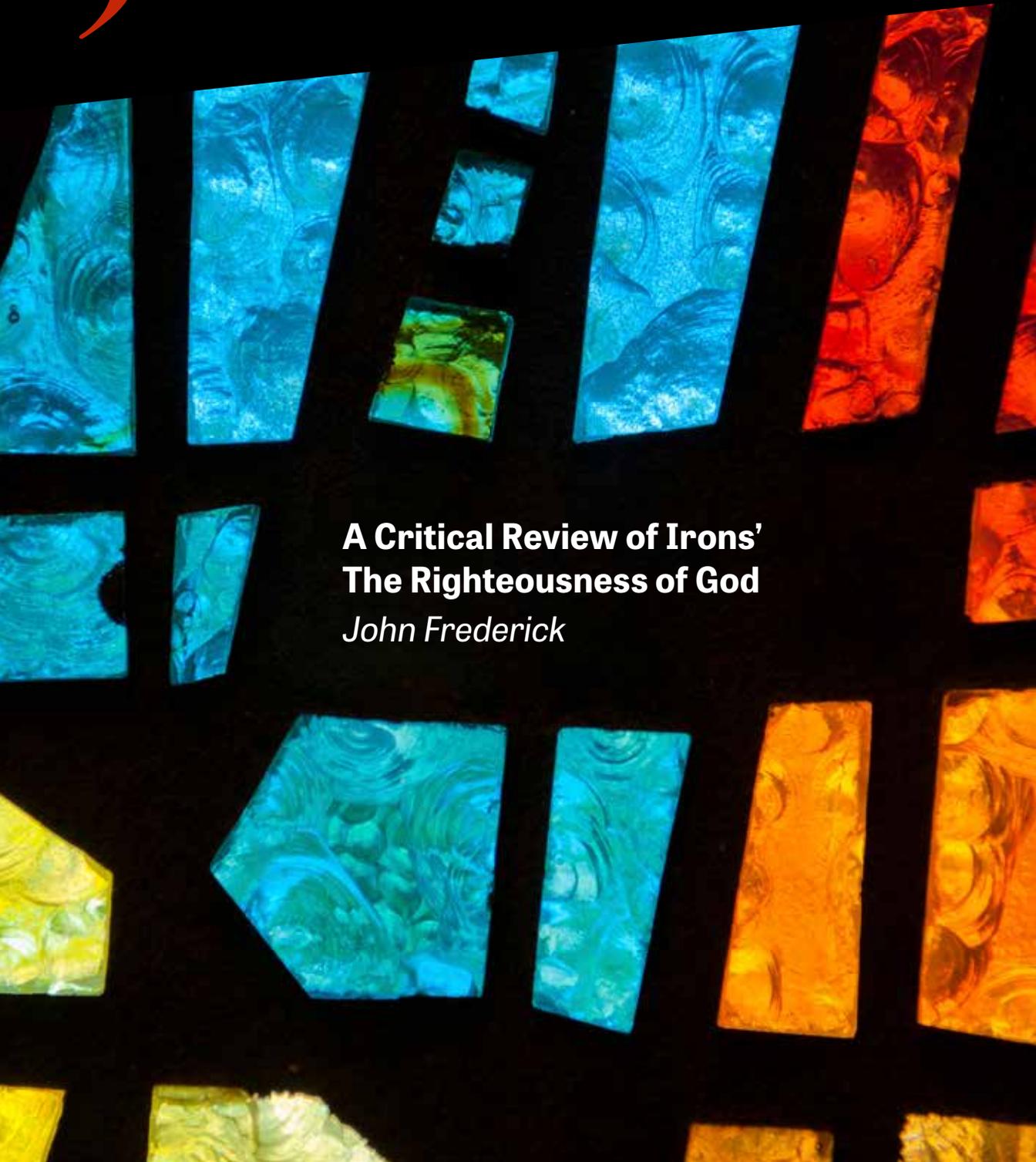


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**A Critical Review of Irons'  
The Righteousness of God**  
*John Frederick*



## ***A Critical Review of Charles Lee Irons' The Righteousness of God***

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.

