AN OVERVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL'S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION:

Part Two–The New Perspective Critiqued (1)

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In a previous article I sought to give an overview of what has been called "The New Perspective on Paul"[1]. Specific focus was given to those aspects of the New Perspective (NP) that most directly touch on the doctrine of justification by faith. We considered its leading proponents, primary tenets, growing influence, subtle appeal, and alarming implications. In this and following articles, we will take up a summary critique of the NP. This article will address historical and hermeneutical problems with the NP. Those to follow will take up some of its exegetical problems.

The Historical Problem with the New Perspective: Was 2nd Temple Judaism Really a Religion of Grace?

As we saw in the previous article, much of the NP approach to Paul is based on the assertion that 2nd Temple Judaism was a religion of grace. One might argue that this assertion is the lynchpin, the keystone, the foundation, the cornerstone, the bedrock of the NP. This assertion (or assumption) is primarily based on the conclusions of E.P. Sanders in his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. It all starts with Sanders. James Dunn puts it this way:

> Judaism is first and foremost a religion of grace...Somewhat surprisingly, the picture Sanders painted of what he called covenant nomism is remarkably like the classic Reformation theology of works....that good works are the consequence and outworking of divine grace, not the means by which that grace is first attained....the Judaism of what Sanders christened as 'covenantal nomism' can now

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[1] See *Reformed Baptist Theological Review*, III.1, January 2006.

> be seen to preach good Protestant doctrine: that grace is always prior; that human effort is ever the response to divine initiative; that good works are fruit and not the root of salvation.[2]

Based on Sanders' work we are to believe that Judaism was a religion of grace and that what the Jews of Paul's day believed and practiced was good Protestant doctrine after all. There are several problems with this. First, even if one accepts Sanders' survey as a balanced overview of the relevant literature, there are flaws in his approach to interpreting the material. Having carefully read Sanders' book, I have found no more powerful refutation of his conclusion than the very literature that he himself cites. One of the flaws of his work is that he approaches Palestinian Judaism in a way that is not sufficiently nuanced to take in all the subtle underlying themes and differences of opinion that are evident in the various teachers and materials that he surveys. He makes clear very early that he is not concerned with the diversity of the literature's teachings on specific questions of soteriology.[3] His concern is with what he calls the overall "pattern of religion" that emerges from the literature. The "pattern," he says, in 2nd Temple Judaism is that you "get in" the religious community by grace, or by God's gracious initiative, and that you "stay in" by your intent and effort to obey God's law.

The problem is that this category is so broad and flexible and vague that it is able to incorporate a large range of contradictory ideas and practices. For example the rabbis gave various answers to the question *why* God chose Israel and took Israel into covenant relationship.[4] One answer was that though the covenant was offered to all, only Israel accepted it. A second answer was that God chose Israel at the time of the Exodus because of the Exodus generation's fulfillment of certain commandments. A third answer was that God chose Israel due to the merit of the patriarchs. Sanders comments, "The motive of making God's choice seem non-arbitrary is clear here. If Israel was especially chosen, or if the tribe of Judah was especially favored, it is because of some

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[2] James D. G. Dunn, "The Justice of God : A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith." *Journal of Theological Studies* 43 (1992): 297. As quoted by Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old And New: the 'Lutheran' Paul and His Critics (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004)*, 342.

[3] E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia:: Fortress Press, 1977), 12-24.

[4] Ibid. 87-91

action which can explain why God made the choice he did"[5] Another common answer was that God did it on the condition of foreseen future obedience. "God foresees that Israel will fulfill the Torah and therefore chooses Israel to receive it."[6] Another explanation was that God chose Israel for His own name's sake in order to fulfill the oath made to Abraham.[7] This is true, but then the question is pushed back to why did God choose Abraham? Sanders comments, "The only answer is that God foresaw that Abraham's descendants would keep the commandments."[8]

> At one time the Rabbis can say that Israel merited the reward of the exodus because of fulfilling some commandments or other, while at others they can say that Israel did not have any merits, or that the rewards were given before the commandments were fulfilled. The Rabbis did not have the Pauline/Lutheran problem of 'works-righteousness', and so felt no embarrassment at saying that the exodus was earned; yet that it was earned was certainly not a Rabbinic doctrine. It is only an explanatory device.[9]

