



# RESURRECTING JUSTICE

Reading Romans for the Life of the World

DOUGLAS HARINK



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# TERMS OF JUSTICE

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- How the theme of justice in Romans gets lost in translation
- Other vocabulary and translation issues in Romans
- Defining two terms: *apocalyptic* and *messianic*

WHEN CHRISTIANS WANT TO think biblically about justice, they do not usually turn to the letters of Paul. They often look to other places in the Bible, such as the laws of Moses, the biblical prophets, and perhaps Jesus, who links his own mission to both the Law and the Prophets in his inaugural justice-sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4:16-21). Ignoring Paul is a habit even for some of the best writers on biblical justice. For example, Ronald Sider's recent book, *Just Politics: A Guide for Christian Engagement*, includes a chapter that summarizes biblical teaching on justice. Sider unpacks the meanings of the two main Hebrew words for justice, *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*, as they occur in the books of Moses, the Psalms, and the Prophets.<sup>1</sup> But there is no mention of any text from Paul.

Further, if you search the tables of contents and subject indexes of scholarly books on Paul or commentaries on Romans, you rarely find any entry on "justice."<sup>2</sup> These findings seem to confirm the impression that Paul and his letter

<sup>1</sup>Ronald J. Sider, *Just Politics: A Guide for Christian Engagement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 77-99. An important exception is Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 35-69.

<sup>2</sup>In recent years the situation is changing. Important contributions to the theme of justice in Paul's writings include Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015); Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *Outlaw Justice: The Messianic Politics of Paul* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Gordon Zerbe, *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2012).

to the Romans have little or nothing to contribute to the topic. One task of this introduction is to account for the absence of justice in studies of Paul, and the absence of Paul in Christian thinking about justice. The other task is to relearn some of Paul's basic vocabulary in order to change our perception of Paul's message and allow the important theme of justice to surface again. In the remainder of the book I explain Paul's letter to the Romans as a message of justice and show how our ideas of justice might be radically affected by that message.

### Lost in Translation

Justice is a central and pervasive theme in Romans. So why is that so difficult for us to see? For English-speaking readers, the most important factor is English translations. When we read through Romans (and other letters of Paul) we encounter the words *righteous* and *righteousness* often. But for the modern reader these words have come to have an almost exclusively individual, moral, and religious meaning, and often not a positive one. One of the most common uses in our popular speech is the term *self-righteous*, describing someone who is too overtly religious, pious, moralistic or judgmental. It carries a negative meaning. Still, if we find *righteous* or *righteousness* used often in Paul's letters, and bearing much important weight, it seems Christians at least cannot avoid them. If they are part of Paul's basic vocabulary, they probably should be part of ours as well, even if they risk being misunderstood. After all, Paul seems to be concerned about righteousness.

What does *righteousness* mean to you? Do you use this word much in everyday life? If not, why not? What does the word *justice* mean to you? Do you feel more comfortable using it? If so, why?

When Paul's letters were translated into Latin early on, the words we read in English as *righteous* and *righteousness* appeared as *iustus* and *iustitia*. Where we now read in Romans 1:17 of "the righteousness of God," the Latin reads *iustitia Dei*, "the justice of God." This also shows up in translations into languages rooted in Latin: for example: "la justice de Dieu" (French), "la justicia de Dios" (Spanish), "la giustizia di Dio" (Italian), and so on. Each of these is a translation of the Greek phrase *dikaïosynē theou*. The word *dikaïosynē* is one word in a set of Greek words beginning with *dik-*: all of them include the sense of what is

just within the social and political order as well as personal uprightness—so, *dikaïos* means “just,” *dikaioō* means “to justify” or “to make just,” *dikaïosynē* means “justice.” In ancient Greek there was no separate set of words that meant “righteous” or “righteousness” in the individual, moral, religious sense, in contrast to “just” and “justice.” The *dik-* words in ordinary Greek usage included both personal *and* legal-social-political meanings. These words may sometimes indicate what we mean by righteousness and a righteous person; but they also indicate such things as a just ruler, justice in a criminal case, just sharing of power and goods, just relations among groups and peoples, and doing justice.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans the Greek word *dikaïosynē* occurs thirty-three times, and other words with the *dik-* stem occur another thirty or more times—more than anywhere else in Paul’s writings specifically, and more by far than in any other document in the New Testament in general. When the early believers in Rome heard these words read from Paul’s letter, they would not have understood them to mean only “righteousness” or “righteous,” separated from the meanings of social and political justice. In the Greek word *dikaïosynē* they would have heard the Latin *iustitia*. Justice is the central and pervasive theme of the letter to the Romans—the justice of God, the just ruler, the just person, the way of justice in relationships, society and the world. It would therefore not be unreasonable to call Romans a treatise on justice.

