

MARTYRDOM IN PAUL'S RELIGIOUS ETHICS: AN EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 5:7

by YEHEZKEL LANDAU

The fifth chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans is a remarkably eloquent and compact presentation of the apostle's perspective on salvation history. Paul outlines the radical transition from the epoch of sin and death to the Messianic Age in which these two enemies of humanity have been defeated. It is the righteousness of God which justifies the faithful and grants them eternal life. The event which has ushered in this absolute transformation of history, the final victory of the divine over the demonic powers, is the crucifixion of Christ and his glorious resurrection. Rom. 5:6 speaks of Jesus' sacrificial death for the "ungodly" or impious: "While we were still helpless [lit.: weak] at the right time Christ died for the impious."¹ The eighth verse offers Paul's interpretation of this supreme sacrifice; for him it reveals the saving grace and love of God in allowing His own Son to die as the atoning price for human sin: "But God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died on our behalf."²

Yehezkel Landau is a teacher and writer who lives in Jerusalem. He lectures on Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations at Nes Ammim and other Christian institutions, and serves as information secretary for Oz ve-Shalom, the Religious Zionist peace movement in Israel.

The original version of this essay was written for a graduate seminar at Harvard Divinity School taught by Prof. Krister Stendahl. The author would like to express his deep appreciation to Prof. Stendahl for everything he has gained as student, colleague, and friend.

1. Alfred Marshall, *The R.S.V. Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975, p. 616.

2. *Ibid.* The apostle's argument, or testimony of faith, builds from the sixth to the tenth verse, as Krister Stendahl has shown through his condensed paraphrase: "While we were yet *weak*, Christ took the initiative and died for us; while we were yet *sinners*, Christ took the first step; while we were yet *enemies*, Christ took the initiative so that through his death we were reconciled." *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, Philadelphia, 1976, p. 48.

Sandwiched between these two verses is a rather odd statement. Rom 5:7 offers an image of human behavior that is clearly meant to contrast with the references to ultimate devotion and sacrifice demonstrated by God and His obedient, self-denying Son. The RSV version reads: "Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man — though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die." The Greek phrasing is as follows: μόλις γὰρ ὑπὲρ δικαίου τις ἀποθάνεται ὑπὲρ γὰρ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ταχα τις καὶ τολμᾷ ἀποθανεῖν. For the purpose of illustrative comparison, we may note these variant translations of the verse: "Even for a just man one of us would hardly die, though perhaps for a good man one might actually brave death" (New English Bible). "For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure [perhaps, possibly] for a good man some would even dare to die." (King James Version). And the French text reads: "À peine voudrait-on mourir pour un homme juste; pour un homme de bien, oui, peut-être osera-t-on mourir." ("Hardly would one be willing to die for a just/righteous man; for a good man, yes, perhaps one will dare to die.")

Regardless of the slight differences in nuance that result from the use of the conditional, the future, or (as in the original Greek, v. 7b) the present tense for the act of dying or risking death, the general point of the verse is evident from the context. Paul means to say that human love is limited by evaluations of another person's worth, by egocentrism, and by fear — unlike the impartial, selfless love shown by Jesus or by God. Christ sacrificed his life for ungodly souls, and God allowed him to do so for the sake of all humanity; whereas the average person, in Paul's view, would rarely display such sacrificial devotion, even for the sake of a virtuous, deserving individual.

Since this comparison between the inordinate, almost unimaginable magnanimity demonstrated by both God and Jesus, on the one hand, and the limited, quite conceivable altruism which ordinary humans are capable of exhibiting, on the other, is evident enough, few commentators have given the seventh verse much detailed consideration. For most exegetes, a few cursory remarks about the phraseology usually suffice to explain the apostle's insertion of this "secular comparison," as Ernst Käsemann terms it.³ Werner Kümmel's treatment of the verse illustrates the typical exegetical pattern. In his essay on "New Testament Exegesis," Kümmel takes up Romans 5:1–11 as a sample text for basic hermeneutical inquiry. In his consideration of vv. 6–8, Kümmel cites the textual ambiguities in the opening words of v. 6 (*ei ge* versus *eti gar*), concluding that "the only thing that is really clear is that Paul proved God's love for us with the statement that Christ died for the ungodly. And this meaning is confirmed by verse 8."

3. Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, Philadelphia, 1971, p. 45.

