

## HERMENEUTICS OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL

Robert L. Thomas  
Professor of New Testament

*Recent changes in evangelical hermeneutical principles have opened a wide door for new-perspective (NP) proposals on Pauline literature and more basically NP proposals about second-temple Judaism. Setting aside the time-honored ideal of objectivity, the proposals have raised questions about longstanding views of Augustine and Luther and of the nature of first-century Judaism. E. P. Sanders has been a major figure in raising these questions. The questions arise in part through an allegorical versus a literal handling of God's OT covenants with Israel, i.e., through devising a system known as "covenantal nomism." The NP system also seeks support through a neglect of the established principle of single versus multiple meanings for a given passage and through disregarding the importance of immediate context in interpretation. The NP builds on an erroneous base of wrong-headed conclusions about first-century Judaism and commits multiple hermeneutical errors in its approach to Pauline literature.*

\* \* \* \* \*

As one has appropriately put it, the new perspective on Paul is more accurately termed a new perspective on second-temple Judaism,<sup>1</sup> which inevitably results in a new perspective on Paul. This new perspective brings to the surface a number of hermeneutical principles that twenty-first-century evangelicalism desperately needs to avoid if it is to maintain a high view of biblical inspiration.

---

<sup>1</sup>Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 178. Westerholm writes, "The conviction most central to the 'new perspective on Paul' pertains in the first place to Judaism, not Paul: first-century Jews, it is claimed (in dependence on E. P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*), were not legalists who supposed that they earned their salvation (or membership in the people of God) by deeds they did in compliance with the law."

### Preunderstanding Versus Objectivity

Elsewhere I have dealt with the highly significant change that occurred in evangelical hermeneutics in the 1970s and early 1980s, a change which most basically incorporated a new first step in biblical interpretation.<sup>2</sup> That new beginning point is the preunderstanding of the interpreter that then theoretically undergoes correction as he studies a biblical text. Until the 1970s, traditional grammatical-historical principles dictated that the interpreter repress whatever opinion about what he thought the text should teach and adopt a firm goal of letting the text speak for itself, in other words, the goal of objectivity. As harmless as the difference in starting points between traditional evangelical hermeneutics and the new evangelical hermeneutics may seem, it has wrought havoc in the way many evangelicals are now reading and interpreting the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

New-perspective proposals offer a classic example of the drastic effects of preunderstanding on the interpretation of Pauline literature as well as the rest of the NT. The impact of this hermeneutical principle on new-perspective scholars is visible in two areas, in rethinking the interpretations of Augustine and Luther and in rethinking the nature of first-century Judaism.

#### Rethinking the Interpretations of Augustine and Luther

A 1977 work by E. P. Sanders in which he advanced a radically new view of first-century Judaism gave birth to the new perspective.<sup>4</sup> The new-perspective (hereafter NP<sup>5</sup>) views Augustine as having introduced an “introspective conscience” into an interpretation of Paul’s writings, a conscience that was not present in the writings themselves.<sup>6</sup> Sanders does not see guilt as the main problem with Paul; the problem Paul dealt with was that of people not recognizing the lordship of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther allegedly erred the same way as Augustine. As Paul deals with the problem of circumcision in Galatia, N. T. Wright—another NP advocate—sees the issue Paul faced as far different from the questions debated between Augustine and

<sup>2</sup>Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) especially 41-62 on “The Origin of Preunderstanding.”

<sup>3</sup>I have elaborated on this extensively in various parts of *Evangelical Hermeneutics*.

<sup>4</sup>E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Two of the purposes of the work was “to destroy the view of Rabbinic Judaism which is still prevalent in much, perhaps most, New Testament scholarship” (xi) and “to establish a different view of Rabbinic Judaism” (ibid.).

<sup>5</sup>The customary abbreviation for the new perspective on Paul is “NPP,” but since the issue has more to do with first-century Judaism, this essay will use the abbreviation “NP” to designate the new-perspective position on both.

<sup>6</sup>Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 17.

<sup>7</sup>Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* 500, 503.

Pelagius or between Luther and Erasmus.<sup>8</sup>

In essence, Sanders—the godfather of the NP—and his followers say that Augustine, Luther, Wesley, and others have been wrong in their reading of Paul. Such later Christian voices have read into Paul doctrines—justification by faith, the doctrine of imputed righteousness, and other related doctrines—that Paul did not teach. That NP understanding of Luther and company anachronistically attributes to them the more recent development of preunderstanding which affected their interpretation of Paul’s writings. Luther allegedly interpreted Paul as though he were writing about issues of later times instead of the ones he was actually facing. According to NP proponents, the well-known advocates of justification by faith—such as Luther and Calvin—imposed their own biases on the text rather than letting the Pauline text speak for itself.

Such proponents as Sanders fail to acknowledge that a basic hermeneutical principle of the Reformers, of whom Luther was one, was to exclude their own biases and follow the principle of *tabula rasa* (“clean slate”).<sup>9</sup> This meant to study the text with an open mind in applying grammatical-historical data to arrive at the meaning intended by the original author and understood by the original readers. Sanders and company say that the Reformers failed in the process because of their preunderstanding of what they felt the text *should* say. Yet preunderstanding was not a hermeneutical principle in orthodox Christianity until a time much later than the Reformers.<sup>10</sup> It is Sanders’ own preunderstanding of second-temple Judaism that forced him into attributing preunderstanding to interpreters who consciously attempted to avoid it.

### **Rethinking the Nature of First-century Judaism**

**Critique of Sanders’ view of rabbinic literature.** Sanders summarizes his view of Judaism as follows:

On the assumption that a religion should be understood on the basis of its own self-

<sup>8</sup>N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 120.

<sup>9</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977) 105. Sproul writes, “The interpreter was expected to strive as hard as possible for an objective reading of the text through the grammatico-historical approach. Though subjective influences always present a clear and present danger of distortion, the student of the Bible was expected to utilize every possible safeguard in the pursuit of the ideal, listening to the message of Scripture without mixing in his own prejudices.”

<sup>10</sup>Ramm describes orthodoxy thus: “The true philological spirit, or critical spirit, or scholarly spirit, in Biblical interpretation has as its goal to discover the original meaning and intention of the text. Its goal is *exegesis*—to lead the meaning out of the text and shuns *eisogesis*—bringing a meaning to the text. . . . Calvin said that the Holy Scripture is not a tennis ball that we may bounce around at will. Rather it is the Word of God whose teachings must be learned by the most impartial and objective study of the text” (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970] 115-16).

presentations, as long as these are not manifestly bowdlerized, and not on the basis of polemical attacks, we must say that the Judaism of before 70 kept grace and works in the right perspective, did not trivialize the commandments of God and was not especially marked by hypocrisy. The frequent Christian charge against Judaism, it must be recalled, is not that some individual Jews misunderstood, misapplied and abused their religion, but that *Judaism necessarily tends* towards petty legalism, self-serving and self-deceiving casuistry, and a mixture of arrogance and lack of confidence in God. But the surviving Jewish literature is as free of these characteristics as any I have ever read.<sup>11</sup>

Through use of his three sources, particularly the Tannaitic literature, Sanders reaches several conclusions about the rabbinic teaching.