But Paul’s language of justice depends not only on Greek and Roman meanings, but also on the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (abbreviated with the Roman numerals LXX), the translation that Paul and other New Testament writers used most often. For them the Greek Septuagint was the Bible. In it we encounter the *dik-* stem words—the justice words—numerous times, where they translate the Hebrew words *mišpāt* and *sedāqâ*. Here are just three familiar examples from the Septuagint:

O God, give your judgment to the king, and your *dikaïosynē* [justice] to the king’s son; that he may judge your people with *dikaïosynē* [justice] and your poor with judgment. (Ps 72:1-2)

The Lord has made known his salvation, he has revealed his *dikaïosynē* [justice] in the sight of the nations. (Ps 98:2)

But let judgment roll down as water, and *dikaïosynē* [justice] as a mighty torrent. (Amos 5:24)

God is the source of justice, he gives justice to the ruler, he calls for justice from his people, and he reveals his justice before the nations. God's salvation is his justice: this is a persistent theme throughout the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> It is also, we will see, exactly what Paul too will proclaim in Romans. For Paul, God's salvation and justice are the very meaning of the good news—the good news of Jesus.

Jesus (as we have already noted) preached his first and famous justice sermon about the reign of God from Isaiah 61:1–2, a text that declares the liberation and restoration of the people Israel. Jesus announced this good news to a people in social, economic, and political bondage to an oppressive foreign power, Rome. No wonder, then, that when they heard Jesus' sermon of hope, "all were speaking well of him" (Lk 4:22). But already before his first public sermon of good news for prisoners, the poor and the oppressed, Jesus' birth had stirred up hopes among the Judean underdogs for political liberation and justice, hopes expressed boldly in the songs of Mary (Lk 1:46-55) and Zacharias (Lk 1:67-79). On the other political side, Jesus' birth provoked great anxiety among those in charge—Herod the king, and "all Jerusalem with him" (Mt 2:3). Jesus was dogged by various authorities from the beginning to the end of his ministry, and he was finally publicly executed by the Roman occupiers with the approval of the Judean authorities in Jerusalem. The Gospels make clear that the political authorities (Roman and Judean) believed that Jesus, the Messiah and Son of David, was pursuing political aims that both threatened the bases of their own authority and fostered revolutionary hope among his followers—hope for justice.

The political authorities and Jesus' followers were not wrong about Jesus. What they all found hard to grasp was that he consistently refused to use the usual *means*—coercion, violence, and militant insurgency—to accomplish his revolutionary ends. He refused those means first in his temptations in the desert (where they were proposed by the devil) and finally in his willing submission to public execution. Jesus' revolution in this sense was fundamentally different. He did not refuse politics; rather, he proposed a *political*

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<sup>3</sup>For more on the meaning of justice in the Old Testament, see Sider, *Just Politics*, 77-99; Bruce C. Birch, "Justice," in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 433-37; Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 253-80.

*alternative* to the way the Romans ruled, and to the way his Judean compatriots hoped to rule when the Messiah came. He called his fellow Judeans to refuse guerilla warfare and military solutions in their efforts to attain their hoped-for justice—the liberation and restoration of Israel in its land. Instead he called them to *trust in God* and to wait for God’s time and manner of deliverance. Jesus called his compatriots to love and forgive *both* their fellow countrymen *and* their enemy oppressors. He called Israel even under occupation and oppression to become *the true political community of justice*, a people chosen, ruled, and sustained by God and God’s Messiah, their just King. In fact, he claimed, they could be this community of justice without controlling their national territory, security, or destiny. According to Jesus, for the people Israel to trust in God, forgive enemies, and refuse violence was already to share in the reality of God’s liberation and restoration, God’s justice and salvation—the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup>

We in the modern Western world are tempted to separate “religion” from politics and “spirituality” from justice. Both the Old Testament and the Gospels show that such separation is not part of the biblical mindset. It would therefore be startling and strange if Paul, who was so thoroughly steeped in the Law, the Psalms, the Prophets, and the gospel of Jesus Messiah, and dedicated to the God of Israel and his cause, were now to propose that Israel’s God and God’s Messiah are really only directly concerned with the spiritual condition and moral lives of individuals. We will soon see that, starting from the first few sentences of Romans and carrying on to the last, Paul declares the good news of God and God’s justice for *all of life*, political, social, economic, and personal alike.