He goes on to argue that we still must see the pattern of religion as one of grace, not one of earning salvation. Why? "Because even if election had been earned in the past, there is no thought that subsequent Israelites must continue to earn their place in the covenant as individuals."[10] No, but if that covenant in the past was made on the basis of foreseen obedience, that's not grace. Furthermore, if covenantal status is maintained on the ground of this foreseen obedience as well as based on it, that's not salvation by grace, at least not in the Reformed and biblical sense. It's not *sola gratia*, salvation by grace alone, and it is certainly not, to use the Dunn's words, good Protestant doctrine.

It has been wondered how Sanders would interpret our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and Publican if he had found it in the Rabbinic literature. "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed with himself, God I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes

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[5] Ibid., 91.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 100.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 101.

of all that I possess." Consistent with how he interprets rabbinic literature, one can imagine Sanders saying, "Well again here we see that the Judaism of that time was a religion of grace." Notice the Pharisee said, '*God, I thank you* that I'm not like other men.' He knew that he was not like other men because of God, because of God's grace." And yet *we know* that Jesus spoke that parable to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. The introduction to the parable tells us that. Jesus further says that the Publican went down to his house justified, not the Pharisee. This is a good example of the way Sanders interprets the literature that he surveys.

Remember that the pattern of religion that marked Palestinian Judaism, according to Sanders, was one in which Israel enjoyed special status as God's covenant people by grace. As His people by grace, God had also given them the law; and keeping the law, or "the intention and effort to be obedient" to the law, is the means of staying in. The law also provides means of atonement for the sins of those intending and seeking to obey. That's a part of the pattern, he says. But a mere generalization like that doesn't really take in what the literature actually reveals about the views that these men taught about atonement. According to the Rabbis surveyed, how were sins to be atoned for?[11] Some argued that the ceremonial sacrifices, particularly on the Day of Atonement, atoned for sins. Some viewed repentance itself as a means of atonement. Some even regarded personal suffering as a means of atonement. For example, Rabbi Nehemiah said, "Precious are chastisements. For just as sacrifices are the means of atonement, so also are chastisements...And not only this, but chastisements atone even more than sacrifices."[12] Sounds very similar to Roman Catholic penance theology, doesn't it? Some even argued that death was a means of atonement.

Of course, Sanders gives his own interpretation on the material. He says "If there was a dispute, it was not over the question of whether or not one's sins would be forgiven, but over what the conditions to which God attached his promise of forgiveness were."[13] In other words, we are supposed to accept that, as long as people believe that sins can be forgiven, that is a religion of grace, regardless of what they believe the conditions are for receiving forgiveness or regardless of what they

[11] Ibid., 157-180.
[12] Ibid., 169.
[13] Ibid., 167.

understand to be the basis of forgiveness. That's the kind of confusion that runs throughout Sanders' book.

It is surprising when scholars simply accept Sanders' interpretation of Palestinian Judaism as a proven fact and then confidently assert on this basis that the Judaism of Jesus' and Paul's day was a religion of grace. I believe that it is safe to say that Sanders and the NP's argument that 2nd Temple Judaism was a religion of grace, good Protestant doctrine, is more a revelation of their own faulty understanding of what grace is, than a revelation that the Reformation has misunderstood the issues that Paul was addressing.

Part of the problem is that "grace" can be a very flexible term depending on who is using it. Mark Seifrid says of Sanders' use of the term "grace":

> For him (Paul) 'grace' does not have to do simply with the priority of divine election and favor...In Sanders' paradigm, "grace" (or God's gracious election of Israel) loses its biblical contours because it is not defined in relationship to Israel's recalcitrance and rebellion, a condition that Paul regards as extending into the present (Rom. 10:19-21)...Second Temple Judaism could hardly have forgotten about 'grace' and 'election' so long as it engaged the Scriptures! But that does not mean that it widely embraced an understanding of grace along the lines of Paul's thought. One of the amazing things about 'grace' is that it is an exceedingly elastic concept.[14]

This is the first problem, that there are flaws in Sanders' approach to the material he surveys.

