

“Through the Patience of the Scriptures”: Romans 15:4, Divine Patience, and the Fittingness of Holy Scripture as Text

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Abstract

Is Holy Scripture a text? Curiously enough, modern theologians in the West are of a divided mind. Some have argued that Scripture is not defined by what it is (i.e., a text), but rather, by what it is for (i.e., for the use of the Church) or where it is from (i.e., primitive oral traditions), both inherently non-textual accounts of Scripture. Such critiques tend to conclude that, ultimately, it is unfitting for Holy Scripture to be a text. This essay resists such tendencies by taking up a generative, though often overlooked, passage in the apostle Paul’s epistle to the Romans. I argue that Romans 15:4 teaches that Holy Scripture is a patient text, and the patience of Holy Scripture’s textuality fittingly conveys the patience of God Himself. This essay builds upon theological writings from within Reformed Protestantism, including John Calvin, Karl Barth, and John Webster, as well as Paul Dafydd Jones’ recently unveiled and still unfolding theological exploration of divine patience.

What is Holy Scripture? Most recognizably, it is a text. After all, if not text, just what are these word-filled pages that lay before us, this holy book, this Holy Bible? And when we take up and read this book, we find that it, in fact, self-identifies as text, as written text. The Books of Moses insist on a written Law: written for our instruction (Exodus 24:12), indeed, written with the finger of the LORD God Himself (Exodus 31:18). The LORD told His prophets to write His words down: think of Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel (Isaiah 30:8, Jeremiah 36:1–4, Ezekiel 43:11). That

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unassuming, faithful refrain “as it is written” resounds throughout the so-called “Historical Books” (Joshua 8:31, 1 Kings 2:3, 2 Kings 23:21, 2 Chronicles 23:18, Ezra 3:2, Nehemiah 10:34), the letters of the apostle Paul (Romans 1:17, 1 Corinthians 1:19, Galatians 3:10), and the Gospels of Jesus Christ (Matthew 2:5, Mark 1:2, Luke 2:23, John 2:17). It is a long-forgotten text which the high priest Hilkiah finds in the house of the LORD amidst foreign invasion (2 Kings 22:8); it is a well-known text from which the Lord Jesus reads in the Nazarene synagogue at the outset of His ministry (Luke 4:16–21). No doctrine of Scripture is complete without confessing this truth: Scripture is text, Holy Text!

And yet we must remember that this doctrine is about more than ontology. As the late John Webster cautions, “to talk of the biblical writings as Holy Scripture is ultimately to refer to more (but not to less!) than those writings *per se*.”¹ Scripture is a text, yes, but a text that is, as Protestant divines often style it, an “instrument”² in the economy of salvation, a text that is acknowledged by and enacted upon the faithful. In this sense, then, Holy Scripture is far more than text. It is the sharpened two-edged sword of God, judging “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). It is the blood-stained covenant people at the foot of Sinai, answering “with one voice, ‘All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do’” (Exodus 24:7). Holy Scripture is not just that long-forgotten text found by Hilkiah, but the reform of Judah that would subsequently follow; it is not just that well-known text taken up by the Lord Jesus, but that text’s fulfilment in the hearing of the gathered people. This is the drama of the doctrine of Holy Writ: Scripture is a text, most certainly, but a text *towards us, for us*. “Holy Scripture is the Word of God to the Church and for

¹ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

² See John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), 305, emphasis mine: “...He uses His Word as *the instrument* for accomplishing [our patience and consolation].”

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the Church.”³ This tension between ontology and purpose, between textuality and instrumentality, lies at the heart of this doctrine. The theologian’s task, then, is to hold this tension carefully and firmly, lest one loses the proper dogmatic balance between the two.

