

The Käsemann Hypothesis  
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Käsemann's hypothesis is that in Romans 1:17, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ("righteousness of God") is not a reference to some attribute or quality in God, but a reference to his divine activity or divine power, when he acts savingly in Christ Jesus. Cf. "The 'Righteousness of God' in Paul," in *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) pp. 168-182.

Text

Rom. 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

Rom. 1:16 Οὐ γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι. 17 δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, καθὼς γέγραπται· ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται. 18 Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων,

Quotes (emphases mine)

"From the outset it will be noticed that in the field of the Old Testament and of Judaism in general, righteousness does *not convey primarily the sense of a personal, ethical quality*, but of a *relationship*; originally signifying trustworthiness in regard to the community, it came to mean the rehabilitated standing of a member of the community who had been acquitted of an offence against it. Any interpretation which begins from the general concept and its specifically *juridical* application is bound to centre on the character of righteousness as gift and, in practice, on anthropology. But the formulation which Paul has taken over speaks primarily of *God's saving activity*, which is present in his gift as a precipitate without being completely dissolved into it." 172

"We see here that Paul has kept to the aspect of righteousness as *power*, implicit in the formulation itself and supported by various parallel expressions. God's power becomes God's gift when it takes possession of us and, so to speak, enters into us..." 173

"The widely-held view that God's righteousness is simply a property of the divine nature can now be rejected as misleading. It *derives from Greek theology*, which speculates about such properties; it contradicts the basic sense of 'righteousness' within the tradition of the Old Testament and later Judaism--namely, faithfulness in the context of the community; and it proves ultimately inadequate because it postulates what cannot be convincingly intellectualized--namely, the making-over to a human being of a property of the divine nature. *Δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* is for Paul, as it is for the Old Testament and Judaism in general, a phrase expressing divine activity, treating not of the self-subsistent, but of the self-revealing God.

We take the decisive step along the road to the proper understanding of Paul when, and only when, we grasp the indissoluble connection of *power and gift* within the conception of the

divine righteousness; having done so, we wonder why this finding has not long ago come to be taken for granted.” 174

“Paul was not primarily concerned with the Christian in some purely notional individual capacity, much less with the Christian personality. To say that a man only believes as an individual is simply to say that here, as in the case of ministry in the world, he cannot shrug off responsibility. But I find myself totally unable to assent to the view that Paul’s theology and his philosophy of history are oriented towards the individual.” 175-76

“But equally God continues in that faithfulness which is called *sedaka* in the Old Testament and is there, as in Judaism in general, bound up with the Covenant; the same faithfulness is very powerfully recalled in Rom. 9.” 180 [K. is on to something here, because the Sinai covenant is based upon righteousness, conditioned upon Israel’s obedience, though K. almost surely doesn’t get this.]

“All that we have been saying amounts to this: δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ is for Paul God’s sovereignty over the world revealing itself eschatologically in Jesus. And, remembering the Greek root, we may also say that it is rightful *power* with which God makes his cause to triumph in the world which has fallen away from him and which yet, as creation, is his inviolable possession.” 180

## Issues

1. How, if at all, does Käsemann distinguish δικαιοσύνη from δύναμις here? If the *gospel* is the δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ, why doesn’t 17 then just read δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται? That is, if Paul has a perfectly good word for “power,” one that he has just employed, why doesn’t he simply employ it again, creating a nice word-chain that would enable his readers to follow his thought? (This is similar to the criticism I have of NTW’s understanding of it as God’s “faithfulness”--since the πιστ-language is elsewhere used in Romans, and would have done the job perfectly, why employ δικαιοσύνη?)

2. Does the verb ἀποκαλύπτεται mean the same thing in 17 and 18, and, if so, what is the relation between the revelation of God righteousness and the revelation of God’s wrath? Is it that when God judges the earth in righteousness he displays his judicial wrath? And if so, would this not mean that the entire discussion is moving towards 3:26, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον καὶ δικαιῶντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ? Note that the preceding context refers to Christ as ἰλαστήριον, for a demonstration (twice repeated) of God’s righteousness, διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων 26 ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ, πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ. How is the revelation of God’s wrath “saving activity”?

Recall that wrath is not an insignificant reality in the OT (ὀργή occurs 298 times in the LXX, nearly as many as δικαιοσύνη, 336 times). Israel longs for God to judge the wicked, to judge the nations around her, by the expressing of his judicial wrath.

3. Is it likely that δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ refers to a different thing at the beginning of the pericope (17) than at the end (3:26)? In 3:24-26, it appears to refer to judicial matters, the temporary delaying and later propitiating of God's judicial wrath.

