

2009

Perfection in Paul: Snapshot of a Stand-off

Kent Yinger

George Fox University, kyinger@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Presented at the Pacific NW SBL regional meeting, Tacoma (WA) April 2009 <http://www.etsjets.org/>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the George Fox Evangelical Seminary at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - George Fox Evangelical Seminary by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

“Perfection in Paul: Snapshot of a Stand-off”

Kent L. Yinger, PhD
Professor of New Testament Studies
George Fox Evangelical Seminary

Paper presented at
Pacific-Northwest Regional SBL Meeting
Pacific Lutheran Univ. (Tacoma, WA)
April 25, 2009

Abstract:

Following a review of scholarship on ‘perfection’ in Pauline soteriology, this paper will document the current stand-off among Pauline scholars as to whether Paul requires (or thinks Jewish soteriology requires) perfect Law-keeping -- often connected with post-Sanders’ debates over 1st century Jewish soteriology. Along the way it will reflect on the meaning of perfection language in the various corpora. The paper will then suggest that resolving this issue remains crucial for unraveling Pauline soteriology.

Introduction

A grand frustration in any field of knowledge is the failure, or inability, to build on so-called “assured results of scholarship.” We’ve had an illustration of this recently in public life as some have pointed to FDR’s New Deal intervention as the salvation of the American economy in the 30’s, while others have said that same intervention only made economic matters worse and slowed down the recovery.¹ For those of us investigating Pauline soteriology, a similar type of roadblock occurs over the issue of perfection in Paul. Did he hold to the necessity of flawless, 100%, obedience to the law? In his understanding of Judaism, were Jews required to keep Torah perfectly if they were to be justified “by works of the law”? This perfect law-keeping thesis has played a central role in Pauline interpretation; its importance, in fact, “cannot be overstated” according to many scholars.² Yet, precisely this thesis has been under serious attack for some time now. As far as many students of Paul and Judaism are concerned, it has been decisively

¹ For two opposing evaluations of Roosevelt’s New Deal, see [pro] Harvard Sitkoff and University of New Hampshire. Dept. of History., *Fifty Years Later: The New Deal Evaluated* (New York: Knopf, 1985), and [con] Burton W. Folsom, *New Deal or Raw Deal?: How FDR's Economic Legacy Has Damaged America* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2008). For a brief introduction, see Eric Rauchway, *The Great Depression & the New Deal: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

² Michael Cranford, “The Possibility of Perfect Obedience: Paul and an Implied Premise in Galatians 3:10 and 5:3,” *Novum Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1994): 242.

refuted. For others, however, it continues to play the role of a valid and crucial building block in their understanding of Paul's theology.

This paper will lay out the background and current status of this stand-off among Pauline scholars. Along the way it will suggest where consensus already exists and what remains to be done to resolve this issue so crucial to unraveling Pauline soteriology.

Background to the Stand-off

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law."
(Gal 3:10, NRSV)

A long history of biblical interpretation reads Galatians 3:10 in light of the following syllogism.³

1. (major premise) The law curses those who do not keep it perfectly ("observe and obey all the things written").
2. (minor premise, implied) No one keeps (or can keep) the law perfectly.
3. (conclusion) Therefore, "all who rely on" keeping the law are under a curse.⁴

This is not the place to enter into the numerous exegetical problems connected with this verse.⁵ Instead, we note this interpretation only works if perfect law-keeping was demanded by the text Paul quotes (Deuteronomy 27:26) or at least by the way Paul thought Jews understood it.

The same perfect law-keeping thesis helps many to explain other texts like Galatians 5:3 and Romans 3:20.

³ Guy Waters considers this "perhaps the oldest and most longstanding" interpretation of Gal 3:10, and cites John Calvin for this early view, Guy Prentiss Waters, *The End of Deuteronomy in the Epistles of Paul*, WUNT 2/221 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 93, and n. 64.

⁴ Paul may have a human psychological activity in mind ("rely upon") as in the NRSV translation (also NIV, NAB) or a simple group identifier ("as many as are of the works of the Law," NAS [i.e., Jews]; also KJV; Gk. "Ὅσοι γὰρ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου εἰσὶν).

⁵ See standard critical commentaries on Galatians: Betz (1984); Bruce (1982); Burton (1956); Longenecker (1990); Lührmann (1992); Martyn (1997).

Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. (Gal 5:3, NRSV)

. . . i.e., obliged to obey all of it perfectly, without omission.

For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law. (Rom 3:20, NRSV)

. . . since that would require perfect keeping of the law’s demands, something impossible for sinful people.

