THE 'NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL' AND ITS PROBLEMS

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It has now been more than twenty years since E.P. Sanders published his massive comparison of the apostle Paul with early Judaism, Paul and Palestinian Judaism. Supplemented by further monographs and articles, this work has shaped much of the interpretation of Paul for the past generation. It has had at least two major effects. In the first place, Sanders provided a new paradigm for understanding the soteriology of early Judaism, which he named 'covenantal nomism'. With only minor exceptions, the early Jewish sources suppose that all those who belong to the covenant God established with Abraham are destined for salvation. Only those who rebel openly and without repentance are excluded from this covenant. Secondly, and as a result, Sanders abolished those portraits of Paul which imagined that his conversion had to do with relief from anxiety over the securing of his eternal state through his good deeds. This was by no means the only picture of Judaism which Christian biblical scholarship had produced, but it was the most prominent by the end of the nineteenth century and served for many as the unexamined basis for the interpretation of Paul. Sanders pointed to the numerous places in early Jewish writings in which God's gracious election of Israel was regarded as the sole and secure basis of salvation. In his reading of the materials, the concept of grace in early Judaism came out looking much the same as that which Christians attribute to Paul. Consequently, Paul's break with his past appeared inexplicable on the basis of the older paradigm. Some new explanation had to be found for the change of direction in Paul's life, and for the dispute he carries out in his letters with other Jewish Christians concerning the Law, righteousness, faith and the salvation of Gentiles. As one might imagine, the new proposals which have emerged generally have drawn upon corporate ideas,

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1 The following essay is drawn from a forthcoming book, Christ. Our Righteousness, which is to be published in the UK by Apollos.
eschewing or explicitly rejecting the attribution of an individualistic conception of salvation to Paul because of its association with the older Protestant portraits. In an odd, but perhaps not entirely accidental way, the existentialist interpretation of Paul from the earlier part of the twentieth century has been replaced at its end by that of Paul as the moral leader, who with his Gospel mounts an assault upon the malaise of the world. While the 'new perspective on Paul' by no means commands universal assent, most scholars would accept 'covenantal nomism' as an accurate description of the Judaism which Paul knew, even if they disagree with details of Sanders' work. The displacement of a soteriology oriented toward the individual by a corporate understanding is likewise pervasive, even though a variety of competing readings Paul have emerged within the 'new perspective'.

This new paradigm for the interpretation of Paul has been with us now for a generation. Although it would be premature or even presumptuous to speak of the crumbling of its structure, sufficient time has elapsed for some cracks to appear in its foundation. Our interest here is to trace the lines of some of those cracks.

'‘Covenantalism’ and ‘Nomism’ Not ‘Covenantal Nomism’

Just as earlier Protestant works interpreted the rabbinic materials solely in terms of their expectations of recompense at the final judgement, Sanders reconstructs the early Jewish understanding of salvation through the lens of God's election of Israel. In a very thorough and careful study, Friedrich Avemarie has shown that rabbinic Judaism tolerated a certain tension between affirmations of Israel’s unconditioned election and God’s demand for righteous conduct.³ Although Sanders' emphasis on 'electing grace' enjoys broader support in the materials than the older view, it is also quite clear that the rabbis also could speak of salvation as being contingent upon obedience. They could even speak of the salvation of Gentiles (those outside 'the covenant') on the basis of good deeds.⁴ Rather than striving to produce a system in which all contradictions were eliminated, the rabbis viewed salvation from (at least) these two independent perspectives. In other words in the rabbinic materials, 'covenantalism' (Sanders' 'covenantal nomism') stands alongside 'nomism' without the overarching synthesis which Sanders has proposed.


