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The Old Perspective on the New Perspective: A Review of Some 'Pre-Sanders' Thinkers

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Introduction

The year 1977 marked a distinct turn in the world of NT studies. It was this year in which E.P. Sanders published his watershed book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.[1] Ever since the debate between Luther and the Papacy, it has been commonly held in Protestantism that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith was a direct attack against Jewish legalism. However, Sanders performed extensive research in order to demonstrate that first century Judaism was not a religion of legalism, and that scholars since Luther have read a sixteenth-century debate into the NT. The significance of Sanders' thesis (now called the 'New Perspective')[2] could hardly be underestimated. It has shaken the world of NT studies to the point that it has been recognised has having the greatest influence on Pauline studies since the Reformation.[3]

Before the reader laments – 'Oh no, not another article on the New Perspective!' – let me briefly explain why I have chosen to write on such a well-trodden topic. First of all, although most NT scholars and students who have been around the field for a while will be well versed in the current discussion, many budding theologians are still discovering it for the first time. Those who can remember their first encounter with the so-called 'New Perspective' (whether it was in 1977 or 1997!) know that it has not produced the most reader-friendly literature. I therefore primarily wish to help those who are in the midst of an exegetical wrestling match with Paul and the law, trying to understand the flow of influence leading up to what has now been called the New Perspective.

Secondly, I hope to be a bit more novel by focusing on those scholars who wrote either before 1977 or not much later. This essay is not designed to be a critique, or a verification, of the New Perspective. Rather, I simply wish to review the work of some influential 'New Perspective-like' scholars who either wrote previous to, or relatively independent of, E.P. Sanders. To tie things together, I will conclude by looking at the monumental work of the man himself.

1 Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977.
2 This term has been coined by James D.G. Dunn in his article, 'The New Perspective on Paul', *BJRL* 65 (1983), 95–122.
3 'Since the Reformation, I think no school of thought, not even the Bulmannian School, has exerted a greater influence upon Pauline scholarship than the school of the New Perspective;' Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xiv.

Unearthing the Seedbed: Moore, Stendahl, Howard, Tyson, Dahl and Wright

George Foot Moore

It was George Moore who was one of the greatest influences on the subsequent work of Sanders in the late 1970s.[4] In a lengthy article published in 1921,[5] Moore exposed the highly fallacious studies of previous NT scholars, criticising both their method and use of the original sources. Focusing on three prominent NT scholars (Ferdinand Weber, Emil Schürer, and Wilhem Bousset), Moore revealed their failure to perform a true historical study, which resulted in a distorted portrayal of first-century Judaism.

Moore begins by showing that writers since the early Christian Fathers have misrepresented first-century Judaism. Their primary goal was the edification of the Gentiles, not the conversion of the Jews.[6] This began to change through the ages as the conversion of Jews became the main desire. As Jewish/Christian dialogue began to heighten, Christian apologists quickly learned that the only way to achieve conversion was to argue from the Jewish literature (Targum, Talmud, and Midrash) and to demonstrate first-hand that early Jewish interpretation of the OT possesses much discontinuity with medieval exegesis.[7] In order to win Jews to Christ, Christian apologists had to look to the Jewish interpretations of the OT to demonstrate the folly of Judaism's own beliefs.[8] However, at the turn of the nineteenth-century, a new direction arose regarding Jewish studies. Moore writes:

> These later authors would have described their aim as historical – to exhibit the beliefs and teachings of Judaism in the New Testament times or in the early centuries of the Christian era. For this purpose *they employed chiefly the material that came down to them from their predecessors*, without giving sufficient consideration to the fact that it had been gathered for every conceivable motive except to serve as material for the historian.[9]

This formed a gross misuse of these second-hand sources, which in their original context were never intended to give an accurate picture (or any picture really) of the nature of Judaism in the first-century.[10] Unfortunately, it is the work of Ferdinand Weber which Christian authors cite most. Moore characterises the work of Weber as a German systematisation of the inherently unsystematic theology of early Judaism.[11] Weber's systematic portrayal of early Judaism is that it is a legalistic system of works. Holiness is God's primary attribute at the expense of his love, and man can only please a virtually

