

Seyoon Kim's Critique of the New Perspective on Paul

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In 2002, Seyoon Kim, Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, published *Paul and the New Perspective*.¹ This volume contains three inter-related themes:

First, Kim defends and refines his thesis – originally articulated in his 1977 Ph.D. dissertation² – that Paul developed his Christology and soteriology within a short period of time by reflecting on the Damascus Christophany in light of Scripture (and, Kim would now add, in light of the Jesus tradition).

Second, in the process of defending and refining this thesis, Kim offers an incisive critique of the New Perspective on Paul (NPP), particularly as articulated and defended by James D. G. Dunn.

Third, as mentioned under point one, Kim now wants to add another factor in the origin of Paul's theology. Paul developed his theology, not only from his Damascus experience interpreted in light of Scripture, but also in dependence on the Jesus tradition, that is, the traditions handed down in the early church concerning the words and deeds of Jesus.

The first two themes are interwoven in just about every chapter in the book. The third theme is less prominent, although it makes an important appearance in the latter half of

¹ Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

² Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (WUNT 2/4; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1981; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982; 2nd ed. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1984).

chapter five and is the explicit focus of chapter eight.³ In this summary, I will be focusing on Kim's critique of the NPP, although his thesis about the Damascus origin of Paul's theology will also be dealt with, since it plays an important role in Kim's critique of the NPP. My goal here is primarily to provide an objective summary of his arguments, although I will also offer a brief evaluation at the end.

Kim sees five areas where the NPP falls short.

(1) Paul's conversion/call

Dunn claims that the doctrine of justification was a polemical doctrine that Paul developed 15 to 17 years after his conversion in the wake of the Antioch incident in order to defend the right of the Gentiles to be included in the people of God.⁴ Against this Kim presents an array of arguments to show that Paul developed his doctrine of justification early as a direct inference from the Damascus Christophany.

First, Kim argues (pp. 10-13) that the revelation of the gospel to Paul and his commission to be an apostle to the gentiles were inseparably bound up together. He appeals to Gal. 1:15-16 where Paul says, "God, who ... called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me so that I might preach (*euangelizomai*) him among the gentiles." To be sure, Paul was sent to preach "among the gentiles." But what he was sent to preach was not that the gentiles are now included, but a gospel message centered on God's Son. Dunn

³ Chapter eight is a reprint of Kim's article, "Jesus, Sayings of" in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 474-92.

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, "'A Light to the Gentiles', or 'The End of the Law'? The Significance of the Damascus Road Christophany for Paul," in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 89-107.

arbitrarily separates “among the gentiles” from “to reveal his Son to me so that I might preach him” and puts all the stress on the former while virtually ignoring the latter.

Now Dunn does not totally eliminate the gospel content of Paul's call – and Kim acknowledges this. However, in Kim's view, Dunn's understanding of the gospel that he received through the Damascus event is very limited. Dunn thinks that when Paul saw the same Jesus who had died under a curse now raised and exalted, he drew the conclusion that God favors the outcast, that is, the Gentile, since Jesus' accursed death was tantamount to his becoming an outcast, or a Gentile. Dunn appeals to Gal 3:13 in support of this reading. Kim critiques (pp. 20-21) this interpretation by pointing out that it implies that Christ was crucified for Gentiles only. But what kind of Messiah would Jesus be if he did not benefit Israel? If Jesus died only to show that God is in favor of the outcast or the Gentile, are the Jews already recipients of God's grace merely by being included in the Jewish covenant? This appears to support the two-covenant theory that Dunn claims to reject.

Dunn's very limited understanding of the “gospel” that was revealed to Paul on the Damascus road leads him to deny that Paul reevaluated the law in light of the Damascus experience. But Kim thinks Paul did reevaluate the law, and that this reevaluation was bound up with and central to the “gospel” that he received in the Damascus event. Before his conversion to faith in Christ, Paul had viewed the law as the means of salvation. But seeing the same Jesus who had been crucified under the curse of the law now exalted and vindicated by God caused him to rethink the role of the law. He now saw that salvation was not through his efforts at keeping the law but only through faith in Christ. “Seeing Jesus crucified under the curse of the law appearing as the Messiah and Lord vindicated by God on the Damascus road, Paul realized that Christ's death was indeed the eschatological

atonement for us and therefore that Christ was 'the end of the law' for salvation (Rom 10:4)" (p. 22).