This perfection thesis then forms part of the foundation in Reformation discussions of justification by faith. Thus, in most explanations of Luther’s Small Catechism, in a section regarding the fulfillment or purpose of the law following Luther’s exposition of the Ten Commandments, one will find something like the following.

Question: “How does God want us to keep His commandments?”

Answer: “God wants us to keep His commandments *perfectly* in *thoughts, desires, words* and *deeds*.”⁶

Or,

Question: “What was the original design of the law?”

Answer: “To secure perfect obedience to all its precepts, and thus confer eternal life.”

Question: “Can any man be saved by the law?”

Answer: “He cannot; because no man has perfectly obeyed”⁷

Or as the Westminster Confession states,

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. (Chap. VII, §2)⁸

⁶ Martin Luther, *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism, a Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 1943), 84 (original emphasis).

⁷ Martin Luther and Frederick W. Conrad, *Luther's Small Catechism: Explained and Amplified for Use in Classes, Schools, and Families*, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1886), 49-50.

⁸ See also Heidelberg Catechism, Questions 4-5, “Canst thou keep all these things [the Law’s requirements] perfectly?”

Since the time of the Reformation, some noted scholars had challenged this perfect law-keeping thesis,⁹ but it was *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* by E. P. Sanders published in 1977 which forced the NT guild to wrestle with its validity. “There is no hint in Rabbinic literature of a view such as that. . . . Human perfection was not considered realistically achievable by the Rabbis, nor was it required.”¹⁰ Sanders himself did accept that Paul held to this thesis, but that the apostle differed from Judaism in doing so.¹¹ Actually, Sanders simply echoed here what George Foot Moore had concluded 50 years earlier in his standard treatment of rabbinic Judaism.¹²

Sanders’ understanding of Judaism was widely influential;¹³ but a number of scholars, such as James Dunn, went one step further, arguing that Paul, too, rejected the notion that Judaism held to perfect law-keeping.¹⁴

At this point the stage has been set for a stand-off.

⁹ See George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, the Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1927), 1.494-495 (see note below); and earlier, C. G. Montefiore, *Judaism and St. Paul: Two Essays*, Jewish People: History, Religion, Literature. (London: Max Goschen Ltd., 1914; reprint, New York: Arno, 1973), esp. 33-37.

¹⁰ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 137, see further 137-147. Reiterated in E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 28. Sanders did note one major exception. “In IV Ezra . . . all that is left is legalistic perfectionism.” Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 409.

¹¹ E. P. Sanders, “On the Question of Fulfilling the Law in Paul and Rabbinic Judaism,” in *Donum Gentilicium: New Testament Studies in Honour of David Daube*, ed. E. Bammel, C. K. Barrett, and W. D. Davies (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 105

¹² Moore, *Judaism*. “Righteousness, in the conception of it which Judaism got from the Scriptures, had no suggestion of sinless perfection.” (1.494) “God was too good, too reasonable, to demand a perfection of which he had created man incapable.” (1.495) However, “Paul’s definition of righteousness as perfect conformity to the law of God would never have been conceded by a Jewish opponent. . . .” (ibid.)

¹³ For a recent critical appreciation of Sanders’ influence, see Fabian E. Udoh, ed., *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

¹⁴ 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), 215-241, esp. 226 [originally published 1985].

Snapshot of the current stand-off

The stand-off over perfection in Paul revolves around two distinct but closely related questions. First, did Second Temple Judaism, or better, some forms of Second Temple Judaism, teach the necessity of perfect law-keeping? And second, did Paul hold to the necessity of perfect law-keeping if one were to be justified by the law?

First, the thesis that Second Temple Judaism did not teach the necessity of perfect law-keeping appears now to be followed by most writers.¹⁵

Lexical studies of perfection language, such as Hebrew *tamim* and *shalam*, conclude uniformly,

The Hebrew notion that an action or way of life is ‘complete’ or ‘integral’ [*tamim*] refers in the first instance to a coincidence of thought, word, and deed It suggests neither sinlessness nor particularistic obedience to a specific legal system.¹⁶

Such lexical conclusions, then, are reflected in the exegesis of those OT passages which assert the perfection of some individual. Job is called “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1). Wilson’s 2007 commentary on this verse is typical.

The Hebrew . . . describes not sinless perfection, but a person who is ‘whole’ and ‘complete’ and who has taken pains to maintain right relationships with God and others. . . . Israelite faith assumed the sinful nature of humans, and the sacrificial system provided a way to break down the barrier between sinners and a holy God. The ‘blameless’ person was the one who took measures to restore and maintain right relation with God.¹⁷

¹⁵ See, for example, Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 1st Fortress ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 120-121; Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible V.11* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 257. Even some scholars who wish to utilize a Jewish perfection thesis admit that this is not a typical Jewish position, but represents a minority opinion; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary V. 41 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 118; and Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1964), 40-43.

