

WHEN THE DUST FINALLY SETTLES: COMING TO A POST-NEW PERSPECTIVE PERSPECTIVE

Michael F. Bird

University of Queensland, Queensland, Australia

I. INTRODUCTION

The New Perspective on Paul (NP) is a buzzword that is circulating around the classrooms of NT lecture halls, colleges and seminaries. One can easily trace a spate of articles, books, and websites on the subject detailing its ins and outs.¹ However, the NP is incredibly hard to define since it is not a stringent school of thought with set boundaries as much as it is a trajectory. For instance, if one compares the works of Sanders, Dunn, and Wright one will find many issues on which they differ (e.g. Paul and the law, the faithfulness of Jesus, etc.). The NP has also been radicalized further in some aspects by advocates such as Räisänen and Gager who do not think that Sanders has gone far enough.² Thus, the NP is a complicated entity with several variations on its theme. If one wanted to define the boundary markers that characterize the parameters of the NP, then the suggestion of Francis Watson of schematizing it along the lines of the Calvinistic acronym TULIP is quite apt: (1) Total travesty of the Lutheran interpretation, (2)

¹ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001); Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); D. A. Carson, Peter O'Brien and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 2: The Paradoxes of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). By far, the best introduction to the NP is the little book: Michael B. Thompson, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Cambridge: Grove, 2002). In addition, there is also an excellent website called "The Paul Page: Dedicated to the New Perspective on Paul," www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/.

² Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (WUNT 29; 2nd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1986); John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Unconditional election of Israel, (3) Loyalty to the law as expression of Jewish election, (4) Inclusive salvation of Jews and Gentiles, and (5) Presuppositionless exegesis where scholars endeavor to emancipate themselves from their prior theological commitments.³

In terms of orchestrating a response to the NP, there is the danger that one may accept the findings of the NP somewhat uncritically simply for the fact that it resonates with the sensitivities of post-Holocaust scholarship. Conversely, others, particularly those of the reformed wing of evangelicalism, may feel the temptation to brush off the NP all too quickly because it grates against their traditional way of reading Paul. Ultimately, I do not think any answer to this quagmire of Pauline scholarship is going to be resolved by simply determining whether one is for or against the NP. The issues are far too complex for a resolute rejection or unqualified embrace of the NP. In fact, we are far more likely to encounter principal areas of agreement and dispute with the NP. In view of that, the objective of this study is not to refute or to defend the NP, but rather to appropriate the many fruitful insights that the NP has to offer whilst also critically engaging the more contentious aspects of its position. When the dust has finally settled, hopefully we will have advanced towards reaching a post-NP perspective on Paul.

II. AREAS OF CRITIQUE

Since penetrating criticisms have already been leveled against the NP, I shall summarize what I think are the primary points of contention against the NP.

(1) Does Second Temple Judaism possess any form of "merit theology" amongst its various streams and does that provide the foil against which Paul developed his theology of the law and justification? "Merit theology" views one's ultimate status before God as determined, at least in part, by one's performance of the requirements of the Mosaic legislation. I do not think that the term "works righteousness" or "legalism" are fitting descriptions since they presuppose a religion devoid of grace which does not properly characterize the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period. Even in texts which emphasize human performance, divine grace is still presupposed. Moreover, in the Christian tradition, the term legalism conjures up images of hypocritical conduct and meticulous adherence to the finest minutia of commands, which is a stereotype of Jewish law keeping. Furthermore, the NT and extant Jewish literature have no term which is readily translatable as legalism and thus to impose it onto Judaism or Paul's opponents suffers from a certain anachronism.⁴

³ Francis Watson, "Not the New Perspective." Unpublished paper delivered to the British New Testament Conference 2001. www.abdn.ac.uk/divinity/articles/watsonart.htm. Cited 24 July 2002, 3-4.

