

The New Perspective . . . on James

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The doctrine of justification has come to develop a meaning quite independent of its biblical origins, and concerns the means by which man's relationship to God is established. The church has chosen to subsume its discussion of the reconciliation of man to God under the aegis of justification, thereby giving the concept an emphasis quite absent from the New Testament. The 'doctrine of justification' has come to bear a meaning within dogmatic theology which is quite independent of its Pauline origins. — Alister McGrath²

The Old Perspective on James vs Paul & Rome vs Wittenberg

That Paul has been the *defacto* theologian of Protestant and Reformed Evangelicalism (hereafter, PRE) ever since Martin Luther called James a "strawy epistle," is evident.³ We evangelical heirs of the Reformation struggle with James 2:24, "A man is justified by works, and not by faith alone."⁴ And if you don't struggle with this, your "gospel" is perhaps not as much of a "gospel" as it should be. We love St. Paul who writes, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (Rom. 3:28, see Rom. 3:20, Gal. 2:16). Does James contradict or correct Paul here? We must admit, as Douglas Moo says, "resolution between James and Paul does not seem so easy . . . they disagree on the place of works."⁵

The Reformation tradition over against Rome concluded that "justification" is the initial, judicial declaration the righteous standing of a believer apart from merit or works, i.e., *sola fide*. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church in their definitive Council of Trent decreed justification is inclusive of the sanctification and renovation of the interior man.⁶ This is "faith cooperating with good works" according to Trent, not "faith alone."⁷ Trent said, "If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema."⁸ Thus, the *damned* Protestants with father Luther respond that the gravity of Adamic sin "in, with and under" us requires that justification's declaration of righteousness cannot be dependent on inward transformation, for the very compelling reason that no person can be perfectly transformed in this life, i.e., "T," for *total depravity*.⁹ Thus justification cannot include "works" whatsoever. Therefore, Reformation justification stands upon the alien righteousness of Christ who has merited perfect righteousness on behalf of His people.¹⁰ The Catholic Encyclopedia astutely observes that "the reformation was mainly a struggle against the doctrine of merit."¹¹

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² *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2.

³ "Preface to the New Testament" (1522), in the *Works of Luther*, 33.397.

⁴ James 2:24: ὁρᾶτε ὅτι ἐξ ἔργων δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος καὶ οὐκ ἐκ πίστεως μόνον.

⁵ *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans/Leicester England: Apollos, 2000), 38.

⁶ The Catholic Encyclopedia says, it includes the "sanctification and renovation of the interior man by means of the voluntary acceptance of sanctifying grace and other supernatural gifts (Trent, l. c., cap. vii). Available online: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08573a.htm>.

⁷ Donald K. McKim, *Major Issues in Christian Thought* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 95.

⁸ Canon 9 of session VI of the Council of Trent [On Justification], available here: www.ewtn.com/library/councils/trent6.htm.

⁹ This is obvious in Calvinistic sources but also explicit in early Lutheranism (1530): "They condemn the Pelagians and others who deny that original depravity is sin, and who, to obscure the glory of Christ's merit and benefits, argue that man can be justified before God by his own strength and reason" (Augsburg Confession II).

¹⁰ Augsburg Confession IV says, "Also they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight."

¹¹ Online at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10202b.htm>

Whether one agrees with the “infused” or “forensic” view of justification, a *prima facie* case can be made that the Reformed tradition regarding the role of works in justification is in tension with several passages, not only in James 2, but also in Paul. “Works” or “doing the law” are in the same room with “justification” not only in the thorny James 2, but also in Romans 2:13, “For not the hearers of the law are just [δικαιοι] in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified [δικαιώω].”¹² Incidentally, this is the first use of “justify” [i.e., the verb δικαιώω] in Romans. The first use of “just” [δικαιος] is Rom. 1:17.

How shall we then theologize? Shall we discard the insights of Luther and other Reformers on soteriology which have been the comfort of the evangelical Church, thereby forsaking *sola fide*? Or shall we marginalize James 2 (et al) and thereby sacrifice *sola Scriptura*, the formal principle of evangelical Protestantism, on the altar of our tradition? Of course the problem could be worse. We could be without a coherent Bible, since many critical scholars affirm that “James is almost certainly attacking a position that is central and peculiar to Paul.”¹³ Or, “James 2:14-26 is directed against Paul.”¹⁴

