

THE HELLENISTIC AND JUDAIC BACKGROUND TO THE NEW TESTAMENT



29th International Biblical Conference Szeged
27–29 August, 2018

Edited by Benyik György

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Ottó PECSUK

PAUL'S TERMINOLOGY OF *DIKAIOUN*. A QUESTION OF TRANSLATION

THE PROBLEM

The doctrine of justification by faith has been playing an enormous role in Western Christian Theology. A part of the reason is what Alister McGrath¹ called a double dilemma: 1. A logical one: The Bible says that God is righteous/just but human beings are sinful. However, the Bible also teaches that God justifies human beings. How can God justify a sinner and still remain righteous/just? 2. The second dilemma is one of translation:² How can you keep the semantic integrity of the Biblical thought in a threefold translation process? It is a threefold process in the following way: a) The first translation is Hebrew terminology translated into Greek (LXX) b) The second translation process is not interlingual but intralingual³: LXX terminology translated into the Greek terminology of Paul who, by the way, was constantly aware of the Hebrew background of these Greek words he was using, and c) Pauline terminology translated (mostly via the Vulgate), into the theological language, vocabulary and thinking (also deeply influenced by Latin legal terminology) of the Latin West where the great debates on the true meaning of justification have taken place. Out of these two main dilemmas only the second one is of interest in the present paper, the translation dilemma. We also have to skip the problems related to the third translation process (Pauline terminology translated into Latin). Instead, we will concentrate on the challenges of Pauline justification terminology in the modern vernacular Bible translations. How can we tackle the difficulty of communicating the full Biblical meaning to readers who are theologically not trained and may have an entirely different concept of what “justify” means? We will approach our subject with the conviction that the verb *dikaoun* and its cognates (*dikaïos*, *dikaïosynē*, *dikaïōma*, *dikaïōsis*) are all part of the same semantic field and even though we can distinguish between their special shades of meaning, basically they form one unified set of subject to be researched. For the sake of simplicity, and

¹ McGrath, Alister, *Iustitia Dei*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 6.

² Op. cit., 7–21.

³ For the difference between the two cf. Jacobson, Roman, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” in Achilles Fang et al., *On Translation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959. 232–239.

respecting the fact that the whole situation of “justification” originates from an act of God, we often refer to the whole word group by its verbal element only, like “*dikaion* and its cognates”.

THOUGHT BACKGROUND IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

John A. Ziesler in his monograph on the Pauline Justification summarizes the main characteristics of the Hebrew *tsedakah*-concept:

When we turn to man's righteousness, it is clearly a possibility only within the covenant. Those outside the covenant, and therefore not in relation to Yahweh, cannot be righteous. Being within the covenant involves doing God's will, whether or not this is seen specifically in terms of law-obedience, and it is loyalty to the covenant and therefore righteousness. So also right judging, right governing, right worshipping, and gracious activity, are all covenantal and righteous, despite their diversity. The forensic instances are not a problem, especially if we recall inseparability of ethical and forensic, for while ts-d-q usually refers to acting loyally, those who so act are in a state of loyalty, and will be adjudged thus at the bar of man or God. A verdict about guilt or innocence was really a verdict about loyalty or disloyalty, for both human and divine justice. That is, within a relationship between men, or between God and men, he is righteous who renders what is due from him, this understood more in terms of loyalty than of legality.⁴

C. H. Dodd⁵ approaches the meaning of Hebrew *tsedakah* from a different angle. He says that the meaning is almost never “to be righteous” but rather “to be in the right”. The passive verbal form is synonymous with the adjective. He brings a number of examples, among them the case of Tamar and Judah (Gen 38:26), where Tamar is in the right (or at least a better) place within the social structure of rights and obligations, while Judah is not. The hiphil form (*hitsdik*) and the Piel form (*tsiddek*) are causative but never with the meaning “to make righteous” but “to put someone on the right place” (Ezekiel 16:51–52; 1Samuel 24:18). Dodd believes that the situational righteousness created the notion of righteous status, the moral or ethical righteousness. In the earlier Biblical books, we encounter with the meaning “behavior according to the creational purpose” or “victory” (Judges 5:1–31; 1Samuel 12:7; Micah 6:5), when God establishes *tsedakah* by punishing and conquering Israel's enemies. As we will see, these situations open up for the notions of “deliverance” (*sôtēria*) and “life regained” (*zōē, zēsetai*) which will play important roles in the Pauline concept of justification, as well. We also have to mention a more recent meaning of *tsedakah*: mercy, acts of mercy and almsgiving (Psalm 112:9; Daniel 4:27). In the LXX these meanings could not be trans-

⁴ Ziesler, John A., *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, 42.

