

**Accurate Better Than New:  
An Exploration of the New Perspectives on Paul**

By: Dan Mages  
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The rhetoric of religion is notoriously high. The consequences of ideas are seen as eternal. Incurring the wrath of the deity is to be avoided at all costs. Billions of animals have been slaughtered to appease capricious gods. Some devotees have even been willing to sacrifice their beloved children in order to demonstrate that they fear God (Gen 22:12). The apostle Paul called his theological opponents dogs (Phil 3:2), and wished they would cut off their genitals (Gal 5:12). He called upon God to utterly destroy his opposition at the final judgment (Gal 1:9; Phil 3:19). Proponents of what has been coined “The New Perspective on Paul” by James D.G. Dunn in his landmark 1982 Manson Memorial Lecture,<sup>1</sup> have been similarly “carpet-bombed”<sup>2</sup> by their traditional counterparts. In his 2003, Rutherford House Lecture, N.T. Wright opened his presentation saying that he has been linked with New Perspective proposals that have been “dismissed, scorned, vilified, and anathematized.”<sup>3</sup> Speaking primarily of those in Reformed circles, Wright bemoaned,

Like America looking for a new scapegoat after the collapse of the Cold War, and seizing on the Islamic world as the obvious target, many conservative writers, having discovered themselves in possession of the Pauline field after the liberals got tired of it, having looked around for new enemies. Here is something called the New Perspective; it seems to be denying some of the things we have normally taught; very well, let us demonize it, lump its proponents together, and nuke them from great height.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted as chapter seven in *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> This is the language of N.T. Wright in “New Perspectives on Paul” (paper presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, Rutherford House, Edinburgh., 25-28 August 2003), 4.

<sup>3</sup> “New Perspectives on Paul,” 1.

<sup>4</sup> “New Perspectives on Paul,” 4.

It is no wonder James Dunn says this is “one of the most vigorous debates in current NT studies.”<sup>5</sup> Although Wright and Dunn have received the brunt of recent criticism,<sup>6</sup> this debate is not new, or particularly Pauline. Since the debate mostly revolves around whether or not Second-Temple Period Judaism was a religion of works righteousness where salvation is earned through meritorious deeds, some have designated the discussion, “The New Perspective on Judaism.”<sup>7</sup> Complicating things further, Wright says there are almost as many New Perspective positions as there are proponents.<sup>8</sup> Given the complexity of the subject, I will give a brief historical overview of the New Perspective, introduce the major discussions and end with some tentative evaluation.

Ever since the early apologists and re-emphasized in Reformation teaching, Judaism has been viewed as a foil of Christianity. Judaism is earthly, Christianity is heavenly; Judaism carnal, Christianity spiritual; Judaism proud, Christianity humble.<sup>9</sup> This negative caricature was held by Martin Luther, who according to New Perspective proponents interpreted Judaism through the lens of his struggle against the medieval Roman Catholic Church. E.P. Sanders, the most influential Pauline scholar in the last quarter of a century, who’s contribution to this debate cannot be underestimated, noted that we will misunderstand Paul if we read him through Luther’s eyes.<sup>10</sup>

The New Perspective arrived post-holocaust, when a whole new sensitivity toward Judaism arose. It was during this time that Ferdinand Weber’s 1880 systematic look at Judaic source material, organized to demonstrate that Judaism was a legalistic religion, finally began to be

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<sup>5</sup> *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 340.

<sup>6</sup> These two scholars are the most targeted for criticism because of their prominence, publishing power and Evangelical identities.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Gallant, “Covenantal Nomism? A Comparative Review of Sanders and Carson et al,” Cited 13 March 2007. Online: <http://www.rabbisaul.com/nomism.htm>, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” 3.