In order to explain why Paul radically reevaluated the role of the law, Kim appeals to a key piece of biographical background, namely, Paul's pre-Christian Pharisaic zeal for the Law (Gal 1:13-14, 23; Phil 3:4-6). Kim appeals to Paul's former zeal for the law in order to push the origin of Paul's reevaluation of the law back to his call/conversion and its immediate aftermath. Kim says, "It is not credible that Paul – who was going to Damascus in order to persecute the Hellenists⁵ precisely for ignoring circumcision in their mission to the gentiles – decided to join in their mission without any consciousness of the issue of circumcision" (p. 29). How could Paul, who was formerly so zealous for the law, be converted to faith in Christ without immediately asking about the place of that law for which he was formerly so zealous? To imagine that he did not immediately wonder about the role of the law in his newfound Christian faith would be "to turn this genuine event of conversion into something like a modern-day car accident that resulted in Paul's partial memory loss" (p. 29).

Ironically, Dunn also attaches great significance to Paul's zealous background. But he does so in order to advance his thesis that Paul's call involved a shift from being zealous for Israel's exclusivity and boundary markers, to welcoming the gentiles into the people of God. But the problem is, Dunn only attaches significance to Paul's zealous background "up to the moment of the Damascus event only to refuse to consider it as a factor in the

⁵ The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, mentioned by Luke in Acts 6:1. Many scholars regard Stephen as the spokesman for their theology and believe that the Hellenists were critical of the Torah and the Temple (Acts 6:11-14) and welcomed Gentiles into the church without requiring them to get circumcised. For a defense of this view of the Hellenists, see Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1991), 54-86.

development of Paul's theology and missionary practice after that moment" (p. 32). In other words, Dunn fails to exercise historical imagination. Although Paul abandoned his zeal for the law, he did not forget about it. He did not forget that his zeal drove him to the extreme point of persecuting the church with physical violence (Gal 1:13-14, 23; Phil 3:4-6). Thus, if we exercise historical imagination, it is likely that Paul's memory of his former zeal for the law played a significant role in the development of his theology in the aftermath of the Damascus Christophany. Specifically, it is likely that the memory of his former zeal pushed him to reevaluate the law in light of his encounter with the risen Christ.

Kim outlines his understanding of the origin and development of Paul's theology in the following stages (pp. 42-43):

- a. Paul was a "zealotic" Pharisee who sought righteousness by means of strict law-observance;
- b. He persecuted Hellenist Christians who proclaimed a Messiah crucified under the curse of the law and who criticized the law and the temple;
- c. To such a Paul, Jesus appeared as the vindicated Messiah and exalted Lord, thus converting Paul to the belief that Jesus had died vicariously, bearing the curse of the law for our sins;
- d. Paul, as God's enemy, now experienced God's overwhelming grace – forgiveness, justification, and reconciliation;
- e. Since the very law that he had been so zealously pursuing had pronounced a curse on Jesus, he saw the need to reevaluate the law;
- f. At the same time, Paul also received the Spirit, leading him to develop his "flesh-Spirit" and "law-Spirit" contrast;

- g. Soon after his conversion, Paul learned the Jesus tradition, specifically, Jesus' criticism of the food laws and his disregard for the rules of the covenant;
- h. Thus, he formulated his gospel of justification by grace, through faith in Christ, apart from the works of the law;
- i. This formulation was further stimulated by his sense of apostolic call and gentile mission;
- j. His gospel was constantly challenged by the Judaizers; so as part of his defense of his gospel he also had to expose the weakness of the law.

Kim thinks this explanation for the origin of Paul's doctrine of justification is superior to Dunn's view that Paul developed the doctrine 15-17 years after his conversion "and then only out of a tactical necessity for his gentile mission" (p. 44).

Another problem for Dunn's "late development" theory is: What Gospel did Paul preach before the Antiochian and Galatian controversies?⁶ Did he preach the minimalistic gospel that God is now in favor of gentiles, who can now be welcomed into the covenant without circumcision and observing the food laws? "Would anybody ... have considered this announcement a 'gospel'?" (p. 49). No, the gospel is that Christ died vicariously for the sins of humankind. Dunn's theory is also contradicted by Romans 5-8 where Paul expounds his doctrine of justification without any reference to the inclusion of gentile believers in the people of God (p. 54).

