

## **PUTTING THE NEW PERSPECTIVE INTO PERSPECTIVE: SOME THOUGHTS ON SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM**

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The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) is a loosely defined movement held together primarily by a common understanding of Second Temple Judaism. All NPP theologians basically adhere, with varying degrees of intensity and consistency, to Ed Sanders' claims with regard to the nature of pre-70 A.D. Judaism. Sanders has sought to demonstrate the Jews were not Pelagians before Pelagius. They knew that God had graciously elected them, so salvation was not something to be earned, but was God's free gift to the Jews. They knew that the covenant required a response of fidelity and obedience, but this was done out of gratitude, not an attempt to merit blessing.

Sanders' calls this pattern of religion "covenant nomism" and defines it this way:

Covenantal nomism is the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression . . . Obedience maintains one's position in the covenant, but it does not earn God's grace as such . . . Righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the group of the elect.

In another place, he identifies these basic features.

(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 reestablishment 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>1</sup>

How accurate this picture is remains a matter of debate, but most scholars will at least admit the evidence cited by Sanders' needs to be taken seriously. Only the most arrogant and insecure Reformed scholars breezily and hastily dismiss it with the wave of a hand. However, several factors complicate our evaluation of the data. I offer the following thoughts for consideration by those on both sides of the debate.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 75, 420, 544, 422.

First, Judaism was by no means a monolithic entity in the first century (or even before). As several scholars have pointed out, it is really necessary to speak of various Judaisms. To speak anachronistically, there were numerous denominations within Judaism, each vying for supremacy. It is almost impossible to characterize all Jews in this or that way. The best we can hope to do is identify certain trends and broadly held convictions.

Second, the NPP has not claimed that *no* Jews were proto-Pelagian legalists. How could such a claim ever be proven anyway? Universal negatives are difficult for historians, working with limited and fragmentary data. The human condition being what it is, there is very little doubt that some Jews, if not many, were merit-hungry moralists in their heart of hearts, whatever they may have professed. Like the Pharisee in Lk. 18, many Jews may have been willing to thank God for their virtues even as their egos swelled with pride. I have demonstrated elsewhere that the critique of Judaism found in the NT (both the gospels and Paul) counters this prideful presumption on the part of the Jews. The NPP does not give Pelagianism a new lease on life; it remains an illegitimate soteriology. But that doesn't mean the proto-Pelagian Jews are the ones Jesus and Paul have in cross hairs at all times. In fact, I would argue that in several cases, they most certainly did not have Jewish Pelagians in view, or else their arguments and exhortations would have been shaped quite differently. The NT polemicizes against works (e.g., Rom. 11, Tit. 3) as well as "works of the law." That is to say, it opposes Pelagian-style works of merit done to earn salvation, as well living Jewishly as the way defining the covenant community in the messianic age.

Third (to take the above one step further), just because the Jews professed grace does not mean they really believed it. Even the most die-hard ideological Calvinist can be a legalist at heart. And the problem is all the more insidious, given that he may shield himself from criticism and conviction with his intellectual/doctrinal commitments. But by the same token, many who profess semi-Pelagianism (or Arminianism) believe in sovereign grace in their heart of hearts. They may find Calvinism distasteful because of the unattractive way it's been presented to them, or because they do not want to draw certain conclusions that it would *seem* to demand from them. And yet, despite their "official" Arminianism, they know in their heart of hearts that they contributed *nothing* to their salvation. So whatever we find in the writings of Second Temple Judaism, the actual heart condition of individual Jews will remain unknown by us until the last day when the secrets of every heart will be made public.

Fourth, complicating factors even more is the fact that the canonical writings have countless passages that *could be* interpreted in a legalistic, meritorious fashion. Think of Gen. 22:16 or Mt. 6:14 or Rom. 2:5-11. So when we read meritorious sounding passages in Jewish literature, we have to ask: are they simply paraphrasing the canonical writers, or are they setting forth a theology of merit? With the biblical writers, we can always resort to broader context (e.g., Gen 22:16 is found in the context of God himself providing the sacrifice for sin, cutting short any meritorious interpretation of Abraham's obedience). But in the case of extra-canonical Jewish writings, the broader context is difficult, if not impossible, to recover. This makes it exceedingly difficult to reconstruct first century Jewish soteriology with any precision.

Fifth, if it is argued that the Jewish literature is too optimistic about human nature and does not take sin seriously enough, we need to remember the covenantal context. The same could be said of numerous canonical passages which assume the ability of the covenant people to obey. In Scripture, covenant members are never treated as “totally depraved,” but as recipients of covenantal grace. This fact colors and conditions the way exhortations to obedience are couched (e.g., Dt. 30). Again, if we dealt more honestly with the “problem passages” of Scripture, we would find a wider range of interpretive possibilities for the extra-canonical literature.

Sixth, evangelical and Reformed Christians have every reason to question Sanders’ competence as a historian, given his theological commitments. He is a self-professed “secular Christian” and cannot be trusted to deal faithfully with the sacred texts or to fully understand the covenantal soteriology of Biblical Judaism. He has an axe to grind.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the man has done extensive scholarly work and interacted deeply with a broad range of sources, so his interpretation of the data must be dealt with. At the very least, Sanders’ is a recipient of “common grace,” and is extremely intelligent. We cannot ignore him. The way some Reformed theologians blow off the NPP as though it didn’t need serious examination is disappointing, to say the least. In this area, as in so many others, we cannot resolve things *merely* with an appeal to 400+ year old scholarship.

Seventh, some NT passages could be read as teaching that the Jews en masse were walking along in covenant fidelity before Jesus came. He provoked them to rebellion and they stumbled. This is one possible reading of Rom. 9:32-33: if the stumbling stone is Jesus, the Jews couldn’t have stumbled until he began his earthly ministry. Likewise with Rom. 11: Jesus did not find the majority of branches *already* broken out of the covenant tree. Rather, that occurred as a *consequence* of his death and resurrection. Other passages, though, give the indication that Judaism was *already* corrupt to the core *before* Jesus arrived on the scene and began his public ministry (e.g., Mt.3, 23). This is an area that needs more study: what does the NT itself indicate about the state Judaism before and after the death of Christ? The complex picture has yet to be fully grasped.

More could be said, but hopefully this shows the kinds of questions and issues that are still on the table. I do think the NPP has raised many important issues and proven at least a large portion of its case straight off the pages of the NT. But the details of Second Temple Judaism form a collection of puzzle pieces that have yet to be put together into a coherent whole. There is still much work to be done.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, look up “truth, ultimate” in the index of Sanders’ book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.