REVIEW ESSAY

Judgment and Justification in Paul: A Review Article

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The tension between justification by faith and judgment according to deeds in the Pauline letters is well known in the history of interpretation and goes back at least as far as Augustine. Since the Reformation, justification by faith alone has been the center and boundary of all Protestant theology. Indeed, Paul's theology of justification, as conceived of as being strictly forensic and distinguished from moral sanctification (simil iustus et peccator), is said to be the chief article of the Christian faith (articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae). But the Protestant conception of justification by faith has always been vulnerable to a number of criticisms, including the charge that it fails to solve the purported antinomy that emerges when justification by faith is juxtaposed with judgment according to deeds in Paul in particular and the wider New Testament in general. This is not to say that Lutheran and Reformed commentators were unaware of the problem and did not offer some cogent solutions (see, e.g., Calvin, Institutes 3.11.23), but no solution has won a consensus in the face of criticism, and the tension between justification by faith and judgment according to deeds has continued to perplex commentators and preachers. It is unsurprising then that Bultmann spoke of judgment according to works as a "seeming contradiction" to Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. This seeming contradiction has kept commentators on Paul well and truly occupied with

finding a way of resolving this antinomy.5 A recent contribution to this debate is made by Chris VanLandingham (henceforth, VanL) in his volume Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul.6 VanL argues that in the Judaism of the Greek and Roman periods and in Paul’s letters, God determines an individual’s destiny on the basis of his or her behavior and deeds. He states that “both corpora agree that an individual’s behavior during his or her lifetime provides the criterion for this judgment: good behavior is rewarded with eternal life, bad behavior with damnation.”7 The corollary is that the pattern


7. Ibid., 15.
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of salvation that VanL detects shows no “difference between Paul and his Jewish contemporaries.” VanL's thesis operates on two fronts. First, he contests many of the proposed descriptions of the relationship between works and salvation in Judaism, especially E. P. Sanders's model of “covenantal nomism.” VanL rejects Sanders's exegesis of key texts and objects to his failure to address material that does not correspond to his conception of covenantal nomism. Second, VanL advocates that many of the attempts to alleviate the tension created by judgment according to deeds in Paul's letters (e.g., judgment according to works is a relic of Paul's Jewish past; judgment/justification constitutes an unresolved tension; judgment determines reward, not salvation; and faith and obedience are identical in Paul) are unconvincing. If VanL is correct, then it would warrant a radical reappraisal of the soteriology of second-temple Judaism and an abandonment of the traditional Protestant view of justification by faith. Having just finished writing a volume on Paul's theology of righteousness, I feel rather unfortunate not to have been able to make use of VanL's thesis and arguments. His contribution to the debate is provocative and his attention to detail is commendable. Nonetheless, I am not convinced by his reading of the pertinent Jewish texts or of Paul's epistles. Therefore, the aim of this study is to review and respond to VanL's volume. Space limitations prevent a point-by-point engagement with VanL (both affirmation and criticism); therefore, I intend to provide an overview of VanL's argument and subject elements of his analysis to critical scrutiny.

VanLandingham: Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul

At the hub of VanL's thesis is the contention that grace, understood in its common sense as unmerited favor, imposes a theological framework on texts that are largely concerned with God's action of recompensing meritorious behavior even as the basis of election. In chap. 1, VanL argues that the Hebrew Bible and subsequent Jewish interpretation presents the call of Abraham as based on his subsequent obedience or as a reward for his righteousness and piety. For instance, Gen 15:1 states that God called Abram as a “reward” (MT: דקך; LXX: μισγον). Philo, Josephus, Sirach, the Pseudepigraphical writings, and the Dead Sea Scrolls all regard Abram's precall life as virtuous and meriting reward. He writes: “The notion that God's grace preceded human obligation is nowhere to be found.” The doctrine of rewards and punishment is also the rationale for Israel's covenant observance, while repentance is the prerequisite to the remnant’s return from exile. God's covenant-love (םוד) is contingent on obedience. God's mercy is always a matter of quid pro quo. In this context, “life” and later “eternal life” are rewards for good behavior. In this sense, VanL is an “apologist” for subsequent Jewish authors of the postbiblical