This correction of Sanders’ thesis has enormous implications. Although we shall never know precisely how the tension between Israel’s election and the requirement of obedience worked itself out in the life and thought of individual rabbis, there is no hint in the sources that it was felt as a burden. In this sense Sanders’ critique of the older Protestant interpretation of Paul stands. Nevertheless, Avemarie’s work makes it clear that early Jewish thought was more complex than Sanders has allowed. Once we recognise that obedience could be regarded as a prerequisite to salvation despite Israel’s election, a writing like 4 Ezra (2 Esdras), which Sanders had to regard as a strange exception to his rule, fits quite well within early Jewish thought. Jews in this period, sometimes did speak of salvation as being contingent upon human works, as this writing (along with others, in my judgement) clearly does. Obviously, this soteriology need not lead to uncertainty concerning one’s final destiny, nor need it exclude notions of grace and election, as is evident from the Qumran writings. Paul’s brief descriptions of his own preconversion piety give indication that he marked his status before God not only by his heritage within the chosen people, but also by his obedience (Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:5-6). Although we may not know the calculus by which he integrated the two, it is clear that he did not regard works as a mere proof of election, but as a distinct indication of his standing. This juxtaposition, which is incomprehensible within Sanders’ systematisation of Jewish thought, makes sense given Avemarie’s correction of his work. In the light of this new paradigm, Paul’s coming to faith again becomes explicable as a conversion. His rejection of ‘works of the Law’, which (against the ‘new perspective’) he viewed as religious (and not merely national) boundary markers, has its basis in the cross. In it he came to see God’s judgement upon him and his works:

I have been crucified with Christ, I live, yet no longer I, but Christ lives in me. What I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered himself up for me.

I do not set aside the grace of God. For if righteousness is through the Law, Christ died for nothing. (Gal. 2:19b-20).

Paul’s conversion probably did not involve the rejection of an entirely self-attained righteousness, but it surely represented the rejection of self-righteousness, in favour of the righteousness which he found outside himself in Christ. For Paul, the election of Israel and the demand of the Law meet in Christ, the crucified and risen. The tension within early Jewish thought between grace and demand was resolved in an event, not a higher idea.

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5 I have discussed this matter at greater length in Christ, Our Righteousness. Here it suffices simply to note that in his letter to Rome Paul rejects the ‘works of the Law’ because they subvert the Law’s purpose of bringing condemnation and the ‘knowledge of sin’ (Rom. 3:20-21).
The Cross: More Than a Moral Lesson on ‘Community’

As we have mentioned, the ‘new perspective’ in its various forms represents a criticism of the Protestant reading of Paul which emerged in the nineteenth century. In concrete terms, this has meant that the Bultmannian reading of Paul has been the main target of attack, since his approach, which dominated discussion in the middle part of the century, mediated basic aspects of the older reading of Paul. Actually, Bultmann himself broke with the liberal portrait of Paul, and produced a much more nuanced interpretation than interpreters usually acknowledge. Nevertheless, Bultmann’s reading of Paul is unquestionably problematic, since among other things he supposes that Paul rejects ‘works of the Law’ because they represent self-striving to attain life: in faith one yields oneself to God, and receives life as a gift. Despite the partial truth in this description of Paul’s theology, it is one-sided in at least two ways. In the first place, the event of Christ’s cross and resurrection is reduced to an existential insight. Although Bultmann (with many in his school) never regarded it as such, the cross thereby becomes dispensable. It merely mediates an insight at which a human being might arrive by other means. Secondly, the Bultmannian approach limited its view of the human being to the relation between the person and God, leaving out of consideration our relation to the creation, particularly the community of persons within which we have been placed. The existentialist portrait of Paul reduced the biblical triangle of God-person-world to a lopsided duality.

As we have noted, Sanders’ criticism of the older Protestant approach has shifted the focus of interpretation of Paul’s soteriology from the individual to the community. In varying ways, scholars now argue that Paul primarily was concerned to defend the inclusion of Gentiles within the people of God. Over against other Jewish Christians who insisted upon the circumcision of Gentile believers, Paul called for the abandonment of all nationalistic pride, all ‘boundary-markers’ which separated Jew from Gentile. He wanted to do away with the ethnic boundaries which troubled the Church of his day, in favour of a Gospel which includes all who believe. Although there is again a measure of truth in this characterisation of Paul, it is just as one-sided as the Bultmannian portrait. It merely removes a different leg from the biblical tripod. Now Paul has become the defender of an ethical insight rather than an existential one. The ideal which he defends again is accessible to every human being. Paul didn’t need the cross to tell him that a proud and prejudiced nationalism was

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wrong. He could have gained this much from the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. Moreover, it is not clear that Jewish 'ethnocentrism' is wrong when it is understood in biblical terms. The Scriptures themselves envision the streaming of the nations to Zion (Is. 2:1–4)! Paul is quite arguably no less ethnically particularistic than his opponents.⁸

