

## Righteousness and God's Righteousness<sup>1</sup>

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TO PRACTICE righteousness and to act with unbounded arbitrariness—the two are incompatible. Since Paul's discussion in Rom. 9-11, especially in Rom. 9, seems to speak of the unbounded arbitrariness of the God who elects and rejects, wringing insights on the theme of "righteousness" from that discussion does not come easy. Not only at first glance, but at the second as well, it is hardly possible to go along with the idea that it is precisely Rom. 9-11 that leads to an *understanding* of God's righteousness. One need not be a superficial type, accustomed merely to cursory reading and to listening only in passing, in order to find contradictions to every conceivable form of righteousness presented in this text and, depressingly, attributed to God.

Paul speaks in Rom. 9-11 of the God who loved Jacob and hated Esau (9:13); who has mercy on whom God will, and who has compassion on whom God will (9:15); indeed, who not only has mercy "upon whomever God will," but who also "hardens the heart" of whom God will (9:18).<sup>2</sup> Paul seems to be referring to a God who has put arbitrariness in the place of righteousness. By means of independence, by means of freedom of choice and predestination (9:11), by means of a will which endures no contradiction (9:19), this God may emerge triumphant and prove God's irresistible power. But in no way does the strength of will thus demonstrated or the power and force thus described seem to be able even to be brought into an associative connection with "righteousness." Paul seems to characterize his God by means of power in the sense of arbitrariness and irresistible force—*instead* of by means of righteousness. He seems simply to quash the justified objection that irresistible arbitrariness of God's disposition over humankind likewise totally destroys the capacity for responsibility and other requisite conditions for righteousness to be practiced among human beings. With a *renewed* appeal to that arbitrariness and mere superior force, apparently

<sup>1</sup> Translation by John Hoffmeyer. Sigrid Brandt and Wilhelm Breder offered constructive critiques of the first version of this text. Daniel Migliore and Richard Fenn challenged me to try to improve my contribution by their "Responses" at the Symposium. I am most grateful and indebted to them.

<sup>2</sup> Biblical citations are taken from the RSV, with alterations to avoid gender-exclusive language. Other occasional alterations are noted where they occur in the body of the text.

practiced by God, Paul writes: "You will say to me then, 'Why does God still find fault? For who can resist God's will?' But who are you, a human being, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay . . . ?" (9:19ff.).<sup>3</sup>

But where the triumph of God's unbounded arbitrariness is invoked, there all marks of righteousness grow hazy and disappear. If Paul were only concerned with trying to pass off the effectuation and maintenance of a dependence upon God as *God's* righteousness, a dependence that is unquestioningly and impotently to be accepted, then that would strengthen Paul's readers in their worst prejudices, that the God of the Old and New Testaments is at heart only a despot. The emphasis upon the absolute dependence of all human beings on such a God could not be distinguished from the demand to subjugate oneself in blind submission to nameless fate. Against such a background, Paul's comment that he bears witness to the "zeal for God" of his Israelite brothers and sisters—but that it is a "zeal without *knowledge*" (10:2)—would sound like mockery. How could one *know* the righteousness of a God of whom it is true that "God has mercy upon whom-ever God wills, and hardens the heart of whomever God wills"?

In the perspective on Rom. 9-11 that we have described, the perspective that initially imposes itself upon us, the whole line of thought advanced by Paul strikes us as forced and inconsistent. How can one require "knowledge," praise the "depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God," and at the same time emphasize that God's decisions are "unsearchable" and God's ways "inscrutable" (11:33)? Moreover, Paul seems circuitously evasive and unpersuasive when, on the one hand, he denies the Israelites the "knowledge," but on the other hand, admits that they possess "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (see 9:4-5). What kind of God would, on the one hand, by the divine word give to God's people adoption, glory, covenants, worship, and promises, but on the other hand, deny them knowledge? Is the answer here merely that this is a God who "hardens the heart of whomever God will"? If so, then at any rate one will not be able to attribute *righteousness* to this God. Ought not one to characterize a being who with good promises and beneficent arrangements initially awakens great expectations and effects security of expectations, but who does not allow women and men to attain to

<sup>3</sup> The problems of consistency and convincing power in Paul's argumentation are emphasized by the contributions of Paul van Buren, Christiaan Beker, and Mary Potter Engel in this volume.

a right knowledge of God and hardens their hearts—ought not one to characterize such a being more as an evil, tormenting spirit and cynic than as a righteous God?

