

The
Apostle Paul
and the
Christian Life

*Ethical and Missional Implications
of the New Perspective*

Edited by Scot McKnight
and Joseph B. Modica

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Scot McKnight dedicates this volume to
James D. G. Dunn
Emeritus J. B. Lightfoot Professor of Divinity,
University of Durham,
and Fellow of the British Academy,
who teaches about and dwells in the Spirit.

Joseph B. Modica dedicates this volume to
William V. Crockett
Professor Emeritus of New Testament,
Alliance Theological Seminary, Nyack, New York,
who teaches well by his scholarship and life.

μιμηταί μου γίνεσθε καθὼς ἐγὼ Χριστοῦ. (1 Cor. 11:1)

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We dedicate this book to our mentors (Scot McKnight—James D. G. Dunn; Joseph B. Modica—William V. Crockett), who have taught us much about the apostle Paul and modeled for us what it means to live the Christian life.

Introduction

SCOT MCKNIGHT AND JOSEPH B. MODICA

One of the greatest double-play combinations in baseball history is Tinker to Evers to Chance.¹ These three players led the Chicago Cubs to four pennants during their tenure.² They were the glue that held the infield together and in many ways the entire team. As many of us know, especially one of the coeditors of this volume (whose initials are SMcK), the Cubs have waited very patiently for their chances to return to the World Series.

With all such combinations there is a rhythm and sequence. As one briefly reflects upon the origins and impact of the new perspective on Paul (NPP),³ one immediately thinks of an imaginary double-play combination of Stendahl to Sanders to Dunn. It appears that the three worked assiduously with one another, almost like teammates, even when the contribution perhaps was unknown to the one who followed. Granted, there are always contributing factors to any “new” movement, but for now we’ll very briefly consider the three contributions to this so-called NPP double-play combination.

1. The trio has been immortalized in the 1910 poem “Baseball’s Sad Lexicon” by Franklin Pierce Adams. They were elected together to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1946.

2. From 1906 to 1910.

3. For a basic introduction of the new perspective on the apostle Paul, see Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), and Michael B. Thompson, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, UK: Grove, 2010). See also Mark Mattison’s very resourceful website: www.thepaulpage.com.

Krister Stendahl, with his influential article “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,”⁴ is in many ways the agile shortstop who begins the double play by handling well the ground ball. Stendahl warned against interpreting the apostle Paul through the theological lens (i.e., guilty conscience) of the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther. As Magnus Zetterholm rightly observes about what light the NPP shed on interpreting Paul, “The problem Luther wrestles with—how to find a merciful God—was not Paul’s quandary. Paul’s main interest was precisely the relationship between Jews and non-Jews.”⁵

What can one say about E. P. Sanders’s landmark book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, except that it is essential reading for any serious interpreter of the New Testament? What Sanders did was reinterpret and recontextualize for modern-day readers what constituted first-century Judaism(s). Perhaps the most enduring contribution of Sanders is the understanding that Judaism was not a works-based religion emerging from human effort but one emerging from divine election and the obedience expected of those who were already in the covenant. The implications for Paul simmered on the topic of Sanders’s reevaluation of Judaism. Sanders’s classic definition of Judaism as “covenantal nomism” has now redefined a generation of New Testament scholars, even if not all have bowed the knee to the idea.⁶ His contribution was a herculean paradigm shift, to borrow Thomas Kuhn’s concept. Sanders took the toss from Stendahl, stepped on second base, and began to pivot his throw to first base to complete the double play.⁷

Here is where we find James D. G. Dunn, affectionately known as Jimmy, playing first base. Dunn completes the double play with his groundbreaking lecture in 1982 entitled “The New Perspective on Paul.”⁸ He established specific interpretive language to Sanders’s methodology for the apostle Paul while agreeing with Sanders’s general thesis about covenantal nomism. Dunn’s

4. See K. Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199–215, reprinted in his *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 78–96.

5. See Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student’s Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 98. Zetterholm’s book is essential reading for anyone interested in the historical approaches to the apostle Paul.

6. “Covenantal nomism is the view that one’s place in God’s plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement of transgressions” (Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], 75).

7. In part 2 (“Paul”), Sanders recognizes the contribution of Stendahl (*ibid.*, 435–38).

8. See James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 65 (1983): 95–122. Also see the reprint of the above article in Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 99–120.

language involved seeing “works of the law” as “badges” or “boundary markers” that the apostle Paul, according to Dunn, opposed when critiquing Jews and Judaism. Instead of seeing “works of the law” as attempts by humans to earn favor with God in order to be saved, Dunn located this expression in the debate between Paul and those who thought gentiles needed to adopt the “works of the law” if they wanted to be fully acceptable to God and full members in the “Israel of God.” In retrospect, Sanders does not spend much time with the apostle Paul in his book (exceedingly much more with Palestinian Judaism); it is Dunn who is actually responsible for using Sanders’s observations in interpreting the apostle Paul’s letters.

We are well aware that at times standing at first base were others—not least N. T. Wright, who in his massive studies has given his own twist to the NPP in what he at times has called the “fresh” perspective on Paul—but it is more than fair to say that Dunn’s contribution was to turn the relay throw of Sanders into an out.

What we attempt to answer in this book is this question: How did the apostle Paul understand the Christian life? We believe that a new-perspective reading of Paul—however that might be understood today—offers much to an understanding of the Christian life, so we have assembled a collection of essays from new-perspective scholars. We are very fortunate to have two of the major players (not to overuse the baseball analogy) contribute to this volume: Professors James D. G. Dunn and N. T. (Tom) Wright.

Likewise, we recognize and value the contributions of the old perspective, but we have not yet encountered how a particular old-perspective reading of the apostle Paul unpacks one’s understanding of the Christian life. Sometimes an old-perspective reading of Paul can simply get “stuck” with the implications and aspects of individual salvation or chase the whole of Paul’s thought through what is often called the *ordo salutis*. Of course, individual salvation is important. Moreover, it seems that a new-perspective reading of Paul offers a fresh and a rich approach as one grapples with the apostle Paul’s understanding of the Christian life.¹⁰

9. Dunn interprets “the works of the law” that Paul opposes in Galatians primarily as circumcision, but elsewhere they would include food laws (clean and unclean) and the Sabbath observance.

10. As one might imagine, there are detractors (or modifiers) to the new perspective on Paul often attempting to move beyond the established polarities. See Francis Watson’s *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). Watson argues that the old and new perspectives are too entrenched and that his proposal presents “a *forward* rather than a *backward* step.” Douglas Campbell and others have espoused an apocalyptic approach in contrast to the new perspective. Interaction with the many and innovative approaches to Paul of Campbell and others is beyond the scope of this introduction. Again,

The strength of this volume and the new perspective overall is its emphasis on *ecclesiology*—life in the church (McKnight and Gombis); *pneumatology*—life in the Spirit (Mitchel); *missiology*—life in mission-in-the-world (Wright); *Christology*—life in Christ (Dunn); *soteriology*—a “saved” life (Cohick); *ethicality*—a moral life (Longenecker); and *sanctification*—a holy life (Leach).

these approaches are laudable in the current debate about how best to read and interpret the apostle Paul. But are they helpful in providing a holistic vision for reading and understanding all of Paul’s letters? Thus, what is the *best* prism through which to read and interpret *all* of Paul’s letters?