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# **Lifelines: Perspectives on Paul and the Law**

## **A matter of perspective: 'Lutheran' and 'New'**

A former colleague of mine was known to give the following advice to students: 'If you think you understand Paul's view of the law, then you don't understand Paul's view of the law.' Disconcerting as this advice might be, students have frequently related to me how they once thought that Paul's 'theology of the law' was relatively straight-forward until they engaged in closer study of the relevant Pauline texts.

Part of this difficulty might arise in relation to recent scholarly disputes. The last twenty years have seen a healthy debate among Pauline scholars on the issue of 'Paul and the Law'. In scholarly literature mention is frequently made of two perspectives on this matter: the traditional (sometimes called 'Lutheran') perspective and the (so-called) new perspective. My intention in this brief article is to articulate the views of both approaches, to give an assessment of their relative merits, and to suggest a way ahead.

## **Human inability and legalism**

To the question 'Why did Paul think that salvation was not by means of the law?', different kinds of responses have been suggested. Reduced to its barest bones, the traditional response would follow along these lines: 'Because human sinfulness renders the law ineffective – the law being incapable of overturning human sinfulness.' The fundamental issue is that of the errant human heart. The law is not a means of salvation since it cannot correct this basic problem.

This view has often been articulated with a corresponding corollary: those in Paul's day who sought salvation by means of the law must have assumed either (1) that there is little real hope of salvation, since they were unable do the law, or (2) that they could do a pretty good job of keeping the law, with their own resources and efforts being sufficient for the task. Both assumptions are thought to be indicative of a legalistic approach to salvation, wherein one hopes to amass more good works than bad within the heavenly account books. In such a system, salvation is little other than mathematics; once good and bad works are added up, the verdict of salvation or damnation can justly be pronounced and carried out.

This view of things is commonly referred to as the Lutheran view, because Luther (along with other reformers) articulated sentiments of this sort with regard to Paul's view of the law: the law is unable to uproot sinfulness within the human heart. Luther thought Paul to be attacking the same kind of legalism that Luther himself saw in the Roman Catholic church of his day. In his view, Christian forms

of self-confident legalism in the sixteenth century were replicating the legalism of first-century Judaism, and neither was getting to the root of the problem.

### **Jewish covenantalism and separatism**

This traditional perspective on Paul and the law has come under attack in the last twenty years. 1977 saw the publication of E. P. Sanders' book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (SCM, London), in which Sanders argued that the Judaism of Paul's day was not a legalistic religion but was animated throughout by an awareness of divine mercy effective in the covenant that God established with Israel, his chosen people. In this scenario, the Judaism of Paul's day was not characterised by legalism but by covenantalism. Keeping the law was not 'action' undertaken to gain salvation by good works of one's own initiative; instead, it was the 'reaction' to God's prior initiative in mercifully bestowing his saving grace upon his chosen, covenant people.

(So, for instance, when a husband brings flowers to his wife, it would be improper to accuse him of wanting to earn the love of his wife through legalistic means; the husband is most likely seeking to preserve a prior relationship of love by responsibly nurturing it.)

Sanders characterised the Judaism of Paul's day as 'covenantal nomism' – a term constructed to demonstrate that observance of the law (nomism) – was kept within a covenantal context (something that Jewish scholars had for long been saying to their Christian colleagues). In this 'pattern of religion', keeping the law is not an impossibility, despite human weakness. God had made provision for human weakness within the law itself, so that the notion of keeping the law includes within it the repentance of the sinner who seeks forgiveness from a gracious God, not least by means of atoning sacrifices.

Sanders' case has helped to bring some features of Paul's pre-Christian life into focus. Paul himself, looking back on his life in Pharisaic Judaism, speaks as one who was 'blamelessness' with regard to 'righteousness under the law' (Phil. 3:6). This cannot mean that Paul imagined that he had never sinned; his point is simply that he was at every point mindful of his practice of the law, including repentance and atoning sacrifices. (1 Tim. 1:15 presents Paul in his pre-Christian days as 'the greatest of sinners', but all that is in view there are Paul's efforts to persecute Christians, not any failure to keep the law.) So, Paul gives no indication that in his pre-Christian days he found the law to be impossible to observe. God had assured his covenant people precisely this, where he guarantees that the law is 'not too hard for you' (Deut. 30:11) since it falls within the scope of Israel's abilities.