⁴ On the problem of defining legalism see, Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 132-34; Scot McKnight, *Galatians* (NIVAC;

Sanders explicitly denies the existence of such a merit theology as broadly characterizing Palestinian Judaism (though he admits it in texts such as *4 Ezra*); instead, he advocates a model he calls “covenantal nomism.” This he defines 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.”⁵

In short, getting into the kingdom is by God’s electing grace, but staying in is by works. To give him his due, Sanders’s covenantal nomism squares neatly with the Exodus narrative where God redeems the Israelites from Egypt and then subsequently gives them the law at Sinai. God gives the law to redeemed people, not to redeem the people. In this sense, keeping the law emerges as a response to the grace already received and the means of maintaining the blessings of the covenant relationship. Likewise, selected documents such as those from the Dead Sea Scrolls can be shown to comport with Sanders’s description of covenantal nomism.

As for me, if I stumble, the mercies of God shall be my eternal salvation. If I stagger because of the sin of the flesh, my justification shall be by the righteousness of God which endures for ever . . . He will draw me near by His grace, and by His mercy will He bring my justification. He will judge me in the righteousness of His truth and in the greatness of His goodness and He will pardon all my sins. Through His righteousness He will cleanse me of all the uncleanness of man and of the sins of the children of men (1QS 11:11–15 [Vermes]).

I have no fleshly refuge [and Thy servant has] no righteous deeds to deliver him from the [Pit of no] forgiveness. But I lean on the [abundance of Thy mercies] and hope [for the greatness] of Thy grace, that Thou wilt bring [salvation] to flower and the branch to growth, providing refuge in (Thy) strength [and raising up my heart] (1QH 15:18–20 [Vermes]).

This does not sound particularly like a theology of self-help salvation, though such quotes must be understood in light of the documents of which they are a part. Covenantal nomism fits the strands of selective data. The problem is when one attempts to rigorously apply the category to the vast range of Jewish literature where it does not always fit. In some literature the idea of “getting in” and “staying in” is not even raised. Neusner’s critique of Sanders at this point is justified. Sanders is somewhat guilty of imposing questions onto texts which the texts do not set out to answer.⁶ What is more,

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 23; Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 29–34.

⁵ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977) 75.

⁶ Jacob Neusner, “The Use of Later Rabbinic Evidence for the Study of Paul,” in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, ed. W.S. Green (6 vols.; Chico: Scholars Press, 1980) 2:43–63.

the variety of literary genres and social contexts encountered in various Jewish writings such as *Antiquities*, *Joseph and Aseneth*, *2 Enoch*, *4QMMT*, *1 Maccabees*, or the Mishnah may imply that these documents are not agreeable to such broad blanket analysis. One could easily anticipate a diverse range of soteriologies emerging from such literary platforms.

One passage which suggests this all the more is Philo’s *De Sacrificiis*:

For though they confess that the supreme Ruler is the cause of the good that has befallen them, they still say that they deserved to receive it, for that they are prudent, and courageous, and temperate, and just, so that they may well on these accounts be esteemed by God and be worthy of his favors (χαρίτων νομισθῆναι) . . . and Moses reproves the man who looks upon himself as the cause of the good things that have befallen him in this manner (ἐαυτὸν νομίζοντα τῶν συμβαινόντων ἀγαθῶν αἴτιον σωφρονίζει τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον), “Say not” says he, “my own might, or the strength of my right hand has acquired me all this power, but remember always the Lord thy God, who gives thee the might to acquire power.” [Deut 8:17]. And he who conceives that he was deserving to receive (ὁ δὲ ἀξιόχρεων ἐαυτὸν ὑπολαμβάνων κτήσεως) the possession and enjoyment of good things, may be taught to change his opinion by the oracle which says, “You do not enter into this land to possess it because of your righteousness, or because of the holiness of your heart; but, in the first place because of the iniquity of the nations, since God has brought on them the destruction of wickedness; and in the second place that he may establish the covenant which he swore to our fathers.” [Deut 9:5]. (Philo, *Sacr.* 54–57 [Yonge]).