¹⁶ B. Kedar-Kopfstein, "Tamam, Etc.," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 707. Delling’s *TDNT* article (s.v. τέλειος, 8.67-78) remains one of the best overviews of Greek lexical data.

¹⁷ Gerald H. Wilson, *Job*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 18.

Second Temple literature demonstrates consistent confession of personal sin and reliance on divine forgiveness and mercy instead of sinless perfection.¹⁸ As Sirach puts matters,

Human beings are weak and short-lived,
That is why the Lord is patient with them
and pours out his mercy upon them.
He sees and recognizes that their end is miserable;
therefore he grants them forgiveness all the more. (Sirach 18:11-12)¹⁹

As for the DSS, most older studies did conclude for perfection teaching, but this is hardly surprising in light of the repeated references throughout this literature to “perfection of way,” “walking in perfection,” and the like.²⁰ More recent studies, however, have been able to nuance this perspective leading to essential confirmation of Sanders’ point about perfection in Qumran.²¹ As one of the hymns states,

¹⁸ A broad survey of soteriology in Second Temple literature can be found in Donald A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1, the Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, WUNT 2/140 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001). In spite of varied degrees of skepticism regarding the accuracy of Sanders’ “covenantal nomism” to describe Second Temple soteriology, this volume does not document any general expectation of perfection. See, for example, Daniel Falk, “Psalms and Prayers,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1, the Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brien, and M. A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 7-56. See further Mikael Winninge, *Sinners and the Righteous: A Comparative Study of the Psalms of Solomon and Paul's Letters*, Coniectanea Biblica. New Testament Series 26 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995), 131-134, who terms the devout in the PssSol “the sinfully righteous.”

¹⁹ Cited in Donald E. Gowan, “Wisdom,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1, the Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brien, and M. A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 219.

²⁰ See, for example, 1QS I.8, II.2; CD II.15-16; etc. Older studies include Béda Rigaux, “Révélation des Mystères et Perfection À Qumrân et dans Le Nouveau Testament,” *New Testament Studies* 4, no. 4 (1958): 237-262, and Matthew Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins: Studies in the Jewish Background of the New Testament*, repr. ed. (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983 [orig. 1961]), 118-124.

²¹ Alex R. G. Deasley, *The Shape of Qumran Theology* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2000), 210-254; see also John R. Walters, *Perfection in New Testament Theology: Ethics and Eschatology in Relational Dynamic*, Mellen Biblical Press Series, V. 25 (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1995), 42-65. Walters claims to overturn Sanders’ “no perfection” thesis (61-62), but like Sanders he defines perfection in terms of covenantal relationship and with the provision of atonement for inadvertent imperfections (60).

Man does not have perfection of behavior. (1QH iv.31)²²

The dating of rabbinic literature is questionable as to its relevance for NT studies, but one recent writer concludes,

there appears to be no implication that in order to reap the ultimate rewards it is necessary to fulfill the whole Torah perfectly. The righteous person is not necessarily perfect.²³

In conclusion, one can certainly find scholars who argue for perfection teaching in some strands of ancient Judaism, but their protests remain thus far isolated resistance to a general consensus.²⁴ Unresolved dispute does remain as to whether or not a few streams of Jewish tradition did hold to perfect law-keeping, most notably rabbinic Judaism and 4 Ezra.²⁵ Nevertheless, barring significant new evidence, it seems safe to proceed from the thesis that the various Judaisms of Paul's day did not teach that only those who obey Torah perfectly, with not a single failure or sin, will gain life. Those wishing to proceed from any other assumption will need to give convincing demonstration.

Now to the main arena of debate, did Paul hold to the necessity of perfect law-keeping if one were to be justified by the law? That is, did he think that Judaism or the Law demanded flawless,

²² Also, "My right is with God and from His hand comes perfection of behavior and uprightness of heart." (1QS xi.2)

²³ Philip S. Alexander, "Torah and Salvation in Tannaitic Literature," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1, the Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brien, and M. A. Seifrid, WUNT 2/140 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 284.

²⁴ So, for example, A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), who claims most Second Temple Jews "did maintain that the law enjoins perfect obedience—contrary to the claims of many Pauline scholars" (8, original emphasis). See also Walters, *Perfection in New Testament Theology*.