(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 punishes 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."<sup>12</sup>

A closer look at the sources cited by Sanders reveals, however, that Sanders' reading of the rabbinic material is totally biased.

For example, he says that election was "totally gratuitous without prior cause in those being elected,"<sup>13</sup> which cannot be true. Even he himself acknowledges three reasons assigned by the rabbis for God's choice of Israel, only one of which said election was totally gratuitous.<sup>14</sup> The other two reasons given by the rabbis involved Israel's earning election, thereby making election "at least partially grounded on the merits of the patriarchs or Israel's foreseen obedience."<sup>15</sup>

Sanders argues that obedience to the commandments in rabbinic literature is the result of God's election and that the rabbis included the intention, not just the outward act, in this obedience.<sup>16</sup> Though humans have a tendency to disobey, they do not have a sin nature that requires divine enablement in order to obey.<sup>17</sup> In reality, however, sometimes rabbis taught that God's judgment would depend on a

<sup>11</sup>Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* 426-27.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 422.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Guy Prentiss Waters. *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004) 51.

<sup>16</sup>Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* 107.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 114-15.

majority of good deeds.<sup>18</sup> Other times they taught that condemnation would come on the basis of one transgression.<sup>19</sup> Still others said that salvation would result from one righteous act.<sup>20</sup> The rabbis were in complete disagreement among themselves on this issue too.

According to Sanders, salvation comes by membership in the covenant community and by atonement provided for every transgression.<sup>21</sup> Yet the means of atonement for the rabbis was elusive. Sometimes they said it was through repentance, other times through OT sacrifices, in still other cases through sufferings and even through death.<sup>22</sup>

With such widespread differences of opinion in rabbinic literature, only minimal parts of which are biblical, Sanders has to pick and choose among conflicting statements to come up with his system of covenantal nomism. For example, as Waters notices, “In two distinct arguments (‘the rabbis are not systematic theologians’ and ‘there are numerous “fulfillment of one command” statements as well as “majority of deeds” statements’), Sanders dismisses the significance of the ‘majority of deeds’ comments.”<sup>23</sup> To grasp the inconsistencies of the rabbis takes no systematic theologian; any person with common sense can tell that a unified system of belief was nonexistent in their writings. Though Sanders has provided a fuller picture of first-century Judaism, his interpretation of that evidence is flawed. When taking into account *all* the evidence he cites, he has not established a case that proves Judaism contemporary to Paul was a system based on grace.<sup>24</sup> The origin of covenantal nomism is therefore traceable to Sanders, not to the rabbis. But such an observation is not nearly as alarming as the way Sanders dismisses the four canonical Gospels.

**Sanders’ view of the Gospels.** Since the “Sanders revolution” has affected so many,<sup>25</sup> who is E. P. Sanders? His self-identification is,

<sup>18</sup>Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives* 42-44.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 44-45. Waters expresses this in another way: “In summary, Sanders has corrected the portrait of Judaism as a religion of pure Pelagianism, and has demonstrated that this religion is semi-Pelagian in nature. In election, human ability, obedience, atonement, and acceptance at the judgment, rabbinic opinion is universally and incontrovertibly synergistic. Human actions and endeavors have preeminence over divine grace.”

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 45-47.

<sup>21</sup>Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* 147, 157.

<sup>22</sup>Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives* 48-51.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>25</sup>Wright reflects the opinion of many when he writes, “But the scholar who has affected current Pauline scholarship more than all the rest put together is Ed P. Sanders, a former colleague of mine in Oxford, now Professor at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina” (*What Saint Paul Really Said*

I am a liberal, modern, secularized Protestant, brought up in a church dominated by low christology and the social gospel. I am proud of the things that that religious tradition stands for. I am not bold enough, however, to suppose that Jesus came to establish it, or that he died for the sake of its principles.<sup>26</sup>

A person with his perspective of a “low christology” would not, of course, have a high view of the Jesus of the NT. That expectation turns out to be accurate.

Sanders’ forte has been his investigation of rabbinic literature. His sources have included rabbinic (Tannaitic) literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphical writings, from Ben Sirach to IV Ezra.<sup>27</sup> On the basis of these studies, he concludes,

By consistently maintaining the basic framework of *covenantal nomism* [the name assigned to Judaism’s beliefs by Sanders], the gift and demand of God were kept in a healthy relationship with each other, the minutiae of the law were observed on the basis of the large principles of religion and because of commitment to God, and humility before God who chose and would ultimately redeem Israel was encouraged.<sup>28</sup>

Stated in other terms, Sanders’ view was that “Judaism in Paul’s day was not, as has regularly been supposed, a religion of legalistic works-righteousness. If we imagine that it was, and that Paul was attacking it as if it was, we will do great violence to it and to him.”<sup>29</sup> Judaism was rather similar to Paul in its advocacy of grace: “God took the initiative, when he made a covenant with Judaism; God’s grace thus precedes everything that people (specifically, Jews) do in response. The Jew keeps the law out of gratitude, as the proper response to grace—not, in other words, in order to *get* into the covenant people, but to *stay* in. Being ‘in’ in the first place was God’s gift.”<sup>30</sup>

In formulating his opinion about second-temple Judaism, however, Sanders in his 1977 work conspicuously fails to use the historical books of the NT, the four Gospels and Acts. In a later work, however, he clarifies this omission. In one such clarification he writes,

We know about Jesus from books written a few decades after his death, probably by the people who were not among his followers during his lifetime. They quote him in Greek, which was not his primary language, and in any case the differences among our sources show that his words and deeds were not perfectly preserved. We have very little

---

18).

<sup>26</sup>E. P. Sanders. *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 334.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 24-29.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 426-27.

<sup>29</sup>Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* 18-19.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 19 [emphasis in the original].

information about him apart from the works written to glorify him. Today we do not have good documentation for such out-of-the-way places as Palestine; nor did the authors of our sources. They had no archives and no official records of any kind. They did not even have access to good maps. These limitations, which were common in the ancient world, result in a good deal of uncertainty.

Recognizing these difficulties and many others, New Testament scholars spent several decades—from about 1910 to 1970—saying that we know somewhere between very little and virtually nothing about the historical Jesus.<sup>31</sup>

Through consistent application of tools of historical criticism, Sanders concludes that “very little or virtually nothing” in the Gospels is factual.

