

# Beyond Covenantal Nomism: Paul, Judiasm, and Perfect Obedience

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## I. A New Trajectory From Sanders

In his 1977 *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, E. P. Sanders identified a common pattern in the documents which he examined of Second Temple and tannaitic Judaism. The Jewish people observed the Mosaic Law in response to a gracious God who had elected Israel for a covenant relationship and who had mercifully provided for transgression of that Law. Sanders labeled this pattern “covenantal nomism.” He surmised that no one was expected to obey the Law perfectly in order to enjoy a right relationship with God. Paul exuded a confidence in Philippians 3:3-11 that he was an exemplary Law-observant individual. As a former Pharisee, he clearly suffered no anxiety or pangs of conscience.

So what then was Paul’s difficulty with the Law? In the wake of Sanders’ work, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, and others have championed the “new perspective” on Paul and the Law and have rightly highlighted the intensely ethnic dimension to the apostle’s reasoning. The apostle to the Gentiles’ difficulty with the Law revolved around its differentiation of humanity into Jew and non-Jew. The Gentiles would have to convert to Judaism and be circumcised in order to enter into a relationship with God. Paul recognized that God had never intended the Gentiles to be excluded from the chosen people. The old walls of ethnic hostility and division had been torn down as all people, whether Jew or Gentile, were incorporated into a new humanity identified solely by faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The “new perspective” interpreters, on the basis of Sanders’ analysis of Judaism, have rejected the traditional premise that Paul’s problem with the Law was simply that no one could satisfactorily do it.

Scholars have not generally recognized that one can accept the bulk of Sanders’ analysis of Judaism without accepting the “new perspective” premise regarding perfect obedience. The “new perspective” trajectory from Sanders is not in itself a necessary one. Pauline interpreters have overlooked Sanders’ own struggle with the “demand” of the Law in its

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regulations and strictures on the one hand and the “grace” of the covenantal framework on the other. Quite often, his analysis appears deliberately skewed to emphasize God’s grace and mercy. Sanders minimized the Law’s strict demand as one side of a tension between the embedded nomism and the gracious covenantal framework. In at least three of the bodies of intertestamental literature Sanders analyzed, the Law actually enjoined perfect obedience of its commands. If it is true that the Jews often saw the Law as requiring strict, perfect obedience, then the key premise in the “new perspective on Paul” would be wrong. An incorrect premise would explain why scholars so frequently experience difficulty explaining why Paul’s issue with the Law revolved quite often around satisfying the Law’s demands. A few representative passages, then, will underscore that the apostle’s “plight” with the Law was not just a matter of ethnic exclusion but also its demand for rigorous obedience.

How could the apostle claim difficulty with doing the Law in the face of Judaism’s own gracious framework and provision for failure? Paul, however, has radically redefined that gracious framework of election, covenant, and atonement in favor of a reconstructed framework of grace centering on the person of Christ. The transition into a new framework of grace has affected the embedded nomism. Paul’s problem with the Law, then, was not just with its division of humanity and Jewish ethnic pride and presumption. The time is ripe for a “newer perspective” on Paul and the Law.

## **II. Sanders’ Tension in Intertestamental Literature Sharpened**

Sanders analyzed *Jubilees* and the Qumran literature in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. He reviewed Philo in an article which was published prior to the book. These intertestamental works are more directly relevant to the interpretation of Paul than the tannaitic literature which originated after the catastrophe of the Temple’s destruction in 70 A.D. At that point in time a radical reorganization of the Jewish leadership and Jewish thought took place. *Jubilees*, the Qumran literature, and Philo all showcase the gracious dimension of Sanders’ covenantal nomism. Yet in spite of an overarching gracious orientation, all three bodies of literature also affirm that God’s holy Law was to be obeyed rigorously and perfectly.

### *A. Jubilees*

According to *Jubilees*, all Israel was God’s elect people (1:17-18, 25, 28; 16:17-18; 19:18; 22:11-12). Israel enjoyed a special covenantal relationship with God that was bequeathed from the patriarchs (6:17-19). The author praised God’s gracious provision of repentance (1:22-23; 23:26; 41:23-27) and the sacrificial system (6:14; 50:10-11; 34:18-19) for failure to obey the Law. Since God’s elect could be “righteous” even when not perfectly obedient,

it would be easy to conclude that the Law did not demand strict obedience. From the point of view of the author of *Jubilees*, however, the Mosaic Law *did* enjoin perfect obedience. The people's sins were never ignored but always addressed through a process of atonement and repentance. Perfection of conduct nevertheless remained the ideal. "All of his commands and his ordinances and all of his law" are to be carefully observed "without turning aside to the right or left" (23:16). In 5:19: "[God] did not show partiality, except Noah alone...because his heart was righteous in all of his ways just as it was commanded concerning him. And he did not transgress anything which was ordained for him." Noah, while the recipient of God's mercy (10:3), did "just as it was commanded" and was "righteous in all of his ways." "He did not transgress." Jacob was also "a perfect man" (27:17). Leah "was perfect and upright in all her ways," and Joseph "walked uprightly" (36:23; 40:8). While God granted mercy to the elect, the requirement of right conduct "in all things" (21:23) is still upheld and admonished through these exemplary models. While Israel enjoyed an elect status, the Law must still be obeyed (1:23-24; 20:7). God told Abram in 15:3 to "be pleasing before me and be perfect." Abraham was then praised in 23:10 since he "was *perfect in all of his actions* with the Lord and was pleasing through righteousness all of the days of his life." The author looked forward to the day when Israel would be *perfectly* obedient (1:22-24; 5:12; 50:5). Sanders conceded on the basis of these passages: "Perfect obedience is specified...."<sup>1</sup> He added: "As we have now come to expect, the emphasis on God's mercy is coupled with a strict demand to be obedient."<sup>2</sup> While God offered provision for sin and failure, the ideal remained strict and perfect obedience of the Law.

Sanders preferred to resolve the logical tension between God's mercy toward the elect and the rigorous demands of the Law in favor of mercy since *Jubilees* could speak of sinners as those who were righteous by means of God's own provision for sin.<sup>3</sup> Sanders: "Righteousness as perfect or nearly perfect obedience is not, however, the 'soteriology' of the author."<sup>4</sup> While it is true that perfect or nearly perfect righteousness was not the soteriology of the author, the Law itself demanded just such an obedience. The problem with Sanders' position is that he often downgraded the strict demand of the Law as a reaction to those who had described Judaism as a legalistic religion. As much as the author of *Jubilees* identified the Law as an ethnic identity/boundary marker and as much as he spoke of God's mercy toward an elect and often sinful people (unlike the strict judgment of the Gentiles—5:12-18; 23:31), the author maintained that God intended the Law to be obeyed *without transgression!*

<sup>1</sup>E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 381.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 383.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 380-383.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 382. Sanders (379) argues that in fact *Jubilees* is not so strict since it affirms repentance and God's mercy. This confuses the legal demand itself and the larger framework of Judaism inclusive of God's election and mercy.

