

**An Essay  
Regarding  
The New Perspective of Paul**

by  
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## **Introduction**

It is with excitement that I have undertaken the task of researching and writing regarding the New Perspective of Paul. Our church has recently been engaged in a study regarding the Hebraic Roots of our Christianity; the subjects of Paul, anti-Semitism, and justification by faith are topics that were frequently encountered. As I both perform research for and write this essay, I have an opportunity to determine, in a disciplined and studious manner, many of the truths that I have been seeking. Further, I hope to gain insight into some of the difficulties that I am dealing with concerning the contrasting dichotomy between what the Bible says and what traditional Christianity has espoused for the last 500 plus years. With these thoughts in mind, I engage in my study regarding the New Perspective on Paul.

## **What is the New Perspective?**

According to Dr. James A. Meek of Covenant Theological Seminary, the New Perspective of Paul is a reevaluation of the scholarly consensus regarding Pauline theology, first century Judaism, and Paul's treatment of Judaism.<sup>1</sup> The term, 'The New Perspective of Paul,' was first coined by Dr. James D. G. Dunn as a contrast to the theological restlessness concerning

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<sup>1</sup> James A. Meek, "The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction for the Uninitiated." *Concordia Journal* v. 27 Issue 3 (2001): 208.

the theology of Paul, especially as his theology is viewed in light of his Jewish origins.<sup>2</sup> There was (and still IS among some) a deep, although unconscious, anti-Semitism<sup>3</sup> prevalent among Theologians, particularly those educated in the German schools of theological thought. These schools of thought seem to have been in existence since Martin Luther, although, certainly, many anti-Semitic roots were firmly in place prior to Luther's reformational implementations. Since the time of Luther, many theologians have been wrestling with apparent incongruities in Paul's life. Paul had been a devout, legalistic Jewish Pharisee who seemingly had been liberated from the bondage of the Torah; yet his liberation had been not only at the hands of the work of Christ but also, in part, through the influence of his Hellenistic heritage and surroundings. Dunn records, "So far as the History of Religions School and its heirs were concerned, it was the influence of the universal spirit of Hellenism which had saved Christianity from a Jewish childhood of stunted growth and enabled it to achieve maturity."<sup>4</sup>

Through the studies and writings of Duke University Divinity School professor W. D. Davies, who prior to his death in 2001 was a leading authority in New Testament, early Christianity, and ancient Judaism, it was noted that a change was taking place regarding these avenues of thought regarding Paul. Shortly after Davies' writings, a pivotal text by E. P. Sanders entitled, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, brought forth a new outlook on the Apostle Paul and his theology; this brought to prominence a new point of view that was soon to erupt with great force throughout the theological community. Sanders' writing was based on the understanding that the Hebrews' comprehension of themselves as the People of God was not ultimately based upon their obedience to the Torah or any other human achievements, but was instead, based purely on

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<sup>2</sup> James D. G. Dunn, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

the covenant that God had sovereignly and grace-fully made with Israel. Sanders' observations regarding these issues were made from the literary, historical, and theological writings found in both Second Temple Judaism and rabbinic Judaism.<sup>5</sup> Further derived from these writings, it was Sanders' belief that obedience to the Law which had been perceived by some as legalism was, in fact, not the original intent of the Torah but instead, was a misconceived idealism on the part of some Jews<sup>6</sup> and a misperception on the part of theological observers throughout Christian history. To describe the actuality of these events, Sanders created the phrase 'covenantal nomism' to express "the divine initiative of God's choice of a 'not people' (covenant), and the response of obedience required from that people (law/nomism)."<sup>7</sup> Regarding this issue, Dunn has suggested that the concept, a new viewpoint regarding Paul's Judaism, further required a new perspective of both the theology of Paul and the personhood of Paul himself. Dunn stated

The new perspective shed light on Paul's theology by allowing us to see that its polemical thrust was directed not against the idea of achieving God's acceptance by the merit of personal achievement (good works), but against the Jewish intention to safeguard the privilege of covenant status from being dissipated or contaminated by non-Jews. . . He was reacting against the conviction (shared by most other Christian Jews) that 'works of the law', such as (or particularly) circumcision and laws of clean and unclean, continued to prescribe the terms of covenant relationship for Gentiles as well as Jews.<sup>8</sup>