4 It should be noted that even before the work of Moore, G. F. Montefiore recognised that the negative statements that Paul made against Judaism did not match up with what Early Judaism says about its own religion. Thus, Montefiore concluded, that Paul's attack was not against mainline Judaism, but against a lesser form of Judaism not represented by the original sources; see his *Judaism and St. Paul: Two Essays* (London: Max Goschen, 1914).
5 George Foot Moore, 'Christian Writers on Judaism', *HTR* 14 (1921), 197–254.
6 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 198.
7 Moore, 'Christian Writer', 201–202.
8 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 203–204.
9 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 221 (emphasis added).
10 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 222.
11 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 229.

inaccessible God through strict adherence to a system of religion.[12] Though seeking to be apologetic in nature, Moore contends that Weber's work attempted to show that Lutheran Christianity is better than Judaism.[13]

Moore's main critique of Weber lies in his misuse of sources. Though at a first glance it may seem that he demonstrated a thorough acquaintance with the original Jewish documents, it is clear that he viewed them through the quotations of his predecessors. The original context is neglected, misinterpretations are frequent, and his desire to 'systematise' the thought of the Rabbis proved precarious.[14] Furthermore, Weber restricted his comparison to a Palestinian Judaism which existed three to four hundred year after Christ.[15]

Equally devastating was Emil Schürer's work on Judaism which also sought to demonstrate that Judaism was a legalistic system far inferior to Christianity. This led Moore to conclude that Schürer (like Weber) was not widely read in the Jewish literature.[16] Bousset too, like his young contemporaries,[17] sought to demonstrate that Judaism was a legalistic religion by looking at the Pseudepigrapha and apocryphal writings contemporary to Jesus and Paul. His neglect, however, of the Rabbinic writings (because they were late), was roundly criticised by Moore since these are the most authoritative writings in early Judaism.[18]

Moore concludes that it was not a fresh and thorough study of first-century Judaism that unearthed 'legalism' as the dominant pattern of religion. Rather, it was 'a new apologetic motive' sought by 'NT theologians' to prove that the 'essence of Christianity' was far superior in comparison to Judaism.[19] Moore's plea, then, was for an unbiased and thorough examination of the original Jewish sources in order to gain an accurate picture of what first-century Judaism was all about.[20]

Krister Stendahl and Paul's 'Robust Conscience'

While Moore demolished traditional thinking concerning Judaism, he made little connection with the theology of Paul. This road, however, was travelled later by Krister Stendahl who shook the world of Pauline studies with his groundbreaking article, 'Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', which was published in 1963.[21] His main thesis was that Paul had been drastically misrepresented by scholars who have read his

12 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 229.
13 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 230.
14 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 231–35.
15 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 253.
16 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 239–40.
17 Moore complains that not only are all three New Testament scholars (as opposed to historians), 'the oldest of them (is) scarcely past thirty years old;' Moore, 'Christian Writers', 241.
18 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 243–48.
19 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 253.
20 Moore took up his own challenge in a massive three volume account of early Rabbinic Judaism; see his, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927–30), especially 1.125–216 for his look at the original sources.
21 Originally published in *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963), 199–215, and reprinted in, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles: And Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 78–96. All references will be made to the reprinted edition. For a good summary of Stendahl's thought, see Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 146–49.

letters in light of Luther and Augustine.[22] Unlike Luther, whose conscience was burdened with personal sin, Paul possessed a 'robust conscience'.[23] Paul, as a Jew, lived in a covenant relationship with YHWH, whereby forgiveness of sins was possible by means of repentance and sacrifice. In this sense Paul was faithful, for he was 'blameless' in regard to the Sinaitic legislation (cf. Phil. 3:6).[24] After Paul was called[25] to be an apostle to the Gentiles in Acts 9, he saw the Torah in a different light. The law, being a Jewish document, was an obstruction to his Gentile mission. Therefore, Paul did not view the law as a set of 'legalistic principles'. Such an outlook is a product of late medieval piety. For Paul, the law was primarily a barrier between Jews and Gentiles.[26] The overall framework for the apostle, then, is that of 'Jews and Gentiles',[27] (not 'works' versus 'faith') and 'the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community'.[28]