## B. The Qumran Literature

The Qumran community admonished its members to be perfect in their obedience of the Law.<sup>5</sup> The demand of the Law was strict and absolute (1QS 1:13-17; 5:1, 8, 20-22; CD 2:15; 15:12-14; 16:6b-8; 20:2, 5, 7). According to 1QS 3:9-11, the individual must “steady his steps in order to walk with perfection on all the paths of God, conforming to all he has decreed concerning the regular times of his commands and not turn aside, either left or right, nor infringe even one of his words.” Sanders rightly stressed the availability of a system of atonement for sin at Qumran (particularly right conduct). The men of the Qumran community upheld repentance as a means of rectifying the situation caused by sin before God. However, far from mitigating the strict requirement of the Qumran *halakah* to be perfect in deed, the system of atonement confirmed it. Each sin had to be atoned for in some way so that the individual could be restored to “perfect righteousness.” Any sin rendered a transgressor impure and out of favor before God as well as before the community until that sin had been properly rectified. For example, CD 10:2-3 says: “No-one who has consciously transgressed anything of a precept is to be believed as a witness against his fellow, until he has been purified to return.”

Even with these provisions for sin, Qumran members still expressed an intense self-awareness of sin in their hymnic material.<sup>6</sup> Far from finding perfect obedience a matter of due course, they struggled individually with living in a fully righteous manner before God. The author of 1QH 12 (=4):29-33 lamented falling short of the “perfect path” required by God. Community members looked forward to the eschaton when they would be “cleansed” of this tendency toward sin (1QS 3:21-23; 4:18-22; 11:14-15; 1QH 14 [=6]:8-10; 7 [=15]:15-17).<sup>7</sup> Sanders underscored that a status of “perfect righteousness” flowed out of God’s gracious relations with the elect community, e.g., 1QH 12 (=4):37; 15 (=7):30; 19 (=11):29-32.<sup>8</sup> The requirement for legal perfection was always set within a context of gratuity. The reward was always the result of God’s *mercy* while punishment was always *deserved*.<sup>9</sup> Obedience was always the elect people’s response to God’s grace.<sup>10</sup> While God was indeed merciful, 1QS 4:6-8 is unmistakably clear, contra Sanders, that God would reward those who were obedient in their works: “And the visitation of those who walk in it [the counsels of the spirit] will be for healing, plentiful peace in a long life, fruitful offspring with all everlasting blessings,

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<sup>5</sup>For example, 1QH 9 (=1):36: perfection of way.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 273-284.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 279-280, 283-284, 291.

<sup>8</sup>Sanders himself points out the dilemma between the requirement of perfect obedience and the failure to live up to the standard (288-290). He attempts to resolve the dilemma by arguing that the failure to live up to God’s standard refers to man’s condition *before God*. Perfection must come by means of God’s grace and pardon.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 293.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 295-296.

eternal enjoyment with endless life, and a crown of glory with majestic raiment in eternal light.” While God was a God of compassion and mercy, he still “pays man his wages” (1QS 10:17-18). 4QPs<sup>f</sup> 8:4-5 says: “[Man is examined] according to his path each one is rewar[ded according to his de]eds.” 1QM 11:14: “...you shall carry out justice by your truthful judgment on every son of man.” 1QpHab 8:1-3 says: “Its interpretation concerns all observing the Law in the House of Judah, whom God will free from punishment on account of their deeds and of their loyalty to the Teacher of Righteousness.” Alongside those texts which speak of God’s mercy and forgiveness of sin (even at the judgment), there are passages which adhere to a strict judgment according to the standard of works.<sup>11</sup> Sanders resolved the tension by subordinating the passages which speak of all people being judged according to their works to those passages where God judged the wicked according to works while judging the elect with mercy and grace, e.g., 1QH 13 (=5):6; 14 (=6):9; 17 (=9):34.<sup>12</sup> While many Qumran passages affirm a judgment according to mercy for the elect, such passages do not exhaust all the evidence. The covenanters could also affirm that God would judge all people, even those of the community, on the basis of what they had earned by their works. The two motifs must be allowed to remain in tension.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 291-294, while even citing these passages.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 294. Note that these references fall *outside* the *halakah* in the context of the hymnic material.

<sup>13</sup>As Sanders himself admits with respect to the strict demand of the *halakah*: “...from the point of view of the *halakah*, one is required to walk perfectly. From the point of view of the individual in prayer or devotional moments, he is unable to walk perfectly and must be given the perfection of way by God’s grace” (288). Unfortunately, Sanders is not consistent on this point. Elsewhere he writes:

The various provisions for the punishment of transgression show with striking clarity the way in which the religion functioned. Commandments were given which a man was to obey. Perfect obedience was the aim, and, within the tightly ordered community structure, was not considered a totally impossible goal. Infractions were punished, and the acceptance of the punishment, together with the perseverance in obedience, led to full restoration of fellowship (286).

On the one hand, perfect obedience was *not* “totally impossible,” and, on the other hand, the individual is “unable to walk perfectly.” Sanders tries to resolve the contradiction by distinguishing between behavior monitored *within the community* where perfect obedience is possible as opposed to strict obedience before God where such perfection is not possible. The problem, though, is that the Qumran material itself does not make such a neat distinction. The two motifs are simply not so easily harmonized. Perfect obedience was required by the *halakah*, and such obedience entailed *all* the Law and not just what was monitored. Yet the devotional material shows the struggles individuals had with that requirement and the need to rely upon God’s grace and mercy available to members of the community; see 1QH 12 (=4):37; 15 (=7):18-19; 1QS 10: 11; 11:2-3, 12-15; Bruce W. Longenecker, *Eschatology and Covenant: A Comparison of 4 Ezra and Romans 1-11* (JSNTSup, 57; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 25. New Testament scholars have been led by Sanders’ discussion to assert that perfect obedience of the Law is, in fact, possible. While, according to the Qumran materials, perfect obedience is required by the *halakah*, it is not necessarily so possible.

## C. Philo

In *Praemiis* 79-83 (especially 79 and 82, citing Deut. 30:10) Philo said that it was not enough to hear or profess the precepts of God's Law; one must actually do them. Individuals would be weighed in the scales (e.g., *Congr.* 164; *Quis Her.* 46). In *Quod Deus* 162 one must not deviate to the right or to the left from the path God has prepared for humanity in the Law (*Abr.* 269; *Post.* 101-102; cf *Leg. All.* 3:165; the "middle road" of *Mig.* 146). Philo praised Abraham (*Abr.* 192) since "he had not neglected any of God's commands." One's "whole life" should be one of "happy obedience to law" (*Abr.* 5-6).<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, God "ever prefers forgiveness to punishment" (*Praem.* 166). God granted to the Jews several means by which they could rectify the situation created by sin and violation of God's Law. Philo affirmed atoning sacrifice (*Spec. Leg.* 1:235-241; 1:188-190; 1:235-239). Only God could be sinless (*Fug.* 157; *Virt.* 177; *Leg. All.* 3:106.211).<sup>15</sup> The possibility of repentance flowed out of God's recognition of the human tendency to sin (*Fug.* 99, 105).<sup>16</sup> It was as if one were ill, with repentance being the only hope for a return to health (*Fug.* 160; *Abr.* 26; *Spec. Leg.* 1:236-253). Sincere repentance blotted out the effects of sin as if the sin had never occurred (*Abr.* 19; *Spec. Leg.* 1:187-188; *Quaest. in Gn.* 1:84; *Mut.* 124; *Som.* 1:91).<sup>17</sup> God bestowed rewards and blessings "in honor of their victory" (*Virt.* 175). Those who repented, though, still bore the scars of their misdeeds (*Spec. Leg.* 1:103).