<sup>9</sup> Mark M. Mattison, “A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul,” Cited 13 March 2007. Online: <http://www.thepaulpage.com/Summary.html>, 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Paul: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford, 1991), 58.

challenged. Before that time, scholars such as Emil Schurer, Wilhelm Bousset and followed by Rudolf Bultmann took for granted the negative picture of Judaism presented by Weber.<sup>11</sup> Jewish theologian Claude G. Montefiore<sup>12</sup> criticized Weber for taking rabbinic passages out of their proper context, wherein the law was viewed as a gift from a merciful and forgiving God, not a means to earn salvation.<sup>13</sup> George Foot Moore later provided an even more thoroughgoing critique of Weber, noting that Weber did not really possess firsthand citations from the period, but derived most of the quotations from earlier polemical Christian works written against Judaism.<sup>14</sup>

Neither of these critiques overwhelmingly changed the atmosphere of scholarship the way E.P. Sanders' 1977 book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* did. This work brought to the forefront of the academic world what had been long over due in a pointed and exhaustive fashion. Sanders extensively sifted through and addressed Tannaitic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha writings, illuminating the importance of the covenant in Jewish theology.<sup>15</sup> Sanders came up with the now prevalent term "covenantal nomism" to describe the framework of Israel's relationship with God and the law. Sanders did not find a legalistic system of earning God's favor through meritorious deeds, but a gracious God who brings the Israelites into covenant relationship. In this fashion, the law was not perceived as necessary to "get in" the covenant, but an intention to keep the law was necessary for a member of Israel to "stay in" the covenant.<sup>16</sup> Sanders made it clear that according to all rabbis, perfect obedience was never required to stay in the covenant. For God had established provisions of repentance, sacrifice, atonement and forgiveness built into the

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<sup>11</sup> Mattison, "A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul," 2.

<sup>12</sup> Other Jewish theologians like Hans Joachim Schoeps and Samuel Sandmel have made similar attempts to clear the record.

<sup>13</sup> Mattison, "A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul," 2.

<sup>14</sup> Mattison, "A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul," 2.

<sup>15</sup> F. Thielman, "Law," *DPL* 531.

<sup>16</sup> In a footnote, Sanders acknowledges that Robert Gundry argued for this concept at the Society of Biblical Literature in a 1981 paper in terms of the book of Galatians. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 52.

covenant itself.<sup>17</sup> It is only the incorrigibly wicked, who reject God and refuse to repent that are ousted from the covenant altogether.<sup>18</sup>

If Judaism was a religion of covenantal grace, then the question arises, what are the “works of the law” Paul argued against so vehemently in the epistles. In broad strokes, the New Perspective says whatever it refers to, it cannot be legalism as defined by the Reformation, that is, a general collection of good deeds that are depended upon for finding favor with God. Wright does not see the issue as one of legalism, but of exclusivism, a nationalistic pride that manifested itself through Israel boasting in their election and privileged status among the nations.<sup>19</sup> Commenting on Rom 4:16, Wright argues that Paul saw the promises of God as inherited by grace, not race.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, for Dunn, the works of the law are Jewish badges of identity that were being misused to exclude Gentiles, particularly but not exclusively circumcision, Sabbath, and kosher food laws.<sup>21</sup> Dunn maintains that when Paul was criticizing the works of the law, it was not the law proper that was being critiqued, but a *misuse* of the law as a social barrier, dividing Jew and Gentile.<sup>22</sup> Since Paul witnessed the spirit being given to Gentiles who had not done anything except believe in the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus (Acts 28:28:23, 31; Gal 3:2), he insisted that Gentiles be included into the covenant community as equals,

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<sup>17</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983), 28, 111.

<sup>18</sup> Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 242-3.

<sup>20</sup> *The Climax of the Covenant*, 168.

<sup>21</sup> Dunn says that he has been misunderstood here as saying that the badges are solely and exclusively circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws, when he has not claimed so much. See footnote 97 in *The Theology of the Apostle Paul*, 358. Dunn develops the evolution of law keeping that eventually led to strict separation and Jewish boasting concerning their privilege and status on pages 354-65.

<sup>22</sup> *The Theology of the Apostle Paul*, 366.

without these *specific* identity markers. As apostle to the Gentiles, this was one of his primary concerns, as these observances served as a major hindrance to full proselytization. Many God-fearers stood on the edges of full participation, restrained by the requirements of law abiding, principally, circumcision, Sabbath and keeping the kosher foods.

