactical and grammatical issues need to be considered carefully. In other words, is the translation suggested really a grammatically valid alternative, that commentators have simply not noticed? Or is it grammatically wrong? I am arguing that on grammatical grounds alone, it is both valid, and the most likely reading.

Second, we will assess whether the reading proposed makes best sense of the argument of the immediate context. Here we

in this project. Glombitza’s proposal is noted in a footnote by Michael Wolter , but is rejected on the basis that Paul’s argument would then be tautological. Wolter misses the logic of the passage, I would suggest. Michael Wolter, *Der Brief An Die Romer (Teilband 1:Rom 1-8)* (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2014) 119.

⁴ Theodores S. de Bruyn, (Trans) *Ambrosiaster’s Commentary on the Pauline Epistles: Romans* (Atlanta :SBL Press, 2017) , 23.

examine the concepts with which ἐν αὐτῷ is most closely connected, as to their likely meanings.

Then thirdly the structure of the argument of Rom 1:15-18 is closely examined, testing the alternative translations. In particular, the immediately preceding clauses will be examined, as these are what the reader or hearer has in mind when they come to the phrase in question. At this stage we also review the argument that follows verse 17, down to the end of the chapter, to see whether the reading proposed does in fact lead into the discussion that follows. Here we look into the nature of the connection between verses 16 and 17, and the major developments in Paul's argument that follow from verse 18, as noted in the introduction above.

As Romans 1:16-17 functions as an introductory summary of the thesis of the letter, it would be instructive to consider whether the reading of verse 17 proposed does in fact summarize the key points Paul goes on to demonstrate, and to emphasize, in the body of the letter. There is not space to trace this evidence.

In such a brief space, I cannot hope to include all evidence, or answer all possible objections. What I do hope to do is make a compelling argument, that will provoke further discussion. I will be interacting with, and building on the research presented, in a number of recent monographs.

THE QUESTIONS OF GRAMMAR AND SYNTAX

So that my thesis is clear, let me here give my translation of the whole sentence. First, the greek text is-

Roman 1:16. Οὐ γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ ἔυαγγέλιον,
δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ
πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἕλληνι·

Romns 1:17. δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, καθὼς γέγραπται· Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται.

Translation:

‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew then for the Greek, because the righteousness from God is being revealed in everyone who believes, from faith to faith, as it is written ‘the one who is righteous by faith shall live,’...

It is clear that αὐτῷ in verse 17 is the correct form to follow either a masculine or neuter antecedent. So the pronoun could either refer to the neuter noun εὐαγγέλιον (the gospel), or the masculine participial phrase παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι (everyone who believes). How should we assess the alternatives? The letter was written by Paul with the intention of being read aloud to the groups of Christians and enquirers in the house churches in Rome. Putting aside the question of the meaning of the phrase for the moment, which antecedent would a reader or hearer assume Paul meant? They would automatically and subconsciously first look for the nearest available preceding antecedent.⁵ And they would only skip over that substantive or possible antecedent, if it made no sense in the context. Now, I would suggest that both ‘the Jew’ and ‘the Greek’ in the previous verse would be recognized by a reader as grammatically possible antecedents, but as conceptually awkward in the context. However, both point to the summary phrase they are examples of - ‘the one who believes’. So this

⁵ Personal pronouns are usually anaphoric i.e. they refer back to a noun previously mentioned. That is the most frequent usage. There are times when the pronoun refers forward to a noun further on in the sentence. But that is much more rare. There is no strict rule that a pronoun always refers back to the nearest noun. Context should make clear what the antecedent is. The standard grammars seem to assume, in their practice, that this principle is accepted.

would be the most likely referent. Unless the question of the wider meaning and argument of the sentence requires it, the nearest antecedent should not be passed over.⁶ And the immediately preceding concepts firmly lodge ‘the believer, Jew or Greek’, as the mental representation at the forefront of the minds of the reader.⁷

Some might object that the sense of παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι is plural, even though the words are singular, and so a plural personal pronoun would be required if this is the antecedent. But this is to miss a number of important considerations. The first is that Koine Greek is often grammatically more ‘strict’ on such matters, and so this reading is likely. We find that in the New Testament in general authors regularly follow the singular forms of this adjective πᾶς with singular personal pronouns, singular relative pronouns and singular verbs, even when the sense of the antecedent is plural.⁸

If we turn now to Paul’s use of this adjective, a search of all of his letters where πᾶς (and all other forms of the adjective, παντὶ etc) are used shows that Paul also consistently follows the singular forms of this adjective with singular personal

⁶ A scan of Romans 1-11 reveals that in 90 percent of cases the antecedent to the pronoun αὐτῷ etc is the nearest substantive. In the other 10 percent of cases, the nearest substantive makes no sense in the context, and so is intuitively passed over by the reader. (e.g Rom 3:25)

⁷ It is true that εὐαγγέλιον is prominent in verse 1-14, but Paul has moved from discussing what he is announcing, to defending why it is the only means to salvation.

