

REVIEW

Kent L. Yinger

The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction

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The title of this slim volume announces the author's intention to lay bare the key issues and controversies associated with the "New Perspective on Paul." Yinger is not conversing with fellow scholars here but with pastors, seminarians, and educated laypersons—chiefly of a Protestant stripe—who have heard the New Perspective praised and criticized yet lack the capacity to assess it for themselves. As Yinger explains his purpose, such readers "should find help in getting behind the hype to the real issues" (p. 2).

Yinger clarifies these "real issues" in the seven chapters that follow his introduction. In the first three, he examines the origins of the New Perspective. Due credit is given to three patriarchs: E.P. Sanders, who challenged traditional representations of Judaism as overly legalistic and instead claimed that most forms of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism fit a pattern of religion he called covenantal nomism; James D.G. Dunn, who drew on Sanders' work and interpreted Paul as a Jew within that religious pattern of covenantal nomism; and N.T. Wright, who contextualized Paul's gospel within Israel's historic mission. The trajectory they established constitutes what Yinger calls the four "main lines" of the New Perspective—namely, (1) that ancient Judaism fits the religious pattern of covenantal nomism; (2) that legalism or works-righteousness was accordingly not in Paul's crosshairs; (3) that inclusion of Gentile believers in the people of God was Paul's principal concern; and (4) that Paul's disagreement with contemporary Jews was not over the relationship between grace, faith, and works, but over the identification of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. In addition to the Sanders-Dunn-Wright-trajectory, Yinger explains how these main lines inform the variations in the New Perspective put forth by Don Garlington, Francis Watson, Heikki Räisänen, Lloyd Gaston, John Gager, and others.

In the next three chapters, Yinger explores the historical, exegetical, and theological controversies raised by the New Perspective. The last two receive the most attention. On the exegetical front, Yinger examines the standard catalog of pivotal phrases and passages (e.g., "works of the Law," "faith in / of Christ," "curse of the Law" [Gal 3:10-13]; Paul's robust or burdened conscience [Phil 3:6; 1 Cor 4:4; 2 Cor 1:12; Rom 7:1-25], and more). His analysis is admirably clear, concise, and balanced, enabling even newcomers to New Testament studies to discern the differences between the traditional and new perspectives along with the strengths and weaknesses of each. Yinger's treatment of the theological controversies is no less exemplary as he weighs both sides of the well-known accusation that the New Perspective is incompatible with Reformation theology.

The final chapter considers the potentially positive effects of the New Perspective. It is here where many readers of this journal, regardless of their specialty, might take interest because the New Perspective is often credited with wearing down the supposed contrasts that have generated Christian antipathy towards Judaism: grace vs. works, love vs. fear, Spirit vs. Law, etc.

Unfortunately, Yinger's reflections on contemporary Christian-Jewish relations are meager. In a brief section (hyperbolically) titled "Goodbye to Anti-Semitism?" he suggests that "the NPP might also help reduce some Christian tendencies toward anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism" because covenantal nomism is more appealing to Christians than legalism, which many Christians consider "inferior," "failed," or "wrong-headed" (p. 88). On his reading of the *New Perspective*, "Judaism and Christianity turn out to have most of their pattern [of religion] in common" (p. 88). Some may have concerns over this approach to Christian anti-Judaism because it seems as though the legitimacy and respectability, even the palatability, of Judaism depend on Judaism's resemblance to Christianity. Many Jews—and I count myself among them—do not look upon legalism with such disrelish, however; they embrace legal discourse (distinct from its pejorative portrayal by traditional Christian scholars) as a quintessential expression of Jewish engagement with God and the Torah. It might be preferable to find ways of encouraging Christians to understand and to appreciate the legalistic aspects of Judaism rather than effacing them (with reciprocal acts of understanding and appreciation on the part of Jews, naturally).

That contention notwithstanding, Yinger's effort should be judged an overall success. It has a Protestant flavor, to be sure, but I think students of all backgrounds will find it to be as clear and concise as any introduction to the momentous shifts in Pauline interpretation that have occurred over the past three decades. The annotated list of suggestions for further study provides direction for greater immersion in the field. Even scholars well acquainted with the *New Perspective* may find this book useful for distilling ever expanding reams of scholarship into digestible lessons and lectures.