When on top of that we are assured that the hearts of some out of the house of Israel were *not* hardened (11:5ff.), and that the Gentiles, who were *not* striving after righteousness, have received it (9:30), the bottomlessness and limitlessness of God's arbitrariness seem to be proven completely. Maybe we swallow theology's assurance that *in this way* all self-righteousness and all boasting of human beings is rejected. Yet at what cost does this take place? Is not all self-righteousness of human beings rejected at the cost of *God's righteousness* simply becoming unrecognizable behind the arbitrariness with which God elects some and hardens the hearts of others?

At the outset of my reflections on Rom. 9-11 I would like to take those questions seriously. They mark nothing less than some of the basic difficulties which Christian theology in general, and Reformed theology in particular, have with the so-called doctrines of election and predestination. I would like to show that Rom. 9-11 gives an answer to the questions posed above that is not particularly simple, but that is nevertheless clear and univocal. I would like to show that in this answer God's righteousness becomes formally recognizable as well, and is described in a way that even non-Christians can understand and follow. With this answer, Paul renders superfluous all theologies which, with a merely obfuscatory reference to "the Christ event," draw back from the questions posed above. Paul renders superfluous, above all, theologies which, with a lot of solemn hand-waving about the numinous and the paradoxical, wish to pass off God's unbounded power and arbitrariness as specific to God's righteousness. God's righteousness confronts human claims of righteousness not in a numinous or even obscure way, but clearly and determinately.

I would like to show this in the three following sections. I would like first to consider the relation between righteousness and mercy in the law traditions of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, in the Messianic promises, and in Rom. 9-11. In this context, the question "What is God's righteousness?" is to be specified. Second, the ways shall be presented in which, according to the Messianic promises, righteousness and *universal* knowledge of God are realized in differentiated forms in Israel and among the Gentiles. Third, God's righteousness will be described in the tension between God's faithfulness and God's glory. We shall see how God's righteousness alters human ideas of righteousness and human claims to having realized righteousness.

## I. Righteousness and Mercy

I understand the practice of mercy as turning to those who are weaker, waiving claims and refraining from pressing home one's interests, and even abstaining, in favor of those who are weaker, the outsiders, and the disadvantaged, from pressing home one's legitimate claims under the law. Thus understood, mercy has still to regain in our cultures the position which the biblical traditions attribute to it. If I am not mistaken, according to our contemporary consciousness of right and our contemporary moral sensibility, mercy is restricted to the chance mood of the charitable individual, the chance situation which triggers corresponding impulses, or the discretion of high political leaders in rare and extreme limit situations: e.g., the response to pleas for clemency. According to biblical traditions, by contrast, mercy is an element of *God's law*. What does that mean?

In the codes of law (*Gesetz*) in the Bible, one finds ordinances for settling legal conflicts (*Rechtskonflikte*<sup>4</sup>) and ordinances that have to do with cultic affairs. From the earliest traditions onward, though, one also finds regulations that work towards the waiver of claims in order to protect those persons who are worse off economically and socially, and that work towards their reintegration in the legal and social community. Slaves, strangers and those who are isolated, widows and orphans, the poor, and those who are without power and influence are already explicitly named in the earliest biblical traditions as the groups who, by means of the mercy laws, must be brought to the level of general social, economic, and legal communication. At the least there is a need for efforts to keep them on this level, for their full and equal participation in communal life is threatened. Together with the regulations affecting legal justice and cultic practice, the mercy laws constitute the functional connection of God's law.<sup>5</sup> From the Book of the Covenant onward (cf. especially Ex. 21:2ff. and 22:20ff.) we find—with different and changing relative importance—all three groups of regulations in all the great codes of law. In the development of law in the Hebrew Bible, we can indeed observe what recent sociology calls the "differentiation of the legal system (*Recht*)."<sup>6</sup> This differentiation of the normal settlement of legal

<sup>4</sup> Both *Gesetz* and *Recht* can be translated as "law." *Recht* also means "right" and "justice." In this article, "law" will be reserved for translating *Gesetz* (with one exception, which is dictated by current usage, and will be noted when it appears). Either "legal justice" or simply "justice" will translate *Recht*. Compounds built upon *Recht* will be rendered by constructions using "legal": e.g., *Rechtskonflikte* as "legal conflicts."