⁵ Dodd, C. H., *The Bible and the Greeks*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1954. 42–46.

lated with the *dikaion* word family and consequently *eleēmosynē* was used, which has resulted in the misunderstanding that God's justice and mercy are two distinct concepts.⁶ This later development in the semantic field of *tsedakah* has led to the fact that already in LXX and also in the Latin translations using *iustitia/iustificare* the previously unified and harmonious character of God's "righteousness" could not be expressed with one word and therefore in the mind of readers of both the Greek and Latin Bible God's righteousness and mercy could not be easily reconciled. By way of summary we can say that "righteousness" had become an important status concept that served as an identity marker for the Jews, differentiating them from other peoples.

SECULAR GREEK TERMINOLOGY

The Greek *dikaion* similarly to the Hebrew word *tsaddik* is causative, therefore we would expect a meaning like "to make right, to make righteous", but this is not the case. It usually means "to set right" (cf. the Liddell-Scott reference⁷ to a fragment of Pindar /151.4/). C. H. Dodd classifies the Greek usage into two main categories: 1. *Dikaion* with an impersonal object means "to think, deem right", with an infinitive it means "to decide to do something" (cf. Liddell-Scott's reference to Thucydides 2.41)⁸ 2. *Dikaion* with a personal object means "to treat someone justly" as opposed to *adikein*. From a quotation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (9.11.1136a),⁹ Dodd draws the conclusion that a cognate word of *dikaion* (*dikaio-pragein*) may have carried the meaning "to do justice to someone". This may have functioned in two ways: to punish the guilty and to acquit the innocent one accused falsely. Even though Dodd did not find any classical example in the Greek dictionaries, he infers that *dikaion auton* may have meant something like "to punish someone who acted wrongly" or "to acquit someone who acted rightly". Therefore, both Dodd and Ziesler¹⁰ agree on the conclusion that

while in the LXX and the NT the influence of Hebrew has been strong, this word-group would have quite successfully communicated to an ordinary non-Jewish Christian. *The real difference lies less in the use of the words themselves than in accompanying ideas of God and of man's relation to him.* Allowing for this, these words are proper and comprehensible. What is abundantly clear is that neither noun nor adjective is used in a purely forensic way, i.e. to refer to a status alone. (...) If Paul did use the words primarily for one's standing before God, we must seriously question whether any of his readers, and especially his Gentile readers, would understand him at all.

⁶ Op. cit., 56.

⁷ *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, MDCCCLXIX, 383a. At this point Pindar is talking about the right and fitting judgement of the violent cyclops.

⁸ *Dikaiantes mē aphairethēnai autēn* – "they could not even think that the city could be taken away from them"

⁹ Cf. Dodd, 49–50.

¹⁰ Ziesler, 51. Emphasis mine.

THE LXX USAGE

It is highly probable that in using *dikaoun* the LXX translators carried forward the meaning “to do justice to someone” (Psalm 81:3 /82:3/ “*tapeinon kai penēta dikaiōsate*” and 2Kings 15:4 “*dikaiōsō auton*”. *Dikaioun* can mean “to litigate, to go to court with someone” but only when the Hebrew verb *rib* (רִיב) is translated, *tsadak* could never carry that meaning. According to Exodus 23:7 (and Prov 17:15) we read that God forbids absolving the guilty (*ou dikaiōseis*), because it is an essential part of his character that he hates those who declare the guilty innocent (*dikaion krinei ton adikon* is a synonym for *dikaioi to adikon*), and the innocent guilty. Dodd¹¹ suggests that the LXX combines or rather confuses the two above mentioned categories of secular Greek *dikaioun* usage, the one with an impersonal and the other with the personal object. Consequently, the non-Jewish or non-Christian Greek readers of LXX may have understood LXX justification terminology but they certainly have lost sight of an important semantic element of the Hebrew *tsedek/tsadak* concept what John Skinner¹² called the “positive energy of God who intervened for the sake of the oppressed and wronged in the legal debates”. As a result, for the non-initiated, the LXX terminology reduced the rich justice-terminology of the Hebrew Scriptures to a much narrower Greek legal notion of *dikaoun*. Surprisingly, when the LXX translators translated the situation of justification, they preferred *dikaiośynē* to other nouns like *dikaïōma* or *dikaïōsis* which more naturally expressed forensic overtones. Dodd also brings a non-Pauline example: Matthew 5:6 (*makarioi hoi peinōntes kai dipsōntes tēn dikaiosynēn*) which, for the reader who is not familiar with the context, may appear like the blessed are desperately seeking to be righteous, but in fact, they are longing for a fair judgment and consequently for their vindication.

It is also worth to mention the witness of the Hellenistic Jewish extrabiblical literature, but for two reasons we cannot deal with it in this short article: 1. lack of consensus regarding the dating of most of these writings (in some cases we cannot rule out a post-Pauline composition or editing) and 2. just like the LXX, most of these writings are translations, more often than not without a known *Grundchrift* and we may not be sure if they also translated the *tsadak* word group with *dikaoun* and its cognates.¹³

¹¹ Dodd, 53.

