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The New Perspective on Paul: Rethinking the Judaism of Paul's Day and the Identity of God's People

Abstract: *For centuries Christian interpretation of Paul has centered around a reading of Paul that presupposed a legalistic and works-righteous Judaism of his day. This essay discusses the movement in Pauline scholarship away from those assumptions, beginning with E.P. Sanders and continuing with scholars like James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright in the 'New Perspective on Paul.' It concludes by examining how this approach has the potential to positively affect Jewish-Christian dialogue.*

Introduction

The 1977 publication of E.P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religions* launched what most scholars of the so-called 'New Perspective on Paul' characterize as a turning point in the church's Pauline¹ scholarship. The 'New Perspective on Paul' (henceforth NPP) as a subcategory within Christian Pauline scholarship seeks to carefully re-read Paul in his historical context; in doing so, NPP scholars challenge the Lutheran reading of Paul, rooted in Luther's own anti-Medieval Catholicism, personal spiritual conflicts,² anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.³ In this essay I discuss Sanders' aforementioned magnum opus on Second-Temple Palestinian Judaism, the movement it inaugurated within Pauline scholarship, and the subsequent interpreters who have utilized his re-reading of Paul as a launching point for determining Paul's theology. I argue with James D.G. Dunn, N.T. Wright, and Talmud scholar

Daniel Boyarin that Paul is fundamentally centered on the question of identity in his corpus. I conclude by considering the positive effects of the NPP in Jewish-Christian dialogue.

It is important to acknowledge authorial biases and assumptions underlying this essay. First, I am exclusively relying upon American and British scholarship of Paul, which of course ignores the conversations being had on Paul world-wide. Time, space and language limits me in this regard. Second, given my own Christian faith, my intention is primarily to engage the NPP as a conversation within Christian scholarship, though Levine and Boyarin, as Jewish voices, contribute to my discussion as well.⁴ Third, I assume that Luther's issues with the Medieval Catholic church, particularly, as Sanders notes, "the existence of a treasury of merits established by works of supererogation,"⁵ color his reading of Paul. Finally, I myself am inclined to see the NPP as the best way to approach Paul, especially in critical texts like Galatians 2:15-16 and Romans 3:27ff.

Sanders on Rabbinic Judaism

Sanders begins his book by stating that much of Pauline scholarship up to 1977 represents Paul as the "*antithesis* of Judaism, while being *dependent* on it with regard to *individual motifs*" (emphasis original).⁶ He is not content with this, but before dedicating around 350 pages to his own textual analysis of Rabbinic Judaism, Sanders surveys the current status of Pauline scholarship.

Beginning in the late nineteenth-century, German Lutheran scholars, in their work on Paul, contrasted Paul to a Judaism of his day that was characterized by legalism, an inaccessible God, and a pursuit of righteousness, *δικαιοσύνη*, on the basis of works. Leading this charge was Weber, with a view that "holds [Judaism] to be at best an inadequate religion and at worst one

which destroyed any hope of a proper relationship between God and man.”⁷ Weber’s reading was similar to that of Schürer and Bousset, and eventually inherited by Rudolf Bultmann, one of the most influential scholars of the twentieth-century, as well as Köberle and Billerbeck. For this cavalcade of scholars, the first-century Judaism Paul was reacting against was one in which “the means of earning salvation are Torah and Aboda,” God’s dealing with Israel is based on a system of merits and demerits, and Israel maintains an obsession with ritual performance of Torah rather than appreciating the ethical implications of the law. This makes the law “burdensome” for Israel, and yet ironically also fosters self-righteousness among some of the Jews at the same time.⁸

Sanders addresses a few of the problems inherent in this reading of Paul even before discussing his own. First, Sanders points out Billerbeck’s concealed assumptions underlying his merit-based reading of Paul: “the old Jewish religion is thus a religion of the most complete self-redemption; it has no room for a redeemer-savior who dies for the sins of the world.”⁹ It is evident that Billerbeck’s distaste for non-messianic Jews results in a reductionist fallacy projected onto all of first-century Palestinian Judaism. Second, this group of scholars, Sanders repeatedly points out, are not qualified to draw the conclusions they are making due to their lack of experience and expertise on the rabbinic texts themselves. Rather than spending time with the texts, as is the case with Moore, Sandmel and Sjöberg, they rely on secondary sources which conveniently bear their own names. Because this group of scholars, in Sanders’ estimation, do not feel a need individually to textually defend a legalistic view of Judaism, the indication is that this reading is particularly pervasive.¹⁰