<sup>5</sup> For further detail, see M. Welker, "Security of Expectations. Reformulating the Theology of Law and Gospel," *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986): 237ff.

<sup>6</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Ausdifferenzierung des Rechts. Beiträge zur Rechtssoziologie und Rechtstheorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981).

cases leads to a situation where only foundational and limit problems of legal justice are preserved in God's law. At the same time, the regulations having to do with cultic practice undergo an enormous expansion in Deuteronomy and the texts of law of the Priestly writings. The regulations having to do with mercy, however, remain astonishingly constant in this development (all the way to the connection between wisdom theology and theology of law—a connection which favors the regulations having to do with mercy). The overall conclusion is that, first, in spite of such displacements in relative weight, there remain three irreducible groups of regulations—namely legal justice, mercy, and cult (whereby “cult” is to be understood as the public, regulated, and shared relation to God, which is the object of shared expectations). Second, those three groups constitute the decisive contents of God's law. Correspondingly, Mt. 23:23 still emphasizes “justice and mercy and faith” as “the weightier matters of the law.”

That means, however, that in the perspective of God's law, righteousness cannot even be conceived without mercy: i.e., without continual turning to the poor, the weak, the disadvantaged, the outsiders and the excluded, and without their acceptance and reintegration into the community. The early writing prophets, especially Amos, make this strikingly clear in a differentiated way by showing that a people who lack mercy begin to pervert legal justice and to misuse cultic life. The perversion of legal justice and the misuse of cultic life become recognizable in the lack of mercy. This development leads to community decline that can become irremediable. The illusion of a well-ordered relationship with God, and political as well as economic successes, cannot deceive the prophets about the fact that the community which disdains mercy is eroding, that it is inwardly decaying, and that it will be no match for dangers which come to it from the outside, e.g., in the form of natural catastrophes and military threats. By contrast, a community which routinely practices mercy, indeed, which allows the dynamic of its legal development to be determined by mercy, gains strength in all its functions.

The important *Messianic* traditions in the texts of Isaiah which speak explicitly about *God's spirit resting or remaining* on God's chosen bearer of the spirit, describe in great clarity the righteousness that God intends for the benefit of human beings. God's chosen one, on whom God's spirit remains or rests, will *establish justice by simultaneously practicing mercy* with those who are poor, insignificant, and bowed down. The three decisive texts Is. 11:1ff., 42:2ff., and 61:1ff. emphasize this strict connection between justice

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and mercy as the high minimal condition for the spread of real righteousness.

According to Is. 11:4, the righteousness which is characteristic of and spread by the Messianic bearer of the spirit is determined by the fact that he judges "the helpless" "with righteousness" and decides "with equity for the poor of the land" (trans. altered). Is. 42:3 also connects the statement that the Messianic bearer of the spirit brings justice with an explicit reference to the dominant orientation upon mercy: "... a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench: he will faithfully bring forth justice" (see also 42:7). Finally, Is. 61 connects the establishment of justice and righteousness with the joyous message which the Messiah and bearer of the spirit sends out for those who are poor, imprisoned, in chains, and in mourning (Is. 61:3, 8 and 11).

As at least 14 citations in the three chapters Rom. 9-11 confirm, Paul had the Isaiah traditions continually before his eyes.<sup>7</sup> When he emphasizes that God is *righteous* precisely by practicing *mercy*, he need not invoke the numinous or the paradoxical. Nor need he lay claim to a "righteousness" which human beings simply cannot comprehend, and which supposedly for that very reason is to be termed "divine." The great codes of law as well as the Messianic traditions make clear, rather, that mercy is constitutive of a legal development that realizes righteousness. Orders of legal justice and orders of life that are not marked and determined by mercy cannot be regarded as forms of justice and righteousness intended by God. Thus the first impression is dispelled that Rom. 9-11 is talking about a *mere* arbitrariness of God which can only be determined *in opposition* to every understanding of righteousness. The answer to the question framed by Paul: "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?," is now partially comprehensible: "By no means! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So it depends not upon human will or exertion, but upon God's mercy" (Rom. 9:14-16; see also 30-32).