Second, another major problem in Sanders, and in the NP as a whole, is a failure to properly distinguish between Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism.[15] Sanders may, indeed, have demonstrated that the Jews were not Pelagian in their understanding, but what he describes is very similar to semi-Pelagianism, *i.e.*, a teaching that regards acceptance with God as based both on grace and good works. It is a description that fits

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[14] Mark Seifrid "Unrighteous by Faith," *Justification And Variegated Nomism* Volume 2-The Paradoxes Of Paul, eds. D.A. Carson, Peter O'Brien, and Mark Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2004), 144.

[15] Cornelius Venema, "Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul" (2), 4. This is one of an excellent series of articles explaining and critiquing the New Perspective. They can be found at www.wrfnet.org/articles. Also they can be downloaded from the "Paul Page" referenced in the first article.

well with the very issues Luther and Calvin were addressing in the Reformation.

The charge is often made that the Reformers, by reading into the Scriptures their own controversy with the merit theology of Rome, assumed that the Jews advocated a kind of proto-Pelagianism in which one is saved by pulling himself up by his own bootstraps to an acceptable standard of righteousness. The Reformers are said to have mistakenly read this kind of Pelagianism into their interpretation of the issue Paul was addressing with the Jews in his doctrine of justification. The problem with that approach is the failure to distinguish between Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. The Reformers opposed the doctrine of justification taught by the Roman Catholic Church not because it was Pelagian but because it tried to make justification partly on the basis of grace in Christ and partly on the basis of human effort and the endeavor to cooperate with that grace and thereby merit further grace. It was a kind of semi-Pelagianism that they were attacking; a kind of synergism.

The parallel that they drew between Rome and the Judaist heresy that Paul was fighting was not that it was pure Pelagianism; not that it was salvation solely on the basis of human effort and the attempt to pull yourself up by the bootstraps. The problem with the Jews was similar to Rome because there was a mingling of grace and works as the basis of one's acceptance before God. As Cornelius Venema comments:

> The irony here is that Sanders' description of 'covenantal nomism' closely resembles a kind of textbook description of semi-Pelagian teaching and therefore lends unwitting support to the Reformation argument. To put the matter in the traditional language of the doctrine of justification, covenantal nomism fits rather comfortably with the idea that the justification and acceptance of the righteous, now and in the future, depends upon the works of obedience to the law that follow and are added to God's gracious initiative. If that is the case then what Sanders calls 'covenantal nomism' bears remarkable formal similarities to the kind of semi-Pelagianism that marked the medieval Roman Catholic doctrine of justification.[16]

Let me add that while Sanders' Judaism has parallels with semi-Pelagianism, there are some points in which it sounds like plain old Pelagianism. For example Sanders says:

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[16] Ibid.

> It is important to note that the Rabbis did not have a doctrine of original sin or of the essential sinfulness of each man in the Christian sense. It is a matter of observation that all men sin. Men have apparently, the inborn drive towards rebellion and disobedience. But this is not the same as being born in a state of sinfulness from which liberation is necessary. Sin comes only when man actually disobeys; if he were not to disobey he would not be a sinner. The possibility exists that one might not sin.[17]

That is classic Pelagianism, and yet this is what Sanders tells us the Rabbis taught. Then he can he say that the Judaism of Paul's day was a religion of grace? And how can Dunn say that the Judaism of Paul's day can now be seen to preach good Protestant doctrine?[18]

Third, it must be pointed out that whatever 2nd Temple literature might say or be interpreted as teaching that doesn't mean that what the Rabbinic scholars wrote is what the Jews of Paul's day actually believed. Sanders may be able to strain the literature so as to teach a religion of grace. But even if we try to put the best possible construction on the literature that he surveys and give Sanders all the rope that we can, there is still such a strong emphasis on the necessity of obedience to the law to maintain God's favor found in that literature and such an emphasis on merit, that it would not be surprising if that teaching was understood in the common mind in a purely legalistic manner.

We all know that in our own day the statements of theologians or the creeds of denominations are not always an accurate reflection of what is actually believed and practiced in the hearts and lives of the rank and file people and pastors. For example, most Protestant denominations have an evangelical creed. The Church of England has the 39 Articles which contain good Reformed doctrine. But is what is written in that document an accurate reflection of what is really believed in most of the Anglican and Episcopalian churches? No, it is not.