While Philo affirmed Israel's special status as recipients of God's mercy and affirmed repentance as a means to remedy the situation caused by sin, he nevertheless commended those whose conduct was perfect. Those who remained sinless and unblemished were superior to those who must repent and so be healed of their illness (*Abr.* 26; *Virt.* 176). Abraham achieved perfect obedience of the Law (*Mig.* 127-130; *Abr.* 275-276; *Quis Her.* 6-9).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>I take the law of nature to be coordinate with the revealed, Mosaic Law. See especially *Mos.* 2:52, Naomi Cohen, "The Jewish Dimension of Philo's Judaism," *JJS* 38 (1987): 169-170, and John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE-117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 172.

<sup>15</sup>David Winston, "Philo's Doctrine of Repentance," *The School of Moses: Studies in Philo and Hellenistic Religion*, ed. John Peter Kenney (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 32; Jon Nelson Bailey, "Metanoia in the Writings of Philo Judaeus," *SBL 1991 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 140-141.

<sup>16</sup>Winston, "Philo's Doctrine of Repentance," 32. Note how contrary this assumption is to the prevailing trend in Pauline scholarship to think that perfect obedience of the Law is attainable.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 34; Bailey, "Metanoia," 140. On the necessity of sincerity, see *Fug.* 160.

<sup>18</sup>The passage from "Who is the Heir?" is representative both as an admonition to strive toward perfect obedience as well as an expression of Abraham's attainment of that goal:

When, then, is it that the servant speaks frankly to his master? Surely it is when his heart tells him that he has not wronged his owner, but that his words

Noah was “perfect” in virtue (*Quod Deus* 117, 122, 140; *Abr.* 34, 47). Interestingly, Philo immediately qualified the attribute of perfection for Noah (*Abr.* 36-39). Noah only attained a perfection relative to his generation; he was “not good absolutely” (οὐ καθάπαξ). Philo then compared Noah’s “perfection” with other sages who possessed an “unchallenged” and “unperverted” virtue. Noah therefore won the “second prize.” Although Noah was to be praised for his achievement, Philo clearly commended the “first prize” of an unqualified virtue to his readers. Moses, for instance, fell into that highest category. The Lawgiver exemplified the attainment of the highest place of all (*Mos.* 1:162; 2:1, 8-11; *Leg. All.* 3:134, 140; *Ebr.* 94; *Sac.* 8). Philo commended Moses as a model of the perfection toward which his readers were to strive (*Mos.* 1:158-159). Obviously perfect obedience and sinlessness remained the ideal for Philo.

Philo maintained that the Jews, as an elect people, were to strive to live as virtuously and as perfectly as possible, as difficult as this might be. Even Enoch and Enosh were not able to live perfectly and without sin. On the other hand, God, a merciful God, recognized humanity’s difficulty with sin and offered abundant grace and mercy to the repentant. While the balance certainly weighed heavily toward mercy and forgiveness of sin in Philo, the Law still enjoined a perfect obedience toward which all people should strive.<sup>19</sup>

#### D. Clarifying a Crucial Distinction

While upholding the Law as a marker of Jewish ethnic identity, Jubilees commended Noah, Abraham and others for their perfect obedience of the Law. Philo too spoke of certain “perfect” individuals. Similarly, the language of “perfect righteousness” at Qumran had a prescriptive force. Perfection was the standard by which the community members were to try to live. Whether by perfect exemplary models or by claiming that God demanded strict obedience, these documents evince a struggle with the Law’s strict demand. In the words of Eleazar to his torturer, Antiochus, in 4 Maccabees

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and deeds are all [πάντα] for that owner’s benefit. And so when else should the slave of God open his mouth freely to Him Who is the ruler and master both of himself and of the All, *save when he is pure from sin* and the judgements of his conscious are loyal to his master.... The loyalty of Abraham’s service and ministry is shewn by the concluding words of the oracle addressed to Abraham’s son, “I will give to thee and thy seed all this land, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in thy seed, because Abraham thy father hearkened to My voice and kept My injunctions, My commands, My ordinances and My statutes” (Gen. 26: 3-5). It is the highest praise which can be given to a servant that *he neglects none* [μηδενός] *of his master’s commands...* [emphasis mine].

<sup>19</sup>For a more detailed discussion of Philo, *Jubilees*, and the Qumran material, see chapter 1 of A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001). This chapter also treats the *tannaim* at length. Chapter 2 then extends the analysis into the apocalyptic literature of the first century.

5:20-21: “The transgression of the Law, be it in small things or in great, is equally heinous; for in either case equally the Law is despised.”<sup>20</sup>

Certainly the virtually ubiquitous broader perspective was that the Jews were a special people who had been favored by God and who had been granted a system to remedy the situation caused by transgression of God’s Law. Nevertheless, Sanders minimized the fact that perfect conduct always remained the ideal. A distinction must be made between the Law considered inclusive of its gracious framework where one may fall short of perfect obedience, and the Law considered from the vantage point of its legislation where the demand is absolute. The distinction is critical. One of the shortcomings of Sanders’ analysis is that he does not consistently distinguish between the gracious system as a whole and the embedded legal demand. He wrote in his discussion of the *tannaim* at one point: “Human perfection was not considered realistically achievable by the Rabbis nor was it required.”<sup>21</sup> The rabbis “consistently passed up opportunities to require legal perfection.”<sup>22</sup> Sanders was wrong to claim that the *halakah* never required perfect obedience. As he rightly urged elsewhere: “In their [the Rabbis’] view, God had given all the commandments, and they were all to be obeyed alike. It would be presumptuous of man to determine that some should be neglected.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, “...the biblical commandments, while not necessarily more difficult to fulfill than the laws of some other societies, are nevertheless difficult or even impossible fully to obey.”<sup>24</sup> “Although the term ‘righteous’ is primarily applied to those who obey the Torah, the Rabbis knew full well that even the righteous did not obey God’s law perfectly.”<sup>25</sup> The apparent contradiction in Sanders’ analysis was resolved by keeping the strict demand of the Law conceptually distinct from the larger framework of God’s mercy and election of Israel. The rabbis could therefore speak of how rare it was for anyone to obey God’s Law perfectly, that is, the Law’s requirements considered in themselves. Yet perfect righteousness and blamelessness were quite achievable when inclusive of God’s forgiveness, sacrifice, and atonement. This was not the same, though, as actually accomplishing all that the Law required. While affirming with Sanders the importance of God’s election and merciful regard toward the Jewish people, the Jews did maintain that the Law enjoins perfect obedience—contrary to the claims of “new perspective” Pauline scholars. These interpreters may well have erred by dismissing in advance the likelihood that Paul also considered perfect obedience of the Law’s strictures difficult, if not impossible.

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<sup>20</sup>The rabbis did at times speak of the necessity of perfect obedience, e.g., M. Abot 3:16; Charles L. Quarles, “The Soteriology of R. Akiba and E. P. Sanders’ Paul and Palestinian Judaism”, *NTS* 42 (1996): 190.

<sup>21</sup>Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 137.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 203.

### III. Paul and Perfect Obedience

All the gains of the “new perspective” in incorporating the ethnic dimension of Paul’s argument are not necessarily incompatible with the possibility that the apostle also understood the Law to require strict obedience and was not optimistic about humanity’s ability to meet its standards.<sup>26</sup> By adopting a privileged Jewish ethnic identity through observance of circumcision, Sabbath, and the food laws, one would simply be obliging oneself to follow Moses’ Law in its entirety. Since Paul’s Jewish contemporaries maintained that God’s Law should be rigorously obeyed by its recipients, the possibility cannot be rejected in advance that strict obedience of the Law played a role in Paul’s thinking as well. In passages such as Galatians 3:10, Romans 2, and Romans 7, the problem with the Law appears to be the difficult or impossible demand it places upon its adherents. These passages have proven problematic for “new perspective” interpreters but are understandable in light of Jewish struggles with the Law’s strict demand.

