

THE INTERPRETATION OF ΠΡΟΣ IN ROMANS 3:26

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In an article published in 1980, Richard Hays argued that Romans 3 should be seen as a unity. The whole chapter is an assertion of God's integrity—that God is δίκαιος. Verses 21–26 'close the circle by answering the objections raised in verses 1–7'.¹

Hays's thesis has been largely rejected. S. K. Stowers stated in 1984 that Hays was 'almost alone' in stressing the internal coherence of the argument in Romans 3,² and subsequent scholarship has largely concentrated on the analysis of specific sections of the chapter rather than on the chapter as a whole. My aim in this article is to support Hays's thesis by examining verse 26, and in particular Paul's use of the preposition πρὸς in that verse.

Verse 26 ends with the statement that God is righteous when he declares believers in Jesus to be righteous. The meaning of God's righteousness in this verse can be illustrated from Psalm 143, which Paul has cited earlier in his argument in verse 20. This is one of many psalms (and also of many passages in Isaiah 40–66) in which God's righteousness denotes his faithfulness to his covenant people. The psalmist pleads with God: 'listen to me in your righteousness' (ἐπάκουσόν μου ... ἐν τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ σου, Ps. 142:1 LXX). The question at issue throughout chapter 3 is whether, by treating Jews and Gentiles equally, God has reneged on his covenant obligation to the people of Israel.

The climax of Paul's argument comes in chapters 9–11, where he finally answers the question: 'has God rejected his people?' (11:1). But the same question lies behind the introduction to the main body of the letter in 1:16–17: 'what is revealed in the gospel is that God is

¹ R. B. Hays, 'Psalm 143 and the Logic of Romans 3', *JBL* 99/1 (1980): 107–115 (113).

² S. K. Stowers, 'Paul's Dialogue with a Fellow Jew in Romans 3:1–9', *CBQ* 46 (1984): 707–22 (721 n.56).

righteous (true to his covenant promises) in offering salvation on the basis of faith to the Jews first and also to the Gentiles’.

The final clause in 3:26 confirms this statement, and may be paraphrased: ‘so God is righteous (faithful to his covenant promises to Israel) when he counts as righteous those who put their faith in Jesus.’

How does Paul’s argument in verses 24–26 lead to this conclusion? The key to answering this question can be found in the interpretation of the phrase πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ in verse 26. These words are often treated as a virtual repetition of the phrase εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ in the previous verse. But Sanday and Headlam in their ICC commentary understand them not as a repetition but as a logical continuation of the previous verse: the ‘passing over’ (πάρεσις) of sins in times past was ‘with a view to the display of his righteousness at the present moment’³. This translation of πρὸς as ‘with a view to’ is both grammatically sound and integral to the argument.

There are a number of passages in the New Testament where a noun governed by πρὸς denotes a reference point with a view to which, or in the light of which, the action of the main verb is performed. In Mark 10:5 Moses allowed divorce in the light of the hardness of heart of people: πρὸς τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν ἔγραψεν ὑμῖν τὴν ἐντολὴν ταύτην. In Luke 12:47 a manager is punished because he knows his master’s wishes but does not act in the light of those wishes: μὴ ἐτοιμάσας ἢ ποιήσας πρὸς τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 when we appear before the judgement seat of Christ we shall be judged in the light of what we have done in our corporeal existence; ἵνα κομίσῃται ἕκαστος τὰ διὰ τοῦ σώματος πρὸς ᾧ ἔπραξεν. In Galatians 2:14 Peter and Barnabas were at first willing to eat with Gentiles at Antioch; but after the arrival of some strict Jews from Jerusalem they stopped doing so. In Paul’s view they were not behaving correctly in the light of the truth of the gospel: οὐκ ὀρθοποδοῦσιν πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου. Ephesians 3:4 refers to a previous letter of Paul’s in the light of which, if they read it, they can realise how much he knows about the mystery of Christ: πρὸς ὃ δύνασθε ἀναγινώσκοντες νοῆσαι τὴν σύνεσίν μου ἐν τῷ μυστηρίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

In all these examples the factor in the light of which an action is performed is a chronologically pre-existing factor. In Romans 8:18

³ W. Sanday & A. C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (5th edn; ICC; Edinburgh, Clark, 1902): 90.

πρός introduces a factor still in the future in the light of which (with a view to which) present-day experience is to be evaluated: οὐκ ἄξια τὰ παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ πρὸς τὴν μέλλουσαν δόξαν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι εἰς ἡμᾶς. The sufferings of the present day are seen to be worth nothing in the light of the glory that will be revealed.

