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The Righteousness of God**
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Introduction

This dialogue presents an opportunity to review some of the significant differences between the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) and what some have called the Old Perspective on Paul. The NPP rests on three pillars. The first pillar is the new view of Judaism championed by E. P. Sanders in his well-argued and massively documented book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.¹ Sanders showed that Pauline scholars were working with a caricature of the religion of Judaism in Paul's day. Rather than being a religion devoid of grace, it conformed to a pattern Sanders dubbed "covenantal nomism." This means that the grace of God is the prior basis on which he gave the law, and that the Jews are obligated to keep the law, not in order to earn God's favor, but to remain within the covenant. Only those who apostatized by rejecting the covenant (the Torah) were excluded. Those who repented of their sins, sought forgiveness, and attempted to live faithfully in accordance with the Torah would be saved eschatologically.

The second pillar of the NPP follows from the first. If Judaism is no longer understood as a religion of seeking to earn God's favor by works-righteousness, then what was Paul arguing against when he said that humans are justified not by "the works of the law" (*erga nomou*)² but by the faith of Jesus Christ? It sounds as if he is polemicizing against a view that does make justification by works. New Perspective scholars, most notably James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright, resolve the dilemma by reinterpreting the phrase. According to them, "the works of the law" are not the good moral deeds required by the law, but Israel's ethnocentric pride, supposed favored-nation status, and the boundary markers that set the Jews apart from the Gentiles. Paul is not contrasting works versus faith as the means of righteousness but racial sectarianism versus identification with Christ by the badge of faith. The gospel is that God's grace

1. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977).

2. Paul uses the phrase "the works of the law" in Rom 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10.

is not exclusive to the Jews, since God welcomes into his family anyone who has faith in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile.

The first two pillars of the NPP have received excellent critiques from Old Perspective scholars, but there is a third pillar that has received less sustained attention, and that is the notion that Paul's "righteousness" and "justification" language is to be understood covenantally. Specifically, it is claimed, the noun "righteousness" can mean "covenant faithfulness" or "covenant membership," and the verb "justify" can mean "reckon someone to be a member of the covenant." Of particular interest is the Pauline phrase, "the righteousness of God," which occurs in some form 10 times in his writings.³ New Perspective scholars claim that "the righteousness of God" should be translated "God's covenant faithfulness." Both Dunn and Wright make that claim. It is at root a lexical claim, since they argue that the concept of God's righteousness must be understood in terms of its Hebraic meaning in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature, where, they argue, it has a technical meaning that sets it apart from the ordinary judicial and ethical meanings of righteousness in extra-biblical Greek. I have sought to subject the NPP claim that "the righteousness of God" in Paul denotes "God's covenant faithfulness" to critical examination and to argue for an Old Perspective interpretation, namely, that it means "a righteousness that comes from God." I argue that "the righteousness of God" is not God's own righteousness, viewed either as an attribute or an activity, but the legal standing of righteousness that all who believe in Jesus the Messiah receive from God as a gift.

I attempt to do this in my published dissertation, *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation*.⁴ I am honored that my monograph has received such thoughtful reviews for the inaugural issue of this journal. I appreciate the positive statements that both reviewers have made. Greever's comments are more favorable. Greever says he is in "fundamental agreement" with my thesis and believes I have "demonstrated convincingly and definitively that God's righteousness is not to be defined as or equated with God's covenant faithfulness." Although Frederick aligns himself more with the New Perspective, he recognizes the importance and value of my research. Frederick says that "in terms of exhaustive lexical comparative work, the monograph is exemplary" and is "a useful scholarly resource." He also thinks I have made a "solid and convincing case against Hermann Cremer's view" that righteousness is a thoroughly positive, relational concept in the

3. Some variant of the phrase is found in Rom 1:17; 3:5, 21-22, 25-26; 10:3 [2x]; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9. I contend that in Rom 3:5, 25-26 it denotes God's distributive justice, and in the other seven cases it means "the gift of (imputed) righteousness from God." The genitive modifier "of God" (or "his") can be taken as a genitive of possession or as a genitive of source, depending on the context.