Scholars who follow in his NP train entertain similar views regarding NT historical books. Wright, for example, describes the Gospels as combinations of “neither simply biography nor simply religious propaganda, yet sharing the main characteristics of both.”<sup>32</sup> He pictures the following as the current stage in the Third Quest for the historical Jesus: “First-century Judaism and the Gospels are opposite edges, and all discourse about Jesus must take place between them.”<sup>33</sup> Wright and other “questers” along with NP advocates exemplify an extremely low view of biblical inspiration of the Gospels. The Gospels are at best only on the “edge” of truth, they say, and are less reliable than rabbinic writings in their portrayal of first-century Judaism.

**The View of Jesus and John the Baptist.** Among scholars—evangelical scholars not excluded—that trend of viewing the Gospels as only the edge of truth is occurring right before the eyes of contemporary Christians and is cause for great alarm. Now it has affected Pauline writings as well as the Gospels. In contrast to the positive portrait of Judaism painted by the NP, recall some of the statements by John the Baptist and Jesus about second-temple Judaism:

- John the Baptist saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized by them and called them a “brood of vipers” (Matt 3:7). That characterization of

<sup>31</sup>E. P. Sanders. *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1993) xiii. Note how Sanders dismisses Gospel descriptions of Jesus because of their tendency to glorify Jesus, but takes rabbinic writings at face value without recognizing their tendency to glorify Judaism.

<sup>32</sup>N. T. Wright. *The Contemporary Quest for Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 73.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 73. Regarding Wright, Waters writes, “A second reason that one should study Wright is that he has done more than any other single individual to mediate NPP exegesis into the mainline and evangelical churches. . . . Wright’s popularity among evangelicals is also due to his general respect for the integrity of the New Testament. His scholarship on Jesus stands out from contemporary lives of Jesus and theologies of the Gospels in at least one respect. Wright purposefully approaches the Gospels as credible historical records, sidestepping *many* of the source-critical and redactional-critical concerns that New Testament scholars often bring to the text.” (Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives* 119-20 [emphasis added]). Waters’ opinion notwithstanding, Wright—like all other “third questers”—is far from accepting the historical reliability of everything in the Gospel accounts.

second-temple Judaism hardly fits the description advanced by the NP.

- Matthew 5–7, Jesus' Sermon the Mount, whose theme verse is Matt 5:20: "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were rabbis. The whole sermon heralded the apostasy of rabbinical Judaism's leadership.<sup>34</sup>
- Mark 2:1–3:6 records a series of five "conflict" stories in which Jesus' opponents were the scribes, Pharisees, and/or Herodians. Sanders dismisses these episodes of Jesus' disagreements with Judaism as having been read back into the life of Jesus by Mark, a previous author, or the early church.<sup>35</sup> In other words, it is improbable that the events ever happened and that Jesus ever made such criticisms of Judaism's use of the law.
- Mark 7 and Matthew 15 record Jesus' disagreements with first-century Judaism regarding the washing of hands. Sanders flatly pronounces, "Deadly enmity over handwashing is, I think, historically impossible."<sup>36</sup> He takes issue with Jesus' attack on the Pharisaic view of *korban* by writing, "No Pharisee would justify using a semi-legal device to deprive his parents."<sup>37</sup> This NP advocate flatly rejects the historical accuracy of the Gospels.
- Matt 23:13-36 records Jesus' opinion of second-temple Jewish leaders in His woes pronounced against them. He calls them snakes and a brood of vipers (23:33), blind guides (23:16), and blind fools (23:17; cf. Matt 15:14). That is hardly a description of a "covenantal nomism" that guards the truth.
- Jesus consistently portrayed Judaism of His day as a religion of externals only. One example is in Matt 23:27-28: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." That is just the opposite of NP descriptions of the covenantal nomism of first-century Judaism which says that the system "was not especially marked by hypocrisy"<sup>38</sup> and describes its faith as "the badge of covenant membership, not something someone 'performs'

---

<sup>34</sup>About the Sermon on the Mount, Sanders writes, "Only modern New Testament scholars have thought that part of the Sermon on the Mount expresses opposition to the Mosaic law, but that is because they have not considered the numerous levels of legal agreement and disagreement" (Sanders, *Historical Figure* 212). He misses Jesus' point. Jesus did not speak against the law; He spoke against the scribal and Pharisaic interpretation of the law.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 216-17.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 219.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* 427.

as a kind of initiation test.”<sup>39</sup> Rather, the badge of covenant membership for the Judaism of Jesus’ day was compliance with outward Pharisaic prescriptions.

- In John 8:44a Jesus addressed the Jews who opposed Him with these words: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire.” This is hardly a fit description for loyal upholders of the religion of the OT as Sanders and others of the NP want to portray Judaism in Jesus’ day.

The Gospels and Acts provide many examples of Judaism’s inclination toward an external kind of religion and toward the neglect of internal matters of godliness.

**First-century Judaism.** New-perspective proponents seem to have lost sight of the fact that the Judaism of Jesus’ day was not the religion of the OT. It was largely a product of Israel’s captivity years in Babylon. Because of circumstances that brought a cessation of the temple sacrifices, a study of the law took the place of the temple sacrifices. That increased attention to the law brought into existence the office of the scribe or teacher of the law who became as important to the religious life of the people as the priest had been while the temple was still standing.<sup>40</sup> For the most part, the scribes, most of whom were Pharisees, were the rabbis of the first century A.D.

The new set of circumstances also created a need for a new center of worship, the synagogue. The widespread dispersion of the Jewish people during the exile necessitated local forms of gathering, i.e., synagogues in various locations. The synagogue became a firmly established institution wherever ten men were available to form a regular congregation. The synagogue adapted older rites and observances of Judaism to the new conditions under which the people had to live. Synagogues continued to function even after the temple was rebuilt.<sup>41</sup>

Before the captivity, sin was evaluated and judged on a communal scale rather than individually. The uprooting of the nation destroyed the connection of reward and punishment with national responsibility, thereby reaffirming individual responsibility. Messianic hope for the advent of a political deliverer remained strong during this period.<sup>42</sup>

The troops of Nebuchadnezzar burned the temple of Solomon in 586 B.C. A second temple was begun and completed by the returning remnant in 516 B.C., only to be plundered by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B.C. In 165 B.C. Judas Maccabaeus cleansed and repaired the second temple. The repaired structure remained until 37 B.C. when Herod the Great took Jerusalem and burned some of the temple structures. In 20-19 B.C. Herod started to rebuild the temple, work that

---

<sup>39</sup>Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* 125.