In light of this, the argument of Paul in Romans 2–3 is drastically affected. Paul is not primarily concerned with 'how to find grace and forgiveness before a holy God', but rather to point out that the transgressions of the Jews prove that they are not better than the Gentiles. The law is no help for the Jew, for he too stands in judgement before God, even more than the Gentiles.[29] Paul's purpose in the early chapters of Romans is to proclaim the 'new avenue of salvation' which is equally available to both Jews and Gentiles.[30]

Stendahl believes that the 'lost centrality of "Jews and Gentiles" is most clearly to be felt in a study of Romans'.[31] In Romans, Paul is not using the theme of 'Jews and Gentiles' as an example to show that all are guilty. Rather, 'Paul was chiefly concerned about the relation between Jews and Gentiles – and in the development of *this* concern he used as one of his arguments the idea of justification by faith'.[32] The purpose of Romans is to proclaim 'God's plan for the world and about how Paul's mission to the Gentiles fits into that plan'.[33] Therefore, the 'climax' and 'real centre of gravity' of Romans is not chapters 1–4, but 9–11.[34] It is in these chapters, Paul reflects on the relationship between 'church and synagogue, the church and the Jewish *people* – not "Christianity" and "Judaism," and not the attitudes of the gospel verses the attitudes of the law'.[35]

Stendahl's provocative thesis can be summarised in the following statement:

22 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 79, 82–83.
23 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 80.
24 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 80.
25 Stendahl views Paul's Acts 9 experience as not a 'conversion', but a call to be an apostle to the Gentiles; Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 84–85; See also his lengthy defense on pages 7–23.
26 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 84, 86.
27 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 87.
28 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 86.
29 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 81.
30 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*.
31 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 3.
32 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*. Stendahl also points out that wherever the topic of 'justification by faith' occurs in Romans, it is found in the midst of a clarifying statement of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles (cf. Rom 1:17; 3:28–30); Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 26.
33 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 27.
34 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 4, 28; cf. 85.
35 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 4.

> Thus even justification by faith, important though we have seen it to be, must be subsumed in the wider context of Paul's mission to the Gentiles, part of God's plan for his creation. Or perhaps we should say it this way: Paul's thoughts about justification were triggered by the issues of divisions and identities in a pluralistic and torn world, not primarily by the inner tensions of individual souls and conscience. His searching eyes focused on the unity and the God-willed diversity of humankind, yes, of the whole creation.[36]

So then, according to Stendahl, two major aspects of Paul's theology are in need of major revision. First of all, justification has been tragically misread by traditional exegetes. It does not reflect the core of Paul's theology. Rather it arose out of the Jew/Gentile issues that he encountered on his mission. Justification is not the battle cry of an individual who has found peace with a holy God, but a doctrine of identity that unites Jews and Gentiles into one family.[37]

Secondly, Paul's mission to the Gentiles is the framework in which all of his theology must be read. The community, not the individual, was Paul's major concern. What is significantly needed then, for a proper reading of Romans, is a freeing of Paul from the reformation fetters in which he is often bound? When this is done, the focus is moved away from the *individual* to *the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the plan of God.*

The Exegetes: George Howard and Joseph Tyson

Generally George Howard is not seen as a major pre-contributor to the New Perspective. A brief look, however, at his exegetical discoveries will show that a lot of what Howard emphasised early on is now seen to be major elements in the writings of New Perspective advocates. Like Stendahl, Howard sought to reveal that Paul was greatly concerned with the inclusion of the Gentiles into the plan of God.

In looking at the soteriologically rich passage of Romans 3:21–31, Howard homed in on the universal thrust of Paul's argument.[38] Instead of *explaining* the atonement, Howard argues, Paul *uses* the atonement as a supporting argument to back up other dominant themes in the epistle.[39] Universalism, says Howard, is the overall theme in Paul's argument in the first three chapters in Romans.[40] 'Since Paul opens and closes with the theme of universalism, it is logical to look to it as the key to his theology in the present passage.'[41] It is the inclusion of the Gentiles, then, that is at the heart of the doctrine of justification, not some sort of forensic declaratory act.[42] This is to offset the modern understanding that justification by faith is a polemic against works of merit. Against this popular understanding, Paul uses the atonement in 3:21–26 to argue for the inclusion of the Gentiles in 3:27–31.[43] According to Howard, the connection

