

JBTS

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES



**The Righteousness of God as "The Gate
to Paradise": A Review Article of The
Righteousness of God by Charles Lee Irons**
Joshua M. Greever

The Righteousness of God as “The Gate to Paradise”: A Review Article of the Righteousness of God by Charles Lee Irons

Irons, Charles Lee. *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/386. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015. 444 pp.

JOSHUA M. GREEVER

Joshua M. Greever has a PhD in New Testament and teaches New Testament at Grand Canyon University and Grand Canyon Theological Seminary

Introduction

In approximately the year 1518 Martin Luther discovered the gospel of the righteousness of God. In a preface to his Latin writings in 1545 he recounted his experience, which had to do with his understanding of Romans 1:17:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous will live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.¹

Luther’s experience is telling: knowing the precise sense of the “righteousness of God” has great import, for it is the difference between “an extremely disturbed conscience” and entrance into “paradise.” Over the centuries, Luther has not been alone in wrestling with Paul’s meaning, for it has been the focus of much scholarly attention.

Not surprisingly, the issues surrounding the “righteousness of God” are thorny and complex. Questions such as the following dominate the discussion:

Is righteousness a relational or covenantal concept, or is it defined as conformity to an external norm?

- Is the righteousness of God to be equated with the righteousness of faith, or does the former produce the latter?
- Is the righteousness of God always and only a positive concept that signifies God’s act to save and vindicate his people? More specifically, does God’s righteousness connote his covenant faithfulness?
- Does the righteousness of God include God’s act to judge those who oppress his people? Does God’s righteousness include notions of distributive justice?
- Is the righteousness of God a “gift” to people, such that people can have a divinely-approved righteousness from and before God?

In his published dissertation, *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation*, Charles Lee Irons has provided a much-needed contribution to these questions. Before I review Irons’ thesis and arguments as well as offer some constructive critique, I want to make clear at the outset that I am in fundamental agreement with his thesis regarding the righteousness of God. Even though clarity of argument can be better achieved at various points, I believe he has demonstrated convincingly and definitively that God’s righteousness is not to be defined as or equated with God’s covenant faithfulness, and that Paul’s teaching on the righteousness of God primarily concerns the divinely-approved righteousness before God that believers receive by faith in Jesus Christ.

The Thesis and Argument of *The Righteousness of God*

The thesis of *The Righteousness of God* is inextricably lexical: the Hebrew and Greek terms for righteousness in Scripture (רָצוֹן/רָצוֹן; δικαιοσύνη) do not *mean* faithfulness to covenant promises. That is, righteousness is not a relational concept but concerns

1. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1972), 34.336-37 (as quoted in Charles Lee Irons, *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/386 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015], 22-23).

conformity to an external norm.² Hence, divine righteousness—the “righteousness of God”—does not *mean* that God acts to save in fulfillment of his covenant promises. Furthermore, Paul’s teaching on justification—the divine declaration that a person is “righteous”—has little to do with “covenant membership” but rather describes “the state of being legally recognized as δίκαιος [“righteous”] before God.”³ Irons’ thesis, therefore, is a shot across the bow towards the so-called “New Perspective on Paul,” a rather recent interpretive tradition that has emphasized the covenantal/sociological/ecclesiological nature of God’s righteousness and an individual’s justification.

The argument of the book is logical and easy to follow. Chapter 1 surveys the history of interpretation regarding the righteousness of God. Irons concludes that until the middle of the 19th century, church theologians interpreted the righteousness of God as a gift. Precisely *how* the righteousness is given was debated—whether it was infused or imputed—but that it was *given* was a source of agreement. In the middle of the 19th century there arose a new strain of interpretation, associated with names like Albrecht Ritschl and Hermann Cremer, which defined righteousness either in relation to God’s love or as a relational and covenantal term. This new school of thought undergirded such 20th century interpreters as Ernst Käsemann, who contended for the power-character instead of the gift-character of God’s righteousness, as well as the scholars associated with the New Perspective on Paul, such as James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright, who define God’s righteousness as his faithfulness to save his people in fulfillment of his covenant promises.