²⁵ So Friedrich Avemarie, *Tora und Leben: Untersuchungen zur Heilsbedeutung der Tora in der Frühen Rabbinischen Literatur*, Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum V. 55 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996) on rabbinic Judaism, and E. P. Sanders on 4 Ezra, Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 409-418. For a different view on 4 Ezra see Richard Bauckham, "Apocalypses," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brien, and M. A. Seifrid, WUNT 2/140 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 161-175, esp. 155-156. In addition, Pr Man 8 speaks of Abraham's sinlessness, Falk, "Psalms and Prayers," 14, and F. I. Andersen finds perfectionism in 2 Enoch 41:2, "2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch," *OTP* 1.167. Michael Bird suggests a number of Second Temple texts which may testify to a belief in sinlessness, but most are dubious upon closer inspection, Michael F. Bird, "Judgment and Justification in Paul: A Review Article," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18, no. 2 (2008): 307, n. 38.

100% obedience or, at least, should have demanded it logically? As you see from the annotated list on the handout, there are plenty of writers on both sides of this perfect law-keeping fence. Although rare, one can still find supporters of the older view that Paul is combating a typical Jewish doctrine of perfect obedience. More common is the suggestion that Paul is combating a minority opinion among Second Temple Jews (R. Longenecker). That is, even if Sanders is correct that most Jews did not hold to the necessity of perfection, there may still have been some who did, and it is these strands which Paul reflects in Galatians 3. Still others argue that Paul was not reacting to any *actual* Jewish position on perfection—Jews did not hold to this doctrine, they agree. Instead, they contend, the apostle now saw that this is what Jewish soteriology *ought* to have concluded (Condra, Das). This means, further, that Paul's view of Jewish soteriology is something of a novelty, drawn not from his own Jewish tradition but from his new insight in Christ (Schreiner; B. Smith). Straddling this particular fence is H. Räisänen, who accuses Paul of inconsistency on this point and of resorting sometimes to the strained argument of perfect law-keeping (Gal 3:10), but otherwise rejecting this view (Phil 3:6; Rom 2:13-14).

The breakdown of interpreters on the handout falling on either side of this fence looks fairly evenly balanced, but this list is representative rather than exhaustive. A more thorough study would reveal the current predominance of the viewpoint that Paul did not think Torah demanded flawless obedience for salvation. But as is equally clear from this list, there are plenty who think otherwise. This, in itself, need not constitute a stand-off. However, too few of these interpreters, on either side, seek to address directly this question that separates them. The majority—to whom I admittedly belong on this issue—assume the Sanders position on perfection in Judaism and assume that Paul thought no differently. The minority bring a number of differing arguments to the effect that Paul may, indeed, have thought differently. The exegesis of texts like Gal 3:10 and the analysis of Pauline soteriology run along predictable and contradictory lines with neither side having much of an impact on the other; hence, the stand-off.

Suggestions for Progress

In what follows I would like to suggest a number of areas in which further research might lead to progress beyond this stand-off.

First, all writers should give greater attention to the way they are using perfection language. Terms like “rigorous” or “radical obedience,” “thoroughgoing adherence,” etc. occur too often as synonyms of perfection. In the English language relevant definitions of “perfection” include “without fault or defect,” “immaculate,” or “sinless.” Generally we do not think of something as being “more perfect” than something else. Perfection is an absolute standard above which nothing exists, and below which it is no longer called perfection. It is nothing less than 100% fulfillment; 99% is close, but is no longer perfection. This 100% fulfillment is how most traditional interpreters understand the term when asserting that behind Gal 3:10 stands the belief that no one can keep the law perfectly. As Lightfoot put matters, Gal 3:10 “utters an anathema against all who fail to fulfil *every single ordinance* contained in the book of the law.”²⁶

²⁶ Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921), 138 (emphasis added).

When these interpreters seek for a perfection precedent within Judaism, however, they more commonly use terms like “rigorous” or “strict obedience,” “unbending demand,” etc. In speaking this way, they usually recognize the provisions in Judaism for failure, that is, for imperfections, via sacrifice, repentance, forgiveness and mercy. But this is clearly no longer the sort of perfection they perceived behind Gal 3:10. They actually seem to come closer at this stage to the sort of covenantal loyalty or righteousness language used by New Perspective proponents. This position also lines up well with the OT’s understanding of perfection as integrity, wholeness and wholeheartedness.

