

# **Why Is God Justified in Romans?: Vindicating Paul's Use of Psalm 51 in Romans 3:4**

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## **Abstract**

The relationship between Romans 3:4 and Psalm 51:4 (Psalm 50:6 in the Septuagint) has long puzzled scholars. Many suggest that Paul's use of Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> either seems not to fit the logic of Romans 3 or does not reflect the psalmist's meaning. This article offers an interpretation of Romans 3:4 that eliminates the apparent tension between the two texts. It clarifies Paul's meaning in Romans 3 by reinterpreting Psalm 51:4 in its context. Both Psalm 51:4 and Romans 3:4 refer to God's saving righteousness. The conclusion that Romans 3:4 speaks of God's saving righteousness is not unique to this study. However, typical arguments in favour of this view are susceptible to significant criticism. Specifically, they do not demonstrate how the whole of Psalm 50<sup>LXX</sup> shapes Paul's argument, and/or they do not explore the possibility that Psalm 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> also refers to God's saving righteousness.<sup>1</sup> This article addresses both issues. After reviewing the theological and exegetical significance of Romans 3:4, four major questions that challenge readers today will be surveyed. Next, an integrated exegesis of both passages, showing how Psalm 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> sheds light on Romans 3, will be presented.

## **Key Terms**

Romans; Psalms; Psalm 51; Psalm 50<sup>LXX</sup>; Romans 3:4; justification; saving, imputed, punitive righteousness; intertextuality

## **1 Why is God Righteous?**

Why does Paul quote Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>? In Rom 3:1–8, Paul writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Even in a few cases where scholars address one (or more rarely both) of these tasks, their arguments are underdeveloped.

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. <sup>3</sup> What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? <sup>4</sup> By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, “*That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.*”<sup>2</sup> <sup>5</sup> But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) <sup>6</sup> By no means! For then how could God judge the world? <sup>7</sup> But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? <sup>8</sup> And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.<sup>3</sup>

In Ps 50:3–6<sup>LXX</sup> David writes:<sup>4</sup>

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great mercy, and according to the abundance of your compassion blot out my lawless deed. <sup>4</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my lawlessness, and from my sin cleanse me, <sup>5</sup> because my lawlessness I know and my sin is ever before me. <sup>6</sup> Against you alone did I sin, and what is evil before you I did, *so that you may be justified in your words and be victorious when you are judged.*

Interpreters usually interpret Paul in two ways. First, some exegetes suppose God is justified in Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> because he judges David’s sin. This reading is then used to explain Rom 3:4. Others think the flow of Rom 3:1–3 requires Rom 3:4 to refer to God’s saving righteousness. Accordingly, Paul claims that God is justified because he will be faithful to his promises to Israel. In each case, one context is generally prioritised at the expense of the other.

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<sup>2</sup> Adjusted from the ESV. I read κρίνεσθαι as passive (“you are judged”) rather than middle voice. Thus, the quote’s second line explains the first. See Pss. Sol. 2:15; 3:3, 5; 4:9; 8:7, 26, 29–35; 9:3; 17:12; see also Isa 43:6, 26; 45:19–25. Cf. Dunn (1988, 133–134); Longenecker (2016, 348); Watson (2016, 407).

<sup>3</sup> English translations of the LXX come from *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (NETS). All other biblical citations come from the *English Standard Version* (ESV). For simplicity, I maintain quotations from scholars who do not specifically appeal to Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup> but instead cite Ps 51 (e.g., Ps 51:4 = Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>). I have adapted the NETS translation of Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> to reflect the passive κρίνεσθαι (“you are judged”).

<sup>4</sup> For conciseness, this article refers to David as the speaker, following tradition.

Romans 3 depends on Ps 51 far more than many assume. Paul does not merely borrow wording from Ps 51; rather, the psalmist's logic is imported into and integral for Rom 3. Paul demonstrates that God is not a liar. God is justified in fulfilling his promises to Israel, yet he will do so apart from the law. Thus, God shows himself righteous through saving David, an exemplar of one who is justified apart from the law.

This article challenges interpretations that view God's righteousness in Romans as either Christ's imputed righteousness or God's punitive righteousness. Accordingly, this intertextual reading has systemic implications for how one understands the broader argument of Romans.

## 2 The Significance of Romans 3:4

Romans 3:4 is significant for several reasons. Verse 4 is a pivot point within a passage that interweaves Rom 2, with Paul's discussion of God's righteousness, and Rom 3. Paul quotes Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> to rebut objections that his teaching nullifies God's righteousness. Responding to this concern is important to Paul, as evident by the fact that he revisits the question in Rom 9:13. He already highlights God's righteousness as a major theme in Rom 1:16–17: the gospel reveals God's righteousness. Allusions to God's righteousness reoccur in key sections (e.g., Rom 3:4–5, 21–22, 25–26; 10:3). Thus, one's understanding of this idea shapes one's interpretation of the entire letter.<sup>5</sup>

Romans 3:4 helps clarify the meaning of God's righteousness in Romans.<sup>6</sup> Limiting our view of God's character to *any* single text is methodologically suspect (Schreiner 1998, 69). Nonetheless, this observation does not diminish the passage's importance for clarifying the meaning of God's righteousness. Hermeneutically, Rom 3:1–8 is a key text precisely because v. 4 cites Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>. Accordingly, one's interpretation is checked against two separate contexts. Also, there is added significance in

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<sup>5</sup> One's reading of Rom 3:1–8 significantly influences how one understands multiple sections of the letter. Cf. Penna (1988).

<sup>6</sup> Multiple references to God's righteousness are found in the immediate context (Rom 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26 twice) and distant context (Rom 1:17; 10:3; cf. 9:14; cf. Ps 50:16<sup>LXX</sup>). Thus, Rom 3:4 (Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>), though using δικαιοθῆς, contributes to Paul's discussion of God's righteousness. Verse 5's θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην directly stems from 3:4. As secondary support, Paul uses δικαιόω to reference people's righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) elsewhere in Rom 4:5–6, 9, 11, 22, 25; 6:4; 10:6, 10. Cf. Price (1974, 271); Kuyper (1977, 247); Smith (2008, 242–244).

the fact that Rom 3:4 falls amid a flurry of other references to God's righteousness (Rom 1:17; 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26).

