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The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ in Romans 3:21b

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Introduction

The continuity of the Old and New Testaments stands as a weighty doctrine for understanding the Bible and the Gospel itself. The significance of this continuity is emphasized throughout Scripture. Clear evidence of this lies in the multitude of Old Testament references sown into the New Testament clearly revealing the Law and the Prophets as witnesses to the work of Christ. One important reference to this continuity is found in Romans 3:21b as Paul argues for justification by faith in Christ. He insists that the Old Testament bears witness to this truth writing, “μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν” but exactly what is meant by the Law and the Prophets testifying to the manifested righteousness of God is debated in current scholarship. The best interpretation of this phrase believes Paul’s claim to be that the Old Testament has always taught faith as the means of achieving righteousness and has pointed to the future work of Christ as the final accomplishment of this means of justification.

Context

Context of the Book of Romans

Romans 3:21b exists within the larger context of Romans, itself written in a very specific context. First, Paul wrote in the New Testament age. The promised Messiah has come and fulfilled his incarnational work and the Apostle’s (guided by the Holy Spirit) are now the leaders of the Christian church. God’s people no longer live in a theocracy or monarchy with a divinely given code for life. Instead, Christ promised the disciples—soon to be apostles—that the Holy Spirit “will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26).¹ Paul, the self-proclaimed apostle to the Gentiles, writes the book of Romans within this stage of salvation history. The Spirit guides his writing and gives the Christian church teachings from God. Thus, this epistle of Paul comes at significant point in the history of God’s work as he provides foundational teachings for the new church.

The historical and cultural context of Romans also plays a significant role in understanding the book and by extension the phrase in Romans 3:21. A significant characteristic of the church in Rome is its ethnic diversity. Both Gentiles and Jews comprised the membership of this church which precipitated divisiveness. John Stott notes, “The church in Rome was a mixed community, consisting of both Gentiles and Jews with Gentiles in the majority.”² This occurred as the Jews were expelled from Rome in A.D. 49 by Emperor Claudius, as Carson and Moo note.³ They returned to a Gentile dominated church. The disunity caused by the different ethnic backgrounds should not be understood as mere racial strife; rather, as Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles affirm, it stems from a difference of outlook.⁴ Many of Paul’s themes reflect this difference of

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the NASB.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 34.

³ D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 395.

⁴ Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and The Crown* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 603.

outlook as he provides a sound theological teaching and a unified outlook for the church. The phrase in 3:21 must be considered within this historical context, for it undoubtedly will reflect Paul's desire to provide a clear, unified understanding of the Old Testament and its relationship to Christ and the Church.

Context of Phrase Within Romans

Romans 3:21 is a pivotal verse in Romans, marking a turn in Paul's argument as he transitions from explaining the fallen nature and inability of man to achieve righteousness through works of the Law, to now explaining how Christ accomplished God's righteousness for believers. Paul's argument preceding verse 3:21 is wonderfully summarized in verses 3:19-20 which adamantly state, "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." Paul unequivocally denounces the view that performing works of the Law leads to righteousness before God. Many early Christians even felt that performing works of the Law aided in achieving righteousness. However, according to Paul, no person can achieve any measure of righteousness via works of the Law. Thus, the Law must have another purpose.

The section of Romans which begins with verse 3:21 focuses upon justification given through faith in Christ. Righteousness is given to those who place faith in Christ, this righteousness attained by Christ and given to those who profess faith in him. In chapter four Paul uses Abraham as an example of righteousness being the result of faith independent of works, displaying the continuity of both Testaments. This teaching does not contradict the teaching of the Old Testament but is grounded within it.

Hence, Paul has shown the sinfulness of all mankind and emphasized the inability of works of the Law to provide righteousness before God. The turning point in his thought, marked by verse 3:21, now shifts focus to faith as the means of becoming righteous in God's sight—works do not supply or aid in achieving this righteousness before God.

Translation of the Phrase

In the original Greek text of Romans, this phrase reads, "μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν."⁵ The common English translation reads, "being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets." Within the phrase, three words stand out as most significant for proper interpretation: μαρτυρουμένη, νόμου, and προφητῶν.

The first key word, μαρτυρουμένη, is a verb predominantly meaning to testify or bear witness.⁶ The most common translation in the New Testament is a form of the word 'testify'. Out of the ninety-six occurrences of this word, it is translated as a form of 'testify' sixty three times. Other times it has been translated as 'witness' (as in 3:21 in many English translations), 'bear', or 'spoken'. Clearly, the idea conveyed by Paul's use of this word is one of bearing witness or testifying.

⁵ Jay P. Green, ed. and trans., *The Interlinear Bible, 2nd Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 874.

⁶ James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 55.