Kümmel continues:

In between, however, stands verse 7, the real *crux interpretum*: the first half of the sentence says that death on behalf of a righteous person hardly ever occurs (and, hence, it is implied that death on behalf of an unrighteous person *never* occurs), but the second half of the sentence states that death on behalf of a good person is entirely thinkable. Michel simply ignores this difficulty, and Lietzmann and Kuss, in different ways, accept the second clause as a Pauline self-correction of the first. This verse cannot really be explained with any certainty, and we can only infer from it that Paul intends, in verse 8, to describe the divine love as something scarcely conceivable among human beings.⁴

Kümmel's outright rejection of any definitive interpretation of the verse serves to remind us of the difficulties confronting the exegete. Yet his speculations about what the apostle intended or what the verse might imply, plus his undue reliance on the judgments of other commentators, do not really accord with the rigorous standards of exegetical scrutiny which Kümmel offers in this very essay. At the very least, we can say that such casual consideration does not do the text or Paul's intentions sufficient justice.

The scant attention given the verse by most exegetes might, in itself, commend it to us for closer scrutiny. It has generally been overshadowed by Paul's theological witnessing in the surrounding text, especially his subsequent discussion of justification and the unfolding of salvation history, which comprises the remainder of Romans 5. In any examination of v. 7, one can hardly ignore the context in which it appears, including Paul's dramatic rendering of *Heilsgeschichte*, his account of the reign of sin and death which commenced with Adam and has now, according to the apostle's faith-understanding, come to an end through Christ's atoning death. But by focusing on the seventh verse, we may be able to reverse figure and ground, so to speak, and achieve another angle of hermeneutical vision.

A second reason for trying to ascertain Paul's meaning in this verse is that it presents, in stark and bold language to our own ears, a classic problem in moral theology or religious ethics; namely, under what circumstances would, or should, one sacrifice his or her life for another? This is clearly not Paul's operating concern in Rom. 5:7, but his appraisal of the human capacity for love or altruism seems strangely constricted on first reading. The verse has a ring quite different from, say, the words of Jesus in John 15:13: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone (τις) should lay down his life for (ὕπὲρ) his friends." Or Matthew 10:39: "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it." (Cf., also, Luke 14:26-7). Stauffer's discussion of *agapé* in Kittel's

4. Werner Georg Kümmel, "New Testament Exegesis," in *Exegetical Method*, E.V.N. Goetchius trans., New York, 1963, p. 55.

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) addresses Paul's view of love:

The goal of the work of divine love is the new man. But this goal is not attained without man and his work of love... God's will does not exclude human volition. It includes it, finding its purest fulfilment in its fullest exercise... God pours the *pneuma* into His elect. [Romans 5:5, in fact, speaks of this very act of grace, in which God's love has been transferred to us — which makes verse 7 sound all the more incongruous or dissonant, since God's love, at least as reflected in human behavior, seems to be limited] ... the *pneuma* liberates man for supreme activity in love... As for Jesus, so far Paul *agapé* is the only vital force which has a future in this aeon of death.⁵

Does Rom 5:7 imply that the vitality of Christian love ends, at least for ordinary mortals, at the supreme sacrifice? Paul's own testimony indicates that he himself longed to end his life in the service of Christ his Lord, thereby joining Jesus in paradise when the imminent *parousia* arrived. (We might add that such an early death would have also released Paul from all the affliction his flesh was heir to — cf. II Cor. 4:10–12, 5:2, and 5:8, as well as Phil. 1:20–23). Paul also declares, in I Cor. 13:3–7, that self-sacrifice *without love* gains nothing, and that love is capable of enduring all things, which would presumably include death.

Romans 5:7, we must recall, derives its intention, if not its entire meaning, from the context in which it appears. In vv. 5 and 8 of the chapter, Paul speaks of God's love. And the sixth verse, referring to the death of Jesus as a demonstration of that love, also suggests that Christ displayed super-human love in his obedient, self-sacrificing surrender to the will of God. Ernst Käsemann, in reflecting upon the contrast between Divine and human love, sees in this passage confirmation of Paul's fundamental belief that human beings are incapable of securing their own salvation, no matter how virtuous and altruistic they may be.⁶ God's redeeming

5. Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. and ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1964, vol. 1, pp. 50–51.

6. Käsemann, *op. cit.*, p. 39:

In its different variations, Jesus' death sometimes appears (as in Rom. 5.25; 8.32) as a divine sacrifice and the proof of God's love, sometimes (as in Gal. 1:4; 2:20; II Cor. 5:1f.) as the self-sacrificing love of Christ. Correspondingly, love in Paul always means the manifestation of existence for others, displayed in concrete form and with a special emphasis on the act of dying. The apostle introduces a personal and theologically important nuance into the formula when he talks about dying for the ungodly and sinners (Rom. 5.6ff.), for the Christian brethren (Rom. 14.15), or for all men (II Cor. 5.14). The central theme is always the "for us." [For other instances in which the preposition ὑπὲρ is used, see II Cor. 1:6, 5:15, 5:20, 5:21, and Gal. 1:4, 2:20, 3:13.] It covers the two meanings: "for our advantage" and "in our stead"; and the changing interpretations characterize Paul's intensity and range. What he is establishing is our incapacity to achieve salvation for ourselves. Salvation is always open to us without our doing anything for it — as a gift, according to Rom. 3.24, and, as Rom. 5.6ff. stresses with intense emotion, before we have fulfilled the will of God. It is only the love of our creator which saves.