### More Vocabulary

Separating religion from politics, economics, and justice was not the mindset among Judeans in Paul’s time. Nor was it the mindset of Greeks and Romans. For them, all matters of imperial and political authority, good government of cities, and administration of justice in legal, social, and economic spheres,

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<sup>4</sup>The perspective on Jesus I have sketched here is developed in the classic work by André Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004). The other classic works on these matters are by John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1977), and *The Politics of Jesus: Vicut Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

as well as the ordinary matters of success in family, business, agriculture, trade, travel, and war, were thoroughly interwoven with what we think of as religion.<sup>5</sup> In matters great and small, Greeks and Romans honored the gods through offerings, sacrifices, rituals, and festivals. They regularly consulted prophets, shamans, astrologers, and soothsayers; they exorcised demons, read omens, cast spells, and practiced magic. No military general would go to war unless the divine signs (discerned by priests and prophets) were in their favor. Temples were built to gods who secured the safety of cities and the triumph of emperors. Indeed, even some of the great emperors, such as Augustus, were regarded as gods or sons of god and were honored in temples built for them. Life—especially *political* life—and “religion” were one. Thus, many New Testament words that we often think of as having specialized spiritual meanings, such as *dikaïosynē*, were part of the vocabulary of Greek and Roman political life. Here are some examples with their meanings:<sup>6</sup>

- “lord” (Greek *kyrios*): a ruler, emperor, master
- “son of God” (Greek *huios theou*): a ruler or emperor with divine authorization or status
- “good news,” “gospel” (Greek *euangelion*): a public proclamation of a military victory, royal birth, enthronement, or benefaction
- “coming” (Greek *parousia*): the auspicious arrival or visit of a ruler/emperor, military commander, or other important official; or the presence or manifestation of a god
- “savior” (Greek *sotēr*): the emperor/ruler regarded as a military or political liberator, victor, or protector; “salvation” (Gk *sotēria*): the beneficial results—for example, peace, security, abundance—brought about by an emperor’s rule or military victory
- faith (Greek *pistis*): the loyalty, allegiance, and faithfulness that subjects owed to their lords and rulers, or that citizens owed to their cities or to Rome

<sup>5</sup>A Roman citizen or soldier in Paul’s time would understand and sympathize with the sentiment of a bumper sticker seen on some cars in modern America: “God, Guns and Guts Keep America Free.”

<sup>6</sup>The following list is adapted from Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*, second ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 131-32.

- freedom (Greek *eleutheria*): political or ethical autonomy of citizens
- “church” (Greek *ekklēsia*): an assembly of citizens in a city; a business meeting of a club

Other words could be added to this list, such as the Greek words for “grace,” “peace,” “mercy,” “blessing,” and so on. Paul does not invent new “religious” words or create special religious meanings for words. He uses what was available in ordinary speech, often from the political discourse and propaganda of the surrounding culture.<sup>7</sup> These ordinary words do undergo a transformation of meaning when Paul uses them to proclaim the gospel, but it is not a transformation from secular or political meanings to religious or spiritual meanings. Rather, Paul brings these common words into the orbit of the story of Messiah Jesus and defines them by that story. The ordinary secular and political meanings are co-opted, taken over, and used by Paul to declare a radically new story about the gods (God), kings (Messiah), nations, political authorities, loyalties, and citizenship.

As we will see, this is also what happens for the word *dikaïosynē* (justice). It is not that Paul simply squeezes the meaning of the gospel into the ideas of justice that were available from Greek and Roman surroundings. On the contrary, Paul takes over the Greek justice words and fills them up, even blows them open with the meaning of the gospel, so that they come to signify a justice almost impossibly more radical and comprehensive than those words could have had in their original context. More important, for Paul the new gospel meaning becomes *the true standard* by which other meanings must be measured. *Justice is only truly justice if it lines up with and looks like gospel justice.* Likewise with *lord, son of God, savior, grace, peace,* and so on. For Paul these words take on a new fullness and normativity of meaning when they are “evangelized”—that is, when they are conscripted into proclaiming the news of God’s justice in Messiah Jesus.