Southern Baptists have Reformed roots and in their doctrinal statements speak of justification and conversion in very orthodox terms. But do those statements and that history really reflect the rank

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[17] Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 114-5.

[18] Now it is true that some forms of Protestant doctrine have fallen into various forms of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. In fact, it could be argued that much of evangelicalism today is in a kind of semi-Pelagian bondage. This may account for the success of the New Perspective. But this is certainly not the theology of the Reformers and reformed confessions.

decisionism that we see in many of their churches? One day someone may read one of our sermons against decisional regeneration and compare it to the creeds of the evangelical churches of our day. Then they may write a book in which they argue that what we preached against was not really a problem in our time period. And then they may come up with some wild theory as to what it was we were actually preaching against as opposed to what we appeared to be preaching against. Whatever one thinks about the rabbinic literature, the fact is that *works righteousness is always the religion of the unregenerate heart in every generation.*

I have pointed out that even if one accepts Sanders' survey as a balanced overview of the relevant literature, there are flaws in his approach to interpreting the material that he surveys. There is a failure to properly distinguish between a pure Pelagianism and a kind of semi-Pelagianism. And whatever 2nd Temple literature might say or be interpreted as teaching, that does not mean that what the Rabbis wrote is what the Jews of Paul's day actually understood.

Fourth, more recent studies of 2nd Temple Judaism have seriously challenged and debunked Sanders' model of "covenant nomism." These studies have shown that Sanders is selective in the literature that he uses in such a way as to give a prettier picture of 2nd Temple Judaism than is warranted. I'm not an expert on rabbinic literature, but there are men who are, and who, since the publishing of Sanders' book, have studied the literature extensively and argued that his picture is simply wrong. I've listed a few of the books in the footnotes.[19]

One lengthy book that challenges Sanders is *Justification And Variegated Nomism Volume 1,* edited by D.A. Carson, Peter O'Brien, and Mark Seifrid. In the final section entitled "Summaries and Conclusions," Carson summarizes the current state of affairs in light of

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[19] See D.A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark Seifrid, eds. *Justification and Variegated Nomism* Volume 1, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001). Also Andrew Das, *Paul, The Law, And The Covenant* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen Publishers Inc., 2001). Also Seyoon Kim, *Paul And The New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 294. Kim points out that the New Perspective school has elevated Sanders' definition of Second Temple Judaism to the status of a dogma and insists on interpreting Paul only in terms of that dogma. In a footnote on page 295 he adds that M.A. Elliot's *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconstruction of the Theology of Pre-Christian Literature* "in effect destroys the very basis of the New Perspective School."

the studies that are contained in the book.[20] He points out, for example, that there is a lot of Jewish literature that Sanders never dealt with which gives a much more legalistic picture of Judaism. And, of course, this is joined to the misleading nature of the slant Sanders puts on the literature that he does survey.

This leads to a fifth problem with Sanders' argument that Judaism was a religion of grace. It is soundly contradicted by the NT itself. Surely in attempting to understand the Judaism of that day, the NT should be included as one of our major sources. Even if you're a skeptic who doesn't believe in the inspiration of Scripture, it would seem common sense that the NT is the best source for what the Judaism of NT times was like. But this is especially true for those of us who believe that the NT is the Word of God, *i.e.*, that unlike any merely human writing, it is God-breathed, infallible, inerrant, and authoritative. What is the picture of the Judaism of that day that we get from the NT? Does the NT depict it as a religion of grace, a religion akin to good Protestant doctrine? No. Jesus and the Apostles consistently describe it as apostate, as marked by externalism, ritualism, legalism, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exposed a practice that marked the Scribes and Pharisees as being external and self-focused. He pointed out that they did their righteousness to be seen of men and for the praise of men, not out of love and gratitude to God for His grace. When the Scribes and Pharisees were offended because He ate with publicans and sinners, He said to them, "I did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance," implying that they considered themselves to be righteous and because they considered themselves to be righteous they had cut themselves off from the salvation He had come to give.