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 5.
10. Ibid., 10–15.
11. See my Saving Righteousness of God, 155–78.
12. VanLandingham, Judgment and Justification, 64.
period, because he maintains that later interpretations are plausible extrapolations of biblical data.13

In chap. 2 (the longest chapter of the book), VanL examines judgment according to deeds and its relationship to God’s grace, mercy, and covenant with Abraham. He maintains that, consistently in Jewish literature, the criterion for eternal life is obedience to the covenant stipulations. At the final judgment, it is one’s behavior and not the covenant that determines one’s destiny. This is the outworking of the deuteronomistic formulas of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Obedience is not simply a condition of salvation but its effectual cause. In several places, such as the Qumran scrolls, covenant and obligation cannot be separated. In 1QH and 1QS, VanL takes תונוש to be neither eschatological nor forensic (i.e., it does not refer to the positive judgment rendered at the Day of Judgment); instead, it refers to God’s corrective, educative, and disciplining judgment that guides people in their lives and leads to their salvation. VanL also regards 4 Ezra and its rigorous nomism as typical rather than exceptional in Judaism (pace E. P. Sanders). He concludes: “Early post-biblical Jewish texts consistently and thematically state that the criterion for survival or approbation at the Last Judgment is deeds.”14

VanL surveys the Pauline literature in chap. 3 in search of the same pattern of eternal life as a reward for good deeds at the final assize. In his reading of Paul, God could conceivably reject believers for their moral failures at the final judgment. What is more, the final judgment is also retributive and dillies out the appropriate rewards and punishments for behavior. He finds in references to the Parousia terms such as “blameless” that indicate a moral criterion at the Day of Judgment. VanL believes that in Paul’s letters there is no exact correlation between those who are justified by faith and those who pass muster at the final judgment. He detects in Romans echoes of the two-ways-to-live theme that undergirds Paul’s teaching on faith as obedience leading to eternal life.

In chap. 4, VanL presents his understanding of “justification by faith” in Paul’s letters. He categorically rejects a forensic meaning for the δικαιος- word group with the sense of acquittal at the final judgment. According to VanL, righteousness marks out the initiation of Christian experience and is associated with cleansing, purification, forgiveness, and freedom from sin’s domination and power.

In his conclusion, VanL reiterates his criticism against E. P. Sanders’s proposed pattern of Palestinian religion of covenantal nomism as well as many views about Paul and righteousness held in contemporary scholarship. In VanL’s view, Paul’s pattern of soteriology is as follows:

The Last Judgment is not a judgment over the work of Christ or even over what the Holy Spirit has done in the believer; it is a judgment over the individual and what he or she has done. The work of Christ has made it possible to receive approbation in a judgment according to deeds, but not because God is merciful toward the Christian based on Christ’s merit, nor because in God’s perception Christ’s death has

13. Ibid., 64–65.
made it as though the Christian has never sinned. Rather, the process of salvation is worked out as follows: At the time of faith, a person who has been “made righteous” is forgiven of past sins (which become a dead issue), cleansed from guilt and impurity of sin, freed from the human propensity to sin, and then given the ability to obey. The Last Judgment will then determine whether a person, as an act of the will, has followed through with these benefits of Christ’s death. If so, eternal life will be the reward; if not, damnation.15

PRELIMINARY CRITICISMS

Before I engage with VanL in Romans, I want to set forth four criticisms that I think raise doubts about certain aspects of his thesis.

Grace in the Old Testament and in Judaism

VanL finds continuity between the Old Testament and Jewish authors of the intertestamental period in maintaining that obedience to the precepts of the Sinai covenant are the basis for salvation (earthly or heavenly). VanL is correct in one sense; covenant is both gift and demand, and the imperatives of covenantal obedience cannot be swept away by God’s gracious initiative of the covenant relationship. The Psalms demonstrate that personal righteousness, while not necessarily forensic, is appropriately rewarded in the covenant relationship.16 Likewise, atonement is only efficacious in the context of covenantal obedience to the precepts of the law. Yet I would be prepared to argue that, at the macro level, this is within the narrative substructure of Israel’s sacred traditions—salvation is ultimately sola gratia and not quid pro quo.

