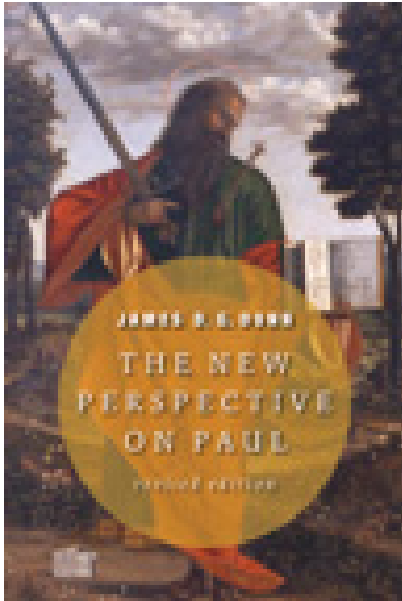


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The New Perspective on Paul

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In his Manson Memorial Lecture of 1982, James Dunn delivered a paper that would prove programmatic not only for Dunn's own work but also for the scholarly guild over the next thirty years. "The New Perspective on Paul" is the title of that lecture, the moniker given to the movement it represents, and now the title of a volume that collects twenty of Dunn's earlier essays on the subject. This volume also contains two important new contributions in the way of a nearly one-hundred-page assessment of the project ("The New Perspective: Whence, What and Whither?") and a new essay on Phil 3:2–14 (a complete list of the essays is provided at the end of the review).

Dunn's narrative of the New Perspective in the opening chapter contains important summaries and clarifications of his own position as well as responses to his critics. The initial summary of what Dunn means by the "New Perspective" is particularly instructive in coming to grips not only with Dunn's own project but also with the larger question of whether there is such a thing as *the* New Perspective (singular) in New Testament scholarship, and if so which scholars might be working within this framework. He summarizes his New Perspective with these five points: (1) E. P. Sanders's expression "covenantal nomism" rightly summarizes the gracious nature of Second Temple Judaism; (2) within such Judaism, the law played an important social role in keeping the Jews

separate to God and separate from the nations; (3) Paul's arguments about justification strive to overcome this barrier; thus, "all" being justified by faith means first of all both Jew and Gentile; (4) Paul sets his teaching of justification over against "works of the law" because some Jewish Christians were insisting on the connection between certain laws and status within the covenant; and (5) the New Perspective draws attention to an overlooked aspect of justification that might have helped combat nationalism and racism in Christian communities (16–17).

One striking feature of this summary is that the New Perspective on Paul has much less to do with a new view of Paul's own theology than it does with a new view of Judaism and Paul's Jewish-Christian social environment. As Dunn's "New Perspective on Paul" essay indicates (ch. 2), Sanders set the stage for these developments, but Dunn is intent on further clarifying what Paul was up against when he proclaimed justification by faith and "not by works of the law." If we allow Dunn the privilege of defining the New Perspective in the five points outlined above, such that it is in the first instance a claim about first-century Judaism rather than a claim about, for example, exactly how justification fits into Paul's broader soteriology, then it is safe to say that the New Perspective on Paul is a proverbial Rubicon across which there is no retreat for New Testament scholarship (96). As Dunn points out in the introduction, even the most sweeping attempt to demonstrate that Sanders's portrayal of Judaism was mistaken has succeeded, despite the intentions and efforts of its editors, in showing diverse manifestations of covenantal nomism.¹

After summarizing his view, Dunn turns to answer his critics on four counts: (1) that he offers his view as an antithesis to the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith; (2) that he "reduced 'works of the law' to a few 'boundary markers'"; (3) that he reduced Paul's concerns about the law to an attitude toward the law; and (4) that he placed justification so late in the development of Paul's thought as to reduce its central importance to Paul's gospel (17–18). This section, directed as it is against particular critiques of his work, is tremendously clarifying of Dunn's positions. It also makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Paul in spelling out clearly the inherent connection between believers' relationship to God and their relationships to one another.

In this introduction, Dunn's response to his Lutheran and Reformed critics is fascinating both for the trail of slander and libel against him that can be traced through the footnotes and for the ground that he concedes to traditional Protestant interpretations of Paul. On

1. The volume in question is *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (vol. 1 of *Justification and Variegated Nomism*; ed. D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brien, and M. Seifrid; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), which Dunn aptly comments "would have been more appropriately entitled *Justification and Variegated Covenantal Nomism*" (61).

the latter point, Dunn not only says that justification is a vital part of Christian faith (20) but also affirms the post-Reformation claim that justification is *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* (23) and later refers to Paul's gospel as "the gospel of justification by faith" (97). The latter two concessions in particular raise the question of whether Dunn exerts the same ruthless energy on creating a particularized and historically contextualized explanation of "justification by faith in Jesus Christ" as he does on explicating its Pauline antinomy of "not by works of the law." We will return to this question below.