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### **Introduction**

Charles Lee Irons' 2015 Mohr Siebeck monograph entitled, *The Righteousness of God*, is an admirable work of serious New Testament scholarship focusing on the usage of the Greek phrase *dikaiousunē Theou* ("the righteousness of God") in its Jewish, Greco-Roman, and canonical attestations. The book contributes valuable new research on the phrase 'the righteousness of God' and contains an exhaustive survey of the history of interpretation of the biblical texts that use the phrase (ch.1). After setting the stage with methodological considerations in chapter 2, Irons embarks on the main portion of the work, namely a lexical study of the extra-biblical Greek sources (ch.3), the Old Testament sources (ch.4), and the extra-biblical apocryphal and pseudepigraphal Jewish sources (ch.5). The book concludes with a comparative of study of the usage of the term in the epistles of Paul (ch.6), a synopsis (ch.7), and a comprehensive, 38-page appendix which lists and categorizes all of the occurrences of the word 'righteousness' in the Old Testament.

The purpose of the monograph, according to Irons, is to undermine the relational view of the word 'righteousness' which, he argues, the New Perspective on Paul has viewed as a "cipher" for "inappropriate covenantal categories." These covenantal categories, he argues, have contributed to the adoption of a skewed understanding of Paul's doctrine of justification which departs from the history of interpretation of the phrase "the righteousness of God" and abandons the Reformation-era understanding of the forensic imputation of "righteousness" as the proper focal point of the doctrine of justification. From this error Irons desires to "rescue" the doctrine of justification

from out of the hands of adherents of the New Perspective by highlighting the “fallacious” root of that view in the writings of Hermann Cremer.<sup>1</sup>

Irons’ thesis maintains that Cremer’s early works have introduced a faulty understanding of ‘righteousness’ as a relational term, emphasizing right covenant relationship with God. This view, he argues, has contributed to the rejection in New Testament studies of Lutheran ideas of imputation and other primarily judicial understandings of the doctrine. Indeed, in chapter 1 Irons pronounces his desire “to undermine the central lexical basis of the New Perspective interpretation of ‘the righteousness of God’” in order to “vindicate” the Old Lutheran perspective on Paul. In a moment of personal affirmation he declares in his concluding chapter (ch.7) that he has, in fact, successfully undermined the New Perspective in his monograph. However, I cannot join Irons in his assessment of his monograph’s success in vindicating the Old Perspective view of justification. Rather, I find his thesis to falter in regard to the stated goal of undermining the New Perspective on Paul. I will approach the critique of the monograph in three movements, namely: (1) a critique of Irons’ methodological approach, (2) a critique of Irons’ view of ‘righteousness’ as a non-covenantal, judicial/forensic term and category, and (3) a critique of Irons’ view of Judaism.

### **A Critique of Irons’ Lexical Approach: The Necessity of Context for the Determination of the Theological Function of a Word**

Central to Irons’ project is a methodological approach which seeks to determine the proper theological meaning of ‘the righteousness of God’ via a lexical study of the phrase in various literary works from antiquity. His monograph is essentially a word study that surveys the usage of the terms in a variety of sources, and then categorizes their uses into a list that expresses the basic semantic field of possible meanings of the word(s). As can be observed in the appendix (p. 344), Irons enumerates three key domains of usage for the term “righteousness,” namely: legal righteousness (i.e., courtroom language), ethical righteousness, and correctness (i.e., speaking the truth, using just balances, etc). It must be stated that in terms of exhaustive lexical comparative work, the monograph is exemplary in regard to its breadth and in regard to the author’s ability to organize the results into a useful scholarly resource. In chapters 1-5, Irons’ command of the material, and his concise, informative summaries of the various authors and works stand on their own as useful overviews of often obscure texts. The worth of these chapters is evident quite apart from any potential contribution they are intended to make toward the establishment of the monograph’s main thesis. In terms of lexical study Irons proves himself to be a master of the task.

1. 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), 6-7.