Some may not feel so caught in the horns of the god Dilemma. We evangelicals are not without our aversions to such tensions. A.H. Strong says, “James is denouncing a dead faith, while Paul is speaking of the necessity of a living faith.”¹⁵ Douglas Moo says, “The appearance of a conflict is created because they give two key words, ‘faith’ and ‘justify’, different meanings and because their arguments are advanced against different errors.”¹⁶ Vivid analogies also come to our aid. “The two writers may be compared to two trains which are, indeed, running in different directions, but which are in no danger of colliding, since they are not running upon the same track.”¹⁷ Reformed Statesman RC Sproul says, “James is saying, not that a man is justified before God by his works, but that his claim to faith is shown to be genuine as he demonstrates the evidence of that claim of faith through his works.”¹⁸

But . . . the actual words of James say in no uncertain terms, “by [ἐκ “of, out of, from”] works a man is justified — ἐξ ἔργων δικαιούται ἄνθρωπος. All admit that both Paul and James define faith as living and obedient. Luther himself says, “Paul does not say that true faith exists without its proper works, for without these there is no true faith . . . Justification therefore does not presuppose the works of the Law, but rather a living faith which performs its proper works, as we read in Galatians 5:6 [i.e., ‘faith working by love’].”¹⁹ However, attempts at a resolution of the Protestant Paul and the Judaist James only by a robust definition of faith only marginalize the actual claim of James, which bluntly asserts that *works justify*.²⁰ Inasmuch as one “becomes” a Christian by “justification,” James says justification includes works and Paul says, “no it don’t.”²¹ The solutions above are unsatisfying to me and perhaps to a growing number of interpreters. From the earliest days of Luther facing off against a medieval Roman merit system, to the Puritan neo-nomian debates, to the “Lordship controversy” of the 1980s, the role of works in salvation has been continually disputed in evangelical theology.

¹²Οὐ γὰρ οἱ ἀκροαταὶ νόμου δίκαιοι παρὰ τῷ θεῷ, ἀλλ’ οἱ ποιηταὶ νόμου δικαιωθήσονται.

¹³Andrew Chester, Ralph Philip Martin, *The Theology of the Letters of James, Peter, and Jude* (Cambridge, 1994), 48.

¹⁴*The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch, Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 92.

¹⁵A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium and Commonplace-book Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland, 1909), 852.

¹⁶Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 100.

¹⁷George Barker Stevens, *The Messages of the Apostles* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1900), 68.

¹⁸R.C. Sproul, *Now, That's a Good Question* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1996), 139-140.

¹⁹*Commentary on Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 75.

²⁰ Notable exceptions to the robust view of faith include the non-lordship” views of Zane C. Hodges and Charles Ryrie. See for example, Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981) and *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990). Cf. the “lordship” view by John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988).

²¹Some argue James means “justification” in the sense of demonstration before others while Paul means forensic justification. Problem solved. “This difference is very obvious in their [James/Paul] notions of ‘justification’. Paul confines the term to God’s definitive acceptance of a soul into a certain status, as a court of law definitively accepts (or rejects) a man’s plea of innocence.” James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), 37-38.

There is a mighty high place for “justification” in the soteriology of the Protestant tradition, both of Lutheran and Calvinist’ theologies. It is beautifully catechized as, “What is justification? A. Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”²² And this truth I heartily affirm.²³

In light of the paramount importance of justification to the evangelical project, most often evangelical interpreters have seen the need to revise what James actually said or take Paul (select) at face value while shoving James under the bus. If traditional views of justification (Rome vs Protestants) are at an impasse on justification in James 2, I believe some new directions for a fresh appraisal of James may be found in a reassessment of Pauline readings and a reconsideration of the author and context of the book of James.

The New Perspective on Paul

In contemporary Pauline scholarship “there has been a veritable explosion of writing on the topics of the Law and justification in Paul.”²⁴ Much of the “unending flow of books, dissertations and articles that have kept the presses rolling” fly under the banner, the *New Perspective on Paul* [hereafter, NPP].²⁵ James Dunn minted this moniker in his Manson Memorial Lecture of 1982, entitled “The New Perspective on Paul.”²⁶ The seminal writer, E.P. Sanders argued that Paul’s views were traditionally Jewish. “Salvation is by grace but judgment is according to works; works are the condition of remaining ‘in,’ but they do not earn salvation.”²⁷ The famous label for this, as N.T. Wright says, is a “scheme Sanders famously labeled as ‘covenantal nomism’ (from the Greek *nomos*, law).”²⁸

It appears the view that, “Paul, too, regards right moral action as necessary . . . [following] the traditional structure of Jewish religion” is gaining acceptance as a mainstream view.²⁹ Paul, on judgment according to deeds, “demonstrates fundamental continuity with second temple Jewish sources . . .”³⁰ Simon J. Gathercole observes, “. . . Paul defines the Jewish concept of justification in Rom. 2:13 . . .”³¹

While I am not concerned to defend any and every distinctive of the NPP, consider the useful contributions from NPP thinkers, such as the reminder that Paul had a context. Texts in Paul are not *fallen from heaven in the 1611*. Rather, Paul was writing in and from a world conversant with the conceptual, if not textual, cosmos of Second Temple Judaism. While we need not swallow all the import of Second Temple, non-Canonical texts, surely (PRE) evangelicals ought at least to be concerned to see how Canonical texts were utilized by Paul.