#### A. Perfect Obedience: Galatians 3:10

Galatians 3:10 forms an enthymeme, a logical argument where one of the premises is missing because the premise should have been obvious to the original readers.<sup>27</sup> The stated premise is: “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in this book of the law.” Paul concludes: “All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse.” The omitted premise necessary to complete the syllogism is: “All who rely on the works of the law do not observe and obey all the things written in this book of the law.” People simply are not capable of doing all that the Law requires and thus fall under its curse.

“New perspective” interpreters have offered several explanations of this problematic passage’s apparent reference to perfect obedience. N. T. Wright and James M. Scott thought that Galatians 3:10 addressed Israel’s corporate fate and said nothing about individual disobedience of the Law.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>For a recent study exploring the ethnic dimension to Paul’s thinking, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

<sup>27</sup>Aristotle writes: “For if any of these [premises of an enthymeme] is well known, there is no need to mention it, for the hearer can add it himself” (*Rhetoric* 1.2.13 [13 57a], translation from the Loeb Classical Library). In *Rhetoric* 2.22.3 (1395b), “nor should [an enthymeme] include all the steps of the argument...it is simply a waste of words, because it states much that is obvious.” See also *Rhetoric* 3.18.2, 4 (1419a); Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.8,1-4; Quintilian, 5, 14, 24; 5, 10, 3; *The “Progymnasmata” of Theon*, III, 104-109 (trans. James R. Butts; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1986), 198-201.

<sup>28</sup>N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 147; James M. Scott, “For as Many as Are of Works of the Law Are Under a Curse’ (Galatians 3. 10),” *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders (JSNTSup, 83; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 214 n. 89.

In response, however, the fate of the nation as a corporate whole cannot be abstracted from the conduct of its individual members. The sin of individual Israelites accrued to Israel as a whole. In Galatians 3:10 Paul cited Deuteronomy 27, a chapter which does not address the corporate fate of Israel only. Deuteronomy 27:26 is the twelfth in a series of curses (27:15-26). Two of the twelve curses are explicitly identified as sins committed “in secret” (vv. 15, 24).<sup>29</sup> Four more curses involve sexual sins that would also be committed privately (vv. 20-24). Likewise, no one would move a boundary marker in public (v. 17). A blind man would never be able to testify that he had been led astray (v. 18).<sup>30</sup> Bellefontaine explained that when the Levites pronounced the curse and the community responded in affirmation during the ceremony envisioned in Deuteronomy 27, the community was guaranteeing that sins committed by individuals in secret would not bring about God’s vengeance on the community as a whole (e.g., Achan in Joshua 7). God would curse the guilty criminal with the community no longer liable.<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 27:26 is situated in the context of a section concerned with the retributive divine curse that falls upon individual law-breakers for secret sins. Likewise Deuteronomy 29-30 shifts easily back and forth between individual and corporate accountability. While Wright and Scott have corrected the tendency to ignore the corporate dimension, the fate of corporate Israel must not be abstracted from the deeds of its individual members. The exile of Israel testified to the conduct of individual Israelites under the Law. Paul’s own discussion alternates between corporate responsibility and individual accountability later on in Galatians 5:25-6:10.

James D. G. Dunn offered yet another alternative to the reconstructed syllogism offered above. Like Wright and Scott, Dunn did not think that Paul was claiming in Galatians 3:10 that the Mosaic Law must be perfectly obeyed. On the contrary, Paul uses the technical term “works of the Law” which, according to Dunn, referred to those works required by the Law which distinguish the Jews from Gentiles. These works included circumcision, Sabbath observance, and the food laws.<sup>32</sup> Under pressure from his critics, Dunn modified his position: the phrase “works of the Law” referred to all that the Law requires, but the primary focus of the expression was still on those laws that acted as national and ethnic boundary markers.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Elizabeth Bellefontaine, “The Curses of Deuteronomy 27: Their Relationship to the Prohibitives,” *A Song of Power and the Power of Song*, ed. Duane L. Christensen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 260.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 267; see also Albrecht Alt, “The Origins of Israelite Law,” *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 115.

<sup>32</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, (WBC 38A; Dallas 1988), lxxi-lxxii, 186-187, 190-194.

<sup>33</sup>See, for examples Dunn’s article, “Paul and Justification by Faith,” in *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul’s Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 96-97.

Either way, Paul had in mind, from Dunn's standpoint, particularly those aspects of the Law that served as signs of Jewish ethnic identity. Galatians 3:10 could be paraphrased: "those who rely on their Jewish ethnic identity are under a curse." In Dunn's paradigm Galatians 3:10 pronounced guilty those relying on their ethnic heritage since they denied uncircumcised Gentiles a place in God's plan in Christ. By insisting on the "works of the Law," such individuals were guilty of nationalistically excluding the Gentiles from God's people.<sup>34</sup>

Pauline scholarship is indebted to Dunn for underscoring how Paul considers the Law to be the unique possession of the Jews (e.g., Rom. 2:12). Romans 3:28-29 certainly associates "works of the Law" with Jewish ethnic identity. Acceptance of Dunn's alternative that the Law was the unique and special possession of the Jewish people does not rule out that this Law must also be obeyed strictly and in its entirety. Dunn pointed to Galatians 2:16 as an instance of "works of the Law" referring to Jewish ethnic identity, but Paul continues in Galatians 2:21: "for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing." Paul's statement in 2:21 parallels his claim a few verses earlier that no one is justified by the "works of the Law." Likewise verse 19: "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God." Paul's elaboration in the ensuing verses seems to have more to do with the Law as a whole than with a focus on only a part of the Law.<sup>35</sup> Paul's point is that the Law as such cannot justify. A better approach would begin not with the boundary marking features of the Law but with the Law in its entirety: obedience to the Law requires obedience of all that it commands. This obedience would certainly include those aspects of the Law which distinguish the Jews from the Gentiles. An acceptance of what the Law requires of new converts in circumcision or food laws would signal a willingness to obey the whole Law. Thus Paul could move very naturally from a review of his critique of Peter at Antioch to a discussion of the Law itself. Paul saw no point in forcing the Gentiles to live like Jews under the Law since the Law did not offer a right relationship with God (vv. 15-16).

Paul claims in Galatians 3:10 that everyone who relies on "the works of the Law" is under a curse. Another clue that Paul's phrase "works of the Law" cannot be limited just to those aspects of the Law that distinguish the Jews as an ethnic people from the Gentiles comes from Paul's citation of Deuteronomy 27:26, a verse situated in a portion of Deuteronomy (chaps.

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<sup>34</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 172; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 231.

<sup>35</sup>Against Dunn's view that the Jews misunderstood the Law in overly ethnic terms, Räisänen objects on the basis of Galatians 3: "And it is altogether impossible to read chapter 3 as an attack on just a particular attitude to the law. Why should the death of Christ have been necessary to liberate men from an attitude of theirs?" ("Galatians 2:16 and Paul's Break with Judaism," in *Jesus, Paul and Torah: Collected Essays*, trans. David E. Orton [JSNTSup, 43; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992], 122).