After Chapter 2 lays out the method and ground rules for the succeeding chapters, Chapters 3-5 analyze righteousness language in extra-biblical Greek, the Old Testament, and Jewish literature of the Second Temple period. In Chapter 3 on righteousness terminology in extra-biblical Greek, Irons shows that righteousness is often used with an ethical sense as a cardinal virtue, and sometimes it can be used in the sense of distributive justice.

In Chapter 4 Irons analyzes righteousness language in the Hebrew Bible as well as the Septuagint. He finds that there are two primary semantic distinctions for righteousness terminology—a legal and an ethical sense—although he adds a third category of “correctness” as well. At times the legal and ethical senses can blend together, though, especially when righteousness describes an individual’s righteous status before God.⁴ This righteousness-before-God can be attained by actual ethical righteousness or by God’s gracious accrediting of righteousness.⁵ Chapter 4 is one of the most

2. “There is no evidence, in either the Greek or the Hebrew usage, for the notion that ‘righteousness’ is a relational concept in which the relationship itself is the norm so that ‘righteousness’ is conformity to the demands that a relationship brings with itself” (Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 8).

3. *Ibid.*, 7.

4. The ethical category “can refer simply to righteous conduct, often with verbs of doing, or to the status of righteousness that one has in God’s eyes on the basis of such righteous conduct” (*ibid.*, 118).

5. *Ibid.*, 118, 124.

significant in the book, for the Old Testament's use of righteousness serves as the most likely background for Paul's understanding of the righteousness of God.

In Chapter 5 Irons examines righteousness terminology in the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings originally composed in Hebrew (e.g., Psalms of Solomon, Jubilees, 1 Enoch), Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings originally composed in Greek (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon, Philo, Josephus), and the New Testament (outside of Paul's letters). Although there are various shades of meaning that each stream of literature emphasizes concerning righteousness, Irons concludes that there is much continuity between the use of righteousness language in the Old Testament and that in the Second Temple literature. However, Irons notes that there seems to be more emphasis in this literature on obtaining and/or maintaining a righteousness before God by strict adherence to the law of Moses—an emphasis Paul will attack in his emphasis on righteousness by faith.

Finally, Chapter 6 is the climactic chapter in which Irons analyzes Paul's ten occurrences of the phrase "righteousness of God" (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) against the backdrop of the semantic range of the lexeme "righteousness." On the one hand, Irons considers arguments—and finds them lacking—that the "righteousness of God" is God's covenant faithfulness, or at the very least his saving activity or power. Consideration is given to significant texts such as Romans 1:16-17; 3:1-8, 25-26; and 2 Corinthians 5:21. On the other hand, Irons contends that seven out of the ten occurrences of the "righteousness of God" in Paul's literature refer to the gift of righteousness from God so that people receive a status as righteous before God by faith in Christ Jesus.⁶

Convincing Arguments

As mentioned in the introduction, I find fundamental agreement with the thesis and argument of the book. Not surprisingly, then, in my estimation there are many more strengths than weaknesses in this book, and certainly more than I have space to mention. Nevertheless, I will focus on what I consider to be some of the strongest or most convincing arguments of the monograph.

The Weight of Church History

As mentioned above, in Chapter 1 Irons demonstrates that the history of interpretation regarding the righteousness of God is remarkably consistent: the righteousness of God in Paul's letters is considered to be a gift—whether infused or imputed—to the individual. This consistency is found in both the Greek (e.g., Origen, Chrysostom) and Latin (e.g., Ambrosiaster, Augustine) fathers in the early church tradition; in the

6. The seven texts are: Rom 1:17; 3:21-22 (2x); 10:3 (2x); 2 Cor 5:21; and Phil 3:9. The other three are deemed examples of God's judging (or distributive) righteousness: Rom 3:5, 25-26