²²Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 33.

²³While, of course, I do not deny the theological truths of our forgiveness and righteousness by Christ often placed under the “aegis of justification” (McGrath), I question whether “justification” has taken on a larger soteriological role than is exegetically warranted in Paul or James. If our exegesis in this case is incomplete, as NPP/Wright suggests, I suspect we have skewed theological and practical conclusions as well. For example, as our definitions of soteriological justification in Protestantism have become more and more tight and technical, it has had the effect of excluding or raising suspicion regarding more and more Christian brethren. The result is that the emphasis of Jews and Gentiles together in one Body, emphatic in Paul’s use of justification, has virtually no practical application in our theology of justification. Even more, whereas unity within the “worldwide family of Abraham” is Paul’s goal in preaching justification by faith, we seem quite content to divide and anathematize fellow (PRE) believers, much less Roman Catholics or Orthodox, over the details of our views of justification.

²⁴Veronica Koperski, *What Are They Saying About Paul and the Law?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 1.

²⁵Don Garlington, Review Article of D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume I. The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001). For a brief summary of the NPP, see M. B. Thompson, *The New Perspective on Paul, Grove Biblical Series* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002). I recommend N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) as the starting place for the “best” of the NPP insights.

²⁶Available in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians*, J.G. Dunn (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 183-214.

²⁷E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 543.

²⁸Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 19.

²⁹Heikki Räisänen, *Challenges to Biblical Interpretation: Collected Essays 1991-2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 119.

³⁰Kent L. Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment According to Deeds* (Cambridge University, 1999), 15.

³¹*Where Is Boasting?: Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 24.

While (PRE) Protestants claim *sola Scriptura*, the Old Testament background to the concept of justification is largely absent from (PRE) Protestant interpretations of justification.³² The foundational concept of justification in Protestant orthodoxy is found articulately only in Romans and Galatians which continually address the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ.³³ Add to that the fact that the Canonical gospels rarely, if ever, make clear a “Pauline” message of justification by faith.³⁴ The Gospels then must be interpreted with deep dependence upon (alleged) Pauline concepts. One can hardly help concluding that Protestant Christianity was founded by Paul, not Jesus. Paul is our real theologian and all texts must serve *Paul and Paul alone*. As one Reformed minister said to me, “You cannot get the gospel from the Gospels.”³⁵ Another Reformed conference speaker concluded that if we must choose between Paul or James, we must, of course, go with Paul.³⁶

On the contrary, Paul, just as other faithful Jews of Jesus’ day, held that the new covenant/return from exile themes in the prophets point to a glorious future for Israel. In the day when all the promises (e.g., Isaiah 40-55) are fulfilled, Israel will be vindicated (*justified*) before the world and Abraham’s promised blessing to all nations would be fulfilled. In the “last day” (*ἔσχατη ἡμέρα*) (Is. 54:13) *eschaton* the “justified” people will, “in righteousness” (*צְדָקָה*) (LXX, *δικαιοσύνη*), be established (Is. 54:14). Isaiah 45:25 says, “In the LORD all the descendants of Israel shall be justified, and shall glory.” God is righteous precisely in keeping His covenant promises.³⁷ Israel is like the innocent defendant in a trial (see Pss. 43:1; 135:14; Is. 50:8; Lk. 18:7) to be “acquitted” and “vindicated” by the judgment. Enter Jesus. Now think about the whole of the apostolic mission to tell Israel and the nations that the covenant is fulfilled in Jesus. It is now a declaration that Israel’s God has accomplished this *eschaton* reality, now, by the True Servant, Jesus, through His death and especially His resurrection. Jesus was “was raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). The burden of Paul in Romans is to argue that through Jesus *this eschaton has come to the present*.