It is liberating and comforting to know that God's mercy breaks through human spectra of judgment concerning what is to be regarded and defended as just and fair. It is liberating and comforting that God stands by those who cannot obtain justice and righteousness for themselves. Yet as liberating and comforting as those things are, it is difficult to strike up a hymn in praise of mere mercy when one has attentively taken note of the law and the Messi-

<sup>7</sup> See also the important observation of David Satran in this volume, that the images used in Rom. 9:20-21 and 11:17-24 might have been taken out of Is. 60:21!

anic promises. According to them, God's mercy and the mercy that God also intends to be exercised among human beings is characterized by the strict connection between righteousness and knowledge of God.

However God's turning in mercy to the Gentiles is to be described more precisely, it cannot in any way call God's righteousness into question, nor allow it to become unclear or even unrecognizable. An action which *somehow* brings *something* good to *someone* in *some* need is not mercy. Neither, however, would an action deserve the great name of righteousness which permitted a previously disadvantaged group of people to come to the fore and to gain the advantage, and which in exchange allowed those who had previously enjoyed the advantage now to doubt God's faithfulness, reliability, and dependability. But can we, according to Rom. 9-11, exclude the possibility that God arbitrarily turns first to this, then to that group of people, and that God does this not only at the expense of the "other" group in each situation, but also at the expense of the continuity and clarity of the revelation of God's will? Can we make clear that God's word has *not* ceased to be viable? Can we show that the mercy attested to in God's word, in law and promise, is a constitutive element of *God's righteousness*? Can we make it conceivable that this mercy which is constitutive of God's righteousness manifests itself in the election of the Gentiles, "who did not pursue righteousness" (cf. 9:30 and 10:19)? And how can this be made comprehensible from Israel's perspective as well? How can it be made clear that there is no cause for Israel to doubt God's steadfastness and faithfulness, and thus God's righteousness? The perception that mercy is constitutive of the righteousness intended by God puts an end to the impression of *mere* arbitrariness, but it makes us ask what exactly God's righteousness constituted by mercy is.

## II. Messianic Promise, Righteousness, and Universal Knowledge of God

The Messianic promises in Is. 11, 42, and 61 speak of the establishment of justice, mercy, and knowledge of God. It is important to see that these **three** texts, which deal with the spirit's resting or remaining upon the Messiah, also mention all three functional elements of the law.<sup>8</sup> Equally important, though, is the observation that, according to the information supplied by all three texts, both the fulfillment of the expectations of righteousness and the knowledge of God *do not remain confined to Israel*.

Is. 11:9 reads: "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain:

<sup>8</sup> For further detail, see M. Welker, "Gesetz und Geist," *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*, vol. 4 (1989): 215ff.

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for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." Connected with that is the fact that Israel will be doubly striking to the peoples, and a power doubled in force will emanate from Israel upon the peoples. First, Israel, filled by righteousness and knowledge of God, will directly attract the peoples. "In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples: him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious" (11:10). Second, as is recorded by what is most likely a later addition,<sup>9</sup> dispersed Israel is gathered "from the four corners of the earth," and this again is connected with an "ensign for the peoples" (See Is. 11:11-12).

Is. 42 thematizes still more clearly the universality of the knowledge of righteousness and of God mediated by the Messianic bearer of the spirit. The chosen one of God brings justice to the peoples and grounds upon earth the justice upon which even the most removed regions of the world wait (42:1 and 4). Independently of how we decide the difficult question whether according to Is. 42, especially 42:6, an individual or a community is destined to be a "light for the peoples," we should note that the universal establishment of justice marked by mercy brings with it the knowledge of God which is to be universally propagated (cf. Is. 42:8 and 12). The mediation of the illumination of the peoples, which is to be universally propagated and which corresponds to God's being the creator (42:5), is explicitly described as an act of *mercy* which proceeds from *righteousness*: "I (Yahweh) have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you . . . to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (42:6 and 7). A mercy which is practiced in connection with righteousness, which is indeed practiced on account of righteousness, aims at universal knowledge of righteousness and of God among the peoples. In spite of the stronger emphasis, over against Is. 11, upon the intended worldwide relevance of the event—intended from the outset—Is. 42 (see esp. 6b!) leaves no doubt that it is primarily Israel which is involved and affected.<sup>10</sup>

This connection between first Israel's and then the peoples' being affected by God's revelation and the manifestation of God's righteousness is clarified

<sup>9</sup> See Hermann Barth, *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit. Israel und Assur als Thema einer produktiven Neuinterpretation der Jesaja-Überlieferung*, WMANT 48 (Neukirchen, Neukirchener Verlag: 1977), p. 58. In this context I am leaving aside the notion of the "remnant" in Is. 11:11 and 16, which most likely means the "relative" remnant which still remains in Assyria. See Hans Wildenberger, *BKAT X/1*: 467-68.

