Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm, eds.

Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle


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James D. G. Dunn’s 1982 Manson Memorial lecture, “The New Perspective on Paul,” was originally intended to describe a paradigm shift in Pauline studies triggered by E. P. Sanders’s 1979 book Paul and Palestinian Judaism. In his lecture, Dunn embraced Sanders’s recognition that the traditional Christian caricature of Judaism as a religion of legalism is a gross distortion (a recognition now shared broadly by Pauline scholars, with the exception of some committed to preserving older Christian interpretations). The title of Dunn’s lecture quickly became the catchphrase for a generation of biblical scholars’ attempts to reconstruct a more historically plausible Paul whose doctrine of justification by faith must have been something other than a polemic against a presumably legalistic Judaism.

More recent developments in Pauline studies have included increased consideration of Paul’s rhetoric in the light of Roman imperialism (often described more simply as Paul and empire) and the increasingly better defined interpretative approach to Paul completely within the context of Second Temple Judaism. Once considered more broadly under the rubric of “the new perspective,” these scholars have struggled to delineate their unique perspective in a variety of ways. Pamela Eisenbaum, for example, early on suggested “a radical new perspective,” which tried to convey the idea of moving even further toward interpreting Paul in continuity with Judaism but which nevertheless was
not much more descriptive than “the new perspective.”¹ In 2010 these scholars presented at a Society of Biblical Literature session entitled “Paul and Judaism,” and shortly thereafter they began to describe their perspective more helpfully as that of “Paul within Judaism.” Most of these essays have now been published by Fortress under the title Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle, edited by Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm, and this new book is well-positioned to convey their unique approach to those who are less familiar with it.

In the introduction, Mark Nanos provides some context and an overview that is helpful overall (including some of the details above) but that could perhaps have benefited even more from a perfunctory description of the new perspective at the outset. However, the first essay, “Paul within Judaism: The State of the Questions,” by Magnus Zetterholm, quickly remedies this in a superlative historical overview of the evolution of anti-Jewishness in Christianity. What began as a political move by early gentile Jesus-followers to legitimize their movement by claiming the heritage of Judaism while simultaneously denigrating Jews, Zetterholm points out, soon became a theological problem (37–38) which deepened throughout the history of the church (38–42) prior to the paradigm shift signaled by the work of E. P. Sanders (42–44). Zetterholm’s cursory description of the new perspective is good overall, although it repeats some popular overgeneralizations. For example, Zetterholm’s one-sentence summary of Sanders’s view—“In short: the problem with Judaism is that it is not Christianity” (44)—is an (unannotated) reference to probably the most famous sentence in Paul and Palestinian Judaism, “In short, this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: It is not Christianity” (552)—one of those statements that takes on a life of its own and compels its author to provide more nuanced qualification.² Similarly, Zetterholm’s description of Dunn’s definition of “the works of the law” as “Jewish identity markers” (45) may not fully preserve the nuance that Dunn has repeatedly tried to make since 1982.³ But given the brevity of his outline, Zetterholm’s lack of nuance is perhaps understandable; in its broad brush strokes, the description seems close enough.

As one final aside with respect to “the new perspective on Paul,” in his response essay in the current volume, Terence L. Donaldson draws attention to statements by both Dunn and Wright suggesting that “the new perspective” moniker predated Dunn’s Manson Memorial Lecture (278 n. 2); one hopes it is not too pedantic to note that the previous

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2. See E. P. Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 154ff., 165 n. 38.
references in both Wright (1978) and Stendahl (1963) were simply to “a new perspective,” not “the new perspective on Paul” per se.

More to the point on the topic of terminology, the essay following Zetterholm’s fine introduction is Anders Runesson’s helpful “The Question of Terminology: The Architecture of Contemporary Discussions on Paul.” Runesson’s exercise in questioning the terms “Christian/Christianity” and “church” in Pauline scholarship (since, after all, “Christianity” as such did not yet exist in Paul’s day) is particularly effective in clearing the way for consideration of the new paradigm. His observation that even the NRSV, contrary to its usual translation of synagōgē, nevertheless renders it as “assembly” instead of “synagogue” in Jas 2:2 is instructive. Runesson also introduces a suggested term that he and Nanos are proposing to describe the early Jesus movement in Paul’s day: “Apostolic Judaism” (67; see also 121 n. 27).

An entirely different but no less useful exercise is taken up by Karin Hedner Zetterholm in “The Question of Assumptions: Torah Observance in the First Century,” which considers Paul’s halakic instructions for Jesus-oriented gentiles in 1 Cor 8–10 after describing by way of analogy the depth and diversity of contemporary Jewish understandings of Torah observance.