<sup>40</sup>Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 82.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 85-89.

was not completed until A.D. 62 or 64. It was in this rebuilt second temple that Jesus and His disciples taught and preached and Saul of Tarsus offered sacrifices. The Roman army destroyed this temple in A.D. 70.<sup>43</sup>

The synagogue was the social center where Jewish inhabitants of a city gathered weekly to meet each other. It was also the educational medium for keeping the law before the people's attention and served as a substitute for temple worship, which was impossible because of distance or poverty. The synagogue service consisted of five parts: a recitation of the Shema (Deut 6:4), a ritual prayer concluding with an opportunity for individual silent prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, a sermon which explained the Scripture that had been read, and a blessing pronounced by a priestly member of the congregation. Such a sequence eventually became influential in the services of the early church.<sup>44</sup>

Five of the Jewish feasts had their origin in the OT: Passover or Unleavened Bread, Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets or the New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. The other two feasts originated during the intertestamental period: the Feast of Lights, commemorating the cleansing of the temple by Judas Maccabaeus, and the Feast of Purim, commemorating the deliverance of Israel during the time of Esther.

All the sects of Judaism originated during the captivity: the Pharisees (the largest and most influential), the Sadducees (the priestly party during the days of Christ), the Essenes (an ascetic brotherhood), the Zealots (fanatical nationalists who advocated violence to obtain liberation from Rome), the Zadokites (a priestly element who wanted to reform the priesthood), and the Herodians (a left wing of the Sadducees who favored perpetuation of the Herodian dynasty).<sup>45</sup>

The dispersion of Jewish people began in 721 B.C. with the captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel. It spread gradually until Jews were found in almost all the large cities of the Mediterranean and Middle East, including North Africa, and many smaller cities too. Within the dispersion there were two distinct groups: (1) The Hebraists retained the religious faith of Judaism and utilized the Aramaic language and the Hebrew customs. Paul was a Hebraist (Phil 3:5). (2) The Hellenists were far greater in number than the Hebraists and had absorbed the Graeco-Roman culture, but had ceased to be Jewish except in matters of faith. They spoke only Greek or whatever happened to be the language of the area where they settled.<sup>46</sup>

Sanders says very little if anything about such facets of first-century Judaism as resulted from the Babylonian exile. In his 1977 work on rabbinic literature, his "Index of Subjects" has no entry for "synagogue" which was the

---

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 89-92.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 93-95.

<sup>45</sup>H. E. Dana, *The New Testament World* (Nashville: Broadman, 1937) 66-139.

<sup>46</sup>Tenney, *Survey* 117-20.

rabbi's main locus of operation. His entry on Pharisees is relatively brief, and the Day of Atonement is the only feast that has an entry. One can only conclude that the rabbinic literature consulted by Sanders is a poor source for reconstructing a picture of first-century Judaism. And with crumbling of the foundation for the "Sanders revolution" falls the case for a new perspective on Judaism and, consequently, that for the new perspective on Paul also. The system falters because it is based on an unsupported preunderstanding, not on allowing the biblical text to speak for itself.<sup>47</sup> Following the dictum of "all truth is God's truth," it seeks to integrate rabbinic tradition with Scripture, thereby reducing the voice of Scripture to a whisper.<sup>48</sup>

Wright describes how Sanders reasons from solution to plight:

What is the key, the focal point around which everything else organizes itself? And where did Paul begin his train of thought. The answers Sanders offers to these questions are as follows. First, Paul began with the solution, and worked back to the problem: that is to say, he did *not* . . . begin with a problem in search of a solution and then perceive Christ as that solution, but came to the matter the other way around. His statements, and still more his arguments, about the plight of man and the inadequacy of other methods of salvation are not therefore the base of his scheme, but the result of it, and their various inconsistencies may thereby be more easily understood.<sup>49</sup>

Based on Paul's alleged reasoning from the solution back to the problem solved by the solution, Sanders and other NP advocates have built into their explanations of Paul's writings an understanding of second-temple Judaism that is fraught with misinformation about Paul's relationship to the Judaism of his day, i.e., that he could not have differed with Judaism on soteriological grounds.<sup>50</sup> In implementing

<sup>47</sup>James D. G. Dunn acknowledges the role of preunderstanding in his *Jesus Remembered* (vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]): "In short, if we sum up the hermeneutical issues by responding to the postmodern question 'Is there meaning in the text?', the answer has to be either a qualified Yes or a qualified No. . . . The truth has to be somewhere in between, indeed precisely in the integration of these two too simplistically separated terms, in the 'fusion' of these two polarities. . . . As with the critically realist approach to the history of Christianity's beginnings, so with the hermeneutics of reading the NT, there is neither an absolutely objective meaning 'in' the text, nor an absolutely subjective meaning imported to the text by the reader" (124-25). Wright does likewise when he denies the existence of an antithesis between objective and subjective: "Instead of the spurious antithesis between 'objective' and subjective, we must hold to the proper distinction between public and private" (*Contemporary Quest* 80).

<sup>48</sup>See my discussion of "General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 113-40.

<sup>49</sup>Tom [N. T.] Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1988) 426 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>50</sup>Waters expresses the same fact as follows: "It is simply not true (unless our narratives deceive us) that there is a virtually seamless continuity between the Judaism(s) of Paul's day and the specimen of religion that he adopted and promoted subsequent to his encounter on the Damascus Road" (*Justification and the New Perspectives* 157); cf. Richard B. Gaffin, "Paul the Theologian," *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 (2000):134.

grammatical-historical principles of interpretation, one must get the history right. Otherwise, his exegetical conclusions will be thoroughly flawed.

### **Allegorical Versus Literal Handling of the OT**

Illustrations of such flaws in the case of the NP are plentiful. Covenantal nomism makes much over God's OT covenants with Israel, beginning with the Abrahamic covenant. Wright's words are typical:

Romans 4, in which Paul discusses the faith of Abraham, is not, as is so often suggested, a detached 'proof from scripture' of an abstract doctrine. It is an exposition of the biblical covenant theology which has now been unveiled in the gospel. Genesis 15 is the backbone of the whole chapter—Genesis 15, that is, seen as the chapter in which the covenant with Abraham was established in the first place.<sup>51</sup>

That covenant, with along the other OT covenants with Israel, was God's promise to ethnic Israel. In the original statement of the Abrahamic covenant, God promised,

Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen 12:1b-3).

In the context of Genesis 12, Abraham understood God to promise him a physical lineage that would become a great nation. The fulfillment of those promises and the promises of the other OT covenants with Israel can come only to ethnic Israel, Abraham's physical descendants. NP proponents have allegorized the promises in such a way that they apply to those in the body of Christ, most of whom are not physical descendants of Abraham.