Now, maintaining such a balance is no small thing. After all, it is the struggle for just this balance that has preoccupied so much of theology in the modern era. In this era, we find those who resiliently maintain the authority and primacy of the Scriptural text itself, with their full-throated accounts of plenary inspiration, infallibility, perspicuity, and reliability. Think, perhaps, of some of those early Reformed formularies: the French, Belgic, and Westminster Confessions, for instance. Think, too, of Charles Hodge, who would later defend those earlier accounts against historical and scientific objections in his own nineteenth century United States.⁴ But in the modern era, we find also those who grow weary of this, all this that risks divinizing the biblical text and risks denying the true creatureliness of these human writings. These weary ones give pride of place, then, not to *text*, but to *purpose*: the self-revealing God of salvation, the “event,” as Karl Barth would say, to whom these holy texts bear witness.⁵ Indeed, Barth did much to defend this reprioritization, taking seriously the creatureliness of human writing—writing that is, by definition for Barth, fallible—but doing so without surrendering a commitment to the biblical text as normative for dogmatics. For Barth, the text is not necessarily revelation, but it *witnesses* to Revelation, and by God’s free and gracious choice, it can become revelation to us yet again.⁶ And notice something similar at play in the field of biblical studies: those interested in the oral origins of the Bible share a related conviction that these texts merely witness to something else, something

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, §19.2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2010), 20.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, volume 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 170–172.

⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, §19.1, 1–16.

⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, §19.2, 77.

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that is not text, and in a way, something that is more important—even more authoritative—than the text itself.⁷ The biblical text is important, but only insofar as the text bears witness to something else, something more important. This is the force of prioritizing purpose over textuality: the text of Scripture is servant to the event of God.

But this, too, risks dogmatic imbalance, rendering the text so secondary, so accidental, that its own textuality is made arbitrary. This risk is most fully realized in those accounts of Scripture as human practice, to where Scripture is not defined by what it is, nor by its service to God’s purpose, but by how it is used by human creatures.⁸ Prioritizing Scripture’s purpose—or worse to my mind, Scripture’s *use*—undermines this particular creature, this textuality, being uniquely chosen and sanctified as servant in the economy. “[R]evelation—God’s active presence as Word—is to be understood as ‘treasure in earthen vessels’ (2 Corinthians 5:7), Scripture being the *fitting creaturely servant* of the divine act.”⁹

The remainder of this essay offer an admittedly brief constructive sketch of just one way of maintaining a balance between Scripture’s textuality and its purpose. This sketch focuses on the *fittingness* of Holy Scripture as text, “fittingness” being that all important term for the early apologists and the medieval scholastics—indeed, for Christian dogmatics today, as well. I argue that it is entirely and unashamedly fitting for Holy Scripture to be a text. Now, of course, there is something entirely *unfitting* about Scripture’s textuality, about God’s majesty being limited to human words. Barth was certainly aware of this, as was his Reformed forebear, John Calvin, and many others in western Christian thought. Such unfittingness lies at the heart of the *accomodatio*

⁷ As just one example, see William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), especially 196.

⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (London: SCM, 1993), 300–302.

⁹ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 25, emphasis mine. See also G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 195–212.

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Dei, the doctrine of God accommodating His word of blessing to His feeble creatures.¹⁰ But here, I am interested in the fittingness of this particular accommodation, of this particular medium—*this textuality*. Why would God accommodate to His creation in this specific way? The following sketch responds to this question by taking up an often overlooked yet deeply instructive “golden text” in the doctrine of Holy Writ, Romans 15:4, which, as I will argue, describes the written textuality of Scripture as *patient*. After establishing a translation, I will first locate this reading of Romans 15:4 in the epistle as a whole. Then, I will describe just how such a reading might have a place within Holy Scripture more broadly. Along the way, I will continue to welcome figures from Reformed Protestantism: John Calvin in particular, but also, the contemporary theologian Paul Dafydd Jones, whose own recently revealed first volume on divine patience will be deeply instructive for this essay’s efforts.¹¹

ὅσα γὰρ προεγράφη εἰς τὴν ἡμετέραν διδασκαλίαν ἐγράφη, ἵνα διὰ τῆς ὑπομονῆς καὶ διὰ τῆς παρακλήσεως τῶν γραφῶν τὴν ἐλπίδα ἔχωμεν.

