

The New Perspective on Paul and  
the Correlation with the Book of James

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for graduation  
in the Honors Program  
Liberty University  
Spring 2017

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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## Abstract

The New Perspective on Paul is a new theory of how to interpret the Pauline epistles through the lens of first century Judaism. Three of the leading scholars that hold to the New Perspective are E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright. These men have done their best to defend the New Perspective of Paul, but have not adequately used, or explained the arguments set forth in the book of James, specifically found in James 2:14-26. The New Perspective fails to either give an analysis of James through the proposed lens of the New Perspective, or show how the book of James affects the New Perspective on Paul overall.

### The New Perspective on Paul and the Correlation with the Book of James

The Bible is an extremely complex and intricate piece of literature. It is a collection of writings ranging from history, to poetry, to epistles, and each book of the Bible has its own purpose and use within Christianity. The books are each different but complement one another and are integral to the proper understanding of the other books. While the Bible is made up of different individual books, the Bible must be read within its context, which is the entire book. The Bible is the inerrant word of God, meaning that it does not contradict itself, and it is always true. This means that every word of the Bible is true, in the sense that it means exactly what the author, namely God, intended it to mean. With that being said it is important to know the context of the entire Bible before proposing a theological claim or type of doctrine. This is important to remember, especially when a new perspective of theology is introduced.

The New Perspective on Paul is exactly how it sounds, it is a new interpretation. It is a new perspective on a way of thinking and interpreting the apostle Paul that has been in place since the days of the Reformation. It is important that every doctrine, way of thought, and theology be carefully examined and proved to be superior to all others before it is widely accepted. Also, every doctrine should be reexamined from multiple angles to be sure that there is not a better interpretation. That being said, the New Perspective of Paul is introducing a new interpretation. It is a fresh look at the thought processes of Paul and a different way of interpreting what his letters to the people really mean. While the New Perspective on Paul (sometimes referred to as the NPP) has some very valid points, it is important to analyze it within the right contexts, which includes the entire Bible and how it matches up with other truths that are written. While this would be

an extremely lengthy endeavor, this essay will only focus on interpreting the NPP through the lens of one other book, the Book of James. This book in particular has always caused trouble with Paul's writings because, taken at face value without much in-depth analysis, James can often be interpreted as saying the opposite of Paul, particularly when it comes to works versus faith. The goal of this thesis then, is to see how NPP scholars interpret the book of James, and if there is any correlation between James' statements on faith and works, and the statements that Paul makes concerning salvation by faith.

This thesis will aim to analyze and cross-reference the ideas of the scholars, namely E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright, who hold to the NPP and how they interpret the book of James, with special consideration as to how it correlates to the NPP. An analysis on the book of James will also be provided, with potential hints as to how this could be applied to the NPP, if sufficient correlation has not already been researched.

### **New Perspective on Paul Summary**

#### **Overall view**

At this point it is important to summarize what the NPP is, how it came about, and what specific interpretations it holds to. Three of the main contributors to the NPP will be discussed in-depth. It is important to note that there are many different scholars that fall under the category of the NPP, and there are almost as many different ideas within the NPP as there are scholars who write about it. This being said, however, they all believe that Paul has been interpreted poorly over the years and holding to a reformation view of Paul is outdated and could be refined. Each scholar builds on and interacts with one another, so each view will be separated and analyzed fully.

**E. P. Sanders.** The first contributor to the NPP is a man by the name of E. P. Sanders. Sanders wrote a book in 1977 entitled, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*<sup>1</sup>. This is the first book in a series of many that started the trend toward understanding Paul in a new light. Sanders did extensive studies into the writings of first century Judaism and the culture of the religion during the time of Paul. Sanders' biggest idea was that Judaism had been viewed in the wrong way for many years. He believed that while many scholars (particularly since the reformation) viewed Paul's letter to the Romans as an attack against legalistic Judaism, that was not the case at all. Sanders stated that Judaism as a whole was a very grace-centered religion<sup>2</sup> and that the emphasis on salvation through faith was very prevalent throughout. This line of thinking caused some major problems for many of the interpretations of Romans because most of the interpretations had been through the lens of a reaction against legalism. If Sanders was right about Judaism not being legalistic, then Paul could not have been reacting against legalism in the book of Romans. If this is the case then Paul had to be reacting against something else and when he refers to "works of the law" it could not be in reference to a works based salvation, because that was never taught in first century Judaism.

Sanders believed that Paul was reacting completely against these nationalistic badges and not against the law completely. Sanders puts it this way, "When the topic changes, what he says about the law also changes."<sup>3</sup> This means that in some instances

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

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 543.

Paul believes that the Law should be fulfilled, but in others, like talking about entrance requirements, he excludes the law. So, Sanders would say that Paul agrees with Judaism in some respects, but not every aspect. He states, “Paul is in agreement with Palestinian Judaism... *Salvation is by grace but judgment is according to works...* God saves by grace, but... *within* the framework established by grace he rewards good deeds and punishes transgression.”<sup>4</sup> So it is clear that according to Sanders, Paul does agree with Judaism to an extent. This also helps to show that Judaism was not a works-based faith, but instead grace based.