The first chapter concludes by turning to what Dunn sees as substantive issues that need renewed clarification. Among these issues are final justification and judgment according to works (two interrelated issues that take increasing prominence in the volume's later essays) and participation in Christ. Here, as he has done so often, Dunn opens up important avenues for future scholarly conversation. The New Testament guild will do particularly well to accept Dunn's invitation to reexamine the connections between justification and participation in Christ (a task already being taken up by Michael J. Gorman, among others). The tendency to treat these as distinct and even incompatible models, such as one sees in the work of Sanders, needs to be overcome. The final essay of *The New Perspective on Paul*, "Phil 3.2–14 and the New Perspective on Paul," shows how Dunn himself is now working toward an integration of these themes.

Chapters 3–8 are essays in which Dunn works out his understanding of works of the law in particular cases (3: "The Works of the Law and the Curse of the Law"; 5: "What Was the Issue between Paul and 'Those of the Circumcision'?" 6: "The Theology of Galatians") and more generally (4: "The New Perspective on Paul: Paul and the Law"; 7: "The Justice of God"; 8: "Yet Once More—'The Works of the Law'"). Indeed, "works of the Law" is an issue that headlines not only chapters 3 (originally appearing in 1985) and 8 (1992) but also 17 ("Whatever Happened to 'Works of the Law'?" 1998) and 19 ("Noch einmal, 'Works of the Law': The Dialogue Continues," 2002). These essays represent Dunn's signature contribution to the New Perspective on Paul: the phrase "works of the law" denotes actions done in one's life-long observance of the Torah, but in Jewish usage and in Paul's letters it connotes in the first instance those particular acts of Torah-keeping that separate Jews from non-Jews or, as at Qumran, one Jewish group from another. Paul is arguing that Gentiles do not have to separate themselves from other Gentiles, that is, become Jews, in order to become part of the people of God.

Chapter 10, "How New Was Paul's Gospel? The Problem of Continuity and Discontinuity," answers some crucial questions about the New Perspective. Once the old perspective on Judaism has been abandoned, such that Judaism, too, is seen as a religion of grace, what makes Paul's message news at all, not to mention good news? Dunn first

traces points of continuity, highlighting some ways in which Paul is intent on showing his message to be the fulfillment of the promises one finds in the scriptures of Israel. He then turns to highlight the apocalyptic discontinuities that indicate that God begins a new creation with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Dunn insists that it is wrong to drive a wedge between these *heilsgeschichtlich* and apocalyptic perspectives. In embracing both perspectives, Paul himself is in step with early Jewish apocalypticists who claim “to embody *in themselves* the continuity of God’s saving purpose from the past into the future” (260). Here is Dunn’s assessment of Paul’s own revelation: “for Paul the revelation was one which showed him how the ancient promises and hopes were to be fulfilled. It was new in that it focused in Jesus, but the new gospel was also the foretold way of completing the old purpose” (261). He then goes on to talk about the central importance, for Paul, of the inclusion of the Gentiles.

In assessing Dunn’s project, the chapter on continuity is crucial inasmuch as it fills in what, in the reviewer’s assessment, it far too often left off the table in Dunn’s work. Although we find affirmation in *The New Perspective on Paul* that Jesus Christ is the “difference between the soteriology of Second Temple Judaism and that of Paul” (89), that crucial point of difference is insufficiently incorporated into Dunn’s assessments of Paul, the law, and Second Temple Judaism. This lack is felt most acutely in Dunn’s assessment of Paul’s “conversion” (“Paul’s Conversion: A Light to the Twentieth Century Disputes” [1997]). Based on the silence of Gal 1:13–14 and Phil 3, Dunn suggests that Paul’s “conversion” was not primarily a reorienting of his understanding of Jesus as Messiah (352–53). Dunn’s assessment of the negative is excellent: Paul converts from “Judaism,” which Dunn is careful to define in terms of a particular sociological understanding within which covenantal nomism (and a Pharisaic expression of it in Paul’s case) demarcates the people of God; moreover, Paul converts from his violent, persecuting zeal. (Though we find the evidence lacking for Dunn’s claim that Paul was persecuting Hellenist Jews who were taking a circumcision-free gospel to Gentiles [362]). Dunn then argues that what Paul was converted to is fully accounted for in Paul’s mission: “God ... was pleased to reveal his Son to me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles” (Gal 1:13–16). For Paul, calling and commissioning “both amounted to the same thing” (364).