grace, acting through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, eclipses all human initiative in the unfolding of sacred history and renders all other criteria of true righteousness irrelevant. But even within the context of Paul's faith perspective, colored so radically by an eschatological immediacy, the question remains as to whether, in verse 7, he has deliberately understated the human capacity for altruism in glorifying the redemptive love of God and the devotional love of Christ. As Käsemann himself observes, Paul "is seldom fortunate in his analogies because his impetuous temperament always made him argue from the point at which he was aiming, without always considering sufficiently the appropriateness of the material he drew on for evidence."⁷

With that general criticism in mind, let us explore the text of Rom. 5:7 in greater detail to see what material Paul might have drawn on, besides his own experience, in making his appraisal of altruistic behavior.⁸ Although we want to look at the wording of the particular verse more closely, we must not rip the sentence out of its context so as to reduce it to what might appear, on the surface, as a purely psychological or anthropological judgment. We want to retain an awareness of the theological purpose which it serves and the confessional context in which the words acquire their communicative power.

Let us explore first the possibility that Paul's distinction between the "righteous man" and the "good man" is a non-issue. In his commentary on Romans, C.K. Barrett suggests this: "In the two clauses of v. 7 he virtually repeats himself, as the repeated 'for' (γάρ) shows. It is not impossible that Paul dictated v. 7a, thought he could express himself better, and dictated v. 7b. But Tertius (xvi. 22) had now put v. 7a on his paper, and by an oversight it was never removed."⁹ Other commentators have argued that *dikaïos* (just man) and *agathos* (good man) represent the same kind of individual in the verse. But Sanday and Headlam

7. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

8. Paul's use of the impersonal pronoun τις in both halves of the verse shows his inclination to lump all people together, without allowances for personality differences, in order to make his point and sharpen the analogy. A more considered assessment of the human propensity for self-sacrifice would take into account the variety of ways in which generalized rules or norms are expressed in behavior. "For example," writes moral theologian James M. Gustafson, "if part of the significance of faith through Jesus Christ is that a person seeks not his own interests but the good of others, as Paul admonished the Corinthian Christians to do (I Cor. 10:24), differences in basic personality will make differences in how that admonition is fulfilled. Indeed, it has been fulfilled with scrupulous obedience in a compulsive way by some, it has been fulfilled in joyous abandon of the self for the sake of others by others; it has been a prime directive to aggressive social reform by some, it has led to a more passive inward self-denial in others. The religious meaning and the moral imperative flow into and form to some extent what a person does with his basic personality characteristics." *Can Ethics Be Christian?*, Chicago, 1975, pp. 55-56.

9. C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, New York, 1957, p. 105.

reject this synonymy argument. They cite Irenaeus' use of the Gnostic dichotomy between the God of the Old Testament (*dikaïos*) and the New Testament God (called *agathos*): "The *dikaïos* keeps to the 'letter of his bond'; about the *agathos* there is something warmer and more genial such as may well move to self-sacrifice and devotion."¹⁰ James Denney, in his article on Romans for *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, also notes the Gnostic contrast and adds:

Unless *agathos* is meant to suggest a certain advance upon *dikaïos*, it is impossible to see in what respect the second clause adds anything to the first. Of course the words are broadly synonymous, so that often they are both applied to the same person or thing (Lk. xxiii. 50, Rom. vii. 12); still there is a difference, and it answers to their application [i.e., in Rom. v:7].

Denney paraphrases the verse in this way: "it is *difficult* to die for a just man, [but] it has been found *possible* (one may venture to affirm) to die for a good man."¹¹ Denney here seems to apply the verb *τολμᾶ*, in the weaker sense of "venture," adopted by Paul elsewhere (e.g., II Cor. 11:21; cf. Fitzer's article in *TDNT*),¹² to the claim itself, rather than the act of dying described by it. This is a highly dubious interpretation, for by removing the element of courage from 7b, it becomes hard to see what the practical difference between the sacrificial acts outlined in the two clauses would be. The distinction would be reduced to a statistical one rather than an assessment grounded in Paul's sense of human motivation.