4. Charles Lee Irons, *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II/386 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

Bible.⁵ These assessments are personally satisfying, since it means I was successful in my critique of Cremer's relational theory of righteousness. There may be much more to discuss and debate with regard to the broader theological issues surrounding the New Perspective, but I am pleased that my achievement with regard to the Cremer Hebraic/relational theory is recognized. Cremer's relational theory of righteousness has been hugely influential in 20th century scholarship to the point of being an unquestioned consensus enshrined in practically all theological dictionaries and word books. It is a reigning paradigm of biblical scholarship, both OT and NT, and is in turn the theoretical lexical basis of the NPP view that "the righteousness of God" in Paul means, denotes, and should be translated as "God's covenant faithfulness." Thus, the recognition that I have made a convincing case against the theory is noteworthy in itself, apart from the polemics over the NPP.

There is much that could be said by way of response to these two reviews, but I am going to focus on five areas of engagement raised by Frederick. One of these (the fourth) is also a concern raised by Greever, so I will respond to both together under that heading.

1. Theological Presuppositions

The first area of engagement has to do with exegetical method. Frederick charges that I conducted my exegesis with an unwarranted theological bias, particularly the bias of Reformed theology. As Frederick acknowledges, there is no such thing as presupposition-less exegesis, so he is not claiming that theological presuppositions are always bad. Yet he thinks in this case I approached exegesis "from an overly dogmatic perspective."

It should be noted that all of the passages he objects to are from Chapter 6 of my book, the chapter devoted to exegesis of "the righteousness of God" in Paul, and not from the preceding chapters devoted to the lexical analysis of "righteousness." In a section⁶ devoted to analyzing the "of God" part of the Pauline phrase, I argued that it is a genitive of source, so that the phrase could be translated "a righteousness *from* God." I argued that taking "of God" as a genitive of source is consistent with a broader theological thread running through Paul's thought, namely, his frequent contrast between divine agency (which Paul calls God's "grace") and human agency. Paul operates with the assumption that anything in us that is spiritually good is "of God" and not "of ourselves" (e.g., 2 Cor 3:5; 4:7; cp. Eph 2:8-9; Phil 1:28). I cited several New Testament

5. Hermann Cremer, *Die paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre im Zusammenhange ihrer geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1900). The title may be translated, *The Pauline Doctrine of Justification in the Context of Its Historical Presuppositions*. The historical presuppositions Cremer had in mind were primarily the salvific usage of God's "righteousness" (*tsedeq* and *tsedaqah*) in the Hebrew OT, particularly in the Psalms and Isaiah.

6. Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 316-18.

scholars in support this reading of “the Pauline doctrine of grace.”⁷ I did not appeal to my theological presuppositions as evidence for the genitive of source interpretation, but to specific Pauline texts and scholarly commentary on those texts.⁸

I find it ironic that Frederick earlier faulted me for my failure to sufficiently examine broader theological themes. I am unclear why examining broader theological themes is a good thing in the cases where I allegedly failed to do it, but a bad thing in the cases where I actually did it. It would appear that appeals to broader theological themes are only good when they support the NPP. I admit that my exegesis of Paul was conducted from a broader view of Pauline theology. But I remain unconvinced that it led to distorted exegetical results. No doubt Frederick thinks it did, but he did not offer any evidence of that.

The real issue is whether my theological perspective casts doubt on the results of my lexical analysis of the word “righteousness” in the OT and Jewish literature. Is the phrase, “the righteousness of God” in the OT, in Jewish literature, or in Paul, a technical term for “God’s covenant faithfulness”? This is not really a theological debate, because everyone acknowledges that Paul thinks God is faithful to his covenant promises. The question is: What does the phrase mean? The question can only be decided by lexical analysis.

2. Lexical Method

It is to the topic of lexical analysis that we now turn—the second area of engagement. Frederick finds fault with “the primacy of place [my lexical approach] gives to the meaning of words above . . . the determination of the theological function of a phrase in its theological context.” He says that “too much autonomy” is given to words apart from their theological functions. My lexical method “seems to operate in a Platonic manner in which a generic meaning . . . governs and restricts how the word is allowed to operate in any given theological context.”