The two key words νόμου and προφητῶν hold a specific meaning when taken together as in 3:21b. Frequently, ‘τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν’ is a reference to the entire Old Testament. The Law often refers to the Pentateuch while the Prophets, as Lamorte and Hawthorne explain, refer to the prophetic books of the four major prophets and the twelve minor prophets.⁷ This same construction is used in Matthew 22:40 where Jesus, referring to the entire Old Testament, declares, “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” On understanding of ‘τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν’, John MacArthur writes that this phrase is “commonly used to encompass all of God’s written Word, what we now call the Old Testament.”⁸ James Dunn agrees affirming that “it was certainly familiar...as a way of speaking of the Jewish sacred writings as a whole” and further noting that this phrase was not a Christian creation but was used by Jewish writers, also.⁹ Therefore, both the common interpretation of this combination of terms throughout the New Testament, along with the context of the phrase within Romans, supports understanding this phrase as referencing the whole Old Testament.

Survey of Scholarly Interpretations

Scholarly opinion on the meaning of ‘μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν’ in verse 3:21 is relatively consistent. Nearly all scholars agree that Paul conveys an idea of continuity between both testaments regarding the gospel of Christ and justification by faith. However, certain differences exist relating to Paul’s specific emphasis, the relation of the phrase to the first part of the verse, and to the full meaning of exactly what continuity between the Old and New Testaments means.

F. F. Bruce argues that Paul teaches in 3:21 the reality of a new way to achieve justification given through the work of Christ. He writes, “But now a new way to acceptance with God has been opened up, a completely different way from that of legal obedience.”¹⁰ Yet this new way was not hastily orchestrated; rather, this new way is a fulfillment of the Old Testament’s teaching about what God was going to accomplish: “Yet this is no new-fangled way, thought up by ourselves; it has ample witness borne to it in advance in the Old Testament writings—in the Law and the Prophets,” as Bruce argues.¹¹ Thus, the Law and the Prophets testify about God’s righteousness being manifested apart from the Mosaic Law by prophesying and providing a context for the work and ministry of Christ. The Old Testament, both its stipulations in the Law and its prophetic witness about the Messiah are fulfilled in Christ.

James Dunn argues that when Paul speaks of the righteousness of God being manifested ‘apart from the Law’ he means that God’s righteousness is revealed apart

⁷ A Lamorte and G. F. Hawthorne, “Prophecy, Prophet,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd Edition, ed. Walter A Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 961.

⁸ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 1-8* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 203.

⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8, Volume 38a* (Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2015), 238. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 105, *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

¹¹ Bruce, *Romans*, 105.

from the national and religious parameters of the nation Israel. For many, God's righteousness was summed up in the Law and was necessarily linked to the Law. However, through Christ, God's righteousness was manifested separately from the Law in that He is now working outside of the nation and religion of Israel. Hence Dunn's statement that "the salvation-history transition Paul has in view is precisely the transition from a salvation-history conceived in too narrowly Jewish terms to a salvation-history which embraces Gentiles as well as Jews on the same terms."¹² Gentiles are now being saved without becoming Jews. So, in saying that the Law and the Prophets bear witness to this, Paul safeguards against a misunderstanding of his view which understands him as creating a chasm between the Law and the Cross. There is continuity between what God did in the nation of Israel and what He has done through the work of Christ. Dunn explains the important use of this key phrase in 3:21b stating:

To be able to appeal to the (Jewish) scriptures was of course fundamental for the earliest Christians (with the terminology here cf. particularly John 5:19 and Acts 10:43). But it was even more important for Paul, with his too easily misunderstood attempt to put space between the gospel and the law. The testimony he will subsequently elaborate, particularly in chaps. 4 and 9-11, is of a continuity in the character of God's saving purpose through Israel, which is not to be confused with a national or ethnic continuity as such.¹³

Thus, on Dunn's view there is a continuity of character in God's salvific purposes through Israel, distinct from national/ethnic continuity. Dunn's believes Paul is elaborating on the salvation-historical continuity and the discontinuity with regard to national/ethnic lines.

Craig Keener holds a position which believe that the Law and the Prophets teach faith as the sole means of achieving righteousness before God. In this way, the work of Christ and the call to place faith in Christ was witnessed by the Old Testament for it taught faith as the means of justification. In this vein Keener thus writes, "The law and the prophets do in fact teach the right way to be put in right relationship with God and made righteous (3:21): not by boasting in one's achievement, but by faith, i.e., depending on God (3:27, 31)."¹⁴ In times past, this faith was understood as dependence on God, but now faith rests on God's ultimate work manifested in Christ.¹⁵ Therefore, Keener's view of 3:21b is that it affirms the Old Testament teaching of faith as the sole means of justification. With the death and resurrection of Christ, the object of faith has become more robust and perfect.

