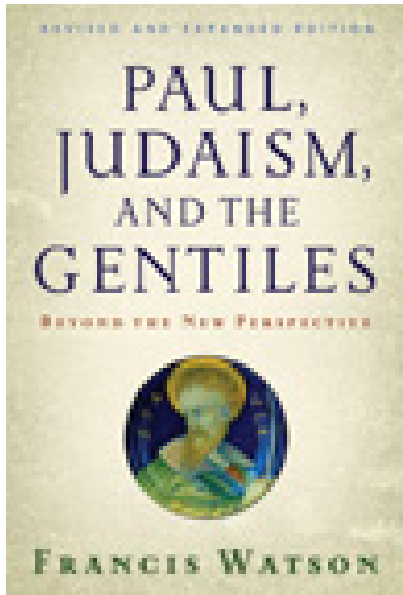


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Watson, Francis

Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective

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This is the revised and expanded edition of Watson's *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach* (SNTSMS 56, 1986), itself a revision of his doctoral thesis for Oxford in 1984. It seems to have three different but overlapping objectives.

The most obvious is the revision and expansion of the original thesis. The original thesis is still there: that Paul sought to create and maintain Christian communities sharply distinct and separate from the Jewish community/synagogue (51–54). The basic structure is the same: chapter 1 on “Paul, the Reformation and Modern Scholarship”; chapter 2 on “The Origins of Paul’s View of the Law”; chapter 3 on “The Galatian Crisis”; chapter 4 on “Philippi, Corinth and the Jewish Christian Mission (formerly ‘The Judaizers’)”; chapter 5 on “Rome in Pauline Perspective’ (formerly ‘The Situation in Rome’), and then no less than four further chapters on Romans itself, where the regular “The Social Function of...” the sections of Romans in sequence has been replaced by more sharply defined titles: “The Social Function of Romans 2”; “Pauline Antithesis and Its Social Correlate (Romans 3)”; “The Law and Christian Identity (Romans 4–8)”; and “Election: Reimagining the Scriptural Witness (Romans 9–11).” Where the body of the first edition ran to 231 pages, the revised edition runs to 369 pages. Illustrative of the difference between the editions are the numbers of pages devoted to different sections of Romans, such as:

	1986	2007
Romans 3	16	40
Romans 9–11	21	43

In the expanded version, however, this central thesis is not as prominent as it was in the first edition. Watson also seems to have softened the thesis and smoothed away some of its more jagged edges. For example, he drops the comment made on 222 note 81 of the 1986 edition (“the fact that Paul regards the church as the seed of Abraham does not mean that he regards it as existing in a salvation-historical continuum with Israel”) and the surprising interpretation on 156 of the 1986 edition (“In insisting that the law is good, Paul is in fact damning it with faint praise”). This indicates a welcome feature of the new edition, that Watson does not hesitate to indicate clearly when he has changed his mind (e.g., 208 n. 38 and 215 n. 59 of the new edition). When many scholars still assume that a change of mind is something shameful and that they have to defend all earlier views to the last syllable, this unashamed forthrightness is very welcome.

However, the revision is weaker than it need be in that some of the major weaknesses of the original thesis have not been addressed. Watson’s starting point seems to be what he sees as a straightforward fact: that Pauline congregations were already more or less autonomous in relation to the synagogue. He thinks that this concrete social reality is uncontroversial—presumably in dependence on the famous judgment of Wayne Meeks. His thesis is an attempt to explain how this situation came about: that Paul’s objective was to bring about and to reinforce such autonomy and separation. But the basic thesis needs a good deal more defense than Watson seems to appreciate. It may certainly be the case, as John Barclay has cogently argued, that the unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians that Paul exhorted and hoped for proved to be unworkable in practice, but Watson pushes beyond that to argue that what Barclay sees as the social *effect* of Paul’s advice was actually his *intention* (180 n. 50).

This is slightly odd, since we know that for several centuries Christians continued to attend synagogues and to observe Jewish festivals. Writers such as Justin, Origen, Aphrahat, and Chrysostom had to warn Christians forthrightly on the subject. The Councils of Antioch (341) and Laodicea (363) explicitly prohibited Christians from practicing their religion with Jews, in particular from celebrating their festivals with them. So we know that for centuries ordinary Christians understood their religion as on a continuum with or overlapping with or of a piece with the religion of the synagogue, even when, presumably, they did not accept circumcision or observe the Jewish food laws in their own table fellowship or Eucharist. Where did they learn that? Paul’s letters provide a ready answer! Was it already so clearly otherwise in the Pauline churches? We also know how a Christian leader who wanted Christians to stay away from the synagogue spoke

explicitly and emphatically on the subject. Where do we find such exhortation and teaching in Paul?