But I do not understand how we can do exegesis in any other way. Lexical meaning *must* “govern and restrict” how words can be used theologically. Whatever further theological functions we think a word may have, they usually remain within a word’s semantic range and do not arbitrarily break outside of that range to a whole other meaning in a completely different semantic field. If that does occur, it has to be

7. “The Pauline doctrine of grace” is not a code-word for Reformed or Calvinistic theology (that would be the plural, “the doctrines of grace”), but is a common phrase used in German NT scholarship, *die paulinische Gnadenlehre*.

8. The scholars I appealed to were Adolf Schlatter and Francis Watson, as well as the multi-author volume *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, edited by John M. G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole (London: T&T Clark, 2008). To the extent that these scholars’ interpretations of Paul comport with a broadly Augustinian conception of grace, perhaps it is not so much because they are reading Paul with Augustinian blinders, as it is because Augustine himself was a good reader of Paul.

demonstrated with a high standard of proof. Of course, I believe words can have a variety of metaphorical extensions and contextual modulations, but these are normally “tethered” in some way to what the words actually mean lexically, that is, their lexical sense.

I am unsure how to read Frederick here. Does he really believe a word’s “theological functions” can be totally unrelated and untethered to its lexical meaning? He seems to imply that when he writes that lexical study is “utterly useless” unless considered in tandem with theological function of a word. If that is what he means, we have a sharp disagreement on a fundamental principle of exegetical method. On this approach, we should give up trying to do responsible exegesis to determine Paul’s intended meaning and just read his letters as we please, divining whatever “theological functions” we happen to think we see in the text. Exegesis then becomes a Rorschach inkblot exercise in which each exegete projects their own views onto the text.

But I doubt Frederick countenances that, so perhaps a more charitable reading is possible. Let’s set aside his unfortunate use of the phrase “utterly useless.” Perhaps what he is trying to say is that the theological function of a word in a particular theological context can be a further specification, extension, or application of its lexical sense. Rather than being “utterly useless,” careful lexical study is necessary to establish the semantic range of the word. However, our work is not yet done, for we would still need to investigate further to see if there are any further specifications of meaning *within* that semantic range, that is, further “theological functions” arising from the use of the word in specific contexts. If that is all Frederick meant to say, then we are in agreement. In fact, that is precisely the approach I took in my investigation. First, I established the semantic range of “righteousness” in extra-biblical Greek (ch.3), in the Old Testament (ch.4), and in Jewish literature (ch.5). Having established the semantic range, I then turned in the chapter on Paul (ch.6) to ask whether there was any evidence of a particular theological function of the phrase “the righteousness of God” in Paul’s writings in which the phrase was used to refer (“within the actual context of the discourse in which it is being used”) to a broader theological concept such as God’s covenant faithfulness. On this more charitable reading of Frederick, far from undermining my entire project, my word-study method is precisely the method called for.

More importantly, my word-study approach was necessary since the claim of Dunn, Wright, and others, going back at least to Käsemann, is that “the righteousness of God” in early Jewish literature is a technical term picked up by Paul. Wright says, “There is thus, I contend, an excellent case to be made out for reading the phrase as a clear Pauline *technical term* meaning ‘the covenant-faithfulness of [Israel’s] God.’”⁹ And Paul picked up this technical meaning from the OT and the Jewish literature based upon the OT:

9. Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians 5:21,” in *Pauline Theology. Vol. II: 1 & 2 Corinthians*, ed. David M. Hay (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 200-208; see p. 203; emphasis added; brackets original.

When we meet a word or term which is used in a consistent way across a range of literature of a particular period, and when we then meet the same word or term in an author we are studying, the natural presumption is that the word or term means there what it meant elsewhere . . . Careful exegesis of “God’s righteousness,” both in the Old Testament and in second-temple Judaism, indicates that, among the range of possible meanings, “faithfulness to the covenant” is high on the list.¹⁰

Since this claim is of a lexical nature, my examination of it had to be of a lexical nature. It is not simply a theological debate about some added theological functions of a word or phrase in Paul. It is a lexical semantic debate over the meaning of *dikaiosynē theou* primarily in OT/Jewish literature, and secondarily in Paul in conversation with Jewish thinking. Given the state of the question, I do not see how this debate can be resolved any other way than by conducting a careful study of the way the phrase is used in the OT and in Jewish literature. Frederick’s finding fault with my word-study method leaves the impression that he is unfamiliar with the precise nature of the NPP claim.