Perceptive readers may already have noticed I have been using some other unusual vocabulary in this work. Just now (and earlier) I used the phrases “Messiah Jesus” or “Jesus Messiah.” Some readers are likely aware

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<sup>7</sup>One can see how many of these words were used in Greek and Roman political documents and propaganda in a chapter by Neil Elliott and Mark Reasoner titled “The Gospel of Augustus,” in *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, ed. Neil Elliott and Mark Reasoner (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 119–73.

that *christos* in Greek refers to the Jewish *messiah*. *Messiah* is not a second name (as in “Christ” being Jesus Christ’s second name); *Messiah* is a *title*. And it is not a religious title; it designates an anointed one, whether political or priestly. More accurately, it is a *theo-political* title, since for Jews in biblical times God (Greek *theos*) and politics were not held in separate compartments; they belonged together.

Does using the phrase “Jesus Messiah” bring meanings and connections to mind that the phrase “Jesus Christ” does not? If so, what are some of those meanings and connections?

Many Judeans in the time of Jesus, Paul included, had high hopes that a political ruler, chosen and anointed by God—a messiah—would suddenly and dramatically arrive in Israel. He would appear in Jerusalem bearing God’s own authority and mandate to be the one through whom God himself would rule Israel. These hopes were rooted in the Old Testament prophetic writings. *Messiah* came freighted with divine meaning. As God’s anointed agent, a messiah would liberate (by divinely empowered military might) the people and the land of Israel from their occupation and oppression by the Romans, purify the people, establish social and economic justice in the land, restore Israel to its rightful place among (or above) the nations of the world, and rule with justice from Jerusalem over the nations of the earth. A careful reading of the temptations of Jesus in Matthew 4 and Luke 4 reveals that the devil tempted Jesus with exactly that vision of messiahship, a vision that truly did tempt Jesus—because he loved his people and remained in fundamental solidarity with them—but one he finally resisted. He determined instead to trust God to show him the shape and path of his own messianic mission as well as the future for Israel. Jesus’ path as Israel’s Messiah led finally not to a glorious throne in Jerusalem but to a torturous public execution outside the gates. It seemed to be the end of his messiahship.

However, the early messianic believers were convinced by his resurrection that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed Israel’s hoped-for Messiah. He was Jesus Messiah, God’s chosen, anointed, and empowered royal ruler, in whom God himself was reasserting his claim on Israel and calling Israel to a renewed trust in him for its future. By putting together the name Jesus with

the title “messiah,” the early believers and New Testament authors, Paul included, were declaring that Jesus now *defines* the meaning of the title messiah. Messiah remains a *theological, royal, and political title*, but the true nature of divine power and human political authority are revealed in who Jesus was, what he did and taught, how he lived and died. This is of crucial importance for understanding Romans. When reading Romans we must understand the Greek word *christos* (“Christ”) with its original Judean meaning, “messiah.”

Readers may also have noticed that I often use the word *Judean* rather than *Jew* or *Jewish*. The reasons are similar to those for using *messiah*. We are in the habit of thinking that *Jew* designates a religious group and that *Jewish* indicates their type of religion. There were, of course, many aspects of Judean life governed by instructions regarding purity, tithing, worship, and sacrifice—things we might regard as religious. But the law of Moses can hardly be reduced to a code of “religion.” The law was a kind of treaty or national constitution given by God on Mount Sinai to regulate matters of social, economic and political order—justice—across the whole range of Israel’s life *in the land* which they had been promised. Most Judeans of the first century (not only those who lived in the land) were still deeply committed to that land (known as *Ioudaia*, Judea), to being a people in the land (or returning to it), and to the right to have their own national constitution—the law of Moses—become again the law of the land. They were not content simply to practice their “religion” as individuals in a land now occupied and ruled by a foreign and often oppressive power with its own laws. Judeans, like the Romans, or like Canadians, Americans, and Chinese today, knew themselves as *a people* among peoples, a nation among nations, and hoped sometime—soon—to reclaim their rightful place in the world by *getting back control of their land*. Both Jesus and Paul shared this land hope with their fellow Judeans, even though they differed from their compatriots in how they thought that hope might someday be realized politically. When Paul uses the Greek word *Ioudaios*, as he does often, I will usually render it *Judean* (rather than *Jew*) in order to keep in mind the close association of the Judean people with the land and constitution (law) of *Ioudaia*, Judea—Israel.

