

THE 'BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS'  
IN EPHESIANS 6:14  
IMPUTATION OR VIRTUE?

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**Summary**

*This study examines the long-standing disagreement over the nature of the 'breastplate of righteousness' in Ephesians 6:14. One position argues that the righteousness is external, consisting of imputed righteousness. The other position argues that the righteousness is internal, consisting of Christian virtues. This study includes a brief survey of Paul's usage of spiritual armour in other Epistles and an examination of the Isaianic background of spiritual armour. After examining the metaphor of the 'armour of God' and the context in Ephesians, it is argued that the breastplate is ethical, consisting of virtues that reflect Christ.*

**1. Introduction**

The armour of God in Ephesians 6:10-20 is part of the staple diet of both children's church lessons and Sunday morning preaching. The imagery and the application of Paul's doctrine to Christian life make it a significant source for contextualisation and spiritual warfare issues. The purpose of this article is to examine the nature of the breastplate of righteousness in Ephesians 6:14b:

*Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. (Author's emphasis)<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the updated NASB unless noted otherwise.

What has been debated for several centuries is where this righteousness of the breastplate is derived from.<sup>2</sup> Though the discussion of spiritual warfare and the armour of God occurs in innumerable sources, the nature of the armour of 'righteousness' is often accompanied by data that provides knowledge about the text, but not necessarily knowledge of what the text is about.<sup>3</sup> There are two prominent views regarding the nature of the righteousness referred to by the breastplate. The first view posits an external righteousness to the believer by *imputation* of Christ's righteousness.<sup>4</sup> The second view posits an internal righteousness of the believer that consists of *virtue*.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Intentional Ambiguity

Due to the polarity in interpretations of the breastplate of righteousness it is not inappropriate to ask the question of whether the use of an Old Testament quotation by Paul is grounds for considering double meaning.<sup>6</sup> To be succinct, the notion that Paul would allude to or quote

<sup>2</sup> In 1643 Paul Bayne noted three extant positions, (1) a righteousness imputed by faith, (2) a righteousness 'inherent in us, which is part of the divine quality begun in us' and (3) a 'righteousness of course, or conversation, or worke'. Paul Bayne, *An Entire Commentary upon the Whole Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians* (London: M. F. Publishers, 1643): 780.

<sup>3</sup> For this distinction see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993): 284.

<sup>4</sup> Those who view the breastplate as being external or imputed righteousness include Michael Barrett, *Complete in Him* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald, 2000): 223; Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Acts to Revelation* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.): 720; Thorsten Moritz, *A Profound Mystery: The Use of the Old Testament in Ephesians* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996): 203; James Rosscup, 'Ephesians: Prayer's Strategic Role' in *The Master's Perspective on Difficult Passages* (ed. Robert Thomas; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998): 229.

<sup>5</sup> Those who view the breastplate as being virtue or an ethical quality include William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 1976): 211; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (vol. 3; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003): 238; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854): 338; Kylene Snodgrass, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996): 342; John MacArthur, *The Believer's Armor* (Chicago: Moody, 1986): 88; William Lincoln, *Lectures on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: John Ritchie, n.d.): 80; Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament: With a Critically Revised Text* (Boston: Lee and Shephard, 1881): 146; Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002): 841; Francis Foulkes, *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956): 174.

<sup>6</sup> See Vanhoozer's general discussion of double meaning and ambiguity. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 256.

Isaiah in order to communicate something wholly different from what Isaiah himself meant would be both nonsensical and confusing if not misleading to the original recipients who were familiar with the OT.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of quoting Isaiah would be to bolster the authority of his message by demonstrating its continuity with the Prophets and/or to communicate something in a particular way (viz. the armour metaphor) that had already been used in the OT. These purposes would be negated by using such a direct reference in a way that would have been alien to the original recipients. In other words, the notion of double meaning would destroy Paul's usage of Isaiah as a communicative act and as a source of reference to OT concepts. If we understand that quotations and allusions generally enhanced the authority of the author's own writings, it would seem puzzling to use a midrash technique that is associated with superfluity rather than hermeneutical modesty.<sup>8</sup> Because the quotations of Isaiah are being used to bolster an argument, any recourse to a hermeneutic that asserts intentional ambiguity requires substantial evidence in the text itself. Such evidence does not appear in the text of Ephesians chapter 6.