36 Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 40.
37 Stendahl evoked significant critiques from the German New Testament scholar, Ernst Käsemann, regarding justification (see his *Perspectives on Paul* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], 66ff).
38 'Romans 3:21–31 and the Inclusion of the Gentiles', *HTR* 63 (1970), 223–33.
39 Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 228.
40 Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 230. He sites 1:5, 16; 2:10–11; 3:22, 23, 29–30 in support of his thesis.
41 Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 230.
42 Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 231.
43 Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 232.

between Romans 3:27–30 is irresolvable in light of the common understanding of justification by faith. The text reads:

> 27 Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. 28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. 29 Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, 30 since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith (NIV).

In light of Paul's argument for the inclusion of the Gentiles, the rhetorical question made in verse 29, that God is also the God of the Gentiles, makes sense. The modern understanding of justification by faith cannot explain the connection between verse 28 and the question raised in verse 29.[44]

Probably one of the greatest statements concerning the inclusion of the Gentiles, according to Howard, is the problematic passage of Romans 10:4ff.[45] This is another passage which is often misunderstood as teaching that the Jew insisted that they rely on their own works to merit salvation instead of recognising that Christ has brought an end to the system of works inherent in the law.[46] However, as G.F. Moore has sufficiently demonstrated, the Judaism of Paul's day 'believed very much in salvation by grace'.[47] In fact, 'this concept permeated the whole of Judaism in all of its divisions'.[48] So then, when Paul confronts the Jews for 'seeking to establish *their own* righteousness', (Rom. 10:3) he is not referring to individual legalistic merit, but rather 'collective righteousness, to the exclusion of the gentiles'.[49] The key to the passage, then, is the phrase 'to everyone who believes' (10:4b; cf. 10:11ff). The intended goal (*telos*) of the law was to point to 'the ultimate unification of all nations under the God of Abraham ... In this sense Christ is the *telos* of the law; he was its *goal to everyone who believes*'.[50]

Another exegetical study that had an incredible effect on subsequent scholarship was a short article by Joseph B. Tyson in 1973.[51] Tyson focused his study on Paul's use of the phrase, 'works of law', in his letter to the Galatians. The traditional perspective thought that Paul's pejorative use of the term was against 'works-righteousness'. Tyson attempted to show, however, that Paul 'uses the phrase, *erga nomou* [works of law], not to express the deeds of men accomplished in response to law but to describe the conditions out of which deeds may be accomplished'.[52] 'Works of law' for Paul is not 'human moral achievements' but 'nomistic service' or 'life under law'.[53] When Paul

44 Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 232.
45 George Howard, 'Christ, the End of the law: The Meaning of Romans 10:4ff', *JBL* 88 (1969), 337.
46 Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law', 331.
47 Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law', 333.
48 Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law', 333.
49 Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law', 336.
50 Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law', 336 (emphasis original).
51 '"Works of the Law" in Galatians', *JBL* 92 (1973), 423–31. Another study by Tyson that was influential in a similar way was his, 'Paul's opponents in Galatia', *NovT* 10 (1968), 241–56. For the sake of space, I will only review his former article.
52 Tyson, 'Works of law', 425.
53 Tyson, 'Works of law', 425. Tyson here is drawing on, and improving, an earlier study by Ernst Lohmeyer.

writes in Galatians 2:16 that 'we may be justified on the basis of faith rather than on the basis of "nomistic service"' (Tyson's translation of 'works of law'), he is arguing that 'nomistic service is not the system which provides the conditions on the basis of which man can be regarded as righteous'.[54] This 'system' has been superseded by a 'new set of conditions' opened up by the death of Christ.[55] If one, therefore, wishes to live in the old realm of existence marked out by 'nomistic services', he or she is in a sense 'saying that God has not really spoken in Christ'.[56]

In summary, Tyson concludes his study by saying that 'works of law': 1) are not human deeds in a generic sense; 2) are primarily associated with circumcision and food laws; 3) have been superseded by a new set of conditions in Christ; and 4) Paul rejected them because of a new vision of what (now) demarcates the people of God – faith. Like Howard, Tyson sought to show that Paul (at least in Galatians) was not primarily attacking works–righteousness.