Our note about Judeans is important for another reason. Just as that word draws our attention to a people and its land, it should also draw our

attention to the reality that Judea was surrounded by other peoples and their lands. In fact, many Judeans in Paul's time did not live in Judea but among other peoples, in the towns and cities of other lands. These Diaspora (meaning "scattered") Judeans lived in the major cities of places such as Babylon, Persia, Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. There was a significant population of Judeans in Rome. In the Greek language, "peoples" or "nations" are *ethnē* (plural—the singular is *ethnos*: it is easy to see that the word *ethnic* is derived from this). However, in most recent English translations of the New Testament (and so also in Romans) the word *ethnē* is usually translated "Gentiles" rather than "peoples" or "nations." But there are problems with this.

First, like the word *Jews*, *Gentiles* leads us to think in almost exclusively individualistic terms. So, for example, when Paul writes in Romans 1:5 (NRSV) that through Jesus Messiah he has "received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles [Greek *ethnēsīn*]," we likely imagine that Paul has in mind preaching the gospel to all non-Jewish individuals, indistinct from one another in terms of their geographical locations and their ethnic, social, and political groupings. But this is not how Paul usually thinks. It is evident from the opening greeting in each of his letters to churches that he has a very clear idea of the *geographical-ethnic-political* definition of the people group to which he is writing. He writes to the messianic assemblies in the city of Corinth (and "throughout the region of Achaia," 2 Cor 1:1), in Galatia (either an ethnic or provincial designation), in the cities of Philippi, Colossae, Thessalonica, and so on. The messianic assemblies in a particular place in some sense *stand for* that place as a whole; though few in number, they represent (before God) the city, region, or people from which they are drawn. This sense of representation is especially visible in Paul's own description of his mission, which he provides in Romans 15:18-26:

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Messiah has accomplished through me to win obedience from the [*ethnē* nations] . . . so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have *fully proclaimed* the good news of Messiah. Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, *not where Messiah has already been named*, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written,

“Those who have never been told of him shall see,  
and those who have never heard of him shall understand.”

This is the reason that I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, with *no further place in these regions*, I desire . . . to come to you [in Rome] when I go to Spain. . . . At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints. *Macedonia and Achaia* have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

We cannot make sense of this important text if we think of *ethnē* as *individual* non-Jewish persons, that is, simply as “Gentiles” in an individualistic sense. For, in those terms, what could Paul possibly mean when he writes that “from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum” (the whole northeast portion of the Mediterranean area) he has “fully proclaimed” the gospel? He certainly cannot be boasting that every individual in this whole area has heard the good news from him. That would be the work of an entire lifetime and much more. He has in fact (as the accounts in Acts testify) moved deliberately from one important urban center to another, preaching in the synagogues, public squares, and marketplaces of those cities, declaring in them *the sovereignty (the name) of Messiah Jesus*. In those cities only small groups of believers in Jesus were formed. Nevertheless, on this basis alone Paul is bold to say that he has “no further place in these regions” to proclaim the good news and that, instead, after a short stay in Rome, he plans to travel on to Spain. Before he does that, however, he will carry resources from Macedonia and Achaia to Jerusalem.

What can Paul mean by these sweeping declarations? It is clear from this text that when he thinks here in terms of *ethnē*, he is thinking not in terms of individual Gentiles but in terms of peoples or nations as a whole, represented by specific major cities or geographical or political regions. He has proclaimed the sovereignty of Messiah Jesus to the various *peoples* or *nations*, in this representative and regional sense, from Jerusalem, throughout Asia Minor, and around to Illyricum.

When I use the word *nations* here, it is important not to think of nation-states as we know them today, but of “peoples in their regions with their rulers, language, customs, and laws.” The modern nation-state is understood as a relatively stable political entity with sovereign

rights over a geographical territory marked out by well-defined borders. The political reality in ancient times was more fluid; rulers claimed sovereignty over regions without clearly defined boundaries. I will sometimes use *nation* and *people* interchangeably when translating the Greek word *ethnos*, but I mean by both something like “a people in its region with its ruler, language, customs and laws.”