On the minor, yet related, question of the article *τοῦ* before *agathou* (which is absent in 7a), Denney observes that some exegetes "make both *dikaïou* and *τοῦ agathou* neuter; some who take *dikaïou* as masculine and take *τοῦ agathou* as neuter (so Weiss and Godet — 'pour un juste, pour le bien'); but, as Jowett says, the notion of dying for an abstract idea is entirely unlike the N[ew] T[estament], or the *āge* in which the N.T. was written, while the opposition to Christ's dying for sinful persons requires that persons should be in question here also." Denney avers that the "absence of the article with *dikaïou* corresponds to the virtually negative character of the clause [7a]: it is inserted before *agathou* because the exceptional case is definitely conceived as happening."¹³ Sanday and Headlam echo Denney here and offer, as "what appears to be the simple and natural sense of the passage": "A few may face death for a good man, still fewer for a righteous man, but in the case of Christ there is more even than this; He died for declared enemies of God."¹⁴

10. William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (The International Critical Commentary), New York, 1895, pp. 127–128.

11. James Denney, "St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans," *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, New York, 1900, p. 625.

12. *TDNT*, *op. cit.* (n. 5), vol. 8, Gerhard Friedrich, ed., pp. 184–185.

13. Denney, *op. cit.*

14. Sanday and Headlam, *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 128.

So we have at least tentatively established that Paul is, in fact, making a characterological distinction here between the righteous and the good man, one that seems to have a bearing on the frequency, or likelihood, of heroic self-sacrifice. The two uses of *gar* which Barrett sees as suggesting an intended substitution, an alternative rendering which Paul meant to supplant the first, could be equally, if not better, explained by simply excusing Paul's hasty dictation. P.C. Sands has discerned that Paul can be quite irregular in his Greek syntax. The apostle could create classical, polished sentences, but "in his rush he makes some very loose sentences, too, overloading them with prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and participial clauses, till the main idea is obscured and the sentence proper uncompleted." Sands cites instances where Paul's style "is neither good classical Greek style nor good Hebrew; it is the impetuous rush of a Jewish orator using Greek connecting words in a non-classical and non-Jewish manner. His chief fault is the stringing together of prepositional phrases," as in II Cor. 1:2; and he occasionally left connections loose or hanging, as in Gal. 2:4–7.¹⁵ Why Sands should feel that Paul's religious background might color his ability to use the Greek tongue, particularly since his youth was spent in a Hellenistic environment, is unclear. But in regard to our main point, compared to the weightier syntactical problems posed by other Pauline passages, the inclusion of an extra preposition in Rom. 5:7 is not a critical matter.

What *is* critical to an understanding of the verse is Paul's use of the terms *dikaïos* and *agathos*. Let us examine what he might have meant in distinguishing one from the other and then see whether the behavioral contrast is plausible and meaningful.

In using *dikaïos*, Paul could mean one of two things. He could be describing the new Christian who is made righteous through faith in Christ. (This is Paul's understanding of Habakkuk 2:4 — cf. Rom. 1:17, Gal. 3:11).¹⁶ It is the freely bestowed righteousness of God that justifies the sinful or ungodly, thereby transforming them, through their Christian faith, into righteous souls who are both judged (mercifully) and saved. (See Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:9). Since the fifth chapter of Romans emphasizes the connection between God's righteousness and the justification of man,¹⁷ one might assume that this theological connection would apply to v. 7, especially since the verse just before mentions the category of the "impious" or "ungodly" (ἄσεβῶν), those who are justified through Christ's death and who would otherwise have remained condemned (cf. II Cor. 3:9, 6:14).

15. P.C. Sands, *Literary Genius of the New Testament*, Oxford, 1932, pp. 165, 166.

16. Cf. Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, Norman P. Goldhawk trans., New York, 1961, p. 49.

17. The Greek root *dikaio-* corresponds to the English *just-* and links *justice* with *justification*. Compare, in Romans 5, vv. 9 and 16 with vv. 7, 17, 19, 21, and v. 18 which links the two concepts. (Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 616–19).