This passage supposes that there were some Jews, in Alexandria at least, who thought that they could earn God’s blessings and others who were adamant that they could not. This suggests that we are confronted with a variety of conceptions about salvation and works in Judaism. If legalism is a reductionism and inadequate to describe the complexities of Second Temple Judaism, then the same could be said of “covenantal nomism.” The fact remains that some strands of Judaism were more nomistic than others, which justifies the term “variegated nomism,” a designation that appropriately titles the book edited by Carson, O’Brien and Seifrid.⁷

(2) At another level, the very way that Sanders employs the language of election can be somewhat misleading. “Election” is used by him to mean only God’s special choosing of Israel for salvation. The flaw in Sanders’s proposal is that he basically equates election with salvation which is complicated further by his distinction between getting in by grace and

⁷ D. A. Carson, Peter O’Brien & Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

staying in by works. Peter Enns points out the problems with this formulation:

It might be less confusing to say that *election* is by grace but *salvation* is by obedience. In fact, getting in and staying in may not be categories that do justice to the evidence provided by the Second Temple sources. Since election is the beginning point, and this is solely Israel's property according to *Jubilees*, perhaps we should speak of "being in" rather than getting in, since the latter is never really in view. This is more than merely a semantic distinction. "Being in" is by birth; it is nationalistic. Staying in, however, is a matter of individual effort. Now, to be sure, that individual effort must be seen within the context of the individual's self-understanding and confidence as a Jew, a confidence that rests on God's faithfulness in calling a particular people to himself, and that he is predisposed to forgive transgression, an obvious fact seen in the biblical institution of a system of atonement. The point still remains, however, that the final outcome is based on more than initial inclusion in the covenant.⁸

Thus, in Sanders's program initiation is by grace but salvation is by works! This is merit theology conveniently disguised with the language of election.⁹

(3) The phrase "works of the law" (ἔργα νόμου) as it appears in Rom 3:20, 27, 28; Gal 2:16; 3:3, 5, 10, is frequently taken to denote the law in general, but specifically, those laws which functioned as boundary markers between Jews and Gentiles, viz., circumcision, Sabbath-keeping and dietary regulations.¹⁰ The expression "works of the law" (*ma'aseh hapwrah*) is also found in 4QMMT from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Now, we have written to you some of the works of the Law, those which we determined would be beneficial for you and your people, because we have seen [that] you possess insight and knowledge of the Law. Understand all these things and beseech Him to set your counsel straight and so keep you away from evil thoughts and the counsel of Belial. Then you shall rejoice at the end time when you find the essence of our words to be true. And it will be reckoned for you as righteousness in that you have done what is right and good before Him,

⁸ Peter Enns, "Expansions of Scripture," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, eds. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien & Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 98.

⁹ Cf. T. Eskola (*Theodicy and Predestination in Pauline Soteriology* [WUNT 2.100; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1998] 56): "if legalism means that keeping the law affects eschatological salvation, then covenantal nomism is legalistic nomism by definition."

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, "The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith," *TynBul* 29 (1978) 82–84; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (London: SPCK, 1990) 215–41; idem, "Yet Once More — 'The Works of the Law': A Response," *JSNT* (1992): 99–117; idem, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 354–66.

for your own benefit and to that of Israel. (4QMMT C 26–31 [Wise, Abegg, Cook]).

The reconstructed document is a letter of exhortation written by a leading figure of the Qumran sect to the addressee concerning differences on legal issues that the addressee is accused of transgressing since coming under the influence of a third party.¹¹ Since the halakhic discussion centers upon laws that involve separation from Gentiles or from other Jews, the phrase "works of the law" in 4QMMT is cited as confirming the view that "works of the law" in Paul signifies boundary markers.¹²