There is a good reason why Paul thinks in these terms. The Old Testament texts that Paul quotes and alludes to most frequently in his letters—certainly in Romans—are Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and (especially) Isaiah. Many of Paul’s references to *ethnē* (for example, in Rom 15:9-12) come from the Septuagint. In their Old Testament context none of these uses of *ethnē* refer to Gentiles in the individual sense. They refer to the non-Israelite peoples or nations and are almost always translated that way (from the Hebrew) in our English Bibles. The Old Testament is indeed deeply concerned about Israel’s place among the nations. Yet it is also concerned about the nations themselves, the gods of the nations, and what the nations are doing politically and militarily among themselves and with respect to Israel. God is God not only of Israel but also of the nations.<sup>8</sup> We have little problem seeing that when we read the Old Testament.

Therefore, there is no reason to think that Paul understands *ethnē* individualistically as Gentiles when, quoting Psalm 18:49, he writes (in Rom 15:9), “Therefore I will confess you among the *ethnēs*in [nations] and sing praises to your name.” Or, in Romans 15:12, when quoting Isaiah 11:10 (in the Septuagint version), “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule *ethnōn* [nations]; in him *ethnē* [nations] will hope.” So unless there are strong indications that Paul is speaking in specifically individual terms, when we encounter the word *Gentiles* in translations of Romans we should think of “peoples” or “nations.” The difference this makes will become clear as we make our way through Romans, particularly as we ask questions about the justice of God.

What role, if any, does the idea of nations play in your understanding of God’s work of salvation in the world?

<sup>8</sup>This point is made clearly and powerfully by Christopher Wright in “Politics and the Nations,” in *Old Testament Ethics*, 212-52.

## Two Technical Terms

Throughout this book I will frequently use two technical terms that in some measure capture two crucial aspects of the good news about God's justice that Paul proclaims. They roughly correspond to the aspect of *divine action* on the one hand and the aspect of *human action* on the other. With respect to divine action, I speak of *apocalyptic*. With respect to human action, I speak of *messianic*. Let me explain.

***Apocalyptic.*** This word often generates thoughts, images and feelings of doom, destruction, and cosmic end-time scenarios. Hollywood produces numerous blockbuster films in the apocalyptic genre, where entire cities or even the whole planet are in imminent danger of massive destruction by some uncontrollable force, whether natural (such as an asteroid or tsunami) or manmade (such as a nuclear bomb).

What is one of your favorite or most memorable apocalyptic films? What world-altering threat has to be averted in it? Do you ever imagine an apocalyptic event as good news?

If we think *apocalyptic* in biblical terms, our minds likely run to astonishing, often frightening texts in Ezekiel, Daniel, Mark 13, and especially the book of Revelation. In fact, the very first word of the book of Revelation is the Greek word *apokalypsis*. It is translated “revelation”—hence the name of the book. However, as we read through the book of Revelation, the word *revelation* seems a rather bland and flat descriptor of what is going on there. In its normal use, revelation means something like a disclosure, perhaps of a secret or of something that lies behind a veil or curtain. Think of the reveal, the moment in reality television shows when the public gets to see how a home has been renovated, how a person has undergone a dramatic makeover, or whom the bachelor has chosen.

There is in the book of Revelation something of that meaning of revelation, but there is also much more. The book is full of high tension and grand, often terrifying, sometimes gruesome and horrifying dramatic action on both the historical and cosmic planes, by divine, angelic, demonic, monstrous, and human actors. When we come to the climax of all of this action in Revelation 21–22, *the whole creation has been altered by God* in the most

fundamental way, such that there is “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1). This is not mere revelation; it is more like wholesale, cosmic revolution. It is truly apocalypse!

Now, all of this may seem a long distance from the writings of Paul. To be sure, the apostle writes two somewhat obvious apocalyptic passages in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12. But for the most part it seems Paul is not much for apocalyptic drama—he is more for doctrine and ethics. Here again, though, our translations may hide more than they reveal. For at crucial junctures in his letters, especially Galatians and Romans, when Paul emphatically introduces the good news he proclaims, he speaks of an apocalypse. In Galatians 1:12 he insists that he did not receive the gospel from a human source, but rather “through an *apokalypseōs* of Jesus Messiah.” Further, in Galatians 1:16 he writes that God was “pleased to *apokalypsai* his Son to me.” So dramatic and powerful and comprehensive is this apocalypse that Paul claims his previous self and world *came to an end* because of it, and a whole new person and world was brought into being: “I have been crucified with Messiah; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Messiah who lives in me” (Gal 2:19–20). And later in the letter, “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Messiah, by which the world [*kosmos*] has been crucified to me, and I to the world [*kosmos*]. For neither circumcision [being Judean] nor uncircumcision [being Gentile] is anything; but a *new creation* is everything” (Gal 6:14–15). World destroying and creating anew are the *apocalyptic work of God*.

