



The Ego and “I”: Galatians 2:19 in New Perspective

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RECENT STUDY OF GALATIANS HAS HAD A MASSIVE IMPACT ON THE FAMOUS “I have been crucified with Christ” statement of Paul (Gal 2:19), a comment taken by many scholars as a self-evident process of Christian faith. I was nurtured in a comfortable blend of Calvinism, Arminianism, and Lutheranism, and so the “I” of Gal 2:19 was easy to understand: we are all selfish and depraved and in need of God’s grace. Paul’s “Ego” here is the self, the unredeemed person, the depraved will, the flesh of our old humanity. This “Ego” expresses selfishness, especially in the attempt to earn favor, acceptance, and salvation on the basis of good works. And every person in the world finds himself or herself in this very “Ego” who needs co-crucifixion. This is how we heard the gospel, and this statement of Paul’s expressed clearly the contents of our socialization into that gospel. If recent New Testament study of Paul has not overturned the fundamental tenets of theological

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Who “died to the law” in Gal 2:19? Reading Galatians in the light of recent sociological interpretation suggests the “I” of this text is the “Ego” of Peter and Paul as Jewish Christians, not all who believe in Christ, as often assumed.

systems handed on to our youth,¹ it has at least challenged Paul's claim that everyone needs crucifixion with Christ.

I. WHAT IS THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL?

In short, the new perspective on Paul unfolds from a more sympathetic perception of Judaism and how Jesus, Paul, and earliest Christianity fit into that perception. Three theses state the new perspective.²

First, *Judaism was not a "works-oriented" religion but a covenant-based faith from which works flowed as obedience in order to maintain one's relationship to God within that covenant.* This perception, the result of a series of important pieces of scholarship, challenges the older view that Judaism was a religion that focused on works, led to internal insecurities about one's standing before the God of Israel, drove the level of inter-Jewish competition sky-high, and eliminated the glories of trust and joy. The implications of this perception of Judaism are enormous and affect nearly every commentary and scholarly work of this century.

Second, *earliest Christianity remained within Judaism for a good long while and was neither outside of it as a "new religion" nor was it fundamentally critical of Judaism per se.* In short, the new perspective finds substantial and essential continuity between the various sorts of Judaism of the ancient world and the earliest forms of Christian faith, emerging and evolving as it did in interaction with those sorts of Judaism. This view sees Jesus as a prophet of Jewish restoration and Paul as a Jew who argued vigorously for Jesus as Messiah, but in so arguing Paul was not establishing a new religion. Though most today see significant tension between Paul and the dominant form of Judaism with which he was debating (e.g., some form of Pharisaic Judaism), a few scholars today would argue that the Pauline gospel was a variant form of Judaism and would have been perceived at that time as a kind of Judaism.³ James D. G. Dunn, commenting on the origins of Paul's doctrine of justification, a doctrine customarily understood as a (if not *the*) Christian innovation, concludes: "In its essence it was simply a restatement of the first principles of his own ancestral faith."⁴

¹I am thinking especially of E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), and James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). I attempt to utilize this approach to Paul in my commentary on Galatians in a context for pastors in *Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). The implications of the new perspective on Paul for preaching and articulating the gospel are far-reaching. I contend that Paul's Judaizing opponents are no more Roman Catholic than evangelical Protestants: the analogies today are to those who compromise the sufficiency of Christ and the adequacy of the Spirit.

²See James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 183-241; see also the clear survey of Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 14-47.

³The most forceful expression of this is Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). Two other studies, also by Jewish scholars, are Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale, 1990); Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994).

⁴Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 345.