Medieval theologians (e.g., Peter Abelard, Thomas Aquinas); and in the Reformation and post-Reformation tradition (e.g., Martin Luther, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, William Perkins). Indeed, if Irons had broadened his survey to include all the righteousness terminology, it would have only strengthened his thesis, for as early as the 2nd century the tradition has a clear stream of interpretation in favor of righteousness as a gift.⁷ If this survey is largely on point, then Irons has produced a rather potent argument for the traditional understanding of the righteousness of God and against the covenant faithfulness interpretation. Certainly it is true that the authority of a consistent stream of reception history does not outweigh the canonical authority of Scripture itself. Nevertheless, it is, generally speaking, a fool's errand to hold to an interpretation of Scripture that is relatively recent. At the very least, the burden of proof lies squarely on the new school of thought to prove the legitimacy of its interpretation.

The Function of Hebrew Parallelism

One of the main arguments for the covenant faithfulness interpretation is that in the Old Testament—particularly in the Psalms and Isaiah—righteousness terminology is placed in parallel with terms such as “salvation” or “faithfulness.”⁸ It is assumed that “righteousness” therefore is synonymous with these parallel terms and thus should be understood as fundamentally a positive concept that describes God's commitment to bring “salvation” to his people in “faithfulness” to his covenant promises.

However, Irons demonstrates that this understanding of Hebrew parallelism is outdated and has been improved upon by a number of scholars, such as James Kugel, Robert Alter, and J. P. Fokkerman.⁹ These scholars have rightly noted that “parallelism is almost never purely synonymous; rather, each line brings its own semantic contribution so that the sum is greater than the parts.”¹⁰ In other words, parallelism creates a surround sound stereo effect; when both terms are used in concert, they provide the reader with a fuller, richer, and deeper understanding of the concept. In the case of parallelism involving “righteousness” and “salvation,” then, righteousness is “never purely synonymous” with “salvation.” Rather, these two terms together connote a robust concept of God's saving righteousness whereby he delivers his people by means of judging his enemies.

A good example of this phenomenon is given regarding Isaiah 46:13.¹¹

7. See, for instance, *1 Clement* 32.3-4; *Epistle to Diognetus* 9.1-6. For a thorough study of these and other texts, see Brian Arnold, *Justification in the Second Century* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, forthcoming).

8. See Psalms 40:10; 96:13; 143:1-2; Isa 45:8, 21; 46:12-13; 51:5-8.

9. Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 66. See James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); J. P. Fokkerman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville: WJK, 2001).

10. Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 143.

11. *Ibid.*, 147.

I am bringing my righteousness near,
it is not far away;
and my salvation will not be delayed.
I will grant salvation to Zion,
my splendor to Israel (NIV).

In this text “righteousness” is parallel with “salvation,” and “salvation” with “splendor.” As Irons rightly notes, it is unlikely that “salvation” and “splendor” are pure synonyms, and therefore “salvation” and “righteousness” are not pure synonyms either. Rather, each term adds a new perspective on what God will do to save his people: “it is a salvation that (a) comes by means of his righteous judicial activity and (b) results in splendor or glory.”¹² In other words, “righteousness” does not *mean* salvation any more than “salvation” *means* “righteousness.” To define it as such is to strip the parallelism of its surround sound stereo effect.

The Righteousness of God as the Righteousness of Faith in Romans 3:21-22

Another convincing argument is that at least seven of the ten occurrences of the phrase “righteousness of God” in Paul’s letters are equated with the righteousness of faith, and that therefore the righteousness of God is a gift of divinely-approved righteousness from God. For the sake of space I would like to focus particularly on Irons’ analysis of Romans 3:21-22, a hotly debated and climactic paragraph regarding God’s righteousness, and provide additional analysis for support.

From Romans 1:18-3:20 Paul demonstrated that “everyone, both Jew and Gentile, is under sin” (3:9), that “there is no one righteous” (3:10), and that therefore “by the works of the law no flesh will be justified before him” (3:20). In 3:21 Paul asserts that there is a divine solution to the plight of humanity: “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been manifested.” The phrase “righteousness of God” hearkens back to the thesis of the letter, which asserts that the reason the gospel is powerful to save is “because in it is revealed the righteousness of God” (1:16-17).

