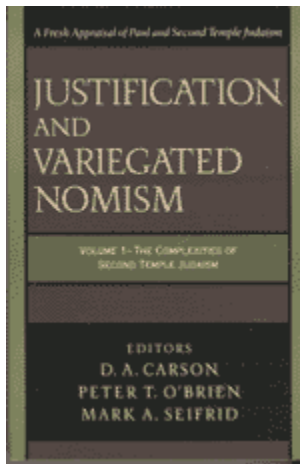


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Carson, D. A., Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds.

Justification and Variegated Nomism: A Fresh Appraisal of Paul and Second Temple Judaism

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001. Pp. xiv + 619, Paperback, \$44.99, ISBN 080102272X.
Volume: 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism

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Justification and Variegated Nomism Volume I is the first of a two-volume project, the primary purpose of which is the re-evaluation of E.P. Sanders' identification of the "pattern of religion" of Second Temple Judaism as "covenantal nomism," a designation he came to after a systematic analysis of ancient Jewish literature in his monumental book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). The editors have chosen to proceed much as Sanders himself did: Volume I is entirely devoted to the study of Jewish literature in close chronological proximity to Paul, while Volume II (not yet published) will be devoted to reading Paul in light of this newly evaluated Jewish literary context.

The motivation for the project is spelled out clearly in the introduction: Sanders' work has been enormously influential, particularly in the way it constitutes the foundation, or at least the touchstone, for the "new perspective" on Paul. The editors rightly claim that the work of new perspective scholars does not represent one coherent perspective on Paul, but that new perspective scholars generally share an appreciation for the way in which Sanders uncovered baseless Christian biases underlying the study of Paul. Sanders attempted to provide a historically grounded picture of ancient Judaism based directly on Jewish sources within which to situate Paul. The present book sets about to test whether Sanders' notion of "covenantal nomism" adequately characterizes Judaism in Paul's time.

Not including the "Introduction" and "Summary and Conclusions," both of which are written by D. A. Carson, *Justification and Variegated Nomism Volume I* contains 14 essays, divided according to genre, theme, or author. They are as follows: Daniel Falk, "Prayers and Psalms;" Craig A. Evans, "Scripture-Based Stories in the Pseudepigrapha;"

Peter Enns, “Expansions of Scripture;” Philip R. Davies, “Didactic Stories;” Richard Bauckham, “Apocalypse;” Robert Kugler, “Testaments;” Donald E. Gowan, “Wisdom;” Paul Spilsbury, “Josephus;” Philip S. Alexander, “Torah and Salvation in Tannaitic Literature;” Martin McNamara, “Some Targumic Themes;” David M. Hay, “Philo of Alexandria;” Markus Bockmuehl, “1QS and Salvation at Qumran;” Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism;” and Roland Deines, “The Pharisees Between ‘Judaisms’ and Common Judaism.” The volume also contains several helpful indices, including all texts cited, ancient names, modern names, and a subject index.

Although the list of contributors is lacking in gender and religious diversity, the book is not monolithic in its perspective; neither is it uniform in the way each author approaches the literature and relates the question of covenantal nomism to the texts under discussion. While the lack of uniformity could be perceived as a problem about methodological consistency, the diversity of approaches is illuminating. If the issue of covenantal nomism had been dealt with in exactly the same way in each chapter, the book would have probably been redundant to the reader and constrictive for the contributors.

The majority of essays are lucidly written, handle the subject matter responsibly and fairly, and attempt to update and build on Sanders’ work rather than dismiss or defend it simplistically. Particularly exemplary in this regard are the essays by Enns, Kugler, and Brockmuel. In many cases, updating or building on Sanders’ work has meant evaluating literature that Sanders did not include in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. For example, Spilsbury offers an interesting and creative reading of Josephus’ understanding of the relationship between God and humanity which is a kind of Romanized version of covenantal nomism that Spilsbury calls “patronal nomism.”

Most of the authors recognize the complexity of bringing so specific a modern agenda to ancient writings that may have had a completely different agenda, and thus may not easily yield answers to the question posed. Most also recognize the complexity of the literature itself—it may be fragmentary or have a complex textual history about which there is no scholarly consensus—and thus they are appropriately cautious in drawing their conclusions.

The volume as a whole, however, has three flaws. First, in the years since Sanders produced his seminal work, the amount of material evidence that has come to light, including countless inscriptions and much more sophisticated archaeological work on our understanding of the synagogue, is tremendous. No account of this material is taken. To be fair, the volume claims to be surveying Jewish literature, not Jewish history generally. Still, because the volume aspires to be a comprehensive assessment of whether covenantal nomism is the dominant “pattern of religion” for ancient Judaism broadly speaking, it would have been greatly enhanced by the inclusion of this material and done the new perspective debate a great service.

Second, D. A. Carson, the primary editor, as well as a few of the contributors, make mention of Sanders’ failure to analyze certain works in light of the concept of covenantal nomism, and they imply that Sanders’ selective use of texts skewed the argument. Carson, for example, is perplexed as to why Sanders did not make use of

Josephus (p. 522). Sanders specifically says in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* that his goal (one of six given on p. xii) is “to argue a case concerning Palestinian Judaism (that is, Judaism as reflected in material of Palestinian provenance) as a whole.” Thus, Sanders did not claim to be providing an exhaustive study of all relevant Jewish literature. He was quite intentional about excluding literature produced in the Diaspora (e.g. Josephus). How Sanders’ clearly stated intentions could have escaped the editors of this volume is baffling. Ironically, one of the strongest critiques one might level against Sanders—that his exclusion of Diaspora literature was ill-conceived, on the grounds that Paul was a product of the Diaspora, and not really of the “land”—is lost on the editors. However, their choosing to include Diaspora literature has corrected for Sanders’ weakness, even if they apparently did it unwittingly.

Third, the “Summary and Conclusions” provided by Carson seems at odds with the majority of essays. Most essayists find that “covenantal nomism” works fairly well as a shorthand way of capturing “the essence” (to the extent one can) of the ancient Jewish understanding of the relationship between Israel and her God. They also note exceptions and give greater nuance to this essence in relation to the specific set of texts or topics they have been assigned. Carson acknowledges that several writers give qualified validation to covenantal nomism, but he concludes that “the fit isn’t very good” (p. 547) or that, while “Sanders is not wrong everywhere, . . . he is wrong when he tries to establish that his category is right everywhere” (p. 543). Since Sanders limited his corpus, and since he himself recognized the great diversity of expression in this varied literature, some of which he would no doubt consider variations or exceptions to the dominant pattern of religion, Carson’s criticisms seem unnecessarily harsh. Even stranger is that his conclusions do not coincide with the conclusions drawn by the majority of authors; their critiques of Sanders are much more nuanced and far less polemical. The incongruity is most apparent when he calls covenantal nomism “reductionistic” and “misleading,” a charge that might well be leveled against him in relation to the body of work he purports to be summarizing.

In spite of my disagreements with the conclusions drawn by Carson (and with some of the contributors), the volume constitutes a most useful scholarly contribution. (Its intended audience is clearly other scholars or advanced students, especially those familiar with the debate surrounding the new perspective on Paul.) The collective effect of these essays demonstrates the utility of the exercise as a whole, namely, the analysis of a broad selection of ancient Jewish texts with the common thread being a re-evaluation of Sanders’ concept of covenantal nomism. In contrast to Carson’s conclusions, the essays collectively demonstrate that covenantal nomism has surprising resilience as a useful theological category for analyzing ancient Jewish literature. As for its usefulness specifically in relation to Pauline literature, we must await Volume II of *Justification and Variegated Nomism*.