⁶ The Antiochian controversy refers to the events narrated in Gal 2:11ff, where certain men came from James and put pressure on Jewish believers like Peter and Barnabas to avoid sharing the common meal with Gentile Christians because of their failure to observe the food laws. This occurred about one or two years before the controversy over circumcision that is the hot issue in Galatians.

To support their contention that Paul's doctrine of justification was a later development, Dunn and others appeal to the absence of "justification" language in 1 Thessalonians.⁷ This argument has been persuasive to many. Kim responds in chapter two by showing that even though the language is absent, the basic ideas are present. The gospel presented in 1 Thessalonians is a message of deliverance from God's wrath through Christ's atoning death (1:9-10; 4:14; and 5:9-10). Furthermore, the will of God for believers is not defined by the Torah but in terms of the commandments of the Lord Jesus (4:1-8). "Thus, 1 Thessalonians contains all the elements of Paul's doctrine of justification ... except the actual terminology" (p. 97). Why is the terminology missing? Because 1 Thessalonians is "a specimen of the version of the gospel that he preached to the gentiles when there was no controversy with the Judaizers" (p. 99).

In chapter six, Kim reinforces his thesis that Paul received the gospel on the Damascus road by a careful exegesis of 2 Cor 5:11-21. What Paul is talking about in this text is what happened to him on the Damascus road. Kim persuasively interprets the "we/us" pronouns that run throughout this passage as referring to Paul himself, so that Paul's own experience of being reconciled to God become paradigmatic for others. "His personal experience of God's overwhelming grace in his reconciliation of him to himself led Paul to interpret Christ's death as God's provision of the means of atonement and as God's work of reconciliation of the world to himself" (p. 237). If this is correct, then it provides additional evidence that the Damascus experience was more than a call to go to the gentiles. Far more important for Paul is the fact that the Damascus experience was a

⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993), 18-19; U. Schnelle, "Der erste Thessalonischerbrief und die Entstehung der paulinischen Anthropologie," *NTS* 32 (1986): 218; and J. Beker, *Paulus: Der Apostel der Völker* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1989), 294-50.

revelation of the gospel of grace. On the road to Damascus, as he was breathing out threats and violence against the Lord's disciples, Paul personally experienced God's forgiving and transforming grace. He realized that the death of Jesus was actually God's act by which he was reconciling hostile sinners to himself. This is the gospel that was revealed to Paul on the road to Damascus – not merely in propositional form but also by means of a dramatic experience – and this is the gospel that he was commissioned to take to the gentiles.

In conclusion, Paul's doctrine of justification apart from the works of the law was developed early, out of his encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. "The doctrine belongs to the center of Paul's gospel, and it is not a mere tactical maneuver which he developed fifteen to seventeen years after his conversion and call in order to fight the Judaizers in defense of his gentile mission" (p. 82).

(2) "The works of the law" as boundary markers

I turn now to Kim's second main criticism of the NPP – the debate over the meaning of the phrase "works of the law" (*erga nomou*), a phrase which plays a critical role in discussions about the NPP. Dunn defines it as "what the law requires of Israel as God's people," those commandments of Torah which "marked out Israel's set-apartness to God and separation from the nations."⁸ The Antioch incident and the Galatian controversy admittedly seem to support this interpretation, since the former had to do with the food laws and the latter had to do with circumcision. Yet, Kim argues that "Paul elevates the question of observing circumcision and the food laws to the level of trying to obtain justification through the efforts of law observance" (Gal 2:19-21; 3:10-14) (p. 58). Furthermore, in

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 255-56.

Romans 4:4-5, the phrase “works of the law” clearly means law observance in general, rather than focusing on Jewish boundary markers, as other scholars have shown.⁹ Although there are some passages where boundary markers are in view, the phrase “usually refers more generally to the deeds done in obedience to the law which are considered as human achievements or as good works done to earn God’s favor” (pp. 59-60).