The question is, what exactly is the “righteousness of God,” and why is it the solution to humanity’s plight? Some commentators have understood the phrase to refer to God’s saving activity in fulfillment of his covenant promises. While this is possible, more likely God’s righteousness refers to the righteousness he gives to all those who have faith in Christ. First, the righteousness of God in 3:21 is immediately

12. Ibid.

qualified in 3:22 as that which is “by faith in Jesus Christ” and “for all who believe.”¹³ The emphasis on a righteousness “by faith” indicates that the righteousness in view is something that is *received by* individuals, not merely something *performed for the sake of* individuals. In other words, the righteousness of God is equated with the righteousness of faith. The former emphasizes the divine source of righteousness, whereas the latter the means by which individuals receive righteousness.

Second, 3:21-22 finds a verbal parallel in 3:24, where believers are “declared righteous” by God through Christ.¹⁴ The structure of the paragraph is as follows:

Righteousness of God (3:21-26)

Negative means of righteousness: manifested apart from the law (3:21)

Positive means of righteousness: received by faith in Jesus Christ (3:22)

Paraphrase (3:23)

Basis of righteousness (3:24-26)

In 3:21 the righteousness of God is defined negatively (as something manifested “apart from the law”), and in 3:22a it is defined positively (as something received by faith and given to anyone who believes). Verses 22b-23 form a parenthesis explaining why both Jews and Gentiles can access this righteousness by faith alone. Then in 3:24-26 Paul explains the basis for this gift of righteousness: it comes to individuals “freely by his grace” (3:24a) and is rooted in the redemptive and propitiatory sacrifice of Christ (3:24b-25a). Because of Christ’s death, God is proven to be “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (3:26).¹⁵ The gift-character of this righteousness is especially clear in that individuals who receive the righteousness of God by faith (3:22)

13. Regarding the πίστις Χριστοῦ (“faith of Christ”) debate, Irons adheres (ibid., 329-34) to the objective genitive (“faith in Christ”) as opposed to the subjective genitive (“faithfulness of Christ”). It is sometimes averred that the phrase διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (“through the faith of Jesus Christ”) in Rom 3:22 must refer to Jesus’ own faithfulness as the means of God’s righteousness, for otherwise the phrase “for all who believe” would be redundant. If this is the case, then it is thought that the righteousness of God would naturally refer to God’s saving activity enacted for believers by means of the faithfulness of Jesus, particularly in his death and resurrection. With Irons, my sympathies lie with the objective genitive view, and I agree with Irons on 3:22: “Paul wants to make two points about the role of faith in appropriating this righteousness: it is received by faith, and it comes to all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile” (ibid., 322). Nevertheless, unlike Irons, I do not think the subjective genitive interpretation would “seriously undercut” the argument (ibid., 329), for Paul would merely be emphasizing that the righteousness-before-God that is “for all who believe” is provided by means of Jesus’ faithful life, death, and resurrection.

14. Ibid., 323. At this point translations may obscure the lexical connection between 3:21-22 and 3:24. The noun δικαιοσύνη appears in the former, and the passive participle of the verb δικαιώω (“to declare righteous”) in the latter.

15. With Irons (ibid., 279-89), the last two occurrences of the “righteousness of God” in 3:25-26 likely refer to God’s distributive justice (cf. 3:5). Irons’ analysis of the meaning of πάρεσις and ἔνδειξις is especially sound: he argues that πάρεσις describes God “passing over sins” (as opposed to “forgiving sins”), and that ἔνδειξις has to do with God “demonstrating” (as opposed to “displaying”) his righteousness.

are “declared righteous” (δικαιοῦμενοι) by God—that is, given a status of “righteous” (3:24).¹⁶

Third, Irons follows and builds upon the argument of Thomas R. Schreiner in recognizing the close parallels between Romans 3:21-22; 10:3; and Philippians 3:9.¹⁷ In Romans 10:3, Paul attests that Israel did not submit to the righteousness of God but rather sought to establish their own righteousness. In the near context (9:30-10:13), Israel’s pursuit of self-righteousness is described as a pursuit of a “law of righteousness” (9:31; cf. 10:5), whereas the Gentiles, who were not pursuing righteousness, obtained the “righteousness of faith” (9:30; cf. 10:6). Given the immediate context of Romans 10:3, it appears that the righteousness of God is equated with the righteousness of faith, and self-righteousness is equated with the righteousness of the law.

