

Translating *dikaiosyne*: a response

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I am grateful for the chance to offer a brief response to Dr Moore (a much fuller account can be found in chapter 10 of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*). The question of whether or not we should hear ‘covenantal’ resonances within Paul’s *dikaiosyne* language has also been raised recently by S. Westerholm (2013, ch. 4), and my comments will apply there as well.

Dr Moore rightly points out that I use different English translations for similar phrases in Galatians and Romans (in my ‘Everyone’ series, reproduced in *The New Testament for Everyone* [US title *The Kingdom New Testament*]). I have some sympathy for the view that similar wording should be similarly translated, to alert readers to parallels. I am also sympathetic to the view that similar wording might sometimes be translated differently, to alert readers to ambiguities. In any case, my translations of Galatians and Romans were done some years apart. In between, among other projects, I wrote my commentary on Romans (Wright 2002), in which I developed and argued for a particular point of view. That commentary, and my other relevant writings, is where the attack should be directed. Had I attempted to standardize, I would have had to modify not only the published translations but the commentaries from which those translations were taken.

So how should we translate *dikaiosyne*? We all agree, I think, that for a popular audience the older English words ‘righteousness’ and ‘justification’ are more or less dead metaphors – or, worse, ‘religious’ words with overtones of ‘churchiness’ or even (despite our protests) *self*-righteousness. Dr Moore offers ‘a single English word-family approach’ which will do instead of the ‘righteousness’/‘justification’ dilemma. It isn’t clear (at least to me) what this single word-family is, since the titles of his works offer three possibilities: ‘rectification’ (the term preferred by J. L. Martyn and his followers, but I suspect with a different meaning to Moore’s), ‘justification’, and the language of ‘right relation’. I am, he may be surprised to learn, happy with ‘right relation’ – provided only that the ‘relation’ in question is precisely the *covenant* relationship, which is of course what he resists.

But the covenant relationship between God and his people looms large in the biblical texts Paul is quoting or echoing. ‘What Paul actually wrote’ – to use Dr Moore’s words – was regularly resonating with the Septuagint, where *dikaiosyne* and its cognates frequently render *tsedaqah* and its cognates. And *tsedaqah* regularly carries *covenantal* meanings of which the Greek *dikaiosyne* would otherwise have been innocent, but with which it is thereby regularly invested. A glance at basic dictionaries strongly confirms this, [FOOTNOTE: Seebass and Brown in *NIDNTT* 3.355-7, 363; Schrenk in *TDNT* 2.195; Hays in *ADB* 3.1120, 1131f.; Reumann in *ABD* 5.471, etc.] as does a further glance at standard secondary texts. [FOOTNOTE: e.g. Ziesler 1972, 20, 37-9, citing older studies; Eichrodt 1961, 1.241f.; von Rad 1973, 185.] Dr Moore makes no attempt to refute this widely-held position.

When Paul, with the Septuagint in his head, uses *dikaiosyne*, the word is capable of carrying a dense, interwoven range of meaning for which there is no single English word in sight. Hence we must paraphrase. This is admittedly risky, but not nearly so risky as staying with a single term and thus luring the reader into supposing Paul’s usage to be univocal and non-covenantal. The meaning of a

word is its use in context, and Paul's contexts vary considerably. To paraphrase Dr Moore, the reader who knows the underlying Septuagintal usage would be incredulous at the idea that a single English term might cover the lot.

But does Paul really retain the covenantal associations of LXX *dikaioyne*, or has he gone in a different direction? Has he, as some in Reformed circles insist, simply used the normal meaning of 'moral goodness'? This is of course frequent in both Testaments, and is often invoked to fund the 'covenant of works' view of 'justification' popular in some Reformed circles ('we need "righteousness" in terms of "moral goodness"; we don't have any; Jesus has plenty, and it gets "imputed" to us). Or has he, as I think Moore is suggesting, spoken of a 'right relationship', in terms either of a legal 'standing' or a 'personal relationship with God' in an existential or spiritual sense? That is how a non-covenantal and often individualistic protestant reading of Paul has taken it. This is where Moore seems to be going. But is that true to Paul?

'Abraham believed God, *kai elogisthe auto eis dikaioynen*': Romans 4.3 and Galatians 3.6 both quote Genesis 15.6. But Genesis 15 is all about God's double promise to Abraham (a huge, uncountable 'seed', and a territorial 'inheritance'). These are then guaranteed by the establishment of the covenant, which also specifies that the inheritance will be gained through rescue from slavery (Genesis 15.7-21). Does Paul have this larger picture of Genesis 15 in mind? Emphatically yes. Both the 'seed' and the 'inheritance' are major themes in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. In Galatians 4.1-7, and more extensively in Romans 6—8, these are accomplished precisely through the exodus-like rescue of slaves.