To take but one example of Paul’s interpretation of Christ’s work through the lens of Canonical Second Temple texts, consider how omnipresent Isaiah 52-53 (and Is. 40-55) is in undergirding Paul’s argument. Beginning in Romans 2:24 — “For ‘the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,’ as it is written”— is free quotation from the LXX of Isaiah 52:5. Isaiah’s theme is the restoration of Zion, when God will reign as king, or the kingdom of God. “Your God reigns! . . . When the LORD restores Zion” (Is. 52:7-8). In the key justification text, Romans 4:25, Paul says, “[He] was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.” This is a direct allusion to the Servant Song in Isaiah 53. He will “make many righteous, and bear their iniquities” (53:11).³⁸ Paul uses “delivered up” [*παραδίδομι*] from Isaiah 53:12 (from the LXX). “Delivered because of their iniquities” (Is. 53:12). Like Isaiah 53:11-12, Paul uses the definite article with “many” — “the many” in Romans 5:15ff [*οἱ πολλοί*].³⁹ The comparison is “the many” and “the transgressors”:

³² For example, the citation of Is. 52:5 in Romans 2:24 is not even referenced in some evangelical commentaries: James R. Edwards, *Romans* (NIBC 6; Accordance electronic ed. 18 vols.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), 77; also Robert H. Mounce, *Romans* (NAC 27; ed. E. Ray Clendenen; Accordance electronic ed. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 100.

³³ Aside from James, the usage of “justify” (verb) in the Epistles is exclusively Pauline (Rom 2:13; 3:4, 20, 24, 26, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 6:7; 8:30, 33; 1 Cor 4:4; 6:11; Gal 2:16–17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4; 1 Tim 3:16; Titus 3:7; Jas 2:21, 24–25).

³⁴ The term (*dikaio*) only occurs in the Gospels seven times (Matt 11:19; 12:37; Luke 7:29, 35; 10:29; 16:15; 18:14). For example: Matthew 12:37, “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” Only in Luke 18:13–14 would a Pauline function, be possible: “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner! I tell you, this man went to his house *justified* rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.’”

³⁵ He meant that one cannot get the clear forensic “justification by faith alone” explicitly from the Gospels. Indeed there are many Gospel statements in tension with this “gospel” (Mt. 5:48, 19:17-22; Luke 13:24).

³⁶ Hywel R. Jones, at Westminster Theological Seminary in California’s NPP/Federal Vision conference called, “Meeting God on His Terms” (2006) in his lecture on James.

³⁷ N.T. Wright argues everywhere that *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* means God’s covenant faithfulness, e.g., *Paul for Everyone: Romans* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 14. “Righteousness” includes “the status of covenant membership,” WSPRS, 152.

³⁸ Also noting this citation/dependence are Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 182-183.

³⁹ The Hebrew text has the article on “the many” (*רַבִּימָה*). While some translations make this smooth for English and leave out “the” — this usage shows Paul’s strong allusion to Isaiah 53:11-12.

Romans 5:15 But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to *the many* . . . For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One *the many* will be made righteous.

Isaiah 53:11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify *the many*, As He will bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with *the transgressors*; Yet He Himself bore the sin of *many*, And interceded for *the transgressors*.

Only in Isaiah 53 does one find the combination of a righteous/just one bearing sin and justifying many (LXX has “justify” as in Paul, *δικαίωω*). Paul insists that Messiah Jesus died “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). Romans chapters 3-5 expound the meaning of that death as Jesus being delivered up and bearing our sins so that we may be “justified.”

The New Perspective on Paul on James

While there are diversities of readings from NPP, one strand may alleviate some of the tension in relation to justification in James 2. Here, I favor the reading of N.T. Wright. Wright's view of Paul's “justification by faith” is a declaration, not an infusion or cooperation of grace. Yet it is not how one “gets saved” in Christ, but “who is in” Christ. “What Paul means by justification, in this context, should therefore be clear. It is not ‘how you become a Christian,’ so much as ‘how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family.’”⁴⁰ But there is a decidedly eschatological component. Israel's God has accomplished the eschatological vindication of His people *now*, by the victory of Jesus. What was for the “last day” is now available for Jews and Gentiles by faith. The future declaration of Israel's acquittal may now be applied to all in Christ.

On Romans 2:13, Wright says, “The right way to understand this, I believe, is to see that Paul is talking about the *final* justification. Eschatology, the hope of Israel, dominates the horizon as ever. The point is: who will be vindicated, resurrected, shown to be the covenant people, on the last day?”⁴¹ Who then are the “doers of Torah”? They are Gentile (and Jew) Christians who live in the Spirit and fulfill the righteous requirement of the Torah. “It will take [Paul] eight or ten more chapters to explain finally what he means by ‘doing’ Torah, and we must follow the argument through to understand him at that point (see on 8:1-4; 10:5-11).”⁴² The key to interpreting what Paul means by the doers of Torah in Romans 2:12-13 is that “He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3-4).