To understand Paul's view of justification, one should know why Paul refers to the "righteousness of God." Many Protestants interpret the phrase as righteousness gifted *from God*, a legal status imputed to believers in Christ (McGrath 2005; McCormack 2006; Vickers 2006). Others claim it refers to God's character, either his "covenant faithfulness" or upright indignation towards sin. Some think God's righteousness highlights his reign over the world or his saving actions on behalf of his people.<sup>7</sup> These views are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is beyond the scope of this article to review these arguments.<sup>8</sup>

### 3 Contrasting Perspectives on Romans 3:4

How is Rom 3:4 typically interpreted? Many commentators contend that God's righteousness in v. 4 specifically refers to his wrath or penal condemnation of sin.<sup>9</sup> That is, God is shown right by condemning sinners. This interpretation is *assumed* more often than defended due to certain views of Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, some scholars argue that God in Rom

<sup>7</sup> Käsemann (1994, 81) says v. 4 "is to be regarded as a key passage for the whole of Paul's doctrine of justification." Thus, understanding v. 4 has added significance for assessing Käsemann's apocalyptic reading; see also Campbell (2008).

<sup>8</sup> Translating righteousness/justification language (ῥησ, δικαιόω) is notoriously difficult, given Paul's frequent use of Isaiah and Psalms in Romans; cf. Krašovec (2003). For simplicity's sake, I will generally translate the noun and verb respectively as "righteousness" and "justify." These translations do not try to nuance the significance of related words in various contexts; instead, they follow conventional renderings that convey a broad range of meaning. For example, δικαιόω generally means to prove, demonstrate, vindicate, etc. Cf. BDAG, "δικαιόω"; L&N, "δικαιόω." Cf. also Achtemeier (1962, 80–99); Ziesler (1972); Reumann (1982; 1992, 724–773); Wright (1988, 590–592); Toon (1996, 687–688); McGrath (2005); Dunn (2006, 335–345); Bird (2007, 6–39); Sanders (2015, 501–521).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mounce (1995, 105); Moo (1996, 190); Murray (1997, 95–96); Morris (1998, 155–156); Schreiner (1998, 151–159); Wright (2002, 453). Again in Berkhof (1938, 370); Hill (1967, 158); Hall (1983, 187–188); Piper (1983, 127); Hays (1989, 49–50); Stanley (1992, 86–87); Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman (1998, 735); Seifrid (2000, 58); Grieb (2002, 33–34); Dabourne (2004, 138); Neyrey (2004, 112); Cottrell (2005, 131); Demarest (2006, 367); Jewett (2006, 246–247); Ochsenmeier (2007, 140, 143); Bruce (2008, 101–102); Lange et al. (2008, 111); Lee (2010, 192); Longman and Garland (2010, 63); Kruse (2012, 177–178); Wright (2013, 492).

<sup>10</sup> Turner (2010, 296) says the passage's "unspoken assumption must be that God will inflict his wrath on us . . ."

3:4 is justified by his saving faithfulness. Accordingly, God demonstrates righteousness by keeping covenant with his people despite their unfaithfulness (Rom 3:1–4a; cf. 2:12–29). Unfortunately, this position is rarely and inadequately defended.<sup>11</sup> Lacking are detailed exegetical and theological arguments in view of *both* contexts, Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup> and Rom 3.

Cranfield (1975, 183) only mentions the “possibility” that Paul has in mind God’s faithfulness to David, yet he never develops this idea.<sup>12</sup> Lyonnet (1959) argues that Paul draws from a long Jewish tradition of praising God for his saving righteousness despite Israel’s sin. Yet Lyonnet hardly notes the many contextual clues found in Rom 3 and does not explore possible intertextual links between Rom 3 and Ps 51. Furthermore, he makes no attempt to explain the logical flow of the psalm’s opening verses. Although Käsemann (1994, 81–83) emphasises the importance of Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup> for interpreting Rom 3:4, he assumes the psalm should be read apocalyptically without offering an extensive exegetical defence. Alternatively, this article traces the logic of each passage without importing assumptions presumed by an apocalyptic reading.

Woyke (2001, 205) observes that Rom 3:4 and Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> both speak of God’s saving righteousness. He claims that Rom 3:21 further emphasises God’s saving justice. He writes: “Andererseits aber kann sich die Hoffnung auf Gottes heilschaffende Gerechtigkeit völlig uneschatologisch in individuellen Bußgebeten Ausdruck verschaffen, so etwa im Kontext der Psalmen, die Paulus Röm 3,4.20 zitiert bzw. paraphrasiert (Ps 50:16<sup>LXX</sup>; 142:1, 11<sup>LXX</sup>).” However, Woyke gives no exegetical argument beyond this passing reference.

Gignac’s treatment is noteworthy (2005, 54–55). He argues that God changes roles in Rom 3, from the accuser to the accused, and speculates that Paul’s rhetorical strategy reflects a change from the MT to the LXX. He privileges an Aramaic reading of the root זכה over the Hebrew (“blameless”). Thus, he suggests God is an accuser (in the MT) but becomes the accused in the LXX. The vast weight of his argument hinges on this

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Williams (1980, 268–270); Dunn (1988, 134); Byrne (1996, 109); Gundry (2011, loc 610); Williams’s “brief look” at 3:4 never analyses Ps 51 (50<sup>LXX</sup>). See also Achtemeier (1962, 94), yet he takes a more conventional view in Achtemeier (1990, 87); Keesmaat (2004, 145); Onesti and Brauch (2004, 965); perhaps, Ziesler (1972, 190); cf. Martin (1991, 174–196, 333–375); Martos (2013, 266). Bird (2007, 37) simply says Rom 3:3–5 is an “instance where God’s righteousness is umbilically related to God’s faithfulness.”

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Leenhardt (1957, 92).

tenuous conjecture. Also, he does not address broader grammatical and syntactical issues. Gignac observes important thematic connections between the psalm and Rom 3, yet he does not highlight other intertextual links informing Paul's argument.