As an example of this allegorization, Wright writes about "the Christian, the fulfilled-Israel, line"<sup>52</sup> and speaks of "Paul's message to the pagan world" as "the fulfilled-Israel message: the one creator God is, through the fulfillment of his covenant with Israel, reconciling the world to himself."<sup>53</sup> Speaking of the predominantly Gentile church as the "fulfilled-Israel" or the "new Israel" is in clear violation of principles of literal fulfillment for which grammatical-historical interpretation stands. Traditionally, non-dispensational systems have followed the same non-literal understanding of Israel's OT covenants, but that does not mitigate the seriousness of the hermeneutical flaw.

<sup>51</sup>Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* 129.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 91.

The NP approach also necessitates the conclusion that national Israel has no future in God's program: "'Resurrection' was, in Ezekiel 37, a metaphor for the return of Israel from exile. When Paul was faced with the fact of Jesus' resurrection, he concluded that the return from exile had in fact happened. . . . It meant that Israel had in principle been redeemed, in the person of her anointed representative."<sup>54</sup> For the NP, the first coming and resurrection of Jesus were the fulfillment of God's promises to ethnic Israel. Yet God's promises to Israel in the OT contained no indication of figurative language. To read those promises in an allegorical sense is a severe breach of their plain meaning.

### Single Meaning Versus Multiple Meanings

#### Romans 1:1

In assigning more than one meaning to a word, phrase, or sentence, the NP clearly places itself into the camp of the extreme subjectivism of the new evangelical hermeneutics. Traditional grammatical-historical principles emphasize the importance of assigning one meaning and one meaning only to each aspect of a given text,<sup>55</sup> but Wright wants at least two meanings for the word "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον, *euangelion*) in Rom 1:1: a Jewish word of comfort regarding Israel's return from exile and a pagan announcement of a great victory and a coming ruler. He wants somehow to combine the two meanings:

Which is these backgrounds, then, is the appropriate one against which to read the New Testament evidence? Is 'the gospel', for Paul, an Isaianic word of comfort or an imperial proclamation?

I suggest that the antithesis between the two is a false one, based on the spurious either-or that has misleadingly divided New Testament studies for many years.<sup>56</sup>

In calling the separate meanings a *false* antithesis, however, he has committed the error of assigning two meanings to the same word. The two meanings *are* antithetical.

He does the same with the Greek word for "Lord" (Κύριος, *Kyrios*), assigning one meaning in connection with Paul's Jewish upbringing and another in connection with his Greco-Roman audience.<sup>57</sup> With the latter group Paul used it to connote Jesus as lord of the whole world, but in the context of his Jewish lineage he used the word to refer to the sovereignty of the one true God of Israel (Isa 43:23).

---

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>55</sup>For further elaboration, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 141-64.

<sup>56</sup>Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* 42-43, especially 43.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 56-57.

For Wright the term has both meanings in Phil 2:11.<sup>58</sup>

### **Romans 1:17**

Wright also assigns a double meaning to the word often translated “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη, *dikaïosynē*) in Paul’s writings. From a Jewish perspective he sees “the righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, *dikaïosynē theou*) in such passages as Rom 1:17; 3:20; 10:3 as referring to God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Israel (cf. Isaiah 40–55).<sup>59</sup> In addition, he sees the same phrase in the same passages as a forensic term, the picture of the judge in a law court pronouncing a defendant not guilty.<sup>60</sup> In the former case the genitive in “the righteousness of God” is a possessive genitive—“a quality in God”—and in the latter case it is a subjective genitive—“an active power which goes out” from God.<sup>61</sup> Wright sees both senses as intended in each passage,<sup>62</sup> in other words, two meanings for the same expression in each text, another hermeneutical flaw.

Dunn follows essentially the same line of reasoning in assigning a double meaning to the expression *dikaïosynē theou* in Rom 1:17. Like Wright, he views *dikaïosynē* as a relational term because of its background in Hebrew usage. In other words, he views “‘righteousness’ as the meeting of obligations laid upon the individual by the relationship of which he or she is part.”<sup>63</sup> On the basis of such a definition, he sees the genitive in *dikaïosynē theou* as both a subjective genitive—“an activity of God”—and an objective genitive—“a gift bestowed by God.”<sup>64</sup> Though he defines the genitives differently from Wright, he commits the same hermeneutical blunder as Wright by assigning two meanings to the same expression in the same text.

Regarding δικαιοῶ (*dikaioō*), the verb form of *dikaïosynē*, Dunn draws a similar conclusion:

The other dispute . . . was whether the verb *dikaioō* means “make righteous” or “reckon as righteous.” But once again the basic idea assumed by Paul was of a relationship in which God acts on behalf of his human partner, first in calling Israel into and then in sustaining Israel in its covenant with him. So once again the answer is not one or the

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 56-57, 66.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 101, 103.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 341.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 344.

other but both.<sup>65</sup>

Since a person needs good works to remain in the covenant family, in addition to reckoning a person as righteous, God must also make him righteous in order for that person to obtain deliverance from final destruction,<sup>66</sup> according to Dunn.

### Romans 5:12, 18-19

In discussing the last clause of Rom 5:12—“because all sinned”—Wright prefers to translate the aorist tense of the verb “all sinned” (ἤμαρτον, *hēmarton*) referring to the primal act of Adam, at the same time preferring not to place too much weight on the tense of the verb. His inclination in downplaying the tense of the verb results from equivocating on the meaning of the clause.<sup>67</sup> As a result, he comes up with the following two meanings for the clause:

Paul’s meaning must in any case be both that an entail of sinfulness has spread throughout the human race from its first beginnings and that each individual has contributed their own share to it. Paul offers no further clue as to how the first of these actually works or how the two interrelate.<sup>68</sup>

The two meanings are in obvious conflict with one another: does Paul refer to personal sin or to sin as transmitted from generation to generation? Wright explicitly answers “both” and, in so doing, assigns two meanings to the passage. In the process, he ignores what has been the clause’s predominant interpretation, that when Adam committed his sin in Genesis 3, he did so as the federal (or seminal) head of the human race. He avoids mention of Adam’s federal headship because it would involve imputation of Adam’s sin to the whole race. When Paul continues this line of thought in Rom 5:18-19, the converse doctrine would be imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers, a doctrine that Wright staunchly rejects. He admits that the two verses speak of status, but interprets status as pertaining to the last day, at the final judgment,<sup>69</sup> not to imputed righteousness presently attributed to believers. He puts it this way: “Justification, rooted in the cross and anticipating the verdict of the last day, gives people a new status, ahead of the performance of

---

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.; cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, vol. 38A of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1988) 43, where the author writes, “*dikaiōn*, ‘to justify’: does it mean ‘to make righteous’ or ‘to count righteous?’ . . . Since the basic idea is of a *relationship* in which God acts even for the defective partner, an action whereby God sustains the weaker partner of his covenant relationship within the relationship, the answer again is really *both*. . . .”