For whatever was written beforehand was written for our learning, so that, through the patience and the comfort of the scriptures, we might have hope. (Romans 15:4)

Students who are familiar with the Pauline epistles will recognize the uncertainty of such a translation. This translation subordinates both *patience* (τῆς ὑπομονῆς) and *comfort* (τῆς παρακλήσεως) to *the scriptures* (τῶν γραφῶν), whereas other translations, strictly following the doubled use of the preposition διὰ, treat *patience* and *comfort* independently, something like, “through patience and by the comfort of the scriptures we might hope.” Quite simply, “there is a syntactical ambiguity” in Romans 15:4.¹² That is, it is not possible to entirely rule out one possible

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 305, emphasis mine: “If the Spirit of Christ is everywhere the same, it is quite certain that *He has accommodated His teaching* to the edification of His people at the present time by the apostles, as He formerly did by the prophets.”

¹¹ Paul Dafydd Jones, *Patience—A Theological Exploration: Part One, From Creation to Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2022).

¹² Jewett, *Romans*, 881.

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rendering or the other. But for this constructive sketch, I will maintain the first option: patience is not attributed to us, but to Scripture. Regretfully, it is beyond this essay’s scope to recount the entire debate on this verse in the way that such a debate deserves—but something must be said, however briefly. After all, this translation is defensible and precedented, even if uncommon.¹³ Most importantly, the translation used for this essay is defensible because it privileges the parallel construction found in the benedictory formulation found in Romans 15:5. In both Romans 15:4 and 15:5, patience and *comfort* each appear with a definite article, and in their respective pairs, they function in relation to just one subject each—the *Scriptures* (αἱ γραφαί) in 15:4 and *God* (ὁ θεός) in 15:5. For one, privileging the parallel between Romans 15:4 and 15:5 stays close to the biblical line; indeed, alternative renderings of Romans 15:4 that wrestle with the relationship between *patience* and *Scriptures* tend to stray far from the underlying Greek’s word order. But also, and perhaps more dogmatically pertinent, privileging the parallel between Romans 15:4 and 15:5 better acknowledges the parallel between God and His Scriptures, as articulated by the apostle Paul. To miss the parallel is to miss a potential claim about God’s own very self.¹⁴

“Fair enough,” a critic might say, “but is there not risk in pursuing a mere ‘potential claim’?” Most certainly—but here, we should welcome Paul Dafydd Jones to the conversation, who offers an encouraging word to those of us taking the road exegetically less-traveled:

How, precisely, does one explore? In principle, one could go slowly. One could settle close to one’s landing spot in this “new world,” so to speak, and one could opt to move gradually outward, inch-by-inch, day-by-day. But that wouldn’t really be exploration, in any meaningful sense of the word; and that would perhaps dampen the joy and sense of possibility that flare up when one is drawn into something new. Certainly, it tries not to dash about, and certainly it grasps the importance of carefully surveying particular

¹³ For a critical analysis of this working translation’s defensibility, see Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 880–883.

¹⁴ For just one theological interpretation of this working translation that pays close attention to the parallel between Romans 15:4 and 15:5, see A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God’s Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 131.

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structures and terrains. But it is interested in engaging the most prominent dimensions of the landscape in a fairly bold way, and it is willing...to plot a dogmatic course that is relatively idiosyncratic...A theologian tries out various paths for understanding—probably with varying degrees of success—knowing that [the world of the Bible] in which she has been placed asks to be received and thought about in ever new ways.¹⁵

Largely, Jones encourages theological exploration here because, so often, readers of Holy Scripture are quick to attribute patient to humanity, yet timid to attribute patience to Almighty God, even when the Bible seems to be at its most direct and plain. As such, patience becomes what Jones calls a “burdened virtue.”¹⁶ He illustrates in fine detail the theological tendency to fixate on human patience, but not divine.¹⁷ In this essay, then, following Jones’ lead, we will explore the latter: the patience of God as fittingly encountered in His patient servant, Holy Scripture.