In Kim’s reading, Paul is relentlessly opposed to human achievement and advocates reliance solely on God’s grace. Only if this is the issue can we understand why Paul was so vehemently opposed to the Judaizers in the Galatian controversy. If Paul were only concerned to affirm that gentiles could become members of God’s people without adopting the Jewish boundary markers, Paul would have taken a very different approach in Galatians. The Judaizers were not attempting to exclude the gentiles from membership in God’s people. They were only insisting that if the Gentiles wanted to be regarded as full members of God’s people, they had to get circumcised and keep the law. “If, as Dunn claims, at Damascus Paul had received only the apostolic call to the gentiles and if his concern had been merely about the gentiles becoming members of God’s people, why could he not happily have gone about doing his gentile mission in the way the Judaizers demanded – calling for faith in Christ *and* circumcision?” (p. 61). Clearly, Kim concludes, “Paul’s opposition to works of the law involved more than Jewish nationalism” (p. 63). Romans 4:3ff makes clear what Paul’s deeper concern was: he believed that reliance on works was incompatible with “utter dependence” and “unconditional trust” in God.

⁹ Kim cites the following: Stephen Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 113-21; Thomas Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 99-100; Mark A. Seifrid, “Blind Alleys in the Controversy over the Paul of History,” *TynBul* 45 (1994): 82-84; Douglas Moo, “‘Law,’ ‘Works of the Law,’ and Legalism in Paul,” *WTJ* 45 (1983): 94-97.

In keeping with their limited definition of “the works of the law,” both Dunn and Wright define “justification” as God’s acknowledgment that someone is a member of the covenant people of God.¹⁰ As a result they interpret Paul’s statement that people are “justified by faith in Christ apart from the works of the law” to mean “Gentiles can now become members of the covenant without having to observe Israel’s covenant distinctives, that is, without having to become Jews.” In response, Kim does not deny that covenant membership is one aspect of justification, but he points out that the ethical dimension of justification is primary. For example, in 1 Cor 6:9-11, the sins from which the Corinthian Christians have been “justified” are moral transgressions like sexual immorality. In Romans, the same ethical or moral contrast is evident. Paul uses terms like “sin” (*hamartia*) and “trespass” (*paraptōma*) to define that from which sinners are justified. He does not limit his concern to transgressions of the commandments that specially mark Israel off as the covenant people of God (circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath). “Instead, they are often specified as transgressions of the religious and ethical commandments of the law (Rom 1:18-3:20; 5:1-11; 6:1-23; 7:4-25)” (p. 67).

Furthermore, if Paul were merely attacking Israel’s covenant distinctives (boundary markers), why does he emphasize the need for *the Spirit* to enable those who are justified to fulfill the law? Presumably most Jews could keep the boundary markers without much difficulty (p. 70). Furthermore, why does Paul rejoice in the *liberty* that we have in Christ (Gal 5:1)? Is Paul merely referring to our liberty from the duties of circumcision, food laws, and festival days? Surely Paul’s feeling of liberation from the law has to do with something

¹⁰ Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 190; N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 119, 129.

deeper, i.e., with his sense of liberty from the law as a *paidagōgos* that was “constantly forcing him to be a ‘good boy’ with its sanction of reward and its threat of punishment” (p. 71). The fact that Paul brings up these topics – the Spirit and liberty – suggests that Paul’s faith vs. works antithesis wasn’t simply a slogan for opposing Jewish nationalism or exclusivism, but had to do with “the fundamental contrast between reliance on God’s grace and reliance on human achievement” (p. 75).

(3) “My/their own righteousness” as national righteousness

A third element of Kim’s critique centers on the Dunn/Wright interpretation of “my own righteousness” (Phil 3:9) and “their own righteousness” (Rom 10:3). Dunn and Wright see these phrases as references not to personal achievement but to Israel’s national righteousness. Kim responds (pp. 75-81) by pointing out that Paul contrasts “my/their own righteousness” with “the righteousness of/from God.” But if “my/their own righteousness” equals Israel’s national righteousness, it makes no sense to contrast it with the righteousness from God, because Israel’s national righteousness *was* from God. As Sanders has argued, the law was God’s gift to Israel as part of his covenant of grace. Therefore, Israel’s attempt to do the law, in response to God’s grace, would not have produced a righteousness that is “their own” but a righteousness “from God.” Furthermore, why does Paul say that by trying to establish “their own righteousness” Israel was ignorant of “the righteousness of God” (Rom 10:3)? Shouldn’t he have said that the Jews were ignorant of the fact that God’s righteousness was not just for Israel but for all humankind?