Nils Alstrup Dahl: Justification in Paul's Mission

Like Howard, Dahl is often overlooked as being a major contributor to the New Perspective. His influence, however, is rich with regards to the doctrine of justification, promoting much of what was expressed earlier by Stendahl. Unlike most traditional interpreters, Dahl says that Paul's doctrine of justification should be understood in light of its social context. It is not that it is primarily a sociological doctrine, but that 'the framework which Paul uses to locate the doctrine is social and historical rather than psychological and individualistic'.[57] Dahl does not fully agree with Stendahl, that Paul's theology was a rational defence for his Gentile mission,[58] but does concur that justification is not primarily focused on the individual. Justification, rather, is 'something more than a dogmatic doctrine or an answer to the question of how the individual is to find a gracious God'.[59] The doctrine not only concerns the individual, 'but is also of importance for the common life of Christians'.[60] Justification 'has a clear social relevance; it implies an understanding of what Christian community is, and it provides guidelines to show the members of that community how they ought to relate to one another'.[61] This becomes clear when one realises that Paul's missionary endeavours and his theology were inseparable from each other.[62] Rather than presenting a system of theological dogma, Paul 'argues theologically in order to make the missionary congregations understand their own place within the divine economy'.[63]

So then, while much of his work regarding Paul and the law remains rather traditional, his anti-individualistic approach, as well as his theological–social emphasis in

54 Tyson, 'Works of law', 426.
55 Tyson, 'Works of law', 430.
56 Tyson, 'Works of law', 430.
57 Nils A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 110.
58 Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 74.
59 Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 95.
60 Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 95.
61 Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 108. Thus, the behavior of Peter and Barnabas revealed, according to Paul, that they disregarded that justification was by faith by their failure to preserve Christian unity at the Lord's table; cf. page 109.
62 Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 70.
63 Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 71.

Paul, had a significant effect regarding his doctrine of justification, and provides a valid seedbed for future critics of the Lutheran Paul.

N.T. Wright

One may wonder why I have included N.T. Wright in a 'Pre-Sanders' discussion on the New Perspective. I have done so simply because it was only one year after the publication of Sanders' *magnum opus* that Wright expressed some of the most 'New Perspective-like' thoughts on Pauline theology. Even more remarkable is that he did this almost completely independent of Sanders' work (his citation of Sanders is fairly infrequent). It was in 1978 when Wright nudged his way into the dialogue regarding the relation of the Apostle Paul to first-century Judaism in the publication of his Tyndale Fellowship lecture.[64] Attempting to interact with the opposing views of Ernst Käseman and Krister Stendahl regarding Paul and justification, Wright promoted a mediating position in order to present a 'new view of Paul'.[65]

Two primary points emerged from Wright's seminal study: 1) Judaism was not a Weberian religion of works righteousness;[66] and 2) justification was a polemical doctrine that has been abused by Lutheran thought. Regarding the former, Wright agrees wholeheartedly with Moore and Sanders[67] that according to the original sources, Judaism was not a legalistic religion and so Weber was way off in his depiction. The Apostle was not confronting a wrong view of works–righteousness, but rather Jewish 'national righteousness', namely, 'the belief that fleshly Jewish descent guarantees membership of God's true covenant people'.[68] Possession of the law was, for the Jew, a 'badge of national privilege'.[69] According to Wright, this was Paul's point in Romans 10:3 where he faults Israel for being ignorant of God's righteousness and 'seeking to establish *their own* righteousness' (i.e. 'national righteousness').[70]

Secondly, the doctrine of justification by faith needs to be revised. Rather than occupying the core of Paul's theological thought, justification by faith was a polemical doctrine 'because it declares that the way is open for all, Jew and Gentile alike'.[71] Contra Luther, justification is aimed at Jewish *national* pride, not moralistic self-reliance. In light of this, justifying faith is not 'easier than law' since 'both are impossible without grace'. Rather, faith, unlike law, 'is available world-wide'.[72]