### 3. Spiritual Armour and Weaponry

Before examining Ephesians in particular, a consideration should be made of Paul's use of weaponry and armour imagery in Epistles other than Ephesians.

The most common word for weaponry and armour is ὄπλα. This word is common in the Septuagint (LXX). The word ὄπλα refers to weaponry or a shield in 1 Samuel 17:7; 2 Kings 10:2; and Nahum 2:3 [2:4 LXX]. In 1 Kings, the word ὄπλα is used three times to refer to shields (10:17; 14:26, 27). In 2 Chronicles, it refers twice to weapons and shields (2 Chr. 23:9; 32:5) and once where a reference to weapons is possible (2 Chr. 21:3).<sup>9</sup> In the OT, there are only three occurrences

<sup>7</sup> Moritz agrees, stating, 'The author spared no effort to employ terms already familiar to the readers from Israel's Scriptures.' Moritz, *A Profound Mystery*, 182.

<sup>8</sup> This 'authority' is similar to the authority accompanying normative texts. As Francis Watson notes, the reading community that 'acknowledges certain texts as normative... also concerns itself with the implications of that normativity.' Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2004): 78.

<sup>9</sup> Both the ESV and NAS translate ὄπλα in 2 Chr. 21:3 as 'possessions' and 'precious things', respectively. However, the statement that this was 'together with fortified

where the word refers to an instrument or an implement of some sort (Jer. 43:10 [50:10 LXX]; 51:12 [28:12 LXX]; Prov. 14:7).

Because ὄπλα can refer to weaponry/armour and instruments, it makes the reference in Romans 6:13 difficult: 'And do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as*<sup>2</sup> instruments (ὄπλα) of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments (ὄπλα) of righteousness to God.' Douglas Moo argues that the Pauline usage here could be rendered in both occasions in this verse as 'weapons of unrighteousness' and 'weapons of righteousness'.<sup>10</sup> Moo further suggests that when 'unrighteousness' is taken as an objective genitive, it can be rendered as 'weapons for the purpose of unrighteousness'.<sup>11</sup> The discussion is somewhat moot for our ultimate purpose because regardless of whether a weapon or tool is in view, it is related to the metaphor between 'members' of our body. These 'members' are not physical parts and limbs but our 'natural capacities' in the flesh.<sup>12</sup> The idea in this passage deals with the virtues of the Christian in light of the freedom from sin we have through Christ.

Even if it is not possible to be conclusive with regard to Romans 6:13, there is a clear reference to spiritual weaponry in Romans 13:12: 'Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light (ὄπλα τοῦ φωτός).' Here, the Christian's battle with evil is seen in terms of putting on (ἐνδυσώμεθα) the deeds or virtues that accord with light; these are valuable as a weapon or as armour. Interestingly, a connection similar to that of Ephesians 6 is made between 'walking' (or acting virtuously) in verse 13 and the injunction to 'put on (ἐνδύσασθε) the Lord Jesus Christ' in verse 14. Moo makes a similar observation with regard to Ephesians 4, stating: 'Our relationship to Christ, the new man, while established at conversion, needs constantly to be reappropriated and lived out.'<sup>13</sup> The 'armour' in

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cities in Judah' may indicate the gifts contained weapons for the purpose of defending these cities.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996): 384 n.167.

<sup>11</sup> This is in contrast to the genitive of quality which would be rendered as 'unrighteous weapons'. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 385 n.170. Wallace holds that this is a genitive of description. Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996): 80.

<sup>12</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 384.

<sup>13</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 825.

Romans 13 clearly refers to virtues and actions that reflect Christ and what he has done.