The next essay, Mark D. Nanos’s lengthy but nevertheless engaging “The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul’s Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus’s Advisors to King Izates,” thoroughly explores Josephus’s highly relevant narrative about God’s preservation of Izates who accepted circumcision as “the fruit of piety” toward God by monō pepisteukosin, “faith alone” (123), though Nanos consistently uses the phrase “faith(fulness)” instead of “faith” throughout to emphasize that “faith” for Paul entailed more than simply “belief in contrast to action or deeds or works or effort” (118 n. 23). “The work” or “the rite” (ton ergon) of circumcision for Izates was a matter of debate between Ananias, a Jewish merchant who advised against circumcision in the particular case of this foreign ruler (whereby he would “definitively” become “a Jew,” 110) and the Galilean Eleazar, who urged circumcision precisely as an act of faith(fulness). Nanos’s essay effectively highlights the degree to which conflicting positions on circumcision for non-Jews has nothing whatever to do with the bifurcation of faith and deeds (125ff.). His essay goes on to provide helpful critiques of both the new perspective (including E. P. Sanders) and traditionalists in their essential conceptualization of Jewish texts in universalizing terms reflective of Christian theology (144–52). “In short,” Nanos writes, “it is a category error of significance to universalize Paul’s position against the circumcision of Christ-following non-Jews without distinguishing that special topic from the issue of the circumcision of sons born to Jews, Christ-followers or not, and then to
compare that conclusion to other Jewish groups’ positions on the circumcision of Jews” (151).

Caroline Johnson Hodge’s “The Question of Identity: Gentiles as Gentiles—but also Not—in Pauline Communities” also eschews the term “Christian” as anachronistic in Paul’s letters but goes on to explore the perplexing ambiguity of the “kind of liminal space” that gentiles-in-Christ occupy in Paul’s thinking (157). Exploring relevant texts in Josephus, Ezra, and Jubilees, she shows how Paul argues for the inclusion of these gentiles as “the seed of Abraham” without becoming Jews.

Paula Fredriksen’s “The Question of Worship: Gods, Pagans, and the Redemption of Israel” presents a delightfully colorful depiction of just how deeply ingrained paganism was in Paul’s world: “It was impossible to live in a Greco-Roman city without living with its gods,” she writes; “This god-congested environment, civic and cosmic, was the matrix of Paul’s mission” (177). Living in diaspora cities required Jews to “negotiate between their own god’s demand for exclusive worship and the regular requirements of ancient Mediterranean friendship, loyalty, patronage/clientage, and citizenship wherever they lived” (181). By discouraging pagans in the Jesus movement from becoming Jews, Paul radically challenged the stable social arrangements whereby only Jews were exempt from the obligations to honor the local gods (185–89). As in her recent JBL article, she argues that for Paul the phrase dikaiðthentes ek pisteòs, commonly translated “justified by faith,” should more accurately be understood as the spiritual empowering of pagans to observe nine of the ten commandments; she points out that dikaoisynè, “justice,” was a way of denoting the Second Table of the Law (eusebeai, “piety,” denoting the First Table). Paul’s apocalyptic perspective, as seen in Rom 9–11, is what provides the context (194–201).

In “The Question of Politics: Paul as a Diaspora Jew under Roman Rule,” Neil Elliott articulates with his usual clarity Paul’s imperial context without essentializing categories, critiquing in turn the work of Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, Jörg Frey, and John M. G. Barclay. One critique that stands out in this essay is the following observation about the attraction of the new perspective on Paul:

This approach nevertheless has gained in its appeal to many contemporary interpreters, in part, I suspect, because it has the apparent advantage of absolving Paul of having misunderstood Judaism. To the contrary, on this view, Paul appears as something of a champion of modern multiculturalism and as an opponent of ethnic chauvinism or ethnocentrism (which was exemplified by his

Jewish opponents). It is not surprising that this approach has proven popular in the United States and the United Kingdom, that is, in ethnically diverse, democratic societies where more liberal interpreters see a happy integration of different peoples as a paramount value.

This interpretation (and cultural appropriation) of Paul comes at a cost, however, as a number of critics have pointed out. It routinely portrays as characteristically Jewish a collective insistence on ethnic distinctiveness, sometimes in negative terms formerly used to describe the boastful, arrogant, self-justifying Jewish individual. As Thomas Deidun put it years ago, New Perspective efforts to rehabilitate Paul as an opponent of Jewish ethnocentrism allow “practically all the old Lutheran demons” of Jewish caricature “to return unabashed to the Judaism which Sanders had by all accounts meticulously swept and put in order.” Similar criticisms have been raised by Mark D. Nanos and Daniel Boyarin, among others. (206–7).