⁸ For example, in Matt 10:32 we read Πᾶς οὗν ὅστις ὁμολογήσει ἐν ἐμοὶ ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὁμολογήσω καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ πατρὸς μου τοῦ ἐν οὐρανοῖς. The sense of Πᾶς here is plural, (everyone who...), yet the following verb ὁμολογήσει and personal pronoun ἐν αὐτῷ are singular. Another example is Acts 2:21 καὶ ἔσται πᾶς ὃς ἐὰν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται. Again, the sense is plural, but the Greek text is the singular adjective πᾶς, then singular relative pronoun and singular verb.

pronouns, relative pronouns and verbs, even when the sense of the antecedent is plural. (e.g. 1 Cor 1:29, 2 Tim 2 :19 etc).⁹

In Romans itself, it is significant that Paul uses both the singular and plural phrases to refer to believers. Especially when the context warrants supporting his point by an OT quotation, he uses παντι τῷ πιστεύοντι, the singular form where the singular is used in the Old Testament passage concerned.¹⁰ We see this in Rom 1:17, where Paul is supporting his assertion by reference to Habakkuk, where the singular is used –

καθὼς γέγραπται· Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται.

Similarly, in Romans 10:4 the singular is used, where Paul is making his point based on the singular expression in Isaiah 28:16 (quoted in Romans 9:33) On the other hand, Paul uses the equivalent plural phrase in Romans 4:11.

I think there is another reason that Paul uses the singular form in Rom 1:16-17.

It is that the singular is maintained because Paul's point is that he is not ashamed of the gospel because it has this saving effect in every single believer. The singular focus is significant for Paul, as we will see below. So, BDAG gives this note about the use of Πᾶς-

The noun in the sing(ular), without the art(icle)- emphasizing the individual members of the class denoted by the noun...¹¹

⁹ There are occasions where other collective nouns in the singular are followed by plural verbs and plural substantives, for example 'the world' in 2 Cor 5:19 is followed by the plural personal pronouns, but this is not the usual pattern.

¹⁰ Thanks to Dr Peter Baker for pointing this (and other elements of the grammar) out to me. I had noticed it in connection with the immediate context, but not the link to Romans 9-10.

¹¹ W.F.Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 631.

Before we come to the question of the sentence structure, a note about Paul's style is appropriate here. In case anyone should argue that Paul does not generally use a personal pronoun to refer back to a participle as its antecedent, a brief observation about other instances in Romans is in order. In Rom 4:5 Paul writes-

τῷ δὲ μὴ ἐργαζομένῳ, πιστεύοντι δὲ ἐπὶ τὸν
δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἄσεβῆ, λογίζεται ἡ πίστις αὐτοῦ εἰς
δικαιοσύνην,

Here, the personal pronoun αὐτοῦ (his) refers back to πιστεύοντι (the one who believes) , and also to “the one who does not work”, also a participle. The point to observe is that this is Paul's usual style. As already noted, we see it again in Rom 4:11, in the plural.

Therefore, to summarize, on grammatical grounds alone, the proposed translation is certainly plausible. On the grounds of proximity, I would argue that it is the most likely to reflect Paul's intended meaning. So, now we turn to ask the question regarding the meaning of the sentence as a whole. Does the translation make sense in the context?

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT EXAMINED

Significance of the theme of revelation.

Both the theme of revelation, and that of the righteousness of God, are raised in the immediate context. First, we look at the significance of the theme of revelation. As we consider this theme, our question is “Is it more likely that Paul is referring to a revelation in the gospel, or in the believer?” The text is-

δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται

When Paul writes of something being revealed, to what is he likely to be referring?

First, we note that the verb is a present tense, and given the context Paul is indicating something ongoing, in the present time.¹²

But what does Paul have in mind when he says that something is ‘being revealed’? Marcus Mininger has written a monograph that traces the theme of revelation through the first three chapters of Romans. Discussing the phrase ἐν αὐτῷ in this context, he notes that the preposition typically describes the location where something is revealed, and that particularly in the following chapters of Romans this “is observable in the conditions and actions of various people”.¹³

Later in Romans 8:18 Paul writes of the future work of God in believers in these terms-

πρὸς τὴν μέλλουσαν δόξαν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι εἰς ἡμᾶς.