This terminological imprecision has bedeviled most debates over the relationship of faith and obedience in Paul. My own preference would be to use the term “perfection” only in the biblical sense of integrity, wholeness and wholeheartedness. The more legal or mathematical understanding as unerring or 100% fulfillment does not seem to have been a serious player when biblical authors used the term. This we might better call “sinless perfection.”²⁷

Another area of potential progress addresses the question of such sinless perfection teaching in a few strands of Jewish tradition. Granted, most forms of Judaism did not commonly hold to the necessity of perfect law-keeping, were there some which did? And could Paul be drawing upon such minority positions? Since Second Temple Judaism was not monolithic in its theology, this position could have some inherent plausibility.

What remains to be produced are (1) detailed studies of these minority positions, and (2) demonstration of Paul’s reliance upon these sources, or at least his sharing with them of a common stream of tradition. As to such Jewish minority positions, a few article-length studies have appeared,²⁸ but much more will need to be done, and experts in Second Temple Judaism and the Old Testament should be invited to weigh in. It is still far from clear that IV Ezra, Sanders’ perfectionistic exception, should count in such a minority.²⁹ As to the suggestion that Paul draws upon such a supposed Jewish tradition, until such a tradition is demonstrated the issue is, of course, moot.

The novelty thesis is another area of potential focus. That is, although Paul does not say that the OT or Jews held to perfect law-keeping, he now thinks, in the light of faith in Christ, that they *should have* held to this doctrine. Perfect law-keeping should be the logical conclusion of OT

²⁷ A few have argued for such an expectation in Paul. See Helmut Umbach, *In Christus getauft, von der Sünde befreit: die Gemeinde als sündenfreier Raum bei Paulus*, FRLANT 181 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

²⁸ Falk, “Psalms and Prayers,” 7-56.

²⁹ “There is no need to take the view that 4 Ezra is the exception that proves the rule, legalism gone mad.” Simon J. Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting?: Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 137, see 136-139.

and Jewish soteriology, even if they themselves never arrived at that conclusion.³⁰ This thesis will never gain traction, however, until crucial questions are answered convincingly by its proponents. If Paul's arguments are based on such a novelty, how can he have expected them to have any force with Jewish hearers? All that the teachers in Galatia need have done was to say "We don't teach that." And assuming Paul was aware of the novelty of his proposal, why does he allegedly base his crucial syllogism on it without making it explicit or even seeking to support it?

Most other issues revolve around the interpretation of Gal 3:10, with occasional glances at other Pauline passages. A great deal of study has been devoted to most of these matters, but without much agreement to-date. In the interests of time, I will simply list these issues and note some of the players in the footnotes.³¹

Does Gal 3:10 contain a syllogism with an implied premise as to the necessity of perfect lawkeeping? This traditional understanding still finds supporters, but has come under vigorous attack.³²

If Paul's argument in Gal 3:10 (and 5:3; Rom 3:20; etc.) does not presume the demand for perfect obedience, how can it be better understood? Quite a few suggestions have been made—this is a strictly terminological argument (Sanders), the curse refers to Israel's exile (Scott), etc.—but none have proven convincing to a majority of interpreters.

Is there evidence elsewhere in Paul's writings that he, in fact, held to the fulfillability of the Law rather than the impossibility of fulfilling Torah? Crucial texts include Phil 3:6 ("as to righteousness under the law, blameless") and Rom 2:13-14 ("the doers of the law . . . will be justified").

³⁰ So Condra, Schreiner; B. Smith; Francis Watson (1986), 71.

³¹ A number of these have been examined in Cranford, "The Possibility of Perfect Obedience," 242-258.

³² Yes: In addition to those listed under "yes" on the handout, see Ernest DeWitt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988); Longenecker (*Galatians*), and Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 175-177.

No: In addition to those listed under "no" on the handout, see James R. McGahey, "'No One Is Justified by Works of the Law' (Galatians 2:16a): The Nature and Rationale of Paul's Polemic against 'Works of the Law' in the Epistle to the Galatians (Saint Paul)" (Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1996); Wolfgang Reinhold, "Gal 3,6-14 und das Problem der Erfüllbarkeit des Gesetzes bei Paulus," *ZNW* 91, no. 1-2 (2000), 91-106; Richard B. Hays, "Galatians" in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols. (Abingdon, 2000), 181-348, esp. 257.

Bachmann suggests there are two syllogisms, not one, at work in this text: Michael Bachmann, "Zur Argumentation von Gal 3.10-12," *NTS* 53 (2007): 524-44.

And last, does Paul's addition of "all" to the citation of Deut 27:26 (LXX) suggest perfectionism?