¹² Cf. “Righteousness in the OT” in James Hastings (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 4. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911. 274.

¹³ Ziesler cannot give a meaningful summary at the end of his investigation on the Greek intertestamental writings and he concludes his chapter on Philo and Josephus this way: “Both ethical and forensic meanings are found, but the latter never in the sense ‘acquitted’ or ‘acquittal’. Only a minority are in explicit relation to God.” Ziesler, 111.

PAUL'S TERMINOLOGY OF *DIKAIOUN*

To understand Paul's use of *dikaion* and its cognates¹⁴ we need to keep in mind both the Hebrew background of *tsadak/tsedakah* and the translational peculiarities of LXX. Paul wrote in Greek and mostly quoted the LXX,¹⁵ but he was also aware of the Hebrew background of his terminology,¹⁶ therefore he was not afraid to use expressions that may have easily sounded contradictory to a non-Christian reader, like "God who justifies the impious" (*dikaionta ton asebē*, Romans 4:5). For a secular Greek speaker, this sounds like the definition of a corrupt judge. For Paul *dikaiosynē theu* means that God – on account of their faith – regards precious and valuable those who are still in their sins (*dikaion ton asebē*).¹⁷ *Dikaion* is not making someone righteous, which is rather expressed by *dikaion kathistanai* (Romans 5:19) and refers to a future event while justification is a present "transaction" between God and the believer.

To get a clearer picture about the way Paul understands *dikaion* and he borrows the concept from the Old Testament, I am going to compare four original Old Testament passages with their quoted form and their immediate contexts in Romans. I will use Romans¹⁸ for the comparison because even though he forged out his concept of justification in Galatians, in Romans he wrote to a personally unknown audience, so he had to make sure that they would understand him, regardless of any previous teaching or clarification.

¹⁴ Hill, D., *Some Important Soteriological Terms in the New Testament: A Study in Biblical Semantics*. Ph.D. thesis. St. Andrews: University of St. Andrews, 1964. 142–308; Prothro, J. B., "The Strange Case of δικάζω in the Septuagint and Paul: The Oddity and Origins of Paul's Talk of »Justification«" in *ZNW* 107:1 (2016), 46–69.

¹⁵ For this question cf. Dodd, C. H., *According to the Scriptures*. London: Nisbet and Co., 1953; Ellis, E. E., *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*. Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1957; Bratcher, R. G., *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament*. UBS Technical Helps Series. New York: United Bible Societies, 1984.

¹⁶ Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*, 57.

¹⁷ In this instance *asebēs* means more likely *by nature* "sinful Gentiles" (cf. Galatians 2:15) than a person who commits concrete sins.

¹⁸ For Justification in Romans cf. Tasker, R. V. G., "Justification by Faith in Romans" in *Evangelical Quarterly* 24 (1952), 37–46.

Paul ignores the Hebrew text ("the believer will not run away") and limits himself to the LXX reading. He introduces the quotation with a parallelism between *diakiosynē* and *sōtēria* and both are illustrated with the prophetic saying about the chosen cornerstone (*lithos akrogōniaios*; in the parallel Romans 9:33 *lithos proskommatos* and *petra skandalou*), who is Jesus Christ. Whosoever believes is not put to shame. For Paul being declared righteous means honour, salvation and protection from shame. There is a forensic context, but the relational background is even more important: God protects the believer and takes away his/her shame.

PSALM 143:2B (142:2B) – ROMANS 3:20

Hebrew text	LXX	Quotation and its context
לֹא־יִצְדָּק לְפָנַי כָּל־תִּי	οὐ δικαιοθήσεται ἐνώπιόν σου πᾶς ζών.	διότι ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιο- θήσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, διὰ γὰρ νόμου ἐπίγνωσις ἁμαρτίας

The context in the Psalm is the persecution of David by Absalom. Even though he knows he is just as sinful as anyone else, David prays for deliverance. His sinful status (again: *asebeia*) is elevated by Paul to a universal level illustrating the impossibility of justification by Law. Law was not given to save life but to detect and classify sins and transgressions (cf. Romans 7:7–11). David calls on God's justice (1b: *en té dikaiosynē sou*) and asks for his justification (2a: *mē eiselhēs eis krisin meta tou doulou sou*) which is nothing else but salvation and restoration of his status before other people. There are some forensic overtones here in the concept of *dikaiosynē/dikaiōthēsetai* but the essence of the passage is the restoration of human-human and God-human relationship, which – in Paul's understanding – does not depend on the obedience to the Law (*ex ergōn nomou*), only on the faith in Jesus Christ.