To begin with, the very architecture of the Mosaic dispensation is undergirded by God’s gracious provision of salvation. God gives Torah to redeemed people, not to redeem the people. The exodus precedes the giving of the Mosaic legislation at Sinai in the flow of redemptive history: thus, grace precedes law. Additionally, the figurative and dramatic retellings of Israel’s history in Deut 26 (v. 5: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor”) and Ezek 16 (v. 3: “Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite”) presents Israel as helplessly lost and unworthy of salvation and yet God intervenes on the basis of his grace. Similarly, the hope for the end of exile and the renewal of the covenant in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Hosea is predicated on the hope that God will do again what he did in the exodus while acknowledging that Israel has no grounds to merit an act of salvation of this sort. In fact, the exilic prophets are concerned with showing that the experience of judgment and exile is entirely appropriate because of Israel’s national rebellion. This removes any claim to merit or righteousness which could somehow warrant God’s intervention on their behalf. Moreover, while the righteousness of Abraham was emphasized in inner biblical exegesis of the

15. Ibid., 335.
Abrahamic narrative (e.g., Neh 9:7–8) and fictionalized along the lines of a righteous pagan in intertestamental writings (e.g., Jub. 11–12), the first interpretation of Abraham outside the Pentateuch depicts Abraham as called out of idolatry (Josh 24:2–3). We observe also that Deut 7:7–8, 8:11–20, and 9:4–6 are concrete evidence that the exodus and conquest was not due to Israel's own “power” or “righteousness” but due to the wickedness of the nations and God’s promises to the patriarchs. This falsifies VanL’s claim that in the Old Testament the “notion that God’s grace precedes human obligation is nowhere to be found.” VanL’s views concerning election in the Old Testament need to be juxtaposed with the study of Sigurd Grindheim, who offers his own analysis of election in the Old Testament, including aspects of obligation and rejection and posits a far more nuanced understanding of elected privilege and covenantal obligation. Israel’s election manifests a reversal of values as the one who was lowly and unworthy is brought into salvation. At the same time, election is purposive and Israel is elected to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests. When they fail to do this, rejection follows, but the rejection is never touted as being final.

Shifting to postbiblical literature, the question of how electing grace operated in relation to covenantal obligation was one that was handled differently by Jewish authors. The breadth of Jewish literature demonstrates that the emphasis could fall on either grace and covenant or Torah and obedience. For this reason, I follow D. A. Carson et al. in using the designation “variegated nomism” to describe this diversity. Philo himself notes different interpretations of Deut 8:17 and 9:5 among the Jews of Alexandria as to whether or not salvation was freely given or earned (Philo, Sac. 54–57). It is inaccurate then to characterize Second Temple Judaism as a religion of legalistic works-righteousness or argue for “covenantal nomism” and define the category so broadly that it can accommodate both sola gratia and quid pro quo patterns of religion. In my estimation, 1 Esdras is one document that fits Sanders’s covenantal nomism down to the tee, which VanL does not address. In addition, the soteriology of 1QS is highly complex in the interface of grace and reward, but the final form of the document is not necessarily explicating a rigorous ethic of works-righteousness. Judaism never lost sight of the idea of grace and mercy as long