This hypothesis, however, presents a serious problem: if *dikaios* does stand for the faithful Christian justified by God's love through Christ, why would one be less apt or inspired to die for that person than a "good man"? That discrepancy does not square well with the ideal of Christian love toward those in the New Covenant community. So we are led to the other, more traditional image of the righteous man, that of the pious soul whose life is lived in accordance with the will of God, the "saintly" individual in the popular sense, conforming to the Hebrew *Zaddik*. Schrenk, in his essay on "dikaios" for *TDNT*, asserts that Paul does, in fact, use the term in this way for Rom. 5:7. Here, Schrenk says, "even Paul, notwithstanding his doctrine of justification, can still describe these relative moral distinctions among men in terms of the usual categories [opposing *dikaios* to *asebos*], quite apart from his salvation-centered anthropology." Schrenk goes on to compare this use of *dikaios* with possible parallels in the Synoptic gospels. "If the usual Jewish distinction is not rejected, there is in the syn[optics] a stern rejection of the hypocrisy of a righteous appearance and of the confidence of the *dikaios* in his own piety (Mt. 23:28; Lk. 20:20; 18:9). This repudiation of the nature of *dikaios* as habit, appearance, and self-confidence, and of the associated contempt for others, means that a question mark is put behind the claim of the righteous...."¹⁸

In Paul, this question mark becomes a firm refutation. And this tendency may help to explain Paul's use of *dikaios* in Rom. 5:7. The apostle's entire gospel, and specifically chapter 5 of Romans, is based on his conviction that salvation comes through Christian faith in God's love acting through Christ rather than by a Judaic normative ethics. The pre-Christian ideal of righteousness, especially as proclaimed by the Pharisaic opponents of Paul's embryonic religion, is rejected by the apostle along with any attachment to the outmoded Law which dispensed death. Any man who claimed to be righteous according to the old, Judaic standard was, in Paul's post-conversion view, a deluded moralist at best, and a hypocritical legalist at worst. This unflattering image would not evoke great sympathy, much less heroic altruism, on the part of another who might be in a position to sacrifice his life for this *dikaios*.

This second hypothesis, which we can label the "Judaic image," as opposed to the "Justified Christian image," is supported by passages from the Apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon. Sanday and Headlam show, by comparing passages from Romans and Wisdom,¹⁹ that the similarities in thematic content and mode of expression are so strong "as to make it clear that at some time in his life St. Paul

18. *TDNT*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, Kittel ed., pp. 189, 190.

19. Sanday and Headlam, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-2, 268-9.

must have bestowed upon the Book of Wisdom a considerable amount of study.”²⁰

The second chapter of Wisdom takes on appreciable importance in this light. The text includes long sections of perverse, self-deluded thinking entertained by those “ungodly men” who “made a covenant with” death, thinking that their short time on earth was to be spent in greedy, sadistic, and self-aggrandizing activities. Part of their sadistic pleasure was to come from persecuting “the righteous man”:

Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child [or servant] of the Lord. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange.

We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father.

Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God’s son, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.

Let us test him with insult and torture, that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected.

If Paul did, in fact, recall this image of the *dikaios* in composing his epistle, he may have imagined the righteous man as someone whose “ways are strange,” who remains contemptuously aloof from the less devout, with whom he would prefer not to associate. Though the average person in Paul’s time would not be inclined to harbor so much resentment against such a pious soul (even if that piety proved to be hypocritical) as to incite the kind of cruel persecution pictured in Wisdom, still the less-than-righteous might remain reciprocally distant from the *dikaios*. If that were the case, an altruistic display of generosity (let alone heroic martyrdom) would not be a natural and spontaneous occurrence, growing out of mutual acquaintance and concern. There might even be a sense of reluctance to help, stemming from a perception of the righteous person as already-with-God, sufficiently protected so as not to require altruistic intervention.

Another passage in Wisdom (4:7, all quotations from RSV) reads: “the righteous man, though he die early, will be at rest.” A story is then recounted about a *dikaios* who was “taken up” by God through premature death in order to save him from the corruption or his sinful surroundings. He was mercifully returned to God “lest evil change his understanding or guile deceive his soul... Being perfected in a short time, he fulfilled long years; for his soul was pleasing to the Lord,

20. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

therefore he took him quickly from the midst of wickedness.” The general conclusion one can draw from these passages is that “impious” people are apt to view pious souls who strive to fulfill the demands of the Lord as eccentric, self-contained individuals who commune with God rather than with their fellows. At least it can be argued that Paul might have imagined the *dikaïos* in that way and brought that image from Wisdom into Romans 5:7, especially in the light of his efforts to counter the claims of his Pharisaic adversaries. Given, then, the psychological and religious distance between the *dikaïos* and the rest of humanity, we can see why Paul could have envisioned suicidal heroism on behalf of this “righteous man” (conceived in the negatively stereotyped “Judaic image”) as an extremely unlikely act. Why should one become a martyr for such a moralistic egotist, especially when a truer model of righteousness, *dikaïosuné*, is now proclaimed?