### 3.1 *Challenges when interpreting Romans 3:4*

Four challenges confront interpreters of Rom 3:4. First, Paul uses the phrase ὅπως ἄν, which normally conveys purpose.<sup>13</sup> Moo (1996) summarises the tension:

What makes Paul's quotation of this verse difficult is that the negative application of God's justice in the Psalm—God is right when he judges—is used to support what is apparently a positive revelation of God's faithfulness to his people (vv. 5–6a). It is possible, of course, that Paul uses the quotation very generally to support the notion that God is faithful. But if this were so, it is peculiar that he would include the troublesome “in order that” on the second line in his quotation. (p. 187)<sup>14</sup>

How do *both* Romans and Psalms express purpose?<sup>15</sup> What is problematic about saying Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> uses a purpose clause? David writes, “Against you alone did I sin and what is evil before you I did, so that (למען; ὅπως ἄν) you may be justified in your words and be victorious when you go to court.” However, if “so that” indicates purpose, David claims he intentionally sinned in order to demonstrate God's righteousness. This absurdity leads interpreters to suggest a grammatically less likely reading, namely that ὅπως ἄν indicates result. For instance, Longenecker (2016, 348–349), who does not discuss ὅπως, asserts 3:4b is a result clause.

Second, there is the pitfall of inconsistency when explaining God's righteousness in Rom 1–4. In Rom 1:17, God's righteousness carries positive, *saving* connotations. Many interpreters then suggest God's righteousness in Rom 3:4–5 concerns punitive justice. Yet the next references to God's righteousness in Rom 3:21–22 are both naturally understood in terms of salvation. Some scholars (e.g., Moo 1996, 236–241)

<sup>13</sup> Cf. BDAG, “ὅπως”; Wallace (1996, 676); LEH, “ὅπως.” Among commentators, see Morris (1988, 156 n. 22); Moo (1996, 187); Schreiner (1998, 151–152); Seifrid (2007, loc 23107).

<sup>14</sup> Cf., e.g., Williams (2007, 78–80). Bruce (2008, 113–114). Cranfield (1985, 74–75).

<sup>15</sup> Schreiner (1998, 151) even calls this a “serious difficulty.” Cf. Murray (1997, 95).

claim that Paul quickly reverts back to God's punitive righteousness in Rom 3:25–26. Alternating the meaning of God's righteousness in this way is arbitrary. This phenomenon amounts to the totality transfer fallacy whereby all possible meanings of a word are applied in the same passage without respect for context. One expects some consistency in meaning within a narrow context like Rom 3:3–26, where Paul alludes to God's righteousness at least seven times (Rom 3:4, 5, 21, 22, 25, 26 twice).

This potential for inconsistency seems to lead Moo (1996, 189–190) to adopt a strained reading of Rom 3:3–4. He assumes that God demonstrates faithfulness and truth by punishing his people's sins.<sup>16</sup> Moo (1996, 900 n. 56) cites Neh 9:32–33 and Lam 1:18, but neither one implies that God's faithfulness/truth is demonstrated through punitive action. Nehemiah says that God has rightly allowed his people's suffering *because* they acted wickedly despite God's faithfulness (expressed in God's keeping covenant and steadfast love, according to 9:32).

Third, readers are challenged to integrate the purported meanings of Rom 3:4 and Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> in their respective contexts. Scholars rarely give extended attention to how Ps 50:6b<sup>LXX</sup> functions within the psalm. Instead, many assume David speaks about God's punitive justice.<sup>17</sup> This view is then imported into Romans (see also the fourth interpretive challenge below). Longenecker's (2016, 173 n. 66, 348–349) few scattered comments about Rom 3:4 and Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> are difficult to interpret. He describes God's righteousness in Ps 50:3–14<sup>LXX</sup> as God's righteousness gifted to David, yet for Rom 3:4 he explains God's righteousness as divine "faithfulness." Also, various scholars link Ps 51 (50<sup>LXX</sup>) and Rom 3 by interpreting God's righteousness eschatologically. They refer to the creator's prerogative both to judge and save the world. Consequently, their exegesis misses the specific

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ps 96:13; Prov 29:14; Isa 38:19; 63:7. Campbell (2008, 208) states: "God's fidelity is intrinsic to any act of salvation."

<sup>17</sup> Flebbe (2008, 37–38) primarily views God's judgment in Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> as punitive: "Der Psalmist erkennt das Gericht Gottes über ihn als gerecht an aufgrund seiner Sünde." His reading becomes forced when suggesting that we should simultaneously see God's covenant faithfulness in v. 4. His reasoning might be influenced by the mention of "oracle" in Rom 3:2. Flebbe reaches beyond the text of the psalm by claiming Nathan's oracles (*Heilsworte*) of past salvation and words of present judgment in 2 Sam 12:7–9 should be read into Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup>. Otto (1978, 159) offers a strained exegesis: it appears he turns the confession that God is right to judge into the very act of saving faith.

sense in which God manifests righteousness within the specific historical-grammatical context of Romans and Psalms (e.g., punitive, saving).<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, interpretations of Rom 3:4b should fit the immediate setting of Romans, since v. 4b follows from the prior context. Paul's focus in Rom 3:1–4a is unmistakable. He responds to the charge that God is not "faithful" or "true" to his people Israel (Rom 3:3–4). Yet, appealing to God's punitive justice does not answer the objection. In fact, it restates the interlocutor's premise (i.e., God condemns rather than saves Israel).

Since the objection concerns God's faithfulness to the Jews, one should give attention to the OT background. God's righteousness *specifically with respect to his people Israel* most often carries saving, covenantal connotations.<sup>19</sup> God will be faithful to his promises. If Paul explains God's righteousness in terms of punishment against Israel, this usage would be atypical.

### 3.2 Why does Paul use Psalm 50<sup>LXX</sup> in Romans 3:4?

At this point the contexts of Rom 3:4 and Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> need to be compared. First, we recall Paul's argument in Rom 2–3:4a, which sets up the quote in 3:4b. Second, we consider Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> in its original OT context. Romans 3:4 can be misinterpreted if one overlooks the flow of Ps 50:3–6<sup>LXX</sup>. Next, a reading of Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup> is offered that makes sense of Rom 3:4b in its context. Romans 3:4b not only stems from 3:1–4a; it leads naturally to 3:5–8. Thus, this reading addresses the challenges noted above.

In Rom 2:1–3:4, Paul critiques law-boasting Jews. He repeatedly uses the first-person and presses the Jew-gentile distinction (2:12–14, 17, 23–24, 25–28).<sup>20</sup> Paul considers those "who have the written code and circumcision but break the law . . . a Jew who is merely one outwardly" (2:27–28). Lacking the Spirit, they fail to be a light to the gentiles (2:20–24; 3:2–3). Paul's criticism raises the question of ethnic privilege. If "a Jew is

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Stuhlmacher (1998, 49–50); Hofius (2002, 44–45); Härle and Neuner (2004, 37–39); cf. also Käsemann (1994, 81–82).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Achtemeier (1962, 82–83); Reumann (1992, 725–735). Note wherever צדק and שפט appear together in the OT (as in Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>), they carry a positive, salvific meaning.