There is a further benefit of the New Perspective; it removes the negative focus from the Jewish people that has been unduly accorded to them, partially on the behalf of Luther in the Reformation. Luther had 'rediscovered' justification by faith alone, in part, due to his dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, a misinterpretation by Luther of Paul's teaching on justification caused that particular teaching to be "seen as a reaction against and in

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, *The Cambridge Companion*, 10.

opposition to Judaism.”<sup>9</sup> It was further observed that “as Luther had rejected a medieval church which offered salvation by merit and good works, the same [rejection] was true of Paul in relation to the Judaism of his day.”<sup>10</sup> This unfortunate misunderstanding was later perceived as impetus and justification by some in the theological community for further anti-Semitic actions.

### **Strengths of the New Perspective**

It has been suggested that the “apparent goal of these authors (of the New Perspective of Paul) [was] to make a new beginning in Pauline interpretation, so as to free Jewish-Christian dialogue from improper accusations against the Jewish conversation partners.”<sup>11</sup> As previously stated, these improper accusations stem from a post-Reformation tradition of Pauline interpretation that viewed Paul’s theology as contrasting Christian comprehension of themselves as the People of God with the Jewish comprehension of the same. The contrast between these two considerations is a false one developed from an improper understanding of the Jewish thought that their positioning as the People of God was/is secured through human obedience to the Law. This is “not at all what Paul intended.”<sup>12</sup> The New Perspective interpretation has obviously changed the perception of many theologians regarding Paul and his affiliation with the Jewish religion. Following this same pattern, it has also caused a shift in the way that many Christians are currently viewing the Jewish people; it has further caused an increased desire among Christians to know more about the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. In addition, it has caused some to take another, more critical look at the thoughts and events leading up historically to such atrocities against the Jewish people as the pogroms and the Holocaust.

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<sup>9</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 336.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 336-337.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Stuhlmacher, *A Challenge to the New Perspective: Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine of Justification*, (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 34.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Watson, “*Not the New Perspective*,” an unpublished paper delivered at the British New Testament Conference Manchester September 2001 located at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/divinity/staff/watsonart.shtml> accessed on 06/25/2004 , 3.

## Weaknesses of the New Perspective

There are those, however, such as Dr. Friedrich Avemarie, Professor of New Testament at the Fachbereich Evangelische Theologie at Philipps-Universität Marburg, who have suggested that Sanders has focused too narrowly upon the covenant side of ‘covenantal nomism.’<sup>13</sup>

Avemarie’s suggestion is that “the language of ‘justification’ should be used in reference not only to the initial acceptance of faith but also to the final judgment.”<sup>14</sup> Further, Dr. Avemarie has suggested that the “Jewish idea of salvation [as] a status both received as a gift (election) and to be maintained (by doing God’s will), is not so very different from Paul’s. If Jewish hope of salvation is founded upon God’s choice of Israel to be His people, so Paul’s is founded upon the grace of God in Christ received through faith.”<sup>15</sup>

Others feel, however, that “there are serious shortcomings in Sanders’ own presentation of ‘Palestinian Judaism’”<sup>16</sup> In particular, Sanders does not seem to acknowledge or admit the extent to which the literature of this period portrays covenant and law as indistinguishable from one another.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, this oversight, if accurate, may prove crucial to the outcome regarding the New Perspective. In addition, there have been charges by others that Sanders and proponents of the New Perspective have been insensitive to the diversity of Judaism over both time and space.<sup>18</sup> Dr. Robert Gundry, Scholar-in-Residence at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, states

Interpretive [and] applicatory traditions draw the criticism in the NT outside Pauline literature if they smother the original intent of the law. Whether it was Jesus or the early church that was originally responsible for the criticism and whether or not the criticism was just, the very raising of the issue establishes a

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<sup>13</sup> Dunn, *The Cambridge Companion*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> Watson, *Not the New Perspective*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Robert H. Gundry, “Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul,” *Biblica* 66 (1985): 6

Palestinian Jewish preoccupation with the law and its careful observance and indicates a basic disagreement between Palestinian Judaism and Christianity at this point [regarding the law].<sup>19</sup>

From these arguments, it certainly seems that both proponents and opponents of the New Perspective are equally convinced concerning their opinions regarding this highly controversial matter.