The *agathos*, on the other hand, seems to be a more “down-to-earth” and congenial person, engaged in the collective struggle to make the world a more humane place. Paul uses “good” to describe actions that combat the existing evil among men. Good conduct and good works are held up for commendation throughout Romans (2:7, 2:10, 3:8, 7:19, 9:11, 12:21, 13:3, 16:19) and in II Cor. 5:10 and 9:8, Gal. 6:10, and I Thess. 5:15. To Grundmann, writing in *TDNT*, “the good” for Paul is “the love which the Christian is enabled to exercise and which is the innermost purpose of the Law [which is still held to be “holy, just, and good”: Rom. 7:12]. The good is achieved in concrete I-Thou relationships.”²¹ Paul tells his audience in Rome that he is assured of their own goodness (Rom. 15:14), so this moral attribute seems to be a relatively common virtue, at least among faithful Christians. Its broad manifestation, its connection to the life of Christian faith, and its achievement through interpersonal relationships all serve to make “goodness” a more human, generally attainable and respectable virtue than the more lofty and suspect ideal of “Judaic” righteousness. Consequently, Paul can say that the good man would be more apt to inspire our loving self-sacrifice on his behalf.

As for the word $\tau\omicron\lambda\mu\acute{\alpha}$, “dares,” we have already noted our belief (cf. *supra*) that, in its use with “to die,” it connotes courage in the face of possible or certain death. Unless self-sacrifice occurs totally unwillfully, as a reflex response to a sudden threatening situation, uncommon courage would appear to be a requirement for its commission. Since the Greek word does have resonant connections with courage, especially with the courage to endure suffering,²² it is reasonable to infer that Paul meant to connote heroic courage in Rom. 5:7b.

21. *TDNT*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, Kittel ed., p. 16.

22. *TDNT*, *op. cit.*, vol. 8., Friedrich ed., pp. 181–182.

In light of all these considerations, we may “dare” or venture to construct our own paraphrase of the verse. An expanded and clarified rendering might read something like the following: beginning with “for” as a link to v. 6 denoting “because you see,” or “you can see that...”, we would then have the rest of the sentence read, “one would hardly give up one’s life on behalf of a pious moralist, but for a loving comrade in the struggle against evil one could muster the courage to brave death.”

To assess the full ethical import of this statement would require a more detailed examination of Paul’s attitudes toward bodily existence, death and human freedom.²³ One of the basic problems we might encounter in applying the verse to issues in moral theology would be the apparent constraint placed on heroic suicide by Paul’s theological link between sin and death. If “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), why would one willfully choose death and thereby assume that onus? The Greeks, of course, saw dying as a supremely moral act, the capstone to an ethical life. Recent existentialist thinking tends to similarly focus on the ethics of suicide and martyrdom. But Paul’s religious worldview is such that we really can not expect much guidance from him on this crucial ethical problem. His cosmology, positing good and evil powers in the universe, and his eschatology to an even greater extent (anticipating the imminent advent of the *parousia*), define a completely unique moral universe. As Käsemann explains, it is apocalyptic expectation that eclipses all moral idealism for Paul.²⁴ And that insight brings us back to the context in which we find Rom. 5:7. Paul is trying to strengthen his claim, the heart of his gospel, that human action counts for nothing on the grand scale of *Heilsgeschichte*. It is God’s love that redeems, that has reconciled humankind to Him through the sacrifice of Jesus. In contrast to that supreme sacrifice, and to the paradoxical mystery of Creation redeemed through

23. A good starting point could be W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, New York, 1967, ch. 2, “The Old Enemy: The Flesh and Sin”. Davies compares Paul’s views on human sinfulness and responsibility with Rabbinic teachings of the same period. He acknowledges (p. 34) that the apostle “goes beyond the teaching of the Rabbis” in his understanding of a “direct causal relation” between the Fall of Adam and the sinfulness of all human beings, expressed so forcefully in the concluding verses to the chapter we have been considering, Romans 5. In his discussion of the *yezer ha-ra’*, the evil impulse in the human soul, Davies illustrates the ambivalence with which the Rabbinic sages viewed this quality; for in certain aspects, such as “the urge to self-preservation and propagation”, the *yezer ha-ra’* can actually serve a good purpose. In the case of martyrdom on behalf of another person, this “urge” or instinct for survival is pitted against noble sentiments and ideals. The person called upon to act confronts an anguishing choice, and any onlooker should avoid hasty evaluations of his behavior, especially a judgment that vitiates the tragic pathos and unique relationship in question by some universalizing abstraction about the human condition.

24. Käsemann, *op. cit.*, p. 31. This apocalyptic conviction in Paul only compounds what Krister Stendahl has called a “weakness motif,” or “the ‘nonheroic’ note in Christianity.” Stendahl, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 48ff.

the victorious death and resurrection of Christ, even the most noble of human acts is reduced to insignificance.