If we derive our conception of 'community' from the apostle himself, rather than bringing our own ideas to the material, we shall find it impossible to speak of community apart from individual persons, and vice versa. In Paul's understanding, as in biblical thought more generally, the person is not subordinate to the community, nor does the community exist simply to serve the persons within it. The body is composed of many members, which must remain in their diversity if there really is to be a body and not some absurdity. At the same time, the body of Christ constitutes a reality which transcends the mere collection of the parts. Obviously, we cannot here provide a thorough analysis of Paul's ecclesiology, for which fresh work is needed. We may suggest, however, that in the broad sweep of Paul's thought, there are only two fundamental human communities, Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:12–21). Israel and the nations represent a temporary bifurcation in human history, which God shall yet join together, not merely conceptually, but in substance: 'in Christ' there is neither 'Jew nor Greek' (Gal. 3:28). This arrival of the new creation is not merely a matter of eschatology, as if Paul were only one salvation—historical step ahead of his opponents. In Christ the world has been judged:

May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal. 6:14).

The cross, upon which a person was crucified, encompasses both Paul (his person and his works) and his community. The 'new perspective' on Paul legitimately emphasises the social dimension of Paul's gospel, the announcement that God has included the Gentiles. Taken by itself, however, such inclusivism is nothing more than the embrace of an ideal. It does not fundamentally differ from the earlier portraits of Paul which supposed that he came to understand the idea of 'grace' or authentic existence through faith in Christ. Paul's Gospel transcends such ideals in that it announces the advent of a new being in the resurrection of the crucified Christ in whom the world has been judged.

The Gospel as the Beginning of Exile Not the End

Paul's thought also has been interpreted in corporate terms in another way. The thesis that many or most first-century Jews

⁸ Against T.L. Donaldson, Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). Paul does not regard believing Gentiles as proselytes who have joined the nation of Israel. Believing Jew and Gentile alike have entered into the Israel of promise which has come to reality in Christ.
regarded the Babylonian exile of Israel as continuing into their own
day currently is receiving considerable interest and acceptance.⁹
According to this construal of early Judaism, Israel’s promised
forgiveness of sins and restoration from exile were thought to be yet
to come. Paul announced in his Gospel that the hour of fulfilment
had arrived in Jesus’ cross and resurrection, or so it is argued.
It must be said, however, that this reading of Paul is a mere variation
on an older theme. To shift from speaking of the burden of personal
guilt to that of the nation represents no real movement away from
psychologism. Whereas Paul was once thought to have been plagued
by personal sins, now the nation, or at least many within it, are
thought to have lamented their corporate failures.

The thesis also involves a large claim concerning the self-
understanding of first-century Judaism. Not surprisingly, it is
exceedingly difficult to sustain across the various witnesses to
Jewish thought from this period, especially within Paul’s letters.¹⁰
The attraction which Judaism held for Paul’s churches in Galatia is
very difficult to understand if one assumes that Jews generally were
lamenting their condition. The attractiveness of Judaism to Paul’s
readers is felt throughout the letter.¹¹ Paul’s assertion that the
heavenly, not the earthly Jerusalem, is the ‘mother’ of believers
presupposes that the earthly city bore considerable influence in the
minds of his converts (Gal. 4:21–31). His declaration that the
earthly Jerusalem ‘is enslaved with her children’ does not derive from
the ongoing Roman occupation (of which his converts would
have been aware), but because of its failure to believe the Gospel
(cf. Gal. 5:25).

Furthermore, ‘Israel’ is divided frequently into the pious and the
wicked in the Jewish writings from this period. Those who adhere to
the demands of the Law in the present shall be prepared for the
restoration which is yet to come. The rest will suffer punishment
with the enemies of God’s people.¹² The ‘sin’ of the people is no longer
absolute and all-encompassing, as the ‘exilic’ reading of
Paul requires. Those who are obedient may await the future
with confidence, as for example in the book of Baruch, where the
author claims,

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⁹ See, e.g., N.T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God
(Christian Origins and the Question of God 1), (Minneapolis: Fortress.
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994). 48–68; J.M. Scott, ‘Restoration
of Israel’, in G. Hawthorne, R. Martin, and D. Reid, eds., Dictionary of
Paul and His Letters (Downers Grove/Leticester: InterVarsity, 1993).
796–805.

¹⁰ See, F.G. Downing ‘Exile in Formative Judaism’ in Making Sense In
(and of) the First Christian Century (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press,
forthcoming).