Remember our Lord's encounter with the rich young ruler. The young man wanted to know what good thing he could do to inherit eternal life. When he was questioned he seemed to really think that he had sufficiently kept all the commandments from his youth up. Remember when Jesus was in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Simon was troubled because our Lord was kind to a sinful woman. In that context Jesus pointed out that it is those who see themselves as having been forgiven much who love much. The point was that Simon obviously didn't see himself that way. He was self-righteous.

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[20] D. A. Carson, "Summaries and Conclusions," in *Justification And Variegated Nomism*, Volume 1, 543-547.

What about the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican? We are told that Jesus spoke this parable it to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. He described the Jewish leaders as those who justify themselves before men, who declare themselves righteous before men. Remember the words of contempt that the Pharisees heaped on the blind man Jesus had healed when the poor man dared to question them. They said, "You were completely born in sins and are you teaching us?" Did you catch the implication? "You were completely born in sins, we were not, we are righteous. How dare you try to teach us." This is self-righteousness.

What about the picture of the Judaism that we get from the Apostles? The NP tries to put a twist on that picture and fit it into their reconstruction of Paul's doctrine. But what is one to think, whose mind has not been tainted by recent scholarly opinions, when he reads words like these, *i.e.*, written to Jews about the Judaism of Paul's day? Romans 10:3 says, "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God." Again, I know that the NP tries to put a certain spin on this text and many like it. But what about the poor ignorant people who have lived for the last two thousand years of church history without the advantage of Sanders' scholarship and allegedly ground breaking book? Naïve, simple minded, though well meaning fellows like Luther and Calvin and Owen and many others! Is it surprising that was clear to them from a simple reading of the NT that one of the problems with the Jews in the days of Christ and the Apostles was an external, legalistic confidence in their own righteousness for acceptance with God? As one has commented:

> If the average Bible reading Christian takes a dim view of first century Judaism, it is evident where he got that dim view. Read through the New Testament, and simply mark every polemical comment directed at the Pharisees, Sadducees, the circumcision, the Jews, and so on. The evidence is so clear that it takes about three years of graduate work in theological studies on average, to erase it.[21]

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[21] Douglass Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough* (Moscow ID: Canon Press, 2002), 202. This is evidence that Wilson is not in agreement with this particular tenet of the NP that I'm currently critiquing. However, as mentioned in the first article, there are definite connecting points between the NP and certain other aspects of Wilson's theology.

This is a good place to point out that when Sanders tries to compare his picture of Judaism with the writings of Paul, he makes several admissions that should greatly concern us. For example, he excludes Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, and the Pastoral Epistles from consideration as being of questionable authenticity. This should tell us something about his doctrine of Scripture. He also excludes from the discussion the book of Acts. This is very convenient, for there are things in these books that do not fit well with Sanders' conclusions.[22]

The skeptical presuppositions that underlie Sanders' approach to the Word of God are evidenced in other ways. After he compares Judaism with Paul, he points out that though the pattern of religion Paul sets out is very similar to covenantal nomism, in his judgment there are important differences. But then he adds, "It is not one of the conclusions of this study that one of the patterns which we have described is superior to the other."[23] He emphasizes this point several times, that he is not intending to make a value judgment on the inferiority or superiority of either Paul or Judaism.[24] In other words, it seems that his purpose is not to find the truth. Perhaps he just enjoys studying ancient documents and making comparisons for the sake of knowledge in and of itself. His skeptical presuppositions are especially revealed when you consult his index of subjects. Under the heading "truth, ultimate," he cites three page numbers, pp. 30, 32, and 430. But these pages are blank. Of course, it is possible that these are simply typos, but it is difficult to imagine how that could happen. If this was, indeed, deliberate, what is the message that it is intended to convey?

And then, sixth, Sanders fails to distinguish between the literature of 2nd Temple Judaism and the teaching of the OT.[25] The two are discussed as one body of literature with the impression given that Paul's world-view and gospel were equally informed by all the literature in an undifferentiated way. One problem with this is the way that Paul himself distinguishes between these bodies of literature. Throughout his writings he only attributes divine authority to the writings of the OT. He never does this with any other Jewish literature. He speaks of the ancestral traditions that he received from his fathers, but he never attributes divine authority to them nor does he ever base any of his arguments on them.