Notice that the future revelation will be εἰς ἡμᾶς, in those who believe. (Noting the different preposition, of course). Here, the future transformation of the believers’ bodies is on view. But the connection is that the revelation will be an observable change, and that change will be ‘in’ people.¹⁴

¹² James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (2 vols. ; Dallas:Word Books,1988) 47-48. As Dunn notes, if Paul were thinking of a revelation in the gospel, an aorist would be more suitable- ‘has been revealed’. Moo makes the same point (Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 70). He takes the reference to be to the ongoing proclamation of the gospel. So also Robert Jewett *Romans, A Commentary* (Fortress Press: Mineapolis, 2007) ,142-143.

¹³ M.A. Mininger, *Uncovering the Theme of Revelation in Romans 1:16-3:26* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 86-93. Mininger’s research leads him then to see the revelation as the gospel content, rather than the preaching. But he misses the translation option being proposed here, and this puts a tension in his overall argument regarding this section of the text.

¹⁴ Noting that it is possible that εἰς ἡμᾶς here means “to us”.

Paul also uses this language to speak of how God has worked in his own life and changed him.¹⁵ In 1 Timothy 1:16 we read-

ἀλλὰ διὰ τοῦτο ἠλεήθην, ἵνα ἐν ἐμοὶ πρώτῳ ἐνδείξῃται
 'Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς' τὴν ἅπασαν μακροθυμίαν, πρὸς
 ὑποτύπωσιν τῶν μελλόντων πιστεῦειν ἐπ' αὐτῷ εἰς
 ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

Here, what is revealed or displayed is Christ's patience, but the context is that this patience has been shown in the acceptance and inner transformation of Paul. The phrase here is ἐν ἐμοὶ. Paul is no longer the violent man, but the man who loves. And this is evident to all. He has become an example to all, in this regard. His behavior is on view. And the very same expression is used by Paul in Galatians 1:16 as he describes his conversion there.¹⁶

So, the language used in Rom 1:17 typically points to a change in a believer, not the content of the gospel message, or the gospel preaching.

As noted above, more telling in the context in Romans 1:17 is the way Paul sets up the parallel between the revelation of God's righteousness and that of God's wrath, as noted above. In verse 18 we read-

Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ Θεοῦ ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ

We will return to this phrase later when we look at the argument being continued from Rom 1:16-17 here, but for now it is important to notice where this wrath is being revealed. It is seen in the lives of those who do not believe in, or honor and thank

¹⁵ While the Pauline authorship of 1 Timothy is much debated, I am here simply assuming that it is written from within the 'Pauline orbit', and so accurately reflects his thinking. See for example Philip H. Towner *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 9-89.

¹⁶ Noted by Michael Wolter in the footnote *Der Brief An Die Romer (Teilband 1: Rom 1-8)* (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2014) 119.

God. And how is it seen or manifested? It is revealed, displayed for all to see, in their behaviour, as God hands them over to all manner of ungodliness. Three times in verses 18-32 we read 'Therefore God gave them up...'

The Greek phrase in verse 24 reads-

Ἐπὶ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς

And this 'giving up' is evident in engagement in homosexual immorality, and in their practicing and approval of every kind of wickedness. So, the revelation is observable, in the lives of people. To sum up, on the basis of Paul's use of the phrase ἐν αὐτοῖς or similar phrases in the context of revelation, we would expect it to refer to a change in people. Our proposed translation of verse 17 "in the believer" agrees with this evidence, while the reading "in the gospel" does not.

Otto Glombitza puts the point this way in his article -

"Therefore ἐν αὐτοῖς will probably refer to πιστεύοντι. In the believer the righteousness of God is revealed. Just as God's power in v 16 meant God's own power, and unquestionably God's anger in v18 meant God's anger, so God's righteousness is also meant here. But, just as the power of God does not remain with itself, but becomes salvation for the believer, and the wrath of God affects the partner, so it is with God's righteousness: it is not the self-contained quality of God, but what characterizes his action with his partner, man.....because the actual will of God is manifest in him".¹⁷

¹⁷ Glombitza "Von der Scham der Glaubigen. Zu Rom. 1:14-17", 79.

Significance of the theme ‘Righteousness of God’

But what then of the phrase ‘righteousness of God’. How should this theme influence our judgment regarding the best reading here? Many commentators take this phrase as referring to Justification¹⁸ (from Rom 3:21-26), and so a reading that locates it in the believer would make no sense. Justification by definition can not be observed, since it is a declaration by God concerning a person’s legal standing with himself. If Paul is referring to revelation in the gospel, this makes sense. Equally, if the righteousness of God refers to God’s own character of righteousness, as those from the New Perspective school (among others) hold, this equally makes some sense if the phrase is referring to a revelation in the gospel. The translation I am proposing would have to be rejected if either of these meanings for the phrase are the most likely. What does the evidence suggest?