<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, this is underlined by the note in Is. 42:21, directed against "disobedient" Israel, that God "was pleased, for the sake of God's righteousness, to magnify God's law and make it glorious." On the other hand, it is underlined by the centering of the peoples and nations upon Israel, described in Is. 43.

in Is. 61 in the following way. Through the Messianic bearer of the spirit, a universal knowledge of God is effected among the peoples (Is. 61:11: "... so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all peoples" [trans. altered]) which has its center precisely in the knowledge of the righteousness and mercifulness established in Israel. "Strangers" and "foreigners" will characterize Israel as a mirror of God's righteousness and glory. Strangers and foreigners will accept the God of Israel as *their own* God. More precisely, they will identify their own god as God of Israel: "... but you (the Israelites) shall be called 'priests of the LORD,' people shall speak of you as 'ministers of our (!) God'" (trans. altered). And in "all nations," in "all peoples," the story with regard to the descendants of Israel will run thus: "... all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed" (Is. 61:6a and 9b; cf. also Is. 62:1ff. and 12). The promise made to Abraham will be universally recognizable and universally recognized (See Gen. 12:1-3).

The peoples do not only take notice of the Messianic establishment of justice, mercy, and knowledge of God in Israel.<sup>11</sup> They get a share in this event, they become involved in it by reaching a knowledge of God that is connected with the experience of righteousness. Thus it is already recorded in the Messianic promises of the Hebrew Bible that an establishment in Israel of justice, mercy, and knowledge of God which mediated *no* knowledge of God to the Gentiles, which thus did not mercifully include them, would in any case not be an establishment of the righteousness of God which could appeal to the *Messianic promises*.

The radiation of this event to the peoples, the participation of the peoples in Israel's experience of righteousness and knowledge of God, is inseparably connected with the establishment of the Messianically-promised righteousness of God. This process whereby the peoples become participants, this universal radiation, does not signify any diminution of salvation for Israel. Quite the contrary! The merciful participation of the peoples in the experience of God and God's righteousness only redounds to Israel's recognition and honor, and to many positive repercussions by means of this event. Above all, as is to be shown later, only the inclusion of the peoples reveals the full *glory* of God's righteousness.

Rom. 9-11 says that this event, to which the Messianic promises look for-

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Miller has pointed out to me that this holds true even beyond the prophetic perspective. Cf. such texts as Deuteronomy 4, 8, 11, 15 or Psalms 46 and 126. The involvement of the peoples can already be found in reflections about the fulfillment of the blessing bestowed on Abraham in the Pentateuch.

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ward, has begun. To be sure, only for a part of Israel is it already revealed. However, it will become recognizable and efficacious for all Israel. This event sets the Gentiles equal to Israel with regard to the knowledge of God and the experience of God's righteousness, as was Messianically anticipated. And it does so without depriving Israel of the precedence of a natural and historical centering upon it.

III. God's Righteousness, God's Faithfulness, and God's Glory

All understandings of God's righteousness which wish to contest a natural-historical centering upon Israel, and the honor of Israel connected with that, must disregard Rom. 9-11 in several respects. The Israelites have "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; theirs are the patriarchs and from them, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen" (9:4-5). Moreover, going beyond the open number of Gentiles destined for salvation, "all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob'" (11:26).<sup>12</sup>

To be sure, the Gentiles are also destined to be children of the living God, destined to the knowledge of God and the experience of God's righteousness. But they do not achieve clarity concerning that destiny in the framework of just any experience, be it religious or otherwise, out of just any heathen tradition. Rather they achieve the clarity concerning that destiny in the field of reference that, determined by the promises made to Israel (see 9:8ff.), is newly opened to them and appears in a new light through their Messianic experience, through the coming, the suffering, and the dying of Jesus Christ. Paul graphically describes this natural-historical centering of the Gentiles upon Israel as wild olive branches being grafted onto the "cultivated olive tree" (see 11:16ff.).<sup>13</sup>

According to Rom. 9-11, what the Gentiles who believe in Christ have in common with a part of Israel, and what they have ahead, so far, of another part of Israel, is the knowledge—admittedly, extremely significant knowledge—that *Jesus Christ* is the Messiah of whom the promises speak. The