This view makes Lutherans and many evangelicals of all stripes declare that such a view is legalism, Pelagianism, or semi-Pelagianism, and a few other “isms” not nearly as pleasant. But Wright's response should be heard, “Does this mean, after all, some kind of semi-Pelagianism in which God first infuses ‘righteousness’ into me and then declares that he likes what he sees? Have we abandoned the *extra nos* of the gospel? By no means. That is simply to take what I have said and filter it back through the old misunderstandings of the word ‘righteousness’ which I have been careful to rule out.”⁴³ Wright has been urging this at least since 1988.⁴⁴ In the 1988 New Dictionary of Theology (IVP), edited by Sinclair Ferguson (among others, David Wright, J.I. Packer) Wright states:

The verdict issued in the present on the basis of faith (Rom. 3:21–26) correctly anticipates the verdict to be issued in the final judgment on the basis of the total life (Rom. 2:1–16, on which see Cranfield, Romans, vol. 1,

⁴⁰ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said. Was Paul of Tarsus the Real founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 122.

⁴¹Ibid, WSPRS, Wright, 126.

⁴²Wright, N. T. *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. in *The New Interpreter's Bible* 10 (Nashville, Abingdon, 2002), 440.

⁴³The manuscript from Lecture 1 at the 2005 Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conference, Monroe, LA (http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Auburn_Paul.htm).

⁴⁴“Justification by faith, the verdict issued in the present time over gospel faith which anticipates the verdict issued in the future over the entire life, thus produces the solid assurance of membership, now and in the future, in the single family promised to Abraham, which as I have already stressed is the family whose sins have been forgiven, since the purpose of the covenant in the first place was always to deal with sin. Justification in the present tells every believer that she or he is a beloved, forgiven child of God, a fact which must at once be put into practice in terms of full membership in God's people, full dining rights at the family table.” 2005 Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conference, Monroe, LA (http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Auburn_Paul.htm).

pp. 151–153). This future ‘verdict’ is in fact, seen from another angle, simply resurrection itself (Phil. 3:9–11). The logic of this ‘eschatological’ perspective is explained as follows: faith is itself the sign of God’s life-giving work, by his Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3), and what God has begun he will complete (Phil. 1:6).⁴⁵

Meanwhile, back in the book of James . . . Certainly we should interpret James in view of *James*, not Paul. We must hear James’ voice for what it is. As Luke Timothy Johnson says, “The most important gain from breaking the Pauline fixation is that it liberates James to be read in terms of 108 verses rather than 12 verses, in terms of its own voice rather than in terms of its supposed muting of Paul’s voice.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, my point is that we have given neither Paul, nor James their due. If Paul is interpreting eschatological justification in light of Christ, which verdict is available for those who have faith in Jesus — then we need not stretch James over the bones of Paul. James also speaks of justification in the eschatological sense.

Remember the verses before the justification passage in James says, “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (NASB 2:12-13). This later phrase, κατακαυχᾶται ἔλεος κρίσεως, “yet mercy triumphs over judgment” in the middle voice, is literally, “boasts against.”⁴⁷ Perhaps a better sense is that “mercy prevails in judgment.” James calls believers to always temper judgments with mercy (v 13), not unlike Matthew 7.⁴⁸ In effect, James says mercy fulfills the law.⁴⁹ Gathercole also agrees. “An eschatological perspective on the role of works might also clarify the position with regard to the soteriology of James 2 . . . Here the scene is eschatological judgment, as it frequently is in James (cf. Also 3:1, 6; 4:12; 5:17).”⁵⁰

James is speaking of the eschatological judgment and salvation in the last day.⁵¹ Such themes are clear in the post-exilic prophecies cited above. Leon Morris observes in agreement with Douglas Moo that, “Paul uses justification of the initial step of becoming a Christian, James, like Matthew and others, uses it of final justification, the kind of justification we will see on Judgment Day.”⁵² James moves in his flow of thought from judgment to justification, just as does Paul (Rom. 2:13, then 3:20, etc.). James speaks of justification, not in some lesser sense than Paul. Justification is parallel to “saving” — “Can that faith save him?” (2:14). Surely James is emphatic that faith cannot be without obedience. He is just as emphatic that justification cannot be without works. But I hasten to add, this is “justification” not in the sense of initial, forensic declaration, but in the eschatological sense of “who is in” (cf Wright above).

A living faith cannot exist without an expression of obedience to the royal law of love. Faith with “works” [συνεργέω James 2:22] is clear in the cases of Abraham/Rahab. But it is not self-righteousness or self-merit. Salvation is for prostitutes who trust God and for polytheistic pagans like the uncircumcised Abram. In both cases God is able to “justify the ungodly” (Rom. 4:5). James reproves people who claim to believe, but are disobedient, precisely because James’ view of justification is “who is in” not “how one gets in” and it is in reference to the eschatological justification/judgment event. Would Paul have said anything different? No. James refers to the same event as does

⁴⁵ “Justification” in the *New Dictionary of Theology*. David F. Wright, Sinclair B. Ferguson, J.I. Packer (eds), (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 360.