27-30) that condemns all sorts of legal violations—illicit sexual relations, misleading the blind, changing borders, following other gods, even withholding justice from widows and orphans. The summary verses in Deuteronomy 27:26; 28:1, 15, 58, 61; 30:10 consistently emphasize obedience of all that God commands in the Law. The language is comprehensive; the Law is an organic whole that must all be obeyed. Deuteronomy's focus is never limited just to those laws that distinguish Israel from other nations. Even in the verses that immediately precede Deuteronomy 27:26, the commands often involve sins committed individually in secret (27:15-26). In fact, the prohibitions of Deuteronomy 27 usually correspond with similar prohibitions elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> Deuteronomy 27:15-26 has simply extended the threatened curses to situations where the sin takes place in private. Since Deuteronomy 27:26 concludes a section hardly concerned with prohibitions that distinguish Israel as an ethnic people, it is difficult to see why Paul's citation of Deuteronomy 27:26 in connection with "works of the Law" in Galatians 3:10 should be limited only to those features of the Law that function as boundary markers for the people of Israel.

The Qumran manuscript 4QMMT offers a rare independent witness in Hebrew to Paul's phrase "works of the Law" (מעשי חֻדָּה). The Qumran phrase refers to all that the Law requires. Whenever an individual chose to depart from the community's understanding of God's Law on a particular point, that member had apostasized. From the community's perspective, to neglect any aspect of the Law would bring about the curses of Deuteronomy 27-30 and the need for separation (as Dunn himself showed). In other words, the "works of the Law" refers primarily to what the Law requires in general and in its entirety. Only secondarily does it focus on particular boundary-defining strictures. Dunn reversed the rightful emphases. Because the focus is primarily upon the Law as a whole, the particular laws referred to by the phrase can vary from one conflict situation to another. By esteeming and obeying those laws the community showed itself devoted to the entirety of God's counsel.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>For instance, compare verse 16 with Exodus 20:12; 21:17; Leviticus 19:3 and 20:9. Compare verse 17 with Deuteronomy 19:14; verse 18 with Leviticus 19:14; and verse 19 with Exodus 22:20-23; 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34; Deuteronomy 1:17; 10:18-19; 24:17-18. See Bellefontaine's discussion for the remaining curses ("The Curses of Deuteronomy 27," 256-268), as well as Gerhard Wallis, "Der Vollbürgereid in Deuteronomium 27, 15-26," *HUCA* 45 (1974): 50-51.

<sup>37</sup>4QMMT's heading indicates that it addresses "some of the works of the Law." "Works of the Law" must therefore go beyond those aspects in dispute within the document to include the entirety of the Law; Ben Witherington, III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 176-177. Joseph A. Fitzmyer has likewise noted the "broad outlook" of this document. Nothing suggests the restriction of the phrase to only certain boundary-marking aspects of the Law ("Paul's Jewish Background and the Deeds of the Law," in *According to Paul: Studies in the Theology of the Apostle* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1993], 23). Fitzmyer repeatedly emphasizes throughout his article that "works of the Law" at Qumran must be taken as those works that the Law requires in a general sense (19-24).

The Community Rule at Qumran confirms this interpretation of 4QMMT. The Community Rule called members to “return to the law of Moses according to all that he commanded” (1QS 5:8). In 1QS 5:21 individuals were examined upon entry into the community with respect to their “works of the law” whether they had been careful “to walk according to all these precepts” (see also 1QS 6:18). The precepts included the “avoidance of anger, impatience, hatred, insulting elders, blasphemy, malice, foolish talk, and nakedness” (1QS 5:25-26; 6:24-7:18). Circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, and the food laws were therefore only the starting point. The Qumran parallels further suggest that Paul had more than just the ethnic or boundary-marking components of the Law in mind in Galatians 3:10, which is best taken as a reference to the necessity of perfectly obeying the Law.<sup>38</sup>

## B. The Challenge of Law Observance: Romans 2 and 7

Recent scholarship has become polarized on whether Paul’s problem with the Law was the inability of people to obey its demands or its exclusion of the Gentiles—whether by a misunderstanding or ethnic pride. “New perspective” and more traditional interpreters do not always recognize that it is a both/and relationship. The Law functions both to distinguish the Jewish people and to place a burden of obedience upon them. The apostle sees absolutely nothing wrong in a Jewish ethnic identity in Romans 2 provided one actually does all that the Law requires. It is not enough just to obey those aspects of the Law that distinguish a person as Jewish. Paul’s rhetorical charges against the Jews in Romans 2:17-29 assume the difficulty even for Jews of doing all that the Law required. He makes that assumption explicit in Romans 7.<sup>39</sup>

Romans 7 laments human inability to do what the Mosaic Law requires of its adherents. While the Law is indeed “spiritual” (7:14) and “good” (7:16; see also vv. 22 and 25), the power of sin turns out to be far stronger than the desire to do what the Law commands.<sup>40</sup> People under the Law find themselves in the “wretched” position of being unable to do good; they do what they hate instead (7:15) because of the tyranny and power of sin (7:14, 17, 20, 24). Three times Paul cycles through an admission that the “I” is unable to accomplish what the Law demands (7:15-16, 18-20, 21-23). Paul finds one commandment epitomizing the futile struggle to obey the Law: “Do not covet.” Of all the commandments the prohibition against coveting exposes the problem of a sinful heart. The battle against sin

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<sup>38</sup>For a critique of other attempts to explain this text in a “new perspective” paradigm (including Sanders’ own approach), see chapter 6 of Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*.

<sup>39</sup>For a detailed exposition of Romans 1 and 2, see chapter 7 of Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*.

<sup>40</sup>On sin as an enslaving power, see 3:9; 5:14, 17, 32; 6:18; Robert C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1967), 16.

penetrates to the inner core of human existence, that is, to secret, sinful desires and motives that stand in the way of obedience of God's holy Law.<sup>41</sup>

Michael Winger has drawn attention to Paul's use in Romans 7 of ἐντολή.<sup>42</sup> Paul may have had in mind the command οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις ("Do not covet") in Romans 7:7. A second possibility is that Paul was referring to νόμος from the point of view of all of its commands.<sup>43</sup> In either case, Paul's choice of ἐντολή in the midst of his discussion of νόμος places the emphasis squarely on the Law's command. The varied terminology that Paul uses to express the same point makes it clear that doing the Law is the key issue. He repeatedly uses three distinct synonyms eleven times in verses 15-21: πράσσω (vv. 15, 19), ποιέω (vv. 15, 16, 19, 20, 21), and κατεργάζομαι (vv. 15, 17, 18, 20).<sup>44</sup> The "problem" or "plight" of the Law according to Romans 7:14-25 is that those who know what the Law demands are unable to "do" it. Paul turns in Romans 8:3-4 to the work of Christ as the solution to fleshly humanity's inability (τὸ ἀδύνατον) to do what God requires in the Law. Through Christ the Law's "righteous decree" (τὸ δικάϊωμα τοῦ νόμου) is fulfilled in believers.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>"Do not covet" in Romans 7:7 is the most private and interior of the commandments. Philippians 3 says little or nothing about the possibility of an internal struggle with sin and desire and remains at the level only of a public, observable blamelessness. The only distinguishing characteristic of the tenth commandment from the others is its unique focus on interiority (J. A. Ziesler, "The Role of the Tenth Commandment in Romans 7," *JSNT* 33 (1988): 47-48). Whereas most Jews would have no problem keeping the other commandments (murder, adultery, robbery, the Sabbath), it is the command not to covet that exposes the extreme difficulty of keeping the Mosaic Law (Ziesler, "The Role," 48). As Ziesler himself points out, Paul "almost certainly generalizes from it [the command not to covet]" ("The Just Requirement of the Law [Romans 8.4]," *AusBR* 35 [1987]: 80). This point is developed at greater length by Douglas. J. Moo, "Israel and Paul in Romans 7:7-12," *NTS* 32 (1986): 123, and J. G. Strelan, "A Note on the Old Testament Background of Romans 7:7," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 15 (1981): 23-25. Philo calls desire the fountain of iniquity from which all sinful actions flows (*Decal.* 142-153, 173); for this reason God prohibited coveting. 4 Maccabees 2:5-6 (in their context) claim that if one can control and limit sinful desires through reason, then one will be able to obey the Law in other ways as well. The tenth commandment could therefore epitomize the entirety of the Law (even as in Rom. 7).