<sup>20</sup> There is no space to fully address commentators like Stowers, Campbell and others who posit a rhetorical structure that swaps Paul and the interlocutor's role (relative to traditional interpretations). Nevertheless, the coherence between Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup> and Rom 3 (as argued in this article) strongly suggests a traditional view of the dialogue and addresses objections against this view by Stowers and others. See Stowers (1994, 159–175); Campbell (2009, 572–578).



one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart,” then “what advantage has the Jew” (2:29; 3:1)?

Paul responds, “Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God” (3:2). Nuances aside, most scholars agree the term “oracles of God” carries positive, salvific connotations.<sup>21</sup> Given Rom 2, one might infer God's faithfulness depends upon Israel's faithfulness (3:3). Therefore, Paul cites Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> to vindicate God's faithfulness. Although speaking of God's “righteousness” (3:4, 5),<sup>22</sup> the logical connection in 3:4b (ὅπως ἄν) indicates that God's righteousness *in this context* refers to his faithfulness and truthfulness (to saving “oracles”; 3:2).

Here we must be vigilant to avoid inconsistency.<sup>23</sup> Murray's comments are typical of others. He rightly notes that Rom 3:1–3 speak of God's faithfulness to bring about salvation. Murray (1997, 95) then states: “The appeal to Scripture (Psalm 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>) in this connection presents some difficulty because of the difference between the relationship in which David spoke these words and that in which Paul adduces them.” Murray says God is declared righteous because he judges David's sin in Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup>. Accordingly, Murray (1997, 92–95) claims Rom 3:4 refers to God's “condemnatory judgment.” Ignoring the logical connection between v. 3 and v. 4, he supports his interpretation using the “succeeding context.”

Moo's thorough treatment of Rom 3:4 also fails to reconcile the tension. He calls the purpose clause in v. 4 “clear” but “troublesome” (Moo 1996, 187). For Moo, Paul's citation supports “a positive revelation of God's faithfulness,” although Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> gives the line a “negative application.” Moo's reading of the psalm shapes his conclusion about Rom 3:3–4, “We must assume, then, a transition of sorts between vv. 3 and 4” such that “the ‘truthfulness’ of God in v. 4a itself includes this negative aspect of God's faithfulness to his word [i.e., via judging sin]” (1996, 188). Once again, the difficulty of reconciling Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> and Rom 3:4 leads to the assumption that v. 4b suddenly refers to God's punitive righteousness, despite the natural flow of the passage.

<sup>21</sup> One exception is Seifrid (2007, loc 23082–23083), who reads vv. 10–18 back into v. 2, such that λόγια refers to God's judgment or “charge against humanity.” This interpretation makes no sense of v. 2, which responds to v. 1, saying circumcision, that is, Jewish identity, has an advantage. Cf. Murray (1997, 94); Schreiner (1998, 149).

<sup>22</sup> This is conveyed both by the verb δικαιοθῆς (v. 4) and directly by δικαιοσύνην (v. 5).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Schreiner (1988, 149–151).

On the other hand, Dunn (1988, 133–134) argues that God is justified because he faithfully keeps his covenant promises in a non-punitive sense (cf. Cambier 1976, 211–212). Dunn does not directly address the ὅπως-clause. Instead, he presumes Paul cites Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> because the psalm shows God's justice via his judgment against David's "lawlessness and sin" (Dunn 1988, 133). Dunn struggles to explain how God's righteousness in Rom 3:4 is saving, or non-punitive, whilst simultaneously having a punitive meaning in Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup>. In short, Dunn does not show how the quotation functions in both Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> and Rom 3:4 (cf. Byrne 1996, 108–109, 111).

#### 4 Why is God Justified in Psalm 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>?

In Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>, what is the meaning of ὅπως ἂν δικαιωθῇς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις σου ("so that you may be justified in your words")?<sup>24</sup> Why is God justified in v. 6b? Interpreters of Romans normally assume God is justified in condemning David's sin.<sup>25</sup> After all, David in vv. 5–6a<sup>LXX</sup> confesses, "because my lawlessness I know and my sin is ever before me. Against you alone did I sin, and what is evil before you I did."

A few observations help answer these questions. First, we will see that v. 6b<sup>LXX</sup> is a purpose clause. Second, the logic of v. 6<sup>LXX</sup> must be explained within the immediate context. The psalm's structure confirms our reading. Third, it should be clarified how David's prayer makes sense both within Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup> and the broader context of the OT. Elsewhere, OT writers discuss God's righteousness and use syntax in a way similar to Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup>.

Like Rom 3:4b, Ps 50:6b<sup>LXX</sup> also uses ὅπως, which routinely conveys purpose in the LXX.<sup>26</sup> What idea is modified by ὅπως (and וְכִי, MT)?<sup>27</sup> Readers might easily confuse what David *says* with what he *does*. Commentators explain the *confession* with the purpose clause (cf. Hall 1983, 187). This view is problematic. Consider the relationship between Ps 50:5–6a, 6b<sup>LXX</sup>:

<sup>5</sup> . . . my lawlessness I know and my sin is ever before me. <sup>6a</sup> Against you alone did I sin, and what is evil before you I did, <sup>6b</sup> so that you

<sup>24</sup> While this article focuses on the first phrase in 6b, the two phrases might constitute synonymous parallelism, where each rephrases the other. Cf. Kselman (1977, 251–252).

<sup>25</sup> As do most OT scholars. Cf. Eaton (2003, 206); Goldingay (2007, 129).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. LEH, "ὅπως."

<sup>27</sup> Krašovec (2014, 422) notes, "A bone of contention in the history of interpretation of verse 6b is the meaning of the conjunction [וְכִי]."

may be justified in your words and be victorious when you go to law

But notice the sequence of actions:

I [David] sinned . . .  
 I did what is evil . . .  
*so that*  
 you [God] may be justified . . .

If we suppose v. 6b<sup>LXX</sup> explains vv. 5–6a<sup>LXX</sup>, the purpose clause would explain the reason why David sinned. It does *not* explain why he confesses his sin. David does not say “I confess my sin *so that* you may be justified.” Rather, he says, “I sinned . . . did what was evil . . . so that . . .” Few if any commentators accept the idea that David sinned *in order that* God will be declared righteous.