Just as the phrase “works of the law” is viewed within the social context of first-century Judaism, some adherents of the New Perspective also see the doctrine of justification by faith as something that Paul principally derived within the context of his Gentile mission. The question regarding how Gentiles are to become full, equal members of the covenant community, according to Paul, is by trust.<sup>23</sup> Circumcision was no longer necessary contra Gen 17:9-14,27, a text noticeably avoided by Paul, but surely used by his opponents. Furthermore, Wright points out, “if we are thinking Paul’s thoughts after him, we are not justified by faith by believing in justification by faith. We are justified by faith by believing in the gospel itself – in other words, that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.”<sup>24</sup> It is hard to not see the irony in a doctrine which was intended to unite all those who shared faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord, but ultimately has led to countless church splits.<sup>25</sup>

For Wright, there is a “massive conspiracy of silence on something which was quite clear for Paul (as indeed for Jesus),”<sup>26</sup> that even though present justification is by faith, future justification will be by works (Rom 2:1-16; 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:10).<sup>27</sup> The final judgment will be based on the totality of a person’s life. Since judgment day resides in the future, present

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<sup>23</sup> Depending on which Pauline epistle, it could be trust in the Abrahamic promise, that is the kingdom of God, or in Jesus dying for sins, being raised from the dead by God, or in Jesus as God’s Messiah.

<sup>24</sup> “New Perspectives on Paul,” 14.

<sup>25</sup> Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” 15.

<sup>26</sup> Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” 8.

<sup>27</sup> To be fair to Wright, he later somewhat softens his position by the concession that these are not unaided works, but things brought about in a persons life as a result of the Spirit’s indwelling. “New Perspectives on Paul,” 9.

justification language is best understood as an “anticipation in the present of the justification which will occur in the future.”<sup>28</sup> All of this is based on God’s faithfulness to do that which God promises. God is believed to be so true to his word, that Paul was able to speak *proleptically* about the future, that is, as if his vindication was already present.<sup>29</sup>

Another related New Perspective discussion is the meaning of “the righteousness of God” in Pauline usage. The phrase is used a total of eight times, seven of which are in the book of Romans.<sup>30</sup> According to Wright, when Paul uses this language in Romans, he often is conjuring up the metaphor of a Jewish law court. In this light, the righteousness of a judge is his ability to refuse bribes, uphold the law, and make fair and impartial judgments. For the plaintiff, it would refer to their accusation being upheld and for the defendant, to be vindicated or acquitted. In an attempt to reform some Reformation doctrine, Wright points out,

It makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom...To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge’s righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how the language works.<sup>31</sup>

Wright highlights that an imputed foreign righteousness given by a judge to another is a type of “legal fiction.”<sup>32</sup> Based on Israel’s covenant relationship with God, Wright argues that

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<sup>28</sup> Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” 9-10. Dunn agrees that justification language has future implications, utilizing both Gal 2:16 and 5:5 to demonstrate the future aspects of both justification and righteousness. *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 190.

<sup>29</sup> This is one of the least appreciated and utilized insights concerning the NT. It helps immensely in explaining much of the NT realized eschatology, without devolving into invisible spiritual realities, whatever that means. Johannine language of possessing eternal life is also better understood in this light. Obviously all who have ever claimed to have eternal life have perished in death, yet God’s promise to grant immortality in the resurrection was understood to be so certain that it was spoken about *as if* it was a current possession.

<sup>30</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 98.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98.

<sup>32</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 102.

“the righteousness of God” is best understood as either a possessive (moral quality of God) or subjective (moral action) genitive, more so the former than the later.<sup>33</sup> Far from being a “cold piece of business,”<sup>34</sup> the phrase refers to God’s own righteousness, in the context of Israel, his covenant *faithfulness*.<sup>35</sup> The Hebrew parallelism of Ps 143:1 brings this nuance out clearly. David is remembered as saying, “Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my supplications in your *faithfulness*; answer me in your *righteousness*” (NRSV Emphasis mine). God’s righteousness is here synonymous with God’s faithfulness.