17. VanLandingham, Judgment and Justification, 64.
as it remained in dialogue with its own Scripture and as much is evident from various Jewish prayers and petitions of the Second Temple era as VanL admits. However, when Torah obedience is mandated in a sociological context that is concerned about apostasy and deviance, when it is expressed alongside eschatological hopes for entering the new age, amidst Jewish factionalism, sectarian rivalries, and debates over interpretation, then the emphasis inevitably falls on the nomism rather than on grace and covenant. In an environment of this sort, the value of Torah obedience, especially perfect obedience, becomes far more intense and acute. It is also worth pointing out that the election of a particular ἔθνος ("nation") can become equally merit-oriented toward outsiders who must undergo the appropriate rituals in order to gain entrance into the group—hence, nomism occurs most frequently where issues of the means of rites of entry and boundaries around the community destined for salvation are being debated or redefined. It is this web of apostasy/defection occasioned by Hellenism, intensified eschatological beliefs in Second Temple Judaism, competing sectarian agendas over who are the "true" Israel, and Jewish debates about Gentile inclusion in Jewish communities that provides the extrinsic circumstance against which Paul formulated his theology of righteousness.23

Paul's Language of "Righteousness"

VanL's own understanding of "righteousness" or the δικαίος word group is expressed primarily in negative terms, i.e., he thinks that it does not refer to acquittal at the final judgment, it is not usually forensic, and it is not relational. He is also adamant that righteousness is not synonymous with salvation because this would render certain phrases in Israel's Scriptures redundant—righteousness is the basis of salvation, not its driving force.24 VanL explicitly rejects any idea of imputation and he takes the verb δικαιοῦω to be akin to a legal fiction at several points.25 In his own exposition, righteousness language is fundamentally an "initiating event" that makes judgment according to deeds with a favorable outcome possible.26 VanL links righteousness with sacrifice,
cleansing, purification, and forgiveness. The δικαίωμα- terms are also qualitative and refer to one's current moral state rather than an assured verdict at the final recompense.27

I acknowledge that VanL’s argument has certain weight on some issues. It is overly simplistic to regard the noun δικαιοσύνη as ethical and the verb δικαίωμα as forensic (see Rom 6:7 and Gal 5:5, which are clear exceptions).28 VanL correctly notes the punitive element of righteousness in the Old Testament,29 but this does not render it irrelevant to salvation, because salvation transpires for Israel when God executes justice against the nations oppressing Israel.30 In fact, VanL touches on a very good point. The righteousness language of the Bible is not concerned merely with declarations or promises of justice but with the actual enactment of justice.31 The exemplary story of this is, of course, Luke’s parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8). In this story, the widow is not after a declaration but wants justice actually done.32 What we have in Jesus’ death and resurrection in Paul's understanding is not merely the grounds of a declaration but verdicts formally enacted and executed. God executes his verdict against sin on his son, and God vindicates his son by raising him from the dead. The verdicts are formally enacted and justice is carried out: condemnation and vindication.33

In terms of his linguistic analysis of words for “righteousness” and their contexts in the relevant corpora, VanL’s arguments have several unfortunate misgivings. He treats nonforensic language as if it is forensic (e.g., ἀνέγκλητος ἀπόσκοπος, “blameless”) and forensic language if it were not forensic (e.g., δικαίωμα “to righteous”). Let me illustrate this by way of reference to 1–2 Corinthians.

First, in terms of “blameless,” Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: “He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless (ἀνεγκλήτους) on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor 1:8–9).” VanL rejects the notion that God grants a righteousness by which he acquits believers at the final assize. Instead, he understands the verb βεβαιός and the prepositional phrase ἐς τὸν τίλλους to “indicate progress towards a goal, not something one is given.” He qualifies this by saying that it does not mean being sinless or morally perfect, and he cites Pss. Sol. 3, where the δικαιος are not sinless either. VanL also argues that Paul entertains the idea of moral failure

29. Ibid., 249.
30. Seifrid, Christ, Our Righteousness, 38–45.
31. VanLandingham, Judgment and Justification, 257.
32. I owe this point to a conversation with Mark Seifrid of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.
33. Seifrid, Christ, Our Righteousness, 47, 77.
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and unfaithfulness, thus the Corinthians being “blameless” at the last judgment is not a certainty. In response, while 
bebaiovw can carry the sense of “confirm,” “establish,” or “strengthen” it can also refer to “something legally validated” and thus has connotations of legal security. Similarly, 
adéyuklhto
might not be strictly forensic as is often the case with the 
dikai
- word group, but it is positional, rather like some instances of the 
gn-
 of “sanctity”), and in this context “blameless” is indicative of the status that the Corinthians will have at the parousia.

