



An Introduction to the



NEW TESTAMENT

CONTEXTS, METHODS
& MINISTRY FORMATION



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Cameo with portrait of Augustus: Italy, Roman, reign of Tiberius, A.D. 14-36. Travertine, H.4.6 cm; W.6.4 cm © The Cleveland Museum of Art. The John L. Severance Fund, 1991.154.

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In honor of my father,
J. Arthur F. de Silva,
on his seventieth birthday,

and in loving memory of my grandfather,

Stephen Frederick de Silva

(1902-1981)

When the father dies he will not seem to be dead,
for he has left behind him one like himself,
whom in his life he looked upon with joy
and at death, without grief.
He has left behind him an avenger against his enemies,
and one to repay the kindness of his friends.

BEN SIRA 30:4-6

The "New Perspective" on Paul and Early Judaism

Pauline studies have undergone something of a paradigm shift during the last quarter of the twentieth century, principally thanks to the insights and energies of those who promote a "new perspective" on Paul and early Judaism. This new perspective grows out of a recognition that much interpretation of Paul and Judaism in the modern era has been distorted through the ongoing influence of Luther's interpretation of Paul against the backdrop of a Catholicism that called for meritorious works as the means of achieving salvation. In Luther's writings Judaism became the graceless, externalistic, legalistic foil to Paul's religion of grace, the Spirit and love. The caricature of early Judaism fed the caricature of the Jewish people, and the extreme end of such denigration manifested itself in the Holocaust.

The horrors of the Holocaust precipitated a reevaluation of the perception of Judaism in the New Testament texts and their interpretation. Although several scholars had urged already that Judaism was also a religion of grace, it was E. P. Sanders who forcefully brought widespread attention to this understanding. He showed consistently that in all its diversity early Judaism was a religion of grace. The election of Israel was an act of divine grace; the giving of the Torah, the covenant that bound God and Israel to one another, was an act of divine grace. Doing the law was not understood as the means by which God's favor could be earned but as the proper response to God's favor already given in election and in the covenant. It had to do with the maintenance of an elect status bestowed by God, not with the acquisition of such status. Moreover, God had generously made provisions for failure to observe the covenant in the form of sacrifices, so that forgiveness and reconciliation remained available. Such provisions show that flawless performance was not expected. Sanders described Judaism as a religion of "covenantal nomism," the regulation of life by a law (*nomos*) within the framework of a graciously bestowed and maintained covenant relationship.

How, then, can we understand Paul's polemics against Judaism if the "new perspective" is correct thus far? An important insight that has emerged is that Paul does not oppose "grace" to "good works" in any way.^a Rather, the works that are the target of Paul's polemic, often more fully expressed as "works of the law," involve those covenant obligations that pertained strictly to Israel under the Torah—the pedagogue and guardian whose time is past (Gal 3:23–4:7). Persevering in "works of the law" is a problem because the purpose of these laws was largely to mark off the Jewish people from the nations (see the powerful expressions of this in *Jub* 22.16 and *Letter of Aristeas* 139, 142). Remaining holy to the Lord entailed remaining distinct and separate from people who did not live by Torah, which meant the Gentiles and, quite often, unobservant Jews. A corollary of distinctiveness was ethnic pride in Torah as a sign of God's special favor toward the Jews (thus Paul's castigation of "confidence in the flesh" and of "boasting" in the law). This was a problem for Paul since, with the death and resurrection of Jesus, God had manifested God's desire to extend the promise and the blessing to all the nations, something that

^aSee James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC 38 (Dallas: Word, 1988), pp. lxvii-lxx; *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 354-59, 365.

"zeal for the Torah" quite thoroughly inhibited. At such a stage in salvation history, insisting on the "works of the law" ran against God's purposes for the present era. In trying to remain "true" to the law, non-Christian Jews (and Judaizing Christians) had in fact betrayed the Law, not observing that its goal had been reached in the coming of Christ. Insisting on "works of the Torah" meant trying to reerect the "dividing wall of hostility" at a time when God tore it down in Christ and in the outpouring of the Spirit (cf. Gal 2:18; Eph 2:11-16), thus acting in open defiance of God.

The new perspective has certainly brought many benefits to the study of the New Testament and early Judaism. It has taught us to try to understand early Judaism on its own terms as a prerequisite to interpreting Paul. It has given us good cause to reexamine some long-held views of Pauline theology that may have more to do with Reformation-era debates than with Paul's challenge to some streams of Jewish Christianity. Even though some of the statements that have come out of the new perspective are more extreme than the evidence necessitates, this is exactly what we would expect—and should be prepared to allow—after the pendulum has been swinging so long and so hard in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, its leaven, with some modifications, will be evident throughout our discussions of Galatians and Romans.

FOR FURTHER READING

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The rival mission considered Paul's activity as a threat to the larger group (the Jewish people), which had to be preserved. These teachers were also acutely aware that apostates could be persecuted by the zealous (as Paul himself had done prior to his conversion; Gal 1:13-14, 23). Such zeal was firmly rooted in the tradition of Phinehas, who struck down an Israelite and his Moabite concubine and so won for himself a covenant of priesthood and saved Israel from being destroyed by a plague for its apostasy (Num 25:1-13). It was rooted in the tradition of Mattathias and his sons at the outset of the Maccabean Revolt, as they

purged apostates from the midst of Israel and thus "turned away wrath from Israel" (1 Macc 2:15-28, 42-48; 3:6, 8). A significant movement within Jewish Christianity, therefore, wanted to make it clear to both non-Christian and Christian Jews that the Jesus movement was in no way a movement that promoted apostasy. By reinforcing Jewish (Christian) adherence to the Torah, and all the more by bringing Gentiles to the light of the Law, the rival teachers could save themselves, the church in Judea, and the churches in the Diaspora where Jewish communities were strong, from the intramural persecution that

Criticisms of the "New Perspective"

The "new perspective" has not been greeted with unanimous support and approval. Indeed, some have regarded it as a dead end in the study of Paul, leading many astray from the time-honored truth about Paul. Some basic cautions raised by a number of scholars are well worth considering.