Moving beyond Pauline literature, is Paul alone in the NT in holding to this perfect law-keeping viewpoint,³³ or does the remainder of the NT corroborate it? Actually, there seems to be general agreement that, outside of some interpretations of Paul's letters, one does not encounter this requirement of flawlessly perfect obedience to the Law; or to put this in other terms, they portray obedience to Torah, even being perfect in such, as not only desirable, but apparently quite possible.³⁴

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48; also 19:21)

Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. (James 3:2)

In Conclusion

In ongoing debates over the shape of Paul's theology, over the New Perspective, over the place and meaning of justification by faith, etc., one's understanding of perfection in Paul continues to play a crucial, if too often unexamined, role. Did Paul's frustration with the Law grow out of its supposed (and unrealistic) demand for perfection? Or was his Jewish and later his Christian conscience largely untroubled since no such demand was made? What exactly was the problem with Torah in Paul's mind?

In discussions of Paul's theology the tide has clearly turned as far as I can discern. The earlier perfectionistic building block has been removed for most interpreters, and they are at work seeking to understand the apostle without such a presumption. Nevertheless, significant voices in

³³ Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 119-120.

³⁴ On perfection in the NT, see Paul Johannes Du Plessis, *Teleios: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 168-244 (does not find the "moral perfectionistic" understanding, but generally the Semitic "integrate, wholehearted"); Patrick J. Hartin, "Call to Be Perfect through Suffering (James 1:2-4). The Concept of Perfection in the Epistle of James and the Sermon on the Mount," *Bib* 77 (1996): 477-92 ("complete, whole, total in all that one does" 484); Ulrich Luck, *Die Vollkommenheitsforderung der Bergpredigt; Ein Aktuelles Kapitel der Theologie des Matthäus*, Theologische Existenz Heute 150 (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1968) (ties Matthew's call to perfection especially to Jewish wisdom literature and to the DSS); David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in The "Epistle to the Hebrews"*, SNTSMS 47 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

exegesis and theology continue to build on this perfection thesis, leading to quite different results.

This paper has not attempted to resolve that stand-off; but it has tried to shine the spotlight on an issue which too often trips up such discussions.³⁵

³⁵ On perfectionism in Christian theology, see R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology: An Historical Study of the Christian Ideal for the Present Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), (Wesleyan “flowering of perfect love”), and more broadly still, Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism*, Oxford Ethics Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Paul and Perfect Law-Keeping (Handout)

[alphabetical by last name]

Did Paul impute to Judaism a soteriology requiring perfect keeping of the law?

“Yes”

- Ed Condra, *Salvation for the Righteous Revealed. Jesus amid Covenantal and Messianic Expectations in Second Temple Judaism* AGAJU 51 (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
Although Jews themselves did not see this, both Jesus and Paul saw the problem of the righteousness of the law to be that humans were unable to keep it perfectly. “Paul . . . brings out clearly what is really happening within Judaism, even though the Jews-at-large may have been unaware of it. Paul is fully aware of the Judaism of his time but can interpret it in light of the gracious event of the cross” (167; see also 196).
- A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001); and *Paul and the Jews* Library of Pauline Studies (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).
Surveys OT and Second Temple literature to show that Jews did believe in perfect law-keeping. However, they did not clearly recognize the implications of this belief since it stood in tension with their belief in covenantal mercy.
- Timothy George, *Galatians* (NAC, 1994), 230-32
Gal 3:10 “hinges on an unstated premise that he assumes as self-evident. . . the Bible says that those who do not perfectly obey the law are cursed” (230). He refers to “a number of rabbis and Jewish teachers of Paul’s day, especially those of the school of Shammai” as showing that Paul is not unique in holding this position; also refers to Jas 2:10 for the same point. Against Sanders, he refers to Schreiner for a decisive refutation (232, n. 51).
- Hans Hübner, *Law in Paul’s Thought* (trans. James Greig; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984).
“the *tacit presupposition* [of 3:10] is that there is *no single* person who follows the Law in *all* its prescriptions. Of course in using Deut 27.26 LXX Paul is expressing something wholly different from what the Hebrew text intended.” (19, original emphasis)
- Richard Longenecker
Although not common and not typically Jewish (*Galatians* [WBC, Dallas Word Books, 1990] 118), Paul is in agreement with some strands of Judaism about the necessity of perfect law-keeping (*Paul, Apostle of Liberty* [New York Harper & Row, 1964] 41-42).
- Frank Matera *Galatians* SP (1992), 123-24

“Paul seems to imply that everyone under the Law is under this curse since no one perfectly fulfills all of the prescriptions of the Law.” (123)
- Franz Mussner, *Der Galaterbrief* (HTKNT 9; 5.edn.; Freiburg: Herder, 1988), 223-26
Cites Schoeps (2x) to reinforce his point that Paul thought Deut 27:26 demanded perfect fulfillment of all the law’s demands and that no human was capable of such perfect

obedience. It is not clear whether he thinks this was a typical Jewish viewpoint, since his point is simply that this is how Paul takes the Deut text.

- Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 1st Fortress ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 94-127 (“Can the law be fulfilled?”).
Paul is inconsistent. When arguing against Jewish soteriology, as in Galatians 3:10 and 5:3, he resorts to this strained and artificial argument of perfect law-keeping. Paul is the only NT author to hold to this view. However, he otherwise considers the law to be capable of fulfillment (Phil 3:6; Rom 2:13-14).
- Thomas R. Schreiner, “Is Perfect Obedience to the Law Possible: A Re-Examination of Galatians 3:10” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27, no. 2 (1984): 151-160; and “Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law: An Evaluation of the View of E. P. Sanders” *Westminster Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (1985): 245-278; and *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 44-59.
A leading exponent of this viewpoint. Paul’s position was somewhat of a novelty, since the OT did not teach this.
- Barry D. Smith, *What Must I Do To Be Saved? Paul Parts Company With His Jewish Heritage* (New Testament Monographs 17; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007)
Jewish soteriology held mercy and (perfect) obedience in an illogical tension. Paul sides with mercy (divine monergism) and sees Judaism as logically requiring perfect obedience.

“No”

- Daniel Boyarin, “Was Paul an Anti-Semite? A Reading of Galatians 3-4,” *USQR* 47/1-2 (1993): 47-80.
As a Jewish scholar, he agrees with Sanders that perfection was never demanded (49), but brings no new evidence.
- Michael Cranford, “The Possibility of Perfect Obedience: Paul and an Implied Premise in Galatians 3:10 and 5:3” *Novum Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1994): 242-258.
Probably the most thorough refutation to-date of the traditional exegesis of Gal 3:10 and 5:3 related to perfect law-keeping.
- James D. G. Dunn, *Letter to the Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 170-71

- Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?: The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); and “Paul and ‘The Works of the Law,’” *WTJ* 38/1 (1975): 28-42.
Jews would not have agreed perfect law-keeping was necessary for salvation. Paul is not opposing perfect law-keeping but a legalistic misunderstanding (i.e., not failing, but trying to keep the law is what’s wrong).
- Timothy Gombis, “The ‘Transgressor’ and the ‘Curse of the Law’: The Logic of Paul’s Argument in Galatians 2–3,” *NTS* 53 (2007): 81-93
Rejects both the traditional perfection argument (esp. 83-84, and nn. 7 and 9) and the exile argument.
- Richard Hays, *Galatians* (NIB 11, Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 257.
- George Howard, *Paul, Crisis in Galatia: A Study in Early Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), esp. 49-54.
“For Paul to have argued that the law demanded absolute obedience and that one legal infraction brought with it unpardonable doom, would have been for him to deny what all the world knew, namely, that the Jerusalem temple stood as a monument to the belief that Yahweh was a forgiving God who pardoned his people when they sinned.” (53)
- James M. Scott, “‘For as Many as are of Works of the Law are Under a Curse’ (Galatians 3.10)” *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel* (ed. C. A. Evans and J. A. Sanders; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 187–221, 189.
- Norman H. Young, ‘Who’s Cursed – and Why? (Galatians 3.10–14)’, *JBL* 117 (1998) 79–92, 81–3.
Rejects perfection argument, finding it neither in Paul’s argument nor in Judaism.

- Alexander, Philip S. "Torah and Salvation in Tannaitic Literature." In *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1, the Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Donald A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien and Mark A. Seifrid, 261-301. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Avemarie, Friedrich. *Tora und Leben: Untersuchungen zur Heilsbedeutung der Tora in der Frühen Rabbinischen Literatur* Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum V. 55. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996.
- Bachmann, Michael. "Zur Argumentation von Gal 3.10-12." *NTS* 53 (2007): 524-544.
- Bauckham, Richard. "Apocalypses." In *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter Thomas O'Brien and Mark A. Seifrid, 135-187. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Bird, Michael F. "Judgment and Justification in Paul: A Review Article." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18, no. 2 (2008): 299-314.
- Black, Matthew. *The Scrolls and Christian Origins: Studies in the Jewish Background of the New Testament*. repr. ed. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983 [orig. 1961].
- Burton, Ernest DeWitt. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* ICC. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988.
- Carson, Donald A., Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds. *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1, the Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, WUNT 2/140. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Cranford, Michael. "The Possibility of Perfect Obedience: Paul and an Implied Premise in Galatians 3:10 and 5:3." *Novum Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1994): 242-258.
- Das, A. Andrew. *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001.
- Deasley, Alex R. G. *The Shape of Qumran Theology*. Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2000.
- Du Plessis, Paul Johannes. *Teleios: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament*. Kampen: Kok, 1959.
- Dunn, James D. G. "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*, 215-241. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990.