<sup>42</sup>*By What Law?: The Meaning of Νόμος in the Letters of Paul* (SBLDS, 128; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 166-167.

<sup>43</sup>Paul is certainly not using the word as a synonym for νόμος. Why would Paul vary his terminology for the Mosaic Law here and nowhere else?

<sup>44</sup>This creates a powerful rhetorical effect; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 202. John M. Espy's distinctions between the three terms seem overly subtle ("Paul's 'Robust Conscience' Re-Examined," *NTS* 31 [1985]: 184-185 n. 62).

<sup>45</sup>E. P. Sanders (*Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 74) admits that in Romans 7 "humans are depicted as unable to fulfill it [the Law] because of sin and the flesh." He adds (74-75): "Its 'fault,' rather, is that it does not bear within itself the power to enable people to observe it." Sanders is then quick to qualify his comments on Romans 7. He says with respect to Pauline material outside of Romans 7: "it is worth observing that in none of these passages does Paul argue that the law is too hard to be fulfilled adequately" (Sanders, *Paul, the Law*, 78). Romans 7 is therefore the exception where Paul does say that people are unable to accomplish the Law. The problem is that

Absolutely nothing in Romans 7 indicates that Paul's problem with the Law is that it leads to national righteousness or ethnic pride.<sup>46</sup> On the contrary, possession of the Law is good as long as one can translate possession of the Law into the concrete action which the Law demands. Winger explained that ἐντολή was never used in a way that would clearly demarcate Jews from Gentiles.<sup>47</sup> Paul sees the Law as setting forth a demand which must be successfully accomplished by the individual. Sin renders successful accomplishment of the Law impossible.<sup>48</sup>

### C. "Blameless" Obedience: Philippians 3:3-11

Philippians 3:3-11 proves difficult for the thesis that Paul thought people were unable to accomplish what the Law required. Paul called his own observance of the Law "blameless." E. P. Sanders' analysis of Judaism can be credited with providing the necessary background to evaluate Paul's claim of "blamelessness." A recurrent motif in Sanders' analysis of Judaism was the consistent recognition that human beings fall short of God's will. With respect to the tannaim, Sanders wrote: "Although the term 'righteous' is primarily applied to those who obey the Torah, the Rabbis knew full well that even the righteous did not obey God's law perfectly."<sup>49</sup> The Biblical commandments "are nevertheless difficult or even impossible fully to obey."<sup>50</sup> "Human perfection was not considered realistically achievable by the Rabbis."<sup>51</sup> The Sipra on Leviticus related the incident in the Hebrew Scriptures of Nadab and Abihu as an example of human imperfection. Nadab and Abihu were killed by fire for an unholy offering of fire before the Lord, and yet they were not exposed or humiliated in death.<sup>52</sup> The Sipra commented: "how much the more so [will God show pity to] other righteous persons" (emphasis mine). Abihu and Nadab were considered among the

other passages confirm what Paul says in Romans 7. Apart from Galatians 3:10, the necessity of doing the Law has been a motif in Romans 2-4 and these chapters pave the way for the critique in Romans 7. What seems obvious to Sanders in Romans 7 need not be a contradiction of what Paul says elsewhere. Paul will continue his critique in Romans 9-11; see Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*, chapter 10. There is nothing "extreme" about Paul's "presentation of human inability" here; contra Sanders (*Paul, the Law*, 78).

<sup>46</sup>James D. G. Dunn inexplicably thinks that Paul's problem with the Law in Romans 7 must be understood in terms of the sin of "national righteousness," "national self-righteous judgment on others," or the "unself-critical presumption of God's favor" (Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 352). The eschatological Spirit has liberated humanity "from that too narrowing understanding of the law's role" in terms of "pride in national identity" (387). Where does Paul address a mistaken understanding of the Law in Romans 7?

<sup>47</sup>Michael Winger, *By What Law?: The Meaning of Νόμος in the Letters of Paul*, (SBLDS, 128; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 166-167.

<sup>48</sup>For a more detailed discussion of Romans 7 as well as the evidence that νόμος should be taken as referring to the Mosaic Law throughout Paul's discussion, see chapter 9 of Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*.

<sup>49</sup>Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 203.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 115; see also p. 137.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 137.

<sup>52</sup>Sifra Shernini Mekhilta deMiluim 22-27 (on Lev. 10:1-5).

righteous even though their sin warranted punishment by death. “Righteousness” for a Jew never meant that one had been sinless and had perfectly done all that God commanded in the Law. The “righteous” were those who attempted to obey the Law in its entirety and sought atonement for their sin or failure.<sup>53</sup> The ultimate criterion was faithfulness to the covenant relationship. As Sanders summarized the views of the Qumran sect: “...from the point of view of the *halakah*, one is required to walk perfectly. From the point of view of the individual in prayer or devotional moments, he is unable to walk perfectly and must be given perfection of way by God’s grace.”<sup>54</sup>

The “righteous” were typically sinners who availed themselves of God’s mercy and election even while falling short of the perfect measure toward which they were striving. Biblical figures are often characterized as “blameless” even when the Biblical text admits their sins (2 Chron. 15:17 [cf. 2 Chron. 16’s catalog of sins]; Luke 1:6, 18-20). Paul could admonish his own audience to be “blameless” (Phil. 2:15; see also 1 Thess. 3:13; 5:23; and 1 Cor. 1:8). With respect to Philippians 3, Paul’s boast as a Jew included not only his Jewish identity but also his zeal for and accomplishment of the Law. The Law always involved the demand for rigorous obedience alongside its ethnic particularity.<sup>55</sup>

Paul reflected the same tension in his writings: he could call himself blameless with respect to the righteousness of the Law and yet still affirm that all people are sinners.<sup>56</sup> What Sanders had to say on this matter is more accurate and cannot be stressed enough: “It would be hazardous to

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<sup>53</sup>As Sanders puts it: “...the *righteous* are those who obey the Torah and atone for transgression” (emphasis?) (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 204). Or with George Foot Moore: “Righteousness, in the conception of it which Judaism got from the Scriptures, had no suggestion of sinless perfection. Nor are the sins of the righteous all venial; the gravest moral lapses may befall them, as they did David. What distinguishes the righteous man who has fallen into sin is his repentance...” (*Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927], I, 494-495).

<sup>54</sup>Thus Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 305-312. He concludes from the data (311-312) “On the one hand, there is the sense of human inadequacy before God...: no one can be righteous or perfect before God; no one, on his own, has ‘righteous deeds.’ On the other hand, there is the consciousness of being elect; thus some are righteous (*tsaddiq, yitsdaq*), but only by the grace of God.”