So, for Sanders, where did the distinction come from? To put it simply, Sanders believed that Paul didn't like Judaism because it was not Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Mark Mattison describes some of Sanders' beliefs by stating,

For Sanders, the language of justification is “transfer terminology.” To be justified is to enter into the covenant people. The distinction between “getting in” and “staying in” is important in this regard. The debate between “faith” and “law,” he writes, is a debate about entry requirements, not about life subsequent to conversion. The law is excluded as an entry requirement into the body of those who will be saved.<sup>6</sup>

This is one of the main differences with the New Perspective on Paul and the original Reformed version of Paul. Sanders believed that Paul was reacting against a type of racism and that if any Gentile wanted to be a Christian, they had to perform the works of the law, which meant becoming like a Jew in every respect, especially physically. This specifically means circumcision and dietary restrictions. Sanders believed that this

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<sup>4</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, 543.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 552.

<sup>6</sup> Mark M. Mattison, *A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul*, [www.thepaulpage.com](http://www.thepaulpage.com), October 16, 2009.

ethnocentrism “put Gentiles at a decided disadvantage should they want to belong to the people of God: Jews had merely to remain Jews, whereas Gentiles had to adopt Judaism.”<sup>7</sup> Sanders believed that equality between Jews and Gentiles was the most important concept in the book of Romans. He believed that the declaration of righteousness was about whether a person was declared “in” or “out” of the family of Christ. He summarizes this by saying, “The question is not about how many good deeds an individual must present before God to be declared righteous at the judgment, but, ... whether or not Paul’s Gentile converts must accept the Jewish Law in order to enter the people of God or to be counted truly members.”<sup>8</sup> Sanders’ Paul was not reacting against the legalism of Judaism, because there was no Jewish legalism, at least in the sense of following the rules of the law. Instead, he was reacting against the blatant racism that the Jews were enacting against everyone who was not Jewish.

E. P. Sanders was a leading scholar on Palestinian Judaism and therefore one of the pioneering scholars for the New Perspective on Paul during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While he was one of the first, and he broke a considerable amount of ground, the term “New Perspective on Paul” did not come until the next scholar came up with the term in 1982. Sanders laid the ground work for many other scholars to come along and continue the analysis of Paul from a new point of view. However, not everyone agreed with all that Sanders had to say. Not even all those scholars who hold to the New

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Westerhold, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 2004, 250.

<sup>8</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1983), 20.

Perspective agree with him, but his contributions to this theory are indisputably essential to the whole of the New Perspective.

**James D. G. Dunn.** James D. G. Dunn is the second scholar that will be analyzed. He agreed with, and used much of what E.P Sanders was saying in his essay on Paul in the context of the first century. One of Dunn's most recognizable additions was his coining of the term "The New Perspective on Paul."<sup>9</sup> This would be the term that encompassed the entire movement to see Paul in a different light. Dunn was grateful for the work that E. P. Sanders did to help with the struggle of interpreting Paul in light of first century Palestine Judaism, however he still wasn't convinced. He states, "If the Judaism of Paul's day also gave such a place to divine election, atonement and forgiveness, then what was Paul objecting to? Sanders did not help me to make sense of Paul against this background."<sup>10</sup> Dunn makes it clear that he did not agree with Sanders on everything. It was almost as if Sanders had laid some good groundwork, but was not quite able to take it all the way to what Dunn saw as the logical conclusion. He agreed with his initial analysis of Judaism, but was not convinced with Sanders' proposed solution.

He found his solution in an analysis of the phrase "works of the law" found throughout Paul's writings. He describes this phrase as being "used to characterize the insistence of Jewish believers that obedience of the law ('nomism') was the reason necessary and sufficient for them to 'separate' from other believers and was essential to

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<sup>9</sup> James D. G. Dunn, "New Perspective on Paul" (lecture, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK, November 4, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, (Grand Rapids: MI, Eerdmans, 2005), 7.

their being ‘counted righteous.’”<sup>11</sup> To Dunn, this was a good explanation of the problems that Sanders’ interpretation presented. Dunn believed,

More important for Reformation exegesis is the corollary that ‘works of the law’ do *not* mean ‘good works’ in general, ‘good works’ in the sense disparaged by the heirs of Luther, works in the sense of achievement.... In short, once again Paul seems much less a man of sixteenth-century Europe and much more firmly in touch with the reality of first-century Judaism than many have thought.<sup>12</sup>

By showing the dichotomy between the Reformation sense of “works of the law” and the New Perspective sense, the differences become clear. Dunn believed that Paul was reacting against the works of the law, which he saw as “badges” of Judaism. He was not reacting against legalism, (not to say that Paul approved of legalism) but of racism and ethnocentrism that the Jewish believers used to exclude the Gentile from their circles. Anticipating the possible criticism that his view could receive, Dunn states,