It is instructive to ask the question: ‘What would a reader or hearer of this letter think this phrase meant, given their shared cultural context and then the introduction in the preceding verses?’ The linguistic insights from the field of discourse analysis emphasize that an interpreter needs to keep in mind that any piece of literature is an act of communication.¹⁹ As such, both the situation of the writer and readers needs to inform our understanding of it. The hearers of Paul’s letter were part of a culture that spoke of δικαιοσύνη, righteousness, in all manner of contexts. What, from this wider culture, can we say Paul would have relied on as he wrote, in this regard?

Here I am indebted to the recent work of Charles Irons in his monograph *The Righteousness of God*, in particular for the

¹⁸ Justification here meaning a forensic declaration of ‘not guilty’, without any implication of ethical transformation.

¹⁹ For the terms used above, see for example David Matthewson, and Elodie Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar: Syntax for students of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2016).

breadth of research he presents.²⁰ Irons examines the use of the word δικαιοσύνη in general Greek usage of the New Testament period, including in Jewish Literature, Greek literature, and the New Testament. With regard to New Testament usage, he notes that by far the most common usage is the ethical sense, with righteousness referring to upright behavior.²¹ A simple example from Mathew's gospel gives the sense, where Jesus is reported warning his disciples as follows-

Matthew 5:20. λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν.

Here, the call is to live a life that displays a godliness greater than that of the religious leaders of the time. Righteousness has the usual ethical sense. Irons does, however, go on to argue for the forensic understanding of the word in Romans 1:17.²² But Iron's evidence does not lead to this conclusion.

This can be seen if we carefully consider the question I have posed above-

'What would a reader or hearer of this letter think this phrase meant, given the introduction in the preceding verses?'

Firstly, it is to be noted that the reader has not yet considered Paul's arguments in chapter three, regarding either justification by faith (3:21-26), or regarding God's character and faithfulness (3:1-8) It is methodologically unsound to use these later

²⁰ C.L. Irons, *The Righteousness of God* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015)

²¹ Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 263.

²² Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 322.

passages as determinative for the meaning of the phrase ‘righteousness of God’ in Rom 1:17.²³

Second, without other guidance, the usual meaning in Koine Greek should be our starting point, as this would be the meaning in the mind of the reader. That is, some connection to ethical righteousness in people would be in mind.²⁴ But there are also two ways in which Paul has already directed his readers on this matter, and a third confirming or clarifying point to follow.

First, Paul has repeatedly directed his readers to a particular Old Testament passage as background for his thinking here. As part of his introduction to the letter, Paul has declared the substance of the gospel, that it is regarding God’s Son, who has now been declared by the Spirit “Son of God in Power” by his resurrection. So, Jesus Christ is now rightly Lord, according to Paul. But it is important for our purposes to notice the reference in Rom 1:2, to the fact that this gospel was promised. A reader is now pondering what promise Paul might be referring to here. It is identified as a promise in the Holy Scripture, by the prophets- but which prophets? Where? Then again in verse 9 we read that Paul serves in preaching εὐαγγέλιον and in verse 15 Paul declares his intention to visit, based on his apostolic responsibility in these terms-

²³ Contra many scholars, for example in D.A. Campbell, *Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009): 683. Campbell simply asserts that the meaning in Rom 3:21-26 must be the one Paul has in mind in 1:17. Our reading of the logic of Paul’s argument from Chapters 1 to 3 and beyond will show this is not the case. Discourse analysis shows us that we need to respect the horizontal nature of a text, or linearization.

²⁴ The genitive θεοῦ does not count against this reading. Genitive case simply restricts the substantive it covers in one of a wide range of senses. One common sense is that of source. So, here. This is contra many scholars who effectively take the phrase as a technical term, looking for exact OT equivalents.

