

Guy Prentiss Waters. *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response*. P&R, 2004. 273 pp.

Dr. Guy Waters is assistant professor of biblical studies at Belhaven College. He studied under E. P. Sanders as a doctoral student. This book originated as approximately 20 hours of lectures given at the First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi during the 2003 John Hunter Lecture Series. The lectures were very well received, and Dr. Waters was encouraged to edit them for publication.

Waters gives four objectives for the book: (1) “to give an exposition of what leading scholars are saying about the theology of Paul and related issues”; (2) “to show how the NPP emerges from an academic and theological discussion that predates it by more than two centuries”; (3) “to illustrate the ways in which the NPP deviates from the doctrines set forth in the Westminster Standards . . . [and] to show how Reformed theology surpasses the NPP in explaining Paul’s statements regarding the law, the righteousness of God, justification and a host of other topics and doctrines”; and (4) to “attempt to explain why officers and congregants within Reformed and evangelical churches find the NPP attractive” (x).

Waters makes clear from the outset that he writes (1) “from a standpoint of full sympathy with the Westminster Standards” and (2) “primarily for individuals who already find themselves within the Reformed community” (x-xi).

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1. “How the Mighty Have Fallen”: *From Luther to Schweitzer*

Waters argues that “the NPP swirls around two figures—Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann” (1). Waters is on target when he asserts that “the NPP is fundamentally centered on Paul, and specifically his understanding of the ‘law,’ ‘works of the law,’ ‘righteousness,’ and other related issues” (1).

“The Reformers represented a new chapter in the history of interpretation in at least three ways: (1) “many Reformers had been trained according to the canons of the recent humanist criticism, whose cry was *ad fontes*, or ‘(back) to the sources’”; (2) “Protestants self-consciously embraced the theological conviction *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone)”; (3) “the historical training and sensibilities of the Reformers ensured that Lutheran and Calvinist biblical interpretation would be sensitive to the history of interpretation” (3).

From the Reformation, Waters jumps to Baur who began teaching at Tübingen in 1826.

“European philosophy had now radically embraced doubt as its epistemological starting point” (3).

“Exegesis would assume an unprecedented independence from systematic theology and the history of interpretation. . . . No longer would exegesis be governed by the teaching of Scripture as a systematic and theological whole” (3-4).

Baur was influential in many ways, but one of the most significant was the way in which he “set the terms of subsequent debate for critical Pauline scholarship in the form of three questions: (1) Who were the opponents of Paul? . . . (2) What was Paul’s view of the law? . . . (3) What is the ‘generating center’ of Paul’s thought?” (6).

Waters also deals with Albert Schweitzer who made a significant step toward the NPP by seeing “an organic connection between Judaism and Paul” (11). Schweitzer saw “being in Christ” as the center of Paul’s thought. Two questions rise to the surface in Pauline studies: (1) what is at the heart of Paul’s theology and (2) is Paul’s thought “Jewish or Gentile in origin” (13).

2. Into the Twentieth Century: *Bultmann, Davies, and Käsemann*

Bultmann was known for his existential reading of Paul. Consequently, he was very individualistic in his theology. Justification by faith was central in Paul’s thought according to Bultmann.

Davies wrote an important book called *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*. It was the “first significant attempt to examine the relationship between Paul and contemporary Judaism sympathetically” (19). He sought to demonstrate that “Paul was *indebted* to Pharisaical Judaism” rather than opposed to it (19). In other words, in Davies view, “continuity with Judaism is stressed, . . . and . . . the law has a positive role assigned to it” (19). In several ways, Davies “carried Schweitzer’s mantle” forward (19).

Käsemann argued that justification was at the heart of Paul’s thought (21). But for Käsemann, justification was primarily corporate in nature. He understands the “righteousness of God” in terms of God’s “saving power” thus cutting “the Gordian knot involved in sorting out the juridical/transformational language” (22).

3. Enter the New Perspective: *Krister Stendahl*

Stendahl is known primarily for his article “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West” (23). Stendahl rejected the individualistic emphasis of traditional theology and the notion of guilt that required justification. Luther’s guilty conscience is responsible for how the whole Protestant tradition has read Paul. With Stendahl the focus shifts to the Jew/Gentile issue.

In a second article entitled “Paul Among Jews and Gentiles,” Stendahl argued that Paul had a “robust conscience” and that the primary concern of Romans was “the relation between Jews and Gentiles” (25). Paul used the doctrine of justification to resolve this ecumenical problem. Another important point that Stendahl made was that Paul never had a conversion but merely a call (26). Stendahl also rejects the doctrine of forgiveness. With Stendahl began the notion that justification was not a soteriological but ecclesiological term (30). A final emphasis of Stendahl is that Paul “reasons from solution to plight” (33).

4. *Ad Fontes?*: *E. P. Sanders on Judaism*

E. P. Sanders is a crucial figure in the study of Paul and especially for the NPP. Waters argues that Sanders’s contribution is not that he said anything particularly new, but that he synthesized “many diverse strands of Pauline interpretation” and that he “grounded [some of those ideas] on a fresh reading of the primary sources pertinent to ancient Judaism” (35). His work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* argues that we have misunderstood Judaism and consequently Paul. In short,

Judaism was a religion of grace not merit; therefore, Paul was not opposing a theology merit but something else.

Waters challenges Sanders on this basic tenet citing many of the Jewish sources that Sanders does. He demonstrates quite clearly that Judaism was *not* a religion of grace in any legitimate sense of the word. Sanders finds bits and pieces of evidence for his points and forces into his mold (or ignores) what does not seem to fit. Sanders seeks to demonstrate that Judaism is not proto-Pelagianism, but he fails to recognize that seeing Judaism as a religion of grace is not the only other option. Waters' analysis of Sanders is quite a bit more thorough than the preceding chapters, likely because he studied under him.