Anthony Thiselton offers a translation of “free from any charge” in light of word parallels that indicate a legal position (i.e., POxy 2.282.12), so that 
adéyuklhto belongs to the “semantic domain of accusative and declaration verdict.” My point is that the issue of an assured status at the parousia is not foreign to the vocabulary and context of 1 Cor 1:8–9. There is a further problem with VanL’s view in that he contends that the issue here is the Corinthians’ moral state leading up to the consummation, and yet he adds that it does not refer to moral perfection. He never defines what it means to be “blameless.” Does it mean to have no unatoned sin or the absence of sinful behavior? Because there was such rampant sin within the Corinthian congregation, how was it possible for them to become blameless? The horns of the dilemma onto which VanL is forced is to choose between some kind of post-Easter system of atonement or moral perfection, neither of which suits Paul. Alternatively, one could posit Paul as describing the status that believers have until the eschaton rooted in God’s faithfulness and graciousness. What is more, whatever contingency is involved in terms of perseverance here, there is also a sense of assurance in the text because God is the implicit subject of the main verb (bebaiovw) in the passage. God is the principle actor in providing the Corinthians with not eternal security but eschatological security.

In 2 Cor 3:7–11, Paul contrasts the ministries of the old and new covenants. He states in v. 9: “If the ministry that condemns (katavkrisi) men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness (dikaiosuñh).” VanL admits that dikaiosuñh must be defined by its opposite and that katavkrisi is indeed forensic. But he questions whether dikaiosuñh means “acquittal” and specifically acquittal at the final judgment. VanL alludes to Rom 5:12–21, 7:24–25, and 8:1 to argue that dikaiosuñh is the basis for life, not acquittal. The “no condemnation” or “righteousness” depends on new creation and the new order of life associated with the Spirit. VanL tries desperately to avoid the plain judicial meaning of 2 Cor 3:9 by imposing his own (erroneous, I believe) conception of “righteousness” from Rom 5–8. There is no reason within the immediate context of 2 Cor 3:7–11 to refuse to take dikaiosuñh as the

34. VanLandingham, Judgment and Justification, 182–83.
35. BDAG 173.
36. Cf. BDAG 76: “so that you will be bl[ameless] when it comes.”
38. On sinlessness in Second Temple Judaism, see 1 En. 81:4, 82:4; Pr. Man. 8; T. Ah. 10:13; Tob 3:14; Jub. 27:18; T. Isai. 7:1–9; T. Levi 10:2; T. Zeb. 1:4; 2 Bar. 9:1.
opposite of κατάκρισις with its full forensic covenantal force pertaining to acquittal and vindication.40

VanL's interpretation and analysis of Paul's language runs into further problems. He repeatedly emphasizes at considerable length the nonforensic nature of the δίκαιος word group.41 He is able to find nonforensic uses for δίκαιος, δικαιοσύνη, ἰδιαίτερος, and δικαιοσύνη, which in some cases I would not contest because it is futile to impose one meaning uniformly. However, he overlooks four significant problems. First, there is a diversity of forensic connotations itself. In the Septuagint, δικαιοσύνη occurs in several different contexts: (1) Literary-judicial contexts, in which human beings render verdicts (e.g., Exod 23:7, Deut 25:1, 2 Sam 15:4, Isa 1:17, Ps 82:3, Sir 42:2). (2) Metaphorical-judicial contexts, in which God renders judgment (e.g., Pss 18:20, 142:2; Mic 7:9; Isa 43:9, 26, 45:25; 50:8; 53:11). (3) Quasi-judicial contexts, in which God or his law is vindicated as right by persons (Pss 18:9, 51:4; Isa 42:21; Sir 18:2). (4) Non-judicial contexts, in which the word denotes persons regarded as right or righteous (Gen 44:16, Job 33:32).42

