

The Textual Variant of Romans 5:1: Do We Have Peace with God?

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Romans chapter 5 serves as a key transitional chapter between the theology of justification and the rest of the epistle. In the very first verse, however, one finds a significant textual issue. What did Paul actually write in Romans 5:1? Did he make a statement about the believer's peace with God or did he express a wish or desire for his believing readers to experience peace with God? This paper will examine the textual variant involved here and reach a conclusion regarding the original text of this verse.

The textual variant in the passage, as already hinted at, involves the verb of the main clause in verse 1. The one reading has this verb in the indicative mood (ἔχομεν) and the other variant has the verb in the subjunctive mood (ἔχωμεν). To be sure, this is a significant variant in the context of where the variant occurs. As people who have been justified by faith, do we as a matter of fact "have peace toward God" or are we admonished to reach a state of peace toward God? There is no doubt that in terms of the exegesis of this passage the variant does matter and in fact involves a significant theological issue. One textual critic has even been observed that he knows no one accepting the subjunctive reading who exegetes the verse as communicating a normal subjunctive meaning.¹ The issue is significant in its theological context. At this point, the question must turn to the evidence.

While the subjunctive variant has a slight advantage, this textual variant has external evidence that is so diverse that it is difficult to give either variant preference.² One is immediately struck by how divided the evidence is. The earliest documented reading is the subjunctive form in a citation by Marcion as reported by Tertullian in the 2nd century. However, one finds both readings in the Greek manuscript evidence as early as the 4th and 5th centuries. In fact, both readings are found within all three major text-types. Furthermore, several sources including some of the most significant uncials (e.g. κ and B) have been corrected from the indicative to the subjunctive. There is uncertainty in other sources as well (e.g. the uncial 0220, the Patristic citation by Gregory-Nyssa, and the Latin Vulgate). One cannot lightly dismiss the presence of these corrections and differences even within the Alexandrian text-type. However, the combination of the corrected forms of κ and B, the support of A and C, and strong secondary support in patristic citations and versions support the judgment that the subjunctive reading is better attested. However, the evidence in no way disproves the possibility for the indicative reading being original. In conclusion, the diversity of the readings within each of the major-text types and the early existence of this diversity seem to force the textual critic to look to the internal evidence to really settle this question.

¹ Daniel B. Wallace, "Do Christians Have Peace with God? A Brief Examination of the Textual Problem in Romans 5:1," Bible.org, accessed January 26, 2016, <https://bible.org/article/do-christians-have-peace-god-brief-examination-textual-problem-romans-51>.

² The external evidence was collected using Barbara Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed. (New York: United Bible Societies). The text-type of manuscript evidence was classified using *ibid.* and the chart in Craig L. Blomberg with Jennifer Foutz Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 34-35.

In reality, the internal evidence actually sheds significant light on the textual variant in Romans 5:1. The very nature of this variant involves transcriptional probabilities. It would be extremely easy for later scribes to mistake an omicron in ἔχομεν for an omega in ἔχωμεν or vice versa, for they were pronounced the same in the 1st century.³ This reality would seem to apply even to the careful scribes of Alexandria.⁴ In fact, some even suggest that the variant could've first originated in Tertius, Paul's own scribe, when he was dictating the letter and that Paul himself may have been the original "corrector." This suggestion is too speculative to say for sure, but Tertius would have likely been subject to this reality just as later scribes. This transcriptional difficulty provides a strong explanation for the early confusion of the reading. With this established, one may now note that the indicative reading fits with the context best. The section is dealing with facts rather than exhortation.⁵ This contextual factor can also be supported by using the grammar⁶ of vv2-3 to show that indicative forms are used in vv2-3 and are joined by a καί to the main clause of verse one. This would make it likely that the form in v1 is also indicative.⁷ In defense of the subjunctive reading, one should recognize that it is the more difficult reading, and the more difficult reading is generally speaking to be preferred. In this case though, the weight of other internal evidence would seem to be greater than this principle⁸ and thus the indicative may be regarded as potentially the correct reading. The internal evidence definitely provides stronger support for the indicative reading.

Can a conclusion be reached regarding this variant? Yes, the indicative is the original reading the verse in question. External evidence may provide support that the subjunctive reading was original, but this evidence is in a context of great confusion at a very early date. While the more difficult reading is normally preferred in terms of internal evidence, in this case the reading would be just too difficult given the grammar and context. Furthermore, the significant diversity of early readings seems to reflect a text that was already unstable at the time of the earliest witnesses. In light of this, other internal factors can have full weight on the variant. In that light, context clearly provides strong evidence supported by the grammar of the passage that the indicative reading is the right one. The presence of the variant reflects the transcriptional possibility of error in copying coupled by scribes trying to account for such early variance in our best copies. The verse is indeed telling us "being justified by faith, we have peace toward God through our Lord Jesus Christ." May all who have experienced the miracle of salvation always live in confidence of the reality that they have this peace toward God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Wallace, "Do Christians Have Peace with God? A Brief Examination of the Textual Problem in Romans 5:1," esp. n1.

⁴ Blomberg and Markley, 11-12.

⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 452; See also Wallace, "Do Christians Have Peace with God?"

⁶ The argument uses presence of the indicative negation particle οὐ, rather than the subjunctive μη, to join two instances of καυχώμεθα as support for the likelihood that a subjunctive verb would not be followed by an indicative verb. If it were joined by a καί.

⁷ For full discussion, see Verlyn D. Verbrugge, "The Grammatical Internal Evidence for ἔχομεν in Romans 5:1," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 3 (Sep. 2011):559-572, accessed January 26, 2016, in the *Theological Journal Database*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 570-571.

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