- Falk, Daniel. "Psalms and Prayers." In *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1, the Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Donald A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien and Mark A. Seifrid, 7-56. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Flew, R. Newton. *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology: An Historical Study of the Christian Ideal for the Present Life*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968.
- Folsom, Burton W. *New Deal or Raw Deal?: How FDR's Economic Legacy Has Damaged America*. New York: Threshold Editions, 2008.
- Gathercole, Simon J. *Where Is Boasting?: Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Gowan, Donald E. "Wisdom." In *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1, the Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Donald A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien and Mark A. Seifrid, 215-239. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Hartin, Patrick J. "Call to Be Perfect through Suffering (James 1:2-4). The Concept of Perfection in the Epistle of James and the Sermon on the Mount." *Bib 77* (1996): 477-492.
- Hays, Richard B. "The Letter to the Galatians." In *The New Interpreter's Bible V.11*, 181-348. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000.
- Hurka, Thomas. *Perfectionism* Oxford Ethics Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Kedar-Kopfstein, B. "Tamam, Etc." In *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, 15, 699-711. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006.
- Lightfoot, Joseph Barber. *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1921.
- Longenecker, Richard N. *Paul, Apostle of Liberty*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1964.
- _____. *Galatians* Word Biblical Commentary V. 41. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990.
- Luck, Ulrich. *Die Vollkommenheitsforderung der Bergpredigt; Ein Aktuelles Kapitel der Theologie des Matthäus* Theologische Existenz Heute 150. Munich: C. Kaiser, 1968.
- Luther, Martin. *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism, a Handbook of Christian Doctrine*. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 1943.
- Luther, Martin, and Frederick W. Conrad. *Luther's Small Catechism: Explained and Amplified for Use in Classes, Schools, and Families*. Rev. ed. Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1886.

- McGahey, James R. " 'No One Is Justified by Works of the Law' (Galatians 2:16a): The Nature and Rationale of Paul's Polemic against 'Works of the Law' in the Epistle to the Galatians (Saint Paul)." Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1996.
- Montefiore, C. G. *Judaism and St. Paul: Two Essays Jewish People: History, Religion, Literature*. London: Max Goschen Ltd., 1914. Reprint, New York: Arno, 1973.
- Moore, George Foot. *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, the Age of the Tannaim*. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1927.
- Peterson, David. *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in The "Epistle to the Hebrews"* SNTSMS 47. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Räsänen, Heikki. *Paul and the Law*. 1st Fortress ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.
- Rauchway, Eric. *The Great Depression & the New Deal: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Reinhold, Wolfgang. "Gal 3,6-14 und das Problem der Erfüllbarkeit des Gesetzes bei Paulus." *ZNW* 91, no. 1-2 (2000): 91-106.
- Rigaux, Béd. "Révélation des Mystères et Perfection À Qumrân et dans Le Nouveau Testament." *New Testament Studies* 4, no. 4 (1958): 237-262.
- Sanders, E. P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977.
- _____. "On the Question of Fulfilling the Law in Paul and Rabbinic Judaism." In *Donum Gentilicium: New Testament Studies in Honour of David Daube*, ed. Ernst Bammel, C. K. Barrett and W. D. Davies, 103-126. Oxford: Clarendon, 1978.
- _____. *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.
- Schlier, Heinrich. *Der Brief an die Galater*. 12th ed. Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962.
- Schoeps, Hans Joachim. *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961.
- Sitkoff, Harvard, and University of New Hampshire. Dept. of History. *Fifty Years Later: The New Deal Evaluated*. New York: Knopf, 1985.
- Udoh, Fabian E., ed. *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*. Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2008.
- Umbach, Helmut. *In Christus getauft, von der Sünde befreit: die Gemeinde als sündenfreier*

- Raum bei Paulus* FRLANT 181. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999.
- Walters, John R. *Perfection in New Testament Theology: Ethics and Eschatology in Relational Dynamic* Mellen Biblical Press Series, V. 25. Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1995.
- Waters, Guy Prentiss. *The End of Deuteronomy in the Epistles of Paul* WUNT 2/221. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006.
- Wilson, Gerald H. *Job* New International Biblical Commentary. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007.
- Winninge, Mikael. *Sinners and the Righteous: A Comparative Study of the Psalms of Solomon and Paul's Letters* Coniectanea Biblica. New Testament Series 26. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995.