Douglas Moo maintains that the entire Old Testament substantiates the new work of God in Christ because this plan of salvation has been God's design from the beginning. There is a discontinuity which Paul references in saying the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law, and Moo explains that this discontinuity stems from

¹² Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 238.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Dunn, 238-239.

¹⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2011), 56, *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

the inability of the Mosaic Covenant to contain the fullness of the Gospel.¹⁶ The continuity, though, flows from the Pauline idea that God's righteousness is now made available to all who put their faith in Christ, which is fully consistent with Law and the Prophets. Thus, Moo says, "The entire Old Testament ('the Law and the Prophets') testifies to this new work of God in Christ. The cross is no afterthought, no 'Plan B'; it has been God's intention from the beginning to reveal his saving righteousness by sending his Son as a sacrifice for us."¹⁷ Moo sees the whole Old Testament as speaking to the future work of Christ and the righteousness to be given to those who place faith in Christ.

John MacArthur holds a multifaceted view of the witness of the Law and Prophets. First, he notes Paul's use of this phrase is meant to reassure the reader that the manifested righteousness of God is not something novel but is taught by the Old Testament. Further, the Law and the Prophets witness to this righteousness by revealing what the righteousness of God is. Speaking of the Mosaic Law specifically, MacArthur writes, "The Mosaic laws were not given as a means of achieving righteousness but of describing God's righteousness and showing the impossibility of men's living up to it."¹⁸ It reveals man's inability of achieving righteousness, exposing the need for imputed righteousness through faith. Further, the Law and the Prophets teach that righteousness of God is only given through faith. This accounts for the Old Testament's witness to the need and reality of the coming Messiah. He manifests the righteousness of God and provides it to all who believe. MacArthur argues that the 'law' spoken of in the first part of 3:21 does not refer to the Mosaic Law but instead refers to the legalistic mindset which seeks to accomplish salvation through works.¹⁹ God's righteousness has been revealed apart from this through the revelation that God Himself gives His righteousness to those who have faith. In sum, MacArthur's view of the witness of the Law and Prophets is that they teach man's inability of achieving the righteousness of God and point to the need for the work of Christ in achieving and giving righteousness to believers.

Writing within the Roman Catholic tradition, Frank Matera holds to an interpretation similar to the protestant views. He maintains that God has revealed His saving righteousness distinct from the Law, neither depending on it nor on human observance of it.²⁰ However, the Law and Prophets attest to the actions of God whereby He has revealed His saving righteousness apart from the Law and provided salvation through faith and not works of the Law. This manifestation of His saving righteousness is not opposed to the Law, for the Law and the Prophets make clear that God has always required faith and has planned on revealing His righteousness through Christ in this 'new' way.

¹⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 126.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁸ MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 204.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

²⁰ Frank Matera, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 90, *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

Scott Hahn, also Roman Catholic, contends that the righteousness of God manifested through the work of Christ is the fulfillment of the teachings of the Old Testament about the work God would do in bringing about salvation. Paul emphasizes that this righteousness has been manifested apart from the Law, yet this merely stresses that God's saving righteousness cannot be attained by the efforts of man but can only be accomplished and given to man by God. Hence Hahn's words: "Paul stresses that saving righteousness is not something that people are capable of attaining or producing themselves. It is something properly divine—it belongs uniquely to God and can only come to us as a gift from him."²¹ This manifestation of righteousness is fully consistent with the Old Testament and fulfills the prophetic teaching found therein. Hahn claims that "we learn of [the saving righteousness of God] through the witness of the law and the prophets."²² Thus, the Law and the Prophets witness to this righteousness by providing the expectation that this would occur and revealing the continuity of God's salvific actions throughout human history.

There are generally two main ways scholars interpret the continuity implied by Paul. One way understands the Mosaic Law as a way of achieving righteousness, yet God promised throughout the Old Testament to bring about a new way of righteousness. The second way understands that righteousness has always been by faith. Obedience to the Mosaic Law did not make one righteous; it has always been given through faith in God. Thus, for the first way, continuity between the testaments emphasizes God's promises throughout the Old Testament to bring about the way of righteousness represented by the Gospel. For the second way, continuity comes through both testaments affirming faith as the means to righteousness.