After outlining and critiquing the architecture of interpretation foundational to German Lutheran scholarship, Sanders takes to the rabbis to re-paint the Judaism of Paul's day. First, Sanders shows that rabbinic sources explain that God's giving of Torah comes only after His election and deliverance of Israel in Egyptian bondage. This means ultimately that "the covenant was not earned, but that obedience to the commandments is the consequence of the prior election of Israel by God."¹¹ The covenant did not require perfect performance of Torah, but is rather unconditional with the obligation and expectation of intended obedience to God on behalf of Israel. Furthermore, prominent in the Hebrew Bible¹² as well as rabbinic writings, Jews did not see the 613 commandments from Torah as "burdensome," but instead a blessing from God to be joyfully complied with.¹³ All Israel shares in the salvation that comes as a result of membership in the covenant, provided that there is evidence of a honest intent to keep the covenant by atoning for transgression of Torah. The same formula is applied to a proselyte Gentile, with circumcision (for males) as the obvious sign of one's accepting of the covenant.¹⁴ As Sanders cheekily concludes, "The Rabbis did not have the Pauline/Lutheran problem of 'works-righteousness.'"¹⁵ Instead, Sanders identifies and defines the primary religion of Palestinian Jews of Paul's day as covenantal nomism:

(1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punished transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved. An important interpretation of the first and last points is

that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement.¹⁶

The work of Sanders opened the door for the beginning of the NPP over the next decade to ask a critical question: if Luther's reading of Paul was historically improbable, and thus Paul was not complaining about a legalistic Judaism, what exactly was Paul's issue in his letters, particularly in Galatians?

'New' Pauline Interpreters: Dunn, Wright, Boyarin and Levine on the Question of Identity

Kent L. Yinger's *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction* traces the history of the NPP following Sanders' publication of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Indebted much to Sanders but unsatisfied with his second half of the book on comparison of patterns of religion between rabbinic Judaism and Pauline Christianity, James D.G. Dunn in 1982 argued that Paul's use of ἔργα νόμου, "works of the law," in Galatians 2 does not refer to Jewish legalism but rather Jewish badges of identity that marked a Jew out in the ancient world from his Gentile neighbors. In Galatians, circumcision and table fellowship are the issues at hand, but NPP scholars agree that three Jewish "works of the law" were primarily on Paul's mind: circumcision, the Sabbath, and food laws. Dunn considered evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls that indicated that Jewish sects used the same phrase in Hebrew, *ma'asei ha-torah*, to mark out those in the sect from those who were not to be further proof that he was on the right track. Ultimately for Dunn, the question we need to ask of Paul is, "Do you have to be Jewish to partake in the messianic age?" or "What marks someone out as a person of God now?"¹⁷

Alongside Dunn, N.T. Wright has perhaps been the most influential figure in the spread of the NPP, especially among Protestant Christianity in the Western world. Wright and Dunn are

in agreement as to “works of the law” in Paul; Paul is not dealing with works-righteousness but “national righteousness, . . . the belief that fleshly Jewish descent guarantees membership of God’s true covenant people.”¹⁸ Thus, the ἐκκλησία, or “church” of God was not defined by ethnic origin.¹⁹ What marks someone out as a person of God is not circumcision, food laws or Sabbath, but the πίστις χριστοῦ, the “faithfulness of the Messiah.” Critical to Wright and apparent in his translation of πίστις χριστοῦ is his reading of Paul through a lens of covenant and narrative.