In Philippians 3:9, Paul rejects as loss “my own righteousness that is from the law” but instead finds of surpassing value a “righteousness through faith in Christ,” which explicitly is defined as a “righteousness from (ἐκ) God.” One would be hard-pressed to miss the gift-character of the righteousness of God in this text!

The remarkable parallels between Romans 10:3 and Philippians 3:9 make it likely that the “righteousness of God” and the “righteousness of faith” refer to the same righteousness, namely, an individual’s divinely-given and divinely-approved righteousness before God.¹⁸ Moreover, since Romans 3:21-22 (cf. 1:16-17) is itself parallel to 10:3, it is likely that even in 1:16-17 and 3:21-22 the same conclusion obtains regarding the nature of the righteousness of God.

God’s Righteousness as the Basis for His Covenant Faithfulness

One of the shortcomings of the book is that it underestimates the pervasiveness of the covenant theme in Scripture. Irons is (rightly) concerned that interpreters can too easily let the covenant motif overpower the lexical data of any given text.¹⁹ But there is also the danger of going too far in the other direction, so as to effectively mute the covenantal theme when present. Even though I agree that at the lexical level righteousness does not mean covenant faithfulness, at the discourse level righteousness may occur in more covenantal contexts than Irons allows.

For example, Irons claims of Isaiah 45:21, “Nothing in the context suggests that ‘a righteous God’ is code for God’s covenant faithfulness to Israel, a thought that would

16. Irons also notes that righteousness in Romans is called a “free gift” in Rom 5:17 and 6:23, suggesting the gift-character of righteousness (*ibid.*, 316-17).

17. *Ibid.*, 334-36. Schreiner’s argument appears in *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 357-58.

18. Those who dismiss the parallels with Phil 3:9 because they are not exact either unduly require rigidity in Greek syntax (especially regarding the use of prepositions) or wrongly assume that the phrase “righteousness of God” is a *terminus technicus*. On this last point, see Irons’ insightful critique of Ernst Käsemann and Peter Stuhlmacher (*ibid.*, 41-48).

19. See his insightful critique of N. T. Wright on this point (*ibid.*, 113 n.11).

be out of place in the immediate context, which is a polemic against Gentile idolatry and a universal call to all the nations to acknowledge the one true God.”²⁰ In reality, though, the immediate context of the call for the nations to leave their idols is promissory: the nations will come to Zion (45:14) and will turn and be saved, and they will confess that Yahweh is their God (45:23). These promises are thoroughly covenantal, for they are rooted in the worldwide promises to Abraham (e.g., Gen 12:3) and David (2 Sam 7:19; Psa 72:8-11, 17). Hence, even though I agree with Irons that the phrase “a righteous God” (Isa 45:21) is not a cipher for God’s covenant faithfulness in the lexical level, at the discourse level God’s righteousness that is received by all the people of God (45:24-25) fulfills his covenant promises to Abraham and David.