But can *elogisthe auto eis dikaioynen* really mean that God 'established a covenant with him'? Again, emphatically yes. In Numbers 25.6-13 Phinehas intervenes to stop the Israelite immorality, and God establishes with him 'a covenant of perpetual priesthood'. This is echoed exactly in ben-Sirach 45.23-25 and 1 Maccabees 2.54. But when the same episode is summarized in Psalm 106.28-31, the shorthand way of saying 'and so God established a covenant with him' is the same phrase that we find in Genesis 15.6. At least, the Hebrew is virtually identical; the Septuagint (Psalm 105.31) is exactly the same, *kai elogisthe auto eis dikaioynen*. The fact that the verse concludes 'from generation to generation for ever' indicates that this 'reckoning of righteousness' does indeed refer to the establishment of the covenant spoken of in Numbers and elsewhere. Granted the well-known covenantal overtones of *tседаqah*, and hence of *dikaioyne* when used to translate it (see the scholars quoted above), this construction, though occurring only in these two passages, is perfectly comprehensible. [FOOTNOTE. On this see *Pauline Perspectives* 566-8. The whole article (an expansion of the original published in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35.3, 2013, 207-41) is relevant to the themes of the present note.]

We should note as well that when Paul quotes Genesis 17.11 in Romans 4.11 he changes *diatheke* to *dikaioyne*. Abraham 'received circumcision as a sign or seal of . . .' the covenant? Or 'the righteousness'? Some suppose that Paul is here deliberately avoiding *diatheke*, and with it covenantal associations altogether. I take it the other way: that Paul is deliberately using *dikaioyne* language, knowing that via *tседаqah* it can carry covenantal meaning, in order to link Genesis 17.11 with Genesis 15.6, already quoted. This enables him to keep the larger argument of Romans 3.21—4.25 in a tight framework, with *dikaioyne theou* itself, the divine covenant faithfulness (as in many biblical and second-temple texts), leading the way (3.21-26). God's faithfulness to the covenant with

Abraham (see too Romans 3.3-5 and 15.8-9) results in the reckoning of 'covenant membership' to all those who share Abraham's faith (4.23-25). This includes the great mass of the 'ungodly', i.e. Gentiles, whom Paul envisaged as being included in the original promise of Genesis 15.5.

On the rare occasions when Paul does use *diatheke* itself this is clear. (On the rarity, I am reminded of E. P. Sanders's point about the Rabbis: the reason they mention *berith* so seldom is that they everywhere presuppose it.) In Galatians 3 Paul first expounds the Abrahamic promises from Genesis 12 and 15, and then, stressing that the Mosaic dispensation cannot disrupt these promises (the single seed and its ultimate inheritance), he says (3.15) that nobody can alter a *diatheke* once it has been established. Only those who ignore the Abrahamic focus of the whole chapter (see the conclusion in 3.29) will read this as a random 'illustration' about a human 'testament'. And in 2 Corinthians 3, referring explicitly to the 'new covenant' of Jeremiah 31, Paul speaks of it as 'the ministry of righteousness', *he diakonia tes dikaiosynes* (3.9). The context there, too, is of a new Exodus. To claim that Paul's infrequent uses of *diatheke* are not connected with *dikaioyne* is thus straightforwardly false. One might also add that in Romans 9—11, flanked by mentions of *diatheke* in 9.4 and 11.27, we find at the centre of the passage Paul's exposition of the 'covenant renewal' passage in Deuteronomy 30 (Romans 10.6-8), where the context is precisely the *dikaioyne* of God on the one hand and the *dikaioyne* of his people on the other. Simply to assert that 'Paul was not a covenant theologian' reminds me of Nelson putting the telescope to his blind eye and claiming to see no signal.

It therefore seems unwise to ignore the normal scholarly analysis of the Septuagintal resonances of *dikaioyne* and to substitute a modern-sounding phrase about 'a right relationship'. I was surprised to see Dr Moore reacting so sharply to the idea of 'God declaring the ungodly to be in the right', since that text is regularly celebrated, in that sense, by most exegetes in the Reformation tradition. His alternative reading, that God 'brings the ungodly into a right relationship', in which 'that person's faith is regarded as the basis for a right relationship', is every bit as periphrastic as anything I have written. (To say that in saving/'justificatory' contexts Paul 'seems to have "right relationship" in mind' is arm-wavingly vague just where precision is called for.) It also seems to me to raise some serious theological questions. For a start: in what sense is the faith of Abraham, or indeed anybody else, the *basis* for a 'right relationship'? And, to return to a previous point, since in Genesis 15 the 'relationship' which God establishes with Abraham is the covenant, with its promises about 'seed' and 'inheritance' which Paul then expounds, is the translator not bound to try to bring this out, however unco-operative the English language may be?

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