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Unlocking Romans: Resurrection and the Justification of God

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In New Testament scholarship, the purpose and the theological intention of Paul's letter to the Romans have always been and still are highly disputed issues. The usual focus in the interpretation of Romans is that of justification, in particular the justification of God as well as the justification of humans before God. In this perspective, Rom 1:16–17 is recognized as Paul's main thesis: the gospel is God's power to save all the believers, for it reveals God's own righteousness so that the one who is righteous by faith will live.

In his 2004 dissertation at Duke University, Kirk claims to have found the most important key to “unlock” Romans. In his view, the resurrection of Jesus represents the crucial event, which for Paul is the hermeneutical key to understand the gospel. Kirk starts from the assumption that the classical Lutheran reading of Romans “hinged on an understanding of ‘the righteous God’ that we must, in the end, leave behind. In giving up on this set of readings that has played so powerful a role in the western exegetical tradition, we are left searching for a different key for unlocking Romans” (4). Kirk is right in asking whether Luther's interpretation of the term *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* as a *genitivus subjectivus* is the most appropriate reading in order to understand Paul's intention in Romans, although this reading may have been plausible for the Reformers in the context of the sixteenth century. Kirk's question, however, is by no means new but already a

genuine part of the so-called New Perspective on Paul, which has already changed our reading of Paul's understanding of God's righteousness and thus also of the letter to the Romans as a whole. What Kirk proposes is that "in Romans, the resurrection of Jesus becomes Paul's key for demonstrating that the promises contained in the Scriptures have been fulfilled in the Christ event. Once we recognize that the gospel is couched in terms of the scripturally-attested resurrection of Jesus, we have the map we need for finding our way through Romans" (8). It is, indeed, this recognition that forces him to "expect resurrection to play a key role in the argument" about the problem of theodicy, of which Romans is "wrapped up," and, "conversely, in a letter suffused with resurrection we expect theodicy to be a major concern" (11). Thus, Kirk tries to explain the issue of theodicy as Paul's main concern in Romans by means of the resurrection of Jesus, supposing that the "pervasive nature of resurrection in Romans has gone largely unrecognized" (11).

In the second chapter Kirk starts with a survey of the functions of resurrection in early Judaism in order to show that the close connection of theodicy with the emergence of the resurrection belief was particularly characteristic for the Pharisaic branch of Judaism, in which Paul the former Pharisee participated. Kirk shortly discusses well-known texts (Daniel, 2 Maccabees, 2 Baruch, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, some texts from Qumran, Psalms of Solomon; 4 Baruch, although particularly interesting in this respect, is unfortunately left out) and emphasizes the "hortatory function of resurrection" as a proposition of a Torah-oriented life in the perspective of the final judgment. "We should therefore not be surprised when a first-century Christian Jew named Paul, grappling with the question of God's righteousness, suffuses his work with resurrection" (24).

Kirk finds this "suffusion" of Romans with resurrection throughout the letter: 1:4, 16–17; 4:16–23; 5:5–10, 15–21; 6:1–23; 7:1–6; 8:1–39; 10:1–13; 11:13–15; 13:8–14; 14:1–12; 15:12. A first glimpse at these texts already affirms the author's admission: "Some of these references are clearer than others; some we will have to argue for" (11). The main part of the book (chs. 3–10) is thus dedicated to an extensive argumentation that only the focus on Jesus' resurrection gives way to understanding Paul's solution of the theodicy problem.

Since it is not possible to present Kirk's exegesis in full, which indeed provides many interesting insights in detail, I will only comment on particularly problematic texts. (1) In chapter 3, Kirk rightly argues for the consistency of the introductory passage of Romans (1:1–7) with its thesis in 1:16–17 and also its end in 15:12. Therefore, in this chapter he develops an impressive argument for the integrity of the whole letter. Romans 1:16–17, he argues, must not be isolated from the *prooemium* but rather understood as some sort of resuming consequence. The passage therefore must be related to the central issue of resurrection in 1:4, which again refers to the final conclusion given in the quotation of Isa 11:10 in Rom 15:12. However, Kirk saves himself and his readers the complex discussion

about the traditional character of 1:2–4, and he does not discuss either, whether or not the term ἐξ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν in 1:4 refers to the resurrection of *Jesus* at all rather than to the general resurrection of the dead. The latter would be at least a possible reading of this phrase, although there is no consensus about it among scholars. Kirk, however, proposes that the phrase in fact relates to Jesus' resurrection, a move that helps him to find the key to unlock Romans as the "theodicy project of Paul" (52, etc.) already at the beginning of the letter. Accordingly, the Pauline phrases κατὰ πνεῦμα and κατὰ σάρκα in Rom 1:3, 4 are not interpreted as categories of a certain perspective of understanding but rather substantially: κατὰ πνεῦμα referring to the spirit as the "agent of Jesus' resurrection-life and ... the defining characteristic of that new mode of existence" (43), κατὰ σάρκα referring to the earthly existence of Jesus (with reference to 2 Cor 5:16).