<sup>55</sup>Blamelessness with respect to the Law ought to be distinguished from perfect obedience. Perfect obedience is unerring success in doing all that God commands in the Law.

<sup>56</sup>4 Ezra 7:68-69 expresses a skepticism about human ability to refrain from sin: “For all who have been born are entangled in iniquities, and are full of sins and burdened with transgressions. And if after death we were not to come into judgment, perhaps it would have been better for us.” In 4 Ezra 9:36: “For we who have received the law and sinned will perish, as well as our hearts that received it.” R. Gainaliel could despair over the necessity of perfect obedience, while R. Akiba consoled him on the basis of a more merciful judgment based on a majority of deeds; see Quarles, “Soteriology.” Elsewhere, the rabbis generally considered a variety of means effective for the atoning of sin. Gainaliel’s despair in M. Aboth is therefore unusual. Most rabbis were confident that “all Israelites” have a share in the world to come. Gainaliel is valuable as an example of the requirement for “perfection of way” within the system as a whole.

suppose that Paul must have held one position as his true view, while using the other only for the sake of argument. He could quite easily have held both, without ever playing them off against each other so that he became aware that they are mutually exclusive.<sup>57</sup> R. Eliezer (Sanhedrin 101a) could assert that “there is none that is righteous” while on another occasion be surprised that he had committed a sin for which he had to suffer.<sup>58</sup> The key lies in the fact that Paul described his prior status as “blameless.” He never said that he was without sin as a Pharisee. To assume that being “blameless” was the same as being sinless and innocent of any violation of the Mosaic Law would be an error. The “new perspective” interpretation of Paul and the Law has been wrong to cite Philippians 3 as proof that Paul did not have a problem with perfect obedience of the Law.<sup>59</sup>

#### IV. The Gracious Framework of Judaism and Paul

Considering the much more optimistic outlook on living in accordance with the Law among the Jews of his day, how is it possible for Paul to see doing the Law as problematic? E. P. Sanders demonstrated that the Law’s demands were always embedded within the gracious framework of God’s election and covenant, which Sanders called “covenantal nomism.” Whenever one failed in the performance of the Law’s demands, one could avail oneself of the sacrificial system, atonement, repentance, and thereby God’s mercy. Sanders himself admitted, however, that Paul was no “covenantal nomist”;

Paul’s ‘pattern of religion’ cannot be described as ‘covenantal nomism,’ and therefore Paul presents an essentially different type of religiousness from any found in Palestinian Jewish literature.... Paul in fact explicitly denies that the Jewish covenant can be effective for salvation, thus consciously denying the basis of Judaism.<sup>60</sup>

It is unfortunate that Sander’s conclusion was not based on a detailed comparison of Paul and Judaism with respect to the categories he deemed central to first-century Judaism, i.e., election, covenant, and sacrifice. Sanders proceeded on the assumption that Paul’s categories of thought were simply different from those of Judaism. Yet how do these crucial elements in Jewish thought fare in Paul the former Pharisee? If Paul had abandoned a system of Judaism that can be described as “covenantal nomism,” what happened to the key aspects of that system in his thought?

Paul was not entirely comfortable with the notion of covenant. As

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<sup>57</sup>Sanders, *Paul, the Law, 24*.

<sup>58</sup>The rabbis could be surprised that they had sinned to the point that they merited suffering or death (*Mek. Nezikin* 18 [to Exodus 22, 22 (23)]; *Sanh.* 101a [on R. Eliezer]).

<sup>59</sup>On Philippians 3 see chapter 9 of Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*.

<sup>60</sup>Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 543, 551 (emphasis his).

Galatians 3:15-17 make clear, the concept of “covenant” had become too closely associated with the Mosaic Law among Paul’s contemporaries. Paul, in a radical move, divorced the Mosaic Law from the only covenant of value, the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>61</sup> In Galatians 4:21-31 the apostle places the Mosaic covenant alongside slavery and bondage.<sup>62</sup> Likewise in 2 Corinthians 3 Paul speaks of the old Mosaic covenant as a covenant of the letter and death. The Mosaic covenant no longer functioned as a gracious framework for the Law.<sup>63</sup>

Paul granted the election of the Jewish people. He looked to a day when “all Israel” would be saved. Nevertheless, the extensive critique of the “two covenant” or Sonderweg theory in Romans 11 has shown that the saving benefits of Israel’s election must be realized through the faith in Christ that Paul speaks of in Romans 10:9-10. There will be no separate path to salvation for the Jews apart from their own Messiah (9:5). Paul’s subsequent emphatic fourfold use of “all” (πᾶς) in 10:11-13 will permit no other interpretation.<sup>64</sup> Further, if faith in Christ is the decisive element in God’s electing activity, the apostle’s calling Gentile Christians God’s “elect” (Rom. 8:28-35) becomes comprehensible.<sup>65</sup> The election of Israel no longer offered any saving benefit apart from faith in Christ.<sup>66</sup>

One looks in vain for atoning sacrifice in Paul. Perhaps Paul’s reference to the ἱλαστήριον in Romans 3:25 may be a reference to atoning sacrifice. On the other hand, a reference to the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant has been disputed. Many scholars now believe that ἱλαστήριον could be more accurately translated in general terms as a “propitiation” or

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<sup>61</sup>Paul’s deliberate use of the plural διαθήκαι in Romans 9:4 is probably a nod to the Abrahamic covenant.

<sup>62</sup>For a more detailed discussion of Galatians 3:15-17 and 4:21-31, see chapter 3 of Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*.

<sup>63</sup>For a detailed exegesis of 2 Corinthians 3, see Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*, chapter 3.

<sup>64</sup>Reider Hvalvik, “A ‘Sonderweg’ for Israel: A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11.25-27,” *JSNT* 38 (1990): 87-107; Dieter Sänger, “Rettung der Heiden und Erwählung Israels: Einige vorläufige Erwägungen zu Römer 11,25-27,” *K.D.* 32 [1986]: 99-119; Erich Gräßer, “Zwei Heilswege? Zum theologischen Verhältnis von Israel und Kirche,” in *Kontinuität und Einheit: Für Franz Mußner*, hrsg. Paul-Gerhard Müller and Wemer Stenger (Freiburg: Herder, 1981), 411-429; E. Elizabeth Johnson, *The Function of Apocalyptic and Wisdom Traditions in Romans 9-11* (SBLDS, 109; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 176-205; Heikki Räisänen, “Paul, God, and Israel: Romans 9-11 in Recent Research,” in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism: Essay in Tribute to Howard Clark Kee*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Peder Borgen, Ernest S. Frericks, and Richard Horsley (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 189-192; Frank Thielman, *From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul’s View of the Law in Galatians and Romans*, (NTS, 61; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 123-132; Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*, chapter 4.

<sup>65</sup>Paul regularly calls his Gentile Christian readers the “elect,” a title previously used for ethnic Israel.

<sup>66</sup>For a fairly detailed discussion of Israel’s election in both Romans and Galatians in light of these letters’ respective situations, please see A. Andrew Das, *Paul and the Jews* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, forthcoming).