In such a thesis, the careful use of language is a matter of prime concern. But Watson seems to assume too readily a distinctive “Christian” identity, even though Paul never uses the term “Christian.” Rather surprisingly in a sociological study, Watson never raises the issue of the legal status of the Christian house groups. The issue is directly relevant to his thesis, since the Roman authorities were notoriously suspicious of voluntary societies and their potential to foment political unrest. So an obvious deduction is that the house churches and apartment group meetings of believers in Messiah Jesus sheltered for most or all of Paul’s mission under the aegis of the more liberal rules (since Julius Caesar) regulating Jewish synagogue communities. Of the little evidence we have on the point, the famous ruling of Gallio, that the disruptions caused by the success of Paul’s Gentile mission were internal Jewish affairs (Acts 18:12–16), should have been given some attention.

Still central to Watson’s thesis is the argument that Paul began his missionary work by addressing primarily his fellow Jews and that his self-conscious “Gentile mission” was “a relatively late development in Paul’s missionary career” (73), occasioned by Jewish rejection of the gospel (81–82). This gives rise to the variation of Watson’s central thesis: that Paul sought “the transformation of a reform movement into a sect” (51). The reform movement had failed, so a more sectarian objective became the goal; Paul “thereby opposes a view of the church that sees it as a reform movement within Judaism, arguing instead for a sectarian view of the church as alienated from Judaism” (118; definition of “sect” on 131). Here again I wonder at the treatment of Paul’s own testimony in Gal 1–2 and 1 Cor 15:8–11, and at the too casual use of terms such as “the church” and “Judaism” when more careful sociological analysis might have cautioned against such generalization of terms used in a much more focused way by Paul. I would have thought it also wiser to use “sect” to denote a movement still regarded as a subgroup *within* Second Temple Judaism (cf. Qumran) rather than a movement that regarded itself as quite separate and alienated from the synagogue communities. The question raised, for example, by Michael White as to whether “sect” or “cult” is the more appropriate term for earliest Christianity within the Roman world (“Shifting Sectarian Boundaries in Early Christianity,” *BJRL* 70.3 [1988]: 7–24) would help clarify the issues in too casual use of key defining terms.

In reference to the Galatian crisis, Watson justifiably argues that if “works of the law” are a way of referring to the distinctively Jewish way of life, then Paul’s opposition to “works of the law” implies a clear break with any Jewish community that practiced works of the law; that is, the opposition between faith and works of the law “articulates the Pauline conviction that the church should be separate and distinct from the Jewish community”

(121–31). This is in fact the strongest argument for his thesis, even if it assumes that Jewish synagogue communities across the north-east quadrant of the Mediterranean would have had a uniform character, so that the less “Judaizing” character of the Pauline churches would have been obvious to all onlookers. The case is not helped by Watson’s readiness to argue the minority views that the Jewish practice of not circumcising proselytes was sufficiently widespread to provide a precedent for early Christian mission (74–79; he even speaks of “a traditional Jewish argument for the non-circumcision of Gentiles” [83 n. 69]); and that concern over circumcision arose *not* at the Jerusalem council (Gal 2:1–10; Acts 15) but only later at the Antioch incident (Gal 2:11–14; pp. 103–7).

Given the contrast between Galatians and Romans, Watson’s thesis would seem to have less purchase on the latter. But he still maintains that Paul tried to persuade his Roman readers “to make a final break with the Jewish community. He wishes to turn a failed reform-movement into a sect” (188, 218, 260, 343), an intention that is nowhere explicit in Romans and that runs counter to the theological logic of passages such as Rom 4:11–12; 9:3–4; 11:17–24; 15:7–12, 25–27. Here I would have expected a revised thesis to pay more attention to the quite influential views of Mark Nanos (*The Mystery of Romans*), who argues the completely opposite (but even less persuasive) thesis that Paul was writing to believers who were still entirely within the Jewish synagogues. In any case, the evidence of Acts 28:17–24 (Paul on arrival in Rome engaged in discussion with representatives of the local Jewish community) is confusing in relation to Romans, but should not be ignored completely.

Overall, it is Watson’s attempt to push beyond John Barclay that gives me greatest pause. It is the claim that Paul wrote his letters to encourage his house and apartment churches to make a complete and final break with the Jewish community that seems to be more read into than out of what Paul actually wrote. I think that Paul had a greater ambition and pursued a more idealistic vision than Watson allows.