The Second Epistle to the Corinthians also indicates that spiritual weapons consist of virtues, not imputation or forensic declarations. In 2 Corinthians 10:4, Paul wrote: 'For the weapons (ὅπλα) of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.' The exact nature of these weapons is not clear from the immediate context of the pericope. They are qualified though, as being 'not fleshly'. Colin Kruse suggests that these weapons are related to the preaching of the gospel, which passages such as Romans 1:16 indicate releases the 'power of God'.<sup>14</sup> However there are indications within the Epistle that would serve as a better indicator of what these weapons refer to. In 2 Corinthians 6:7b there is a use of weapon (NASB, NIV and ESV) or armour (AV) imagery when Paul writes, 'by the weapons of righteousness (ὅπλων τῆς δικαιοσύνης) for the right hand and the left'. This metaphor of a weapon of righteousness follows a string of virtues that describe Paul's ministry as a servant of God (2 Cor. 6:4). The virtues of Paul's ministry are evidence of how he and his ministry partners 'commend' themselves to the Corinthians. Here, the virtues of holding the weapon of righteousness in both hands is set in juxtaposition to enduring afflictions and hardships, being in labours, fastings and sleepless nights.<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that in 6:7a Paul qualifies these as being done 'in the power of God'.

As we narrow our way toward Ephesians 6:14, the next relevant passage occurs in 1 Thessalonians. This Epistle contains language regarding spiritual armour (the breastplate of righteousness) that closely parallels that of Ephesians. In 1 Thessalonians 5:8 Paul writes 'having put on the breastplate of faith and love' (ἐνδυσάμενοι θώρακα πίστεως καὶ ἀγάπης). Here, the breastplate clearly relates to the internal character and virtues of a Christian.<sup>16</sup> While the general nature of the breastplate in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 refers to internal Christian virtues, it also evidences the fact that the breastplate itself may have flexibility as a metaphor. This is because the armour meta-

<sup>14</sup> Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987): 174.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Barnett also finds the immediate context to be a compelling reason for understanding the 'weapon of righteousness' as 'ethical'. Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997): 330.

<sup>16</sup> '[B]y faith we are able to realise the Divine will and the Divine power and by love to embody faith in our dealings with men: this is righteousness.' George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Perthshire, UK, 1908): 68.

phor in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 uses the *breastplate* to incorporate faith (πίστεως), whereas the armour metaphor in Ephesians 6:16 uses the *shield* to incorporate faith (θυρεὸν τῆς πίστεως). While a shield and breastplate no doubt have similar defensive functions, the fact that Paul is willing to attribute different characteristics to the breastplate is evidence that the context of each usage should be given primary consideration for understanding the specific part of the metaphor.<sup>17</sup>

There is also a similarity between the way the helmet functions in both Ephesians 6 and 1 Thessalonians 5. The helmet is described as the ‘hope of salvation’ in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 and as the ‘helmet of salvation’ in Ephesians 6:17.

A comparison of Paul’s usage of spiritual armour and weaponry imagery in his Epistles yield several pertinent facts for the study of Ephesians. First, Paul is willing to be flexible in his use of the specific pieces of armour. But the divergence within this flexibility is not extreme; an internal virtue of righteousness is not totally unrelated to faith and love, for love is the fulfilment of the Law. Secondly, while Paul is willing to give some flexibility to the individual parts of armour, the metaphor has a great deal of consistency to it. In Romans, 2 Corinthians, and 1 Thessalonians, spiritual weapons and armour consist of virtues and there is no indication that Christ’s imputed righteousness is *directly* described in this manner. Thus, the case for imputation in Ephesians 6 would consequently assert that Paul has radically changed the way he uses this metaphor. In other words, the armour of God appears to be a rigid metaphor while the individual pieces appear to have a small degree of flexibility.