Third, *the theology of Protestant churches especially is built upon this fundamental misunderstanding of Judaism and too easily lends itself to anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.* Reformation theology, so combative as it was with Roman Catholicism, grounds its own logic frequently in equating Judaism at the time of Paul with the Roman Catholicism facing Luther and Calvin, and the New Testament scholarship founded upon reformation theology builds upon this logic.⁵ This is a serious historical inaccuracy and, while Luther and Calvin needed to assert the predominance of grace and faith in their own struggles, finding their own struggles in Paul's with Judaism prevented Christian scholarship from seeing both Paul and Judaism in their true colors. Voices protesting against this logic of Christian scholarship were simply not given a fair hearing.⁶

These three theses lead to several important implications. First, Judaism is now seen as a covenant-based religion in which individuals (who are more a concern in modern than ancient history) are securely fastened to the saving grace of God on the basis of his election of Israel. Second, Torah-obedience and works are seen as maintenance of this covenant relationship rather than as establishing that relationship. This perception is called "covenant nomism."⁷ Third, Paul's conversion was not Luther's conversion. Maintaining this distinction permits a more accurate perception of both Judaism and Paul.⁸ Thus, Paul's conversion was not a release from bondage to the Torah nor was the expression of faith by Paul an innovation unheard of in his Jewish world. Paul's factionalistic zeal for Torah gave way to a gospel for the gentiles, for all who believe (Rom 1:16-17; Gal 1:13-16; Phil 3:3-6). Fourth, Paul's theology is seen now as less "anthropological" (concerned with human motives in redemption) and "religious" (concerned with a monolithic Judaism vs. a Pauline Christianity) and more "sociological" (concerned with Israel qua Israel) and systemic-hermeneutical (concerned with how best to read the Bible, how to relate the covenant to gentiles in light of Jesus Christ).

In particular, the implications here for understanding the major themes of Paul's articulation of *justification by faith through grace alone* are far-reaching.⁹ To begin with, as a careful reading of Gal 2:15-16 makes clear, justification by faith is a doctrine of the Old Testament and Judaism. Paul says here, "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." Notice the foundation: Paul argues that those who "are Jews by birth" are those who "know that a person is justifi-

⁵This has been the special polemic of Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 33-59.

⁶The two most important voices prior to Sanders were C. G. Montefiore, "Rabbinic Judaism and the Epistles of St. Paul," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 13 (1900-1901) 161-217; George Foote Moore, "Christian Writers on Judaism," *Harvard Theological Review* 14 (1921) 197-254.

⁷For a convenient summary, see Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 422-423. For a more complete statement, see E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE-66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992) 241-278.

⁸See here Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 78-96.

⁹An extensive discussion can be seen in Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 334-389.

fied through faith." One recent scholar has outlined nine features of the doctrine of justification (called by him "rectification") held by the Judaizing opponents of Paul and sets Paul into that context.¹⁰

Furthermore, "works of the Law" are defined not so much by the motive of earning sufficient merit before God but are seen as badges of identity and Torah-practices that erect boundaries between Jews and gentiles. In other words, "works of the Law" focus on those practices of Jews that give them that special identity; but Paul received an inclusive gospel, and this forced "works of the Law" to be contrary to God's will. In addition, what led Paul into a different form of Judaism that created sufficient tension to force an eventual break with Judaism was the focusing of faith and the redemptive plan of God on Jesus Christ. Justification, or redemption, no longer comes through Moses nor through the Torah, which were good expressions of God's will, however restricted in purpose and time (Gal 3:19-25), but through Jesus Christ. Finally, the faith of Israel was no longer defined by an ethnic Israel. What began as inclusive table fellowship by Jesus becomes under the brilliant insight of Paul an inclusive gospel of justification by faith for all who believe (3:6-9).

II. GALATIANS 2:15-21 IN CONTEXT

Our passage forms the climax of Gal 1:1-2:21, a section that provides a sustained argument by Paul that his gospel comes directly by revelation (1:15-16) and is independent of human teaching (1:13-17), the major churches (1:18-24), the Jerusalem pillars (2:1-10), and even Peter himself (2:11-14 with 2:15-21). Paul considers his gospel so important that eternal destiny is at stake (1:6-9). For Paul the whole debate is about the "truth of the gospel" (2:5), which is not just content but also practical implication, and the absolute necessity of "freedom" (5:1), which enables a person to be paradoxically free of Torah and a slave to others (5:13).