<sup>66</sup>Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 39.

<sup>67</sup>N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in vol. 10 of *The New Interpreters’ Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 526.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 527.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 529.

appropriate deeds.”<sup>70</sup> In accord with covenantal nomism, he sees the necessity of good deeds to complete the justification. Absent from Wright’s discussion is any reference to the universal guilt of man through Adam, which would create the need for Christ’s imputed righteousness.<sup>71</sup>

At this point in his discussion of Rom 5:19 Wright notes his rejection of the view that Jesus’ perfect obedience to the law (His active obedience) acquired for Him a righteousness that is then imputed to those in Christ through His death on the cross (His passive obedience).<sup>72</sup> Drawing upon Isa 53:11 regarding the suffering servant of the Lord, he sees Christ’s obedience in death as an act to replace Israel’s disobedience.<sup>73</sup> For Wright, Christ’s life of obedience has no place in His representation of those in Christ. On the contrary, however, to divorce Christ’s passive obedience from His active obedience renders His passive obedience meaningless. Romans 5:19 points to Adam’s life of disobedience as representative of the whole human race and to Christ’s life of obedience, including His death, as representative of all believers. The imputation of a righteousness derived both from Christ’s active and from His passive obedience contradicts NP teaching.

The conspicuous habit of the NP to assign multiple meanings to single terms, phrases, or clauses in an individual passage signals the utter confusion generated by the system as a whole. Along with its assignment of multiple meanings, the NP also disregards biblical context.

### **Disregard for Biblical Context**

Representatives of the NP repeatedly violate the hermeneutical principle of giving closest attention to the immediate context of a given passage. They invariably jump from passage to passage without a thorough consideration of the various contexts. The result is that they read into a given passage something that is not in that passage’s immediate context, thereby violating the original author’s intention and the original reader’s understanding of what was written.<sup>74</sup> Terry warns against such a practice: “We must avoid the danger of overstepping in this matter [i.e., the matter of using cross-references too carelessly]” and “There may be a likeness of sentiment without any real parallelism [i.e., in regard to verbal parallels between separate passages].”<sup>75</sup>

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives* 182.

<sup>72</sup>Wright, “Romans” 529.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Elsewhere I have called this “hermeneutical hopskotch” (Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 363).

<sup>75</sup>Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (1885; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947) 222-23.

Several citations will illustrate violations of this principle that are very widespread among NP proponents.

### “Gospel” in Rom 1:1, 16

Regarding “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον, *euangelion*) in Rom 1:1, Wright comments, “In Paul’s Jewish world, the word looked back to Isa 40:9 and 52:7, where a messenger was to bring to Jerusalem the good news of Babylon’s defeat, the end of Israel’s exile, and the personal return of YHWH to Zion.”<sup>76</sup> Wright draws his meaning of the word from an OT context, a prophecy of Isaiah regarding national Israel, to define a meaning in Rom 1:1, a letter addressed to a church composed predominantly of Gentiles. He does this, of course, to support his theory of covenantal nomism.

Traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutical principles dictate that this is a use of cross-references which is too careless because no real parallelism exists between the two passages. The proper approach would have been to draw the meaning of the word from Rom 1:9, 15, 16, passages in the same chapter. In Rom 1:15 Paul expresses his willingness to preach the gospel to the predominantly Gentile church in Rome, and in 1:16 he defines the gospel as the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. How would Gentiles in Rome relate to the end of Israel’s exile and YHWH’s return to Jerusalem? Wright would contend that covenantal nomism, the alleged rabbinic-based system, had already by the year A.D. 55 permeated Gentile thinking in faraway Rome. Such a theory is at best farfetched and at worst ridiculous.

Romans 1:16 indicates clearly the individual salvific connotation of Paul’s gospel. To read that verse otherwise involves a redefining not only of “gospel” but also of “salvation.” Wright would have his readers believe that justification was not “so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church,”<sup>77</sup> not how to become a part of the people of God as it is about how one can tell who is a part of that community. He can hardly say contextually that justification is not salvific when the word for salvation is in this very context, but he does so anyway by defining salvation as the rescue of Israel from pagan oppression,<sup>78</sup> a concept that is completely foreign to the context of the book of Romans. *National* salvation is hardly in view when Paul individualizes its recipients with the words “everyone who believes” (1:16). Such a series of redefinitions stems from a preunderstanding imposed on the text of Romans, not from the context of Romans itself.

---

<sup>76</sup>Wright, “Romans” 415; cf. idem, *What Saint Paul Really Said* 40-44.

<sup>77</sup>Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* 119.

<sup>78</sup>Wright, “Romans” 424.

**Romans 2:6, 14-15, 28-29**

Wright multiplies his contextual errors in comments on Romans 2. Two illustrations must suffice. (1) He treats vv. 1-16 as dealing primarily with the judgment of God even though the chapter falls squarely in a section of the epistle (1:18–3:20) that emphasizes universal human sinfulness.<sup>79</sup> The section deals with mankind's guilt, but in it Wright finds proof that justification is based on works,<sup>80</sup> a clear contradiction to a later section where Paul deals directly with the subject of justification. Romans 3:20 says plainly that no one will be justified by works. Regarding Rom 2:6, Wright writes, "To the surprise . . . of those whose traditional readings of the letter lead them to expect that Paul will here simply declare that all are sinners, so that justification can be by faith alone apart from works of the law, he announces on the contrary that justification will be on the basis of works (v. 6). . . ."<sup>81</sup> Regarding 2:13, he writes, "For the moment, he is content to assert the point: Israel's ethnic privilege, backed up by possession of Torah, will be of no avail at the final judgment if Israel has not kept Torah. Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance, not possession."<sup>82</sup> He discounts the possibility that Paul, in the middle of his discussion of human guilt, introduces a hypothetical or theoretical illustration of a human feat that is absolutely impossible to accomplish.<sup>83</sup> In essence, he admits the contextual isolation of his position when he writes, "Throughout the section so far Paul has been saying things that cry out for further explanation, which he will provide as the letter moves forward."<sup>84</sup>

Also, in his disregard for immediate context, he finds references to *justified* Gentiles in chapter 2, before the epistle has reached the point of discussing justification. Regarding 2:14-15, he writes, "[H]ere he is hinting at a theme he will explore later in the letter, namely that the people in question are *Christian* Gentiles (vv. 14-15—indeed, Christian Jews and Gentiles alike (vv. 7, 10))."<sup>85</sup> Regarding 2:28-29, he writes, "Paul now transfers the name, and the validation, to a different group. In the previous verses he has referred to Gentiles who, though uncircumcised, keep the law's regulations; he can only mean Gentile Christians, since this passage, explaining what has gone before, is clearly about membership in the new,

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 438.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid. He writes, "[H]e [i.e., Paul] announces on the contrary that at the last assize justification will be on the basis of works (v. 6), and that there will not only be tribulation and wrath for all wrongdoers, but glory, honor, immortality, eternal life, and peace for all who seek for these things in the appropriate way (vv. 7, 10)."