⁴⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), cited in Patrick J. Hartin, *James* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 4.

⁴⁷ Martin makes this point and also notes that “13b echoes the eschatological promise of Matt 5:7: ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy’ (by God).” T Ralph P. Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 72.

⁴⁸ “Rabbi Barabbi said, ‘To him who is merciful to the created, Heaven is merciful, but to him who is unmerciful to the created, Heaven is also unmerciful’” (b. Shabbath 151b). Peter H. Davids, *James* (NIBC 15; Accordance electronic ed. 18 vols.; Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 62.

⁴⁹ Richardson is poetic on this point. “Whatever else James had to say about the law and the content of faith is always in view of the final judgment before Christ. This judgment will be undone as we may have come to expect it in the case of merciful believers. Mercy will judge judgment. Just as atonement turns away wrath, mercy turns away condemnation. James was speaking of an end to judgment much like Paul spoke of the end of death: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’ (1 Cor 15:54). Judgment is swallowed up in mercy.” Kurt A. Richardson, *James* (NAC 36; ed. E. Ray Clendenen; Accordance electronic ed. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 126-127.

⁵⁰ *Where Is Boasting?: Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1-5*, 116.

⁵¹ T.C. Penner, *The Epistle of James and Eschatology: Re-reading an Ancient Christian Letter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 121-213, cited in Gathercole.

⁵² *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 314.

Paul. Paul writes "the doers [ποιηταί] of the law will be justified" (Rom. 2:13). James writes, "But be doers [ποιηταί] of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22).

A New Perspective on James

In recent years a few articles and conference talks, as well as a forthcoming commentary have urged a new perspective on the authorship and dating of James.⁵³ The authorship of James turns out to be quite relevant to the context, date and the conception of "justification" in the epistle. While six or seven Jameses are found in the NT only two have been ordinarily put forward as candidates: James the Greater and James the Just. James the Greater is the James the son of Zebedee, brother of John and James the Just is James of Jerusalem or James the "the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:19).⁵⁴

A good case can be made from the internal evidence of James and the NT that the son of Zebedee is the author. This will simply be a brief sketch and not a full-scale defense. This is at best a suggested course of inquiry. At least four indications arising from the internal content of the book and NT commend this for consideration, at least: 1) the meaning of *diaspora*, 2) early source material in James, 3) the lack of awareness of Gentile inclusion issues in the epistle. Each of these support an early setting consistent with a Jewish persecution of the expelled Jewish believers from Jerusalem.

1) The *diaspora* reference in James 1:1 is best taken as a dispersion of Christian Jews from Jerusalem which began in Acts 8 (A.D. 30-44).⁵⁵ This suggests an early date, perhaps prior to the ascendancy of James the brother of Jesus to the leadership of the Jerusalem church. **2)** James seems to have independent "source" material to the teachings of Jesus. It is widely observed that James is heavily parallel to Matthew, frequently echoing Jesus' teaching.⁵⁶ Some even observe that James must have had a Jesus "source" just as did Matthew.⁵⁷ Peter Davids argues that "James gives prima facie evidence that there existed an early parantentic collection of the sayings of Jesus (oral or written) and that James knew a version of that block of tradition."⁵⁸ James the son of Zebedee is in the inner circle with Peter and John, actually prior to John ("James and John") in the normal denotations. This James would certainly be privy to such an independent source of Jesus's own words and the son of Zebedee's authorship comports well with early, independent and/or Matthean content. **3)** James, unlike virtually every other NT book (aside from Matthew), lacks any present awareness of the Gentile inclusion into the Church. There is simply no word about the Jew/Gentile together issues. This is a "loud silence" if indeed James of Jerusalem (brother of Jesus) were the writer, since according to Galatians, Acts 15 and 21, he has a predominant role in these matters. If James the brother of Jesus wrote this, then the date is likely within the late 50's to 60's but prior to 62 A.D. (his death). This is long after Gentile inclusion and there are continual issues in relation to this (as the Epistles of Paul indicate).

Therefore, the early setting of James (Acts 8-11) written by a prominent apostle, James son of Zebedee, fits easily with the Jewish persecutions expelling the believing Jews from the Jerusalem area which began with the stoning of Stephen.⁵⁹ "And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered (*diesparetan* is the root = διασπείρω) throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles" (Acts 8:1). This would place the book of James between Acts 8 and 11, which would likely be prior to Gentile inclusion in the Jerusalem Jewish Christian Church.