We should not let our grasp of Paul’s reasoning slip back into the old distinction between faith and works in general, between faith and ‘good works’. Paul is not arguing here for a concept of faith which is totally passive because it fears to become a ‘work’. It is the demand for a *particular* work as the necessary expression of faith which he denies.<sup>13</sup>

This shows that Dunn did not believe Paul would have approved of legalism or of a faith that just sits by idle. Paul was opposed to both of these. Faith, he supposed, was to be the one and only saving grace by God, but from that faith certain works sprang. Not the works that were considered badges, as was the case with some Jewish believers, but the works which are more accurately discussed in the book of James. This is the “*particular* work” to which Dunn refers to. These works are not circumcision or dietary

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<sup>11</sup> Dunn, *New Perspective*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 194-195.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 198

restrictions, but instead works that were exemplified by Christ while he was on Earth. He explains his views on justification by saying, “Justification is not confined to Jews as marked out by their distinctive works; it is open to all, to Gentile as well as Jew, through faith.”<sup>14</sup> Justification, therefore, has nothing to do with works at all, which is what the reformed opinion believes, but it especially has nothing to do with nationalistic markers, as many Jews of the first century thought.

Dunn is one of the most influential scholars and writers when it comes to the New Perspective on Paul. For one, he is the first person to come outright and call this line of thinking what it really is, a new perspective. Dunn paved the way for many other scholars and built from the work of E.P. Sanders in a way that led to further clarification. Dunn’s thoughts more clearly articulate just what it was that Paul was resisting and gave more clarity to why he was resisting the xenophobic nature of the Jews in his time. Dunn also made sure to clarify that his interpretation was not at all changing the doctrine of justification by faith, but expanding it to mean specifically not justification by ethnic markers.

**N. T. Wright.** Of all the scholars and authors to work on the New Perspective of Paul, N. T. Wright is probably the most often associated with this view. Wright, like Dunn, built from the views of Sanders and used his work as a starting point for developing his own thoughts and theories about the New Perspective on Paul. N.T. Wright is a firm believer in the New Perspective on Paul, but continues to have views

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<sup>14</sup> James D.G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1993), 14.

different from both Sanders and Dunn. He speaks about both of these men in his paper, *New Perspectives on Paul*, which was presented in Edinburgh in 2003. Concerning Sanders he says that he dealt more with religion and was not dealing with theology, and therefore they disagreed on many things.<sup>15</sup> Concerning Dunn he writes, “His proposal about the meaning of the ‘works of the law’ in Paul – that they are not moral works through which one gains merit but the works through which the Jew is defined over against the pagan – I regard as exactly right.”<sup>16</sup> But later he also claims that he doesn’t believe that Dunn has gotten to the heart of Paul, and that Dunn’s analysis of Paul’s doctrine of justification is lacking for Wright. Wright, like each of the other scholars, has a different idea of what the New Perspective of Paul is supposed to be. However different, each author falls under the category of the New Perspective on Paul and are united in their thoughts that Judaism has been caricatured and caused Pauline theology to be misinterpreted.

Wright gives a brief synopsis of his findings, writing,

Supposing, I thought, that Paul meant ‘seeking to establish their own righteousness’, not in the sense of a moral status based on the performance of the Torah and the consequent accumulation of a treasury of merit, but an ethnic status based on the possession of the Torah as the sign of automatic covenant membership? I saw at once that this would make excellent sense of Romans 9 and 10, and would enable the positive statements about the law throughout Romans to be given full weight while making it clear that this kind of use of Torah, as an ethnic talisman, was an abuse.<sup>17</sup>

On the topic of justification Wright has this to say, “What Paul means by

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<sup>15</sup> N.T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul” *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, (ed. Bruce L McCormack; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 246.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 245.

justification, in this context [meaning the New Perspective], should therefore be clear. It is not ‘how you become a Christian,’ so much as ‘how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family.’<sup>18</sup> This matches up with what Dunn has to say, which is that Paul is reacting against a nation of people who want to exclude others from the family of Christ. Paul wants everyone to be included because he was sent to the Gentiles and the Jews and he makes it clear that God is accepting everyone, not just those who are circumcised or who follow certain dietary restrictions, or who are of the Jewish ethnicity. While he does not deny that legalism is wrong, that is not Wright’s main focus, nor does he believe that it is Paul’s. “The real problem is not ‘legalism’ as usually conceived within traditional Protestant theology, but rather the question of whether one has to become a Jew in order to belong to the people of God.”<sup>19</sup> N.T. Wright is stressing that Paul is reacting against salvation by the works of the law which are considered badges of Jewish faith, and not against moral works in general, which can show the fruit of a believer’s faith in Christ.

N.T. Wright has written numerous essays, papers, and presentations on the New Perspective of Paul. His position is the one that most scholars look to first as being the main arguments of the New Perspective. He believes fully that Paul was reacting to ethnocentrism and racism in his epistles to the Romans and the Galatians. Wright does his best to get down to the heart of Paul by showing his doctrines of justification and his attacks against the works of the Law. N.T. Wright’s work on the New Perspective has been very impactful and he is considered the front man for the New Perspective. His

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<sup>18</sup> N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 122.