¹¹ See Gal. 1:10 – 2:10; Gal. 2:11–21; Gal. 6:16.

¹² See O. Steck, Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten,
We praise you from our exile because we have turned away from our hearts all the unrighteousness of our fathers who sinned before you.\textsuperscript{13}

This development is of considerable significance, since now the piety of some within the nation is decoupled from its outward condition.

The early Jewish materials often present the exile has having ended in some sense or another, even if they also regard it as continuing or recurring. The book of Judith speaks directly of the end of the exile.\textsuperscript{14} The conclusion of the pseudepigraphal book of Baruch suggests that the return from exile is already in progress.\textsuperscript{15} The Qumran community regarded itself as the remnant, delivered from the continuing guilt of the nation, even if they entered a new exile in their separation from Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{16} The book of Tobit appears to envision a two-stage conclusion to the exile: by God's mercy some return from the exile and rebuild the Temple in an imperfect way; later all return from exile and rebuild Jerusalem in splendour. The exile has ended for some, but the 'times of fulfilment' are yet to come.\textsuperscript{17} Philo can speak of God himself as 'homeland, kinsfolk and inheritance' and regard the exile as the Jewish colonisation of the world, even though he also expects an end of exile.\textsuperscript{18} Josephus can treat the exile as having ended after 70 years, only to be followed by subsequent 'exiles', including the one he himself experienced.\textsuperscript{19}

Quite understandably, those in the land could regard themselves as not being in exile. The Mishnah contains a saying ascribed to Abtalion, who lived in Jerusalem under Herodian rule in the first-century BC. He warns teachers of the Law to guard their words so that they may not become guilty of the punishment of exile, and be exiled to the place of 'bad waters', i.e. bad teaching. Despite subjugation to Rome, he obviously did not regard himself to be in exile.\textsuperscript{20} The form of the Passover Seder recorded in the Mishnah is significant in this regard, since it may reflect something of the

\textsuperscript{13} Baruch 3:7. See also the Prayer of Azariah. Among other early Jewish writings 1 Enoch, Tobit, the Psalms of Solomon, 4 Ezra and the Qumran writings (despite their emphasis on unconditioned grace) display this sort of thinking.

\textsuperscript{14} Judith 4:1-5; 5:17-19.

\textsuperscript{15} See Baruch 4:36; Baruch 5:5-9.


\textsuperscript{17} Tobit 14:1-9. Note that only the obedient shall be saved, 14:7-9.

\textsuperscript{18} See Philo, Who Is the Heir of Divine Things, 26-27. Here Abraham (who perhaps represents all Diaspora Jews like Philo) acknowledges God as his homeland, kinsfolk, and inheritance, even though he is a pilgrim and a wanderer. Philo's expectation of an end of exile appears in On Rewards and Punishments, 162-72.

\textsuperscript{19} Antiquities 4:314; 10:112-13; 10:247-77; 11:1-4. For his own reasons, he regards exile positively and seems to lack an expectation of a return.

common practice and thought of early Judaism. A father is to
instruct the son concerning the redemption from Egypt from
Deuteronomy 26, 'beginning with the disgrace and ending with
the glory' (Deut. 26:5–9). No mention is made of the subsequent
description of exile and return in Deuteronomy 28–32.21

It is not at all clear, therefore, that there was a widespread sense
among Jews of Paul's day that Israel remained in exile in the way
that this theory demands. The pervasive sense of national guilt and
lament which it requires is lacking in the sources. Undoubtedly
many Jews in Paul's day regarded the exile as in some sense
continuing. Yet many Jews also supposed that the exile had in some
sense ended or that its effects had been ameliorated, even if it
remained. The return to the land, the reconstruction of the Temple,
and the adjustment by many Jews to life in the Diaspora brought
forth varied perspectives on Israel's experience.