οὕτως τὸ κατ' ἐμὲ πρόθυμον καὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς ἐν Ῥώμῃ
εὐαγγελίσασθαι

(‘That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel
also to you who are in Rome’ NIV)

We know from the number of Old Testament references in Romans that Paul expects his readers to have some knowledge of the prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures. More, in Romans Paul quotes Isaiah more than any other part of the OT, and does so explicitly identifying his gospel preaching with the good news of redemption declared by Isaiah.²⁵ (In Romans 10:15-17 (Isaiah 52:7 and 53:1) and Rom:15:20-21 (Isaiah 52:15)) With such a background, there is one group of prophecies that Paul would expect his readers to have in mind. They form the climax of the redemptive narrative of Isaiah. Together they repeatedly foretell the one God would send, anointed by the Spirit, who would announce the gospel of God - εὐαγγελίσασθαι is the word in the LXX, from Isaiah 61:1.²⁶ (Notice the same word in Rom 1:15) And the result of the ministry of this anointed one will be that God’s currently sinful people will then be called -

‘Oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for
the display of his splendor’ (Isaiah 61:4 NIV)

Further on we read- ‘So the sovereign Lord will make
righteousness and praise to spring up before all the
nations.’(61:11 NIV)

Then, at the start of chapter 62- ‘For Zion’s sake I will not keep
silent, for Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet, till her

²⁵ Robert C.Olson, *The Gospel as the Revelation of God’s Righteousness*. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 4. Olson perceptively points out that there is evidence of much greater dependence on Isaiah than simply what is indicated by the direct quotations.

²⁶ Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 59. This is the key place in the OT that this language of “good news” is used. There are also references in the LXX of Joel 2:32 and Nahum 1:15.

righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.’ (Isaiah 62:1-2 NIV)

In these passages we see a promised ‘good news’ or gospel, and it is a picture of God creating a people who display ethical righteousness, to the world. The nations will see that God’s people are no longer ruled by sin, ensnared in idolatry, as they were in Isaiah’s time. They will be so changed that even the nations will see it, and praise God. This is the language of revelation. All the themes of salvation, revelation and righteousness are found in these passages, and Paul has indicated to his readers that he has these promises in mind when he writes Romans 1:17, by his repeated references to ‘the gospel’ (εὐαγγέλιον) and ‘preaching the gospel’ (εὐαγγελίσασθαι). God has promised to save his people by transforming them, and promised that his work of transformation will result in the nations observing this renewal, and praising the God who has done it.²⁷ Paul’s use of the phrase δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ in the context of concepts such as εὐαγγελίσασθαι/ εὐαγγέλιον in the previous verses, would be expected to bring these prophecies in Isaiah to the forefront of the minds of his readers.²⁸ And the term δικαιοσύνη is qualified by a simple genitive of source θεοῦ, indicating that it is God who produces this character, this life, as Isaiah had promised, through the work of the Servant.

More, we know from other New Testament writings that the passage in Isaiah quoted above was known as the context for

²⁷ Dunn, *Romans*, 39, sees this emphasis here as well.

²⁸ Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, does not address these passages in his work. He concludes his survey with the statement that Paul had only three alternatives when he used the phrase ‘righteousness of God’- the semantic range being God’s distributive justice, God’s punitive judicial activity, delivering his people thereby, or the status of divinely approved righteousness. This conclusion is not supported by the evidence. Irons makes no mention of the possibility that God’s promised work of renewing his people, making them righteous, might be indicated by this phrase. See Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 272.

understanding the gospel announcement. When Jesus is recorded by Luke as beginning his public teaching ministry, he opens the prophet Isaiah at Ch 61, and having read the opening two verses declares ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ (Luke 4:21 NIV). The early Christians certainly connected the gospel message of Jesus with the passage in Isaiah, and so Paul could expect them to make this connection as he wrote Rom 1:16-17. Further, this section of Isaiah includes the note of the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation. Surprisingly, we read in Isaiah 65:1- ‘I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said ‘Here am I.’” Paul of course refers to this verse to explain in Rom. 10:20, that the inclusion of the Gentiles was always God’s plan. So, another theme of Rom 1:16-17 is evident in this section of Isaiah, confirming that Paul has these prophecies in mind.²⁹ And so, this examination of the likely specific OT background Paul has in mind supports the translation we are proposing.³⁰

To sum up, consideration of the preceding context shows that a reader is being led to be thinking of ethical righteousness in Rom 1:17, by the way Paul has introduced his ‘thesis statement’. And this understanding of the phrase “Righteousness of God” then supports the revised translation of the verse being proposed in this article. While other understandings of the phrase might still be considered

²⁹ N.T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans* in “The New Interpreters Bible”, Vol 10. Edited by Leander E Keck. (Nashville:Abingdon, 2002), 398. Wright, with many others, argues that second Isaiah (40-55) is the background. Typically, these arguments pick up the theme of God’s promised rescue of Israel from their enemies, the Gentile nations. But that does not resolve the problem posed at the start of Isaiah’s prophecy, which is that God’s own people are sinful nation (Is 1:4). Salvation must overturn that problem, which is what is prefigured in Is 53, and promised in third Isaiah in full.