So, then, in beginning with the assumption that this patience is attributed to Scripture, new possibilities start to emerge. The strong purpose clause fashioned by the Greek ἵνα is the framework for the whole. That which was written beforehand was written *for* or *towards* (εἰς) our learning, all for the purpose of us having hope. “Inscriptionation,” a term in Protestant idiom to describe Scripture’s being made text, has a purpose: that purpose being our learning, our having hope. And the patience and comfort of the Scriptures are caught up in this purpose. Scripture was written beforehand for our learning and, by the patience and comfort of these written texts, for our having hope. Scripture’s being made text is inherently connected to its patient and comforting purpose towards us.

¹⁵ Jones, *Patience*, 58–59. Notice Jones’ homage to Barth’s notion of the “strange new world of the Bible.” See Karl Barth, “The Strange New World Within the Bible,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1935), 28–50.

¹⁶ Jones, *Patience*, 267–296.

¹⁷ Jones offers Martin Luther as a compelling example of this tendency within early modern Protestantism. See Jones, *Patience*, 168–173. We find a particularly telling example of resistance in Gerhard Kittel’s dictionary entry on ὑπομονή, arguing that “ὑπομονή is not attributed to God...since He is not subject to external pressure.” See Gerhard Kittel, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, volume 4, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 587.

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Now, of course, Romans 15:4 appears in the midst of an extended ethical section; this is, in part, what gives rise to interpreting this patience being of us, not of Scripture. However, I argue that Romans 15:4 is not about ethics as much as it is about hermeneutics—about how Paul reads the Scriptures of Israel. “The intent is to justify Paul’s use of Scripture.”¹⁸ In the first three verses of Romans 15, Paul relates the Christian life to Christ, He who “did not please himself” (Romans 15:3). Instead, writes the apostle, *insults* and *reproaches* (οἱ ὀνειδισμοὶ) fall upon Him, a reference to Psalm 68:10. This verse from the Psalter, then, speaks of Christ. And the more, this verse of Psalmody is spoken by Christ Himself. It is far too easy to miss the enormity of this moment: according to Paul, Christ is radically caught up in the drama Israel’s Scriptures. Somehow, these Scriptures—these patient, comforting writings of old—now speak of Him in an altogether new way. “Scripture is being ‘modernized’ here, adapted under the power of the Spirit to the current situation of the audience regardless of its original meaning.”¹⁹ Robert Jewett calls this recontextualization a “scandal...a gigantic, virtually heretical step for Paul as well as his audience, requiring an explicit statement of his hermeneutic.”²⁰ Romans 15:4, then, is such an explicit, hermeneutical statement.

That which was written in former days has been patient and comforting so that we might one day have hope. Patience, in this way, is about *remaining*, God being *steadfast* towards His people throughout all that has happened over the course of their history. Throughout all waywardness—*despite* all waywardness—Scripture remains. It is fitting for the Scriptures of a patient God to be written texts because written texts *patiently remain*. This is just John Calvin’s point in his *Commentary on Romans*:

¹⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 880.

¹⁹ Jewett, *Romans*, 881.

²⁰ Jewett, *Romans*, 881.

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[Romans 15:4]...provides an excellent refutation of the fanatics who maintain that the Old Testament is abolished, and that it has no relevance at all to Christians. Are they to have the impertinence to turn Christians from those books which, as Paul testifies, have been appointed by God for their salvation?²¹

So writes Calvin against these so-called “fanatics,” these persons who would dare to reject the validity of Old Testament texts for the Christian life. The written Scriptures of Israel are not abolished; rather, they are astonishingly relevant still, appointed by God’s Himself. In their being written down, His words *remain*.

And now, notice Romans 15:5, the very next verse, the aforementioned benediction: “May the God of patience and comfort grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus...” Here, the way in which these two verses work together comes into clearer view. In the Scriptural text—the text that is patient and comforting—we encounter the God of patience and comfort. As Katherine Grieb finely restates it, “it is this God of steadfastness and encouragement who speaks of hope through the steadfastness and encouragement of the Scriptures.”²² This is exactly of what it means for this patient textuality to be fitting: textuality conveys the patience, the steadfastness, that is of Almighty God.²³ And, after all, this steadfastness is one of the centerpieces of Romans as a whole. In Romans, the apostle offers a sustained account of God’s steadfastness, His faithfulness towards His people and for His people. So perhaps, then, this is what we find in the oracles of God being written down. These Scriptures, these texts of Israel, have been *waiting*; they have been *steadfast* towards us. It is fitting for Scripture to be a text because, in this way, these Scriptures *last*—or at least, they last longer than spoken words. Inscripturation preserves spoken words. The Scriptural text is a *steadfast* word that *remains* for us.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 305.