Rom. 3:24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness (τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ), because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness (τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ) at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier (δίκαιον καὶ δικαιούντα) of the one who has faith in Jesus.

4. Does δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ever mean, even in the OT, "saving power," in an abstract sense, or, alternatively, does it imply such merely because the covenant itself is predicated on the obedience of the Israelites? That is, when the Israelites appeal to God to save them because of his righteousness, is this or is this not due to the terms of the Sinai covenant, in which temporal blessings were pledged to obedience and temporal cursings to disobedience?

5. Does not Käsemann jump too quickly into Pauline theology without first doing Pauline exegesis? Most of Käsemann's argumentation deals with the theological consequences of various construals of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ--whether Luther's, that of the Reformed, or that of Bultmann-- without first demonstrating what the expression ordinarily means, especially in the OT. To be sure, Käsemann asserts that in the OT it means something like "saving power," but he does not actually demonstrate it, or wrestle seriously with it, until pp. 177 ff., where he says, "I have so far by-passed the question as to why Paul describes the eschatological saving action of God by this particular word δικαιοσύνη and does not always keep to ἀγάπη θεοῦ, which he also uses" (and note that Paul also uses, and in this very context, δύναμις θεοῦ, which Käsemann does not mention).

6. Is it not likely that the double prepositional phrase in 17 (ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν) modifies the verb (ἀποκαλύπτεται) and not the noun (δικαιοσύνη)? That is, whatever is disclosed historically about God's righteousness, it is not equally disclosed to all, but remains hidden, and is only disclosed *by* faith and *through* faith to those who *have* faith. ESV translates it: "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed *from faith for faith*, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith," apparently taking the expression "from faith for faith" as qualifying the verb ("is revealed by faith") rather than the noun, e.g., "In it the righteousness of God from faith for faith is revealed..." Käsemann rightly notes the citation of Habbakuk here, that "the righteous shall live by faith," but this does not necessitate that we construe the prepositional phrases in Paul's thought to qualify "righteousness;" they could equally plausibly qualify the verb, to make it clear that whatever is revealed by God in Christ is not *revealed* to all, but only to those who have faith. Käsemann's hypothesis that the two prepositional phrases modify the noun is not impossible in Greek, but is unlikely, since Greek ordinarily uses a definite article, in agreement with the noun, when it employs a prepositional phrase adjectivally. Without it, the ordinary Greek use of prepositions is adverbial, to modify the verb. An additional difficulty with Käsemann's rendering is that the word order is this: noun (qualified by genitive), prepositional phrase, verb, double prepositional phrase. Käsemann's construal requires the last two prepositional phrases to

leap, as it were, back across the verb and another prepositional phrase, to modify a noun with which, because there is no definite article, it has no agreement in case, number, or gender.

7. If the gospel is, in some sense, the “power of God,” and if δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ means something like “God’s saving power,” the passage would then be construed as this: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (to the Jew first and then to the Greek). For in it (the gospel-as-power) the saving power of God is revealed...” That is, if δικαιοσύνη is translated as the virtual equivalent of δύναμις, then 17 is not an additional stage in the reasoning but a redundancy.

8. There may be OT texts where δικαιοσύνη means something like “power,” “saving power,” or even “faithfulness to the covenant.” And certainly the term is commonly used as a general term of moral probity. But it is also indisputable that there are other texts where it plainly means God’s equity as an upright judge of the world.

a. These are texts where, at least by parallel implication, δικαιοσύνη is similar to, if not identical to, σωτηρία. These are the kinds of texts to which Käsemann makes reference. In some, the “salvation” is manifestly God’s judgment of Israel’s enemies. In others, this is not express, but the ones that are express are ordinarily precisely the judicial/forensic expressions of God’s righteous wrath that Käsemann denies.

Is. 46:12 “Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness (δικαιοσύνης)· 13 I bring near my righteousness (τὴν δικαιοσύνην μου); it is not far off, and my salvation (τὴν σωτηρίαν) will not delay; I will put salvation (σωτηρίαν) in Zion, for Israel my glory.”

Is. 51:5 My righteousness (ἡ δικαιοσύνη μου) draws near, my salvation (τὸ σωτήριόν μου) has gone out, and *my arms will judge the peoples*; the coastlands hope for me, and for my arm they wait. 6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; *for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment*, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner; but my salvation (τὸ δὲ σωτήριόν μου) will be forever, and my righteousness (ἡ δὲ δικαιοσύνη μου) will never be dismayed.... 8 For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool; but my righteousness (ἡ δὲ δικαιοσύνη μου) will be forever, and my salvation (τὸ δὲ σωτήριόν μου) to all generations.

