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

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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. 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. 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)

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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; 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. 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 COMING TO A POST-NEW PERSPECTIVE perspective
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.”

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). 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).

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. What is more, 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 (χαριτῶν νομισθῆσαι) . . . and Moses reproves the man who looks upon himself as the cause of the good things that have befallen him in this manner (ἐστίν νομίζων τῶν σωσθηκότων ἵνα τίνι σωφρονίζῃ τὸν τρόπον τούτων). “Say not” says he, “my own might, or the strength of my right hand has acquired me all this power.” [Deut 8:17]. And he who conceives that he was deserving to receive (ὁ δὲ οἰκονόμας ἵνα τούτῳ ὑπολαμβάνει 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 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

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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” (ma’aseh hapwrah) 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, 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’ (σκιδησθω).”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

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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.”
15 Cf. BDAG 983.
of “my own righteousness” denotes “national righteousness” as a covenant member rather than a “self-achieved righteousness.” Though 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. Paul reconfigures his biography in view of his faith in Christ and that has led him to regard his previous manner of life as σωματία ("human filth"). 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. 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. 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.”

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 interpreted quite differently by Sanders, Seifrid, and Bockmuehl. 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. be it with terms such as "covenantal nomism," "common Judaism," "pillars," "story, symbol and praxis," "web of social and religious commitments." 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

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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. 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. 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.” Tacitus writes, “They have introduced the practice of circumcision to show that they are different from others.” 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.” The forced conversion of the Idumeans by John Hyrcanus I and the Ituraeans by Aristobolus I in the second-century BC underscores the attempt to judaize Eretz Israel. Josephus tells of some Judeans who threatened to forcibly circumcise two Gentile refugees, “if they wished to live among them.” 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. 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. 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. 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 stringent 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. 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

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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.

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, Geog. 16.2.34.
36 Peder Borgen, Early Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 46, calls this “sword mission.”

37 Josephus, Life, 113.
38 Hippolytus, Haur. 9.21.
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. In perhaps 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. 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.” This interpretation runs afoot 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. More recently, Wright has developed (in proper proportion) the dual aspect of justification whereby God creates a new people with a new status. 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 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. Even Seifrid and Gundry, who have been relatively critical of the NP, agree on this point. 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.

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. Although we should never want to forfeit the sola fide (“faith alone”), I believe that the transforming and renewing power of the gospel means that justification can never be alienated from the outwarding 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.

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...
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. 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. 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.


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.