3. Wright and Cremer

The third area of engagement is quite significant, for it has the potential to undercut a major plank in my argument. While I may have succeeded in critiquing Cremer, Frederick suggests, Wright’s arguments are independent of Cremer and therefore they remain untouched and unscathed by my research. Frederick thinks my attempt to link Wright to Cremer is “a massive, improbable stretch.” He adds, “A quick look through all of N. T. Wright’s major works reveals that Cremer is never even mentioned!”

But as I showed in my book, a good case can be made that Wright is in fact reliant upon Cremer’s Hebraic/relational theory of righteousness. This would be true even if Wright had never heard of Cremer. Scholarly ideas and paradigms are often conveyed to subsequent generations of scholars through intermediary scholarship that is itself dependent on the original source. The fact that Wright never cites Cremer directly means little in view of the evidence for his dependence on Cremer. Let’s look at the evidence.

First, I would argue that Wright was influenced by Cremer indirectly, through the work of Ernst Käsemann.¹¹ In his commentary on Romans, commenting on “the righteousness of God” in Rom 1:17, Käsemann wrote:

At least in the course of the last century we have freed ourselves from the Greek understanding of *dikaiosynē* as a norm of what is right for God and man

10. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 49, 99.

11. Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 7, 10, 37 n.121, 42, 46-47.

. . . Further progress is made with the insight (already Cremer, *Rechtfertigungslehre* . . .) that in biblical usage righteousness, which is essentially forensic, denotes a relation in which one is set . . . To the extent that this interpretation is oriented to the OT motif of covenant faithfulness, it can plausibly explain why *dikaiosynē* never means penal righteousness in Paul.¹²

Even though Käsemann attempted to scrub covenantal thought from Paul, he nevertheless viewed “God’s righteousness” in Rom 3:25-26 as a pre-Pauline Jewish-Christian technical term that had “original reference to God’s covenant faithfulness.”¹³ Whether or not Wright was aware of Käsemann’s dependence on Cremer, Käsemann himself was aware of it, since Cremer’s *Die paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre* is cited three times by Käsemann in his discussion of “the righteousness of God” in Rom 1:17.¹⁴

Wright himself seems to have gotten the covenant-faithfulness interpretation from Käsemann. He acknowledges that Käsemann “is well aware that a natural meaning of the phrase [*dikaiosynē theou*] in early Christianity would include God’s covenant faithfulness,” adding that this meaning is “uppermost in the many instances cited by Käsemann and others in the [Jewish] background literature.”¹⁵ Where Wright disagrees with Käsemann is in the latter’s theory that Paul deliberately amended the meaning of the phrase to make it a universal, cosmic term denoting God’s eschatological saving power by which he reclaims all creation.¹⁶ Wright takes issue with Käsemann’s assumption that the covenant is narrow and nationalistic, and argues, rightly, that the Abrahamic covenant had in view the ultimate inclusion of the Gentiles and the cosmic renewal of all creation. What Käsemann separated, Wright keeps together: “The divine faithfulness to the covenant is the appointed means of the divine faithfulness to the creation.”¹⁷ Thus, while scrupling over one element of Käsemann’s view, Wright can nonetheless say that Käsemann’s understanding of the righteousness of God is “foundational” and “helped to create the context” for the NPP.¹⁸

12. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 24-25; referenced in Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 42 n.145.

13. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 30.

14. *Ibid.*, 21, 24, 25.

15. Wright, “A New Tübingen School? Ernst Käsemann and His Commentary on Romans,” *Themelios* 7.3 (1982), 6-16; see p. 14. More recently, Wright has argued strongly that Käsemann never lost sight of the “covenant faithfulness” interpretation and in fact emphasized it more in his later lectures. Wright, “A New Perspective on Käsemann? Apocalyptic, Covenant, and the Righteousness of God,” in *Studies in the Pauline Epistles: Essays in Honor of Douglas J. Moo*, ed. Matthew S. Harmon and Jay E. Smith (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 243-58.