Karl Barth, in his commentary on Romans 5:7–8, echoes and elucidates Paul when he claims that “human self-sacrifice can be no more than a parable of that by which the new man is brought into being.” When measured against the absolute parameters of atonement, salvation, and eternal life, any human action within “the relativity of this world,” even so noble an act as martyrdom on behalf of another, loses its essential meaning and value. Such, according to Barth, is the ethical challenge and consolation in Paul’s testimony of faith, with its radically new ground for religious and moral truth.²⁵

As a Jew who stands on very different ground, theologically and existentially, my moral universe is shaped by rather different parameters than the Pauline ones. The Judaic concept of covenantal partnership, linking God and humanity in the struggle to redeem this world, ascribes much more value to human initiative, courage, righteousness, and sacrifice than a Pauline believer would acknowledge. The whole existential dynamic of sin and atonement is experienced differently in

25. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Edwyn C. Hoskyns trans., London, 1975, pp. 161–162. Barth’s eloquent elucidation is worth citing at length:

The new man does not live by direct, personal benefits. He does not live by sharing in the good things of this life, not even by his capacity to procure them for others. He does not owe his life what another has procured for him by dying, nor does he even profit by his own death... There are rare, but nevertheless quite possible, occasions when one man offers his life on behalf of another — as for example, when a missionary or a doctor dies at his post, when a soldier dies on the field of battle, or when a mother dies in giving birth to a child. It is obvious that, as an effective historical occurrence, the death of Christ, as providing an opportunity for experience, must be set in the context of martyrdom. It is, moreover, possible that, if the motive of suicide were the receiving of benefit from a final despair concerning the things of this world, we might have to respect the man who takes his own life. But we must beware lest the honour which we are bound to pay to those who offer up their lives should degenerate into that sentimentality which attributes to a human action, even to the sacrifice of life, an importance which it cannot in the end bear. For human self-sacrifice can be no more than a parable of that by which the new man is brought into being... There are, no doubt, cases in the world of men and of things, where good men do benefit by the death of others. But no atonement is thereby effected. By it we do not escape from the relativity of this world; there comes into being no security which stretches beyond the business of this world, beyond its greatness and its littleness, its competence and its incompetence; nothing is achieved outside the realm of our lives, nothing on the other side of our life and death, and if we continue to think along these lines, even though the ‘veritably Good’ — which is not a thing which can be experienced in the world — were to appear in our midst, nothing would come of it, since men, as men, would not be in a position to appropriate it — because of their lack of goodness. But the death of Christ is concerned precisely with this benefit... By it the things which are of value in this life are dissolved, and yet it is by it that they are essentially established.

Judaism, which is why a mediating Savior-figure is not needed to sustain Jewish faith, and why Judaism and Christianity evolved different cultural matrices to nurture the life of the two faith communities.

Despite this basic difference between worldviews and identities, Paul's moral insight into human character is still instructive to the Jewish student who makes the efforts to understand him. For the ethical archetypes signified by *dikaio*s and *agathos* transcend theological differences, and Paul has taught us something significant about their ability to inspire loyalty and self-sacrifice. Whatever religious beliefs we profess, our moral judgments can benefit from the lesson in human relations offered in Romans 5:7.

A biographical vignette can serve as an illustration, and as a closure to this meditation. The example is that of a Jew in his early 30's who came on *aliyah* to Israel from the United States. A religious educator by profession, he was active in both the Jewish Peace Fellowship and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, out of a commitment to nonviolence as an integral dimension of his personal ministry in interfaith relations. In fact, his immigration to Israel was motivated, in part, by a desire to apply his interfaith training to the arduous task of Jewish-Arab rapprochement. One outgrowth of his commitment to peace and nonviolence was his stance as a conscientious objector to military service. Although not an absolute pacifist, he felt that he could not become a soldier because the weapons used in all wars today, even "defensive" ones, cause such large-scale and indiscriminate destruction that the means contradict and subvert the values which either side to the conflict claims to be defending — especially the sanctity and dignity of human life.²⁶

In the United States and the European democracies, conscientious objection to army service is legally sanctioned, and provisions are made for C.O.'s to under-