However, Ben Witherington notes that "works of the law" is introduced as "pertinent or important works of the law" which means that the "law" envisaged here is of a broader horizon than just the distinctive sectarian precepts of the Qumran community. Second, the Qumranites repudiated the worship of the temple and its regime, resulting in a withdrawal into the wilderness prompting a description of them as sectarian. In contrast, Paul's judaizing opponents were not pushing a sectarian agenda of separation from Judaism, but wanted the Galatians to have a closer relationship to the Jerusalem church and to Jerusalem which lay at the hub of common Judaism.¹³ Additionally, the *ma'aseh hapwrah* which divide the Qumranites from their opponents embody that which, in Seifrid's words, is "right and good, and result in righteousness and blessing."¹⁴

(4) According to Luke in Acts, a group of Jewish-Christians of Pharisaic background were demanding that Gentiles be circumcised as a necessary criterion of salvation. In Acts 15:1 we read, "And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved (σωθηῖσθε).'"¹⁵ In Luke's telling, Paul's opponents were not merely insisting on the nationalization of Gentiles into Israel as a prerequisite for fellowship in the church, but were strenuously insisting that their very salvation rested on obeying the law.¹⁶

(5) With regards to Phil 3:3–9 many NP advocates understand Paul to be refuting an approach to the law that excluded Gentiles instead of a critique against a merit-oriented view of the law. On this perspective, Paul's mention

¹¹ For an overview see, M. G. Abegg, Jr., "4QMMT," in *DNTB*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000): 709–11.

¹² James D. G. Dunn, "4QMMT and Galatians," *NTS* 43 (1997): 147–53; idem, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 357–59; Tom Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (London: Lion, 1997) 119.

¹³ Ben Witherington, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 353–54. On works of the law in general see, Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (NSBT 9; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000): 99–105.

¹⁴ Mark A. Seifrid, "Blind Alleys in the Controversy over the Paul of History," *TynBul* 45 (1994): 81.

¹⁵ Cf. BDAG 983.

¹⁶ For further discussion see, C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994–98) 2:697–700.

of “my own righteousness” denotes “national righteousness” as a covenant member rather than a “self-achieved righteousness.”¹⁷ Although Paul does indeed repudiate the pride he once had in his Jewish heritage, concurrently, he criticizes his former claim to personal vindication on the basis of how he expressed that Jewish heritage as a zealous Pharisee.¹⁸ Paul reconfigures his biography in view of his faith in Christ and that has led him to regard his previous manner of life as σκῦβαλα (“human filth”).

(6) Much like three little dogs snapping at the heels of the mailman, there are several smaller criticisms which, when held together, represent a forceful criticism of the NP. First, when covenantal nomism is situated in an eschatological context it necessarily becomes merit-oriented in some way simply because only those who do the law will enter into the eschatological age.¹⁹ Second, Simon Gathercole has successfully argued that “boasting” in Judaism was not confined to boasting in Israel’s elect status as God’s special people but often included a “boast” in performance before God. Gathercole infers that this provides the context for Paul’s discussion of boasting in Romans 1–5.²⁰ Third, Francis Watson asserts that covenant and law are inextricably bound up with one another; Torah is both gift and demand. As the elect people, Israel must live according to the law. The differentiation between covenant/promise and law was one of Paul’s hermeneutical principles (cf. Gal 3:17). Watson states: “If law-observance is basic to the covenant, if it is in some sense a precondition of future divine saving action, then it becomes thinkable again that, in contrast to all this, the Pauline Gospel should have laid all possible emphasis on an unconditional and already accomplished divine saving action.”²¹

III. AREAS OF CONCURRENCE

Such criticisms do not justify a complete dismissal of the NP since there are several avenues that we might concur with the NP. (1) The NP correctly emphasizes the Jewish context of early Christianity and the gigantic task of trying to study Christian origins against the backdrop of assorted Jewish beliefs. Second Temple Judaism had a breadth of diversity and we should be warned of following antiquated or revisionist caricatures of it. Its complexity is evident from the literary sources where, for example, a document like the *Community Rule* (IQS) can have its soteriology

¹⁷ E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 23–25, 44–47; Wright, *Saint Paul*, 124–25; Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 369–71.

¹⁸ See also, Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 366–81; Alan Thompson, “Blameless Before God? Philippians 3:6 in Context,” *Them* 28 (2002): 5–12.