<sup>19</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 173.

work on the theology of justification according to Paul can span multiple beliefs and has proven to be indispensable in scholarly circles.

### **Summary of views**

The New Perspective on Paul has many different scholars who hold to it. The three previously discussed are the most well-known and have made the biggest contributions to this perspective. Each one is different than the rest but a fundamental truth clearly ties them together: Pauline theology has been interpreted wrongly in light of first century Judaism. All three men discussed agree that Paul could not have been reacting against a works based salvation, but instead he must have been reacting against something else. All three men agree that Judaism as a whole put a big emphasis on salvation by faith and faith alone, as does Christianity. Because of this idea, Paul could not have been reacting against ‘works of the law’ as they are usually interpreted today, which are moral works. Dunn takes it a step further to state that the ‘works of the law’ are really just “ethnic badges” which show that a person belongs to Judaism. Wright takes this even further and believes that justification is the declaration that a person belongs to the family of Christ and that it is only done by faith, which has nothing to do with works, especially circumcision, dietary laws, or anything else that makes a person a Jew. Salvation was for everyone, not just the Jews, and not just the Gentiles, but every single person who believed in Christ.

Douglas Moo, in comparing the old and new perspective gives this summary:

The problem is that new perspective advocates continue to think that Paul criticizes Judaism and in that respect, are no better than the "old perspective." Judaism is still faulted; the fault simply being relocated from "works righteousness" to "ethnocentrism." "These scholars read Paul as fully affirming Judaism. Paul's polemic is limited to attempts to force Judaism on Gentiles. For

all their differences—and I don't want to ignore or minimize them—"old" and "new" perspectives are united in insisting that, for Paul, salvation is to be found in Christ alone.<sup>20</sup>

Another big part of the New Perspective is the difference between a personal and communal faith. Most scholars who hold to the New Perspective on Paul would agree that some aspect of it has to do with the fact that Christians are called to be a part of a church and a community and are not to go about their journey of faith on their own. So, when Paul talks of justification, it is for the entire body, not just for an individual. Therefore, the New Perspective on Paul argues that Judaism didn't teach that the only way to get into heaven was through good works, and they did believe in justification by faith. In which case Paul is responding, not to Judaism's thought that believers need to earn their way into heaven, but instead he is responding to the "good works" or "badges" that some Jews thought were needed to be included in the community. This means that Gentiles didn't need to be circumcised or follow certain dietary restrictions in order to be considered a Christian. So, it's not as much a reaction against salvation by works, as it is a reaction against salvation by inclusion through badges. While the New Perspective on Paul states that Paul is not reacting against salvation by works, this does not give any more merit to the doctrine of salvation by works. Salvation by works is still wrong, and almost every scholar who writes on Paul's work makes that clear.

As stated at the beginning of this thesis, the Bible is meant to be read within its own context, which is the rest of the Bible. That being said, it seems as if the New

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<sup>20</sup> Moo, Douglas J. 2016. "John Barclay's Paul and the Gift and the New Perspective on Paul." *Themelios (Online)* 41, no. 2: 279-288. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost, accessed January 28, 2017.

Perspective on Paul is lacking in one area in particular that could be of great use in explaining the differences between ‘works of the law’ as Paul writes it and how it is interpreted by some today. The book of James has long been a controversial one, and was even ranked last by Martin Luther as to books of the New Testament that were theologically sound and helpful to Christian life. However, the book of James, being a part of the canon and therefore inspired Scripture, speaks to the issues of faith and works, as does Paul, but in a very different light. The next section will begin to analyze the book of James and how the scholars of the New Perspective on Paul interpret it.

### **The Book of James**

#### **How Each New Perspective Scholar Deals with the Book of James**

This section will analyze how, if at all, the New Perspective Scholars interpret the book of James. Special attention will be given to Sanders, Dunn and Wright, as they are the most prominent of the New Perspective advocates. In many of the essays presented for the case of the New Perspective the book of James is scarcely mentioned. It is sometimes mentioned in passing or in reference, but in most cases, it is never fully explored. The parallels between the New Perspective and the book of James are fascinating, but are hardly ever put into words.

**Sanders, Dunn, and Wright.** Sanders, Dunn and Wright have all written dozens of essays, books, and articles collectively on the New Perspective on Paul. In all of their works, the book of James is hardly given much thought. N.T. Wright at one point mentions the book in a seemingly offhand comment, but never fully dives into how this new thought affects James. Concerning James, Wright says this,

We are left principally with the question of James 2.14-26. One might have

thought that his passage would no longer present a problem, so often has it been shown that when James says ‘faith’ he means a dead orthodoxy which Paul and Luther would have been equally quick to condemn. But, since the debate still rumbles on in some quarters, two additional points (arising out of what has been said so far) may be in order.