16. Wright, “A New Tübingen School?” Cp. his recent statements to the same effect in Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 19 n.29, 123, 148, 190.

17. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 841.

18. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 56.

Second, Wright quotes from the article on “Righteousness, Righteousness of God” by K. L. Onesti and M. T. Brauch in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*.¹⁹ Here is Wright’s exact quote from that article, which he uses as an appeal to authority in support of his covenant-faithfulness interpretation:

The concept of righteousness in the Hebrew Bible emphasizes the relational aspect of God and humanity in the context of a covenant . . . The Hebrew meaning of justice means more than the classical Greek idea of giving to every one their due. Usually the word suggests Yahweh’s saving acts as evidence of God’s faithfulness to the covenant. For this meaning of righteousness of God, *dikaïosynē* is not as flexible as the Hebrew word . . . An essential component of Israel’s religious experience was that Yahweh was not only Lord of Law but also the one who was faithful to it. God was faithful to the covenant. God’s righteousness was shown by saving actions in accordance with his covenant relationship . . . Righteousness is not primarily an ethical quality; rather it characterizes the character or action of God who deals rightly within a covenant relationship . . . The covenant faithfulness of God, the righteousness of God, is shown by Yahweh’s saving acts.²⁰

These are the words of Onesti and Brauch as quoted by Wright. A few pages later, Onesti and Brauch credit the originator of the covenant-faithfulness interpretation: “H. Cremer (1900) launched scholarship in a new direction by pointing to the OT understanding of *sēdaqa* (‘righteousness’) as covenant faithfulness.”²¹ Cremer’s paradigm shift was recognized by Brauch himself in an earlier essay on the same topic:

A new turning point [from Luther’s emphasis on the gift-character of righteousness] . . . was provided by H. Cremer in that he pointed to the Old Testament as the historical presupposition for Paul’s conception of ‘God’s righteousness.’ Cremer demonstrated that *dikaïosynē theou* must be understood in terms of *tsedaqah*, a ‘relational concept’ which designates the action of partners in keeping with the covenant (i.e., covenant-faithfulness).²²

Thus, we have two pieces of evidence for Wright’s dependence on Cremer: his own admission of reliance on Käsemann, who cited Cremer, and his appeal to the

19. K. L. Onesti and M. T. Brauch, “Righteousness, Righteousness of God,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (= *DPL*), ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 827-37. I noted Wright’s reliance on this article in *The Righteousness of God*, 6 n20.

20. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 800, quoting sentences from Onesti and Brauch, *DPL*, 828-29.

21. Onesti and Brauch, *DPL*, 834.

22. Manfred T. Brauch, “Perspectives on ‘God’s Righteousness’ in recent German discussion,” Appendix to Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 525. This essay seems to have provided much of the basis for the later *DPL* article which was co-authored with Karen L. Onesti, then a Ph.D. candidate at the same institution with Brauch.

article by Onesti and Brauch, who explicitly acknowledged Cremer as a key “turning point” in the interpretation of the Pauline concept of “the righteousness of God.”

Frederick gives the impression that in his magnum opus, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Wright advances an independent, detailed lexical case for taking God’s righteousness as his covenant faithfulness. But if one peruses the section of the book devoted to this topic, it becomes evident that such a detailed lexical case is lacking.²³ Wright quotes some verses from the OT where the righteousness of God is used in significant theological contexts (especially Isaiah 40-55), but he quotes them without making any arguments. He just asserts that God’s righteousness in these texts means God’s covenant faithfulness. Even more glaring is the omission of any discussion of “the righteousness of God” in the Jewish literature (the Dead Sea Scrolls, the OT Apocrypha, the OT Pseudepigrapha, Hellenistic Jewish literature, Philo, and Josephus). Wright does not provide original scholarly arguments of a lexical nature defending his view and instead relies on the prior scholarship of Käsemann, Onesti, and Brauch, who were in turn explicitly relying on Cremer.

4. Righteousness and Covenant

We come now to the fourth area of engagement, the one where both reviewers registered similar concerns. Both Greever and Frederick take issue with my separation of righteousness from covenant. Greever thinks I merely overstated the distinction between righteousness and covenant, whereas Frederick thinks I made a major exegetical error in advocating a non-covenantal definition of righteousness.