Reinterpreting the primary, go-to text used to teach imputed righteousness, which says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him *we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21 NIV Emphasis mine), Wright argues that Paul is not talking about imputation theory, but embodiment.<sup>36</sup> Paul had been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18), had become an ambassador for Christ, (2 Cor 5:20a), and God was making his appeal through him (2 Cor 5:20b). Becoming the righteousness of God then, involved becoming an incarnation of God’s faithfulness to the world. It was through Paul’s pain, suffering, rejection, and victories wherein God’s faithfulness was being manifested.<sup>37</sup>

The more New Perspective proponents probed Paul’s first-century Jewish, sociological, political, historical context, the less and less he looked psychologically like Augustine and Martin Luther who were plagued with a guilt ridden, introspective conscience. Krister Stendahl raised this issue in a 1963 article called, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective

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<sup>33</sup> See Wright’s chart and description in *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 100-3.

<sup>34</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 110.

<sup>35</sup> Dunn also sees God’s righteousness as relational, calling to mind God’s faithfulness, especially to God’s covenant. He points out Ps 71:15 which speaks of God’s righteous acts as God’s saving deeds and 1 QS 11:11-15 which discusses the righteousness of God in the context of God’s vindicating actions. *The Theology of the Apostle Paul*, 342-3.

<sup>36</sup> *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 104.

<sup>37</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 104-5.

Conscience of the West.”<sup>38</sup> In it he points out that despite the conventional view of Rom 7,<sup>39</sup> Paul had a robust conscience. Prior to coming into contact with the risen Lord, Paul did not strike himself with lashes, like the plagued Luther doing penance prior to embracing grace, but perceived himself “as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil 3:6).<sup>40</sup> Throughout Paul’s ministry, he proclaimed a clear conscience (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 2 Cor 1:12a), though he acknowledged this did not ensure a favorable verdict (1 Cor 4:4).

Much could be said regarding these provocative proposals. In truth, what has been said regarding the work of E.P. Sanders, could be said of the New Perspective in general, their work is so significant, even those biblical scholars who disagree, must interact with them in order to be taken seriously.<sup>41</sup> I tend to agree with New Perspective proponents that the covenant was a meta-narrative, an over arching framework by which most Jews perceived their relationship with God, however, I am unwilling to say that there was only one view about how one entered and stayed in the covenant. It is my impression that there have and always will be those who emphasize God’s role to the exclusion of human response, just as there are those who have emphasized the human obligation, virtually to the exclusion of God (2 Bar. 51:3,7; 4 Ezra 3:36; 9:7; Pss.Sol. 9:3-5; Ant. 20:2:1-4; Rom 2:6-16). Sometimes, both of these kinds of statements are found by one author within the same literature. Occasionally this will happen in the same paragraph, even in the same sentence. When push comes to shove, I do not suspect that Second-Temple Period Jews, including Paul had worked out perfectly the implications of their statements, just as many today have not. Consistency, coherency and systematization are not typically one of religion’s strengths. Those who insist that God is behind everything, enabling, even acting through human

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<sup>38</sup> HTR 56 (1963): 199-215.

<sup>39</sup> Stendahl would most likely say that we should interpret the highly figurative, sin and flesh personified Rom 7, in light of the unambiguous Phil 3 text. He gives his interpretation of Rom 7 in “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” 212-14.

<sup>40</sup> Righteousness or blameless people often stood in stark contrast with the wicked (Wis 10:5, 15; 18:21). Job was remembered as blameless and upright (1:1, 8; 2:3), as were Zechariah and Elizabeth, who are said to have lived blameless according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. (Luke 1:6).

<sup>41</sup> Gallant, “Covenantal Nomism?,” 1.



response, ultimately make life absurd. God pulling all the strings eradicates any kind of authentic relations between Creator and creature. On the other hand, even the most Pelagian Christian realizes that no matter how righteous a life lived, he cannot grant himself immortality, only God has the ability to bestow eternal life. Because of this kind of diversity, I agree with those who say it is more accurate to speak of Judaisms<sup>42</sup> than Judaism.