¹⁹ Charles H. Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” *CBQ* 16 (2001): 4. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting?*, 13: “In fact, obedience as a condition of and basis for final vindication and salvation at the eschaton is fundamental to Jewish thought.”

²⁰ Gathercole, *Where is Boasting?*, 260–62.

²¹ Watson, “Not the New Perspective,” 9.

interpreted quite differently by Sanders, Seifrid, and Bockmuehl.²² Though I marginally favor the proposal of Bockmuehl, in reading the various discussions of IQS one understands how the text can be taken in different ways. The NP also raises the question of how to construct a unifying category that encompasses the various expressions of Jewish belief,²³ be it with terms such as “covenantal nomism,”²⁴ “common Judaism,”²⁵ “pillars,”²⁶ “story, symbol and praxis,”²⁷ or “web of social and religious commitments.”²⁸ The NP moves the debate to the right sphere: the Jewish background of the NT.

(2) A second area of agreement is with the sociological function of the law as a boundary marker for Jewish people. The question remains as to how “boundary markers” function in societies and how they are “badges” of one’s group loyalty. I think I can spell out the significance of boundary markers by way of illustration from my own country, Australia. Since World War II, Australia has been less oriented towards its colonial heritage with England and has looked increasingly towards the U.S. in terms of trade and security relations. If the first-century Mediterranean lived under the *Pax Romana* (“peace of Rome”) it could be said that the twenty-first century Westerner lives under the *Pax Americana* (“peace of America”). This brings with it the proliferation of American culture in many forms ranging from fashion to fast-food outlets. Some more critical social commentators have labeled this phenomenon the “McDonaldization” of the world. One need only to look at an Australian TV guide to see the large inroads that American culture has made in Australian society. Many Australian children can more easily identify American sporting champions than their own national icons. My own daughter occasionally shows signs of having an American accent due to watching Veggie Tales videos despite never setting foot in America. With that in mind, during the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, a company advertised its product by appealing to Australian patriotism. The advertisement ran along the lines of, “I play football *without a helmet*. I sit *in the front seat of a taxi*. I put beetroot *on my hamburger*.” The central

²² Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 239–327; Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (NovTSup 68; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 81–106; Markus Bockmuehl, “1QS and Salvation at Qumran,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, eds. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien & Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 381–414.

²³ See recently, M. A. Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000).

²⁴ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 75, 422–23.

²⁵ E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992) 45–303; cf. Martin Hengel and Roland Deines, “E.P. Sanders’ ‘Common Judaism’, Jesus, and the Pharisees,” *JTS* 46 (1995) 1–70.

²⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991) 18–36.

²⁷ N. T. Wright *The New Testament and the People of God* (COQG 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 215–43.

²⁸ John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE – 117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 442.

point was to accentuate Australian differentiation from American culture. Playing football without a helmet is not an expression of contempt for personal safety but is simply how Rugby is played in Australia as opposed to American NFL where players wear helmets. Similarly, one can still sit in the front seat of a taxi next to the driver in Australia, and, in fact, it is considered highly snobbish if an unaccompanied man does not sit next to the cab driver for the duration of the trip. In contrast, passengers in American cabs sit in the back for security reasons.²⁹ Likewise, to the chagrin of my American friends, placing a turnip type plant known as beetroot on a hamburger is not the result of an odd culinary preference but is a common ingredient in Aussie hamburgers. Thus it is playing football *without a helmet*, sitting in the *front seat of a taxi*, and putting *beetroot on a hamburger* that demonstrate one's loyalty to the national ethos and show one's active resistance to the prevailing trend of Americanization. They are, in effect, boundary markers or badges of Australian identity.

