

James D.G. Dunn and the New Perspective on Paul: A Review Article
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The discussion arises out of one small, but certainly complex, question: "What was it that Paul was reacting against in his letters with regard to the law?" This is the question that launched a thousand articles, as it were. The so-called "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP) is a "new" response to this very old question. Or, at least it was "new" in 1982 when James D.G. Dunn coined the phrase "New Perspective on Paul" in the Manson Memorial Lecture at the University of Manchester. Almost a quarter of a century later we have a reflection on the discussion and a collection of the work of Professor Dunn in this *New Perspective on Paul* volume, though he is still publishing new research prolifically. This review essay endeavors to summarize the book, as most book reviews do, but also to reflect on how the NPP has progressed, what the reactions of others have been, and to get a sense for the persistent impact it will have on scholarship. Of course the work of James Dunn on this topic, almost all of which usefully appears in this book, will be at the center of the discussion.

In order to understand and appreciate why the NPP has been so revolutionary in scholarship, one must get a sense for how Pauline research has developed throughout history. From one point of view, the NPP is a direct reaction against what some consider a misunderstanding of Paul by Martin Luther. What scholars like Dunn have attempted to do is to correct and complicate the prevailing presumption that Paul was "the great exponent of the central Reformation doctrine of *justification by faith*" (p. 101). Those who challenge this traditional reading of Paul have issued a caution to readers of Paul not to perceive his theology wholly through "Reformation spectacles" (p. 203). Dunn is especially concerned with how Luther looked at the problems and issues in his own time and appeared to read them into the background of Paul's letters. This appeared to generate a reading of Paul that saw law in tension with faith and that the crux of salvation was largely an individualistic concern.

What Dunn had sought out to do, following the lead of E.P. Sanders¹ and Krister Stendahl² was to audit this default Lutheran reading by looking more closely at the Jewish influences on Paul, the specific context of his law-discourses, and the nature of Judaism at Paul's time. What emerged from this

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investigation is a set of discussions, not just on Paul and his theology, but also on early Judaism and the function and purpose of the law (Torah) within the context of the covenant and concerning Jewish conceptions of salvation. Dunn was particularly insistent that Paul was not referring to the “law” as if it meant works or deeds of *any* kind; in his context, he had a specific law in mind (the Mosaic law) and specific works in mind (the “works of the law”; see below). In Dunn’s collection of essays, he has summarized his own definition of the New Perspective on Paul using 5 key points (see p. 16).

Firstly, influenced by Sanders’ work on the patterns of religion in Palestinian Judaism, the NPP recognizes that Jews related to God through “covenantal nomism” which affirmed that one entered the covenant through God’s gracious election, but maintained that relationship through obedience. Secondly, the Mosaic law was not simply a means of telling Israel how to be obedient, but also carried a social function, “where separateness *to* God (holiness) was understood to require separateness *from* the (other) nations” (p. 16). Though this was a form of protection, it became the root of Israel’s sin of cultural superiority. Thirdly, the NPP recognizes that a major component of Paul’s gospel message was an affirmation of the unity of Jew and Gentile, the elimination of the wall which the law was seen to have erected. Fourthly, the NPP, especially as Dunn has articulated it, treats “works of the law” as a technical phrase referring to particular works which were considered by many Jewish believers to be “indispensable to their own (and others?) standing within the covenant, and therefore indispensable to salvation” (p. 16). In light of the revelation of Christ, Paul considered “works of the law” to be unnecessary as an identity badge for God’s people. Finally, Dunn argues that “failure to recognize this major [social] dimension of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith may have ignored or excluded a vital factor in combating the nationalism and racialism which has so distorted and diminished Christianity past and present” (p. 16).

For Dunn, this revolutionary re-reading of Paul must also reckon with major issues in biblical theology. Within a Lutheran model, the major failure of many Jews was that they tried to earn God’s favor instead of understanding that it was about grace. If Dunn is correct, then Paul was not really concerned with this at all since (most) Jews would have already held such a view (within a covenantal-nomistic framework). According to the NPP, Paul was criticizing the (Mosaic) law³ insofar as it encouraged “a sense of national superiority” (p. 131), or “ethnic privilege” (p. 167). If God’s original purpose in separating Israel was for her moral and physical safety, it became a ground for boasting in being God’s favored people. Paul, then, found the need to combat some Jewish believers who still held to this national imperialism even as Gentiles began to flood into the new people of God. Paul was faulting these Jewish believers, who

did not want to accept Gentiles *qua* Gentiles, for their “failure to grasp the character and ‘to all-ness’ of faith” (p. 11).