The first thing to say by way of response is that I do not wish to be understood as saying that Paul’s doctrine of justification is a non-covenantal concept. I stated that one of my goals was “to rescue the interpretation of Paul’s doctrine of justification from *inappropriate* covenantal categories.”²⁴ I did not say that I was seeking to rescue Paul’s doctrine of justification from all covenantal categories, but only from inappropriate ones. The inappropriate covenantal categories that I had in mind were those provided by the Cremer theory that “righteousness” in Paul has a Hebraic technical meaning having to do with “covenant faithfulness” or “covenant membership.” I am opposing this particular covenantal interpretation of Paul’s justification and righteousness language, not all covenantal interpretations. Indeed, covenant theology plays an architectonic role in my own understanding of biblical theology in general and of the Pauline doctrine of justification in particular.

Furthermore, I agree that “righteousness” in biblical theology has a definite covenantal context. That is to say, the biblical theological concept of “righteousness” cannot

23. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 795-804. In the Subject Index, the entry for “Righteousness, of God” lists this 10-page section first. In *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (e.g., p. 148 n.6), Wright again refers readers to this section.

24. Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 6; emphasis added.

be rightly understood without reference to a specific biblical covenant. We bring the concept of covenant into the discussion of “righteousness” in biblical theology as soon as we inquire about the standard of judgment. In my book, I did just that.²⁵ I argued, against Cremer, that righteousness is not a relational concept in which the relationship itself is the norm, so that if one is faithful to the relationship or covenant, then one is righteous. In opposition to Cremer, I argued for the traditional pre-Cremer view that “righteousness” is a norm concept. But of course this raises the question, “What is the norm of righteousness in the Bible?” It is here that the covenant enters in. If the question is the judgment of the nations, then I would argue that natural law is the standard—and I take natural law to be covenantal, since it is rooted in the pre-Fall Adamic covenant of works. If the question is the judgment of God’s covenant people, then the Mosaic Law (the Sinai covenant) is the standard of judgment defining what is righteous and what is unrighteous. So it is not true that I have created a complete separation between righteousness and covenant.

However, I maintain that “righteousness” is not a covenantal word. It may sound as though I have just contradicted myself, but hear me out. This paradox is characteristic of many words in the biblical lexicon. Take the word “redemption” and its cognates such as “redeem,” “ransom,” etc. The word-group is profiled against the base of the human experience, common in the ancient world, of buying back something or someone by paying the redemption price.²⁶ Slaves could be redeemed by paying a redemption price. Property (physical land) that had been transferred from one family to another could be redeemed or bought back. The concept of “redemption” is not profiled against the base of covenant. To understand the conceptual metaphor of redemption you don’t analyze the social world of the *b’rith*—covenant ratification rituals, oaths, treaties, promises, stipulations, blessings and curses, and so on. Redemption has nothing to do with covenant. That may sound like overstatement, but it is literally true. Redemption, either as a word or as a concept, is not an inherently covenantal activity. It doesn’t live and move and have its being within the conceptual frame of covenant. It is a fundamentally commercial concept having to do with buying back things (land) or people (slaves) that had become alienated from their original owners by paying the required price so as to re-acquire ownership of them.

Nevertheless, when we move from the field of lexicography to the field of biblical theology, the biblical-theological concept of “redemption” must be understood in light of the larger covenantal context. God “redeemed” Israel from the house of bondage in Egypt because he was keeping the promises he made in the Abrahamic covenant (Exod 2:23-24; 3:6; 4:5; 6:2-8; Deut 7:8). In the new covenant, the blood of

25. *Ibid.*, 162-63.

26. Base-profile analysis comes from one of the founders of cognitive linguistics, Ronald W. Langacker. He gives the example of *hypotenuse*, a concept that only makes sense in terms of its setting within the geometric interrelationships of a right triangle. Thus, the term *hypotenuse* is “profiled” against the “base” of the right triangle. See Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 120 n.25, 126.