The growing incursion of Hellenism in Palestine meant that the law came to function as a visible identifier between law-obedient Jews and Hellenized Jews or Gentiles. Circumcision in particular was a key boundary indicator. Josephus assumes that circumcision is the distinguishing mark of a Jewish male.³⁰ The link of circumcision with Jewish identity *from a non-Jewish perspective* is made by Petronius, "The Jew may worship his pig-god and clamor in the ears of heaven, but unless he cuts back his foreskin with the knife, he shall go forth from the people and emigrate to Greek cities."³¹ Tacitus writes, "They have introduced the practice of circumcision to show that they are different from others."³² The phenomenon of forced conversions presents an image of circumcision as a trophy of the triumph of Judaism over paganism (cf. 1 Sam 18:25–27; 2 Sam 3:14; Gal 6:12–14). Mattathias and his friends "forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel."³³ The forced conversion of the Idumaeans by John Hyrcanus I³⁴ and the Ituraeans by Aristobolus I³⁵ in the second-century BC underscores the attempt to judaize *Eretz Israel*.³⁶ Josephus tells of some Judeans who threatened to forcibly circumcise two

²⁹ During my first trip to the U.S.A. I made the mistake of getting into a taxi by opening the front passenger door and sitting down. The poor driver assumed I was trying to rob him and attempted an emergency exit by leaping through the driver's side window with unbelievable desperation and dexterity. Fortunately, his foot got stuck on the steering wheel and when he looked back over his shoulder he noticed that I was not wielding a knife or gun but was looking back at him with a blank and confused expression on my face. At which point, he sat back down and after calming down he told me that I was supposed to sit in the back seat.

³⁰ Josephus, *Ant.* 1.192–93, 214; *Ap.* 1.171.

³¹ Petronius, *Sat. Frag.* 37.

³² Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2.

³³ 1 Macc 2:46.

³⁴ Josephus, *Ant.* 13.257–58; 15.254–55; Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.2.34.

³⁵ Josephus, *Ant.* 13.318–19.

³⁶ Peder Borgen, *Early Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 46, calls this "sword mission."

Gentile refugees, "if they wished to live among them."³⁷ According to Hippolytus, some Jewish groups would even forcibly circumcise a Jew or a Gentile if they heard them even discussing the law or God.³⁸ Under the weight of such evidence we should not underplay the sociological function of the law as a sign of fidelity to Israel and her God, even if it cannot be reduced to a sociological function. Seifrid points out circumcision could also function as a mark of piety.³⁹ Hence, circumcision could evoke significance for both soteriological and sociological matters. Even so, views of the law as exclusively a stepladder to salvation are skewed at best and inaccurate at worst.

(3) The NP correctly identifies the problem of Jewish-Gentile relationships as the matrix for the *development* of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. We must be cautious at this point; otherwise, we may slip into the view of F.C. Baur, William Wrede, and Albert Schweitzer who contended that justification was nothing more than Paul's response to the judaizing crisis.⁴⁰ More likely, Paul's gospel and its theological expression in justification had their origin in his Damascus road experience but were unpacked in the various disputes that he encountered in the course of his apostleship. Yet the biggest problem that Paul faced was trying to get Gentiles accepted *as* Gentiles into fellowship *by* Jewish Christians. Consider the following examples. In Rom 3:21–26 Paul lays out his most theologically packed and intense explanation of the doctrine of justification by faith. We find the passage packed with the language of redemption, justification, propitiation, God's wrath, the law, and the righteousness of God in relation to Christ's saving work on the cross. And yet the first implication that Paul draws in Rom 3:27–31 is that this doctrine of justification means the demise of Jewish ethnocentrism. God is not the God of the Jews only. The theme is continued in Romans 4 where those who possess the Abrahamic faith belong in the Abrahamic family since they are justified on the same terms as Abraham, by faith. Similarly, in Eph 2:8–10 one observes the most strident denial of salvation by works in the NT which is coupled with Paul's exposition of the richness and sheer magnitude of God's grace lavished on those in Christ. What immediately follows then in Eph 2:11–3:6 is the Apostle's description of the mystery of gospel as the unity of Jews and Gentiles in one body. Galatians is not about getting in or staying in, but going on in the Christian life.⁴¹ Paul argues that the Galatians do not need to keep the law in order to be complete believers.