⁵³See for example, several Biblical Horizons (www.biblicalhorizons.com) newsletters by James B. Jordan and Peter J. Leithart address this, as well as the forthcoming commentary on James by Jeffrey Meyers to be published by Athanasius Press (<http://www.athanasiuspress.org>). Meyers recent lectures on James are available here: <http://www.wordmp3.com/product-group.aspx?id=75>. I am also indebted to Pastor Meyers whose lectures were helpful and who also graciously provided a draft paper from his pastoral staff on authorship.

⁵⁴Apart from James son of Zebedee, James the "Lord's brother," there is James the son of Alpheus (Mt. 10:3), James the Less (Mark 15:40), James the father of Judas [not Judas Iscariot] (Luke 6:16).

⁵⁵"To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad [διασπορά]" (James 1:1). See the noun usages of this term (John 7:35, James 1:1, 1 Pet. 1:1) and the verbal occurrences (Acts 8:1,4, 11:19). The predominant usage is of Jewish dispersion.

⁵⁶Many observe this, e.g., Martin (WBC 48, 1988), lxxiv-lxxvi.

⁵⁷Which source, in my view, was simply Matthew's "dear diary" entries since He was an eyewitness.

⁵⁸Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* in the New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 67.

⁵⁹It may be effectively argued that the internal evidence of James are well suited for a date prior to 44 A.D. with the persecutions beginning in Acts 8 as a backdrop (see Jordan, Leithart, Meyers above at Biblical Horizons).

An alarming level of circular argumentation attends the dismissal of James son of Zebedee as author. For example, Ronald Blue, in the Dallas Theological Seminary's *Bible Knowledge Commentary* says, "James, the son of Zebedee, could not be the author since he suffered martyrdom under Herod Agrippa I *before this epistle was written* (Acts 12:2) [emphasis mine]."⁶⁰ Donal Burdick in the Expositor's Bible Commentary says, the son of Zebedee "was martyred too early (A.D. 44) to have written the epistle (Acts 12:1-2)." More cautiously, Douglas Moo says, he "died a martyr's death in ad 44 (Acts 12:2) and it is unlikely that the epistle was written as early as this."⁶¹ It is a beautiful deduction, i.e., the epistle was written after James son of Zebedee died, dead men do not write epistles, therefore James the son of Zebedee did not write the epistle.

Moyter is much more frank in admitting the thin veil of rationale, "It is usually thought that James son of Zebedee was martyred at too early a date (AD 44) for him to have been the author of the letter [of James]. Even this, however, cannot be maintained for certain. Nothing in the letter absolutely forbids a date as early as James the son of Zebedee, and certainly the arguments proposed for later dates lack impressiveness."⁶²

What stands behind a full appraisal of the early dating of James is really critical assessments of dating the NT. But, no one has produced a jot or tittle of evidence that apostles were not writing gospels and epistles within the first decade of Pentecost.⁶³ But it has routinely been urged upon us by Enlightened scholarship that nothing whatsoever could have been written until decades or centuries after this. After all dead men do not write books of the Bible.⁶⁴

If we can break free from the Higher Critical shackles for a moment, let us imagine James the son of Zebedee wrote the book following Acts 8 and prior to Acts 11 to deal with the persecutions of circumcised believers at the hands of Saul of Tarsus and the like. Acts 8:1ff begins, "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him [Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem . . . But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered [δισπείρω] about preaching the word." And then in Acts 9 Luke picks up the thread again, "Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord . . ." (9:1).

Given this setting/author, then the claim of James correcting Paul or contradicting Paul would be not only without a good historical merit, it may also the ironic gospel poetry implicit in the conversion and ministry of Paul. "When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58). Paul (Saul of Tarsus) who held the murderers robes says (no doubt remembering), "For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor. 15:9) and that he "was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor" (1 Tim. 1:13). James would actually (on this account) be commending to those persecuted by perhaps even Paul himself, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (James 1:2). Imagine while Paul was "breathing threats and murder," James son of Zebedee was writing, "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then *peaceable*, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in *peace* by those who make *peace*" (emphasis mine, James 3:17-18). With a note of impending judgment, "You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you" (James 5:6).

⁶⁰John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Accordance electronic ed. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), n.p.

⁶¹*James* in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 20.

⁶²*The Message of James* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1985), 18.