Verses 5–6a<sup>LXX</sup> are a confession, yet the “so that,” grammatically, does not modify any verbs that mean “to confess.” The verbs in the passage explicitly state David’s action (i.e., sinning). What David *says* (i.e., confession) is not equivalent to what he *does* (i.e., sin).<sup>28</sup>

We must explain the purpose clause.<sup>29</sup> Despite claiming ὅπως conveys purpose, many think ὅπως indicates a result clause (e.g., Seifrid 2000, 58; Schreiner 1998, 152).<sup>30</sup> That is, God’s judgment becomes the result of David’s sin, not its purpose. Interpreters attribute purpose *to God*. Seifrid (2004, 137) thus states: “[T]he psalmist confesses that his sin

<sup>28</sup> Ross (2011, 713) attempts this by claiming “I know” (יָדַעַתִּי, 51:3<sup>MT</sup>) has a causative translation, such as “My sin (חַטֹּאתַי) I caused you to know” or “I made known to you.” He suggests יָדַעַתִּי (an imperfect form of יָדַע) “probably [has] the nuance here” of the “perfect tense, definite past” verb יָדַעְתִּי in [v. 4a], i.e., “I have sinned.” One problem with this view is the hiphil “normally serves as the causative of the Qal imperfect.” See Van der Merwe, Kroeze, and Naudé (1998, 86); Waltke and O’Connor (1990, 433). Second, David does not add a second-person pronoun, as would be expected with Ross’s interpretation. Cf. Ps 32:5, where the psalmist uses the hiphil יָדַעְתִּיךָ with a suffixed second-person pronoun. Because Ross (2011, 706) regards Ps 32 as “a sequel to Psalm 51,” he finds theological reason to read the hiphil יָדַעְתִּיךָ from Ps 32 back into the imperfect verb form in Ps 51:5<sup>MT</sup>. Finally, the LXX, which Paul cites, uses γινώσκω, “to know,” rather than the causative γνωρίζω. Cf. LEH, “ὅπως.” Also, Kraus (1993, 503).

<sup>29</sup> The ὅπως ἄν (למען MT) mitigates against reading v. 6<sup>LXX</sup> like Lam 1:18; 2 Chr 12:6; Dan 9:14; Ezra 9:15.

<sup>30</sup> Contra Krašovec (2014, 429), a supposed third possible translation (“then too”) by Ridderbos (1966, 307–308) and Zenger (2005, 13) adds no clarity.

effected the hidden and strange purpose of God.” Yet, the problem remains that vv. 5–6a<sup>LXX</sup> mention David’s action, not God’s. Nothing about the syntax suggests ὅπως explains *God’s* purpose. If anything, ὅπως would seem to explain *David’s* sinful action (which we saw above is problematic). In short, using ὅπως to attribute purpose to God is unfounded syntactically.

Though Paul uses the LXX, the MT reinforces this reading of Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> (51:6<sup>MT</sup>). The למען in 51:6<sup>MT</sup> normally translates “so that,” conveying purpose.<sup>31</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger (2005, 13) rule out the possibility that למען indicates result. Weiser (1962, 404) says v. 6<sup>MT</sup> conveys “purpose.” Tate (1990, 17) claims למען “has stimulated a great deal of somewhat perplexed discussion” because the purpose clause “produces an extraordinary tension between 6ab and 6c: ‘I have sinned against you . . . in order that you may be justified.’” He finally settles for the less common rendering of למען (i.e., a result clause) in order to avoid “theologizing” (Tate 1990, 18).

How can we preserve the purpose clause, which is a more natural reading of the LXX (ὅπως) that Paul uses (and agrees with the MT למען)? David’s four imperatives in 50:3–4<sup>LXX</sup> petition God to save him. Verses 5–6a<sup>LXX</sup> give the *occasion* for his request. Ps 50:5<sup>LXX</sup> uses the conjunction ὅτι. Verse 6b<sup>LXX</sup> states the *purpose* for which God should answer David. Accordingly, the two clauses (5–6a, 6b) give two answers to the question “why?” Why does David need God’s mercy? Because he sinned against God (vv. 5–6a).<sup>32</sup> Why should God cleanse him? Because God will be shown righteous (v. 6b).<sup>33</sup> We can similarly understand the Hebrew syntax of Ps 51<sup>MT</sup>.<sup>34</sup> This reading enables one to interpret coherently *both* Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup> and Rom 3 and overcomes the challenges above.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Koehler, “למן” in *HALOT*. Contra Goldingay (2007, 122), following Ridderbos (1966, 307–309). However, not only are there comparatively few possible examples where למן indicates result, many examples listed by Tate (1990, 18) are ambiguous or doubtful (e.g., 2 Kgs 13:23, likely meaning “for the sake of”; cf. Exod 11:9; Ps 30:12). Contra Krašovec (2014, 426), Ps 68:23 probably indicates purpose. Where verses indicate purpose, one often sees a result; yet, the presence of a result does not mean a clause *primarily* signifies result. Also, Christopher Wright (2014, 242) calls it a “purposive conjunction.” Krašovec (2014, 426) observes “in order that” is the more ancient rendering.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Ps 41:4.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Ps 6:1–4. Intriguingly, Ross (2011, 262–265) interprets Ps 6 as I interpret Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger (2005, 13) comment, “[Verse 6b<sup>LXX</sup>] is a final or consecutive clause dependent on the petitions in [vv. 3–4<sup>LXX</sup>] for God’s steadfast love and mercy; [vv. 5–6a<sup>LXX</sup>] are a parenthesis.” Unfortunately, they do not develop this possibility.