The second objective is signaled by the new subtitle: *Beyond the New Perspective*. Here it is difficult to escape the sense that Watson regrets that he took such a strong anti-Lutheran line in the 1986 volume. The initial statement in 1986 was blunt: “the Reformation tradition’s approach to Paul is fundamentally wrong” (1). Although he does not regard his 1986 monograph as representative of the “new perspective” on Paul (NPP) (2007, 9), his summing up of the NPP as “the process of ‘delutheranizing’ Paul” (1986, 18) helped more than most others to give “the new perspective” the reputation of being anti-Lutheran. But now a more nuanced account is offered of Luther’s influence on the reading of Paul (xii–xiii), and the opening formulation has been duly softened: “the Reformation tradition’s approach to Paul is seriously flawed” (27). Justifiably and

understandably, the author of the 2007 edition wants a more constructive dialogue with earlier theological readings of Paul than the author of the 1986 monograph. He still regards his work as directed *against* the “Lutheran Paul” (25), but the conclusion to the new edition is quite moving on this point (346–50).

Watson marks out his divergence from the NPP at four main points (12–26; summary on 25). (1) The concept of “covenantal nomism” is used to highlight Paul’s polemic against “works of the law” rather than to promote a view of Judaism as “a religion of grace.” This reaction to the correction of the old image of Judaism (as entirely or fundamentally “legalistic”), which Ed Sanders introduced by emphasizing the “covenant” aspect of Israel’s/Judaism’s “covenantal nomism,” I find puzzling. Paul, no less than Deuteronomy, takes as given the fact of Israel’s election, covenant as based on God’s gracious initiative and promise (Rom 9:4–5, 6–13; 11:26–29). Here again the association between the “Israel” of Rom 9–11 and the “Judaism” of which Watson regularly speaks needs to be clarified. The fact that Paul also operates with something very like “covenantal nomism” in his own understanding of grace-faith-obedience should also be brought into the discussion.

(2) Watson argues that “divine agency plays a more direct and immediate role in the Pauline ‘pattern of religion’ than in the Judaism Paul opposes.” The same question arises. Paul, after all, draws his principal category of “the righteousness of God” (Rom 1:16–17) directly from the heritage he shared with (the rest of) Second Temple Judaism—as “saving righteousness”—a category that presupposes directly the role of divine agency. Or is the ethnic Israel of Rom 9–11 not the “Judaism” that Watson assumes Paul always has in view, and are all the Diaspora Jews with whom Paul had to deal “Judaism” rather than the “Israel” of Rom 9–11, or did Paul insist on separation only from Pharisaic synagogues?

(3) The phrase “works of the law” he understands as referring to “the distinctive way of life of the Jewish community” but without any special orientation toward “boundary markers” such as circumcision or food laws. It is good to see this recognition that living Jewishly (*ioudaizein*) and “works of the law” were closely related in Paul’s thought. But the disclaimer is more surprising, since the logic of separation is the consequence of a mode of conduct that necessitates separation, that is, a mode of conduct that functions as a dividing boundary separating from and excluding the nonobservant. This is certainly the logic to which Paul objected in Gal 2:11–14 (Peter’s “separation” from the Gentile believers) and from which he drew his conclusion that no “works of the law” should be demanded of believers beyond faith in Christ (2:16). This is again where I find difficulty with Watson’s thesis, that Paul himself required a practice that separated church from synagogue; it was just such “separation” to which he objected so strongly in Antioch.

(4) Paul advocated a “‘sectarian’ separation between the Christian community and ‘Judaism,’ rather than an inclusive understanding of the one people of God as encompassing uncircumcised Gentiles.” Which brings us back to his principal thesis, at such odds with Rom 9–11 and the subsequent “Paulinism” of Eph 2:11–22.

The third objective is less clearly defined but is indicated in much of the extended treatment of Romans in particular. The objective seems to be to use the revision of his 1986 monograph to advance the hermeneutical techniques he had signaled in his *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (1997) and developed so impressively in his *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (2004). Here he does continue to shed fresh light on these ancient texts, though not so much through sociological models as through the theological awareness and alertness for which Paul calls. Welcome in this connection is the addition of an appendix—“Christ, Law and Freedom: A Plea for the *Sensus Literalis*” (351–69)—which shows more clearly how Watson began to move on subsequent to his 1986 monograph.

All of which leaves me wondering if it would not have been wiser to produce three different books rather than to push them all together. The 1986 monograph could have stood by itself as a classic statement of a particular thesis drawing on sociological insights. As it is, however, the new edition almost drowns the original thesis at several points, hardly reinforcing the thesis beyond a few possible or at best plausible deductions from the much fuller exposition of passages such as Rom 3, 6, and 11. Watson’s several essays and comments on the new perspective on Paul could have provided a valuable agenda for a more thorough contribution to the ongoing debate on the NPP particularly in North America, though now increasingly within German scholarship. Actual engagement with the many contributions to the NPP over the past few years in particular, beyond what he achieved in *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, rather than generalizations about the NPP would have been more than welcome. And a complete volume on Romans itself would have provided an excellent occasion for Watson to develop his views on Pauline hermeneutics and their importance for our appreciation of Paul’s theology. But if it is not three books, then the one is certainly to be welcomed.