³⁰ It is worth noting at this point that one recent scholar, Thomas Schriener, has reached a similar conclusion, in his commentary, regarding this phrase. Thomas R. Schriener, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998): 67-68.

plausible given the above preceding context, they are inconsistent with the direction of Paul's argument as it develops in verses 17 and following. (see below)³¹

The Habakkuk quotation.

Before leaving the discussion of immediate context, a brief note about the Old Testament quotation that follows our key phrase in Rom 1:17 is appropriate. Paul goes on to support his thesis statement by quoting from the prophet Habakkuk. We would expect that Paul would be using the key words within the quotation with the same meaning as the prophet, for otherwise, his argument is seriously weakened. The quotation is recorded by Paul as follows-

καθὼς γέγραπται· Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται.

As the Old Testament Scholar Francis Andersen rather literally translates:

‘and the righteous person by its trustworthiness will survive.’³²

Central for our purposes at this point is the meaning of the phrase “the righteous one” here.³³ The prophet Habakkuk was tempted to give up on obeying Yahweh, to give up on trusting Yahweh, because it was the evil ones around him who were prospering. It appears as if it is the ungodly who will ‘live’. When this complaint is voiced, the prophet is reassured that Yahweh

³¹ Of course, the literature regarding this phrase is vast. Space prevents direct assessment of some influential proposals such as Kasemann's , E. Kasemann ‘The Righteousness of God in Paul’ in *New Testament Questions of Today*. (Philadelphia:Fortress,1969) , or the assessments of the debate by Westerholm , S. Westerholm *Perspectives Old and New on Paul:The ‘Lutheran’ Paul and his Critics*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

³² Francis Andersen, *Habakkuk :A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 198.

³³ with Dunn, *Romans*, 45, we note that the MT (the Hebrew version Paul would have known) has ‘his faith’. But contra Dunn, we take it that Paul intends this meaning in his abbreviated Greek quote, over against the LXX version which has ‘my faith’ (i.e. God’s).

will, in time, destroy the wicked. What is not yet revealed is the coming judgement of God, upon the wicked. The prophet is called upon to keep trusting God, and promised that those who do so, refraining from evil, will live. The one who is righteous through faith is the one who, because he trusts the Holy God to do right, to uphold righteousness, perseveres in being righteous himself. This is the meaning of the quotation in its context in Habakkuk.

Now many commentators argue that Paul has in fact given the term 'righteous' a different meaning from what it had in the prophet. So, for example Moo admits "the main problem is that Paul appears to give the words a different meaning" i.e., Moo feels Paul is using the quotation to argue for how a person is justified.³⁴ But we have shown that the subject in Romans at this point is not justification, but ethical righteousness. With this understanding the quotation supports Paul's meaning fully. Faith is the key to living a godly life, and so to being saved. This is the point that Paul is using the quotation to support, in Romans 1:17.

Further, it is important to notice that this righteousness in Habakkuk is 'within the person', not a reference to the character of God, or to a message.³⁵

So we have now seen that both the preceding and immediately following context supports our reading of 'righteousness of God', and so also supports the translation being proposed.

³⁴ Moo, *Romans*, 77.

³⁵ Also supporting this understanding is the research of E. Ray Clendening 'Salvation by Faith or by Faithfulness in the Book of Habakkuk' *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 24.4 (2104) 505-513, and that of James A. E. Mulrone 'Revisiting Hab. 2:4 and its place in the New Testament Eschatological Vision' *Southeastern Theological Review* 6/1 (Summer 2015) 3-28.

WIDER CONTEXT: THE STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENT OF ROMANS 1:15-17 EXAMINED

So much for the meaning of key terms in Rom 1:17. What does the wider argument show us? It will be shown that the above understanding of the translation and key terms makes very good sense of the paragraph as whole. It also resolves one of the recurring problems in understanding this section of Romans, the force of the $\gamma\alpha\rho$, in verse 18. As indicated in the introduction, the paragraph is generally understood as a statement of the thesis of the epistle. But how are the clauses within the paragraph related to one another? I want here to rely on some insights from the area of linguistics, in particular relevance theory, as we proceed.³⁶ In her monograph, Casson examines every instance of $\gamma\alpha\rho$ in Romans, and concludes that in every instance the word performs the function of strengthening a previous statements. So she writes-

‘All occurrences, in both expository and hortatory material, can be explained in terms of core procedural instructions that guide toward the inferential procedure of strengthening of preceding assumptions.’³⁷

Most commonly, this means that when we read $\gamma\alpha\rho$, we are being told that what follows gives a reason for the preceding statement. Our English ‘because’ reflects this connective force, in these instances. And Casson is clear that it is not acceptable exegesis, then, to treat the conjunction as an indication of continuation, or as an ‘unexpressed ‘no’ in a dialogical text’³⁸, or to simply ignore it, as many commentators effectively do.