Is. 56:1 Thus says the LORD: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed (τάδε λέγει κύριος φυλάσσετε κρίσιν ποιήσατε δικαιοσύνην ἤγγισεν γὰρ τὸ σωτήριόν μου παραγίνεσθαι καὶ τὸ ἔλεός μου ἀποκαλυφθῆναι).

Is. 62:1 For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness (ἡ δικαιοσύνη μου) goes forth as brightness, and her salvation (τὸ δὲ σωτήριόν μου) as a burning torch.

These texts sometimes explicitly indicate that the “salvation” or “deliverance” consists of God’s *judgment* being poured out on Israel’s enemies. Take Psalm 71 as an example. Verse 15 says: “My mouth will tell of your righteous acts (τὴν δικαιοσύνην σου), of your deeds of salvation (τὴν σωτηρίαν σου) all the day, for their number is past my knowledge.” This sounds like Käsemann’s theory of “righteousness” as “saving activity,” and it is. But it is precisely the kind of saving activity that happens when God judges Israel’s enemies. Consider the passage again in its context:

Psa. 71: 4 Rescue me, O my God, *from* the hand of the *wicked*, *from* the grasp of the *unjust* and *cruel* man. 5 For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth....10 For *my enemies* speak concerning me; those who watch for my life consult together 11 and say, “God has forsaken him; *pursue and seize him*, for there is none to *deliver* him.” 12 O God, be not far from me; O my God, make haste to help me! 13 May my *accusers be put to shame and consumed*; with scorn and disgrace may they be covered who seek my hurt. 14 But I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more. 15 My mouth will tell of your righteous acts (τὴν δικαιοσύνην σου), of your deeds of salvation (τὴν σωτηρίαν σου) all the day, for their number is past my knowledge.... 24 And my tongue will talk of your righteous help (τὴν δικαιοσύνην σου) all the day long, for they have been put to shame and disappointed who sought to do me hurt.

Note then, that there is a relation between “righteousness” and “salvation,” but the salvation, the saving power, is itself a *judicial* act, an act of God’s *judgment* upon the wicked enemies which becomes an act of *deliverance* of David *from* them.

b. The number of texts where δικαιοσύνη refers to general moral probity or uprightness are too numerous to count. No party to the discussion denies that this is a common usage. Käsemann merely wishes to suggest that in many/most Pauline texts it is not God’s general character of moral probity that is indicated by the term, but that character as it manifests itself in acts of saving power. I have no especial problem with that in texts; but my point would be precisely because God is a just judge, He does hold the wicked accountable, will one day express His judgment against them, thereby delivering the righteous. So, by my construal (the dominant historic construal), God’s righteous acts are an expression of His righteous nature, and there is less tension between the two.

c. Many other texts (over twenty) employ δικαιοσύνη refer to God in his office as Judge (and occasionally to human judges), in which he will show no partiality, but judge justly (and the theme of “no partiality” is not insignificant in Romans, cf. Rom. 2:11 For God shows no partiality; Rom. 3:22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; Rom. 10:12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.)

Psa. 9:4 For you have maintained my just cause; you have sat on the throne, giving righteous judgment (κρίνων δικαιοσύνην).

Psa. 9:8 and he judges (κρινεῖ) the world with righteousness (δικαιοσύνη); he judges (κρινεῖ) the peoples with uprightness.

Psa. 50:6 The heavens declare his righteousness (τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ), for God himself is judge (κριτής)!

Psa. 58:1 Do you indeed decree what is right (δικαιοσύνην), you gods? Do you judge (κρίνετε) the children of man uprightly?

Psa. 69:27 Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal (δικαιοσύνη) from you.

Psa. 71:12 O God, be not far from me; O my God, make haste to help me! 13 May my accusers be put to shame and consumed; with scorn and disgrace may they be covered who seek my hurt. 14 But I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more. 15 My mouth will tell of your righteous acts (τὴν δικαιοσύνην), of your deeds of salvation all the day, for their number is past my knowledge.

71:24 And my tongue will talk of your righteous help (τὴν δικαιοσύνην σου) all the day long, for they have been put to shame and disappointed who sought to do me hurt.

72: 1 Give the king your justice (ὁ κρίμα σου), O God, and your righteousness (τὴν δικαιοσύνην σου) to the royal son! 2 May he *judge* your people with righteousness (ἐν δικαιοσύνη), and your poor with justice (κρίσει)! [N.b. chiasm here, from “justice to “righteousness” to “righteousness” to “justice”]

Psa. 96:11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; 12 let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy 13 before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge (κρίναι) the earth. He will judge (κρινεῖ) the world in righteousness (ἐν δικαιοσύνη), and the peoples in his faithfulness (τῇ ἀληθείᾳ).