Another point that Kim made in an oral presentation is that, in Phil 3, Paul is comparing himself with fellow Jews, not Gentiles. When he lists his credentials and says, “I

more" (*egō mallon*), he is talking about his own righteousness in contrast with the righteousness of his fellow Jews. Thus, if he had intended to communicate the idea of Israel's national righteousness, he would have said, "*our* own righteousness."¹¹

For these reasons, it is impossible to interpret the phrase "my own righteousness" to refer to Israel's national righteousness. What Paul finds wrong with "my/their own righteousness" is not its alleged nationalistic quality but its human (fleshly) quality.

(4) Paul's negative statements about the Law

A fourth major criticism of the NPP is that it cannot explain Paul's negative statements about the law, e.g., that it is a mere "letter" that brings only condemnation and death (2 Cor 3); that it is weakened by the flesh and arouses sinful passions (Rom 7:5; 8:3); that it came in to increase the trespass (Rom 5:20); that it is associated with sin and death (Rom 8:2), etc. Presumably Dunn would say these negative statements arose in the context of Paul's conflict with the Judaizers over the questions of Gentile inclusion and Jewish boundary markers. But it is not at all clear how this would work. How does the law's weakness due to human fallenness ("the flesh") follow from the sociological problem of the law (the fact that it erects barriers between Jews and Gentiles)? Kim thinks these negative statements indicate that Paul is wrestling with "the general and fundamental problems of the law" (p. 41). For Paul the law has been co-opted by sin in order to become a part of the problem from which Christ had to redeem humankind. Such a negative assessment of the law would have been unthinkable to a Jew of Paul's day! It is only possible for Paul

¹¹ This point is not so clear in the book, but I heard Kim make this argument when addressing Donald Hagner's "Paul and the Law" class for an invited lecture on February 14, 2007 at Fuller Theological Seminary.

because he has undergone a radical shift in his thinking as a result of his encounter with the risen Christ. It is a major weakness of the NPP that it seriously neglects, even ignores, Paul's criticisms of the law.

(5) Perfect obedience and Gal 3:10-14

Kim's fifth criticism has to do with the NPP exegesis of Gal 3:10-14. Dunn states that this passage is a test case for various interpretations of Paul's doctrine of justification.¹² In chapter four, Kim therefore takes up the challenge and tries to show that the Old Perspective reading of this text is right and the NPP reading wrong. The Old Perspective reading, as defended by Kim, interprets Paul arguing as follows (pp. 141-42). Note that the second proposition is in brackets, since it is not explicit in the text but is (on Kim's view) an implied premise:

- (1) It is written: "Cursed is every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law to do them."
- (2) [But no one can keep all things in the book of the law.]
- (3) Therefore, all those who are of the works of the law are under a curse.
- (4) Thus by the law no one is justified before God.
- (5) Therefore it is evident that "he who is righteous by faith shall live" (Hab 2:4).

This is a good summary of the Old Perspective interpretation of Gal 3:10-14. But what about the NPP approach? Sanders, Dunn, and Wright all agree on two things:

¹² James D. G. Dunn, "Works of the Law and the Curse of the Law (Gal. 3.10-14)," in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 225.

First, NPP advocates agree that the Jews of Paul's day did not think that God required perfect obedience, since those who desired to stay in the covenant could repent, offer the right sacrifices, and have their sins atoned for.¹³

Second, following Stendahl,¹⁴ they point out that elsewhere Paul does not think it is impossible to keep the law, for when he was a Pharisee he was "as to the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" (Phil 3:6). This does not mean that he never sinned, but that he remained in the covenant by means of repentance and atonement.

From these two points NPP advocates conclude that we should not assume proposition (2) in Kim's outline above. Judaism in general did not require perfect obedience. And Paul seems to have been a typical Jew in his regard, since he (though imperfect) considered himself "blameless." Therefore, it is hard to believe that Paul would have assumed the implied premise, "no one can keep all things in the book of the law."

In response to the NPP critique of the Old Perspective interpretation of Gal 3:10-14, Kim makes the following arguments.

First, in order to do away with the implied premise, NPP scholars have to come up with creative interpretations that Kim finds to be incoherent or otherwise lacking. For example, Dunn argues that the curse pronounced in Gal 3:10 (quoting Deut 27:26) is not a curse that comes for failing to observe the law, but the "the curse which had previously prevented [the] blessing [of Abraham] from reaching the Gentiles, the curse of a wrong understanding of the law ... the ill effects of the too narrow understanding of the

¹³ E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 28.