First, Sanders's characterization of the various Judaism's of the first century as "covenantal nomism," with its emphasis on grace rather than performance of works with a view to earning justification, has come under fire. There are some stunning examples of a doctrine of earning justification (acquittal at the judgment) by the doing of works, where the individual earns eternal reward or punishment by doing or transgressing God's law. *Fourth Ezra*, as Sanders already knew, explicitly affirms that having "a storehouse of works" with God brings a reward (4 *Ezra* 7:77; 8:33). When Ezra claims that God will show his righteousness and goodness by showing mercy to those who "have no store of good works" (4 *Ezra* 8:32, 36), he is soundly corrected by God (4 *Ezra* 8:37-40). A text from Qumran, 4QMMT, explicitly claims that doing the "works of the law" as outlined by the author of this text leads to justification before God "at the end time" (4QMMT 30): "It will be reckoned for you as righteousness when you perform what is right and good before Him" (4QMMT 31).^a Moreover, *m. Aboth* 3:16 declares that "the world is judged by grace, yet all is according to the excess of works." Critics therefore claim that it simply will not suffice to characterize Judaism in all its diversity as "covenantal nomism."^b

This is an apt critique, but it begs the question of what we are to do with New Testament texts that affirm that works matter at the judgment and are determinative for eternal destiny. The visions of the last judgment in Matthew 25:31-46, Romans 2:5-11, 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 and Revelation 20:12 all say that people will be judged according to their deeds. Paul also speaks of (bad) works resulting in exclusion from the kingdom (e.g., Gal 5:19-21; 1 Cor 6:9-11). Of course, there are ingenious ways of explaining each of these as not affirming judgment on the basis of works (at least, not for Christians), but this comes across as special pleading. While Sanders's claims require some nuancing, the attempts to redraw a picture of Judaism as at least semi-Pelagian in contrast to Christianity (that is, to serve once more as a foil to Christianity) seem to be fueled by ideology rather than critical assessment.

Second, many scholars take issue with the tendency of some proponents of the new perspective to regard the doctrine of "justification by faith" not as a core element of Paul's theology but as an argument that Paul developed to explain the specific question of how "Gentiles can be equally acceptable to God as Jews."^c While it is true that the topic and language of "justification by faith" comes to the fore only in Galatians and Romans, where the question arises concerning how the new people of God should be defined, Stuhlmacher points out that Paul's doctrine of justification grows out of the early Christian confession of Jesus' death as a death "for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3), an interpretation based on Isaiah 52:13-53:12, where the Messiah bears the sins

of many and "shall make many righteous" (Is 53:11 NRSV).^d The confrontation with Jewish Christians in Antioch and Galatia certainly contributed to Paul's teaching on justification by faith, but this was not its origin and exhaustive purpose.

This criticism reflects a longstanding debate in Pauline studies about the "core" of Paul's gospel. Already in the early twentieth century Albert Schweitzer had relegated justification by faith to the status of a "secondary crater" at the edge of the main impact of Paul's message, which was "participation in Christ." Attempts to absolutize the doctrine of justification by faith as the core of Paul's thought, however, suggesting that it emerges complete from the Damascus Road encounter without further development,^e seem to be another case of special pleading—again in favor of recovering a central tenet of Reformation theology.

A more significant problem emerges from the new perspective on justification, however, where "justification by faith" is understood to be a matter of relevance for Gentiles only, and not for Jews as well. This extreme line of argument tends to be pursued in support of a "two covenant" theology, according to which Jews do not need the gospel but only to be faithful to Torah. Such a view is an understandable development as scholarship seeks to undermine anti-Semitism at every turn, but it is certainly not true to Paul's theology (see Gal 2:15-16).

Third, but closely related to the first and second criticism, many scholars react against Dunn's suggestion that "works of the law" refers specifically to "boundary markers" that separate Jews from Gentiles (e.g., circumcision, sabbath, dietary laws). Rather, these scholars insist that Paul's attack on "works of the law" should continue to be seen as an attack on human achievement in general, against all attempts to establish our own righteousness by measuring up to some set of expectations in which individuals could "boast." To be fair, Dunn does in fact consider "works of the law" to include the ethically relevant precepts of Torah, but he sees Paul reacting against Torah as the Jewish law as opposed to the norm God now provides in the Spirit for both Jews and Gentiles. Dunn also believes that the broader understanding of the failure of all human attempts to achieve righteousness before God on human strength represents a viable outgrowth and application of Paul's critique of pursuing works of Torah and boasting in ethnic privilege. This is just not Paul's original sense.

From such debates it becomes clear that the new perspective has reopened several historical and theological questions of the highest importance, and in which many scholars have a considerable personal and theological investment.

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^aGeza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 228.

^bSee D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brien and M. A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1, *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, WUNT 2/140 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

^cSee Dunn, *Theology of Paul's Letter*, p. 340.

^dStuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification*, pp. 21-22.

^eKim, *Paul and the New Perspective*, pp. 56-57.