This viewpoint led Dunn to argue that Paul’s concern over “works of the law” was something very specific. He argues that there were particular “works” that could be seen as identity badges for Jews, boundary markers; “they are simply what membership of the covenantal people involves, what mark out the Jews as God’s people” (p. 111). Circumcision and the observance of food laws seemed to be prominent examples of such markers as they depicted Jewish distinctiveness. If some Jewish believers felt it necessary to impose such “badge” works on Gentile Christians, Paul saw this move as too ethnocentric and inconsistent with the new-creation vision of the unifying of all peoples.

Dunn’s *The New Perspective on Paul* collection of essays is an excellent resource because it charts his own journey in this field from 1983 to 2007. The first chapter (which we will return to later) is an extended reflection (97 pp.) on the development of this viewpoint and a chance to respond to the critics of his work. Following from that are twenty-one chapters on various aspects of his published research on this topic (except the final chapter which contains new material). Chapter two is a transcript from the Manson lecture where he first discussed the subject in a major public forum. Summaries of the NPP also appear in chapter twelve and his test-case of Philippians 3:2-14 (ch. 22). Several chapters are devoted to the subject of the law and, especially, “works of the law” (chs. 3, 4, 8, 13, 17, 19, 21). Paul’s opponents are dealt with in chapter five. Galatians, which is a book that has received the most discussion concerning the NPP, is the focus of chapters six, nine, and fourteen. A number of chapters, perhaps the most interesting ones for those who are already familiar with the technical discussions mentioned above, relate to theological implications that arise from this hermeneutical dialogue. Thus, chapter seven involves an exploration of the concept of justice as it relates to Dunn’s understanding of “justification by faith” (see also ch. 16). Chapter ten handles the important pan-biblical question of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament (and matters of continuity and discontinuity). Perspectives on Paul’s so-called “conversion” are developed in chapter fifteen. Christology is the subject of chapter eighteen. And chapter twenty looks at covenantal theology.

There is no doubt that many scholars have greatly benefited from Dunn’s articles and essays in the NPP, as well as his commentaries on Romans, Galatians, and Colossians, and *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*.⁴ However, over the last two decades or so, detractors have also emerged. Space permits only a brief mentioning. One concern that some have had with Dunn’s position is that it seems to trivialize Paul’s justification language such that it is primarily

about ethnic reconciliation.⁵ Dunn firmly responds that his intent all along has not been to minimize the meaning of justification, but to fill it out to its fullest extent, especially with reference to the social dimensions that would have been so apparent to the original readers.

Pertaining to the nature of Judaism in Paul's time, some critics have queried Sanders' notion that Jews understood grace and election to be the operative categories of entrance into the people of God. Dunn does admit that Sanders may have overstated his case and generalized too much. Ultimately, Dunn favors a view of early Judaism where "[e]lection and righteousness go together...symbiotically" (p. 67). He recognizes that some groups within Judaism would have certainly been more stringent regarding "*factional shibboleths*" and other litmus tests of in-group standards, but he asks: "should a fundamentalist expression of a religion be seen as characteristically expressive of that religion?" (p. 69-70). A related matter is the meaning of final judgment. It is the contention of some, including a former doctoral student of Dunn's, Simon Gathercole,⁶ that Jews in the second temple period understood final judgment to be a time of reckoning the works of obedience. Again, Dunn has responded by saying that the NT itself also affirms the view that "Salvation (eternal life) is in some degree conditional on faithfulness" (p. 76). That does not mean that the pattern of religion in Judaism was exactly the same as it was for Paul as a Christian. Dunn proposes that the presence of the eschatological Spirit is crucial to understanding how obedience works in new creation. The Holy Spirit, Dunn argues, allows "a more effective doing of God's will" (p. 86). Dunn also observes that the pattern of religion of early Pauline Christianity, unlike Judaism, was centered on the person of Jesus. Life in the new covenant, then, is not just a status, but a process of transformation and conformity to the likeness of Christ (p. 93).

At the end of his initial chapter entitled "The New Perspective: Whence, What, and Whither?," Dunn offers five points concerning the state of the issue. Firstly, Pauline scholarship has been forever changed and cannot simply go back to the "old perspective" on Judaism (as a legalistic works-righteousness religion). Secondly, the move of NPP proponents to focus on the Gentile mission is methodologically significant and serves as an important reminder to read Paul within the confines of his own historical and social context first. Dunn's third point is that "Justification by faith alone needs to be reasserted" in that it "speaks against all attempts to add *anything* to the gospel as essential to salvation" (p. 96). Fourthly, scholars should not feel so comfortable in blunting the tension between justification by faith through grace and judgment according to deeds. Finally, Dunn underscores the point that Paul's theology was driven by his thoroughgoing Christology which signaled and initiated the dawning of the new age of fulfillment that opened doors for all to join God's people through faith.