¹⁴ Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 78-96.

covenant.”¹⁵ Kim effectively shows (pp. 132-34) the absurdities of this interpretation. Furthermore, he shows that Dunn shifts the meaning of “the curse of the law” from Gal 3:10 to 3:13 without justification. Wright takes a different tack in his interpretation of this passage when he interprets “the curse of the law” in light of his theory of continuing exile. Kim critiques this theory (pp. 136-40) by pointing out that Paul wrote “all who are of the works of the law” (*hosoi ex ergōn nomou*) rather than simply “the Jews” in order to make a generalized statement applicable to all who rely on the law to be righteous before God, whether Jew or Gentile.

Second, in response to the NPP objection that the Judaism of Paul's day did not teach perfect obedience, Kim appeals to various scholars who have critiqued Sanders, e.g., Martin Hengel, Mark Seifrid, Friedrich Avemarie, Charles L. Quarles, Graham Stanton, and Mark Adam Elliott.¹⁶ Kim seems to be particularly influenced by Quarles. One of the Jewish texts that Quarles appeals to is in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 81a) which tells the deathbed account of Rabbi Gamaliel II who wept because he had not been able to keep the law perfectly. In addition, the Qumran sectarians apparently sought to walk in

¹⁵ Ibid., 229-30.

¹⁶ Martin Hengel, “E. P. Sanders’ ‘Common Judaism,’ Jesus und die Pharisäer,” in *Judaica et Hellenistica: Kleine Schriften I* (WUNT 90; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1996), 394; Mark Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (NovTSup 68; Leiden: Brill, 1992), 78-135; Friedrich Avemarie, “Erwählung und Vergeltung: Zur Optionalen Struktur Rabbinischer Soteriologie,” *NTS* 45 (1999): 108-26; Charles L. Quarles, “The Soteriology of R. Akiba and E. P. Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*,” *NTS* 42 (1996): 185-95; Graham N. Stanton, “The Law of Moses and the Law of Christ,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (WUNT 89; ed. J. D. G. Dunn; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1996), 104-6; Mark Adam Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

“perfection of way” (1QS 8:1–9:26) Thus, Kim thinks, contra Sanders, that *some* Jews did think that perfect obedience was demanded.

Third, Kim responds to the NPP appeal to Phil 3:6 by arguing that Paul, like Gamaliel II and the Qumran sectarians, wanted to keep the law “as perfectly as possible so as to need repentance and sacrifices as little as possible” (p. 151). Paul was not satisfied with the minimum requirement of sinning and repenting in order to stay in the covenant.

So, then, returning to Gal 3:10-14, Paul did think that the law required perfect obedience. However, from his Christian point of view he now adds the idea that no one can meet that standard. The difference between the Paul the Pharisee and Paul the Christian is not on the goal but on whether it was achievable. Paul the Pharisee would never have said that “all who are of the works of the law are under a curse.” Rather, when confronted with his own inability to keep the law perfectly, he would not have given up but would have resolved all the more to be a scrupulous law-keeper. Therefore, the statements of Gal 3:10-14 could not have been made by someone who still remained “within the system of the law as his only viable world” but “only by one who, having found an alternative to it, has stepped outside of it” (p. 152).

In the remainder of chapter four, Kim attempts to explain the origin of Paul’s “flesh-Spirit” contrast by appealing to the Damascus event.¹⁷ The significance of this for Gal 3:10-14 is that it provides further evidence that Paul believed in the assumed premise that “no one can keep the law perfectly.” Paul’s usual term for describing human inability to keep the law is the term “flesh.” Kim sees this concept further explained in Romans 7, which he

¹⁷ For this argument, Kim relies heavily on J. Frey, “Die paulinische Antithese von ‘Fleisch’ und ‘Geist’ und die palästinisch-jüdische Weisheitstradition,” *ZNW* 90 (1999): 53-73.

takes to be a description of “the inability of the Adamic humanity as a whole and Israel in particular to keep the law perfectly and of their resulting predicament of condemnation and death, from which only Christ redeems them” (p. 154).

Evaluation

I am sympathetic with the overall thrust of Kim's critique. However, there are three areas where I would put things somewhat differently.