Summary

As the reader will see, E.P. Sanders was not thoroughly novel in his thesis. Although he is often credited with providing the foundation for subsequent New Perspective thinking, and rightly so, there were many before him who were embarking on the same path. Moore seemingly destroyed the traditional understanding of early Judaism by

64 N.T. Wright, 'The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith', *TynBul* 29 (1978), 61–88.
65 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 61.
66 He recognises colourfully, that 'Moore said this fifty years ago, and nobody listened;' Wright, 'The Paul of History', 79; cf. 65.
67 Wright criticises Sanders for failing properly to apply the relevance of his thesis regarding first-century Judaism to Paul; Wright, 'The Paul of History', 78, 81.
68 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 65.
69 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 65.
70 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 83.
71 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 71.
72 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 72.

exposing the errors of past treatments. Stendahl agitated Lutheran exegetes by placing Paul in an apparently different world. Howard and Dahl cut against the grain of widely held beliefs about justification and Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. Wright, before the wake of Sanders was completely felt, tied many of these things together and presented a new Paul that was to become familiar in subsequent discussion. Nevertheless, it was E.P. Sanders who produced a weighty first-hand analysis of first-century Judaism, thus paving the way for the inroads of New Perspective thinking.

The 'Sanders Revolution'

Sanders on Judaism

The publication of Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* marked a significant shift in Pauline studies. As the subtitle suggests, the motive of Sanders' revolutionary work is to compare the 'patterns of religion' of the Judaism that existed from 200 BC – AD 200 on the one hand, and with the Christianity promoted by the Apostle Paul on the other. 'What is needed', Sanders writes, 'is to compare Paul on his own terms with Judaism on its own terms, a comparison not of one-line essences or of separate motifs, but of a whole religion with a whole religion'.[73] Sanders criticises past comparisons in that they have focused on an individual motif of one religion (usually that of Paul), which is then compared with the same motif in another religion (namely, Judaism), in order to identify the origin of Pauline Christianity. This is erroneous, says Sanders, since: 'One starts with Pauline motifs and looks for their origins in Judaism, but the various elements of Judaism are not taken up for their own sake. It follows that there is no true comparison of the two religions'.[74] Therefore, Sanders undertakes in his study, 'to compare an entire religion, parts and all, with an entire religion, parts and all'.[75]

Sanders investigated the 'pattern of religion' inherent in Palestinian Judaism from 200 BC – AD 200 by examining the Tannaitic Literature (33–238), the Dead Sea Scrolls (239–321), and the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (329–418). His conclusion regarding the nature of first-century Judaism may be summarised as follows:

> 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. By consistently maintaining the basic framework of *covenantal nomism,*[76] 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 the God who chose and would ultimately redeem Israel was encouraged'.[77]

[73] Sanders, *Palestinian,* 12.
[74] Sanders, *Palestinian,* 13.
[75] Sanders, *Palestinian,* 16
[76] Sanders defines 'covenantal nomism' as '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;' Sanders, *Palestinian,* 75.
[77] Sanders, *Palestinian,* 427 (emphasis original).

In light of the nomistic pattern of religion, Sanders gives a seven-fold structure of Judaism that may be outlined as such:[78]

1. God has chosen Israel.
2. God has given the law.
3. The law implies both God's promise to maintain the election and the requirement to obey.
4. God rewards obedience and punishes transgression.
5. The law provides for means of atonement.
6. Atonement results in maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship.
7. Therefore, all of those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved.

Sanders concludes that this structure reveals that 'election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement'.[79] The Judaism that was attacked by Jesus and Paul, though it may be a correct picture of some individual Jews, is not a correct picture of the *type*, or *pattern*, of religion as revealed by the surviving Jewish literature.[80] 'Covenantal Nomism', rather, 'must have been the general type of religion prevalent in Palestine before the destruction of the Temple'.[81]