First, James was no Judaizer. Although one of the most Jewish writers in the New Testament, there is not the slightest suggestion that he regarded Gentiles as second-class citizens, or circumcision as necessary for membership in the people of God. Paul’s polemic against national pride, with the law as the charter of national privilege, leaves James totally unscathed; and since this is the context of Paul’s polemic against ‘works’, he and James have no fundamental disagreement.<sup>21</sup>

This statement concerning the book of James comes in a section of an essay entitled “Other Books of the New Testament” and seems as if it is an offhand comment quickly put in to appease anyone who might criticize Wright for not mentioning other non-Pauline books. Wright claims that the book of James should be “unscathed” by his argument. However, directly after stating that James should be untouched by the New Perspective, he goes on to say this:

Second, if justification means not how one becomes a Christian but rather God’s declaration that one is already Christian, the whole argument of James 2 looks very different. James, like Paul, goes back to Genesis 15.6 as God’s initial declaration that Abraham is in the right: and, just as Paul looks ahead to the future declaration which will be in accordance with, though still not earned by, the good works which result from the indwelling of the same Spirit who inspired faith, so James sees that Abraham’s works *after his initial justification* demonstrate simply that God’s initial declaration was correct. Problems only arise if we fail to distinguish between justification and regeneration.<sup>22</sup>

This seems to contradict his statement made earlier, that James should be unscathed. However, because of his definition of justification, the argument found in

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<sup>21</sup> N.T. Wright, “Justification: The Biblical Basis and Its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism.” *The Great Acquittal: Justification by Faith and Current Christian Thought*, ed. G Reid, (London: Collins, 1980) 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

James looks very different. While this may seem critical it could also be very important in leading to a fuller examination of the book of James in light of the New Perspective. In N.T. Wright's collection of Essays entitled *Pauline Perspectives, Essays on Paul, 1978-2013*<sup>23</sup>, there is only one reference to the argument of faith with works found in James 2. In the collection of thirty-three essays, there is only one other explicit mention of the book of James. This seems troubling, especially when considering that a large argument of the New Perspective is that the "works of the law" that Paul is teaching against are not moral works, but works that strictly show ethnicity.

N.T. Wright has written a small commentary on the book of James in a series called "The Early Christian Letters for Everyone."<sup>24</sup> This series of books is divided between each book in the New Testament and presents a handful of questions and thoughts for each passage within a certain book. Sadly, however, his installation of the book of James is lacking in any scholarly data. As the title implies, it truly is a book for everyone and does not give any indication as to his beliefs and ideas of the New Perspective. Nor does he allude to any difference between Paul and James' use of the word "works" within this book. He does mention in his book that James and Paul agree on the idea of justification. That is, he holds to the fact that a person is considered justified because of God's declaration that they are considered part of the covenant of God and are considered a friend of God.<sup>25</sup> His commentary on the book of James is

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<sup>23</sup> N.T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives, Essays on Paul, 1978-2013*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone*, New Testament Series for Everyone (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Wright, *Early Christian*, 19.

helpful for everyday study and new believers, but it does not bear much weight in this discussion.

Throughout the writings of New Perspective advocates there seems to be a huge lack of correlation with the book of James. In a similar collection of works by James Dunn to the aforementioned ones of N. T. Wright, out of the twenty-two essays compiled, only two essays mention the argument found in the book of James. The first mention of James is in response to a criticism of the New Perspective, which assumes that Sanders is implying a works-based salvation. Dunn responds to this by citing James 2:14-26 in order to show that it is not a requirement, but a reflection of the righteousness that has been imputed.<sup>26</sup> The second mention is found later in the book in an essay entitled *The Theology of Galatians*. Dunn writes,

Paul's argument is thus clear. *Ongoing praxis must be a continuing expression of the faith by which his readers first began to function within God's covenant promise and purpose* – a beginning whose divinely given character was self-evident both to Paul and to his readers. Stated thus, the argument is certainly open to sharp criticism: The law was also given by God; why should works of the law be regarded as an antithesis to faith? We hardly need Jas 2:18-26 to spell this line of criticism out for us. But at least Paul's logic is clear, and it is only part of the complete argument.<sup>27</sup>

These are the only two times, in Dunn's twenty-two essays, that James' argument is used. It seems as though Wright, Sanders, and Dunn are lacking in research done into the book of James. The next section will analyze the few passages that were used by Wright and Dunn, followed by a proper analysis of the book of James as well.

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<sup>26</sup> James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul: whence, what and whither?" *The New Perspective on Paul*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 77-78.

<sup>27</sup> James D. G. Dunn, "The Theology of Galatians: The Issue of Covenantal Nomism, 1991." *The New Perspective on Paul*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 179.