There is no evidence that Paul, who returned from the Diaspora to
Jerusalem in his youth and refers to his practice of the Law as
'blameless' considered himself part of a nation suffering in exile for
its guilt. Furthermore, when Paul speaks of Israel's failure in his
letters, he treats the nation as a whole. We therefore cannot
suppose that he regarded part of the nation as being in exile or as
thinking itself to be in exile, as the early Jewish sources might allow.
The judgement which he formed concerning his people was all-
encompassing. It is derived not from an assessment of Israel's
outward condition, but from its rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

This observation brings us to Romans 9–11, where Paul himself
cites biblical texts which have to do with Israel's exile. His perspective is nearly the opposite of that attributed to him by the
'exilic' interpretation. A 'remnant' of Jewish believers in Christ
has come about in the present effectuation of God's word in Christ
(Rom. 9:28; Rom. 11:1; Is. 10:22; Is. 28:22). Israel's rejection of
Jesus is the 'stumbling against the stone of offence', which leads to
exile (Rom. 9:33; Is. 28:16). The believing community of Jews and
Gentiles represents, 'a provocation to jealousy by a nation which is
not'. That is to say, it represents the effectuation of the 'exile' of
which the book of Deuteronomy speaks (Rom. 10:19; Dt. 32:21).
The servitude to which Israel is now subjected is its failure to believe
the Gospel (Rom. 11:7–9). The image of the exile stands behind the
figure of the olive tree branches, 'who' were broken off because of
their unbelief (Rom. 11:20). Paul wants his Gentile readers to know
'this mystery', this once-hidden truth of Scripture now revealed: 'a
hardening in part has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the
Gentiles enters in'. In this strange way, by its present hardening,
'all Israel shall be saved (Rom. 11:25).22 The nation is presently
consigned to disobedience, in order that it may know the justification
of the ungodly by the Redeemer who shall come 'from Zion' to

21 m. Pesaḥ 10:4.
22 One need not, and should not, adopt a temporal reading of the adverb here.
'remove ungodliness from Jacob' (Rom. 11:26). He shall effect the new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke, taking away their sins (Rom. 11:27). It is on account of the gospel, not some past failure, that God now treats the Jewish people as enemies (Rom. 11:28). The time of proclamation shall come to an end. At the arrival of the eschaton the nation shall be saved. Paul sees the Deuteronomic sequence of apostasy, exile and return in Israel's present rejection of Jesus as Messiah and future salvation. Israel's history itself bears prophetic significance, and is fulfilled in Christ in an eschatological recapitulation of the exile and return.

Justification as the Justification of the Creator Not Covenant–Faithfulness

Present discussion generally has assumed that Paul's terminology for righteousness and justification derives its meaning from the realm of covenant and election. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find in the literature the expression 'covenant righteousness' applied to Paul's usage. As a human attribute and requirement for salvation, righteousness then may be said to entail the fulfilment of those demands which God has set in his covenantal relation with his people. It does not imply the demand for perfection, only (it is said) the desire to obey God, a certain standard of behaviour, and repentance for any failures that occur. Once this understanding of righteousness is applied to Paul, his soteriology becomes indistinguishable from that of early Judaism, and the basic impetus toward national categories, which is inherent to the 'new perspective', is given. In a similar manner, the covenantal interpretation of 'God's righteousness' often reduces it to the idea of 'salvation'. This equation, which has roots going back to the end of the nineteenth-century, became influential in the middle of the twentieth century, especially through the OT theology of Gerhard von Rad. References to 'God's righteousness' which appear frequently in the Psalms and the Book of Isaiah generally do signify his saving action, and may be justifiably rendered as 'salvation' (as the New Revised Standard Version often does) even if some meaning is thereby lost. Nevertheless, we cannot properly turn 'salvation' into a definition of the idea of divine righteousness, even if it is an acceptable gloss in a good number of contexts. The 'righteousness of God' which brings salvation to his people also means retribution for his enemies! Furthermore, there are a number of instances in the Hebrew Scriptures in which the idea of a retributive righteousness appears. The most significant of these are the confessions which appear in association with a contention in

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23 Paul here freely conflates Is. 59:20 and Jer. 31:33–34.
24 We may note in passing that Luther – much maligned and misunderstood by the 'new perspective' – found in Paul's understanding of justification the basis for rejecting a covenant theology which is scarcely distinguishable from the one many scholars now attribute to Paul!
25 E.g. Ps. 7:1–18; Ps. 11:5–7; Ps. 35:24–28; Is. 10:22; Is. 51:4–8.
which the guilty party, who is subject to retribution acknowledges, ‘Yahweh is righteous’ (*'addiq*). This adjectival usage, which seems to have been largely overlooked in modern research, clearly signals that something wider than the notion of ‘salvation’ is involved in the biblical understanding of God’s righteousness.