In particular, it was his experiences at Jerusalem (2:1-10) and Antioch (2:11-14) that shaped Paul's theology and give rise to the important statements of 2:15-21. At Jerusalem (2:1-10), which as an event is either an alternative account of Acts 15 (the Jerusalem conference) or the famine visit (Acts 11:30; 12:25), Paul learns that circumcision is not a requirement for faith in Christ, that his gospel is fundamentally endorsed by the Jerusalem pillars, and that he and Peter have separate, but equal, callings. At Antioch (Gal 2:11-14), Paul observed a unified worship of both Jewish and gentile Christians interrupted catastrophically when a group from Jerusalem, representing themselves as a party from James, the brother of Jesus, arrived in Antioch and led the Jewish Christians, including Barnabas (a former ally of Paul's gospel), away from such unity. The result, a horror to Paul, was a momentous rift of the Christian fellowship in Antioch: a gentile Christian Church and a form of Christian Judaism. So serious was Paul (cf. 1:6-9) that he publicly con-

¹⁰J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 263-275. Martyn calls the opponents of Paul "Teachers" (see 117-126).

fronted Peter and set out a rationale for his rebuke, expressed briskly in 2:15-21: if Peter understood the salvation-historical consequences of salvation at the end of history in Jesus Christ then he would not withdraw into a Christian Judaism but would instead nurture a unified Christian Church. As a result of these two experiences Paul learned the weight certain identifiable practices could shoulder; in particular, Paul saw how much significance Jews could attribute to circumcision, purity, and food laws.

Before we turn to the “Ego” of Gal 2:19, we need to unfold the logic and meaning of 2:15-21 in light of the new perspective on Paul.¹¹ This unit neatly divides into two: (1) a common Jewish Christian experience (2:15-16) and (2) the implications of that common experience (2:17-21). It is striking how few interpreters have noted the logic of Paul’s argument. What is fundamental to this unit is that both Paul and Peter had a *common Jewish Christian experience in their conversion*. That is, it is the “we” of 2:15-16 that shapes the argument: it was because they were *Jews* that Paul has a ground to criticize Peter’s own practices at Antioch. It is the “we” who are “Jews” (2:15) who “know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but [or but only] through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16). It was *the Jewish Christians* who perceived this connection. At this point Paul is speaking of an experience in common to Jewish converts to Jesus Messiah rather than of an experience typical of gentile Christians. This viewpoint makes best sense of why Paul would suggest that gentiles are “sinners,” implying that Jews are not; it is because Paul is adopting the angle of Peter, expressed so tragically at Antioch, that Jews are special and that gentiles are “sinners.” In summary, the common Jewish Christian experience of conversion involves (1) an original condition [Jewish by nature], (2) coming to see that justification was to be found by faith in Jesus Christ, and (3) an actual act of trust in Jesus Christ for that justification.

But this raises what must be the most obvious Christian reflex to the new perspective: Does not Paul say the justification is *not by the works of the law* but through *faith*? And does that not mean that Paul is concerned with the attempt on the part (especially) of Jews to gain merit before God on the basis of their performance? Put differently, is not Paul’s “we” of 2:15-16 really identical to the “no one” at the end of verse 16? At this point we need to define, however briefly, what “works of the law” means, because it is in this expression that the age-old reformation theological polemic expresses itself most naturally. Scholars are fairly unanimous in contending that “works of the law” refers to observances of the Torah, acts of individual Israelites that conform to the law of Moses (e.g., Exod 20-24). At this point in the discussion, however, the road forks: for some, notably the classical reformation scholars, the term expresses *motive*, the attempt to gain approval with God by performance, while for the new perspective the term has a *sociological fo-*

¹¹For three commentaries from this angle, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black’s NT Commentaries (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993); McKnight, *Galatians*; G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).

cus. The new perspective rightfully argues that the issue of motive is not part of Paul's argument, because the issue of merit is not a part of Judaism; in particular, it is not a part of "covenantal nomism." Instead of focusing on "works," which must mean "attempts to earn favor," or on a "law," which in reformation theology is the opposite of "grace," recent scholarship has shown that the texts where "works" of the law occur reveal an emphasis on certain kinds of "works," namely acts like Sabbath, circumcision, food laws, and various sorts of purity, and the implication is that the acts so done are *expressions of allegiance to Torah as identifying the people of God in their distinction from either gentiles or other Jewish sectarian understandings of the Torah*. For instance, the newly-discovered fragments of 4QMMT reveal that the exact expression describes the community's own particular interpretation and practice of the Torah.¹² In other words, instead of describing a motive, the expression "works of the law" describes an interpretation of the law and an evaluation of others in light of that interpretation to see who is obedient. It is this attitude that Paul excoriates when he says "not by the works of the law."