**Analysis of James by New Perspective Scholars** This section will cover the three references to the book of James by N.T. Wright and James D. G. Dunn. While it is unfair to expect anyone to be versed fully in every aspect of the entire Bible, it is not uncalled for to expect biblical scholars to thoroughly investigate other books of the Bible, and to use arguments found in Scripture to support their own. In response to Wright's small mention of the book of James, this only seems to be hurting him. It appears a fuller analysis of James would only help the cause of the New Perspective and provide some support for some of the more questionable presuppositions that arise. Wright claims that James' argument is "unscathed" by the New Perspective, but then immediately claims that the whole argument of James 2 looks different. This is an interesting concept that is never fully explored. If the New Perspective on Paul completely changes the argument of another book of the Bible, it seems as if an analysis of that change is then necessary. And not even for the fact that it might affect the New Perspective, but that it might enhance the argument of the New Perspective.

Wright gives a very brief explanation of the argument that is presented in James in light of the New Perspective, which seems lacking. There must be some reason that Wright does not further explore the book of James in this context. For centuries scholars have been wrestling with the problem of harmonizing James' letter with Pauline theology of salvation by faith alone. It seems as if Wright has the perfect way to explain this passage in light of his beliefs on Paul's theology. However, instead of fully developing this argument and leaping at the chance to help explain a difficult situation, he instead takes a more relaxed approach to the use of James by expecting the past interpretations to be enough without drawing specific correlations between the two. While there have been

many books, articles, debates, etc., explaining the argument of James in light of the works of Paul, this seems like an opportune time for Wright to re-explore, re-explain, and help others better understand what it is that James is trying to get across to the people. Instead, he only mentions it once in his essays and does not explore this train of thought as well as he could.

In James Dunn's work, the book of James is referenced twice, although neither one seems sufficient for what has come to be expected from someone like Dunn. The second reference mentioned above, from *The Theology of Galatians*, is a bit troublesome. The context of his passage seems like the perfect place for the mention of the book of James, but his offhand use of the truths presented is alarming. His statement, "We hardly need Jas 2:18-26 to spell this line of criticism out for us"<sup>28</sup> may just be a poor choice of words, but no passage in the word of God should be treated with such passing use. In response to this, the passage in 2 Timothy 3:16 comes to mind. In Paul's own words, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching..." If Paul, the man on whom he is writing, believes that all Scripture is important, then as a Bible-believing Christian, Dunn should as well. Again, it may have just been a poor choice of words, but the book of James is considered a part of the canon, and therefore is the inspired word of God and deserves to be treated as such. The even more surprising part is that the use of James' argument here is directly solving the potential problems that Dunn is writing about. Dunn, instead of fleshing out James' argument in light of the problem being faced and in light of the New Perspective, instead makes a passing remark that could seem to take

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<sup>28</sup> Dunn, "The Theology of the Galatians," 179.

away from the authority of the book of James.

Dunn does redeem himself a bit with the other reference to the book of James<sup>29</sup>, however it still seems lacking. While talking about the orthopraxy that is contended, Dunn brings up James 2 to help defend his position. Dunn believes that the New Perspective is not as much concerned with what happens after the initial election that takes place. The New Perspective could potentially allow for legalistic nomism when looked at in terms of eternity. Critics have argued that the New Perspective does not do enough to combat legalism and could allow for legalism within it. Dunn, in response to these claims, almost side steps the argument claiming that these critiques have missed the point of the New Perspective. He goes on to say that this critique is similar to the one made in James 2:14-26<sup>30</sup>. It seems as if this would set Dunn up for a perfect time to launch a full analysis of the argument in James 2, however, he instead, like Wright, mentions it in passing and moves on without a second glance.

N.T. Wright, James Dunn, and even E.P. Sanders have not explored the possibilities that the book of James has to offer to the New Perspective. There is hardly any scholastic evidence of a correlation between the New Perspective and the book of James. This is disheartening for many reasons, but what is most disheartening is the disregard of the potential helpful ideas presented in the book of James and the authority that this book holds. While Wright uses the book within the right context, he does not expand nearly enough on its application to the issue of works versus faith. Dunn, on the other hand, seems to try and downplay the jurisdiction and power of the book of James in

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<sup>29</sup> Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," 78.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

relation to the New Perspective, and, like Wright, fails to expand on his analysis of the book of James. E. P. Sanders, on the other hand, makes no mention of James in his works and makes no effort to utilize or explain the book at all.

### **Potential Correlations Between James and the New Perspective**

At this time, it seems appropriate to give an analysis of what the book of James says and James' argument that faith without works is dead. This section will look at what other scholars who do not necessarily hold to the New Perspective on Paul have to say about the book of James. This will provide a good perspective on what could potentially be said about the book of James and how it relates to Pauline theology as seen through the lens of the Reformation.

### **Scholars outside of the New Perspective Who Deal with the Book of James**

An exegetical discussion of James 2:14-26 can potentially be extremely helpful. In examining this passage of James, the correlations between James' arguments for works and the interpretation of works within the New Perspective on Paul seem to jump off the page. Starting in verse 14 a key word for the entire passage,  $\sigma\tilde{\omega}\sigma\alpha\iota$  (to save), is used. John Peter Lange claims that this verb does not relate to a future accumulation of salvation, but it instead refers to "principal salvation of the redemption already experienced and passing through progressive stages of completion to ultimate salvation."<sup>31</sup> James is not speaking about a salvation experience here but is instead speaking of the process that occurs after a believer has already been justified.