⁶³Few current commentators will argue an early date for any NT book. To the worldly world of NT scholarship it is hardly acceptable scholarship to believe that an actual NT text could have been written as early as 44 *anno Domini*. Never mind the fact that Luke's narrative of the "early days" drew upon primary sources personally or in documentary evidence, "just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (Luke 1:2). Unless the veracity of Luke's claim is suspect, then we must accept that such sources were extant when Luke began to write.

⁶⁴One interesting a curious detail in early church history is referenced by puritan commentator, Thomas Manton. James is cited as "the first among the epistles called universal" by Eusebius and "It is placed first among the catholic epistles, either as as first written, or first received in the canon, though in the ranking of it there be a variety. In the Greek Bibles it sustaineth the same place which we assign to it." Manton's holds the majority view (of James the brother of Jesus), but also cites sources for the authorship of James son of Zebedee, saying, "There are some few indeed of another judgment, as Flavius Dexter, Julius Toletanus, Didacus Dazor, and others cited by Eusebius Neirembergius [n. 4, de Origine Sacrae Scriptura, lib zi cap. 15-19], a Spanish Jesuit, who also bringeth the authority of an ancient Gottish missal to this purpose, together with reasons to prove this to be the first New Testament scripture that was written . . ." *James* in the New Geneva Commentary series (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991), 12-13.

I have indicated following Wright that Paul uses “justification by faith” in an almost technical sense to explain how the Abrahamic promise is fulfilled in the inclusion of Gentiles (e.g., Rom. 4:13-18).⁶⁵ However, if James is written prior to Acts 10-11 (when the first Gentile came in, Cornelius), then James’ purpose, audience and intention varies radically from Paul in Galatians or Romans.⁶⁶ On this account of James authorship and date, there is even less tension between James and Paul. James is writing to Jews prior to the difficulties of Gentile inclusion and is not “correcting Paul.” James conception of justification is the demonstration or vindication of faithful Jewish believer. Of course, neither is Paul “correcting James.” He is urging the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise by means of a unified *new Israel of God* or Church composed of both Jews and Gentiles through faith (Eph. 2:12ff), that is demonstrated to be God’s people by faith in Jesus. James and Paul both require obedience, but to neither is it the foundation of our acceptance before God.

Conclusion

Accepting a NPP reading of Pauline themes of justification and judgment, ala Wright, we have a way forward beyond the impasse of Paul vs James. James 2:24 does not militate against Paul, as some critical scholars argue. Hence we need not defend against another attack of incoherence in the Bible. Further, James does not need to be relegated to the “back of the bus” and thus marginalized because of the alleged contradiction on justification or works. We need not cave in to Rome’s demands that justification is a process of infusion of grace (semi-Pelagian style) and abandon the important insights of Luther and the Reformed tradition that we need not merit our standing before God. Seeing James as the work of the son of Zebedee invites a nuanced understanding of the developing stages of the apostolic era prior to Gentile inclusion and subsequent to it. Finally, Paul does not need to bear the weight of the founder of Protestant Christianity. For that is a burden that only the One who said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” should bear.

⁶⁵ This routine NPP point is clear from a survey of the passages which explicitly contain “justification by faith” or “not by works” in the NT/Paul demonstrate that the inclusion of the Gentiles central to the function of this concept. For example, in the first usage (emphases mine), “the doers of the Law will be justified. For *when Gentiles* who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law. . .” (Rom. 2:13-14). “By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin . . . the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for *all those who believe; for there is no distinction*” (i.e., between Jews and Gentiles, Romans 3:20–22, also 3:24). “He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. . . For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the *God of Jews only*? Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the *God of Gentiles also*? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one” (3:25-30). This argumentation sets up the Abrahamic covenant inclusion in chs. 4:5, “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies *the ungodly* [allusion to Abram’s pagan background at least], his faith is credited as righteousness.” The same is clear through Galatians 3: “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would *justify the Gentiles* by faith” (3:8). “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. . . . There is neither *Jew nor Greek*, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:25-28). Even Titus 3:4–7: “But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for *mankind* appeared, 3:5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration . . . so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” The complete list of occurrences of “justify” (*dikaio*, verb) is as follows and not all included the Jew/Gentile connection explicitly but they all are “built” upon that foundation in Paul: Rom. 2:13; 3:4, 20, 24, 26, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 6:7; 8:30, 33; 1 Cor. 4:4; 6:11; Gal 2:16–17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4; 1 Tim. 3:16; Titus 3:7; and outside of Paul is James 2:21, 24–25.

⁶⁶I am afraid this point will hardly get a hearing from those who like Christian Musicians are just 25 years behind the Top 40, or in this case, will agree to late first century dates for NT books, but can hardly admit that the apostles could read and write, let alone author a book within the first decade after Pentecost.