To sum up: Paul appeals to the common Jewish experience that both he and Peter shared when they converted to faith in Jesus Christ, an experience that recognized "works of the law" to be an erection of national privilege and socio-religious barriers, now undone in the Jesus-for-the-gentile perception (Gal 3:6-9). This common experience of Jewish Christians in our passage leads to several implications.

First, the opponents of Paul at Antioch apparently accused these Petrine-Pauline Christian compromisers of being "sinners" (2:17). That is, when they saw their table fellowship with gentiles they immediately classed them on the basis of their "works of the law" (i.e., their non-works of the law) as gentiles, and that meant "sinners" (cf. 2:15). Such a classification confirms the sociological orientations of many of these terms and, at the same time, provides Paul with an opportunity to clarify his message. Paul seizes their term for the liberalization of the gospel in an inclusive sharing of table and contests it: we Jewish Christians are not thereby "sinners," and Christ is not leading us into sin by leading us away from such "works of the law." Christ could never be seen as an agent of sin.

If the first implication is that Jewish Christians, by refraining from certain "works of the law" and by engaging in table fellowship with like-minded believers in Jesus, were not thereby to be classed as "sinners," the second is that Peter's act of re-erecting boundaries between Jews and gentiles on the basis of "works of the law" is, in a total about-face, demonstrably sinful itself (2:18). Thus, if a Jew finds that justification comes through faith in Jesus Christ *for anyone and everyone*, with an emphasis on "Jesus Christ" and not "faith" as the opposite of "works-as-merit," then to revert to "works of the law" as boundary markers between Jews and gentiles is to "build up again the very things that I once tore down" and so to force oneself into the category of "transgressor."

¹²For a translation, see Florentino Garcia Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 77-86 (here 4QMMT 113).

A third implication (2:19), which I shall develop below, is that the Jewish Christian dies to the “law,” that is, to “works of the law” as boundary markers. A fourth implication, the corollary of the third, is that death to law means “Christ-alive-in-me” (2:20), which then receives the comment that faith is in the Son of God who offered himself for the Jewish Christian in his death. Finally, the fifth implication is that choosing to denounce “works of the law” (expressed here as “grace”) does not nullify the grace of God because, as all Jewish Christians know (2:15), justification does not come from the works of the law but through the death of Jesus Christ (2:21).

This rendering of Gal 2:15-21 in light of the new perspective on Paul, of course, requires more proof than can be offered here, but my purpose is not a full defense but only a sampling of how Galatians is being read today in light of our new appreciation of Judaism. A point barely touched upon above is the meaning of “Ego” in 2:19, and it is to its meaning that I now turn. While James D. G. Dunn and I differ slightly here on the meaning of the “Ego” of 2:19, what I am offering is a new-perspective reading of that verse with a view to a consistent rendering of the first-person pronouns of 2:15-21.

III. THE EGO OF GALATIANS 2:19: WHO DIED?

Three basic perceptions of the “Ego” of Gal 2:19 have been offered: “For through the law I died to the law....” We begin with the *universalistic interpretation* for which the “I” is *anyone and everyone*—anyone who believes in Jesus Christ must die to the law. This viewpoint can emerge from anthropology or from eschatology. That is, one might argue that since all humans are sinful and naturally desirous of asserting their works and self before God, they all need to die to self and the law if they want to find favor with God. A more nuanced expression of this view finds an eschatological anchor: anyone who finds justification in Jesus Christ enters into the new era of redemption and dies to the law.¹³ While few would contest either the attractiveness of this theory in the history of Christian theology or the insightfulness of the eschatological orientation, the problem for this view is simple: it strays too much from the context of Peter, Paul, the opponents, and the incident at Antioch. Further, it forces either inconsistency in the first-person pronouns of 2:15-21, with a beginning that renders “I” as Peter and Paul but an ending that now renders the “I” as generalized humanity under Christ, on the one hand, or, on the other, a consistent generalized interpretation that neglects the historical particularity of 2:15 with its almost certain use of “we” to refer to Peter and Paul.¹⁴

Instead of such a view, many prefer to see here *the autobiographical experience*

¹³So Martyn, *Galatians*, 249, 255, 258, where one can follow the movement from a direct concern with Peter, Paul, and the “Teachers” to Paul as the paradigm of this eschatological human being.