Sanders' case has needed to be refined in some details. For instance, these days scholars often prefer to speak of varieties of 'Judaisms'. But Sanders' case was not articulated in these terms, leaving his 'covenantal nomism' open to the charge of being an abstraction that does not do justice to the multifarious spectrum of Jewish belief and practice at the beginning of the Christian era. The covenant was often not a point of commonality among mainstream forms of Judaism but a point of diversity and divergence, as different interpretations were given to it in different social contexts. Sanders also made use of some terms that have been found to be unhelpful when discussing the issue of Paul and the law (e.g., 'getting in' [= initial

salvation] and 'staying in' [= maintaining salvation]). But nonetheless, despite matters of this sort, the general picture that Sanders painted continues to carry great force in assessing mainstream forms of Judaism in antiquity. It at least provides a solid starting point for access into most Jewish texts, communities, and/or perceptions current in Paul's day.

Consequently, of course, the question that has needed to be posed afresh is: If Jewish life in Paul's day was marked out primarily by covenantalism rather than legalism, how are we to understand Paul's critique of life under the law? Does the traditional perspective continue to have any merit, with its legalistic portrait of Judaism and its heavy emphasis on human inability to do the law due to sinfulness?

One way of answering questions of this sort is to suggest that Paul was simply addressing a legalistic aberration within the spectrum of Judaisms. In this case, the covenant theology that underpinned the 'official' convictions of mainstream (forms of) Judaism is seen to have deteriorated into a simplistic legalism.

But this solution fails to do justice to important features of Paul's letters. Paul's letter to the Galatians, for instance, indicates that some Jewish Christians (or a branch of what he calls 'the circumcision faction', 2:12) were infiltrating some Christian churches in order to promote things such as circumcision (e.g. 6:12-13) and Jewish calendrical interest (4:10), as well as the keeping the law in general. But their motivation does not appear to be legalistic; that is, they were not encouraging others to earn salvation by their works. Instead their motivation is wholly covenantal; that is, they were wanting to preserve the nomistic purity of the Jewish Christians, either by having them withdraw from the intimacy of table fellowship with gentile Christians (as in Antioch, recorded in 2:11-14; this certainly cannot qualify as legalism) or by seeking to convert gentile Christians to the practices of mainstream Judaism (as in Galatia).

Similar interests are featured in Romans, not least as Paul paints a picture of the 'Jew' that he is dialoguing with as one who 'boasts in being specially related to God' (2:17). Later he asks the poignant question of 3:29: 'Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles also?' Paul's attention in such passages is not on legalism but on the prioritisation of Israel's covenant relationship with God. So, Paul's accusation that non-Christian Jews are 'seeking to establish their own righteousness' (Rom. 10:3) might not be descriptive of legalism (as the traditional view maintains) but of a form of covenantalism; non-Christian Jews are 'seeking to establish a righteousness that pertains to their race primarily/exclusively' (loosely translated).

It is for reasons of this sort that many professional Pauline students (e.g. J. D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright) have advocated what has become known as the 'new perspective' on the issue of Paul and the law. To the question asked above, 'Why did Paul think that salvation was not by means of the law?', advocates of the new perspective frequently respond along these lines: 'Because the law, with its interest in keeping Israel as a people distinct from other nations, generates the separation of Jews and Gentiles at the most intimate level of social interaction.' This social function of the law proved to be fundamentally problematic for Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, who advocated the full acceptability of gentile Christians before

God and promoted the unity of Jewish and gentile Christians. For Paul, then, the phrase 'apart from law' indicates that obligation to the covenantal observances of Judaism is not a salvific requirement.

### **The way ahead: complementarity instead of antithesis**

Advocates of the traditional and new perspectives have frequently articulated matters as if the legitimacy of one perspective rules out the legitimacy of the other. Moreover it might even be that certain theological agendas are more amenable to one perspective than the other. For this reason, it is important to note that, whether applied to traditional or more recent approaches, the label 'perspective' is unhelpful to the extent that it disguises a variety of positions within each general approach.

When long-held traditions are radically disturbed, there is often a period of upheaval as the experts reconsider fundamental issues with intense commitment to their understanding of the matter. This often gives way to a period wherein a different framework emerges that is able to reconcile both sides in the debate. (Recall, of course, the Hegelian model of initial thesis, reactive antithesis and creative synthesis.) I envisage Pauline scholarship to be now entering the latter period, and I expect that period to be a productive one in which the 'either-or' terms of the recent debate will give way to a healthier approach that embraces the legitimate contributions of both 'perspectives'. In the following few paragraphs, I will simply indicate what I perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional and new perspectives.

The traditional perspective is right in finding Paul's critique of the law to include the view that people are unable to keep the law because of the radical extent to which sin marks out the fundamental human situation. Nonetheless, the traditional perspective is less adequate in its view that the issue of human ability and inability to keep the law lay at the heart of Jewish theology of Paul's day. In short, then, the traditional perspective is far more helpful in articulating certain fundamental features of Paul's theology than in its understanding of what Paul was arguing against.