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 439.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 440.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 441.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

or renewed, covenant.”<sup>86</sup> All this results from importing his covenantal nomistic preunderstanding into Romans 2, which in turn results in his importing teaching from later parts of Romans into the passage.

(2) In 2:17-29 he applies references to Israel’s sinfulness corporately rather than individually when he writes about 2:17, “We should beware of the natural tendency, within our individualistic culture, to assume that when Paul uses the second-person singular (‘If *you*, singular, call yourself a Jew’) he is referring to a typical individual.”<sup>87</sup> He sees this as a reference to “the national boast of ethnic Israel.” In so doing, he masks the utter corruption of first-century Judaism by focusing on Israel’s failure as a nation to be a light in the world. Yes, Israel did fail in her national responsibility, but at this point in developing his case for universal guilt, Paul is speaking of individual sins within Judaism of that day.

Covenantal nomism would have readers believe that Judaism was not so corrupt that widespread stealing, adultery, robbery of temples, and the like existed within the system, that it was a system that kept faith and works in proper balance. Yet that is not the picture of Judaism derived elsewhere, nor is it the picture Paul paints here. Wright’s allegiance to the Sanders-defined picture of a refined religious system forces him to read into the present context elements that are not present, elements that Paul certainly did not intend.

### **Romans 3:21-26**

Regarding Romans 3, Wright writes,

Paul’s purpose in 3:21-26 is not, then, to give a full “doctrine of the atonement,” a complete account of how God dealt with the sins of the world through the death of Jesus. Rather, as one part of his argument that on the cross the righteousness of God was unveiled, he is content to state, not completely *how*, but simply *that* this had been accomplished.<sup>88</sup>

Wright’s interpretation of “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ” in v. 22a is equivalent to “God’s saving justice through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.”<sup>89</sup> He arrives at such an unusual rendering of δικαιοσύνη (*dikaïosynē*, “righteousness”) and πίστις (*pistis*, “faith”) by alluding to Paul’s reference to Abraham in Galatians 3, which he uses as a springboard to pull in the Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 15:5, 13-16.<sup>90</sup> Admitting that the word “covenant” does not

---

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 449.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 445.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 467.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 465, 470.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 464.

occur in this immediate context<sup>91</sup>—nor does it occur anywhere in Romans until 11:27—Wright seeks to build a case that 3:21–4:25 affirms that what God has done in Jesus the Messiah is the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham.<sup>92</sup> Paul does refer to Abraham in Rom 4:1, 2, 3, 9, 12, 16 and to the promise God gave him (Rom 4:13, 14, 16, 20), but emphasizes the importance of Abraham as example of “faith,” a word that occurs 35 times in Romans and nine times in chapter 4.

To arrive at such an interpretation of Rom 3:21–26, Wright must redefine “righteousness”—a word occurring 30 times in Romans—as well as “faith” in ways that are foreign to the context in which they occur. As one has put it, he must “strain Paul through an imposed biblical-theological grid supposedly deduced from the Second Temple literature.”<sup>93</sup> In fact, in seeking to prove his point regarding 3:21–26, Wright pulls in Leviticus 16, 4 Maccabees 17:22, and Isa 52:13–53:12 to support his rendering of Jesus’ faithfulness,<sup>94</sup> all of this to the neglect of the context of Romans 3, which so plainly speaks of human sin and guilt and God’s remedy of an imputed righteousness available to people (Rom 3:9–21, 23–26).

### **Romans 3:27–28**

To continue his “imposed biblical-theological grid” in Rom 3:27–28, Wright must disregard the immediate context again. He admits that the “therefore” in 3:27 normally would draw a conclusion from the section just completed in 3:21–26, but since that sense does not suit his superimposed scheme, he must refer the “therefore” all the way back to Rom 2:17–24,<sup>95</sup> a very unnatural leap to a faraway context.

He says that in 3:28 Paul resolves the antithesis between “the law of works” and “the law of faith” by declaring that a person is ‘justified by faith apart from works of the law.’ In this verse Wright reports “on a calculation that has taken place, not in the present passage, but elsewhere, which he will shortly unveil.”<sup>96</sup> In essence, this commentator admits that he must go outside the immediate context to derive meanings for these two verses, meanings to accommodate his preunderstanding of first-century Judaism.

### **Romans 4:4–5**

Wright’s preference for noncontextual factors in his interpretation comes

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.

<sup>93</sup>Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives* 183.

<sup>94</sup>Wright, “Romans” 467–68.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 480.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 481.

through in a striking fashion in Rom 4:4-5.<sup>97</sup> In his system of thought, faith is not the way one becomes a Christian but is a badge of covenant membership,<sup>98</sup> and imputed righteousness is nonexistent.<sup>99</sup> In vv. 4-5 he acknowledges the bookkeeping metaphor of employment and wage-earning in vv. 4-5a, but says Paul reverts to a metaphor of the lawcourt and the covenant in v. 5b.<sup>100</sup> In connection with 4:3 in the same chapter, he assures his readers that “righteousness” has nothing to do with moral goodness and that “faith” is not a means for obtaining that “righteousness.” Rather, he says, “righteousness” is the status of being a member of the covenant, and “faith” is “the badge, the sign, that reveals that status because it is its key symptom.”<sup>101</sup>

He rejects reading v. 5 as a direct contrast of v. 4, the picture that ‘[w]orkers get paid not by grace but by debt, but believers get paid not by debt but by grace.’<sup>102</sup> He prefers the following explanation:

The two sentences are not in fact balanced, partly because Paul pulls himself out of the bookkeeping metaphor halfway through v. 5 and returns to his main points, the lawcourt and the covenant. What Paul says in v. 5 not only contrasts with v. 4 (“working” and “not working”), but also deconstructs the whole frame of thought: The alternative to “working” is to “trust the one who justifies the ungodly.”<sup>103</sup>

His unstated reason for reading in a deconstruction between v. 5a and v. 5b is his embracing of the NP on first-century Judaism as characteristic of the Pauline perspective also. Neither Judaism nor Paul taught justification by faith. With them justification was only a badge of covenant membership, and final justification—i.e., vindication—was by works. To accept v. 5 as a straightforward reversal of v. 4 would teach justification by faith, thereby condemning the NP to deconstruction.