<sup>12</sup> This transcending, together with the difficulties in determining the precise meaning of "all Israel," is documented by Ferdinand Hahn, "Zum Verständnis von Röm 11.26a: '... und so wird ganz Israel gerettet werden,'" in *Paul and Paulinism. Festschrift for C.K. Barrett*, ed. M. D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982), 221ff., esp. 229. The most subtle elaboration of this problem is offered in part IV of Otfried Hofius' contribution in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> See Otfried Hofius, "Das Evangelium und Israel. Erwägungen zu Röm 9-11," *ZThK* 83 (1986): 297ff., 308ff.

believers in Christ have the knowledge that he has brought into effect the righteousness of God, which brings with it justice, mercy, and universal knowledge of God. They have the knowledge that the promised deliverance is bound up with knowing him, confessing him, and believing in him.

Paul also draws upon the promises in Isaiah in reflecting upon the difficulty for Israel in recognizing and confessing the crucified Jesus of Nazareth as the chosen one of God, the bearer of the spirit who reveals God's righteousness. Rom. 10:15 and 16 take up Is. 52:7 and 53:1. There, on the one hand, one reads: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" On the other hand: "Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" The answer given in Is. 53:2ff. is: ". . . he had no form or comeliness . . . He was despised and rejected by men and women . . ."

Why this anti-climax? Why are not the law's intentions of salvation fulfilled and transcended in a universalizing manner by a Messiah who would be recognizable without a doubt to *all* Israel? Why is salvation brought at all by one who is "despised and rejected by men and women?" How can one who is thus despised prepare the way for the *knowledge* of God's righteousness?

Whoever is able, in view of the talk of "salvation," to rest content with imprecise notions of transcendence and inclusion, will not be able to answer those questions. In the framework of a simple success story, be it the success story of a "salvation-bringer" who has the political strength to carry the day, or be it in the framework of a success story of a people of exemplary justice, the inclusion of the Gentiles or the peoples is just so conceived *somehow or another*. But "God's righteousness" is not thereby comprehended.

What does it mean that God *has mercy* upon the Gentiles? As truly as God is *just*, that in no case means that the "families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3b) experience salvation directed to them in a lesser way, that the Gentiles experience, so to speak, a qualitatively subordinate or even second-class treatment by God.<sup>14</sup> God wills to demonstrate on the "vessels of mercy" nothing less than the *glory*, indeed the "*riches of the glory of God*" (Rom. 9:23). This excludes simple notions of inclusion which settle the peoples on the second level or in the mere horizon of the righteousness established in

<sup>14</sup> Paul W. Meyer rightly says that the gospel "even provided the non-Jew with equal access to what Paul located at the very core of Jewish identity . . ." *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 1154.

Israel, or which center them upon the salvation experienced by Israel *only in its own self*. Notwithstanding the emphasized historical and natural centering upon Israel, we must grasp the no less than overwhelming aspect of the promise that the Messiah also fulfills the *Gentiles'* expectations of righteousness (Is. 42)—expectations of righteousness that are not determined by Israel's law—we must grasp the aspect that the Messiah also awakens the *Gentiles'* knowledge of God.<sup>15</sup> The *Israelites* will be called servants of “*our*” God (Is. 61). “Our” God—that means the God of those who are, in the eyes of Israel, strangers and foreigners. This directness, this authenticity of the access of strangers, of foreigners, of Gentiles to the God of Israel and to that God's righteousness can indeed be frightening. It is overwhelming to experience that God's mercy not only mitigates and makes more bearable the situation of a human being, a group, or a people who are in a worse position than others, but also that God's mercy bestows the glory, indeed the riches of the glory of God. The experience of the threat that salvation will be alienated, removed, uprooted, and relativized is oppressive in proportion to the solidity with which the religious tradition and the self-localization in it are constructed, and in proportion to the clarity of the normative structure which has been appropriated and internalized. The tried and familiar ranges of judgment which have grown up, which provide the measure for determining inner and outer, belonging and alien, closer to and further from God, stronger and weaker in faith—these ranges of judgment are broken up.