Yet, where I find fault with this type of lexical approach is in the primacy of place it gives to the meaning of words above, and in some cases instead of, the determination of the theological function of a phrase in its theological context. The decision to approach the task in this manner is overt. When Irons states that his word-study approach is undertaken *instead of* an engagement with “the broad brush of *theological* motifs,” it becomes evident that too much autonomy and weight is being given to words and phrases apart from their *particular* uses in *particular* New Testament texts to express *particular* theological emphases and fulfilling *particular* theological functions. Irons frequently re-presents this primary methodological prolegomena whereby a focus on the meaning of the phrase ‘righteousness of God’ seems to operate in a Platonic manner in which a generic meaning determined from the semantic field of possible meanings governs and restricts how the word is allowed to operate in any given *theological* context. This problematic approach can be observed when Irons insists that the early church fathers understood the phrase “righteousness of God” not in an “esoteric Hebraic/relational sense that bears no relationship to what the word actually means in Greek” but rather in a sense “that was consistent with *the ordinary meanings* associated with the Greek word *dikaio sunē*.”<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere Irons argues in a similar manner that New Perspective scholars have introduced the meaning “covenant faithfulness” into the *dik-* word group.<sup>3</sup> Irons states overtly that: “the contextual concept must not be equated with the lexical concept”<sup>4</sup> and that, although the word “righteousness” *can* be used “to refer to faithfulness,” nevertheless, “faithfulness is not part of *the lexical sense*” of the word “righteous.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Irons goes so far as to say that the “*discourse concepts* in the surrounding context should not be allowed to *overpower the lexical concepts of the world themselves*.”<sup>6</sup> For Irons, Paul is “tethered” to the results of the range of lexical options that arise from the study of the usage of the word in the biblical and non-biblical works in antiquity. This approach does not sufficiently take into account the way in which words take on a *specific theological function* in its immediate context; a function that is not discernible from the mere study of the semantic domain of a lexeme in a generic, blanket fashion across a sampling of disparate, decontextualized, and disconnected texts.<sup>7</sup> Instead, as Irons himself recognizes, even if the word “righteousness” does not literally mean “covenant faithfulness” in a “lexical sense” it can be and is used in both biblical and extra-biblical

2. Ibid., 5. Emphasis mine.

3. Ibid., 83.

4. Ibid., 88

5. Ibid., 89. Emphasis mine.

6. Ibid., 150. Emphasis mine.

7. Ibid. 273. Irons makes a concession here by noting that it is possible that Paul could transform “the linguistic usage” of a word, thus creating a new sort of meaning. Although, he has already conveniently noted on the previous page (p. 272) that the meaning “covenant faithfulness” does not fit this category of “transformed meaning.”

Greek “with reference to covenant relationships.”<sup>8</sup> This demonstrates that even if one prefers to approach the “meaning” of a word apart from its actual usage in a particular discourse, the word will end up being defined in much greater detail when it is read within the actual context of the discourse in which it is being used. Therefore, while a lexical study may be interesting, and helpful for the generic formation of a lexicon entry, it is utterly useless as an exegetical tool unless it is considered in tandem with the theological function of the word within a given discourse. Such a methodological oversight invites skewed results and, instead of undermining the New Perspective, undermines Irons’ entire project.

In regard to the approach of Irons’ project, there are two additional points of his methodology that need to be addressed, namely: (1) his use of a semantic domain comparison which I find to be rigged and which issues forth in unreliable and warped conclusions, and (2) the liberty with which he reads his own theological presuppositions into the exegetical process. We shall conclude this section by briefly addressing each of these critiques before moving on to assess his arguments in regard to “righteousness” in the monograph.