In Romans 3:26 πρὸς has a similar force. The demonstration of God's righteousness in the present time (in the death and resurrection of Jesus) was God's plan from the beginning, and it was in anticipation of it (in the light of it, with a view to it) that he 'passed over' the sins of the past.⁴ Paul's use of the terms ἀπολύτρωσις and ἱλαστήριον (however these words are interpreted) suggests that, when he refers to 'the sins of the past' (τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων) it is mainly the Old Testament sacrificial system that he has in mind.⁵ The death and resurrection of Jesus, he declares, reveal the rationale behind that system. Therefore, if, on the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus, believing Gentiles are now counted as righteous in God's sight, this is not a denial of the covenant promises to Israel but their fulfilment.

There are a number of reasons for following Sanday and Headlam's interpretation.

(a) According to the traditional understanding the repetition of the word ἐνδειξίς seems pointless and awkward. The King James Version tries to relieve this awkwardness by adding the words 'I say' to the second occurrence. But there is nothing corresponding to 'I say' in the Greek. Nor is there any obvious reason for the change from εἰς ἐνδειξίν to πρὸς τὴν ἐνδειξίν. However, if we follow Sanday and Headlam, there is no awkward repetition but a logical progression of thought.

⁴ The translation of πάρεσις as 'passing over' rather than 'forgiving' has been disputed. In James Dunn's opinion (*Romans 1-8* [WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1988]: 174) the puzzle of why Paul uses πάρεσις rather than ἄφεσις 'has not yet been adequately solved'. However, R. Jewett makes the telling point that, in four instances outside the NT where the verbal equivalent of πάρεσις is found in connection with sins, transgressions are left unpunished and passed over but not pardoned (R. Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007]: 289-90).

⁵ R. Jewett, following Wolfgang Kraus, sees in this phrase 'a reference to God's having overlooked sins not covered by the temple cult...which would have included all transgressions outside Israel's ethnic boundaries' (*Romans*, 290, following W. Kraus, *Der Tod Jesu als Heiligtumsweihe. Eine Untersuchung zum Umfeld der Sühnevorstellung in Römer 3.25-26a* [WMANT 66; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991]). But there is no indication in the text that the 'previous sins' were specifically Gentile. The fact that the cultic words ἱλαστήριον and αἵμα precede the reference to 'previous sins' makes it probable that it is the OT sacrificial system that is mainly (or entirely) in Paul's mind.

(b) The emphasis in verse 26 is on the present time (ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ) in contrast with the ‘sins of the past’ of verse 25. Thus verses 25b and 26 are in contrast with each other, not repeating each other.

(c) On this interpretation the whole of verses 25–26 is one continuous argument, with each prepositional phrase being dependent on what precedes it. Πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν is dependent on διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν, which is dependent on εἰς ἔνδειξιν, which in turn is dependent on the main verb προέθετο. Such an accumulation of dependent clauses in one long sentence is typical of Paul’s style of dictation (Rom. 1:1–7; 2 Cor. 1:3–4; 2 Cor. 1:9–11; 2 Cor. 9:10–14; Gal. 2:3–5; Phil. 1:3–7).

I conclude with a free paraphrase of verses 19–26.

‘The texts I have quoted apply to those who follow the law, and show that the whole world, both Jew and Gentile, is guilty in the sight of God. The law does not put people right with God, it enables people to recognise their sinfulness. But now God has revealed his saving righteousness independently of the law (though the law and the prophets bear witness to it). God’s saving righteousness operates through faith in Jesus Christ, and applies to everyone who has faith. All human beings (Jew and Gentile alike) have sinned and fall short of God’s glory, but God gives them the status of righteous people as a free gift through the redemptive action of Jesus Christ. God’s plan was that Jesus, by shedding his blood on the cross, should be the means of atonement (like the mercy seat in the temple)—an atonement to be received by faith. In this way he demonstrated his righteousness (that is to say, his faithfulness to his covenant promises) because when he did not punish as they deserved the sins committed under the old covenant he already had in mind the demonstration of his saving faithfulness that would take place in our time on the cross. So when he declares those who believe in Jesus to be righteous he himself is righteous—that is to say, he is true to his covenant promises.’

On this interpretation the statement in verse 26 that ‘God is righteous’ is a defence of God’s policy of accepting Gentiles as well as Jews on the basis of faith in Jesus. It is therefore illegitimate to use this verse in support of a particular theory of the atonement, which sees the death of Christ as God’s way of resolving a conflict between his justice and his mercy. For example, C. E. B. Cranfield paraphrases verse 26b: ‘that God might be righteous even in justifying’, and comments: ‘For God to have forgiven men’s sins lightly—a cheap forgiveness which would have implied that moral evil does not matter very much—would have

been altogether unrighteous'.⁶ Such a view understands God's righteousness as the abstract quality of justice. But this makes verse 26 irrelevant to its context. Throughout Romans 3, and in Romans as a whole, God's righteousness denotes, not justice in the abstract, but God's faithfulness to his covenant promises.

⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975): I: 213–14.