#### 4. Righteousness in Ephesians

The relationship of the armour imagery in the pericope of Ephesians 6:10-20 with other themes within the Epistle has not been settled. Moritz summarises the debate as being between the position that Ephesians 6:10-20 either to chapters 4–6, or that it relates to the entire Epistle.<sup>18</sup> Moritz demonstrates his support for a relationship to the

<sup>17</sup> ‘Whether it is worth while to expend extended ingenuity on the exact details of the analogy may be doubted.’ George Buttrick, *The Interpreters Bible* (vol. X; New York: Abingdon, 1953): 739.

<sup>18</sup> Moritz, *A Profound Mystery*, 181.

entire Epistle by charting the themes that occur (i.e. the powers, truth, peace, faith, devil, salvation, etc.) throughout the Epistle and their reiteration in chapter 6.<sup>19</sup> In this view, the ‘righteousness’ described in chapter 6 functions within the whole Epistle and is connected to the other occasions for the theme in chapters 4 and 5.

In Ephesians 4:24, the concept of ‘righteousness’ is placed in the injunction to: ‘Put on the new self, which in the *likeness* of God has been created in righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) and holiness of the truth.’ This passage support Moritz’s theory of relating Ephesians 6:10-20 to the rest of the Epistle because there is a repetition of the command to ‘put on’. Just as the armour of God is to be ‘put on’ (ἐνδύσασθε) in Ephesians 6:11, in chapter 4 the ‘new self’ is to be ‘put on’ (ἐνδύσασθαι). Likewise, in Ephesians 5:9, Paul’s description of the works of a Christian is: ‘For the fruit of the Light *consists* in all goodness and righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) and truth.’ The fruit of righteousness is a reflection of the Christian’s ‘walk’ (5:8), and in juxtaposition to the ‘unfruitful works’ (5:11) that used to characterise the Ephesian Christians before their conversion.

While Moritz supports the notion that the ‘breastplate of righteousness’ refers to an imputation of Christ’s righteousness, his work to establish the relationship of chapter 6 to the rest of the Epistle supports the position that it refers to a virtuous Christian ‘walk’ that reflects Christ.

## 5. The Isaianic Background

The direct source of the breastplate metaphor is undoubtedly Isaianic.<sup>20</sup> Paul’s phraseology both in Ephesians 6:14 (ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν θώρακα τῆς δικαιοσύνης) and the LXX of Isaiah 59:17 (ἐνεδύσατο δικαιοσύνην ὡς θώρακα) is strikingly similar. Furthermore, the concept of the Divine Warrior has an extensive background in Israel’s understanding of who YHWH is.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Moritz, *A Profound Mystery*, 182.

<sup>20</sup> Ellis notes fourteen OT references in Ephesians and seven of those refer to Isaiah, three occurring in the armour of God metaphor in ch. six. E. Earle Ellis, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957): 154.

<sup>21</sup> Neufeld provides an extensive footnote referencing sources on the Divine Warrior imagery. T. R. Yoder Neufeld, ‘Put on the Armour of God’: *The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians* (JSNTSup 140: Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997), 23.

The first use of the armour of God or the Divine Warrior imagery in Isaiah occurs in chapter 11. This is significant because Paul also references this in Ephesians 6:14a for the 'belt of truth'. In 11:3 Isaiah creates a strong negative comparison by stating what YHWH is not: 'And he will not judge by what His eyes see, Nor make a decision by what His ears hear.' The Divine Warrior, however, has virtues and actions that are contrasted to this: 'But with righteousness (בְּצֶדֶק) He will judge the poor' (11:4); and: 'Also righteousness (צֶדֶק) will be the belt about His loins, And faithfulness the belt around His waist' (11:5). The righteousness and justice of God in Isaiah 11 functions within the theme of 'righteous governance'; it describes the nature of the rule that YHWH will have over Israel and the Nations.<sup>22</sup>

