

EVIL, SUFFERING, AND THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD ACCORDING TO ROMANS 1–3

AN EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDY¹

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Through the centuries, many who have dealt with the issue of evil and suffering have at some point interacted with the Epistle to the Romans (Augustine, Leibnitz, Moltmann, Ricœur, etc.). But such dialogue is often limited to parts of the Epistle after Romans 4. Occasionally one will find an attempted dialogue with Romans 4 and the role of Abraham (e.g. Moltmann). Such use of the Epistle is not without warrant in the text. Indeed, after Paul has just finished advocating the justification of all by faith, he immediately evokes the afflictions in which ‘we boast’ (Rom. 5:3). Yet questions should be raised: Why this sudden and seemingly unprepared mention of the problem of evil and suffering? Is this really the first occurrence of the problem of the suffering of the believers in the Epistle? Is there a link between evil and suffering in Romans and the issue of the righteousness of God? Is the Epistle meant to encourage the Roman Christians in adverse circumstances? If so, how can the whole Epistle be used today in talking about evil and suffering? Rather than starting from Romans 5 to answer these questions, this work has tried to see whether Paul paved the way for his treatment of suffering in the early chapters of his letter.

This dissertation touches upon several disciplines: exegesis, biblical theology, philosophy, and the history of reading and writing and the use of memory in antiquity. This interdisciplinary approach is an attempt to go beyond the compartmentalisation of the fields of

¹ Erwin Ochsenmeier, ‘Mal, souffrance et justice de Dieu selon Romains 1–3: Étude exégétique et théologique’. A thesis written in French under the supervision of Henri Blocher and defended in March 2007 at the Faculté Libre de Théologie Évangélique de Vaux-sur-Seine (France) for the degree of ‘Docteur en Théologie’. A revised version was published in French as *Mal, souffrance et justice de Dieu selon Romains 1–3: Étude exégétique et théologique* (ZNWBeih 155; Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2007). This extract sums up the data of the published version.

knowledge resulting from today's (over?)specialisation, with all the risks involved in such an attempt. Given time and space constraints, and even though I am convinced that Romans 1–4 should be considered as one argument, the thesis concentrates on Romans 1:1–3:26.

The first chapter is a brief summary of Pauline studies in the twentieth century, focusing particularly on Romans and the issue of evil, suffering and the righteousness of God. Such a survey is arranged in two stages: from Schweitzer to E. P. Sanders, and from Sanders to today (theodicy in Romans, political theology, Romans and Empire, etc.). It concludes that little has actually been done in reading the first chapters of Romans with the issue of evil and suffering in mind.

The second and longest chapter is a commentary on Rom. 1:1–3:26 which concentrates on the passages and verses most relevant to the theme of evil and suffering. It shows that this theme is much more present than often thought. One feature of this commentary is the study of the LXX contexts of all the OT passages explicitly quoted in Romans 1–3. Another feature is the defence of several alternative interpretations. For example, it is argued that Romans 1:11-12 offers a clue to the purpose and function of the Epistle,² or that Romans 1:20 probably refers mostly to God's acts in history rather than to natural revelation, etc.

The third chapter is a treatment of the use of the OT in Romans 1–3. It justifies the use of the contexts of the OT passages quoted by Paul, and of the LXX rather than the MT. It focuses on intertextual theories and the data available from the history of reading and writing and the use of memory in the production and reception of written works in antiquity. Taking the works of Richard Hays and Christopher Stanley as springboards, it criticises the neglect of empirical data in much of contemporary studies in intertextuality and the ample use of assumptions as to what Paul and his readers could or could not have read, written, remembered, done, etc. It also questions the use of and dependency on structural and poststructural studies in intertextual theories, especially as it relates to the referential nature of literature (does literature refer to the real world?). It then takes Romans 3:10-18 as an example of the neglect of OT contexts in Roman commentaries,

² See my 'Romans 1,11–12: A Clue to the Purpose of Romans?', *ETL* 83/4 (2007) 395-406.

the hypotheses behind such neglect, their methodological shortcomings and their disregard for empirical data. The chapter subsequently studies the role of David and suggests that he functions as a key figure in Romans and as an example for the believer. Finally, a brief summary is given of the data on evil, suffering and the righteousness of God available from the contexts of the passages quoted by Paul. This summary shows the lexical and thematic continuity between the contexts of these passages.

The fourth chapter builds on the material from the previous chapters. The first part focuses on Paul's demonstration that God is a righteous God from the use of Paul's vocabulary in Romans 1–3 but also from the flow of the argument. In line with the passage of the OT used, it shows that even in Romans 1–3 a righteous God is a God who punishes the evildoer who does not practise what is known by revelation and saves those who believe in him. The second part summarises the data from Romans 1–3 related to the fate of the righteous and the unrighteous, and shows the importance of the vocabulary of evil and suffering in those chapters as well as its connection with the contexts of the OT passages used in Romans 1–3.

The fifth chapter is a brief study of other passages in Romans (4; 5:1-11; 8:17-39; 12:9-13:7; and 15:1-13) to test whether what has been found in Romans 1–3 is also present in the rest of the Epistle. It demonstrates that there is ample evidence to affirm a thematic continuity between Romans 1–3 and the rest of the Epistle and that the book of Habakkuk is a thematic introduction to the letter. It also suggests that one of Paul's purposes is to demonstrate that those who can say that God is their God and who can claim the Christian hope are those who, like Habakkuk, David, and Abraham, believe by faith that God is powerful enough to give life even when death seems unavoidable (cf. Rom. 1:3-4) and to suggest avenues of personal and communal application.

The sixth chapter summarises the finding of the dissertation and suggests avenues for more work. This is done in interaction with some theological and philosophical literature, with a focus on Jürgen Moltmann. This chapter shows that one can still use the Epistle of Romans to talk about God today. The challenge then is to read Romans as the good news to the believers of the twenty-first century and to show that God fulfills his promises and can thus still be called a God of hope.