A similar example comes from Irons’ analysis of some of the messianic texts in Isaiah (11:1-5; 16:5; 42:3-4).²¹ Regarding the work of the Servant of Yahweh in 42:3-4 he claims “It has nothing to do with keeping one’s promises, i.e., covenant faithfulness.”²² But surely this is an overstatement, for the promise of a future Davidic king is rooted in God’s promises to David (2 Sam 7:11-16).²³ Furthermore, Isaiah 42:4 asserts that “the coastlands wait for his law.” The word “law” refers to the Torah or the instruction of the king, which echoes the promise of 2 Samuel 7:19 that the covenant with David would be “the Torah for humanity” (cf. Isa 2:3).²⁴ Finally, this future king will rule in covenantally faithful ways, for his rule is characterized by faithfulness to the Torah. In 16:5, for instance, Isaiah uses two word pairs that summarize the covenant relationship and responsibilities of the king. On the one hand, he will rule with “steadfast love” (דִּבְרֵי) and “faithfulness” (אֱמֻנָה), which summarize the king’s covenant relationship with God and the people. On the other hand, he will rule with “justice” (צֶדֶק) and “righteousness” (יִשְׁרָאֵל), which summarize the king’s covenant responsibilities toward God and the people. In other words, the king will model for the people covenant faithfulness, as outlined in Deuteronomy 17:18-20.²⁵ Isaiah’s hope for a future king, then, is rooted in covenantal language. Again, this does not entail that “righteousness” means

20. Ibid., 146. See also Irons’ overstatement regarding Isa 46:12-13, “Righteousness here is certainly not God’s covenant faithfulness, a thought that is totally foreign to the context” (ibid., 148).

21. Ibid., 152-53.

22. Ibid., 153.

23. It is likely that the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah is a king (John T. Willis, *Isaiah*, The Living Word Commentary on the Old Testament [Austin, TX: Sweet, 1980], 421; contra Christopher R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study* [London: Oxford University Press, 1948]); cf. Isa 11:1; 53:2; 55:3.

24. For excellent analyses of 2 Sam 7:19, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Blessing of David: The Charter for Humanity,” in *The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies Prepared in Honor of Oswald Thompson Allis*, ed. John H. Skilton (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 298-318; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 399-400.

25. For a more extended treatment of Isaiah’s word pairs, see Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh Is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001); Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 577-82.

“covenant faithfulness,” but rather that God’s righteousness and the righteousness of the future king fulfill God’s promises to David.

To be clear, righteousness terminology is not always used in covenantal contexts; indeed, regarding righteousness terminology in the Hebrew Scripture, Irons notes that such language is “‘profiled’ against ‘the base’ of the judicial setting rather than the covenantal setting.”²⁶ Still, Irons doesn’t sufficiently take into account how pervasive the covenant concept is in Scripture, even where the word “covenant” does not appear.

It would strengthen Irons’ thesis to show more clearly that God’s righteousness in Scripture is tied closely to God’s covenant faithfulness in that the former is the basis for the latter. Nehemiah 9:8 shows this relationship most clearly: “You found [Abraham’s] heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous” (ESV).²⁷ The basis for God’s covenant-keeping shown to Abraham is God’s righteous character (note: “for you are righteous”). Irons recognizes this relationship implicitly at points in his argument, for he approvingly quotes Mark A. Seifrid a number of times in the book: “all ‘covenant-keeping’ is righteous behavior, but not all righteous behavior is ‘covenant-keeping.’”²⁸ This quote is intended to show a distinction between righteousness and covenant faithfulness, but at the same time it also (rightly) asserts that covenant-keeping is a subset or a function of righteousness.²⁹ Hence, God’s righteousness is the basis for his covenant-keeping, and our divinely-approved righteousness before God is the basis for our covenant-keeping as well. This is not to say that God’s righteousness is *equated* with his “covenant faithfulness,” nor that justification in Paul’s theology *means* “covenant membership.” Rather, God keeps his covenant promises *because* he is righteous, and Christians are reconciled to God in a new covenant relationship through Christ *because* of the gift of a divinely-approved righteousness (see

26. Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 125. Even though it needs minor alteration, the evidence provided by Mark A. Seifrid regarding how infrequently covenant and righteousness terminology overlap is weighty and should not be ignored (Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/140, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck/Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001], 423 [as cited in Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 126 n.28]). Also salient is Irons’ comment (*The Righteousness of God*, 296) that Paul’s “righteousness of God” terminology does not occur adjacent to his “promise” terminology.

