

“Freed” Rather Than “Justified:”
A Strange and ‘Unjustified’ Translation of Acts 13:38, 39

by
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God’s glory in the Gospel connects directly to the display of his righteousness when he declares righteous a sinful human being, a depraved, wrath-deserving sinner who has repeatedly violated God’s law. That he might be “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus,” God offered his Son “as a propitiatory sacrifice through his blood” (Rom. 3:26, 25). This justification by God of the guilty sinner through the substitutionary death of Jesus, received by faith alone, openly displays the righteousness of God.

Was Paul’s letter to the Romans the first time this “Gospel” was declared that so wondrously displays the righteousness of God in the justification of the sinner through the blood of Christ?

By no means! Before any written Gospel had been published, during the twenty years in which apostolic proclamation alone defined the Christian Gospel, Paul preached the doctrine of the “rising and falling church”—justification by faith alone apart from the works of the law.

When and where did he make this proclamation?

During his first missionary journey into Asia, as he preached in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia.

What exactly did he say?

Let it therefore be known to you, men and brothers, that through this man, the forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you. From all the things from which you are not able to be justified by the law of Moses, all who believe in this man are justified (Acts 13:38, 39).

Rather remarkable is the translation of the root *δικαιόω* as “freed” rather than “justified” twice in this passage, as it appears in the 1952 Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV).

It would be impossible to discover the thinking behind the Revised Standard Version of 1952 in its rendering of “freed” rather than “justified.” The RSV, it should be remembered, was the first major effort to provide a new translation of the Bible into English that would replace the King James Version of 1611, made almost 350 years earlier. The RSV is basically a good rendering of Scripture, representing a more “literal” rather than a “dynamic” translation. It is frequently used as a helpful tool by Bible translation societies. Yet one might re-imagine the climate of the 1950’s in which the RSV originated in cooperation with the National Council of Churches. Significant resistance to the translation arose when the classic prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 read, “Behold, a ‘young woman’ (rather than a ‘virgin’) shall conceive and bear a son...” As a consequence, this version of the Bible was rejected outright by evangelicals of the day.

In the prevailing climate that produced the RSV, it can easily be imagined that its translators could have concluded that the phrasing in Luke’s report of Paul’s speech in Acts 13 was “too Pauline” to be “authentically Pauline” at this early stage in his life and ministry. To read “everyone who *believes*” is “*justified* from everything from which you could *not be justified by the law of Moses*” might have appeared to them as simply incorporating “too much Paul” into this early speech in the Israelite synagogue of Antioch. These statements agree so perfectly with Galatians and Romans, Paul’s later writings, that it might have been concluded that they represented a “reading back” into Paul’s earlier speech in Acts the more refined theology of his subsequent formulations of doctrine.

This hypothetical analysis can hardly be proven. But it could explain why such clear Pauline phrasing specifically about “justification” would be rendered in terms of being “freed,”

which introduces an entirely different salvational category of “being redeemed” from the power of sin rather than “being justified.”

Further consideration of the context of Acts 13:39 in the speech of Paul provides further reason to hear Paul’s speech in terms of his comprehension of the “justification” category. In the immediately following verse, he quotes the most serious warning of a prophet:

*Look, you scoffers,
be astounded and perish;
for I am doing a work in your days,
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you
(Acts 13:41).*

Who is this prophet, and what is he warning Israel about? It must be a most serious matter, unbelievable, beyond their wildest dreams in its awesomeness.

It is the prophet Habakkuk, who in the first chapter of his prophecy struggles with the coming reality of God’s judgment of Israel and their exile to Babylon. It is an event so unthinkable that they would not believe it even if they were told in advance (Hab. 1:5, 6).

But what does the prophet Habakkuk say in his second chapter? He says that despite this oncoming disaster, “the *justified*--by his *steadfast trust* he shall live!”¹; or, “The righteous shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4). The very passage from all the writings of the prophets on which Paul bases his doctrine of justification by faith alone provides the biblical foundation for his preaching about “justification.” Paul is “thinking Habakkuk’s thoughts after him.” In a context of deliverance from God’s devastating judgment in both the old covenant and the new covenant, Paul places his teaching on justification, explained by him as involving the “forgiveness of sins” (Acts 13:38). His concern is not at this point being “freed” from the power or the domination of sin. He speaks instead of forgiveness of sin, being found righteous, undergoing God’s final judgment

¹ For this translation, see O. Palmer Robertson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 175-177.

now and being judicially declared innocent before His judgment seat. This judicial declaration of “justified” was Israel’s need in light of imminent judgment, and Paul proclaims to his hearers in the synagogue of Antioch that they are in the same situation as Israel facing exile and needing “justification.”

Apparently the English Standard Version (ESV) took over the RSV in its rendering of Acts 13:39.² In conformity with the RSV, the ESV twice reads “freed” rather than “justified,” despite the fact that the passage speaks of the impossibility of being *justified* (*δικαιόω*) by the law of Moses in contrast with the person who is *justified* (*δικαιόω*) by believing or by faith. Yet the term *δικαιόω* appears 39 times in the NT, and the ESV translates this term as “justified” or “declared just” 34 of these 39 times.

The *Reformation Study Bible* (2015), using the ESV translation, has the following explanatory note for Acts 13:39 that reads “freed” rather than “justified” twice:

The law points the sinner to Christ (Gal. 3:24), for “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). To be justified is to be declared righteous by God (Rom. 3:21, 22), and therefore granted forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7).

The whole assumption of this explanatory note is that “justified” is the proper rendering of the term *δικαιόω* in Acts 13:39, rather than “freed.” The ESV version in the Tyndale House Greek-English New Testament (2020) contains a similar footnote at the word “freed” in its version of Acts 13:39 that reads, “Greek *justified*; twice in this verse.” While these explanatory notes provide a proper corrective for the passage, the translation “freed” still remains in the body of the ESV text. An earlier ESV Classic Reference Bible (2001) does not have this correcting footnote, and it may be assumed that many copies of the ESV in English as well as in other languages will

² The 1984 New International Version (NIV) reads “justified” in both places in Acts 13:39. But the 2011 NIV reads “is set free” in the first instance, and “is justified” in the second.

be issued without the corrective footnote. Readers may be confused and misled by the reading “freed” rather than “justified.” They also will be denied the clear testimony to the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the early preaching of Paul.

What is at stake in this translation?

At stake is the accurate record of the early proclamation of the saving gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. In terms of the progress of redemption, this speech of Paul at Antioch, delivered at the heart of the trade routes of Asia, represents the fullest record of an early proclamation of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to the nations of the world, which therefore embodies a significant step beyond the record of Peter’s summary of the gospel as preached at Pentecost. During the twenty to thirty years between the day of Pentecost and the inspired writing of the earliest Christian scriptures, it was the public proclamation of the gospel by the Apostles that defined the nature of the Christian gospel. This recording by Luke of Paul’s programmatic speech makes a critical contribution to the basic definition of the Christian gospel that Paul strongly re-enforces in his subsequent writing of Galatians and Romans. But it is most essential that a true representation of these earliest stages of the proclamation of the Christian gospel be accurately presented, particularly in one of the most read and most influential translations of the English bible. It can be hoped that the next revision of the ESV will include this significant correction.