As these observations already suggest, the use of the category of ‘covenant’ to conceptualise ‘righteousness’ is flawed and has led to distortions in interpretation. In fact, the usage of righteousness terminology itself is rarely brought into close connection with covenantal terms in the biblical literature, and nowhere yields the idea of a saving covenantal act, which interpreters now generally presuppose. It rather appears often in association with the idea of ‘ruling and judging’, as in the expression ‘do to justice and righteousness’. The salvific overtones which are attached to the biblical use of righteousness terminology derive in the first instance from the context of contentions and lawsuits, in which the ‘right’ of an injured party is established by one with authority to ‘rule and judge’, frequently a royal figure. In such instances, the judicial and executive functions are joined, so that verdicts are inseparable from vindicating actions in which justice is established. When the psalmists appeal to God for justice, they want more than a mere pronouncement. Ultimately, this juridical context is bound up with the understanding that God has determined a ‘right’ order for the world. As Creator he intervenes again and again to establish this order, particularly when the rights of the poor have been violated. It was the appointed task of the anointed king within Israel to mediate the judgements of God for the oppressed, and so to establish this righteousness:

_Give, O God, your just judgements to the king_
_and your righteousness to the son of the king_
_He will judge your people with righteousness_
_and your oppressed ones with just judgement (Ps. 72:1–3)._  

When this obligation was repeatedly violated, as the prophets charged the house of David with doing, God determined to establish justice for himself, and to bring retribution on those who opposed

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27 I have surveyed the biblical usage in ‘Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism’ forthcoming in a volume edited by D.A. Carson.

28 E.g. 2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Ki. 10:9; Is. 9:6; Is. 33:5; Jer. 22:3.

29 E.g. Ps. 72:1-4; 2 Sam. 15:4; Is. 9:6; Jer. 22:3.

30 E.g. 1 Kgs 8:32; Ex. 23:7; Dt. 25:1–2; Ps. 82:3.

31 E.g. Ps. 9:5–7; Ps. 35:23–28; Ps. 71:1–24.


33 See also, for example, 2 Sa. 8:15; 1 Kgs 10:9; Je. 22:3; Pr. 31:8–9.

34 See for example Is. 1:10–26; Is. 58:1–14; Am. 5:1–27.
him.\textsuperscript{34} It is within this framework that the Messianic hope comes to expression. God promises his people a 'new' David who, unlike the previous rulers of Israel, will work justice and righteousness.\textsuperscript{35}

Correspondingly, hope came to be more directly fixed upon God himself and his action as Creator within biblical thought. It is this background which informs Paul's allusion to Psalm 98 in Romans 1:17, where he declares that the 'righteousness of God' has been revealed in the Gospel. The psalm itself runs as follows:

\begin{quote}
Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has worked wonders,  
His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him,  
The Lord has made known his salvation,  
To the eyes of the nations he has revealed his righteousness  
He has remembered his constant love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel  
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God (Ps. 98:1–3).
\end{quote}

The psalmist envisions God intervening on behalf of his people against unnamed enemies before the eyes of all the nations. We might well say that the Lord is moved to action on account of his covenantal relation with Israel, since he 'remembers his constant love and faithfulness' to them. But he acts as King of creation, a ruler who first intervenes to save his own children before going on to further works (Ps. 98:6). The following lines of the psalm call upon the nations to rejoice as they anticipate the Lord's coming to judge them (Ps. 98:4–9). God's saving act on behalf of Israel foreshadows the righteousness which he shall effect for the earth, the rectification of the created order.\textsuperscript{36} For this reason the very elements, the sea, the rivers and the hills celebrate his coming.\textsuperscript{37} 'God's righteousness' is bound up with his role as ruler and judge of creation. The covenant fidelity which he displays toward Israel is only one manifestation of the saving righteousness which he exercises as ruler of all.