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[22] Sanders, *Palestinian Judaism*, 431.

[23] Ibid. 552.

[24] Ibid. 552, 559

[25] Guy Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (Philipsburg NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 156-57.

He clearly distinguishes Scripture from tradition. When men try to interpret Paul based on extra-biblical Jewish literature, their failure to recognize this distinction of necessity leads to error.

This problem is seen in another way. Paul, it is argued, never broke with his Judaist roots. He remained a good first-century Jew who now had accepted Christ as the promised Messiah and who now understands that Gentiles are in the covenant without becoming Jews. His gospel is nothing less than a new covenant nomism with "a virtually seamless continuity" with the Judaism of his day. Others argue that he made a complete break with the way of salvation taught in the OT, that his doctrine of justification was something entirely new and different. Neither of those ideas is accurate. The problem with both is the failure to distinguish between Judaism and genuine OT religion.

This, again, is part of the confusion that reigns when you read about the NP. Paul rejected Judaism as it was characterized in his day, yes, but he did not reject the OT way of salvation. The way of salvation and acceptance with God as set forth in the OT is one thing...the message of the gospel as revealed in the OT is one thing...but the Judaism of which Paul had been a part was something different. It was a distortion of it, a perversion of it, and this is what Paul rejected. There was a faithful remnant in those days–Mary and Joseph, Elisabeth and Zacharias, Anna, Simeon, and so on. But on the whole, the Jews are represented in the NT as being in a state of apostasy–an apostasy most clearly evident in their rejection of the teaching of both Jesus and the Apostles (and the OT). Second Temple Judaism and OT religion are not the same thing. Paul rejected the Judaism of his day while at the same time he affirmed that the gospel he preached was the same gospel to which the OT bore witness.

Some Hermeneutical Problems With The New Perspective

There are hermeneutical problems related to the historical problems we have just considered. First, as we have seen, the NP seeks to interpret the NT on the basis of controversial scholarly reconstructions of 2nd Temple Judaism. The logic goes like this, quoting Waters, "We know that Paul did not oppose Judaism as a religion of works, and we know anyway that Judaism was not a religion of works, but a religion of grace; therefore Paul's opposition to Judaism must have been on some other grounds."[26]

[26] Ibid., 154.

This logic is based on the presumed accuracy of scholarly reconstructions of first-century Judaism which themselves are questionable and controversial and, in fact, wrong. Scripture is interpreted on the basis of questionable interpretations of extra-biblical literature and on assumptions as to how much that literature actually impacted the thinking of the biblical writers. In many cases extra-biblical literature is elevated to a more determinative position in our understanding of first-century Judaism and of Paul than the NT itself. For example, at one point N.T. Wright argues that the NT is problematic for gaining a proper picture of Pharisaism.[27] He tells us that the school of Hillel was the dominant influence in Israel during NT times. Thus, in the Rabbinic literature, the school of Shimei, which the Pharisees belonged to, never appears without being denigrated. This characteristic denigration of the school of Shimei in the culture of that time, Wright goes on to imply, influenced the NT writers and the way the Pharisees are depicted in Scripture. Thus, "Such a perspective, like the rabbinic view of Shammai, makes it very difficult to use the New Testament as basic material in our reconstruction of the Pharisees."[28]

This is the hermeneutics of the NP. The NT is to be interpreted through the grid of scholarly reconstructions of 2nd Temple Judaism. There are major problems with this approach. First, the Jewish literature itself must be interpreted. Second, assuming one gets the interpretation right, it must be shown that the particular part of that literature that you are interpreting was both available to Paul and accepted by Paul as authoritative, or at least correct in its perspective. Third, this method bases our understanding of Scripture on non-inspired literature and the non-inspired interpretations of that literature by non-inspired scholars.

A second, major hermeneutical problem with the NP is a denial of the principle that Scripture alone is the authoritative interpreter of itself. There is a place for scholarly investigation of historical background as a help to illuminating the Scriptures. Such investigations can help us to understand God's Word. But we must remember that no human interpretation and reconstruction of history and Bible backgrounds is itself the authoritative Word of God. When someone's opinion about that background contradicts careful exposition of how the Scriptures

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[27] N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God , Christian Origins and the Question of God,* vol.1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992),184. Cited by Ed Goodwin, 12 (see reference in the first article).