An addendum is required here. I am constantly made aware of my own prejudice of reading Paul and the NT via the grid of soteriological inquiry

³⁷ Josephus, *Life*, 113.

³⁸ Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.21.

³⁹ Seifrid, "Blind Alleys," 77–85.

⁴⁰ In contrast see, J. Gresham Machen; *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002 [1921]); Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (2nd ed.; WUNT 2.4; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1984).

⁴¹ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 99–100.

where I often assumed that the question underpinning every Pauline text was, “What must I do to be saved?” A far better question to contemplate as we read Paul (and indeed the entire NT) is this: “Who are the people of God and in what economy shall they be vindicated?” This controlling question is more likely to provide the key to deciphering the core debate between Paul and the Judaizers and Paul and Judaism. Perhaps in the broader picture of history, it may even illuminate the reason for the “parting of the ways” between Christianity and Judaism. Thus, in addition to theological readings, one should also study Paul sociologically, viz., with reference to how the law affected the morass of Jew-Gentile relationships in the earliest Christian communities.⁴² We should not assume that Paul’s discussion of the law focused exclusively on its role as a mediator of salvation (though he does indeed confront that view), but he also addressed its function as a visible emblem that demarcated Jews from Gentiles.

(4) I am in essential agreement with the NP in identifying a horizontal dimension to justification. Where I disagree is with those who see it almost exclusively as an ecclesiological designation for who is “in.” Wright contends that justification “is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*.”⁴³ This interpretation runs afoul of Romans 5 where justification is fundamentally a vertical category between God and sinners. In that section the abolishment of the sentence of condemnation resulting from the disobedience of the first Adam is achieved by the obedience of the second Adam resulting in life-granting-justification. One should not shy away from acknowledging that there is a “horizontal” or “covenantal” element to justification in that those who are justified by faith are established as members of the new covenant community, the reconstituted Israel, the true Abrahamic family, and the renewed Adamic race.⁴⁴ More recently, Wright has emphasized (in proper proportion) the dual aspect of justification whereby God creates a new people with a new status.⁴⁵ This is a paradigm worth considering.

Justification by faith, in its covenantal context, means that there can be no rationale for those who wish to divide the body of Christ along the lines of ethnic identity, since those very distinctions are obliterated by the glory of the new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 3:28–29; Eph 2:11–22; 3:6; Col 3:11).

(5) The NP forces us to pay closer attention to the finer details of exegesis and to question beliefs forged from age old assumptions. To give

⁴² Cf. Marcus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

⁴³ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119.

⁴⁴ Cf. William J. Dumbrell, “Justification in Paul: A Covenantal Perspective,” *RTR* 51 (1992): 91–101; idem, “Justification and the New Covenant,” *Churchman* 112 (1998): 17–29; Robert Smith, “A Critique of the ‘New Perspective’ on Justification,” *RTR* 58 (1999): 98–99, 104.

⁴⁵ N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (ed. Leander E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 10:529; idem, “The Shape of Justification,” *BibRev* (April 2001). Cited electronically at: <http://www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/Shape.html>.

one example, the standard Protestant conception of justification as the forgiveness of sins supplemented by the imputed righteousness of Christ is an entirely legitimate construct in the theatre of systematic theology. It is a feasible and defensible way of restating the forensic nature of justification over against alternative models. However, at the exegetical level we must remember that there is no NT text which spells out justification in those terms. Several NP writers have urged a more careful reading of what Paul means by justification instead of imposing theological categories onto him.⁴⁶ Even Seifrid and Gundry, who have been relatively critical of the NP, agree on this point.⁴⁷ On a more precise reading of Paul, justification has a greater Christocentric character since it ensues chiefly from union with Christ as several passages affirm (Rom 4:25; 8:1; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 2:17; Phil 3:9). The outcome is that union with Christ rather than imputation is the more exact context for Paul’s formulation of justification.⁴⁸