The only other explicit reference to the armour of God or the Divine Warrior imagery in Isaiah occurs in chapter 59. The metaphor of the divine armour in Isaiah 59:17 is oriented around YHWH, who is posited as a Divine Warrior. Here, the attributes of the 'man' who is able to 'intercede' in 59:16 is set in contrast to the attributes of the Israelites. The covenant charges against Israel include: 'For your hands are defiled with blood' (Isa. 59:3); 'No one pleads honestly' (59:4); and 'Their feet run to evil' (Isa. 59:7). When YHWH's people transgress the Covenant, they become, in a sense, his enemies. Thus, Neufeld is correct to say that YHWH is fighting against Israel: 'Yahweh himself took up the task to see to it that abuse was avenged and victims vindicated.'<sup>23</sup> This is confirmed by Isaiah's own interpretation of the Divine Warrior's actions, 'According to their deeds, so will he repay' (Isa. 59:18). The 'man' who brings justice is one who, in 59:17, 'put on righteousness like a breastplate, And a helmet of salvation on His head; And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle.' The armour metaphor as a whole refers to YHWH's attributes as opposed to Israel's moral corruption. The armour of YHWH functions in a way that both stands in contrast to Israel's character and demonstrates the justice that will cause the people to fear the name of the Lord (Isa. 59:19).

This Isaianic background to Ephesians 6 raises the issue of rigidity of metaphor because of the way Paul references different passages so closely in 6:14a and 6:14b. The reference from Isaiah 11:5 is translated

<sup>22</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993): 107.

<sup>23</sup> Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God*, 27.



in the NASB as, ‘Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, And faithfulness the belt about His waist.’ That Paul would use Isaiah 11:5 for the belt of truth in Ephesians 6:14a, and Isaiah 59:17 for the breastplate of righteousness for Ephesians 6:14b is indeed perplexing in light of the fact that ‘righteousness’ (δικαιοσύνη in the LXX and צדק in the MT) as a ‘girdle’ is already connected to the ‘belt’.

Calvin is quoted as complaining that, ‘Nothing can be more idle than the extraordinary pains which some have taken to discover the reason why righteousness is made a *breastplate* instead of a *girdle*.’<sup>24</sup> However, this appearance of superfluity in Paul’s quotation choices is most likely a reflection of his recognition that the parts of the armour metaphor have a degree of flexibility to them. Indeed, it is likely that this itself is a reflection of the flexibility that Isaiah incorporated in the metaphor. This is evidenced by the fact that the breastplate of righteousness in Isaiah 59:17 uses צדקה which is similar to the girdle or belt of righteousness צדק in Isaiah 11:5.

This is significant for Paul’s metaphor and for a specific understanding of the breastplate of righteousness. Moritz argues that Isaiah 59 supports a forensic understanding of righteousness.<sup>25</sup> However, he mistakenly interprets Isaiah 59:20 as ‘presupposed repentance’ for all people and that God’s enemies are identified as some other people than Israel in 59:18.<sup>26</sup> In neither Isaiah 11 or 59 is the armour of God or the Divine Warrior acting in a way that imputes righteousness. Both passages present YHWH as a God whose characteristics are set in contrast to his people. This forces YHWH to act against them by bringing righteousness where there is none to be found.

## 6. The Integrity of the Metaphor

Those who hold that the breastplate consists of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness create a problem for the integrity of Paul’s ‘armour of God’ metaphor. While Paul is asserting that the ‘armour of God’ is a unity (πανοπλίαν τοῦ θεοῦ) in Ephesians 6:11 and 6:13, there is also an emphatic use of the individual parts. The specific

<sup>24</sup> Emphasis his. John Calvin as quoted by R. W. Dale in G. A. Buttrick, *The Interpreters Bible: vol. X*, 739.

<sup>25</sup> Moritz, *A Profound Mystery*, 203.

<sup>26</sup> Mortiz, *A Profound Mystery*, 203.

problem for understanding the relationship between the whole and the parts in terms of imputation for the breastplate is that of referentialism.