Paul recognizes in this experience not a miserable relativism, but rather the establishment of God's glorious righteousness, which calls into question and transcends human ranges of judgment. This recognition, according to Paul, calls for us to hold fast to Jesus of Nazareth, who was rejected, despised, and executed in the name of the religious and political orders. But that also means taking seriously the promise of Is. 53. In no way can one play off “the promise directed to the peoples, but including all Israel,” against the promise “directed to Israel, but including all peoples.”<sup>16</sup>

In recognizing as Messiah Jesus of Nazareth, who was rejected and despised by Jews and Gentiles, condemned and executed in the name of their supporting orders, human beings become open to the knowledge of God's

<sup>15</sup> See also Hans Hübner, “Der ‘Messias Israels’ und der ‘Christus des Neuen Testaments,’” *Kerygma und Dogma* 27 (1981): 217ff., esp. 230ff.; Nikolaus Walter, “Zur Interpretation von Römer 9-11,” *ZThK* 81 (1984): 172ff., esp. note 44.

<sup>16</sup> See also Hans-Martin Lübking, *Paulus und Israel im Römerbrief. Eine Untersuchung zu Römer 9-11*, Europäische Hochschulschriften, Series XXIII, vol. 260 (Frankfurt, Bern and New York: Peter-Lang-Verlag, 1986), esp. pp. 154-156.

righteousness, which calls into question and surpasses their previous notions and practices of righteousness. Even the most well-intentioned, and apparently most verified, well-structured, and recognized forms and practices of righteousness are radically called into question. They are radically called into question in favor of a *richer experience of righteousness*, of clearer experiences of justice, mercy and a clearer knowledge of God. Even a righteousness whose spectrum of judgment has developed a sensitivity for mercy, and which has even been transfigured by notions of God—even such a righteousness of a particular group of human beings, a particular tradition, a particular normative lineage, is broken, relativized, and transcended. Bound up with that is a rejection of all attempts to establish our own individual and collective well-being at the expense of others. That rejection is very difficult for a well-structured normative consciousness to tolerate. It is very difficult to tolerate the rejection of all attempts to determine the measure of what is advantageous to outsiders and what is their due in the framework of one's *own* standards of justice and mercy. It is very difficult to tolerate the connected vulnerability and development of sensitivity for others, for new expectations of righteousness, expectations of mercy, and experiences of God. It is difficult to tolerate all this unless one lives in the sphere of power of the rejected and despised Messiah, the sphere of power in which the experience of failure and the experience that the renewal of human ideas of righteousness is necessary have become basic experiences.

Wherever one has not concerned oneself with the *knowledge* of God's righteousness, and has cultivated and disguised the unconsciously introduced forms or formlessness of one's own self-righteousness, there one has not perceived that it is difficult to tolerate the reproach that human beings fixated upon works of law would only establish their own righteousness. It is also hardly going out on a limb to assert that nebulous knowledge of God's righteousness and veiled, diffuse self-righteousness are characteristics of Christianity, especially in its modern, individualistic, and moralized expressions. Paul emphasizes explicitly that to know the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah and to publicly confess him is to perceive and recognize the dynamic righteousness of God.<sup>17</sup> The acceptance in faith of God's righteousness is identical with the proclamation of the Messiah, with the placement of oneself in his realm of power, with the readiness to continual self-relativization in view of the righteousness, mercy, and knowledge of God established by the coming of the Messiah. The acceptance in faith of

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Rom. 10:3ff.

God's righteousness is identical with the readiness to receive the riches of God's glory.

It is important to observe that Paul describes the establishment of the righteousness of faith with words which Dt. 30 uses regarding the establishment of the law (cf. Dt. 30:11ff. and Rom. 10:6ff.).<sup>18</sup> Justice, mercy, and knowledge of God—the objects of the law—are realized by the Messiah in a way that calls into question human ranges of judgment and transcends them. It is difficult to tolerate this relativizing and transcending without falling into sloppy, vague, and diffuse attitudes of consciousness, that allow God's righteousness to degenerate into obfusatory jargon.

Christian faith seems to me to stand chronically in that danger. Rather than removing that danger, countless moralizing campaigns only strengthen it. The Messianic experience of other human beings, other peoples and, along with it, the establishment of justice, mercy, and the knowledge of God calls into question and transcends our own ideas and achievements of righteousness. This challenge that even our own morally-sensitive and religiously-consolidated ideas and achievements are called into question turns into an experience of strength and liberation if it is grounded in the experience of the Messianic community. The concern with preserving the clarity and distinctness of God's universal righteousness can and must be based on the knowledge of the Messiah as despised and rejected.