26. Within the normative framework defined for Jews by the *Halakha*, the moral dilemma arises from the conflict between two principles: first, the right and duty of self-defense ("If someone comes to kill you, forestall him by killing him first" — BT, Sanhedrin 72a, Berakhot 58a, Yoma 85b); and, second, the injunction to die rather than save your own life by killing an innocent person, when ordered to do so. (Sanhedrin 74a). Weapons technology has advanced to the point where even defensive military actions inevitably kill many innocent civilians, and the real danger of nuclear warfare, regional or global, sharpens the problem even more. In his classic essay on "The Jewish Attitude Towards Peace and War," Rabbi David Shapiro illustrates how the halakhic tradition stipulates limits on the inherent destruction unleashed by warfare by minimizing the de-humanization of, and cruelty toward, the enemy. At the end, he concludes: "Much of the halakha of war is no longer relevant to present-day situations. Whatever of it does now apply can hardly be reconciled with modern methods of warfare which constitute a reversal to primitive barbarism allied in an unholy union with ultra-modern technology." In his *Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. 1, New York, 1975, pp. 349-350.

take alternative civilian service in those countries. In Israel, however, the prevailing political circumstances make it *illegal* for a Jewish man to refuse army service on the basis of conscience. (Religiously observant *women* can legally claim automatic exemptions from army duty for “reasons of conscience”.) The country has been in a formal state of war since its birth, with periodic eruptions of conflict that pit the tiny Jewish state against its larger Arab neighbors. Given this ongoing, real threat to Israel’s survival, Jewish C.O.’s among the male population are a “luxury” which the society, through its elected legislators, has decided it can not afford.

For our new-immigrant C.O., the moral dilemma and challenge went beyond the question of obeying or disobeying the law. The basic issue was that of loyalty and moral responsibility to the wider community, namely the Israeli citizenry he had chosen to join. Outside Israel, such a Jew could enjoy the “status” of *agathos*, a devoted comrade among fellow peace-activists in a worldwide fraternity that is, perhaps, akin to the fellowships which Paul was addressing at the dawn of the Christian era. Such spiritual camaraderie is a precious gift, inspiring devotion and self-sacrifice on behalf of friends who are struggling for peace and justice in other parts of the world. But within embattled Israel, the moral parameters are radically different, creating a conflict of loyalties for our C.O. comrade. By refusing induction into the Israeli army, the new citizen would not only face a prison term, but the ethical motivation for such an act would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of Israelis. In simple terms, such refusal would be seen as a kind of betrayal; and any ethical-educational impact on the public — as an affirmative witness for nonviolent alternatives to warfare, or at least for different models of national service²⁷ — would be virtually nil. The C.O. would be disdained as a naive idealist, a spiritual *dikaïos* who remains aloof from the existential reality of Israeli life. After all, that reality *is* one of citizens risking, and sometimes sacrificing, their lives on behalf of one another. (And they do so, ironically, to put an end to the long *via dolorosa* of Jewish martyrdom and victimization.) So the *dikaïos*, the would-be *zaddik* who holds to a moral standard above or outside the tragic constraints of Jewish history and Israeli politics, risks consigning himself to a form of spiritual exile, a solitary *galut* within the bosom of Zion.

For the Jewish educator, whose first responsibility is toward his own faith community, such a moral stance, however conscientious and Biblical in spirit, turns

27. A Biblical precedent exists in the example of the Levites, for whom the Torah prescribed a form of national service that exempted this whole tribe from military conscription. Their spiritual duties (*avodat 'avodah*) and physical burdens (*avodat masa*) constituted a “*zava*,” a host or community of service that was kept distinct from the army, the *zava* to which all the other tribes contributed their men. (See Numbers, ch. 4.)

out to be disloyal and irresponsible in practice.²⁸ The real-world terms which circumscribe Jewish morality, especially in the contemporary Israeli context, require that any public servant share in the burdens and sufferings which make of three million individuals a community of *agathoi*. And in Judaism, it is the community of “good” men and women — not the saintly, solitary *zaddik* — which serves as the vessel of *kedushah* (holiness) and the vehicle for *ge’ulah* (redemption).

Immanuel 15 (Winter 1982/83)

28. Moral responsibility entails accountability for the likely impact of one’s actions on society, not simply for the nobility of one’s principles or even for one’s personal “integrity”. Max Weber has articulated the problem in his lecture, “Politics as a Vocation,” which distinguishes between an “ethic of ultimate ends” and an “ethic of responsibility.” For the former, adherence to an absolute or sacred principle determines behavior; whereas “conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of responsibility... has to give account of the foreseeable results of one’s action.” Weber concludes that the two ethical orientations are not contradictory but must complement one another. The lecture, in English translation, appears in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York, 1958.

A formulation of the same problem, with a directive conforming to Paul’s message, is presented by Krister Stendahl. Stendahl attributes to the apostle the principle of “love rather than integrity”: “love allows for not insisting on one’s own integrity at the expense of the unity of the community.” He also surmises that perhaps Paul “had had enough of shining integrity and perhaps that really had done something to him to give him a vision of a new way of living.” Stendahl, *op. cit.*, pp. 66, 67.