Second, if Paul did not argue for a forensic righteousness in some form, then the charge of antinomianism that he explicitly responds to in Rom 3:7–8 and arguably seeks to assuage in Rom 6:1–8:17 becomes largely incomprehensible.43 Third, VanL is adamant that righteousness is not relational and not synonymous for salvation or acquittal, and he asserts that to make righteousness equivalent to salvation is redundant (i.e., save me in your salvation).44 This is a red herring. The salvific nature of righteousness in the Old Testament is simply a given in texts like Ps 71:15–16; Isa 46:13, 56:1; and CD 20:20 from Qumran.45 The redundancy in these texts exists only in the mind of VanL, as grammatical statements that may seem redundant to us (e.g., πίστις and πιστικός in Rom 3:22) are simply being emphatic about something. I do not want to enter into a debate about whether or not “righteousness” means adherence to a norm or right relationship. I will only say that what provides the norm is the covenantal relationship and covenantal code that God instituted, necessitating some sense of relationship for biblical language of righteousness (e.g., Gen 38:26).46 What is disappointing is that Hermann Cremer, who championed the relational interpretation of ἴδια,47 does not merit any discussion or reference in VanL's book.

Fourth, how does resurrection relate to justification? Whereas VanL wants to tie righteousness to purification, forgiveness, and cleansing, I submit that this is not possible in a text like Rom 4:25b, “He was raised for our justification”
Jesus’ resurrection is a judicial event; it is the justification of Jesus as the Messiah, and believers are justified insofar as they have union with the justified Messiah, whereby the vindication that is his becomes theirs as well.48

Misunderstandings of Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Further cause to question VanL’s thesis is how he places the emphasis for salvation thoroughly, though not exclusively, in human hands in his reading of Paul. In his view, Paul’s remarks about assurance, confidence, and hope must be set alongside comments that make salvation contingent on continued faithfulness and obedience to God. Thus, there is no guarantee that everyone will pass muster at the final recompense. For example, on Phil 2:12–13, VanL contends that κατεργάζομαι carries the meaning that the Philippians are “to bring about or achieve their own salvation.”49 While God is “the one who is working in you so that you might desire and work for his good pleasure,” this cannot be taken to mean that God himself achieves and enacts salvation independent of human effort because, “if one’s deeds rely solely upon God’s doing, then the logic of God’s commandments is lost and responsibility for one’s behavior at the Last Judgment is moot.”50 In VanL’s view, God “inspires” the believer to accomplish his purposes.51

Any response must be prefaced with acknowledgment of the complexity of divine sovereignty and human responsibility as articulated both in biblical texts and Christian dogmatics.52 This aside, we have reason to question VanL’s resolution of the problem, particularly as he relates it to Phil 2:12–13. For a start, the context is concerned with the Philippians’ obedience in following Christ’s example as an exemplary ethic (2:8) and their former obedience to the pattern of apostolic instruction (2:12a). In this sense, the exhortation is largely pastoral and concerns relations within the community and their relationship with Paul. I would not take that pastoral context to indicate that σωτηρία (“salvation”) here has the meaning of a spiritually healthy and vibrant church life.53 Paul clearly lays on the Philippians the command to make their salvation produce the appropriate fruit but without ever endangering or calling into question their assurance or their final destiny. The explanatory clause that follows (θεός γάρ “For God”) insists that the reason for continued obedience is that God has already begun his good work among them and will bring it into final effect. The “imperative” and the “indicative” are not a division of labor in the economy of salvation as per a synergistic cooperation of divine and human wills but stem from the “already” and “not yet” of Paul’s eschatology. There is no suggestion that God inspires believers to reach

48. See further my Saving Righteousness, 40–59.
49. VanLandingham, Judgment and Justification, 186.
50. Ibid., 187.
51. Ibid., 187, 208, 238.
a standard of obedience that might be acceptable at the final judgment; rather, God’s work is conceived as his ongoing and powerful activity in their lives and we should not hesitate to speak of God’s efficacious saving action.54 I once gave a Pauline theology class the task of summarizing in one line Paul’s teaching about perseverance and the answer that they came up with is an apt description of Phil 2:12–13: *work out what God has worked in.*