Ps 50:3–6<sup>LXX</sup>**Four Requests**

[50:3] Ἐλέησόν με ὁ θεός  
κατὰ τὸ μέγα ἔλεός σου καὶ  
κατὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν σου  
ἐξάλειψον τὸ ἀνόμημά μου

[50:4] ἐπὶ πλεῖον πλῦνόν με ἀπὸ τῆς ἀνομίας μου  
καὶ  
ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας μου καθάρισόν με

**Explanatory Clauses**

[50:5] ὅτι  
τὴν ἀνομίαν μου ἐγὼ γινώσκω  
καὶ ἡ ἁμαρτία μου ἐνώπιον μου ἐστὶν διὰ παντός

[50:6a] σοὶ μόνῳ ἥμαρτον  
καὶ τὸ πονηρὸν ἐνώπιον σοῦ ἐποίησα

[50:6b] ὅπως ἂν  
δικαιωθῇς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις σου  
καὶ νικήσῃς ἐν τῷ κρίνεσθαί σε

Why is God regarded righteous for showing mercy to David? God keeps his covenant with David.<sup>35</sup> This is not to say God's saving righteousness can only be understood as covenant faithfulness; yet, God's faithfulness to his covenant with David is expressed through his saving of David.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> 2 Sam 7:12–14; cf. Ps 89:1–4, 14–21, 24–29, 33–37, 49; 111:3–5. Hall's proposal is tenuous. He confuses the terms of the Mosaic covenant, which explicitly entail blessing and curse, with God's promises to David as though God could fulfil his promises to David by condemning him (1983, 187). Yet, the Davidic promise is everlasting and only certain of David's offspring who commit iniquity will be disciplined. When OT writers speak of God keeping covenant with David (as in the above passages), they stress God's establishing David's offspring forever. Most significantly, Ps 50:16<sup>LXX</sup> explicitly connects God's righteousness with David's salvation.

<sup>36</sup> As creator and a king, God can express his righteousness through salvation (not punishment). One can speak of God's saving righteousness with reference to both creation

As others note, God's righteousness in the OT carries positive, saving connotations more often than not.<sup>37</sup> Seifrid (2000, 44) estimates, "references to God's saving righteousness appear roughly four times as frequently as those to his retributive justice" (cf. Campbell 2008, 211–212). Consider Ps 143, which likely influences Rom 3 (cf. Hays 1980). Precisely because God is righteous, David asks God *not* to judge him, although "no one" (David included) is righteous before God (143:1–2, 11; cf. 31:1).

Psalms 50<sup>LXX</sup> further confirms this reading. David again appeals to God's righteousness in 50:16<sup>LXX</sup>. He asks: "Rescue me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my deliverance, and my tongue will rejoice at your righteousness."<sup>38</sup> He now omits the occasion for his request (i.e., his sin; 50:5–6a<sup>LXX</sup>) but reiterates the petition and purpose from 50:3–4, 6b<sup>LXX</sup>. If God's righteousness in 50:16<sup>LXX</sup> is punitive, following typical readings of v. 6<sup>LXX</sup>, David's words become incoherent. In effect, he says, "Save me and I will praise you loudly for your wrath against my sin."<sup>39</sup>

The psalm's macro-structure magnifies God's saving righteousness. Several writers observe vv. 3–11<sup>LXX</sup> form a chiasm centering on v. 6b<sup>LXX</sup> (Auffret 1976; Ceresko 1978, 6; Gaiser 2003, 385; Terrien 2003, 402; Goldingay 2007, 130–131). Similarly, the chiasm formed by vv. 12–19<sup>LXX</sup> focuses on v. 16<sup>LXX</sup> ("... O God ... your righteousness").<sup>40</sup> Both units draw

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and covenant. This is because, as Wright (2013, 841) states, "the divine faithfulness to the *covenant* is the appointed means of the divine faithfulness to the *creation*." Cf. Wright (2013, 480–482, 502, 800–801).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Leske (1985, 126, 136); Wright (1988); Moo (1996, 81–82); Campbell (2009, 688–702).

<sup>38</sup> Intriguingly, Zaspel (1997, 73, 76) uses 51:14 [50:16<sup>LXX</sup>] to indicate God's righteousness is "the source and ground of salvation." Yet, a few pages earlier, his citation of Rom 3:5 is used to show that "punishment or retribution" demonstrates God's righteousness. Cf. Schaefer (2001, 129–130); Crisler (2016, 68).

<sup>39</sup> Bird (2016, 108) says 51:4 [50:6<sup>LXX</sup>] refers to God's punitive righteousness while observing 51:14 (50:16<sup>LXX</sup>) speaks of God's saving righteousness. He does not reconcile this contrast. Instead, he jests about Paul's use of Ps 51 (50<sup>LXX</sup>), "tracing the logic of Paul's thought here is like trying to nail jelly to the wall and the jelly fights back UFC style."

<sup>40</sup> The MT/LXX both show evidence of a chiastic structure. Scholarly opinions differ about the precise structure of the second chiasm; cf. Auffret (1976); Gaiser (2003, 386); Terrien (2003, 403); Skinner (2016, 88–89). Also, some suppose Paul uses Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup> in a way contrary to the psalmist (cf. Luther 1972, 199–200). Given this structural emphasis, Paul's use of the 50:6b<sup>LXX</sup> is not surprising. One need not presuppose Paul's usage conveys the psalmist's meaning. Rather, this conclusion is made plain first by exegesis of each context and then by observing this reading of Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup> clarifies the meaning of Rom 3.

attention to God's righteousness. Moreover, positive requests or statements about God's saving actions bracket the first chiasm (e.g., blot, wash). The second chiasm couples a request for salvation with praise for God's righteousness.

One might object *ὅτι* (v. 5; *יְ* MT) separates the purpose clause (v. 6a) from the request (vv. 3–4<sup>LXX</sup>). Yet, similar grammar patterns exist elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> For example, Deut 16:3 says, “You shall eat no leavened bread with it. Seven days you shall eat it with unleavened bread, the bread of affliction—for [*ὅτι, יְ*] you came out of the land of Egypt in haste—that [*ἵνα, לַמֶּנּוּן*] all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt.” The *ὅτι*-clause separates the purpose from the imperative. Each clause in its own way answers *why* Israel eats unleavened bread.

Second Chronicles 6:30–31 and 1 Kgs 8:39–40 (3 Kgdms 8:39–40) have constructions similar to Ps 50:5–6<sup>LXX</sup>. The Chronicler writes, “then hear from heaven your dwelling place and forgive and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways, *for* [*ὅτι, יְ*] you, you only, know the hearts of the children of mankind, *that* [*ὅπως ἄν; לַמֶּנּוּן*] they may fear you and walk in your ways all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers.” Solomon's request in v. 30 is followed by *ὅτι*, grounding the petition. Verse 31 states the purpose of v. 30a, not the explanation in v. 30b. Thus, Solomon does *not* claim God knows hearts in order that “they may fear you and walk in your ways.”