### **Romans and the New Perspective**

Paul's writing to the Romans contains two key passages that are pivotal concerning the discussion of the Perspective. Both of these passages deal with the concept of justification. The first passage is Romans 1:13-17

I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."<sup>20</sup> (Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται).<sup>21</sup>

The issue within this passage rests in one's interpretation regarding the act of justification and the possibility of Paul's usage of these comments as a polemic against the Jewish Torah-keeping group. Was Paul addressing a prevalent doctrine of the Jewish people or was he making evident a passageway for the Gentiles to also come into the engrafted position as the People of God? If one accepts the New Perspective, then it is reasonable to assume that this text and the following Romans text are simply placing an argumentative consideration among the Jews that, as they are partakers as the People of God through His grace, so Gentiles, too, may become partakers as the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Romans 1:13-17 NASB.

<sup>21</sup> Romans 10:17b The Greek New Testament.

People of God through His grace by faith in Christ (and thus, through a NEW or RENEWED Covenant.)

The second notable passage is Romans 3:21-31. It states very clearly that there is not the ‘disestablishment’ of the Law, but instead, a ‘fulfilling.’ This latter passage also speaks very clearly to the concept of faith in Christ as God’s grace mechanism for the Gentiles to exercise, with emphasis that there is no room for boasting in good works.

But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God *the God* of Jews only? Is He not *the God* of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.<sup>22</sup>

Certainly, these passages contain pivotal material concerning several issues regarding one’s interpretation of Romans, each dependent upon one’s consideration of the New Perspective.

Although these issues do not appear to be theologically disconcerting ones, they are, in fact, relevant to the way the reader looks at Paul, the way s/he looks at justification by faith, and the way that s/he looks at Jews and Gentiles, each as the People of God.

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<sup>22</sup>Romans 3:21-31 NASB.

## Galatians and the New Perspective

Another pivotal area affected by one's understanding and acceptance of the New Perspective is found in Paul's writing to the Galatians. Again, there are two key passages that express the essence of (and difficulty with) one's understanding the New Perspective.

We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. "But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! "For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. "For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness *comes* through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.<sup>23</sup>

This passage again, deals with righteousness through the law as opposed to righteousness through grace. Again, the question here to be asked is, 'Was Paul dealing with a polemic against the Jews and their understanding of righteousness through obedience to the Law or was he simply arguing his case strongly for the Gentiles to be accepted into the People of God through faith in Christ?' Later in Galatians, Paul writes along these lines again

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed *as* crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.<sup>24</sup>

(καθὼς Ἀβραὰμ ἐπίστευσεν τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην.)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Galatians 2: 15-21 NASB.

<sup>24</sup> Galatians 3:1-6 NASB.

<sup>25</sup> Galatians 3:6 TGNT.

Through careful observance of these passages, it seems clear that Paul is not taking an anti-Jewish stance; instead, he is showing his readers that even the Hebrew system of righteousness WAS faith-based and that works were not the vehicle to attain righteousness. Galatians seems to exhibit a strong case for the New Perspective that has been overlooked by post-Reformation theology until recently.