We should not allow the first lines of this psalm to go unnoticed. The contention which implicitly informs the psalmist's statements involves not merely 'the house of Israel', but God himself: his 'holy arm and right hand' gain salvation \textit{for him} (Ps. 98:1). In revealing his righteousness, God was not only delivering his people, but establishing his own cause against those who contend against him. The violation of the created order is simultaneously a violation of God's right as Creator. In bringing justice, he insists on his rightful claim to be God against the world which denies him:

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34 See, e.g., Is. 9:1–6; Jer. 23:5–6.
35 A similar image appears in Is. 51:4–8: 'My righteousness is near, my salvation has gone forth, and my arm shall judge the peoples. Upon me shall the coast lands wait, and for my arm they shall hope' (Is. 51:5).
36 See also, for example, Ps. 96; Is. 42:10–13; Is. 49:13; Is. 51:4–11.
\end{flushright}
The heavens shall vanish like smoke, 
the earth shall wear out like a garment, 
and its inhabitants shall likewise die, 
but my salvation shall be forever, 
and my righteousness shall not pass away (Is. 51:6).

The punitive action which appears in this text obviously corresponds to God's saving activity, but clearly is not necessary to it. God need not destroy the world to save his people. He acts not merely for them, but also for his own sake. His ruling and judging the world includes his absolute right to be God, even to the point of the destruction of the old and the establishment of a new creation. For this reason, when God has a contention with his people, it is only through wrath and condemnation that salvation and righteousness may come. Indeed, the prophetic oracles of salvation characteristically announce 'deliverance through destruction'.

It is important to recognise that the modern, three-party courtroom is not an appropriate model for interpreting the biblical conception of justification, including that of Paul. The administration of justice always is a two-party affair. A more powerful third party who entered into a dispute took up the cause of one disputant or the other. Therefore, when God enters into a contention, he is not pictured as a judge who stands above the matter, but as a party to the dispute. In effecting justice for the one in the right ('justifying' them) and punishing the one in the wrong, he establishes his own cause, as in Psalm 98. His verdict, moreover, does not merely bring salvation, but re-establishes moral order within the world and his authority as Creator over it. It is not that 'might makes right' – as one must say, if one reduces 'righteousness' to the idea of salvation – but that God's might restores what is right, especially his right as God. For this reason, we find the occasional confessions by the defeated parties that, 'Yahweh is righteous, we are in the wrong' (Ex. 9:27).

It is this context of creation and judgement which lies behind Paul's understanding of righteousness and justification. Obviously there is much to be said on this matter for which we do not have space or time here. The most we can do is briefly comment

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61 With reference to the poor, see e.g. Ps. 72:4; Prov. 31:9.
62 This thought is prominent, for example, in the latter chapters of the book of Isaiah. See especially Is. 41:1-13; Is. 49:23-5; Is. 50:7-11; Is. 51:4-8.
63 I have treated the topic in greater detail in the forthcoming book, Christ, Our Righteousness.
upon Romans 1:16–17, as a way of sketching the outline of Paul’s thought.  

Here the connection between God’s saving intervention on behalf of Israel and the salvation of the world which we find in Psalm 98 recurs. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation ‘for the Jew first, and also for the Greek’ (Rom. 1:16). The ‘revelation of the righteousness of God’ recalls not only God’s promises for his people, but also his purposes for the nations. In speaking of ‘God’s righteousness’ Paul has in view God’s role as ‘ruler and judge’, who shall savingly bring about ‘justice and righteousness’ for the world which he has made. It is ‘in the Gospel’, which announces the crucified and risen Christ, that the ‘righteousness of God’ is revealed. By its very nature, this localising declaration suggests that Paul here refers to Christ’s resurrection, employing biblical language in order to convey its saving significance. ‘God’s righteousness’ is his ‘vindicating act’ of raising Christ from the dead for us. The biblical themes of God’s deliverance of the oppressed, his vindication of his Servant, his faithfulness to Israel and his salvation of the world are implicitly present. That which is to take place at the day of judgement for those who believe is manifest here and now in him.  

Furthermore, it is God’s righteousness which has been revealed. In Christ’s resurrection God has been vindicated and has defeated his enemies.

The broader context confirms this interpretation. In the opening verses of the letter, Paul names the resurrected Christ as the content of his Gospel, which he likewise describes as the fulfillment of promise (Rom. 1:1–4). Even more significantly, he subsequently connects the justification of believers with the resurrection of the crucified Christ: ‘... who was delivered up on account of our transgressions, and raised on account of our justification’ (Rom. 4:25).

Just as our sin brought Christ’s condemnation and death, his resurrection announces our justification. The close connection between verdict and vindication which one finds so prominently in the usage of the Hebrew Scriptures reappears here. The divine verdict ‘for us’ is present and manifest in the resurrected Christ. Later in Romans, Paul identifies the risen Christ with the revealed ‘righteousness of God’ to which Israel refused to submit (Rom. 10:4).