¹⁴One interpretation renders the “I” in light of Quintillian’s rhetorical theory; see Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 113-114, 121-122. In his view, Gal 2:19 begins the “theses” of Paul.

of Paul, in effect, Paul's first run at what later was expressed so forcefully in Rom 7. In contrast to the "zeal" that once motivated Paul (cf. Gal 1:13-16), we now see a zeal for the "works of the law" that has been put to death, whether for anthropological (selfishness, etc.) or hermeneutical (Jesus ends the law; cf. 3:19-25) reasons. The logic, though not as clear in this case, would be as follows: Paul uses his own experience in 2:19, in contrast to the common Jewish experience of 2:15-17, to force Peter to see that Paul's experience ought to be Peter's. Since Paul died to the law, so also ought Peter to die to the law and engage in table fellowship with all those who have faith in the Son of God. A significant point creates too much tension for this view: it is almost certain that the experience of 2:18 is Peter's attempt to re-erect the boundaries between Jews and gentiles, the attempt to "judaize" the gentiles (2:14). Since 2:18 uses the term "Ego" and since 2:19 uses the same "Ego," we are on safer grounds finding the same referent: Peter.

Thus, a third option is that the "Ego" of 2:19 is *Peter's and Paul's Ego as Jewish Christians*. It should be observed that such a view utilizes a consistent first person reference from beginning to end: the "we" of 2:15 is Peter and Paul; the "we" of 2:16 is Peter and Paul; the "we" of 2:17 is Peter and Paul, with an emphasis on Peter; the "I" of 2:18 is Peter, with perhaps Paul included; the "I" of 2:19-20 is Peter, with Paul included; and the "I" of 2:21 is Peter once again, with Paul also included again. Such consistency counts in favor of the Petrine-Pauline Ego as the referent. Further, there is no reason to resort to either generalizing or universalizing interpretation in this context for, apart from the need of (now largely) gentile Christians to find themselves in every text, the text is not about the gentile Christian experience with the Torah—for they do not, in fact, die to the Torah. They don't know the Torah. Indeed, it is a particularly Jewish experience to die to the Torah and it is insensitive of gentile Christian scholarship to neglect the peculiar, if also foundational, experience of Jewish Christians like Peter and Paul in coming to terms with faith in Christ. Finally, perhaps I give back some ground here in affirming that the autobiographical view of Paul is somewhat included in this view, but, instead of Paul as individual, Paul is now *representative Jewish convert to Jesus Messiah*.

In this context perhaps we ought to ask whether this text has any relevance then for the gentile Christian? Does the gentile Christian have an "Ego" which needs to die to the law? In specific terms, no; in general terms, yes. Let me explain. It is a fact that gentile Christians were not tempted to withdraw from table fellowship either to please the Jerusalem authorities or to maintain the boundaries of works of the law. However, inasmuch as Paul's attack is against anyone who contaminates the gospel by re-erecting national or ethnic boundaries, or who systemically pollutes the sufficiency of Christ as ground of acceptance with God or the adequacy of the Holy Spirit as guide for Christian behavior, the gentile needs to die to that kind of law—the law that systemically pollutes the purity of the gospel with other forms of acceptance with God. The "Ego" among gentiles that needs to die is

the Ego which attempts to pollute the gospel, and surely a sub-species of this Ego is the one that thinks the death of the Son of God is not good enough and, instead, needs to assert itself. But, as I say, this is a sub-species. The real issue is the attempt to erect national privilege as boundary between Jews and Gentiles. Paul died to that law, and he here urges Peter to die with him in Christ's death. ⊕