5. Schweitzer *Revivus*: E. P. Sanders on Paul

Sanders follows Schweitzer in seeing "being in Christ" at the center of Paul's theology. He follows Davies in seeing a close relationship between Paul and Judaism. He follows Bultmann in seeing "Pauline soteriology largely as the dealings of God and the individual" (60). And he follows Stendahl in (1) rejecting that Paul had a conversion; (2) asserting that Paul was not disappointed in Judaism; (3) arguing that Paul had a "robust conscience" and "was not plagued by guilt"; (4) denying a prominent place to forgiveness in Paul's thought; and (5) asserting that Paul reasons from solution to plight.

Sanders used the term "covenant nomism" but did not really flesh out the centrality of the covenant in Paul as Dunn and Wright would later do. To Sanders covenant language was inadequate to understand Paul. Paul had worked out something of a transformed covenant nomism. Sanders struggled to find coherence and consistency in Paul's theology, especially in regard to the law. He concluded (in Waters's words) that "Paul's statements on the law cannot be reconciled into a systematic whole" (86).

6. After Sanders: *Räsänen and Dunn*

Räsänen goes beyond Sanders in affirming the total inconsistency of Paul's thought.

Inconsistency, in Räsänen's view, is the hermeneutical key in the attempt to make sense of Paul.

Dunn is the one responsible for coining the term "New Perspective" (96). Dunn differs from both Sanders and Räsänen by affirming a consistency and coherence to Paul's thought. Dunn agrees with Sanders' basic tenet about Judaism but argues that Sanders did not "follow through

this insight far enough or with sufficient consistency” (97). Dunn argues that God’s righteousness is His faithfulness. Justification is not “transfer terminology” as it was for Sanders but is a “declaration that one is already in the community of the saved” (104). For Dunn, Paul criticism of the works of the law focused on the Jewish distinctives such as circumcision, Sabbath, and dietary laws, which served as Israel’s boundary markers. The goal was unity between Jew and Gentile, but Israel resisted such unity by their adherence to these “works of the law.”

7. Enter the Church: *N. T. Wright*

N. T. Wright is the first Pauline scholar to really bring the teachings of this new perspective out of the academy and into the church. He is also important because of his focus on careful exegesis and his overall theological conservativeness. His book, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, is a popular presentation of his views. Righteousness terminology must be understood in terms of (1) the covenant, (2) the law court, and (3) eschatology. God’s righteousness is God’s covenant faithfulness, and justification is being a member in the covenant community. It is a term of ecclesiology rather than soteriology. Final justification will be on the basis of works, according to Wright. Wright emphasizes the death of Christ more than the others, but his language is very vague with reference to what kind of relationship it has to salvation.

8. A Critique of the New Perspective

Waters argues that the NPP have hermeneutical problems: (1) “flawed constructions of Judaism,” (2) “mistaken reliance on scholarly reconstruction,” (3) “a priesthood of scholars,” and (4) a failure to distinguish between the Old Testament and extra-biblical literature. He also deals with their exegetical problems, taking issue with their redefinition of “works of the law,” “righteousness,” “justification,” and their understanding of the death of Christ and universal guilt. As a result they also have significant theological problems: (1) a confusion of grace, merit, and legalism, (2) “ignoring imputation,” (3) a blending of forensic and transformative categories, and (4) a redefinition of justification.

9. What’s at Stake for Reformed Christianity?

Waters lists several doctrines that are at stake for the Reformed community: (1) Scripture, (2) the gospel, (3) justification, (4) faith, (5) the death of Christ, (6) regeneration, (7) assurance of

salvation, and (8) baptism. He suggests several reasons that the NPP, especially the Wright version, has been so attractive to young evangelicals: (1) Wright is a conservative defender of many crucial doctrines; (2) he offers a solution to the dilemma posed by Sanders; (3) he focuses on the covenant; (4) he stresses the importance of obedience; (5) he provides a response to existentialism; (6) he stresses biblical theology over against systematic theology; and (7) many people are ignorant of historical and systematic theology.

Evaluation

In keeping with what P&R normally produces, the book is excellent quality. It is sturdy, has an attractive and easy to follow layout, and a nice font and margins. My one complaint would be the use of endnotes instead of footnotes! I hate endnotes (!) and am convinced that no scholarly work where the author expects his readers to read them should ever, under any circumstances, use them!

Waters's work is a helpful treatment of the issues surrounding the NPP. The value of the book is in its historical survey of Pauline scholarship leading up to the NP and in its very thorough annotated bibliography that orders its entries in chronological order, not according to when they were written but according to the time relevance of their subject matter. That by itself is worth the price of the book. Waters's writing style is very easy to follow. His points are clearly articulated by "first," "second," "third," etc., which allows the reader to follow the flow of thought with precision and ease. Waters's critique of the NP is a very small portion of the book and is unfortunately brief and shallow. As a result it seems that Waters is merely regurgitating the traditional Reformed position as assertion rather than argumentation. Where Waters does offer some argumentation, it seems to be based upon presuppositions that Waters just assumes to be true rather than arguing that they are true. Thus, all the consequent argumentation will be discounted by those who do not accept his premises (and for those who do accept them, the argumentation is probably unnecessary!). So in my view, Waters's book succeeds as a review but largely fails as a response. Certainly he makes some good points along the way. Unfortunately, though, this section of the book, while probably the most crucial in some ways, is the most disappointing.

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