Paul makes another apocalyptic declaration in 2 Corinthians 5:14–17. “We are convinced,” he writes, “that one has died for all; therefore all have died” (2 Cor 5:14). In other words, the whole of sinful humanity has been drawn by God into the death of Messiah and *put to death there*. Paul’s thought here is apocalyptic in two respects. First, to assert that all humankind is already *dead* in Messiah runs radically against the grain of our ordinary human perception: we see people alive all around us, not appearing dead at all. Thus Paul’s assertion must necessarily be an apocalypse, that is, an astonishing revelation of something *alongside yet beyond* our ordinary physical vision. The people we see alive around us are in fact dead in Christ.

Second, to assert that “one has died for all, therefore all have died” is to perceive a *radically altered reality* in which nothing remains the same. As in

Galatians, Paul calls this the new creation: “if anyone is in Messiah, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). The arrival of new creation in Messiah is God’s act—God bringing the old world to an end and beginning something new—the *apocalypse* in real time! Paul does not call us simply to believe in the new creation as something we can dream about and wish for, something that might arrive sometime in the future. He calls us actually *to live now* in this astonishingly new reality, brought into being through the apocalyptic death and resurrection of Messiah, in which nothing remains the same:

And [Messiah] died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for the one who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to our old perception. . . . So if anyone is in Messiah there is new creation: everything old has passed away; behold, *everything has become new!* All this is *from God*. (2 Cor 5:15-18)

An apocalypse indeed.<sup>9</sup>

So when Paul announces in Romans 1:16-17 the theme of the whole letter—the good news of the justice of God—he declares that this good news is “apocalypsed” (Greek *apokalypsetai*). The good news is both the *revelation* and the *reality* of what God *does* to bring about justice in the world (see Rom 3:21, “But now . . . the justice of God has been disclosed . . . , the justice of God through the faith of Jesus Messiah”).<sup>10</sup> The good news is also simultaneously the revelation and reality of God’s judgment on idolatry and injustice (Rom 1:18, “For the wrath of God is apocalypsed [*apokalypsetai*] from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice”). The whole of Romans is written in the aftershock of the apocalypse of God’s coming in Jesus Messiah, which powerfully brings about God’s own justice in the world and, in that very act, exposes and undermines regimes of human injustice.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. I will return to those themes in the following chapters. For now, I have made the point that Paul’s vision of God’s act in Jesus Messiah in relation to all humanity and the whole world is a divine apocalyptic act. The good news is not (only) that God is stirring up

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<sup>9</sup>The scholar most responsible in recent years for increasing our awareness of the apocalyptic character of Paul is J. Louis Martyn; see especially his *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

<sup>10</sup>In Rom 3:21 Paul uses another Greek word, *pephanerōtai*, translated as “disclosed,” but with essentially the same meaning as “apocalypsed.”

new theological thoughts about him or spiritual feelings toward him. The good news is much more: God is actually *creating* a new justice, new relationships, a new humanity, and a new world order. To keep this point before us in the coming pages I will therefore frequently use the words *apocalypse* (as a noun and a verb) and *apocalyptic*.

**Messianic.** Once we have it firmly in our mind that the Greek word *christos* means “messiah,” it is easy to see that Paul’s thinking is messianic through and through. He cannot say enough about Jesus *Messiah*, *Messiah* Jesus. Jesus Messiah *is* God’s apocalypse, God’s own arrival and presence, God in truth and in person. God’s very own reality, power, and mission in the world hinge on Jesus Messiah. But when I use the word *messianic*—an adjective—I intend to point to something quite specific, that is, to the particular manner in which Jesus of Nazareth enacted his messiahship as a truly human being. We have already seen that the four Gospels, each in its own way, show us in considerable detail how Jesus “does” messiah in his life, from his birth and baptism to his crucifixion and resurrection. We come to know the meaning of *messianic* as a *form of life* by attending to the kind of messianic life that the actual Messiah lived and called his disciples to live. In the Gospels this is what is meant by *following* Jesus; it means to live in a manner that reflects the *way* set forth in the teachings and the very life of Jesus himself.