In applying the term “ungodly” to Abraham in v. 5, Wright points out Abraham’s pagan background as explaining that ungodliness, thereby acknowledging

---

<sup>97</sup>Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives* 147-48, 161-62.

<sup>98</sup>Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* 125; his words are, “Faith is the badge of covenant membership, not something someone ‘performs’ as a kind of initiation test.”

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 98; his words are, “If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom. . . . To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge’s righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how the language works.”

<sup>100</sup>Wright, “Romans” 491-92.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 491.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 491-92.

the moral connotations of “righteousness” which he has denied on the page before.<sup>104</sup> He further complicates his own inconsistencies by noting that God established His covenant with Abraham while he was still ungodly and by continuing to contend that faith is a badge of covenant membership.<sup>105</sup> As Waters notes, “It may be, then, that Wright considers ‘ungodly’ to mean an imperfectly covenantally faithful person.”<sup>106</sup>

Historically speaking, God’s covenant with Abraham came before Abraham’s justification by faith. The initial statement of the covenant came in Genesis 12, but the statement of Abraham’s justification did not come until Genesis 15. So a span of three chapters of Genesis separates Abraham’s covenant membership and his receiving of the alleged indispensable badge of covenant membership. In Rom 4:4-5 the NP runs into a hopeless quagmire from which escape is impossible, all because the system reads an ill-defined understanding of Judaism into the passage.

### **Romans 6:1-11**

As a follow-up to his discussion of 5:12-21, Wright asks, “Do Christians find themselves now in the Adam solidarity or in the Christ solidarity?”<sup>107</sup> He answers, “Christians, he [i.e., Paul] says, have left the old solidarity, and belong to the new; they must behave accordingly. The transfer is effected by dying and rising with the Messiah. And the event in which this dying and rising is accomplished is baptism.”<sup>108</sup>

Wright labors the point that water baptism, not faith, is the means by which anyone becomes a member of the covenant community. Paul, he says, “understood baptism in terms of the new exodus,” having made such a link already in 1 Cor 10:2 when he spoke of the wilderness generation as “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.”<sup>109</sup> Wright views Christians as a “new exodus” people and that baptism was “*both* a dramatic symbol of the new exodus *and* a sign of Jesus’ death.”<sup>110</sup> Faith must be based on water baptism in his view of Rom 6:11.<sup>111</sup> Viewing Christians as a new-exodus people does not come from Paul in the context of Romans 6; it is rather a product of Wright’s NP dream world.

In paralleling Christians with the wilderness generation under Moses, however, Wright fails to note a significant difference. The generation under Moses

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 492.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid.

<sup>106</sup>Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives* 148.

<sup>107</sup>Wright, “Romans” 533.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid. 533-34.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 534.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 535.

passed through the Red Sea bone-dry (cf. 1 Cor 10:2); with the new-wilderness generation—as Wright calls Christians—baptism calls upon them to be drenched from head to toe. It is also notable that just after Paul dismisses one external rite—circumcision—as meaningless in relation to the covenant (Rom 2:25-29), Wright would have him introducing another external rite as a means for becoming a covenant member. Water does not appear in the context of Romans 6, nor does water baptism play a prominent role in Paul’s writings elsewhere (cf. 1 Cor 1:14-17).

Suggesting that water baptism is the means for becoming a covenant member is another example of reading into a context elements that are foreign to the writer’s thoughts.

### **The Hermeneutical Upshot of the New Perspective**

A review of a few of the numerous hermeneutical escapades of the NP has illustrated the utter bankruptcy of the system. It has drawn heavily upon a certain preunderstanding about first-century Judaism and has on that basis proceeded to follow an inevitable trail of wrongheaded conclusions in various portions of Paul’s writings. It has fallen into the fallacious pattern of subjectivism promoted by the new evangelical hermeneutics rather than applying time-tested principles of grammatical-historical interpretation.

A word of caution is in order regarding those who have been somewhat swayed by the NP, those who say they see some value in it, but who have not bought into the system as a whole. Anyone who has embraced even a small aspect of the NP has endorsed the starting point of Sanders’ covenantal nomism which defines the nature of first-century Judaism. That person cannot free himself from the system’s degenerative hermeneutical approach, because without Sanders’ covenantal nomism the NP does not exist. A person cannot embrace traditional grammatical-historical principles and take even a first step toward the NP. The two approaches to Pauline literature are utterly incompatible.

### **Brief Summary of New Perspective Errors**

The following summary of the articles derived from the Winter 2005 Faculty Lecture Series states some of the erroneous positions advocated either explicitly or implicitly by the New Perspective on Paul. Whenever sound, grammatical-historical principles of biblical interpretation are violated, error is the inevitable result. NP proponents do not always agree with one another. In cases where they disagree among themselves, therefore, I have tried to reflect the position of N. T. Wright in the summary, because he is finding widest positive acceptance among contemporary evangelicals.

1. First-century Judaism was not a salvation-by-works religion.
2. First-century Judaism was not especially marked by hypocrisy, petty legalism,

self-serving, self-deceiving casuistry, arrogance, and a lack of confidence in God.

3. God has chosen Israel and given them the law which He enables them to keep.
4. Until the death and resurrection of Christ, by virtue of God's election, any physical descendant of Abraham is a member of the covenant people and thereby justified.
5. Those who maintain the covenantal nomism relationship by obedience are the ones who will be saved.
6. First-century Judaism had a correct balance between faith, grace, and works and was not just a religion of externals.
7. Covenantal nomism provides a means of atonement if a person does break the Mosaic law.
8. Paul retained his covenantal nomism after his Damascus Road experience.
9. From that point on, his mission was to dispense with circumcision, sabbath observance, and dietary restrictions of the Mosaic law as boundaries that limited who could be a member of the covenant people.
10. Human beings do not have a sin nature because of the original sin of Adam.
11. Paul did not have an introspective conscience, i.e., no guilt because of his sinfulness
12. Guilt was not expressed in Paul's writings, but was introduced by Augustine and Luther.
13. Justification by faith and imputed righteousness was read into Paul by Augustine, Luther, Wesley, and Calvin because of their contemporary situations.
14. Paul was a Shammaite who retained covenantal nomism in his theology but added the Lordship of Christ to the system.
15. Faith is not the means of justification or of joining the covenant community; it is rather a badge of covenant membership. One joins the covenant community through water baptism.
16. Justification is a process that is completed only at the final judgment; therefore, no one has eternal security.
17. Final justification is based on works of obedience to the Mosaic law so that any justification a person enjoys at present is only preliminary and can be reversed.