[28] Ibid.

themselves depict that background, then that human interpretation of history must be rejected. The Bible alone is infallible and authoritative and inerrant in all its parts. As such, in the language of our Confession, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself."[29]

Third, this approach to interpreting Scripture amounts to a denial of the sufficiency of Scripture. If we cannot properly understand the Apostle Paul without also having detailed knowledge and understanding of the literature of 2nd Temple Judaism, then the Scriptures alone are not sufficient to direct us in "all things necessary for (God's) own glory, man's salvation, faith and life."[30] And if this is so, then what Paul told Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:16-17 is not true. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be *complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*"

Fourth, this approach therefore directs us, in effect, to put our faith in a priesthood of scholars, not in God alone speaking to us in His word.[31] Here we come to the heart of the Reformed doctrine of Scripture. Rome argued that the church is the infallible interpreter of God's Word. Thus, men were not directed to the Word, but to the church as the object of their trust. The common man cannot be trusted to have the Scriptures or to interpret them. The church both authenticates the Scriptures and infallibly interprets them and men are to put their implicit trust in the church and its traditions. It is doubtful that most of the advocates of the NP would ever say this, but, in effect, their approach to the Scriptures amounts to much the same thing. The only real difference is that it is not the interpretations of the Roman hierarchy and tradition that we must depend on; it is a priesthood of scholars

We are told that we cannot properly understand Paul unless we properly understand 2nd Temple Judaism. But of course in order to properly understand 2nd Temple Judaism we must be familiar with all the literature from that period. We must be able to read that literature in its original languages and must properly interpret it, which requires methods of interpretation very different from those we would use to interpret modern literature, or so we are told.[32] All this places the common Christian man or woman, as well as the ordinary pastor, at the mercy of

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[29] *1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith*, 1.9.
[30] Ibid., 1.1.
[31] Waters, *New Perspectives*, 155.
[32] Ibid., 155.

an academic elite and its scholarly opinions, who themselves are always changing from one generation to the next. This, in effect, is a denial of the Reformation and biblical principle set forth in our Confession in 1.4, "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the Author thereof."[33]

Fifth, this is also, in effect, a denial of the Reformation doctrine of the clarity of Scripture as set forth in 1.7 of our Confession, which states, "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed *for salvation* [italics mine], are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in due use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them."[34] The Confession argues that though the Bible is not equally clear *in all* its parts, nor is it equally clear *to all*, yet it is sufficiently clear *for all* with respect to, "those things necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation."

Reformed theology has never denied the importance of scholarship or the place of the official ministry of the Word in helping God's people come to a clearer and more full-orbed understanding of the Scriptures. The doctrine of the clarity of the Scriptures does not argue that they are equally clear in all their parts or equally clear to all. It doesn't advocate a kind of hyper-individualism that denies the necessity and benefit of having trained teachers to help us in our understanding of the Scriptures. But what it does argue is that God spoke clearly enough in His Word for all and any to discover for themselves *from His Word alone* the knowledge sufficient for salvation and the performance of one's duty toward God and man. It is sufficiently clear that, not only the learned but, the unlearned may attain to a sufficient understanding of them.

This is the teaching of the Bible itself about itself. It commands all people without distinction to search the Scriptures as the means for gaining the knowledge necessary for salvation and commends those who do (Ps.119, Acts 17:10-12). This implies that the Scriptures themselves are sufficiently plain for men to find that knowledge in them for themselves. Furthermore, the Bible addresses itself to all men or to the whole body of believers, not just to teachers or a scholarly elite (Rom.1:7; 1Cor. 1:2, i.e., the opening salutations of the epistles).

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[33] *1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith*, 1.4.
[34] Ibid., 1.7.

Furthermore the Bible addresses itself to persons of all stations of life: wives, children, husbands, servants, not just to pastors or scholars. And, finally, the Bible explicitly declares itself to be sufficiently clear for all (Ps.19:7; Ps.119:105; 2 Pt. 1:19; 2 Tim. 3:14 -15 etc.).