27. Irons mentions Nehemiah 9:8 twice (*ibid.*, 136 n.71, 154 n.97).

28. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures,” 424 (as cited in Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 106 n.93, 136 n.71, 143, 154 n.97).

29. Irons actually recognizes that “keeping one’s promises is a subset of righteousness” (*The Righteousness of God*, 154 n.97), and that “God’s saving activity comes in fulfillment of his covenant promises and is an expression of his righteousness” (156). But his view needs to be more clearly differentiated from that Irons’ main interlocutor Hermann Cremer, who also argues that God’s righteousness fulfills his covenant promises (see esp. *ibid.*, 35, 133-34).

Rom 5:1; 2 Cor 5:18-21).³⁰ This explanation of the relationship between righteousness and covenant faithfulness maintains a right balance, for on the one hand it guards the lexical distinction between the terminologies, and on the other it makes sense of the interplay between both concepts that are pervasive in Scripture.

Concluding Thoughts

In *The Righteousness of God*, Irons has provided what is now the definitive lexical study of the phrase “righteousness of God” in Paul’s letters. The argument of the book is, if anything, inextricably lexical in nature, and at this point it succeeds in divorcing “covenant faithfulness” from the meaning of righteousness. Any future treatment of Paul’s understanding of God’s righteousness or the meaning of righteousness terminology in Scripture must reckon with the thesis and argument of this monograph.

Areas for Future Research

With this in mind, I would like to suggest two areas for future research. First, what role do principles of noun formation play in determining lexical semantics? In particular, the Greek noun ending *-συνη* connotes a character quality or attribute, suggesting that the term *δικαιοσύνη* (“righteousness”) has to do with the “quality” or “attribute” of *δίκαιος* (“righteous”) applied to an individual. If this is the case, how does this affect the meaning of *δικαιοσύνη* in its various contexts? Is it proper to speak of, say, a subjective or objective genitive of a noun that isn’t inherently verbal in nature?

Second, Irons rightly asserts that the way in which we enjoy the gift of God’s righteousness comes by our union with Christ; that is, we receive a righteousness imputed to us by faith in Christ.³¹ But how precisely are we to understand the nature of our union with Christ, and how do corporate and representative notions of kingship in the ancient world help us think through the nature of the “sweet exchange” of our sin for Christ’s righteousness? Also, what precisely do we mean by the term “imputed”? Can we speak of a righteousness “earned” or “merited” for us by Christ?

Why Does This Matter?

In closing, why does it matter that we understand aright the meaning of the “righteousness of God”? First—and perhaps most obviously—a *lexical study* of God’s righteousness ultimately has to do with a *theological study* of God’s righteousness. Regarding Hermann Cremer’s claim that righteousness is “thoroughly positive,” Irons insightfully comments, “At its base, this is much more than a lexical claim; it

30. See Irons’ good analysis of the relationship between justification and reconciliation (*ibid.*, 341-42).

31. *Ibid.*, 328.

is a theological claim about the very concept of 'righteousness' in biblical theology."³² More specifically, Irons concludes that if Cremer's view of righteousness is correct, "then this is simply the end of the concept of God's distributive justice."³³ In other words, lexical semantics is foundational for theology!

Finally, the reason why this issue should be taken seriously is that it has everything to do with how an individual can be assured of final justification. If, as some have argued, righteousness and justification do not have so much to do with soteriology (how a person gets saved) as much as with ecclesiology (who a person can have table fellowship with), then what is the basis for the Christian's soteriological hope on the last day? If, however, "justification is a matter of how sinful humans can be righteous before the divine tribunal,"³⁴ then it has everything to do with a person's assurance of final justification. Ultimately, the basis for our assurance that our new covenant relationship with God is real and never-ending is Jesus' propitiatory death, which pays the penalty of our sin and brings us the gift of righteousness before God (see Rom 5:1). This righteousness alone, like Luther came to understand and embrace, is "the gate to paradise."

32. Ibid., 134.

33. Ibid., 340.

34. Ibid., 342.