Sanders on Paul

Sanders' analysis on Paul is generally believed to be less helpful than his research in first-century Judaism, even among his own supporters.[82] Nevertheless, his work on the Apostle's thought shook the grounds of contemporary scholarship leaving various after-shocks that continue to be felt today. Perhaps the most significant contribution to Pauline scholarship made by Sanders was his reversed approach to Paul's theological thought. He believed that for Paul, the solution to man's problem preceded the problem itself. In other words, for Paul, 'the conclusion that all the world – both Jew and Greek – equally stands in need of a saviour *springs from* the prior conviction that God had provided such a saviour'.[83] This stands diametrically opposed to the traditional thought that views Paul's struggle with trying to keep the law as the 'plight' that preceded his 'solution' found in Christ. It is clear from his epistles, argues Sanders, that Paul 'did not *start* from man's need, but from God's deed'.[84] The order of thought in the book of Romans, then, does not in fact reflect Paul's actual missionary tactics. Instead, he preached the gospel, namely, God's action in Christ.[85]

78 Sanders lists an eight-fold structure, but I have combined his points 3 and 4 into the present number 3; see Sanders, *Palestinian*, 422.
79 Sanders, *Palestinian*, 422.
80 Sanders, *Palestinian*, 426.
81 Sanders, *Palestinian*, 428.
82 See for instance, James D. G. Dunn, 'The New Perspective on Paul', in idem, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 186–88, 201–202; N.T. Wright, *What Paul Really Said*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 18–20.
83 Sanders, *Palestinian*, 443. Cf. the critique by Frank Thielman. *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1994), (emphasis original).
84 Sanders, *Palestinian*, 444.
85 Sanders, *Palestinian*, 444.

In light of this, Paul's soteriological contrast between 'faith and works' must be something vastly different than what is commonly perceived as a contrast between Jewish self-reliance and Christian reliance on God. It was Bultmann who championed the view that Paul's attack on the law is really an attack on man's inability to achieve salvation by keeping the law. Man, therefore, 'cannot exhibit "the works of the law" in their entirety'.[86] Sanders, however, in light of his 'Solution-Plight' scheme, thought that 'Paul's view that attempting to do the law is itself sin is not the *cause* of his keeping the law and being Christian are incompatible; it is the *consequence* of it'.[87] 'The basis for Paul's polemic against the law, and consequently against doing the law, was his exclusivist soteriology. Since salvation is only by Christ, the following of *any* other path is wrong.'[88]

Sanders concludes that the pattern of Pauline Christianity is vastly different from the pattern of Judaism, but not in the relation of grace and works. The difference, rather, is in the 'total type of religion'.[89] Or, the problem that Paul had with Judaism, was that it 'lacks Christ'.[90] Sanders took up the question of Paul's thought in a subsequent work, though it falls chronologically out of the scope of this essay.[91]

Sanders' thought on Paul may be summarised as such:

1. The pattern of religion of Judaism does not reveal a religion of 'works righteousness', but rather one of 'covenantal nomism'.
2. In light of this, Paul's critique of Judaism was not an attack against legalism, but simply a denouncement of his former religion. The main problem that Paul saw with Judaism was that it lacked Christ.
3. Paul's polemic against 'works of the law', was not against legalism, but against a wrong definition of the people of God. Faith, not the law, is the defining mark of the elect.
4. The law, being a Jewish document reserved for a Jewish covenant (Mosaic) should no longer be kept as a means of staying in the covenant.

Conclusion

While much contemporary literature will attribute the New Perspective 'seed' to Sanders' influential study, I have attempted to show that the seminal thoughts were expressed in many writers independent of Sanders. This study has attempted to give an unbiased exposition of the major proponents and theological tenets of the early stages of the so-called 'New Perspective' on Paul. I hope that this survey will help the reader to get a basic handle on the history of thought and major contributors in order to understand the various influences leading up to (and including) the work of Sanders and beyond. One thing that is lacking in this approach is an in-depth exegetical evaluation of relevant texts regarding the validity of the New Perspective. This, however, is a path left for the reader to travel.

86 Sanders, *Palestinian*, 481.
87 Sanders, *Palestinian*, 482 (emphasis original).
88 Sanders, *Palestinian*, 550.
89 Sanders, *Palestinian*, 548.
90 Sanders, *Paul*, 47.
91 *Paul, the Law and Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983). Furthermore, by the time Sanders published this second work, the novelty of his thesis began to fade as more scholars were beginning to make contributions to the New Perspective.