Even though New Perspective advocates have made huge strides in correcting the caricature of Judaism as strictly a legalistic religion of self-righteous, haughty, law-obsessed people, Paul's detractors are still in New Perspective words, racist, nationalistic, prideful and boastful in their status as the chosen people. Paul is still seen in battle against a negative form of Judaism. Furthermore, I find it hard to agree with Dunn, that some Jews had misused circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws as ordinances to separate themselves from the Gentiles. Instead of misusing the law, was this not the very purpose of the ordinances, to distinguish themselves apart from the Gentile world. Were not the laws given, so that Israel would be "holy," that is set apart, from their neighbors. The law is filled with commandments which prohibit Israel from doing things which are in and of themselves, morally neutral, but given apparently for the sole purpose of distinguishing God's people from the Canaanites who wore certain kinds of clothing and ate certain kinds of food.

I see Wright's presentation of present justification as an anticipation of a future favorable judgment helpful for understanding some of Paul's statements, however, if final judgment is based on works, even spirit-inspired, how does affirming faith in the gospel or faith in Christ alone factor into the equation. In the end, if judgment is according to the goodness or badness of the totality of one's life (Matt 25), faith in Christ seems obsolete, unless it is seen as adherence to Jesus' teaching to love one another other as we love ourselves (Gal 5:6). Although Sanders attempts to put the Paul pieces together, he often acknowledges that Paul cannot be harmonized. In once instance, he says that Paul's case for universal sinfulness in Rom 1-2 "is not convincing: it is internally inconsistent and it rests on gross exaggeration."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Since Christianity today is just as, if not more diverse than first-century Judaism was, it is also accurate to speak of Christianities.

<sup>43</sup> Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 125.

I find that the more individuals attempt to align their beliefs with Paul's or the biblical data as a whole, the more confused they sound. Christians often acknowledge the presence of "tensions" and "paradoxes" which usually cannot be distinguished from real contradictions. In the end, Wright fails to adequately reconcile the two views of faith in Christ alone and judgment according to works, even though both views are found in the text.

Dunn's emphasis on justification by faith being developed by Paul during and for his gentile mission, even 15-17 years after his Damascus road experience is made very suspect by Seyoon Kim's rebuttal in *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel*. In it, Kim argues that since Paul was a zealous Pharisee, upholding Israel's law, he persecuted Hellenized Christians precisely because they were preaching as Messiah, a man who was obviously accursed by the law (Deut 21:23). This being the case, when Paul came into contact with the resurrected Jesus, he was forced to re-evaluate his view of the law, or at least re-interpret what Jesus' death represented. Kim argues that Paul concluded that Jesus' death was an eschatological atonement (Is 53), and quickly concluded that appropriating faith in Christ included a person into the covenant instead of obedience to the law.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, I find the New Perspective extremely helpful in viewing "the righteousness of God" as God's covenant faithfulness. We should note however that the Hebrew narrative presents us with a picture of God who intended the law to be a blessing, something that was not too difficult for Israel to keep, something that is actually within their grasp, reachable, attainable (Deut 30:11-14). On the contrary, Paul presents a picture very different than that, virtually the opposite. Paul did not have this optimistic viewpoint. It is as if God says humans can keep the law, and Paul says humans cannot (Rom 8:7). Paul is most likely reflecting on the history of Israel, that corporately, has not been able to be faithful. Time and time again, Israel has failed to keep her side of the bargain. Although there have always been a remnant, faithful to God, largely, the nation has been under continual curses, an aspect of God's faithfulness to the covenant. The promises in Jeremiah and Ezekiel about a new covenant sound as if God had a different plan, one that would actually work this time, one that

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<sup>44</sup> See Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 42-4.

included more help on God's part. What never seems to occur to Paul, and especially to Old Perspective interpreters, is that God apparently changed God's perspective. Similar to God regretting that God made man, desiring to start all over (Gen 6:6), God had redesigned the terms of the covenant. This proposal may be useful for a Newer Perspective maybe somewhere down the line, but until then, the important thing for both Old and New Perspective interpreters, is despite our prejudices, predispositions, and loyalties, to let Paul be Paul, irrespective if we agree with the apostle.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Feeling the need to agree with Paul on every point tends to cause interpreters to bring the apostle closer to their own modern, historical, cultural perspectives than vice versa.

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