Concerning Irons’ use of a semantic domain comparison, he explains on p. 109:

In addition to examining the semantic range of the words for ‘righteousness,’ I also compare these words with other words in two semantic domains, ‘courts and legal procedures’ and ‘moral and ethical qualities.’ As we will see, this semantic domain analysis goes a long way toward clarifying the precise contours of the semantic profile of the words for ‘righteousness’ and the particular social context that they presuppose.<sup>9</sup>

Although there is much value in performing a comparative (in addition to a lexical) semantic domain analysis, the problem with Irons’ use of this procedure is that it essentially assumes in advance that any view of “righteousness” defined in relational and/or covenantal terms is by default ruled out. By selecting only two domains of meaning, namely legal and ethical usages of the term, the domain of covenantal/relational “righteousness” is decidedly not represented. Therefore, the conclusions of the comparative study really offer no additional information about the possibility of a covenantal or relational view of “righteousness” because Irons’ did not include that category within his comparative search. That is to say, Irons’ pre-determined set of lexical categories for the semantic possibilities of the word ‘righteousness’ (namely: legal, ethical, and correctness categories) necessarily govern the semantic comparison, and this forces the study to ignore potentially illuminating instances of words that refer to faithfulness to a contract, agreement, or covenant.

8. Ibid., 90. Cf. 105 in which Irons notes that it can be shown extra-biblical Greek documents that the word *dikaiousunē* (“righteousness”) can refer to “social relationships [that] are formalized as promises, oaths, contracts, covenants, treaties, and so on”; cf. 151.

9. Ibid., 109.

This same commitment to predetermined ideas is evident in Irons' theological presuppositions which are rooted in the Reformed tradition. It is, no doubt, impossible for any interpreter to be entirely objective. Likewise, it is well-known that no interpreter can escape the reality of the theory-laden nature of all knowledge. Our ideas and commitments remain with us even when we are trying to remain 'neutral.' Thus, I am not critiquing Irons for holding firm to his faith commitments as an exegete. On the contrary, I commend such a commitment to a pious adherence to one's faith tradition within the fabric of Christian orthodoxy. However, I find an unacceptable level of cross-over of Irons' theological positions—which themselves are reliant to some extent on the exegesis of Scripture—into his exegetical work. When Irons rattles off theological terms and doctrinal positions such as the distinction between “justification and sanctification,” and the reality of “human inability and sovereign grace”<sup>10</sup> his comments reveal his commitment to Reformed theological presuppositions which contribute to his own inability and unwillingness to accommodate the findings of the New Perspective in regard to “righteousness” into his theological system. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that he desires to “rescue” biblical studies by “undermining” an alleged erroneous New Perspective interpretation of the doctrine of justification.<sup>11</sup> Lest one think that I am overstating my case, further comments about “the Pauline doctrine of grace,” the reality of “sovereign grace,”<sup>12</sup> and a “monergistic accent . . . manifested in the salvation and conversion of the elect”<sup>13</sup> further demonstrate Irons' tendency to approach exegesis from an overly dogmatic perspective. The critique here is not that Irons' attempted to do theology, so to speak, but rather that his weaving in and out of the exegetical and theological tasks is not cohesive with the rest of his project, and lacks the precision and care that is evidenced in his earlier, lexical work. Nor is my issue here with Irons' theological ideas per se. Rather, my critique is more specifically directed at the fact that his exegetical points from New Testament texts do not obviously issue forth in the sort of grand theological ideas that he assumes in an obvious and uncontested fashion. That is to say, not all interpreters would agree on the theological take-aways from an exegesis of the passages treated by Irons. Thus, his theological presuppositions cannot be used to function as evidence for his theory about “righteousness” contra the New Perspective without a much more extensive theological and exegetical treatment of the individual New Testament texts.

10. Ibid., 294. Cf. p. 292 where he refers to the concept of “union with Christ” without establishing or even defining what he means by that. I am not opposed to these ideas at all. Rather, I aim to highlight the fact that melding such theological presuppositions into a section on exegesis is methodologically improper.

11. Ibid., 6-7.

12. Ibid., 294. The “doctrines of grace” is a phrase that is commonly used synonymously with Reformed Theology and Calvinism.