Although Wright discusses this assumption about Paul in great detail in *Paul in Fresh Perspective*,²⁰ Yinger provides an abbreviated (but still lengthy as a quote) version that is important to take in to fully understand Wright’s flavor of the NPP:

One of the characteristics of [Wright’s] position is how he sets Paul’s theology within the larger biblical story (narrative) of God’s work with Israel. God’s intention for humanity and creation was temporarily derailed through Adam’s sin (Gen. 1-11). The resolution of this dilemma was the family of Abraham, Israel, through whom the divine blessing was to extend to all humanity (Gen. 12). However, the Jewish people failed as well to fulfill their roles as the instruments of God’s blessing to the world. Instead of being the light for the nations, they wandered from their covenant obligations, ultimately into exile. It would, thus, be left up to Israel’s representative to fulfill Adam’s originally intended role under God. Messiah Jesus is Israel, the seed of Abraham, the son of God, and his obedience, death, and resurrection are Israel’s obedience, death, and resurrection. He is the climax of God’s covenantal dealings with Israel and humanity (Adam).²¹

Because of the πίστις χριστοῦ and the climax of Israel’s covenant in the Messiah, Paul determines that the question of “who are the people of God?” or election, is fundamentally

“reshaped around Jesus.”²² God intended to have one family, not two,²³ and the new and only identity badge that marked one out as part of that reconstituted family of God was faith.

“Justification by faith” in Paul, then, is a legal pronouncement declaring someone to be “in the right” and marking them out in the present as someone who will participate in the age to come. Again, this is, at its core, a question of identity.

From Wright’s perspective, although Sanders’ work on Judaism was integral to his own work, Sanders had completely missed this element of Paul in his exegetical section of the Pauline corpus in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Thus, trying to understand “justification” or “law” apart from Paul’s narrative impulses will not allow you to fully grasp Pauline theology.

Jewish New Testament scholar and Professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School Amy-Jill Levine interprets Paul’s answer to our fundamental question of identity and his “works of the law” in a very similar way to Dunn and Wright in her *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*. Levine explains that, for Paul, Gentiles do not need to become Jews to partake in the messianic age. Furthermore, Levine defines “works of the law” as a “set of practices that separate Jews from Gentiles.”²⁴ She notes that a two-track system, “separate but equal,” within the church will not work for Paul. Jews and Gentiles are newly reconstituted as people of the Messiah and that, now, is their defining and unifying identity.

Finally, Daniel Boyarin, Talmud scholar and Professor at University of California, Berkeley, approaches his reading of Paul with much of the same foundation as the aforementioned scholars. First and foremost, Boyarin has a radical disagreement with the Lutheran reading of Paul. In addition, he agrees with the cultural-criticism reading from Dunn in that Paul is opposed to Jewish ethnocentrism and “works of the law” are those observances of

Torah that mark someone out as being Jewish.²⁵ Finally, Paul is not an anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic thinker.²⁶

However, apart from these similarities, Boyarin proposes the centrality of a social gospel reading of Paul, one which stresses the universalism of Jewish and Greek identity mediated by the contrast of Paul's language of *κατὰ σάρκα* and *κατὰ πνεῦμα*, "according to the flesh" and "according to the Spirit."²⁷ In Christ, new Israel, or new humanity, has been launched, but that new humanity requires some re-thinking of how it will be shaped socially and inter-culturally. For Boyarin, Paul desires a "non-differentiated, non-hierarchical humanity" which requires that "all human cultural specificities—first and foremost, that of the Jews—be eradicated." Paul wants equality, but equates equality with "sameness."²⁸ Boyarin reads Paul through the "spirit" in that Paul, while not necessarily thinking that Jewish identity is 'bad,' no longer finds it to be important and so it is sacrifice-able, especially when the ethnic distinction compromises Paul's "gospel" of universalism.²⁹ The Spirit, in a sense, puts the flesh in its place, its subservient place.

Though he appreciates the unifying universalism of Paul, Boyarin is uncomfortable with his reading of Paul which requires the shedding of ethnic identity. He feels uneasy with the 'sameness' his reading of Paul requires for all of God's people in the cosmos, especially in light of historical occasions of Christian coercion of Jews.

In summary, the NPP and its core tenets center on the question of identity and participation in the covenant community of God redefined around the Messiah rather than the misconstrued "faith v. works" paradigm coming from Luther in the Reformation and later from German Lutheran scholars of the late nineteenth and twentieth-centuries.