Paul does not provide us with many details of Jesus’ life—hardly any, in fact. But this does not prevent him from returning again and again to one fundamental event in that life, the crucifixion. It is the event in which the core meaning of *messianic* is to be learned and lived. This is explicit in Philippians 2:1-11. Paul begins by calling the Philippians to a life together characterized by unity of mind and purpose, and humility toward one another (Phil 2:2-3). “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others,” he writes in Philippians 2:4. Then, to make clear what he means and why this kind of life is to be lived among them, he calls them to share in the mind of the Messiah. This messianic mind is not only a new way of thinking; it is the whole form and pattern of life that the Messiah himself took up and lived out, from his incarnation to his crucifixion: he

emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,  
 he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death—  
 even death on a cross. (Phil 2:7-8 NRSV)

This is the *messianic way* because it is *the way of the Messiah himself*: self-emptying, truly human, giving himself to and serving others, humble, obedient to death, even the unjust and shameful death of an alleged insurgent (Paul emphasizes Jesus' shameful death "on a cross"). When we hear further that this same Messiah was exalted, given the name above every name—that is, he actually receives the name of God—and is worshiped by every human being "in heaven and on the earth and under the earth," this is *because* he took the way of life that he did. "Therefore God also highly exalted him" (Phil 2:9). For the Messiah *himself* took no path to exaltation except through humble service, obedience, suffering, and death. This truth is basic for Paul; it is the bedrock of all of his instruction *to us* about what it means to live in Messiah, not only in Philippians but in every letter he writes. Certainly in Romans, as we shall soon see. The way of Jesus is what I mean by *messianic*.<sup>11</sup>

For this reason I will also usually refer to those who are "in Messiah," follow the Messiah, and have the mind of the Messiah as *messianics*. It is another way of saying "Christians," but obviously a bit strange and unfamiliar. That is just the point. We are inclined to think that "Christians" are those who identify with and practice the "religion" of Christianity. That may be acceptable in our ordinary discourse. But what I aim to accomplish by the strange word *messianics* is to liberate readers of Paul for the time being from that meaning. I wish to draw the meaning of *Christian* as close as possible to the reality and pattern of Jesus Messiah, which is what I think Paul does.

So then, *apocalyptic* indicates *God's action* in bringing an end to the old world and bringing about the new creation through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Messiah. And *messianic* indicates *human action*, first and normatively the act of Jesus the Messiah as the truly human being

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<sup>11</sup>My understanding of the meaning of *messianic* is deeply informed by the works of John Howard Yoder, especially *Politics of Jesus*. For the meaning of *messianic* in Paul and Romans, the (difficult) philosophical reading of Romans by Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), has been influential, as also L. L. Welborn, *Paul's Summons to Messianic Life: Political Theology and the Coming Awakening* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

and king, and then our own action as it is conformed to the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. What all of that means in detail will be explored as we make our way through Romans.

### Making Our Way

What follows in the coming chapters amounts mostly to a *continuous reading* of the text of Romans. In other words, I will more or less follow the order of the text as Paul wrote it. However, this is not a commentary on Romans in any detailed sense. Romans is an immensely dense and rich letter. It takes a very large commentary to plumb its depths, and many such commentaries have been written throughout the centuries.<sup>12</sup> Unlike many of those works, I will not pause over and discuss all the words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs of the letter, as commentaries usually do. My overall purpose is to show that Romans is a letter deeply concerned with justice and to explain what justice means according to the good news that Paul proclaims. I will show how the various sections of the letter contribute to that overarching theme. I will pass over some portions and themes of the letter with very little comment, while I will spend a good deal more time on others. And while I will roughly follow the order of the text, there will be some exceptions in order to make Paul's arguments clearer.

Further, because this book is not a comprehensive commentary in any sense, I do not aim to assert that justice is *the only thing* that Romans is about—far from it! Nor is it my intent to suggest that now we can simply dispense with the theme of righteousness and what it has come to mean for interpreters of Romans—far from it! I offer a reading of Romans, which means that I flow fairly fluidly between Paul's time and our own around matters that I believe are as significant today as they were in the first century. I simply make the humble but insistent plea that we *give Romans a serious hearing on the theme of justice* because on the one hand it is there in Romans, and on the other hand the church and the world so desperately need to hear Paul's word on this, now.

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<sup>12</sup>In Suggestions for Further Reading at the end of this book, I provide the reader with suggestions of helpful works on Romans, including some commentaries.

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