Synthesis and Interpretation of 3:21b

First, the context of the phrase—both within Romans as a whole and in the particular section—indicate that Paul seeks to establish continuity between the Old Testament and the work of Christ. One of Paul's preeminent purposes in Romans is addressing Jewish/Gentile unity within the Roman church. Providing clear teaching on the continuity between the Law and the Prophets and the manifestation of God's righteousness in Christ is vital in achieving his purpose. Further, this phrase occurs between two key points within Romans. In verse 3:20 Paul clearly teaches the inability of achieving righteousness through obedience to the Law. As a result, the Law must not have been given to provide humanity with means to achieve righteousness. Then, shortly after this phrase in 3:21 Paul begins to explain justification by faith in 3:27, culminating in his example of Abraham who was justified by faith. Taken within this context, it seems likely that 3:21b professes the continuity of righteousness by faith first affirmed in the Law and the Prophets and then manifested through Christ. According to Paul, the Old Testament fully coheres with the Gospel of Christ, speaking of both the inability of man to achieve righteousness and of the need for Christ to achieve and give righteousness.

Further, the specific use of μαρτυρουμένη testifies that the Old Testament specifically witnesses to Christ's work and justification through faith. Paul says in 3:21a that God's (saving) righteousness was manifested in Christ apart from the law. In

²¹ Scott W. Hahn, *Romans: Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 69, *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

²² *Ibid.*, 69.

disagreement with MacArthur who understands ‘law’ here to mean “the sense of legalism, of men’s attempts to become acceptable to God by means of their own human efforts,”²³ the reference to ‘law’ is best understood as referencing the Mosaic Law. With this in mind, the witness of the Law and the Prophets should be interpreted as teaching that righteousness comes, not through obedience to the Law, but through one to come who will ultimately achieve this righteousness. Thus, the righteousness of God was manifested apart from the Law through Christ who, though fulfilling the Law, does not require obedience to the Law as the way of righteousness. Faith in his person makes one righteous.

The above understanding is consistent with the teaching of Paul which follows verses 3:21-3:26. Starting in 3:27, Paul teaches that man is justified apart from the Law. He uses the example of Abraham, for Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him at righteousness.”²⁴ Paul emphasizes that Abraham’s righteousness came without obedience to the Mosaic Law, for the Law had not been given yet. From this forthright teaching about righteousness through faith, credence is lent to the understanding of 3:21b as the Old Testament affirming God’s righteousness must be given apart from the Mosaic Law.

Of the two main ways scholars understand the intertestamental continuity shown by this phrase, the second way—understanding the continuity to rest in the idea of faith always having been the means of righteousness—best accords with the evidence. As noted above, Paul relates the story of Abraham and stresses that his righteousness was because of his faith. This unambiguously affirms faith as the way to righteousness. With this in mind, it seems best to understand the phrase under consideration to be presenting the Law and the Prophets as witnesses to the righteousness of God—and the means of being declared and made righteous—as always being separate from the Mosaic Law and obedience to it. The entire Bible teaches that one must have faith in God to be righteous.

Thus, Paul’s meaning in 3:21b should be interpreted as saying the Old Testament testifies that God’s righteousness is given apart from the Law, through faith. Further, it teaches that one would come who would manifest the righteousness of God and achieve this righteousness to then give to those who place faith in him. Keener rightly says continuity is maintained in understanding that faith was always the means of justification; previously faith was understood as dependence upon God and trust in Him, and now faith is understood as confessing Christ as Lord.²⁵ Further, MacArthur’s interpretation is right that the Mosaic Law was not given to provide a means of achieving righteousness, but was rather intended to point to the coming of Christ who would be the giver of God’s righteousness.²⁶ Taken together, these two ideas provide a wonderful interpretation of the phrase. The Law and the Prophets always taught faith as the means of achieving righteousness, and the Mosaic Law was given to show mankind what God’s righteousness is and of the need for one to accomplish and give this righteousness to sinful man. Therefore, the righteousness of God in Christ was always intended to

²³ MacArthur, *Romans* 1-8, 202.

²⁴ Romans 4:3b.

²⁵ Keener, *Romans*, 56.

²⁶ MacArthur, *Romans* 1-8, 204.

manifest apart from the Law, for the Law was given temporarily to Israel for purposes other than justification/salvation.

Conclusion

The phrase ‘μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν’, when taken in context, certainly seems to teach the theme of righteousness through faith being attested by the Old Testament. Further, it is surely suggested by Paul that the Law and the Prophets spoke of the future reality of Christ’s work. According to Paul, the teaching of righteousness given through faith was not a new doctrinal invention but was taught throughout the Old Testament coming to fruition in Christ. This interpretation is most consistent with the context and common meaning of the key words Paul uses. Scholarly consensus, though differing in certain aspects, also agrees that Paul meant to teach continuity existing between the Old Testament and the Gospel with regards to justification. And so, the best interpretation understands this phrase to teach that faith has always been the means to righteousness before God and the Old Testament pointed to the future work of Christ to perfectly secure righteousness to be given to those who believe.

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