Positive Effects and Future of the NPP

Yinger concludes his short introduction to the NPP by discussing what the NPP has gotten right. He identifies them as the following:

1. The NPP allows us to have a better grasp on Paul's letters.
2. A NPP reading of Paul helps us move away from an overly Western individualistic reading of Paul which has made "justification by faith" entirely about saving individual souls rather than remaking all of creation through the fulfillment of the covenant with Israel.
3. The NPP helps reduce anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish tendencies within Christian interpretation of Paul and facilitates a better dialogue on the topic of supersessionism among Christians.
4. The NPP provides considerable continuity between the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.³⁰

In fact, even some modern American Lutheran scholars are appreciating the contributions of the NPP in some of the same ways mentioned by Yinger.³¹

However, Levine and much of the Judeo-Christian world desires for *shalom*, and that type of peace will only come when the Christian church takes more seriously its role of eradicating anti-Judaism. Christian scholars and leaders have a responsibility to share the historically probable reading of Paul within the NPP with the church and the academy and work towards eradicating stereotypes of Judaism that stifle serious Jewish-Christian dialogue. The NPP is crucial in tearing down the false caricatures of the Judaism of Paul's day as a legalistic, works-righteous, meritorious system with an "unbearable yoke" of a Law.³² Rooting our study of Paul in his historical context is not only more biblically sound, it is pragmatically and morally sound.

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Notes

¹ that is, the apostle Paul, the 1st c. C.E. Jewish author of many of the New Testament epistles

² His question: “How may I, a sinner, find a gracious God?” quoted in Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction*, p. 23

³ I am using Amy-Jill Levine’s definitions of these two terms from her *The Misunderstood Jew*, pp. 87-95. Per Levine, “Anti-Semitism refers to hatred of the Jews as an ethnic identity group, and it assumes an essential and unchanging Jewish identity....Anti-Semitism ascribes to Jews innate negative traits...” One need look no further than *On the Jews and Their Lies* to find this type of rhetoric. Despite some defenders of Luther locating him within an anti-Jewish and polemical historical context (see Lull and Russell’s *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, pp. 497-98), Levine’s definition places this text firmly within the bounds of Anti-Semitism. Further, even if Luther was not reacting against actual Jews in Germany, his figural Jew is still the outlet of such diatribes. With respect to anti-Judaism, Levine formulates no strict definition due to the ambiguity and arbitrary nature of the term, and so, I will follow a, perhaps, less-than-academic policy of “you know it when you see it.” Finally, it is important to note that we know Luther historically through his texts, and so I will attempt to focus on the anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism of Luther’s texts rather than explicitly arguing these of the person.

⁴ It goes without saying for many Jews, but perhaps not Christians, that Sanders’ findings on Second-Temple Judaism were already known among Jewish scholarship. The framing of Judaism from 200 BCE-200 CE as a “legalistic” or “works-righteousness” religion was a problem within Christian scholarship, not Jewish.

⁵ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 57. “We have here the retrocession of the Protestant-Catholic debate into ancient history, with Judaism taking the role of Catholicism and Christianity the role of Lutheranism.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-5

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-44

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-55

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-6

¹² see Psalm 116:12-14, Psalm 119 as examples of covenantal nomism

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-110

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 147, 206

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 100

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 422

¹⁷ Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction*, pp. 17-25

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 29

¹⁹ N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, p. 6

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 108-129

²¹ Yinger, p. 29

²² Wright, pp. 110-122

²³ see Romans 3:27ff, esp. v. 29-30 “Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.” *Jewish Annotated New Testament, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*

²⁴ Levine, pp. 66-86

²⁵ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*, pp. 11, 40-42, 52

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 151-52

²⁷ Ibid., p. 107

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 4-8

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 7, 108-114, 133, 155-56

³⁰ Yinger, pp. 87-90

³¹ Stephen Hultgren, “The New Perspective on Paul and the Recovery of Pauline Anthropology” p. 58 in *The New Perspective on Paul*, edited by David C. Ratke

³² Levine, pp. 5, 116-27