13. Ibid., 318.

## **A Critique of Irons' View of "Righteousness" as a Non-Covenantal, Judicial/Forensic Term and Category**

On the topic of "righteousness" Irons makes a solid and convincing case against Hermann Cremer's view that "righteousness" is primarily a positive concept, referring not to distributive justice and the divine response to legal realities in regard to humans, but rather referring to one's positive relationship with God.<sup>14</sup> Irons' next move is to demonstrate through a lexical study that the word "righteousness" (a) never means "covenant-faithfulness" as it is often translated by adherents of the New Perspective, and (b) refers primarily to the forensic dealings of God with humanity according to the principle of justice which corresponds and coheres with God's perfectly just character. Further, it is a main contention of Irons' that by undermining the relational view of Cremer, he has undermined the entire New Perspective position. Though I do not take issue, and on the contrary, agree with Irons' critique of Cremer's solely positive view of God's righteousness, I do take issue with virtually all of the conclusions that he draws from this fact.

To begin, it is not the case that a successful critique of Cremer's position on "righteousness" thereby undermines the New Perspective.<sup>15</sup> A successful critique of Cremer *does* call into question Cremer's theology. Yet, the various views of the adherents of the variegated movement known as the New Perspective on Paul cannot simply be dismissed because of an inconsistency in Cremer's exegesis and theology. After all, Cremer was a thinker who *preceded* the New Perspective. If one wants to critique, for example, N.T. Wright, in what way does it make sense to do this by critiquing a scholar who is not cited, quoted, or included in any book or bibliography by Wright? A quick look through all of N.T. Wright's major works reveals that Cremer is never even mentioned! Thus, it would require a massive, improbable stretch to conclude that Cremer's ideas provide the main foundation for Wright's theology of 'righteousness.' Would it not make more sense, if one is seeking to undermine the New Perspective—a movement to which Cremer never even belonged—to perhaps critique its leading exponents, namely James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright? To be fair, Irons does establish the positive influence of Cremer on Dunn via his usage of Achtemeier's *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, a source indebted to the work of Cremer and a source which Dunn cites.<sup>16</sup> Yet, even this example occupies a tiny portion of the monograph, perhaps a few sentences, and is, at best, a piece of circumstantial and indirect evidence. If Irons actually wanted to say something about the effect of his monograph on the New Perspectives of Dunn and Wright, he ought to have engaged directly with their

14. Cf. *Ibid.*, 182: "Cremer's analysis failed to take account of the bi-directional flow of God's righteousness, that is, the fact that God is described as 'a righteous judge' because he righteously defends the innocent and punishes their oppressors"; cf. 134-135. I completely agree with this assessment and I find it to be a valuable contribution to the scholarly discussion.

15. *Ibid.*, 10.

16. *Ibid.*, 37.

works which, I would argue, are based not on the slavish adoption of an idea from one scholar (namely Cremer), but are part of a wide interpretive movement in biblical scholarship and which—in any case—make their own arguments for the covenantal reading of *dikaïosunē*. The most egregious error in this regard, however, comes from the relegating of the findings and formulations of Wright’s latest work on Paul and justification to a handful of minor footnotes. This oversight allows Irons to construct a strawman which attributes to Wright a sort of monolithic view of “righteousness” that is basically equivalent to Cremer and refers to “righteousness” solely as “covenant faithfulness” apart from judicial overtones. What is most surprising about this is that Irons actually reveals early on in the book that he knows that this truncated understanding of “righteousness” is actually not what Wright argues for in his latest book! On page 58, buried in footnote 220, Irons notes that, in fact, in Wright’s book, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*,<sup>17</sup> he argues not for a monolithic, but rather for a four-fold sense to “righteousness” which includes “right behavior, the law court, the covenant, and eschatological cosmic rectification.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, while it would be correct to conclude that Irons’ project has succeeded in critiquing the exegesis of Hermann Cremer, the lack of Wright’s use of Cremer and Wright’s four-fold sense of “righteousness” makes any claim by Irons’ to have defeated a *Wrightian* account of the New Perspective severely inaccurate. Related to and exacerbating this error is Irons’ own admission that though, in regard to the lexeme itself, the word “righteousness” does not mean “covenant faithfulness,” nevertheless, as was stated earlier, the word *dikaïosunē* (“righteousness”) can be used to refer to faithfulness to a contract, agreement or promise.<sup>19</sup> In his discussion of parallelism in Isa 56:1; Ps 36:10; Ps 143:1, Irons argues:

God’s ‘righteousness’ includes his being faithful to keep his promises and deliver his people. But this does not mean that the word ‘righteousness’ means faithfulness to a promissory covenant. All instances of faithfulness to a promissory covenant may be termed ‘righteousness,’ but not all ‘righteousness’ is faithfulness to a promissory covenant.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, in stating that instances of faithfulness to a covenant can be referred to as “righteousness,” Irons is unknowingly conceding a major point to the New Perspective. The New Perspective understanding of “righteousness” as a status of right covenantal relationship with God on the basis of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to all who have the covenant badge of faith relies not on the meaning of a mere lexeme determined without reference to its usage in a particular text and detached from its immediate literary context. Instead, the New Perspective approach focuses on the theological function of the lexeme “righteousness” and the phrase “the righteousness of God”

17. N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

18. *Ibid.*, 58 n.220. Emphasis mine.

19. *Ibid.*, 105, citing this usage in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 2.75.1.

20. *Ibid.*, 143.

(and their related variations) in their particular Pauline contexts. It is, therefore, a moot point, to quibble over the semantic domain of a word, and to make theological arguments on that basis when the context has been purposefully ignored.

This mishmash of misrepresentations and strawman arguments in regard to N.T. Wright's true understanding of the function of the *dik*- ("righteousness") word group leads to a subsequent simplification of "righteousness" by Irons that, in shutting out any covenantal and relational meaning in advance, relegates the term to a primarily forensic, legal function. But we have already observed in the most recent writings of New Perspective advocate N.T. Wright, that the forensic/legal language of the court room need not, and indeed should not, be separated from the covenantal, cosmic-eschatological, and ethical nuances of the word *dikaïosunē*. Indeed, to exclude the category of "covenant" from one's understanding of divine justice is to decontextualize the mechanism by which the concept of divine justice makes any canonical sense in the first place, namely within the context of a covenant relationship with God, either as a covenant-keeper or a covenant-breaker. In order to downplay, or even to reject the covenantal context and the covenantal nature of divine court-room language in the Bible, one must abstract the notion of justice from the very paradigm in which it find its coherence. Divine justice in regard to Israel is always a *covenantal* justice. Thus, the most notable misstep of Irons is his decovenantalizing of "righteousness" and divine justice.

Irons' notes, for example, that the Old Testament words for "righteous/righteousness" often refer to judicial, legal situations *within the people of Israel*. Yet, he then immediately critiques Wright by arguing that Wright:

ties the law-court imagery too closely to the Abrahamic covenant, and in fact makes the covenant the primary category for interpreting the righteousness language...the forensic character of God's righteousness is muted and the phrase ultimately becomes a cipher for God's faithfulness to his covenant. Once the overpowering covenant motif is removed from Wright's construction, much of what he says about the Hebrew law court is helpful and valid.<sup>21</sup>

Why, though, must the law court metaphor be removed from and abstracted from its inseparable covenant context? This makes no sense and should be considered an exegetical error and oversight. Even referring to the concept of "righteousness" within "Israel" itself necessitates a reference to the covenant, the Torah which functions as the guiding legal document that provides the context and ground for understanding the justice of God in relation to his people and to those who are outside of the covenant community. This position frequently reoccurs throughout the monograph. Elsewhere Irons contrasts covenant themes with forensic themes in a similarly binary and polar

21. Ibid., 113. This is another example, by the way, of Irons' use of an older, popular level text by Wright instead of engaging with his newest, academic magnum opus on Paul. In this case, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

fashion, indicating that “righteousness words” have their “‘base,’ ‘frame,’ and ‘social setting’” in the language of the judicial court *rather than* the covenant.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, even *salvation itself*, Irons argues, “is an essentially judicial activity.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, given the critiques above, it must be stated that Irons’ own understanding of “righteousness” as a purely forensic, non-covenantal reality is, in fact, a result of an error which he ironically attributes to the various adherents of the New Perspective, namely, the importing of an incomplete, incorrect understanding of “righteousness” into the biblical and theological function of the term within its literary context.<sup>24</sup> Strangely, in an illustration toward the end of the book Irons inadvertently demonstrates the deficiency of his own project, namely, a focus and emphasis on lexical study over and against the theological function of a term in its immediate context! He writes:

An exhaustive study of the word ‘glasses’ in the corpus of English literature would not help us in these cases. Such a study can only provide us with these possible meanings of the word, and perhaps a number of additional specialized uses and connotations. The context of English literature will only enable us to establish the semantic range available to a speaker or writer, but it will not enable us to determine which segment of that semantic range is being activated in any given instance.<sup>25</sup>

### A Critique of Irons’ View of Judaism and the New Perspective

At various points throughout the monograph Irons’ argues that the works of Hermann Cremer are foundational for the New Perspective, and he even suggests that the New Perspective understanding of the function of the word ‘righteous’ is “dependent” upon Cremer’s theory.<sup>26</sup> What Irons is particularly concerned to accomplish in his book is to call into question the view of the New Perspective through a lexical study of the word *dikaïosunē* (“righteousness”). The New Perspective, built on the work of E.P.

22. Ibid., 126; cf. 146.

23. Ibid., 156; cf. 169; 178; 193; 195; 205; 207.

24. Ibid., 310 where Irons levels this charge against the adherents of the New Perspective who argue that “the righteousness of God” is a reference to the covenant faithfulness of God rather than a reference to the status declared to a believer. Of course, the New Perspective, in all of its various iterations, holds that the believers’ status of righteousness is also very much present in the writings of Paul. In Romans and Galatians it is expressed through the verb *dikiaoō* which is typically declared ‘to justify’ and through the verb *logizomai* paired with a definite object from the *dik-* word group (“to reckon, declare, or count [righteous]”). In Phil 3, the concept of the human status of righteousness through faith is accomplished through the use of the Greek propositional phrase *ek Theou dikaïosunēn* (“the righteous status from God”). The New Perspective is merely arguing that in Romans and in Galatians the phrase *dikaïosunē Theou* (“the righteousness of God”) is a reference to a characteristic of God, in those instances, and not to the status of human beings, which it nevertheless affirms through other grammatical constructions.

25. Ibid., 319.

26. Ibid., 156.

Sanders, critiqued Luther's view of Judaism in which the religion functioned as a foil to Christianity. In Luther's view, the problem with Judaism was that it was a meritorious, man-centered religion focused on the performance of "works-righteousness" which were undertaken by human beings in order to earn God's favor. Judaism, as the foil to Christianity, provides the negative backdrop for the pure Gospel of grace which is received through faith alone. The work of Sanders and others in the New Perspective movement have shown over the last 40 years or so that this caricature of Judaism as the epitome of "religion" in the negative sense was way off. Instead, Judaism was a religion of grace in which particularly Jewish works functioned, not as a means of earning one's salvation, but as covenant badges that showed that one belonged to the covenant community by God's gracious election. Thus, for the New Perspective, Christianity is not the solution to the foil of Judaism but it is rather *the fulfillment* of the covenant promises to Abraham that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. This universally-aimed covenant, given before the Mosaic Law with its Jewish works of the Law, was brought about through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith, both the Jew and the Gentile alike. Following this line of thought, New Perspective proponents have argued generally that Luther's precise understanding of the Law and its relation to Christianity, as well as his understanding of "righteousness" have needed some major tweaking. These tweaks have included a revised and more historically nuanced and accurate view of Judaism as a religion of grace, and a more careful formulation of the doctrine of justification on the basis of the New Perspective's revised understanding and function of Jewish Law.