### **Issues at stake regarding the New Perspective and Paul**

Dr. Brad Young, in his small book *Paul, the Jewish Theologian*, has so wonderfully expressed a proper understanding of Paul, “The scholar should pursue every discipline of research that might shed light on Pauline thought, including [various Greek philosophies.] Nevertheless, even though all of these studies may provide insight into Paul’s thought and his work among pagan nations, the apostle’s own self-portrait is of foremost importance. Paul describes himself as a Pharisee.”<sup>26</sup> Even a casual observance of his writings will lead to the conclusion that Paul did not simply divorce himself from his Jewish heritage; he saw his faith in Christ as an extension of his Hebrew faith and he saw his mission to the Gentiles as a broadening by the Spirit of God of His desire for relationship with all of mankind. As Dr. Francis Watson has so eloquently stated, “The Lutheran perspective on Paul has got him (Paul) all wrong. It results in a total travesty of what he meant.”<sup>27</sup> Paul was not against the Jews, nor the Jewish religion; he was simply against any aspect of them that would seek to place further burden of works or legalism upon the believer as a basis for that believer’s position as one of the People of God.

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<sup>26</sup> Young, *Paul, the Jewish Theologian*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Watson, *Not the New Perspective*, 4.

### **Issues at stake regarding the New Perspective and First Century Judaism**

The concepts of the New Perspective have created the initialization of a shift from the perception of First Century Judaism as a legalistic religion to an understanding that, while segments of Judaism certainly may have fit this mold, Judaism as a whole religion, has always been primarily a religion of grace. Jewish comprehension of Torah obedience is understood as “the view that one’s place in God’s plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Issues at stake regarding the New Perspective and Justification by Faith**

Luther operated from the understanding that Paul was attacking Jewish legalism, a comprehension that viewed one’s positioning before God as being based upon a devoted observance of the Torah.<sup>29</sup> Sander’s work, however, determined that obedience to the law was, in the mind of most Jews, not the means to engaging in relationship with God nor of earning God’s grace, but was instead, a means of maintaining or displaying one’s place in that covenantal relationship. Further, in his work, *Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles*, it is argued by Krister Stendahl, Mellon Professor of Divinity Emeritus at Harvard Divinity School that “the doctrine of justification originates in Paul’s theological mind from his grappling with the problem of how to defend the place of the Gentiles in the Kingdom—the task with which he was charged in his call.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 75.

<sup>29</sup> Graham N. Stanton, “Paul’s Gospel,” *The Cambridge Companion to Saint Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003):173-184.

<sup>30</sup> Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976, 27.

Another issue that occurs in this discussion, however, is that of the interpretation of the verb, δικάζω. The question becomes, does it mean ‘make righteous’ or ‘reckon as righteous’?<sup>31</sup>

According to James Dunn

the basic idea assumed by Paul was of a relationship in which God acts on behalf of His human partner, first in calling Israel into and then in sustaining Israel in its covenant with Him. . .the answer is not one or the other but both. The covenant God counts the covenant partner as still in partnership, despite the latter’s continued failure. But the covenant partner could hardly fail to be transformed by a living relationship with the life giving God.<sup>32</sup>

From this, although there is certainly still room for disagreement, one can conclude that God both ‘reckons as righteous’ and ‘makes righteous’ His people. His people, therefore, observe their obedience to His law as their privilege, not to earn them a place within the ranks of ‘His people’ but instead, as a display or ‘fruits’ of their covenant participation with God. In other words, their rank as members of the people of God (and, therefore, also as ‘justified’) was attained in a two-fold manner: God’s grace was accompanied by their faith. Their ensuing obedience to Torah was an outward and practical manifestation of their inward and positional state-of-being as the already justified people of God. The concept of justification by faith, thus, remains unchanged by the New Perspective; justification still comes by the combination of God’s grace and man’s faith.

## **Conclusion**

The verdict regarding the New Perspective may still be out for some theologians; yet the understanding is clear that improper sentiments have historically been expressed toward the Jewish people, usually due to the cause of an improper understanding of Paul’s attitude toward them. Clearly, Paul was a well-studied Jew. Clearly, he understood his Christian faith, at least initially, as an extension of his Jewishness. Clearly, he understood that his mission to the

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<sup>31</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul*, 344.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Gentiles was a broadening of God's original intent as expressed to the Jews to be the People of God. It is hoped that theologians will give Paul and his attitude towards the Jewish people another glance in light of these facts. It is further hoped that another glance will be given to the Jewish people and that no further injury will come upon them, especially in the name of Paul and Christianity.

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