Paul, Judaism, and the Law

If Paul shares with a great many Jews the assumption that deeds, works, and ethical behavior determine one’s standing at the final judgment, what then did he find wrong with Judaism and what did he need of Christ to solve that problem? Why is it that, in VanL’s words, “God’s benefits are for those who have faith in Christ, not for those who keep the law of Moses”?55 What does faith in Christ do that the law does not do in terms of making one able to stand before God at the Last Judgment? VanL might say that humans need to atone for past sins and be cleansed of moral impurities, but did the sacrificial cultus not already provide that? Or VanL could argue that what persons need is the Spirit to inspire or empower them to acts of obedience, good deeds, and righteousness to be able to stand before God; but again, a similar teaching is already extant in Judaism (e.g., Deut 30:6, Ezek 36:26–27, and 1QS 3.6–12; Sib. Or. 3:573–600, T. Jud. 24).56 It would seem that VanL is forced into accepting a position similar to that which Sanders advocates, namely, the problem with the law is that it is not Christ.57 In my understanding, Paul’s critique of the inability of the law to provide salvation is indebted to his anthropological pessimism and his inaugurated eschatology. Elsewhere, I have argued that

for Paul the final judgment has already been executed in the sacrificial death of Jesus. The obedience that God requires at the final judgment is fulfilled and completed in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. What is more, Jesus is raised by God so that believers can participate in the verdict of justification that is enacted in his resurrection. . . . The verdicts of the final judgment, both negative and positive, are present *in nuce* in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Resultantly, no condemnation waits for Christians on the final day as they steadfastly hold to Christ (Rom. 5.1, 8.1). Whatever role faithfulness and obedience play in the life of the Christian (and they are not to be discounted) the final grounds for acquittal and vindication remains in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.58

54. Ibid., 284–87.
Romans is probably the best place to get a grasp of Paul’s web of theological and pastoral convictions. While Romans is not a systematic theology, it is the most systematic of his letters and is composed as a deliberate rhetorical defense of his gospel and to elicit support for his future mission to Spain. As such, it is a good benchmark to test any hypothesis pertaining to Paul’s theology. I will focus here on three sections of Romans and assess VanL’s exegesis of them.

The Habakkuk Citation in Romans 1:17

According to VanL, Paul finds in Hab 2:4 (and Gen 15:6) a proof text for a link between righteousness and faith. He thinks that the “righteous” who “will live by faith” refers to the person whom is made righteous from Christ’s death as opposed to one who is acquitted in God’s court. While conceding the judicial context of Rom 1:17, he does not find reason to take δικαιοί as anything other than qualitative as opposed to relational or forensic. He writes, “Paul’s point in Rom 1:16–3:20 that the righteous will receive salvation while the unrighteous will receive God’s wrath is common place.”

In response, I contend that (1) the citation of Hab 2:4 in Rom 1:17 (although dogged by textual, grammatical, and theological issues) is drawn from a context pertaining to salvation through judgment. Thus, Paul’s transition in Rom 1:18 to a discourse on God’s wrath against human wickedness and rebellion does not introduce a completely new topic. Paul echoes the theme of Habakkuk by asserting that God’s faithfulness and its accompanying salvation in the present time also comes in and through divine judgment. The verdicts on humanity in Rom 1:32 and on Jesus in 3:25 are identical. God’s righteous judgment is exercised in the death of Christ as a redemptive and propitiatory sacrifice for sin (Rom 3:24–25). Steve Finamore writes that “Rom. 1.17–18 understands the gospel to be an agent for the revelation of God’s wrath and of God’s integrity; the two are related for both are processes set in train by the Christ-event and its representation in the gospel.” (2) The function of the Habakkuk citation is to set forth Paul’s gospel in terms indicative of the Old Testament. As Francis Watson puts it, “In arguing that righteousness is by faith, Paul attempts to show nothing less than the conformity of his gospel to...
the fundamental dynamic of Scripture.” In other words, Paul is arguing that the pattern of salvation through judgment on account of faith is discernible in Israel’s sacred tradition and again apparent at a new epoch of redemptive history. (3) The conclusion of Rom 1:18–3:20 is not that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked; to the contrary, it is that no flesh is righteous before God and all stand condemned. While Rom 2:12–16 may not be hypothetical and refers to Gentiles who fulfill the law through faith in Christ, any notion of meritorious behavior is eliminated by Paul’s own conclusion in 3:20.