Christ is the payment price, and his blood is the blood of the covenant (Matt 20:28; 26:28). Salvation is construed through the lens of a conceptual metaphor taken from the commercial realm of redeeming slaves from slavery by paying the ransom price. But because God's act of saving and forming his people is covenantal, when the redemption metaphor is utilized to conceptualize salvation, the biblical-theological concept of redemption is also covenantal.²⁷

When writing an article on the biblical theology of "redemption," a biblical theologian would need to explain the covenantal context of "redemption." But when writing an entry for a lexicon, a lexicographer is more narrowly focused on the lexical meaning of the word, which must be derived from careful analysis of the word's relation to other members of its semantic domain, its semantic range, its base-profile configuration, its underlying conceptual significance, and various metaphorical extensions of meaning. Possibly some of the notable contextual modulations of the lexical meaning may be mentioned in a lexicon, particularly a lexicon devoted to a particular corpus (such as the Hebrew OT, the Greek OT, or the Greek NT), but these contextual modulations would have to be carefully distinguished from the lexical meaning, since contextual modulations are usage-specific and any additional shades of meaning are derived from the context and are not part of the lexical value of the word itself. This was the point of the opening section of my chapter on methodology, where I carefully established the crucially important distinction between "lexical concepts" and "discourse concepts."²⁸ This was a key methodological presupposition that laid the groundwork for the rest of the argument as it unfolds in my book.

To return to "righteousness," I claim that "righteousness," is not strictly a covenantal word, even though in biblical theology it functions within a broader covenantal context. In other words, "righteousness" is not profiled against the base of "covenant." To understand what biblical "righteousness" words mean and how they operate lexically, you don't analyze the social world of *b'rith*-making. You analyze, in the first place, the social world of judicial activity in a court setting, and secondarily the realm of moral or ethical behavior, which is plausibly viewed as a metaphorical extension of the court setting. Once you have done that, of course, you can then move on to engage in a broader theological analysis, showing how this fundamentally judicial metaphor is employed covenantally in biblical theology.

27. All theology is highly metaphorical, that is, it uses realities of embodied experience from ordinary daily life to describe or construe spiritual realities. For a primer on conceptual metaphor, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980; reprinted with an Afterword, 2003).

28. Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 61-65.

5. The Role of Works in Judaism

The final area of engagement has to do with the role of works in the Jewish religion of Paul's context. Frederick thinks my work relies on a pre-Sanders understanding of Judaism. He says he is shocked that I did not discuss the Pauline phrase *erga nomou* ("the works of the law").

In my defense, one can only do so much in a dissertation or any book for that matter. Doctoral supervisors typically counsel their students to make sure their dissertation topic is narrowly focused. Instead of engaging that exegetical debate, I chose to point the reader to the work of others who have, in my view, provided satisfactory responses on these other aspects of the NPP. I thought the issues of Sanders's "covenantal nomism" and "the works of the law" had been sufficiently addressed by a number of important studies.²⁹ In my dissertation, I wanted to focus on an aspect of the NPP that I felt had not yet been addressed in detail by the critics of the NPP. It would have made an already long book even longer if I had chosen to rehash the exegetical debate over "the works of the law."

Space forbids me to examine that exegetical debate here, but I do want to point out that Frederick mischaracterizes my view of Judaism. He presumes I hold that Judaism was a man-centered religion devoid of grace in which works-righteousness was performed with a view to earning God's favor. I never wrote that anywhere in my book, and the sentence he quotes doesn't say that.³⁰ The term "works-righteousness" is not one that I used. It is a loaded term, with connotations of a self-righteous legalism that has no need for the grace of God.

Let me take this opportunity to explain more explicitly what I think about the character of the religion of Judaism in Paul's day. To begin with, I think Sanders was right to issue a corrective against the view of many older New Testament scholars that early Judaism had no concept of God's grace, denied the possibility of repentance and forgiveness, and was bent on trying to earn or merit God's favor by works. Sanders provided overwhelming textual evidence from early Jewish literature demonstrating that the Jews did believe in the priority of God's grace, and not all Jews had a crass mentality of trying to earn eschatological life apart from God's grace. *Paul*

29. Andrew A. Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001); idem, "Beyond Covenantal Nomism: Paul, Judaism, and Perfect Obedience," *Concordia Journal* 27 (2001): 234-52; Simon J. Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective, with an essay by Donald A. Hagner* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001); Charles H. Talbert, "Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 1-22; Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); idem, "The Righteousness of the Law and the Righteousness of Faith in Romans," *Interpretation* 58 (July 2004): 253-64. I refer to these scholarly critiques of the NPP in *The Righteousness of God*, 5 n.16; 6 n.21.