³⁶ Sarah H. Casson, *Textual Signposts in the Argument of Romans: A Relevance Theory Approach* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019)

³⁷ Casson, *Textual Signposts*, 121.

³⁸ Casson, *Textual Signposts*, 226, quoting Campbell, *Deliverance of God*, 1021.

(Hence the NIV failure to translate it) So, I will apply some of the results of Casson's research in what follows.

To aid analysis, I now separate and number each clause in the Greek text, and include verse 18-

Statement 1. οὕτως τὸ κατ' ἐμὲ πρόθυμον καὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς ἐν Ῥώμῃ εὐαγγελίσασθαι.

Statement 2. Οὐ γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ ἔϋαγγέλιον,

Statement 3. δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἕλληνι·

Statement 4. δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, καθὼς γέγραπται· Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται.

Statement 5. Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων,

It is to be noted that each statement from 2 through to 5 is connected to the preceding by the connective γὰρ.

Taking the connective with the full force of the English 'because' in each instance, we can trace the logic of the paragraph as follows-

Statement 1. (verse 15) οὕτως τὸ κατ' ἐμὲ πρόθυμον καὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς ἐν Ῥώμῃ εὐαγγελίσασθαι.

'that is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome'

This statement follows from Paul's introduction, where he emphasized that he is an apostle with the particular responsibility of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, including those in Rome. The implied objection from the reader is – 'but you have not come to Rome yet (admitted by Paul in verses 8-

13), so are you really eager to come? Eager to come here to preach your gospel?’

We can see that this first statement requires support, in other words, this objection needs to be answered, hence statement 2 connected by γὰρ.

Statement 2. (verse 16) γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ
‘εὐαγγέλιον,

‘ Because I am not ashamed of the gospel’

Here Paul assures his readers that his failure to come is not due to any lack of confidence in the message, the gospel, which he wishes to preach there. He eagerly desires to go and announce that the crucified Jesus has been declared ‘Son of God in Power’ by his resurrection from the dead. So, Jesus is Paul’s Lord. But from the letter itself, we know of some reasons why this assertion might not be persuasive without support.

Implied objection- ‘Some say that your message leads people to live more sinful lives (objection admitted in 3:1-8), and that it denigrates God’s people the Jews and Judaism (passionately responded to in 9:1-5) so, you should be ashamed of it!’

Possible further implied objection- ‘Also, perhaps we should listen to those who are here now, who teach Jesus and then following the law?’ (The situation Paul reports in 16:17-19)

These objections again need answering, so statement 3 logically follows, strengthening the preceding statement. Regarding this gospel message Paul boldly asserts-

Statement 3. δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν
παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἕλληνι·

‘because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew then for the Greek,’

In other words, unlike the message of Paul's opponents, this message works in bringing salvation to all. It does not lead to sin, but to righteousness and so salvation, for every single person who believes it. This message is God's power to transform people. And this statement is given particular emphasis by Paul, being placed in a position of prominence in the clause.³⁹

Implied objection- 'But surely Jews have the priority with regard to salvation, as 'becoming Jewish' (via circumcision) and then observing the law is the way to righteousness?' We know from later in Romans (e.g 8:1-4 re powerlessness of the law in this regard) and from other Jewish texts of the time that this view was common.⁴⁰

Statement 4. δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, καθὼς γέγραπται· Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται.

'because the righteousness of God is being revealed in the one who believes, from faith to faith, as it is written 'the one who is righteous by faith shall live','

Paul strengthens his previous assertion by pointing to the transformed lives of those who have believed the gospel message, which is the evidence of the gospel 'working', where the law has in the past, and continues to, fail. Paul has already alluded to the changed lives of the believers in Rome, and that this transformation is widely known, in 1:8. The three fold emphasis in this statement on faith is relevant, because it contrasts with the implied objection about righteousness

³⁹ Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 274.

⁴⁰ See Irons , *The Righteousness of God*, 237-238 for examples of this teaching from 4 Maccabees; from Philo, p 256; from Josephus, p258. There are numerous other examples in the literature that Irons identifies, showing it was a widespread view.

coming by keeping the law. And this issue is given further prominence by the placement of the phrase ἐκ πίστεως in the quotation. The Habakkuk quotation shows again that life comes from faith, as it in turn produces righteousness.