Immediately, if thought in context of the New Perspective, this seems to help

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<sup>31</sup> John Peter Lange et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: James* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 82.

explain a lot. However, that will be discussed in the next section. In verse 17, James is explaining an example that he gave to answer his original questions. He states that faith apart from works is dead. He uses the word νεκρά, which is one of the most extreme ways to say “dead.” James uses this word again two more times in this discourse about faith and works. Moo states the importance of this passage by saying, “the words of an uncaring believer who fails to act to help a person in need are as useless as the profession of faith of a believer who does not have deeds.”<sup>32</sup> This example that James gives clearly articulates the need for good deeds, even after the initial declaration of salvation. James says that the bare profession of faith cannot show works, but works can show faith. This reiterates his previous point that faith alone is dead. Faith with works however, can be shown and is full of fruit. James isn’t saying that his objector has to have faith by works, but he is simply asking for the people to show their faith by their actions.<sup>33</sup> Instead of focusing on attaining faith, he is focusing on proving that faith, not on how to attain it.

The real meat of his discourse, and perhaps some of most impactful arguments, happen starting in verse 21. This is the verse that seems to be in the most direct conflict with Paul’s teaching of justification by faith, and faith alone, and his use of the example of Abraham. However, as most commentaries note, James is dealing with the final, eschatological justification, as opposed to initial justification.<sup>34</sup> James’ example of Abraham’s works happen long after he is considered justified by God because of his

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<sup>32</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2000), 126.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>34</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, Mariam J. Kamell, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James*, (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2008), 136.

faith. The specific event that James describes is Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac and the proof of his willingness through the binding of his son. It cannot be stressed enough that this passage does not contradict anything that Paul wrote, but is concerned with a much later event than initial justification. As Moo, who does not hold to the New Perspective but conveniently uses New Perspective language puts it, "Paul wants to make clear that one 'gets into' God's kingdom only by faith; James insists that God requires works from those who are 'in'."<sup>35</sup> As Moo clearly states, James is not arguing for works as the basis of salvation, but instead he is arguing for works from those who are already a part of the family of Christ.

Later on in this discourse James brings up one other historical figure. In verse 25 he uses Rahab as another example of his argument. Rahab the prostitute is commended for her faith and her acts of kindness to the Israelites. For this reason, James brings her up. Blomberg mentions that Rahab differs from Abraham as an example in almost every way, which would then include everyone falling between the two as regards the teaching of faith plus works.<sup>36</sup> Therefore no one is left out from James' command to have faith and works. This means that no Jew, Gentile, or anyone else is excluded from his teachings.

James' argument throughout 2:14-26 is clear. No one can have faith without works. Good deeds are the outworking and proof of that faith. Faith is required for salvation, or "getting in" but it is not finished there. Because of the faith that Christians possess, there should be an outpouring of good deeds and moral actions. James directs

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<sup>35</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: James*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 110.

<sup>36</sup> Blomberg, *James*, 140.

this at everyone, not just Jews or just Gentiles. Therefore, it should seem clear that when James refers to good deeds, he is not talking about the cultural markers that are necessary to be included in Judaism. He is specifically talking about moral actions that are done solely for the benefit of others. The next section will compare the teachings of James 2:14-26 with the teachings of the New Perspective and the potential scholarly work that could be done regarding these two great teachings.

### **Possible Correlations between James and The New Perspective**

The essay has so far analyzed the New Perspective as a whole from three different perspectives. It has examined the use of the book of James by N.T. Wright, James D. G. Dunn, and the lack of use by E. P. Sanders. Lastly, a quick exegetical discussion on the book of James provided a background of what other scholars have to say about the book and what the discourse found in James 2:14-26 really has to say. Throughout these separate discussions, it becomes apparent that the New Perspective is lacking in their explanation, and use of the argument for works found in the book of James. There is no scholarly research done on what the book of James says through the eyes of the New Perspective, or maybe more importantly, how the book of James could in fact be in support of the New Perspective.

In order to make this argument, it is important to remember that each scholar has a different view of the New Perspective, and Wright, Dunn and Sanders all have points on which they disagree with one another. That being said, the basic approach of all three is similar. Each one agrees that Paul has been viewed from the wrong context since the Reformation, and that first-century Judaism needed to be reevaluated in order to fully understand what Paul was arguing against. Most New Perspective scholars would agree