The same point is just as effectively made in the next essay, Kathy Ehrensperger’s “The Question(s) of Gender: Relocating Paul in Relation to Judaism,” an outstanding critique from a feminist perspective. She writes about:

New Perspective on Paul approaches, which consider an ethnocentric version of Judaism to be the problem that Paul overcomes in Christ … an evaluation of a “good” or “bad” Judaism is the basis for acknowledging some positive value to the Jewishness of Paul. The Christ-event is that which liberates either gentiles or women from the constraints of the “bad,” narrow Judaism. (247–48).

Ehrensperger’s essay focuses on the significance of Paul’s instructions with respect to women in worship in 1 Cor 11:2–16 and 14:33–36, locating a plausible context within Paul’s Jewish tradition. She writes that

Paul’s explicit references to women neither indicate his reactionary attitude nor his liberating stance; they cannot be attributed to some narrow or conservative Judaism or a liberating “in Christ” stance respectively. They are merely practical guidance and understanding from within Jewish tradition and practice now applied to non-Jews who join with Israel to worship God as theirs also. (259)

Most importantly, she goes on to also address the problem of universalization (259–61), which problematizes the value of “differentiation within diversity” (262), a point that she elaborates helpfully with insights from gender studies (267ff.).
It is worth noting that Nanos similarly problematizes the new perspective’s purported contrast between Paul’s “universalizing” gospel and Judaism’s “particularizing” problem by what could be considered the self-evident differentiation that Paul makes between the *ekklēsiai* to which he is writing and other groups. Nanos writes that:

What is attributed to Judaism as “wrong” in that approach is predicated on a logical necessity that is not only historically questionable but also based upon a premise that represents a double standard. That is, it makes no sense of Paul’s objection except if Paul is objecting to Jewishness per se. Why is that so? Because to be consistent, New Perspective proponents would have to admit that Paul found something inherently wrong with the essence of group identity itself. But how could that be maintained logically, since Paul was involved in creating a group that claimed to be set apart from all other groups? How could it be claimed that Paul was against ethnocentrism or badges of identity if Paul’s gospel is proclaimed to the nations in order to create groups gathering together (*ekklēsiai*) that consist of people from Israel and people from the other nations (*ethnē*) who are set apart by and to God by way of faith in/of Christ? But if Paul is only against group identity when *Jewish* measures of identity are valued positively, not to claims of group identity per se or when “*Christian*” measures of identity are valued positively, that only reinforces the traditional negative caricatures, mutatis mutandis, to which the New Perspective interpreters otherwise claim to object, and that they seem to believe that their approaches have overcome. (7–8)

In light of the many overlapping points made by these various contributors, it is highly appropriate that an invitation was extended to Terence L. Donaldson to provide a thoughtful response in “Paul within Judaism: A Critical Evaluation from a ‘New Perspective’ Perspective.” In his response, Donaldson accurately pinpoints a common theme throughout the volume’s essays: the eschatological inclusion of the *ethnē*, an emphasis on Jewish restoration eschatology also indicated by Nanos’s proposed terminology of a “chronometrical” claim “to indicate that Paul’s position on what is appropriate within Judaism for Christ-followers is specifically related to his conviction that the awaited age has dawned already within the present age, this requiring some adjustments to prevailing halakah” (109). Donaldson questions the chronology for Paul’s thinking vis-à-vis Rom 11, which Nanos nuances in his introductory essay (25–26).

For my part, my main constructive criticism involves what I would consider the volume’s biggest “blind spot,” specifically, the contributors’ lack of attention to what may arguably be one of the most fundamental obstacles for many of us who are seeking to provide them a fair hearing: a sustained argument that, although Paul’s letters were addressed to mixed communities that included Jews, nevertheless his primary audience was made up of non-
Jewish followers of Jesus, underscoring the argument that Paul’s discouragement of circumcision was specifically directed to gentiles, not to Torah-observant Jews who would normally circumcise their male children. The assumption is liberally alluded to throughout the volume (see 17, 23, 48, 115 n. 17, 134, 136, 145, 148–49, 153, 234, 250 n. 15) but rarely explored, although several places (156 and 185 n. 24) do cite some pertinent texts to support the position. Nevertheless, additional attention to articulating this assumption, I think, would have considerably improved the overall presentation of “Paul within Judaism.”