In fact, if one asks what is the key thematic point of these verses so far, the issue of ‘faith (versus law)’ is central, because Paul has repeated the concept five times (παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, ἐν αὐτῷ, ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, and finally ἐκ πίστεως), showing by this emphasis that it is the key issue. (So, it is fair to say that what follows must answer the question “Why must salvation be by faith?” The need for the salvation is not at issue, as argued based on our current translations, but Paul’s emphasized assertion regarding faith as the only means.)

So, the further implied objection- “But why is ‘faith’ the key to salvation if God has given the Law, and made promises to those who keep it? Surely this fact disproves your claim? (Implied in Rom 2:17-27, stated in Romans 3:1-8)

Statement 5. Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἀσεβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων,

“because the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness”

That is, the wrath and anger of God is being expressed against people because of their manifest failure to express faith in God, shown in their suppression of the truth about him. It is against a failure to ‘retain the knowledge of God’ (1:28). Since wrath comes because of such a lack of faith, salvation must begin with a change to this ‘state’. And the law has not (and can not) achieve this change, as Paul will go on to show.

It is true that Paul does not use the word ἀπιστία here (not until chapter 3:3), but the concept is expressed in full in Rom1:18-

23. It is not simply to say: “I do not believe in a God”. But it is to demonstrate a lack of belief in a Holy God who will one day judge oppression and evil, by continuing in unrighteous behavior, idolatry, and failure to thank God. In other words, this is the direct contrast to the faith of the righteous one in Habbakuk, who because he believes in a righteous God who will judge evil, perseveres in behaving righteously despite his circumstances. In contrast, those who act in unrighteousness, suppress this truth about God by their actions. This “futile thinking” is the heart of the problem.⁴¹ And the wrath of God is seen publicly, in God’s response. It is being revealed.⁴² The public expression of his wrath is the giving over of these people to their ‘depraved mind’ (1:28), and ‘shameful lusts’(1:24,26). Paul expects no argument here, as any observation of wider Roman culture was evidence of this reality in people’s lives. So verse 18 and following effectively answer the implied objection noted above. These verses strengthen Paul’s previous assertion. And, according to Paul, there can only be one ultimate outcome from the situation he reports- judgement (verse 32). So, yes, salvation is needed desperately, from the current hopeless situation of people. But Paul’s argument so far is that this salvation is found only in the gospel message he preaches. And this salvation can only come as people put faith in what God has done in Christ, in which case ungodliness of life is replaced by righteousness. So, my contention is that the proposed

⁴¹ Dunn, *Romans*, 53, notes as follows : “structurally significant for the development of the exposition in 1:18-32 is the threefold repetition of (μετ)ήλλαξαν in vv 23,25 and 26, matched by the threefold repetition of παρέδωκεν in vv24,26 and 28.”

⁴² Contra N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013)_765. While Wright correctly emphasizes the significance of the connective in verse 18, he misunderstands the logical link. His argument that the wrath of God here must be being ‘made known in a new, dramatic and unexpected fashion’ is unfounded. Neil Elliot, *Arrogance of Nations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 72-82 also notes the importance of connecting verse 18 with what precedes, but his argument that the following verses refer to the Roman emperors, not the society in general, has no foundation in the text.

reading of ἐν αὐτῷ , as ‘in the believer’ fits well within the argument of the chapter as a whole. It flows into what follows.

To put the comparison drawn between ‘righteousness from God’ (verse 17) and ‘wrath from God’ (verse 18- note ‘the source’ repeated here ‘from heaven’) in brief: Just as the righteousness of God is being revealed in the one who believes, as God gives them over to godliness of life, so the wrath of God (v18) is being revealed, as God hands those who do not respond to Him in faith, over to ungodliness. In other words, the parallel is between two ongoing actions of God. The Righteousness and Wrath of God are similar in regard to the location of their ‘revelation’, their expression. Both occur first within people’s hearts, then ‘revealed’ in their lives and actions.⁴³ And both are God’s doing, and both are related to the presence or absence of faith.

CONCLUSION

The thrust of this article has been to propose a revision to our translations of Romans 1:17. My hope is that the evidence gathered to support the proposed reading is sufficient to generate debate in the scholarly community on this matter. I believe it is clear, first, that future exegetical discussion of the meaning of Romans 1:17 should include an assessment of the ‘the believer’ as a possible antecedent to ἐν αὐτῷ. Second, the problematic connection between verse 17 and 18 is explained by the reading I am proposing for verse 17. My contention is that our current translations conceal rather than convey Paul’s meaning. Ordinary readers are not being well served by this situation.

⁴³ It is to be noted that in verse 27 Paul describes the consequence of male homosexuality as a penalty ἐν ἑαυτοῖς. (‘in themselves’ NIV) This is a secondary result of God’s handing them over to sin. But the location of this judgement is noteworthy.