It is not political and moral heroes, powerful, proven normative forms, but the crucified Messiah and the field of power centered on him that ever anew make clear and distinct the knowledge of God's righteousness. It is to Israel's hardening that we are indebted for the knowledge that faith in the Messiah is concerned with the experience of God's righteousness which realizes justice, mercy, and the knowledge of God in heterogeneous communities and cultures. Israel challenges the world of the peoples to witness to the Messiah in a way that enables human beings to see clearly the "fulfillment of the law" as achieved through his having come. In this way Israel, as it continues to close itself to the knowledge of the Messiah, fulfills a remarkable function in orienting the Gentiles to the realistic righteousness of

<sup>18</sup> See Hans-Joachim Eckstein, "'Nahe ist dir das Wort.' Exegetische Erwägungen zu Röm 10, 8," *ZNW* 79 (1988): "Paulus versteht also das Evangelium, das er in Röm 10, 8 mit dem 'nahen Wort' in Dtn. 30, 14 identifiziert hat, zugleich als die Botschaft der Freudenboten bei Deuterocesaja, so daß für ihn zwischen der Verkündigung Deuterocesajas und dem Abschnitt Dtn. 30, 11-14 ein innerer Zusammenhang besteht. Aufgrund dieses Zusammenhangs vermag der Apostel in Dtn. 30, 11-14 die Stimme der Glaubensgerechtigkeit zu vernehmen—obwohl der Text nach seinem Literalsinn vom tätigen Gehorsam gegenüber der Sinai-Tora spricht" (p. 219).

God. It is the righteousness of God who mercifully elects the Gentiles and who is faithful to Israel (see Rom. 11:11ff.).<sup>19</sup> In turn, the enrichment of the Gentiles in fulfillment of their expectations of righteousness and in the awakening of the knowledge of God shall mirror for Israel the riches of the glory of God who gives righteousness not exhaustible by the forces of human cultures. The enrichment of the Gentiles shall provoke Israel to "jealousy," entice it to knowledge of the Messiah (see 11:13ff.), and to the knowledge of the riches of God's glory.

A theology which not only attempts to reproduce Paul's thoughts, but to continue them, would indeed need first to develop a sensibility for the numerous ways in which the contemporary testimony that "We have found the Messiah!" (John 1:42) is impotent and unworthy of belief. That testimony's lack of power to persuade is almost completely grounded in the separation between knowledge of the Messiah and clear expectation of the establishment of God's righteousness and a corresponding praxis. Then an obscure power play, a mercy which effects no righteousness, all sorts of notions of righteousness in accordance with the morals of the day, private and more or less clearly-harmonized collective religious, political, and moral forms of egoism stand in the center of the faith. More precisely, they push their way into that center.

Over against that process, it is the shared task of Israel and the church, by means of their complicated relation, to witness to God's righteousness in the tension created by the bestowal of God's faithfulness and God's glory. God's righteousness, in which God gives divine mercy to human beings and thus chooses them for the distinction of experiencing God's glory and being mirrors of that glory, aims at bringing about justice, mercy, and knowledge of God among persons. Perceiving this means holding open and vulnerable for each other ways and forms in which groups of people, times, and cultures experience the connection between justice, mercy, and knowledge of God. It is precisely through their process of mutual relativization and transcendence, precisely in their capacity for revision in spite of readiness for perfection and stability, that the forms of openness to God's righteousness differ from all varieties of self-righteousness.

The immeasurable and unfathomable glory of God's righteousness is experienced not only in the tension between national and historically marked identities. It is also experienced in the situations of conflict between the sexes, between age groups, and between social strata. To be sure, the fact

<sup>19</sup> See also Otfried Hofius, "Das Evangelium und Israel. Erwägungen zu Röm 9-11," *ZThK* 83 (1986): 297ff., esp. 313-14.

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that God's righteousness also wills to take shape in the midst of these situations of conflict is felt and emphasized more strongly in our time than by Paul.<sup>20</sup> That in these situations of tension God does not will to destroy us, but rather to allow us to grow; that in the midst of these and other situations of conflict God gathers the women and men of God's kingdom ever anew from the public power of the Messiah's powerless and forsaken situation—that is made clear by the surprising and liberating knowledge of God's righteousness.

<sup>20</sup> See Bernadette Brooten's contribution in this volume.