While Dunn is surely correct that Paul sees the *purpose* of his conversion in this mission, he moves too quickly past the revelation of the Son itself. To say that the conversion has a particular purpose is not the same as to say that the purpose is the conversion. The possible rejoinder that Dunn himself is simply skipping quickly past what Paul himself gives little attention to gives too little weight to the historical context that generated Galatians. In the Galatian churches, Paul’s commissioning and apostolic authority were the points at issue. But Paul was “converted” neither to a non-Christian missional Judaism nor to a Torah-embracing missional Christianity. Something more needs to be

said about the revelation of Christ itself in order to account for the particular nature of Paul's mission as a Torah-free mission to the Gentiles.

The ability to account for the various outworkings of Paul's theology is why, in the reviewer's opinion, E. P. Sanders's insistence that Paul's theology is best described as "participationist eschatology" is ultimately more satisfying as an explanation of the apostle than Dunn's non-Jewish covenantal nomism. The latter does not have the explanatory force to account for the former, but the former does have the force to account for the latter.

This is not to say that Christ is wholly absent from Dunn's work as an explanation of Paul's mission and theology; however, one does not find that the particular content of faith as faith *in Christ* is as ruthlessly maintained as the particular content of works as works of Torah. The new essay on Phil 3 (ch. 22), a tremendously valuable contribution to the continuing discussions of Paul, the law, and justification, reflects the ambiguous christological emphasis. On the one hand, Dunn insists that Paul's relativizing of his past in Judaism only serves "to enhance to the highest degree the value he now attributes to Christ" (481). But when he subsequently turns to the exegesis of Paul's antitheses in Phil 3, he says that Paul contrasts his righteous status as a Jew with "an acceptability before God given only through or on the basis of faith"—full stop. The purpose of Dunn's work at that point is laudable: showing how Paul's positive point sets up a way of relating to God that equally applies to Jew and Gentile. But he does so without recourse to the christological qualification that Paul himself insists upon. As Dunn goes on to describe Paul's second antithesis, in which righteousness is said to come from God, and to underscore that there is an "immediacy" of faith that Paul insists upon, the same question begins to arise for Dunn's work as one might often bring to traditional Protestant exegetes: Would a faith-filled (and in Dunn's case, Gentile-embracing) Judaism suffice to account for Paul's religion, without Christ?

Dunn would say, of course not! Indeed, the next section of his exposition of Phil 3 begins with the assertion that "[i]t was clearly Paul's discovery of Christ, of the significance of Jesus the Christ, that both brought him to a complete reassessment of his previous grounds of confidence before God, and resulted in Christ assuming that central place in his revised soteriology" (484). Yet the sense of the reviewer after reading these twenty-two essays is that the *christou* modifier in *pistis christou* and the *eis christon* object of *pisteuo* have not been allowed to provide sufficient explanatory force as Paul draws his distinction between faith in Christ and works of the law.

Since the review has now invoked the phrase *pistis christou*, perhaps I can be forgiven for addressing the issue, though no essay devoted to this famed debate appears in the volume.

In referring to his preferred objective genitive reading, Dunn indicates that the subjective genitive reading (“Christ’s faithfulness”) makes *pistis christou* “in effect continuous and consistent with Jewish faithfulness in doing what the law requires” (293). But what Richard Hays, N. T. Wright, Douglas Campbell, and others argue for is *not* the old Reformed idea of the “active righteousness of Christ,” faithfulness to the law, that Dunn here expresses his opposition to. They argue for an act of faithfulness in going to death on the cross. The subjective genitive relativizes Jewish faithfulness much more radically than Dunn allows, inasmuch as it makes the law-accursed death the epitome of salvific faithfulness to God. This is another point at which I wish Dunn had given more weight to the christological emphases of his colleagues in the New Testament guild.

All told, however, the New Perspective on Paul, defined in terms of the scholarly community’s reappraisal of Second Temple Judaism, is perhaps the most important and lasting development of twentieth-century biblical scholarship. And James Dunn has been at the leading edge of this important reassessment of the context within which Paul’s letters find a fresh coherence and important theological imperatives for the heirs of Paul’s gospel. For these reasons, *The New Perspective on Paul* is an indispensable tool for any serious interpreter of Paul.

This volume has broad import and appeal. Scholars will want this volume for its continuing value in the ongoing discussion of how best to read Paul’s letters in their historical contexts and for its modeling of gracious, ongoing scholarly conversation by which real progress is made. Professors will want to use essays from this book to help their students shake off caricatures of early Judaism and begin the process of reinterpreting Paul accordingly. Other essays, such as “The Justice of God,” will be invaluable in helping students reshape their understanding of justification so as to include its corporate elements. The introductory essay is immensely helpful in summarizing the New Perspective to those who may not have encountered it before and will be of particular benefit to those who have encountered the movement primarily through nay-saying guardians of traditional “orthodoxy.”

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