The new perspective is right in highlighting both the covenantal context of Jewish nomistic observance and Paul's recognition of this feature (cf. his depiction of the law as a pedagogical guide for ethnic Israel in Gal. 3:23-25 and 4:1-3). It is also well-placed to articulate what for Paul was the real nub of the law: that is, the law makes problematic the intimate social interaction of Jewish and gentile Christians. For the apostle to the Gentiles, who saw corporate unity among believers as the advertisement of God's sovereignty over a fragmented world, this social function of the law was an impediment to the corporate embodiment of the Christian message, and threatened to undermine the gospel altogether (cf. Gal. 1:6-9).

Nonetheless, the new perspective has been less successful in doing full justice to some of Paul's statements on the law. Despite all that he has to say about the law in connection with God's covenantal election, Paul says some other, far more radical things about the law which reveal a dramatic understanding of the human constituency. This is clear from Romans 8:3, for instance, where Paul speaks of God doing in Christ 'what the law could not do, being weakened by the flesh'.

Presumably this 'fleshly' character within human identity explains why Paul thought that the law does not have the power to bring salvific life (Gal. 3:21): the sinful character of humanity was not overcome by means of the law.

In short, then, the new perspective has served a significant role in highlighting the social and corporate dynamics of Paul's theology against the background of Jewish covenant theology, but its advocates have tended to undervalue or leave unarticulated Paul's radical conviction that law is not able to be kept due to a fundamental problem residing in the human heart.

### **Differentiating between what Paul challenges and how he portrays it**

If a covenantal background sheds helpful light on Paul's texts in various places, it is also important to recognise that Paul often depicts Jewish covenantal practice in ways that its practitioners would barely recognise. A distinction needs to be made between *what* the issue is that Paul is addressing (i.e. Jewish covenantal practice) and *how* he portrays that phenomenon. This is true in three ways.

First, foreign to the covenant theology of Paul's day is his conviction that it is impossible to keep the law, due to the sinfulness of the human heart. (A Jewish theologian who composed the apocalyptic text called 4 Ezra developed a similar view. But he makes clear that he arrived at this view only at the end of the first century AD, after wrestling with the implications of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.) From what we can tell, Paul himself did not hold this conviction in his pre-Christian days. It became part of his theological package only as a consequence of his conviction about the unity of Jew and gentile in Christ. This is one reason why many scholars think that Paul's Christian thinking moved first from a realisation of the salvific solution (i.e. salvation in Christ) to a new realisation of the human plight (i.e. salvation is not by the law, due to human inability).

Second, Paul sometimes depicts covenantally-motivated Jewish observance of the law in legalistic terms. This really should not be too surprising, since it follows from theological first principles. That is, non-Christian Jews who think themselves to be responding to God's covenant grace are, in Paul's estimate, doing little other than legalistically acting to earn their salvation. Since Paul defines salvific grace in relation to Christ, a legalistic portrait of non-Christian covenantalism naturally transpires. So Paul sets in antithesis divine grace and human works, even the works of covenantally-motivated Jews (e.g. Rom. 4:4-5; 9:11-12; 9:32; 11:5-6).

Third, in his letter to the Galatians, the Christians who advocated the salvific necessity of law observance are depicted as those who perpetuate their own self-interests (4:17; 6:13). No doubt they envisaged themselves to be performing a nobler task, encouraging gentile Christians to be full participants in the salvific covenant of Israel. But Paul, already knowing such an enterprise to run contrary to the gospel, considered them to be undermining the gospel of the God who brings unity where there had been division. In Paul's view, these Christians were using the gospel to promote their own reputation and profile. In this way, the covenantalism that they advocated was seen as a form of human egocentrism. For Paul, national covenantalism and individual egocentrism are both one and the same phenomenon carried out on two different levels of existence – the corporate and the personal.

In this way, their ethnocentric covenantalism is itself little other than a demonstration of the fundamental human condition.

## Epilogue

I have attempted here to review recent scholarship and to make a suggestion as to the way ahead on the issue of 'Paul and the law'. If nothing else, I hope the reader has sensed the way in which there is much that is fresh in Pauline study, and much that still needs to be done. One thing that advocates of the new perspective (such as myself) still need to do more adequately is to demonstrate the practical value of that perspective for contemporary Christian theology. We are still in the relatively early days of things on that score. There is much that can be done in this regard, since the features that come alive in the new perspective have much to offer Christianity in the post-modern world – not least in bolstering its confidence to proclaim Christ as the means of supreme intimacy with God.

### Recent Books of Significance

Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1988.

James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatian*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville 1990.

Tom (N. T.) Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1991.

Frank Thielman, *From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans*, Brill, Leiden 1989.

Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1998. At the risk of self-promotion (which is one of the things that Paul opposed), I mention this book since it is one (the only one at present?) that breathes the spirit of 'the way ahead' suggested above, wherein the two dominant approaches are recognised as theologically compatible. See, for example, pp 76f, and 179-83.

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