First, Kim probably hurts his case by trying to hang too much on the Damascus Christophany. I agree that Paul received not merely a commission to go to the Gentiles, but his gospel from the risen Christ. I also agree that Paul reflected on that encounter and developed key doctrines such as his doctrine of justification by faith apart from the works of the law, as well as his reevaluation of the law. I also like Kim's exegesis of 2 Cor 5:12-21 in terms of Paul's Damascus experience of reconciliation (chapter six). However, I am not convinced that one can hang every detail of Paul's theology on this event – e.g., the “flesh-Spirit” and “law-Spirit” contrast; some of the details of Paul's Christology (chapter five); “the mystery” concerning Israel (chapter seven); etc. Some of Kim's arguments here are too speculative.

Second, Kim defines *erga nomou* as “deeds done in obedience to the law which are considered as human achievements or as good works done to earn God's favor” (pp. 59-60, cp. p. 75). I do not deny that some, perhaps many, Jews sought to earn God's favor, or considered their obedience as human achievements before God. The fact that Paul condemns “boasting” (Rom 3:27; 4:2; Phil 3:3-4) suggests that Jews who held such attitudes did in fact exist. However, I do not think it is helpful to introduce such

psychological issues when attempting to interpret Paul's statement that people are "justified by faith apart from the works of the law." The phrase "the works of the law" (*erga nomou*) simply means "things done in obedience to the law."¹⁸ In and of itself, it says nothing about the presence or absence of any attitudinal problems such as self-righteousness, boasting in one's achievements, trying to earn God's favor, and so on. Paul denies that sinful humans can be justified by doing what the law requires, whether or not their law-keeping is accompanied by such attitudes. Clearly, Paul thinks such sinful attitudes can arise for those who seek to be justified by *erga nomou* (Rom 3:27; 4:2). But it would be a grave mistake to think that Paul is only opposed to *erga nomou* when they are viewed as human achievements that earn God's favor.¹⁹ Paul takes a much stronger position: he thinks it is not possible for fallen humans to perform *erga nomou* perfectly, which is what the law requires if one seeks to be justified by it (Rom 2:13; Gal 3:10; 5:3). Adam's transgression has brought all humanity under the reign of sin and death, so that all are "under sin" (Rom 3:9) and "fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Therefore, even if one were to successfully avoid the problems of boasting or self-righteousness, fallen humans would still be incapable of being justified by obedience to the law.

Third, I agree with Kim's Old Perspective interpretation of Gal 3:10-14 which reads an implied premise that "no one can keep all things in the book of the law." I don't think Paul's readers would have had any trouble spotting the enthymeme here.²⁰ But that still

¹⁸ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 209.

¹⁹ Moo adds: "Any restricted definition of 'works of the law' can have the effect of opening the door to the possibility of justification by works – 'good' deeds that are done in the right spirit, with God's enabling grace, or something of the sort" (ibid.).

²⁰ An enthymeme is a syllogism in which one of the premises is unstated. Aristotle, *Ars Rhetorica* 1.2.8-22; 2.22.

leaves us with the question of why Paul would assume the necessity of perfect obedience when the Jews of Paul's day did not believe perfect obedience throughout one's life was necessary. Paul seems to expose himself to the objection, "It isn't true that 'all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse,' because those who sin can repent and have their transgressions atoned for." This, it seems to me, is a weighty objection, and I'm not convinced that Kim has fully answered it. I do not think it will do to cite examples like Rabbi Gamaliel II who wept on his deathbed because he had not kept the law perfectly. Surely, he did not think that his imperfect obedience debarred him from a lot in the world to come. He wept because his love for the law was so great that he wished he could have had a spotless record. It would have been nice, but not required. It is unwarranted to think that R. Gamaliel II was denying the efficacy of repentance for past mistakes. Thus, Kim's appeal to R. Gamaliel II doesn't resolve the problem. I suspect that Paul would respond to the imaginary objector, not by denying the efficacy of repentance for past mistakes, but by pointing out that repentance does not abolish the necessity of law-keeping. Paul would say: "It's true that repentance is efficacious and transgressions can be atoned for. Nevertheless, once you've repented and received atonement, you're still under obligation to keep the law. Repentance only wipes the slate clean. It doesn't make you righteous. To be declared righteous by the law, you must henceforth do *all* that it requires."

On the whole, then, I find Kim's critique of the NPP to be extremely helpful, but I would want to nuance his arguments in these three areas.