However, when one considers that these are the dynamics at play in scholarly discussion of the New Perspective's view of justification, it is shocking to me that there is not a single discussion about the phrase *erga tou nomou* ("works of the law") in this monograph. If, as Irons has expressly stated, the intent is to undermine the New Perspective, then surely this would require at least a brief treatment of the New Perspective's revised understanding of the nature and function of Jewish works of the law. Instead, Irons articulates the view of the New Perspective on page 3 of the monograph, and then does not address the issue until page 324 at which point he simply assumes the Old Perspective, Lutheran understanding of 'works' as (to use Irons favorite term) a cipher for religious "works-righteousness." Besides his lexical work on the term 'righteousness,' which, as we have observed, actually affirms the New Perspective view, Irons offers no substantial critique of the New Perspective. He shifts without justification (pun intended) into a position of presumption, simply restating, instead of arguing for, the old Lutheran view. For example, Irons states:

There is, of course, a major difference between the understanding of this status in these Jewish writings and in Paul's theology: whereas for these Jewish writers, this status of righteousness before God is grounded in one's inherent righteousness that comes from obeying the law (what Paul would refer to as 'the righteousness of the law'), for Paul it comes from God as a gift of grace

received by faith on the ground of Christ's atoning death and resurrection (i.e., 'the righteousness of faith').<sup>27</sup>

Relatedly, while most would consider the language and idea of Judaism functioning as a 'foil' for Christianity to be a gross caricature, even of the Old Perspective, in a bizarre turn of events Irons actually adopts the phrase as a positive representation of his own view of Judaism! Whatever the theological understanding (or, I would say, misunderstanding) driving this view of Judaism, it is clear that Irons sees this pattern of religion in a variety of the canonical and extra canonical sources. For example, he argues that in 4 Maccabees it "may well be that the Jewish doctrine of the righteousness that comes from the Law that is the foil of the Pauline teaching finds its most articulate and sustained expression in 4 Maccabees."<sup>28</sup> He argues elsewhere that Paul has a polemic against "the nomistic theology of Judaism" and that this polemic can even be described as "anti-nomistic" (i.e. against-Law).<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion I have leveled some heavy and sustained critique of Charles Lee Irons' monograph, *The Righteousness of God*. My intention is not to be overly severe but to be scholarly and bold. The preceding article is not meant to attack the hard work done by Dr. Irons, but merely to critically engage as a peer and fellow scholar of Paul, but to do so in an unabashedly forthright manner. To summarize my assessment of the book, I found the book to be a robust, scholarly lexical study of the term "righteousness" in antiquity. The level of detail and attention paid to the primary sources is exemplary. That being said, I took issue with three sets of elements in the book, namely: the methodology, the view of "righteousness" proposed by the author, and the view of Judaism assumed by the author. In regards to the methodology, I critiqued the approach that favored lexicography to the unnecessary and imprudent exclusion of a consideration of the theological function of a word in its particular contexts. Concerning Irons' view of "righteousness," I took issue with his view which emphasized only one aspect of "righteousness," namely, the forensic aspect, to the exclusion of the covenantal context in which forensic themes necessarily function in the canon of Holy Scripture. I also critiqued Irons' self-admission that although the word *dikaiosunē* does not mean "covenant faithfulness," the word can be shown

27. Ibid., 231-232. Emphasis mine.

28. Ibid., 239; cf. 314 where Irons argues that the ordinary understanding of Jewish works before Christianity is "a foil"; cf. the same 'foil' statement again on p. 339.

29. Ibid., 317. It should be noted that on p. 224 Irons does give a nod to E.P. Sanders, the pioneer of the New Perspective on Judaism that launched the New Perspective on Paul. He doesn't outright dismiss Sanders, but ultimately he does not support Sanders' view of covenantal nomism and instead defaults to the Old Perspective understanding of Judaism as a cipher of man-centered 'works-righteousness' religion.

to function in reference to the keeping of covenants and contracts. This attestation of usage in regard to covenant faithfulness, I argued, actually undermined his own argument rather than assisting in his attempt to undermine the New Perspective on Paul. Lastly, I drew attention to Irons' unsubstantiated adoption and articulation of perspectives on Judaism that I argued were not sufficiently established via scholarly argument in the monograph. The result was an infusion of Old Perspective theological presuppositions which were read into the various texts resulting in flawed exegetical results.