²² Grieb, *The Story of Romans*, 131.

²³ Jones, *Patience*, 42.

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Now, let us expand from Romans. In John Calvin, we find someone who is fixated on the patience of God. Paul Jones’ theological exploration of patience is particularly helpful on this point. In his substantial consideration of Calvin, Jones finds someone who is concerned with patience as a “motif that helps one think about the broad sweep of God’s work in history, stretching from the deep past into the Christian present.”²⁴ Calvin is committed to a gracious and longsuffering God who exercises patience towards His creation. For Calvin,

What distinguishes [the history of God’s covenant with Israel], and what in fact makes it possible, is divine patience as an act of merciful forbearance, such that sinful Israel is not destroyed but is instead given additional—and, by definition, undeserved—opportunities to repent, to recommit itself to God, and to reconstitute itself as God’s covenantal partner.²⁵

Such is the patience of Scripture, a steadfast text that speaks to us again and again, despite our creaturely undeserving. And it is in just this way that Calvin so often describes the Scripture’s textuality as being patient, as something that remains. Consider that famous passage from the first book of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

Suppose we ponder how slippery is the fall of the human mind into forgetfulness of God, how great the tendency to every kind of error, how great the lust to fashion constantly new and artificial religions. Then we may perceive how necessary was such written proof of the heavenly doctrine, that it should neither perish through forgetfulness nor vanish through error nor be corrupted by the audacity of men.²⁶

Scripture’s textuality is for the purpose of God’s patience towards us, despite our forgetfulness and our constant inclination towards errors of every kind. It was fitting for God to make such a written deposit of teachings because written texts securely *remain*. Calvin is insistent on this point. For Calvin, just as for the apostle Paul, the Scriptures of Israel *remain*; they are *patient*. Were the oracles of God not written down, human creatures would be hopeless in their “forgetfulness” and

²⁴ Jones, *Patience*, 148.

²⁵ Jones, *Patience*, 143.

²⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, volume 1, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 72 (I.vi.3).

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“corrupted by the audacity of men.” Or perhaps worse, human creatures would “fashion constantly new and artificial religions.” Instead, God had His word written down: a “written proof of the heavenly doctrine.”

We see here...what is the benefit of having the Scripture, even that what would otherwise vanish away or escape the memory of man, *may remain* and be handed down from one to another, and also that it may be read; for what is written can be better weighed during leisure time. When one speaks only, everyone takes in something according to his capacity and his attention; but as words form man’s mouth glide away, the utility of Scripture does hence appear more evident; for when what is not immediately understood is repeated, it brings more light, and then what one reads today, he may read tomorrow, and next year, and many years after.²⁷

Here, we should take stock of our efforts above. I have worked through notions of Scripture’s textuality and purpose, as well as the complicated relationship between the two. I have offered the idea of “fittingness” as being a helpful tool in finding the proper dogmatic balance between textuality and purpose, a means by which we can make sense of this particular medium being the chosen and sanctified servant for the purposes of God. I have argued for just one possible sketch: that it is fitting for Holy Scripture to be a text because textuality is inherently patient and, therefore, Holy Scripture’s patient textuality fittingly conveys the patience of Almighty God Himself. It is this author’s hope, though, that, if anything, this brief constructive sketch has drawn readers closer to the biblical text itself—not to divinize it, and certainly not to deny its textuality, but to encounter the *viva vox Dei*, the living voice of God, which, in these pages, constantly reaches towards His people for their learning, patiently waiting to write something good and hopeful upon their hearts.

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²⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, volume 4 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), 326, emphasis mine.

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