In order for the 'armour of God' metaphor to retain any meaning whatsoever, it must reference a single reality. A problem arises when the parts that constitute the armour function in *essentially* different ways. For example, it is generally recognized that imputed righteousness and righteousness as a virtue are two essentially different things. Paul cannot be exhorting the Christians to 'put on' the imputation of Christ's righteousness and at the same time exhorting them to have a virtuous 'shield of faith'. If it is possible to have more than one sense, an infinite number of meanings can be connected to it, thereby depriving it of any meaning at all. Thus, if the whole 'armour of God' is referencing both imputation and virtue, it loses all meaning as a metaphor. One could never be sure what is being understood by the 'armour of God' – for it could refer to any number of things, including imputation or virtue. Practically speaking, the Christian could never really be sure how to obey Paul's injunction.

At this point it is helpful to consider Gregory Dawes' analysis of metaphor.<sup>27</sup> According to Dawes, a metaphor is a combination of a non-literal 'focus' inside a contextual 'frame'. Dawes uses this understanding of focus and frame to demonstrate that a metaphor is a 'result of the interaction of words' within a context.<sup>28</sup> Stated differently, a metaphor is composed of two part which cannot be pulled apart. There is a single frame within this pericope which is connected to a single referent. An assertion for either imputation or virtue must maintain a consistency of view throughout the foci of the pericope (like a hub and spokes).<sup>29</sup> This is because the metaphor does not rest upon a single word; rather it rests upon an interplay of words.<sup>30</sup> When the parts of the armour are separated from the whole, the frame becomes attached to more than one referent and thus loses the ability to communicate both authorial intention and a single determinate meaning.

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<sup>27</sup> Dawes partially appropriates Max Black's metaphor theory regarding focus and frame. Gregory Dawes, *The Body in Question: Metaphor and Meaning in the Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-23* (Boston: Brill, 1998): 29.

<sup>28</sup> Dawes, *The Body in Question*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin bases his interpretation of the breastplate as internal virtue upon its continuity with other pieces that involve virtue. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 338.

<sup>30</sup> Dawes, *The Body in Question*, 29.

Because it is unlikely that the ‘shield of faith’ in verse 16 refers to imputation of faith, or that the ‘sword of the Spirit’ in verse 17 is the imputation of the Word of God, it is unlikely that the breastplate of righteousness is referring to imputation.<sup>31</sup> To mix external imputation with internal virtue within a metaphor that is already moving between the poles of unity and parts would serve to either confuse or destroy the metaphor itself. Paul is exhorting his audience to a single action. If one asserts that imputation of righteousness is adjacent to the virtue of faith within the metaphor, the whole is rendered nonsensical because Paul’s exhortation (frame) is attributed more than one sense.

Furthermore, if Paul is moving between imputation and internal virtues within the whole armour metaphor, we are faced with another problem. This position is exemplified by Barrett who states, ‘Personal righteousness would give little or no defense against the accusations of Satan or even our own conscience.’<sup>32</sup> If we grant that the shield of faith, for example, does not consist of imputed faith, then it would be just as worthless as personal righteousness in our attempt to ‘stand’. The view that the breastplate is imputed righteousness appears to provide assurance that ‘Nothing can penetrate the sure defense of justification’; however, for those pieces of armour that consist of human action and virtue, it leaves the Christian with little defence.<sup>33</sup> This view is obviously problematic because in the process of upholding the strength of the breastplate by imputation, the rest of the pieces, which rely upon human response and virtue, are made to be very weak. This certainly is far from Paul’s intent as he stresses the need for strong armour in light of the spiritual battles that the Christian faces (Eph. 6:12).

Maintaining a view of hierarchy within the parts is equally problematical if applied to the imputed righteousness position. It would be difficult from a theological point of view to maintain the Lutheran maxim that ‘justification is the article by which the church stands or falls’ if Paul only saw it as second to last in priority. Even if it were granted that justification as a doctrine of ecclesiological unity is not the issue in this passage, justification would still play a relatively small

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<sup>31</sup> This is also congruous with how Paul uses the armour as a whole and the breastplate as a piece in 1 Thess. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Barrett, *Complete in Him* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald, 2000): 223.