It is, of course, in the resurrection of the crucified Christ that our redemption is found. The biblical references to God’s saving acts of righteousness imply that his enemies receive retribution in those

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44 Rom. 2:6; Rom. 2:16; Rom. 3:5–6.
45 The two final occurrences of ‘God’s righteousness’ in this passage stand in immediate parallelism to references to God’s patience and justice (Rom. 3:25, 26). They undoubtedly signify ‘God’s own righteousness’, just as Paul speaks in Romans 3:5 of God’s righteousness in his ‘contention’ with humanity. Note that Paul here employs the simple pronoun, ‘his righteousness’. 
same acts. Paul gives that underlying assumption full expression in his elaboration of Romans 1:17 in Romans 3:21–26, particularly in the latter part of this passage. Christ’s atoning death constitutes a ‘demonstration of God’s own righteousness’, which has been hidden until ‘the present time’ (Rom. 3:25–26). This delay has taken place on account of God’s ‘patience’, in which he passed over the sins which human beings have committed (Rom. 3:25). As similar expressions in Romans indicate, in speaking of God’s ‘patience’ Paul has in view the ‘forbearance of God intended to lead human beings to repentance’ (Rom. 2:4). Paul here refers to God’s earlier suspension of his wrath, not to some former forgiveness of sins. Whereas Paul’s earlier usage of the ‘righteousness of God’ refers the act of God for us in Christ’s resurrection, the latter occurrences of the expression have to do with God’s own righteousness manifest in Christ’s death. God ‘demonstrates his righteousness’ in the crucifixion of his Son (Rom. 3:25). In variance from his earlier language of ‘revelation’, Paul now speaks of the ‘demonstration’ of God’s righteousness. There shall come a time when God the Creator shall ‘demonstrate his wrath and make his power known’ (Rom. 9:22). The cross is the prolepsis of that day of judgement, when God’s contention with the world comes to its conclusion. In justifying the sinner God does not set aside his contention with humanity. He brings it to completion in his own Son.

God wills that this completion take place not merely outwardly in Christ’s cross, but also in us. Paul concludes this passage with the striking statement that the demonstration of God’s righteousness, i.e. his right in his contention with humanity, took place in order that God might ‘become just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus’ (Rom. 3:26). In its context, the clause clearly bears a telic sense: God demonstrated his righteousness so that he might ‘come to be just’. In this concluding statement we may suggest there is a reflection of the ‘confessions’ which appear at the resolution of biblical ‘contentions’. There God ‘becomes’ righteous in that his adversaries confess his right and their guilt. In the same way, the justification of the one who believes in Christ and the justification of God are bound together. Christ’s death represents an atonement (with implicit notions of fulfilment of promise), in which guilt is both acknowledged and removed: ‘God set him forth as a place of propitiation through faith in his blood’ (Rom. 3:25). Faith is thus

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45 The terminology for ‘revelation’ varies between Rom. 3:21 and Rom. 3:25–26. Very likely there is a semantic distinction between the two words for revelation, with endeixis conveying especially the sense of ‘public exhibition’ (as opposed to more mental notions of revelation).

46 This interpretation of Christ’s death goes back through early Christian tradition to Jesus’ own words at his last Passover meal with his disciples. See Stuhlmacher 1986: 16–29. It is not at all surprising, then, that Paul’s language here shows connections with Hebrews, 1 Peter, and the Johannine writings. N.B. God put Christ forward as a ‘place of propitiation’. Paul does not speak of Christ appeasing an unloving God on our behalf, but of a God who redeems humanity in his own Son.
directed to the *crucified* and risen Jesus. In faith, one takes the side of God in his claim against one’s self, giving God justice. At the same time, one takes hold of God’s gift in Christ, whom he has ‘put forward’ as an atonement and in whom he has taken the side of the sinner. In Christ and in faith, the justification of God the Creator meets the justification of the godless. For Paul, the latter cannot take place without the former.

**Conclusion**

Undoubtedly the ‘new perspective on Paul’ in its various forms shall be with us for some time to come. Despite its current attractiveness, however, its problems appear to be fundamental. One can only predict, therefore, that the cracks in its base shall widen until the entire structure crumbles. Whether this shall take place in our generation or one to come is impossible to tell.