In 2007, Francis B. Watson published a revised and expanded version of his doctoral thesis where he wishes to take the discussion, as his subtitle claims, “Beyond the New Perspective.”⁷ Watson takes issue with Dunn on several matters, but one particular concern is with the idea “covenantal nomism” and how Dunn applies it both to early Judaism and to Paul insofar as they involve aspects of gift (covenantal grace) and demand (covenantal obedience). Watson introduces the question of agency and argues that the relationship of divine and human agency appears to be quite different. In the antithesis between the “faith of Jesus Christ” and the “works of the law,” Watson observes that the fact that the latter can be abbreviated as “works” seems to place a greater emphasis on human agency. The fact that Paul repeatedly used “faith” and “grace” as circumlocution for Christian life and salvation seems to place greater weight on divine agency. A more nuanced discussion of the divine-human relationship, such as developed by Watson, offers a helpful advancement of the issue of covenantal life.

Personally, I have benefited greatly from the work of Dunn and the important social, historical, methodological, and theological contributions he has made. I wish only to voice one aspect which I think needs more attention – the epistemological failure of the law. If the law was one that cursed and condemned Christ, then it demonstrated its own inability to guide and judge properly (though it certainly would not be seen to be wholly invaluable). One could use the analogy of a computer (the covenant people) that needed protecting from all sorts of invasive spamming programs (like sin and various external enemies). The owner of the computer (God) installed a virus-protection program (the law) that was designed to detect and eliminate threats. In order to offer maximum protection, this program would need to be vigilant in excluding anything that could even resemble a threat – even those programs that could be useful but have ostensibly suspicious file names. As time went on, and attacks on the computer by viruses grew more powerful and more frequent, the virus-protection program had to become even more restrictive.

Finally, the owner of the computer recognized that, despite the work of the virus-protection program, the computer still was affected by viruses that managed to get through and corrupt the hard drive, causing important programs to crash and run sluggishly. The owner, then, saw the need to upgrade the computer to a more powerful operating system which would require wiping out everything, but with the hopes of fixing all of the processing and computing problems. The virus-protection program, though, saw the upgrade disk as a threat and attacked what the owner saw to be necessary solution to the problems that plagued the computer. Though the owner realized that a computer still

needed a virus-protection program, this particular one had failed to understand and judge appropriately a safe and “friendly” program.

If this analogy is appropriate, it suggests that the law was certainly put to good use and was an important protective measure, but when Christ came, one who himself was the fulfillment of the law, it failed to understand how he was contributing to the progress of covenantal obedience. In that sense, Paul is critiquing the Jewish confidence in the law as an infallible guide to truth, wisdom, and divine revelation. This appears to be the shape of his argument in Romans 2:18-23:

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

Those who follow the law here are described as light, instructors, bearers of truth, etc... Yet, Paul points out that they fail to obey the law and, as he goes on to argue, they misunderstand the nature of the Gospel of God's righteousness that has been revealed *apart from the law* (see Rom 3:21). This concern with the law is primarily hermeneutical in that the law cannot be ultimately understood as a perfectly clear lens through which to perceive “reality.” Indeed, in that the law condemned Christ (Gal 3:13), it is somehow opposed to the cross. Dunn does, in fact, develop this antithesis (especially between circumcision and the cross, see pp. 313-37), but not quite along the lines as I have described above.

In the end, we are in James Dunn's debt for offering this useful collection of essays, articles, and new research on the New Perspective on Paul. He is certainly correct that Pauline studies, and Biblical research in general, has been irreversibly affected by this movement in scholarship. Though many hail this current era as one that is post-New Perspective, Dunn has left an indelible mark that deserves to be recognized and appreciated, even if some will demur on one point or another. This book should be a standard volume in the library of all Pauline researchers who can benefit from many of Dunn's most insightful articles and essays on this topic all in one place, as well as learning from the original pieces found here.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ed Parish Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977).
- ² Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199-215.
- ³ There is disagreement among NPP proponents as to whether Paul's concern was with the law *per se* or with those who distorted or abused what was written in the law.
- ⁴ *Romans* (WBC; 2 vols.; Dallas: Word, 1988); *The Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993); *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).
- ⁵ See D.A. Carson et al., eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Paradoxes of Paul* (Vol. II; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004).
- ⁶ *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).
- ⁷ *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).