<sup>33</sup> Barrett, *Complete in Him*, 223.

role in spiritual battles when compared to the sword of the spirit or the helmet of salvation. Either way, if one maintains the external position of the breastplate as well as a hierarchical view of the armour, justification would not seem to play a strong role in spiritual battles. It is more likely that the passage reflects a loose hierarchy that corresponds primarily to reality and not to a hierarchy of spiritual values. An even better position than the hierarchy position would posit each part as *spokes* which are all attached to the *whole*.

## 7. Context as Hermeneutical Key

How exactly Paul wanted the breastplate of righteousness to be understood should be determined in light of how the entire armour functions. In the case of this pericope of Ephesians 6:10-20, the context provides the hermeneutical key that defines the armour of God and correspondingly, the nature of the breastplate of righteousness. Because it is the metaphor which is debated, it is all the more critical to consider those passages that are explanatory.

The armour passage is demarcated as beginning in Ephesians 6:10 with the transition τοῦ λοιποῦ (finally). Immediately, this pericope presents exegetical difficulties.<sup>34</sup> The exhortation to ‘be strong (ἐνδυναμοῦσθε) in the Lord’ from verse 10 can be taken either as a passive or as a middle.<sup>35</sup> P. T. O’Brien rightly asserts that this is a passive, based upon the fact that believers are to be strengthened in the power that comes from God.<sup>36</sup> This exhortation is a present tense imperative, and as opposed to a Christian who is in the *state* of justification, this is an imperfective aspect. Syntactically, O’Brien demonstrates that verse 11 provides the explanation of how ‘Be strong in the Lord’ is to be carried out: the Christian is to ‘put on (ἐνδύσασθε) the full armour of God’.

The hermeneutical key to the parts of the armour rests upon the parallel concepts of ‘be strong in the Lord’ and ‘put on the full armour of God’ as Paul equates them both as enabling the Christian ‘to stand’

<sup>34</sup> Porter cites Eph. 6:10-17 as being an example of ‘special significance’ with ‘exegetical difficulties’. Stanley Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1999): 227.

<sup>35</sup> P. T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999): 460.

<sup>36</sup> O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 462.

in verses 11 and 13. Arnold, Neufeld and O'Brien all note that the conceptual parallelism is supported by Paul's use of two synonymous verbs for 'put on'; using ἐνδυναμοῦσθε in verse 10 and ἐνδύσασθε in verse 11.<sup>37</sup> Understanding this parallel helps to locate Paul's whole metaphor within his ethical exhortations. Paul is exhorting the Ephesians to 'stand'. This is a call to action and to pursue Christian virtues that reflect Christ; forensic declarations are not in view.

## 8. Conclusion

As we have seen, any theological concerns regarding the 'breastplate of righteousness' should be alleviated by the recognition that the righteousness that Paul desires in Ephesians 6:14 is not a product of the Christian's own strength and might – on the contrary, an ethical view of the breastplate is expressly God-centred. The exhortation to 'put on' righteousness is to be grounded in the strength of the Lord. In this view, the Christian is involved in spiritual battles in a real, substantial way that is akin to wrestling (v. 12) and standing (v. 14). Justification by imputed righteousness does indeed have a role in spiritual warfare, but such concerns should not drive exegesis for this particular verse.

Theologically, Paul's exhortation is similar to the exhortation of James 4:7b: 'Resist the devil and he will flee from you.'<sup>38</sup> In sum, the breastplate of righteousness must be interpreted in light of textual and contextual evidences. A consideration of Paul's appropriation of weaponry imagery from Isaiah, and the contextual clues from both the whole Epistle and the pericope of Ephesians 6:10-20, affirm the view that the 'breastplate of righteousness' is indeed an ethical breastplate of holiness and virtue that is rooted in the strength of the Lord.

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<sup>37</sup> O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 462 n. 88.

<sup>38</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 841.