30. "There is, of course, a major difference ..." (Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, 231-32).

and *Palestinian Judaism* is a masterful piece of scholarship that exploded widely-held scholarly assumptions.

However, I think Sanders himself swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction when he failed to recognize the importance within Judaism of law-keeping as the means to attaining a status of righteousness before God. While God's grace was prior to the giving of the Torah (law) and forgiveness was available to those who repented of their sins, repentance only put one back on the path of trying to obey the law in order to be righteous.³¹ Righteousness was not viewed as a gift freely given by God (as in Paul), but as God's recognition of a person's own righteousness which comes from personal obedience to the law. On this construction, it is not necessary to caricature Judaism as a "man-centered" religion of "works-righteousness." The Jews would have said, "It is not man-centered to obey God's law; God revealed it precisely so that we might obey it!" To make sense of Paul's teaching, however, it is necessary to maintain that many Jews typically thought they had to obey the law in order to be righteous before God.³² This construction of Judaism's view of "the righteousness that comes from the law" seems to be presupposed in several key Pauline passages (e.g., Rom 3:20-28; 9:30-10:6; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9). I realize that these passages are contested, but the scholars cited above have, in my view, brought needed balance to Sanders's overly sanguine view of Judaism and answered the NPP's interpretation of "the works of the law."

The Importance of this Discussion

I have spent most of my space responding to Frederick's critical review, but in conclusion, I want to say that I agree with Greever's assessment of the importance of this subject: "The reason why this issue should be taken seriously is that it has everything to do with how an individual can be assured of final justification." Paul stated that he was not ashamed of the gospel because it is "the power of God for salvation," and it is that power because "in it the righteousness of God is revealed" (Rom 1:16-17). Thus, for Paul, the righteousness of God stands at the very heart of the gospel that he preached. I agree with NPP scholars, and with Wright in particular, that God is faithful to his covenant promises given to Abraham. I would even agree that that truth

31. As I explained in my discussion of Jewish soteriology in *ibid.*, 223-25.

32. For example, here is a quote from the *Psalms of Solomon*, an early Jewish text written in the century before Paul: "Our works are in the choosing and power of our soul, to do righteousness or injustice in the works of our hands, and in your righteousness you visit human beings. The one who does righteousness stores up life for himself with the Lord, and the one who practices injustice is responsible for the destruction of his own soul, for the judgments of the Lord are in righteousness for each man and household" (*Ps. Sol.* 9:4-5). This same writing also recognizes God's mercy (*Pss. Sol.* 3:5-8; 9:6-8; 15:13), so clearly this is not a religion devoid of grace. Yet righteousness is not a gift from God but something that a person must "do" in order to "store up life" with the Lord and avoid destruction of their soul. See my discussion of the *Pss. Sol.* in *The Righteousness of God*, 222-25.

stands at the heart of the gospel (Rom 1:2; 4:16, 21; 15:8; 2 Cor 1:20; Gal 3:8, 18, 29). But as true as that is theologically, my claim is that when Paul uses the phrase “the righteousness of God” in Rom 1:17 (and in Rom 3:21-22; 10:3, 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9), he is not giving expression to that theological truth, important as it may be, but is rather referring to the status of righteousness that comes from God as a gift. Paul says this was what Abraham found—the standing of being “righteous” or “justified” before God, a standing he had, not because he did the good works of obedience demanded by the law, but because he simply believed in God’s promise (Rom 4). That is what makes the gospel the power of God for salvation—the fact that it reveals Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, as the one on whose account sinners may be accepted as righteous before God. This righteousness from God, not our own righteousness, is the basis of our confident assurance that at the last day when we stand before the judge of all the earth, we will not be condemned but will be inheritors, as Abraham’s offspring, of eternal life in the new creation.