Finally, Lyonnet (1959, 348) finds a possible clue by comparing the LXX and MT. He says the LXX's choice of *λόγος* to translate the Hebrew *דבר* (51:6<sup>MT</sup>; 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>) could scarcely indicate a sentence of condemnation. In fact, *λόγος* and *ῥῆμα* routinely translate *דבר* to refer to God's saving promises for David and Solomon (cf. 1 Kgs 8; 2 Chr 6).

## 5 How Psalm 50<sup>LXX</sup> Interprets Romans 3:4

The entire context of Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup> resonates well with Rom 2–3. Verbal links abound. Whereas David says to God, “you delight in truth [*ἀλήθειαν*],” Paul says, “Let God be true [*ἀληθής*]” (Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>; Rom 3:4).<sup>42</sup> Both passages

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Ps 125:1–3; Hos 2:2–3<sup>LXX</sup>. Debatable passages include Exod 10:1; 1 Kgs 11:34; 2 Chr 10:15; 25:20; Jer 44:29.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. 2 Sam 7:28 (2 Kgdms 7:28): “And now, O Lord GOD, you are God, *and your words are true* [*καὶ οἱ λόγοι σου ἔσονται ἀληθινοί*], and you have promised this good thing to your servant.”

prioritise a right heart [καρδία] and spirit [πνεῦμα] (Ps 50:12–14, 19<sup>LXX</sup>; Rom 2:15, 29). David confesses, “you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit” (Ps 50:20–21<sup>LXX</sup>). Psalm 50:21<sup>LXX</sup> says God is pleased with “a sacrifice of righteousness [θυσίαν δικαιοσύνης].” More subtly, Paul’s references to the κρυπτός (“secret,” “inward”) in Rom 2:16, 29 repeats David’s statement that God shows him “the secrets [κρύφιος] of your wisdom” (50:8<sup>LXX</sup>).<sup>43</sup> Just as David will teach the lawless (50:15<sup>LXX</sup>), so the Jews (Rom 2:19–20) regard themselves as instructors and teachers to lawless gentiles (Gignac 2005, 56).

Both contexts highlight the same problem. Each mentions ἁμαρτία (or “sin”) several times (Ps 50:4, 5, 7, 11<sup>LXX</sup>; cf. Rom 2:12; 3:7, 8, 23). David refers to “lawlessness” [ἀνομία] four times (Ps 50:4, 5, 7, 11<sup>LXX</sup>). This word choice particularly suits Paul’s emphasis on law-breaking (e.g., Rom 2:21–27; 3:9–20). In Rom 4:6–7, Paul references David when quoting Ps 31:1 to speak of “the one whom God counts righteousness [δικαιοσύνη] apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless [ἀνομία] deeds are forgiven, and whose sins [ἁμαρτία] are covered’” (cf. Rom 6:19).

Paul’s “recontextualising” of other psalms in Rom 3 is consistent with the reading offered here (Harrisville 1985, 179). Romans 3:4a (“every one were a liar”) quotes Ps 115:2<sup>LXX</sup>. Psalms 114–115<sup>LXX</sup> form the single prayer of Ps 116<sup>MT</sup>. This point is significant when we observe Ps 114:5<sup>LXX</sup> declares God “righteous” (δίκαιος) in a context where the petitioner seeks salvation. Paul’s imperative γινέσθω (Rom 3:4a) preceding a purpose clause mirrors David’s four imperatives (50:3–4<sup>LXX</sup>), which also lead to the purpose clause in 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>.

Moreover, Ps 143 (142<sup>LXX</sup>) likely shapes Rom 3 (cf. Hays 1980). Psalm 142:1, 11<sup>LXX</sup> explicitly appeal to God’s “truthfulness” (ἀλήθεια) and “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη) in praying for salvation “because every living soul will not be vindicated before you” (cf. Rom 3:20). Thus, the psalm’s reference of God’s righteousness “specifically repudiates retributive activity by God” (Campbell 2008, 205). Again, God will use his Spirit (πνεῦμα) in Ps 142:10<sup>LXX</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> Consistent with the tone of Ps 50:8<sup>LXX</sup>, Rom 2:29 commends the “inward” Jew. As argued below, “the secrets of men” (2:16) does not refer to sin but rather the gentile’s paradoxical doing of the law (vv. 13–15, 26–29). Κρυπτός and κρύφιος fall within close semantic range. Cf. L&N 28.69, 28.71–72; *LSJ* 25313, 25330.



Furthermore, David is the perfect counter rebuke to Rom 3:1–3.<sup>44</sup> In confessing sin, David does not trust in the law. He explicitly disavows the notion that God delights in sacrifice more than a pure heart. David hopes in God who, according to his steadfast love and righteousness, will deliver him from sin. God will neither spurn David nor his promises. Paraphrasing Rom 3:3, “Does David’s faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means!” If true for Israel’s quintessential king, Paul’s contemporaries should take notice and repent of their presumption.

In short, Paul not only draws from David’s sin; he also echoes the psalm’s central idea—*God is faithful and righteousness to keep his saving promises, even when his people sin against him.*<sup>45</sup> One can hardly imagine a more suitable passage for Paul to use against those who “rely on the law and boast in the law” (Rom 2:17). As proven through David’s life, God is not a liar.

## 6 Verse 4 Leads to Romans 3:5–8

What about Rom 3:5–8?

But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)<sup>6</sup> By no means! For then how could God judge the world?<sup>7</sup> But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?<sup>8</sup> And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

Logically, v. 5 serves as a rebuttal to Paul’s conclusion in v. 4. Speaking in a “human way,” Paul temporarily assumes the interlocutor’s voice.

Why pose this question? Some speculate Paul’s opponents use his conclusion as a licence for unrighteous living (Piper 1983, 108–113). It is unlikely Paul thinks his Jewish opponents from Rom 2–3:3 will suddenly swing to antinomianism (cf. Schreiner 1988, 153). Others suggest v. 5 is a false inference drawn from v. 4. According to this faulty logic, v. 4 leads to the conclusion that God cannot rightly condemn sin, since human

<sup>44</sup> Similarly, cf. Gignac (2005, 55).