(2) In Rom 4:17, Kirk interprets the belief of the "dead" Abraham in the God "who gives life to the dead" with reference to Jesus' death in Rom 3:23–27 and understands "Abraham's faith as belief in the God who is responsible for the Christ event" (63). It is indeed important to see that from 3:21 to 4:25 Paul develops a consistent argument how he understands the justification of the sinner, who is already "dead" in his or her sin, through God as the one who raises the dead. The "Christ event," that is, the death and the resurrection of Christ, is thus the reason for the argument that God himself is just and justifies the unrighteous. One may even argue, as Kirk does, that resurrection is the key to understand this relation, as without the resurrection of Jesus his death would have no justifying or salvific meaning. However, one might ask whether *the close relationship* between death and resurrection of Jesus as the "Christ event" is underestimated by Kirk, because in Rom 5:9 Paul clearly connects both the justification of humans and the future salvation with the *death* of Jesus (δικαιωθέντες ἐν τῷ αἵματι αὐτοῦ), whereas in 4:25 ἡ δικαίωσις ἡμῶν is clearly related to Jesus' *resurrection*. In chapter 5, when Kirk interprets Rom 5:9–10, he does not consider this significant variant of Paul's language of justification. Instead, he assigns Jesus' death and resurrection to different functions: "The present benefits are particularly associated with the death of Jesus, but the 'much more' of eschatological salvation is associated with Jesus' resurrection life" (90).

(3) Rom 8:12–39 is one of those texts for which Kirk has to make some efforts in order to clarify the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. Explicit references are lacking, and only familiar language can be identified, such as the "language of glory, sonship, and adoption." This language, however, "is sufficient to make the case that the hope of resurrection and glory being presented in vv. 18–27 is a participation with Christ in his own resurrection and glory" (137). In developing this argument, Kirk seems again to establish some sort of dichotomy within the Christ event, relating the death of Jesus to the past and his resurrection to the future. For Paul, of course, both aspects are closely related and merge in the presence of the actual faith "in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ; see, e.g., Rom 3:24;

6:11; 8:1). Paul understands this faith as the faithful trust in God's righteousness and thus as the certainty of the believer of being just because God ensured "us" of his own righteousness by resurrecting the crucified Jesus.

Despite those exegetical problems, Kirk has convincingly called our attention to the hermeneutical importance of the resurrection of Jesus as the crucial point of reference in order to understand Paul's solution of the theodicy problem. The question remains, however, whether the resurrection of Jesus is in fact the "key to unlock *Romans*." Kirk argues for this thesis by searching the text of *Romans* for references to the resurrection of Christ, which after all is sometimes more, sometimes less successful. One may ask, for example, why the resurrection is not mentioned as part of the argument in important soteriological texts such as Rom 3:21–31. However, the main question is whether finding such references throughout the letter suffices to understand *Romans*. There is no doubt that the resurrection of Jesus and his appearances before the apostles are *the* hermeneutical key to understanding the meaning of Jesus' death and of the gospel they began to proclaim (1 Cor 15:1–11; cf. 207). Thus, when it comes to Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is indeed the hermeneutical key for his theological thinking in general—and one would have to say this for every letter he wrote in order to explain his gospel and its consequences to his congregations. This insight, however, does not unlock *Romans*, but rather Paul's theological thinking as a whole (cf. 209) and thus *also* *Romans*. Therefore, the "key" to understand the letter to the Romans remains all the more the situation in which Paul wrote it and thus the question why Paul wrote this letter at all. For Kirk, however, this question does not seem to be relevant.

In sum, Kirk's study provides a thorough introduction into Paul's theological thinking and his hermeneutical propositions. He presents a consistent interpretation of main texts of the Letter to the Romans in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, an interpretation that is at the same time a strong plea for the integrity of the letter as a whole as it includes every part of the letter. Yet, since Jesus' resurrection is the *general key* to Paul's theological thinking, some may find Kirk's reading of *Romans* only in the focus of the resurrection of Jesus somehow overinterpreting, not least because Kirk misses the chance to refer his argument to the very situation of the letter within Paul's missionary career. It is this situation in and from which the question of God's righteousness—and thus the theodicy problem—has been raised. In *Romans*, Paul tries to give in principle an answer from his understanding of the gospel as he has *always* proclaimed it.