that being called justified is all about the act of getting in. Therefore, there is only one thing that is needed to get in: faith. For, as Paul said, salvation is by faith and faith alone. It is not by works. According to the New Perspective, these works that Paul is referring to are not necessarily moral works, but he is arguing against the works of nationalism. He is arguing against those Jewish converts who believed that in order to be a Christian, everyone had to follow all of the laws of Moses, specifically the laws that set the nation of Israel apart. These included dietary restrictions, Sabbath laws, and circumcision. It seems that if Paul's main reason for writing his letters were to argue against a nationalistic, ethnocentric, racist form of salvation, then he would be fully in favor of moral works of faith. Sanders makes a big distinction between "getting in" and "staying in." He writes this: "Neither of the opposing factions saw the requirement of 'doing' to be a denial of faith. When Paul makes requirements of his converts, he does not think that he has denied faith, and there is no reason to think that Jewish Christians who specified different requirements denied faith."<sup>37</sup> At this point in his argument it seems as if the discourse found in James chapter two would become extremely helpful. James shows that the Jews of the first century were not concerned with a works-based salvation simply by virtue of being told to practice their faith by James. It would be helpful for Sanders to draw from James to show that the Jews and early Christians were more focused on works as badges than moralistic works. James gives the perfect explanation of faith and works and the balance that has to obtain between the two.

There are numerous other occasions in the New Perspective writings that seem to

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<sup>37</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 1983, p. 159.

be lacking in the potentially fruitful use of James. N.T. Wright talks about the difference between the works that will be judged versus the nationalistic works that Paul is supposed to be teaching against. In a discussion about the judgment that all people will face in the final day, he writes, “The ‘works’ in accordance with which the Christian will be vindicated on the last day are not the unaided works of the self-help moralist. Nor are they the performance of the ethnically distinctive Jewish boundary-markers (Sabbath, food-laws, and circumcision). They are the things which show, rather, that one is in Christ; the things which are produced in one’s life as a result of the Spirit’s indwelling and operation.”<sup>38</sup> In this discussion, Wright references Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Philippians. Nowhere in his discussion does he bring up James 2:14-26. James clearly articulates that in order to vindicate one’s faith, one must have good works, too. And as Wright has said, they are not works of the “self-moralist” or boundary markers. They are to be good works that come from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. There is no better passage to illustrate the balance between works and faith than the passage found in James.

It is understandable that when looking at the New Perspective on Paul, a scholar would want to use the most possible sources that relate to Paul. It does, however, seem an oversight to not include other books of the Bible, especially those that would be of great importance and support if used in the right way. Supporters of the New Perspective, namely E.P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright do not interact with the book of James enough. Whether to use it in support, or just to examine what there is to be said

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<sup>38</sup> Wright, “New Perspectives, 253-254.

of the book through the lens of a different view of first century Judaism, James and his arguments are not addressed nearly enough. There must be a reason that these scholars do not examine James but that reason is unclear.

## **Conclusion**

### **Summary of findings**

As previously stated, it seems clear that the disregard of the book of James by the scholars of the New Perspective is troubling. It is not evaluated, examined, or brought in for support in any way whatsoever. In some cases, it is even referenced in an almost careless way, by just passing it off as if it does not matter or throwing in a quick mention. This book, and the arguments presented, have the potential to be extremely helpful to proponents of the New Perspective, but it seems as if it is not at all being used in the manner in which it should be. Whether the New Perspective on Paul is right, wrong, or just contains some partial truth, anyone who holds to this school of thought is doing themselves a disservice by not using more thoroughly the book of James to describe the works that Paul is not arguing against, as often stated by New Perspective authors.

### **Final Thoughts**

In conclusion, there has been plenty of ink spilled over this issue of the New Perspective on Paul, but more is necessary if it is to stay relevant. In order for this belief to be fleshed out fully, the book of James must be examined, specifically the arguments put forward in James 2:14-26.

E.P. Sanders believes that there is a big difference between the requirements for “getting in” and “staying in.” He does not, however, use the perfectly good arguments set forward in the book of James to show the distinction between what those “works of the

law” and moral good works are. James Dunn, in one instance, had a great opportunity to use James to spell out his argument in favor of the New Perspective and the critique of the New Perspective that claimed it allowed for a works based salvation. Instead of fully exploring this idea, he quickly answered and moved on. Later in his same essay he seems to disregard the validity of fully exploring the book of James and its arguments presented. Instead of fleshing out James’ beliefs and words, he uses a reference in passing and claims that it is almost unnecessary to be used. N.T. Wright, in his many discussions on judgment, the Law, and works, hardly mentions James at all. In one of his writings, he claims that James is unscathed but then immediately reports that the entire argument of James is changed. He then only offers a short paragraph of explanation. The lack of references and explanations is disappointing, and there must be a reason as to why he does not explore this topic further.

It seems, after an analysis of these three scholars, that the book of James is misused, unused, or sometimes altogether disregarded. In order to flesh out fully the argument of the New Perspective on Paul, more research needs to be done into how the New Perspective affects other books of the Bible, or more specifically, the book of James. The arguments found in the book of James would be the most helpful to use in comparison with the New Perspective because of the similarities between James and Paul’s topic of being justified by works. More research, analysis, and comparisons should be done by the scholars who hold to the New Perspective on Paul for the validity of the New Perspective as a whole to be complete.

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