Psa. 98:9 before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity (ἤκει κρίναι τὴν γῆν κρινεῖ τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐν δικαιοσύνη καὶ λαοὺς ἐν εὐθύτητι).

Psa. 119:40 Behold, I long for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life! (ἐν τῇ δικαιοσύνη σου ζῆσόν με)

Psa. 119:62 At midnight I rise to praise you, because of your righteous rules. (τὰ κρίματα τῆς δικαιοσύνης σου)

Psa. 119:75 I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous (δικαιοσύνη τὰ κρίματά σου), and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.

Psa. 119:106 I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to keep your righteous rules (τὰ κρίματα τῆς δικαιοσύνης σου).

Psa. 119:121 I have done what is just and right (ἐποίησα κρίμα καὶ δικαιοσύνην); do not leave me to my oppressors. [n.b. in all these the rules are righteous, and the psalmist, when he conforms to them, is righteous, appealing to an upright/righteous God to exonerate and defend him--not because such a God is “faithful,” or “powerful,” but because he is upright]

Mic. 7:9 I will bear the indignation (ὀργήν) of the LORD because I have sinned against him, until he pleads my cause (ἕως τοῦ δικαιῶσαι αὐτόν τὴν δίκην μου) and executes judgment for me (ποιήσῃ τὸ κρίμα μου). He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon his vindication (τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ).

Is. 1:26 And I will restore your judges (τοὺς κριτάς σου) as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness (πόλις δικαιοσύνης), the faithful city.

Is. 5:7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice (κρίσιν), but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness (δικαιοσύνην), but behold, an outcry!

Is. 9:7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness (ἐν δικαιοσύνη καὶ ἐν κρίματι) from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Is. 16:5 then a throne will be established in steadfast love, and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice (κρίνων καὶ ἐκζητῶν κρίμα) and is swift to do righteousness (σπεύδων δικαιοσύνην).

Jer. 22:3 Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness (ποιεῖτε κρίσιν καὶ δικαιοσύνην), and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. [n.b. this text could be a reference to what might be called social justice rather than retributive justice]

If Käsemann is concerned to deny “its specifically *juridical* application,” then he must reject major portions of the LXX and assume that Paul does also. Because, in the LXX, the language of is profoundly juridical. Further, as we have seen in the case of texts like Psalm 71, even when the language is “soteric,” and an expression of God’s “power” or “activity,” it is precisely power that judges the wicked, power that rescues the righteous

from them, and therefore, also juridical. Käsemann complains about “Greek philosophy,” when, in fact, it is the LXX that informs Paul’s usage.

9. Thus, the use of the term for God’s uprightness as a judge is plainly well-established in the LXX, so part of the question is: Into what context does Paul put the term now? Is 1:18 a throw-away, that Paul quickly leaves behind, or does 1:18 introduce everything through chapter 3? Note how much of this section (Romans 1-3) refers to God’s judicial judgment, and how often the δικαιοσύνη language is part of that reality:

- 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.
- 1:24 Therefore God gave them up (παρέδωκεν) in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,
- 1:26 For this reason God gave them up (παρέδωκεν) to dishonorable passions.
- 1:28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up (παρέδωκεν) to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.
- 1:29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness (ἀδικία)
- 1: 32 Though they know God’s decree (τὸ δίκαιωμα τοῦ θεοῦ; AV “judgment of God”) that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.
- 2:1 Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. 2 We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things.
- 2: 3 Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?
- 2: 5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment (δικαιοκρισίας) will be revealed.
- 2:6 He will render to each one according to his works: 7 to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.
- 2:8 and who are persuaded of unrighteousness (πειθομένους δὲ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ)
- 2:12 For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.
- 2:13 for the doers of the law will be justified (δικαιωθήσονται)
- 2: 16 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.
- 3:5 But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God (θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην), what shall we say? That God is unrighteous (ἄδικος) to inflict wrath (ὀργήν) on us?
- 3:8 Their condemnation is just (ἔνδικόν).
- 3:9 What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,
- 3:10 as it is written: “None is righteous, no not one (Οὐκ ἔστιν δίκαιος οὐδὲ εἷς).
- 3:19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable (ὑπόδικος) to God.
- 3:20 For no human being will be justified (οὐ δικαιωθήσεται) in his sight by works of the law...
- 3:21 ff. But now the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ) through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified (δικαιούμενοι) by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness (τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ), because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness (τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ) at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier (δίκαιον καὶ δικαιούντα) of the one who has faith in Jesus.



In this context, it appears to me much more plausible that “righteousness of God” is that quality of God that causes him to judge uprightly, to “by no means clear the guilty,” a refusal to compromise justice, which therefore obliges his Son to pay guilt’s penalty on the cross as a “propitiation.”