The Justification of the Ungodly in Romans 4:5 and 5:6

Whereas VanL posits, in effect, that God justifies the just or those who achieve a worthy moral state, this seems most at odds with what Paul says elsewhere, that God justifies the ungodly (Rom 4:5, 5:6). In Rom 4:4–5, Paul gives a crystal clear refutation of a work-for-reward scheme of salvation. There is no indication that this is treated purely as an “initial” forgiveness or cleansing from sin, but it encompasses the gracious nature of the relationship between God and sinners as exemplified by God’s dealings with Abraham. The forensic meaning derives partly from the Septuagint, where, in Gen 15:6, έκκαθησεν has a declarative sense that is accentuated here with the participle form of δικαιωμαι and through the link with forgiveness as well. What is more, the whole scope of Romans 4 is on Abraham’s faith and his works merely as a response to God’s faithfulness. Paul refuses to follow the line of Jewish exegetes that speculated that Abraham had a private revelation of the law or made his justification in Genesis 15 contingent on his subsequent obedience in Genesis 22. On another note, we would do well to consider the possibility that the justification of the ungodly constitutes an overarching theme in a theology of Paul’s letters.


66. VanLandingham, Judgment and Justification, 274–75.


VanL’s thesis that δικαιοσύνη is not forensic and does not relate to the final judgment can hardly be said to comport with Rom 10:9–10. There, Paul makes faith in the saving power of Jesus’ death and resurrection and confession of Jesus’ lordship the sole criterion for salvation/righteousness. In v. 10, δικαιοσύνη and σωτηρία become synonymous via the parallelism. Käsemann rightly notes that that “eschatological salvation consists of justification.”

CONCLUSION

Although VanL criticizes Sanders on various fronts, in many respects his own work bears a remarkable similarity to that of Sanders. Both he and Sanders are apologists for Judaism and argue that Judaism is no better and no worse than Christianity. They achieve this by emphasizing the similarities and continuities between Judaism and Paul’s letters, albeit in diametrically opposed ways. Sanders finds Paul’s theology of grace mirrored in the grace of covenantal nomism, while VanL observes that the commandments for covenantal obedience are replicated in Paul’s assertion of judgment according to works. Sanders and VanL both acknowledge that there are differences between Paul and Judaism(s), but the fundamental drive is to show the similarities between Paul and his Jewish contemporaries. This withdraws any right of Christians to boast that their religion is of a superior order to that of their Jewish counterparts because the two systems or patterns are equally gracious or equally rigorous.

VanL’s understanding of Paul’s theology of righteousness and judgment could be described as a highly nuanced form of ethical rigorism. At times, one wonders whether (theologically speaking) he attributes to Paul a pattern of soteriology that oscillates somewhere between semipelagianism and pure pelagianism. For this reason alone, he will attract much criticism, but I am more concerned with the daring bravado by which he attempts to overturn the near consensus in scholarship that δικαίωμα is forensic at several points in Paul’s letters and that the δικαίωμα word group has nothing to do with the final judgment. That is not to say that he does not try to mount a solid case for his point; he does, but it has a string of arguments that I find unconvincing on the whole.

71. Cf. VanLandingham, Judgment and Justification, 64.
72. While VanL refers to freedom from the power of sin and liberation from the propensity to sin throughout, he denies that the verdict of the final assize is determined by the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer (ibid., 335).