<sup>45</sup> According to Wolter (2014, 218), God is both the judge and trial defendant. Thus, he both justifies and is justified (cf. Rom 3:26).

unrighteousness glorifies God (Morris 1988, 158–159; Wright 2002, 454). If sin ultimately glorifies God, why punish people?<sup>46</sup>

This article simplifies conventional interpretations of vv. 5–8.<sup>47</sup> Verse 5 is a natural response, a rhetorical question put in the mouth of Paul's opponent. The interlocutor wants to show the absurdity of Paul's argument. Rom 3:5, 7–8a are not sincere objections. They do not actually suggest, "Let us do evil that good may come." Rather, they "slanderosly charge" Paul with implying these ideas (v. 8b). In Paul's explanation, God overlooks David's sin in order to be faithful to his saving promises. David's transgression serves as a foil for God's righteousness. In that sense, unrighteousness, via contrast, magnifies God's glory, which spurs the reply in v. 7.

This interpretation differs from the views above. The key issue is not simply about whether one sins.<sup>48</sup> In v. 5, God is still shown righteous *via salvation* (v. 4), not condemnation. More fundamental is the role of the law in view of God's righteousness. Given ch. 2, Rom 3:3–4 seemingly casts the law aside. To Jewish ears, this verges on blasphemy. The hypothetical objection in v. 5 directly responds to v. 4. The implicit point of v. 4 is finally made explicit in Rom 3:21: God demonstrates his righteousness apart for the law. After all, David transgressed the law and did not face wrath. God reveals his righteousness by saving the lawbreaker.

In other words, God saves David precisely when he lived, as it were, apart from law. Given ch. 2, it is not surprising Rom 3:5, 7–8 focus on the law (not mere morality). Paul does not yet respond fully to this concern

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<sup>46</sup> Based on vv. 5–6, scholars generally concur that God's righteousness in these verses entails wrath and punitive judgment. This agrees with the common view that v. 6 refers to God's punitive righteousness.

<sup>47</sup> For example, popular readings often create undue complexity. Such views of Rom 3:5 contradict common readings of v. 4. Common interpretations claim vv. 4, 5 both speak about God's punitive righteousness against sin. However, notice the assumption of Rom 3:5. What does the objection deduce from Paul's retort in 3:4? Paul's interlocutors "slanderosly charge" him with implying v. 5 (and the following sequence of questions; v. 8). Paul is accused of saying God would be unrighteous to pour wrath on sin. This accusation of v. 5 makes little sense of v. 4 if in fact Paul claims God demonstrates his righteousness via punitive wrath. Verse 5 would cease to work as a retort. Traditional views of v. 4b (God is justified by punishing sin) cannot infer the attributed slander of v. 5 (that Paul implies, "God is unrighteous in punishing sin"). By analogy, if I say, "He is right to buy that house," no one would disagree by saying, "So you're implying that he is *wrong* to buy the house."

<sup>48</sup> We go wrong to generalise the discussion to mere wrongdoing when the problem is more precise.

about law, which is implicit in vv. 5, 7–8. Instead, he remains focused on righteousness. Paul returns in 3:31 to ask, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?”

What does Paul mean in v. 6 when he says, “By no means! For then how could God judge [κρίνει] the world”? Interpreters often assume this judgment is primarily punitive, probably due to its proximity to “wrath” (ὀργήν) in v. 5. Certainly, divine judgment involves the condemnation of God's enemies (Schreiner 1998, 155). Nevertheless, wrath is only one facet of judgment both in the OT and in Rom 3. Some writers do not sufficiently emphasise that κρίνω routinely carries positive connotations.<sup>49</sup>

Judgment in v. 6 immediately echoes 3:4b. If v. 4b highlights God's *saving* righteousness, we expect to find saving judgment in v. 6. What does v. 6 say? If God wants to “judge” (i.e., set right) the world (3:4b, 6), how could Paul imply what people slanderously accuse him of saying (vv. 5, 7–8a)? In effect, Paul poses a rhetorical question, “If God never inflicts wrath, how could he ever restore the world to righteousness?” Paul's implicit answer is simply this: God could not restore the world to right if he has no wrath against unrighteousness.<sup>50</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

Readers struggle to grasp Paul's logic in Rom 3:4 when they misinterpret or overlook the context of Ps 50:6<sup>LXX</sup>. These two passages are not in tension; rather, they are mutually explanatory. The above reading of Rom 3:4 overcomes the major challenges confronting interpreters.

Paul demonstrates that God is not a liar. God will show himself righteous in fulfilling his promises to Israel, yet he will do so apart from the law. Thus, he is justified through saving David, whose deeds are lawless.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. BDAG, “κρίνω,” 567. Cf. Ps 25:1; 58:11; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Macc 13:13–16 and Wis 9:3. In Sir 45:26, where the writer prays for the Lord to “judge his people with justice” (NRSV). Regarding the verb in Ps 50:6b<sup>LXX</sup>, *HALOT* lists 1 Sam 18:19, 31; 24:16; Ps 10:18; Lam 3:59. See Koehler (1999, 1621). For a helpful overview of OT background concerning judgment and salvation, see Weinfeld (1995); in shorter form, see Weinfeld (1992, 228–246).

<sup>50</sup> How then does God's saving righteousness relate to his wrath? God saves his people by defeating their enemies. Or we might say, God rescues his people by purging from them (or the land) whatever is unrighteous. Hence, wrath is a mere means by which God keeps his covenant to his people and thus restores the world to right (which is the more precise way of describing his righteousness). Accordingly, God could hardly save his people if he were indifferent to unrighteousness. This pattern is evidenced in Rom 5–8 where God in Christ redeems his people by defeating Sin and Death (cf. 8:3).

One need not alternate between a “negative” and “positive” sense of God’s righteousness in Rom 3:4–26. We are also challenged to revisit interpretations that see God’s righteousness in Romans as either Christ’s imputed righteousness or God’s punitive righteousness.

Rather than waiting until Rom 4, we find in Rom 3 that Paul already presents David as a paradigm of one who is justified apart from the law. This observation reraises questions about the purpose of Abraham in Rom 4. Does Paul use Abraham in the same way he uses David in Rom 3:4? Or does the discussion about Abraham’s being justified by faith have a different nuance? Several verbal and thematic links tied Rom 3:4 to the broader context of Ps 50<sup>LXX</sup>. Our reading is further confirmed by Paul’s other OT references in the near context of Rom 3:4. Both passages affirm God’s saving righteousness. According to David and Paul, God is justified *because* he saves sinners.

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