“expiation.”<sup>67</sup> Should one maintain the reference to the mercy seat, then Paul has reinterpreted the premiere means of atonement in Judaism in terms of Christ. As Peter Stuhlmacher concluded: “The cultic celebration of the Day of Atonement is abolished and superseded by virtue of this act of God, because the atonement granted definitively by God in Christ once and for all renders superfluous further cultic atonement ritual.”<sup>68</sup> In effect, the gracious covenantal framework of Judaism has been reconceptualized in favor of a new framework of grace in the work of Christ.<sup>69</sup>

## V. Conclusion

Sanders wrongly minimized the belief in Judaism that God intended for the Law to be obeyed strictly and in its entirety. Judaism maintained a balance between the need for strict obedience of the Law and the possibility of atonement and forgiveness for God’s elect. But if the gracious framework of Judaism is denied salvific efficacy in Paul, it becomes comprehensible why he has a problem with doing the Law. The Law’s rigorous demands have come to the fore in the apostle’s thinking and emerged as problematic. These demands have become problematical *in a Pauline logic where the only gracious framework was in Christ*. Paul’s solution to sin resided strictly in the work of Jesus Christ.

Paul discovered that the Law was not God’s provision for sin (Gal. 2:21; 3:21). If the sacrifices and atonement of the Law were of no avail in and of themselves, then the Law was reduced to the realm of human achievement and doing. God acted *in Christ* to save. If the Jewish Law were no longer the basis for God’s justifying activity, then the Law could no longer serve to exclude the Gentiles from God’s plan. With the denial of the gracious framework of covenantal nomism, the Law no longer acted as a sign of Jewish privilege; it entailed an enslaving obligation. It entailed “works” (Rom. 4:4-5).

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<sup>67</sup>My own preference is “propitiation” but not because of 1:18-3:20. “Propitiation” functions better in this context as a demonstration of “the righteousness of God.” For a more extensive discussion why *ἱλαστήριον* should not be understood as the “mercy seat,” as well as for a more extensive discussion of atoning sacrifice in Paul, see chapter 5 of Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*.

<sup>68</sup>Recent Exegesis on Romans 3:24-26,” *Reconciliation, Law & Righteousness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 104.

<sup>69</sup>This is precisely the logic of Romans 3. After the denial of any saving privileges based on ethnic identity in Romans 2, Paul asks whether there is any advantage in being a Jew at the beginning of Romans 3. He answers “Much in every way.” For the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God, and these are oracles that testify to their salvation in the Messiah Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21-26). At just the point where the covenantal nomist of Romans 2 would have faulted Paul for denying God’s mercy and atonement in the equation, Paul presents Christ.

# Homiletical Helps on LW Series C —Epistles

## Ninth Sunday after Pentecost Colossians 1:21-28 August 5, 2001

*Preliminary considerations:* The Old Testament reading for the day (Gen. 18:1-14) is the Lord's visit to Abraham a year before the birth of Isaac. Sarah is preparing the meal for the honored guests when she overhears the prediction of her pregnancy. She laughs. Sarah is gently rebuked. The Gospel lesson (Luke 10:38-42) is the visit of Jesus to Mary and Martha. Martha is preparing the meal for the honored guest while Mary listens to Jesus' teaching. Martha is gently rebuked. In both of these situations women who are engaged in the ordinary tasks of life, one at the command of her husband and the other at her own choosing, find themselves being pulled out of the mundane and into the mysterious. For Sarah it is the mystery of a miracle pregnancy, while for Martha it is the mystery of greater learning at the feet of Jesus.

These two accounts form parentheses around the text from Colossians. Though the epistle is part of a *lectio continuo*, Colossians 1:21-28 also describes individuals, in this case the gentile believers in Colosse, who have been pulled out of the ordinary and mundane to find themselves part of an incredible mystery, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The connecting link from all three readings to the hearers is the shared mystery of receiving God's love and mercy.

*Textual exposition:* The pivotal term in the text is ἀποκατήλλαξεν in verse 22. The action is done by God, and the verb is an aorist. The animosity and alienation have been removed. The root word ἀποκατάλλασσω means to transfer from one condition to a very different condition. When used with relationships it describes restoration and reconciliation. God has done this for the Colossians, with the result that by remaining in the faith they will be presented holy and blameless in the sight of God.

Verse 24 challenges the casual reader who must wonder what Paul means by filling up in his flesh "what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions" (τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ). Commentators immediately recognize that this cannot be Paul's act of completing the atoning work of Christ on the Cross. The atonement is complete. This could be Paul's reference to his own commission, as the Lord described it to Ananias in Acts 9:16 with the words "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Or it could be a reference to what is given to believers who are privileged to suffer for the name of Christ. Lenski calls this "the leftover parts of the afflictions of Christ" (Lenski, R. C. H., *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937], 73.). These leftovers consist of the hatred of the world toward Christ that are now turned against His followers. One finds this sense in 1 Corinthians 1:5, "For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives...."

The pericope divides cleanly into two parts, verses 21-23 and 24-28. The first provides the background of God's saving work through Jesus Christ which has

reconciled the Colossians to God, and encourages their persistence in faith. *Nûv* marks the division as Paul now describes his role as a servant of Christ, and his great joy in revealing the mystery of Christ for both Jews and Gentiles.

*Theological confession:* Colossians provides too many points of doctrine from which to choose. If it wasn't for the assistance given by the text itself, we might have a difficult time deciding which of the many truths to emphasize. Here is a partial listing of significant teachings touched upon by Paul; original sin (alienated), actual sin (wicked works), atonement (reconciled in the body of his flesh), justification (present you holy), sanctification (continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast), the church (for the sake of His body which is the church), inclusive Gospel (make known among the Gentiles), heaven (hope of glory), and the ministry (admonishing and teaching).

The attention of the readers of the epistle is drawn to the mystery (*τοῦ μυστηρίου*), however, and this is where the focus of the sermon is most naturally placed. Two complementary views on the nature of this mystery are possible (Carson, H. M. *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 17). First, there is the mystery that the Gentiles are also invited to share in the hope provided through the Jew, Jesus Christ. Second, the use of "mystery" by Paul could very well be an intentional contrast of the glory that is in the believer with the false knowledge of the many mystery cults that thrived in the Colossian context. For the purpose of this sermon, the emphasis will be placed on the mystery of God's love in Christ that brings the hope of glory.

*Evangelical proclamation:* The text functions as strong Gospel for the Colossians in their time of threat from false teachings. It begins with a brief reminder of where they were before coming to saving faith in Jesus, and uses relationship language of alienation. The Gospel is presented immediately as reconciliation through Jesus Christ. As Paul describes himself enduring afflictions for Christ, the hearers learn how circumstances that formerly would have been thought to be punishment or judgment (Law) are now a source of joy that confirms God's love for them through Christ (Gospel).

*Hearer interpretation:* The hearers are confronted with many mysteries in their lives, but none are as filled with awe and consequence as the mystery of their own salvation. The mundane and persistent problems of daily living can lead Christians to wonder how they ever got into the difficulties in which they find themselves. The good news for the hearers begins with realizing that our root question is not, "How did I get into this mess?" but "How did I get into this glory?" The answer that is found is similar to the experiences of Sarah and Martha, who were pulled out of their mundane tasks into the center of God's gracious acts for salvation.

### **"How Did I Get Into This Glory?"**

- I. The mystery of glory is solved in Jesus Christ.
  - A. Once we were enemies of God.
  - B. Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God.
- II. The mystery of glory continues.
  - A. Jesus Christ is in us.
  - B. Our trials are endured as joys.
  - C. We proclaim the hope of glory.

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