HABAKKUK 2:4 – ROMANS 1:17

Hebrew text	LXX	Quotation and its context
וְצַדִּיק בְּאַמוּנָתוֹ יָתִיד	ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως μου ζήσεται.	16 Οὐ γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἕλληνι. 17 δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, καθὼς γέγραπται, Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται.

There is no need to analyse here the well-researched difference between the Masoretic and the LXX reading.²² It is suffice to say that in spite of his own practice, Paul stays closer to the Hebrew meaning of Habakkuk 2:4. Just like in Galatians 3:11 he omits *mou* (i.e. God's faithfulness) and understands the expression as the faith of the *dikaïos* person, rather than the faithfulness of God. However, the main conceptual elements of this passage are surprisingly similar to those of the previous quotation: 1. Again, justification is taking away one's shame (*ou gar epaischynomai*, cf. *ou kataischynthēsetai*) 2. Again, justification is connected to the salvation of the believer (*eis sōtērian* and *zēsētai*). 3. The previous two basically constitute the definition of what *dikaïosynē* means. Justification therefore is God's acting with the believer where the real stake is his /her relationship with the neighbour (shame/honour) and the present and future life (salvation). When using the concept of justification, Paul is also faithful to the context of the prophet Habakkuk, who complains that God allowed the wicked to triumph and the just to be put to shame. According to Paul, only justification by faith guarantees a status where neither death nor shame can threaten the believer.²³ Here we have another example of Pauline justification as a covenantal-relational act and less a forensic or ethical scenario.

HOW DO MODERN BIBLE TRANSLATIONS TACKLE WITH THE ISSUE?²⁴

In my view, the examples shown above have proved that even though justification terminology can have a forensic and ethical background, Paul often used it to express a relational and covenantal situation. If we look at the English translations in the second part of the twentieth Century, we can see two ways: 1. Traditional English Bible translations from the beginnings (the Lollards and Tyndale) used two word-families to translate *dikaïoun* and its cognates: Just-Justify-Justification on the one hand and Right-Righteous-Righteousness on the other. The first group expressed more the forensic, the second more the ethical aspect of Pauline justification. Protestant and Catholic translations have utilised this terminology without much difference. New English Bible in the early 70ies was a refreshing example with alternative attempts like: "God's way of righting wrong" (Romans 1:17). However, its revision in 1989 (Revised English Bible) almost completely reversed these alternative solutions to traditional renderings like "the Righteousness of God".

²² Koch, D-A., "Der Text von Hab 2⁴ b in der Septuaginta und im Neuen Testament" in *ZNW* 76 (1985), 68–85; Jewett, R., *Romans. A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. 145–147.

²³ Bruce, F. F., *Romans*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1985. 75–76.

²⁴ Cf. Moore, R. K., "The Doctrine of Justification in the English Bible at the Close of the Twentieth Century" in *The Bible Translator* 45:1 (1994), 101–116.

The alternative way of translating justification texts in the Pauline epistles was first introduced in the late 60ies and 70ies by Bible Society translations like the Today's English Version (TEV), the Gute Nachricht translation in German and other translations of the same family in a number of languages around the world. This new translational tradition tried to stick to just one terminology instead of the two (right- instead of just-) and also dare to use paraphrase in key texts to express more clearly the relational and covenantal aspect of Pauline justification terminology we have just studied. TEV e.g. created expressions like "the gospel reveals how God puts people right with himself" instead of "the righteousness of God" (Romans 1:17) or "no one is put right in God's sight" instead of "no one is justified in God's sight" (Romans 3:20). After we have witnessed even more recent English translations being published at the end of 20th and in the beginning of the 21st Century, we can see that the alternative way of the Bible Society translations to set a new model for translating more clearly the relational-covenantal aspect of Pauline texts of justification has not gained momentum. It seems that we Bible translators prefer to keep the old translations with hardly understandable technical terms, expressing the forensic-moral aspect of justification and hiding the relational-covenantal aspect and are ready to keep fighting the old traditional theological wars between Protestants and Catholics²⁵, each defending their own justification interpretation, moral and forensic respectively²⁶. As the question of interconfessional translation has come to the surface in Hungary, it is time to return to Paul's real meaning of justification, and let him speak to Hungarian Bible readers through their own vernacular translations as well.²⁷

²⁵ For a Catholic point of view, cf. Crowley, P., "Justification by Faith in St Paul" in *Scripture* XVIII:44 (1966), 97–111.

²⁶ Cf. McGrath A., "Justification – 'Making just' or 'Declaring Just'? A neglected aspect of the ecumenical discussion on justification." in *Churchman* 96:1 (1982), 44–52.

²⁷ A Hungarian version of this article is in preparation, wherein I will discuss the specific obstacles for Hungarian Bible translators.