As opposed to popular views of faith as tantamount to assent, the NP has generally emphasized the transformative character of the Christian life whereby the works that the believer does demonstrates the integrity of the faith that they profess. I recognize that this transgresses into the “Lordship Salvation” controversy which is a disputed topic amongst evangelicals.⁴⁹ Although we should never want to forfeit the *sola* of *sola fide* (“faith alone”), I believe that the transforming and renewing power of the gospel means that justification can never be alienated from the outworking of holiness, righteousness, obedience, and love. In this sense, the NP functions as a corrective to purely cerebral definitions of faith and unpacks the imperatives that grow out of saving faith.⁵⁰

IV. CONCLUSION

I am not sure if the dust has settled or if I have only succeeded in adding to a theological sandstorm. In any case, the NP represents a loud voice in Pauline scholarship that should not be neglected (as Fitzmyer does in his Romans commentary) nor used as a hermeneutical grid (as Garlington does

⁴⁶ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 102.

⁴⁷ Robert H. Gundry, “Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul,” *Bib* (1985): 1–38; idem, “Why I Didn’t Endorse ‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration’ . . . Even Though I Wasn’t Asked to,” *Books and Culture* 7.1 (Jan-Feb 2001): 6–9; Seifrid, *Christ, our Righteousness*, 173–75; idem, “The ‘New Perspective on Paul’ and its Problem,” *Them* 25 (2000): 4–18.

⁴⁸ See Don B. Garlington, “Imputation or Union with Christ: A Response to John Piper,” *Reformation and Revival* 12 (2003): 45–113; Michael F. Bird, “Incorporated Righteousness: A Response to Recent Evangelical Discussion Concerning the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness in Justification,” *JETS* 47 (June, 2004); N. T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul.” Paper presented to 10th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference August 2003. www.home.hiwaay.net/%7Ekbush/Wright_New_Perspectives.pdf. Cited 6th of April 2004, p. 14.

⁴⁹ For a sober evaluation of the debate see, Darrell L. Bock, “Jesus as Lord in Acts and in the Gospel Message,” *BSac* 143 (1986): 146–54.

⁵⁰ Cf. Thompson, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 19–20.

in his Galatians commentary).⁵¹ In reckoning with the arguments and assumptions of the NP I do not think it has got Paul or Second Temple Judaism quite right. But on the other hand critics can only disregard the NP at their own peril since it leads us to a more informed view of Judaism and Paul.

It would seem that Augustine and Luther did not misunderstand Paul, though; like all of us, they also interpreted Paul for their own times.⁵² Nevertheless, Paul does indeed as a primary facet of his pastoral theology confront elements of ethnocentrism, and his ministry must be seen in light of trying to normalize Jewish and Gentile relations in the early Church, an aspect which I think Reformed theology has never really appreciated. However, Paul's entire conception of Christ, the law, and salvation is mystifying apart from the assumption that he also attacked a form of merit theology.

In this essay I have urged a dialogical and irenic approach of critiquing and appropriating what the NP has to say. Lamentably, much of what I have read on the NP (particularly on the internet) has not always been insightful or gracious. N. T. Wright in particular has come under some vitriolic criticism. I do not concur with every point he raises; in fact, I find several of his exegetical conclusions unconvincing.⁵³ All the same, Wright has put Paul into a thoroughly Jewish framework and forced us to look beyond our reformed lenses and to discover a whole new dimension to Paul. Wright's studies on the historical Jesus, though contestable at points, are equally refreshing. I seriously wish scholars and students of the evangelical tradition would appreciate what a gem we have in Wright who has shown that many of the tenets of historical Christianity are not quite so passé as its detractors have thought.

⁵¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993); Don B. Garlington, *Exposition of Galatians: A New Perspective/Reformational Reading* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

⁵² Cf. Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: TPI, 1991) 86.

⁵³ Wright's interpretation of 2 Cor 5:21 (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 104–5) where he takes "become the righteousness of God" to refer to Paul's apostolic ministry as an expression of God's covenant faithfulness, is a prime example of an exegetical decision I find strange.