

On Being Tendentious: D.A. Carson's "Summaries and Conclusions" in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1

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In many recent discussions of the “new perspective on Paul” (NPP), I’ve heard recommended one or more of a handful of critiques of the “new perspectivists.”² Since the NPP is as much a reading of Paul (and the rest of the New Testament) as it is a reading of the literature of Second Temple Judaism, it is not surprising to see recommended the cumbersomely-entitled though excellent collection, *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Volume 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, edited by D.A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien and Mark A. Seifrid (WUNT 2/140; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck/Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

But that's not what interests me.

What I find interesting is how some rather vocal anti-“new perspectivists” suggest that one acquire this volume (either by purchase or through a library). They then quickly note that the volume likely will be too long and too difficult to read. No worries, though, since one should simply turn to the final chapter by D.A. Carson and thus access the essential thrust of the volume. What is so bothersome about this advice is that Carson’s closing summary chapter is a tendentious casting of the overall findings and tone of the actual contributions. Indeed, it so discolors the actual import of most of the other authors that a reader unaware of the contributions themselves would not gain an accurate sense of the contributions that comprise this fine volume (not that all contributions strike the identical tone, mind you). In fact, Carson’s concluding summary so mischaracterizes the actual content of the volume that reviewers time and again have noted the same. Here is a healthy and diverse selection of such reviewers.

Craig L. Blomberg, *Denver Journal*, vol 5 (2002):

Undoubtedly many readers will scrutinize only Carson in detail and then skim or dip into the other parts of the book that prove most relevant or interesting for them. In doing so, however, they will miss some of the diversity of perspectives in the volume, for Carson's overriding agenda in his summaries is to show how at each stage “covenantal nomism” is not fully adequate to describe Second Temple

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² Note: “new perspectivists” is an example of a labeling technique designed to short-circuit discussion by subtly casting an ideological hue on anyone expressing even qualified appreciation of the offerings of E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, or N.T. Wright. It is a form of the rhetorically powerful, though logically fallacious, *poisoning the well*: “they are the ‘ists’ while we are the true blue, the pure, the authentic.” Of course, some who appreciate the NPP may be ideologues – a trait possibly held in common with their more staunch and vocal detractors. To employ the term “new perspectivist” in most common conversations evades the virtue of sympathetically reading one’s opposition (or, simply, the alternatives).

Judaism. At a few points, it even seemed to me that he tried to derive this conclusion from essays in ways that their authors themselves did not.³

James A. Sanders, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (Fall 2002):

Over all, the book offers a rather grudging nod to Sanders' formulation, with some contributions clearer about that than others. But the book has a point of view which is provided in the first and the last chapters, both by editor D. A. Carson. And that point of view is that while thanks are due Ed Sanders for the heuristic value of his thesis on this all-important subject, it is inadequate now and needs reformulation. One must say that if "variegated nomism" is offered as the corrective, it will not have the same sound-bite value or heuristic function as Sanders' simpler vision. One stumbles over variegation.⁴

John Byron, *Review of Biblical Literature* (11/2002):

In the last chapter he [Carson] summarizes the contributions of the fourteen contributors, provides a summary of some relevant yet to be published Ph.D. theses and then draws some, "Concluding Reflections." It is here where the book turns somewhat polemical towards Sanders. Carson concludes that CN is "reductionistic and misleading" (544). He cites the conclusions of the other authors in the volume as a basis for these statements but one does not get the impression that they would have stated their views quite as emphatically as Carson has. Carson closes the book with this: "Examination of Sanders's covenantal nomism leads one to the conclusion that the New Testament documents, not least Paul, must not be read against this reconstructed background; or, at least, must not be read exclusively against this background. It is too doctrinaire, too unsupported by the sources themselves, too reductionistic, too monopolistic" (548). In the interest of giving Sanders's ideas a fair treatment it would have been better to leave out this section and allow the remaining essays in the book to serve as the benchmark by which Sanders is measured.⁵

David W. Kuck, *Currents in Theology and Mission* (December 2002):

Carson in his conclusion, however, seems to be more negative than most of the contributors when he asserts that much of the Jewish literature did embrace a theology of merit and works-righteousness. Just because there are flaws in the thesis of covenantal nomism does not mean that a thesis of Judaism as legalistic is substantiated.⁶

Pamela Eisenbaum, *Review of Biblical Literature* (12/2002):

³ <http://www.denverseminary.edu/dj/articles2002/0200/0203>

⁴ http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0LAL/is_3_32/ai_94330700

⁵ http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1887_3138.pdf

⁶ http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0MDO/is_6_29/ai_95148888

Third, the “Summary and Conclusions” provided by Carson seems at odds with the majority of essays. Most essayists find that “covenantal nomism” works fairly well as a shorthand way of capturing “the essence” (to the extent one can) of the ancient Jewish understanding of the relationship between Israel and her God. They also note exceptions and give greater nuance to this essence in relation to the specific set of texts or topics they have been assigned. Carson acknowledges that several writers give qualified validation to covenantal nomism, but he concludes that “the fit isn’t very good” (p. 547) or that, while “Sanders is not wrong everywhere,...he is wrong when he tries to establish that his category is right everywhere” (p. 543). Since Sanders limited his corpus, and since he himself recognized the great diversity of expression in this varied literature, some of which he would no doubt consider variations or exceptions to the dominant pattern of religion, Carson’s criticisms seem unnecessarily harsh. Even stranger is that his conclusions do not coincide with the conclusions drawn by the majority of authors; their critiques of Sanders are much more nuanced and far less polemical. The incongruity is most apparent when he calls covenantal nomism “reductionistic” and “misleading,” a charge that might well be leveled against him in relation to the body of work he purports to be summarizing.⁷

James R. Daniel Kirk, *Koinonia Journal*, vol XV (2003):

Finally, the most substantial criticism must be leveled against the editorial hand of D. A. Carson. Although the overall tenor of the various contributions to this volume lends qualified support to Sanders’s thesis, the title, introduction, and conclusion all steer the reader toward a more critical judgment of his work. Carson concludes, covenantal nomism “is too doctrinaire, too unsupported by the sources themselves, too reductionistic, too monopolistic” (548). Such a ringing conclusion, while not lacking in rhetorical flourish, hardly does justice to the actual content of the essays. Carson thus detracts from the carefully nuanced studies that he is supposed to be representing.⁸

James D.G. Dunn (the man who coined the term “new perspective on Paul”), *Trinity Journal* (spring 2004):

Most surprising of all is Don Carson’s own conclusion. After a very careful and overall very fair summary of the essays’ findings he concludes that Sanders’s category of “covenantal nomism” is reductionist, misleading, and at times mistaken (pp. 543-46). I must confess to my astonishment at such a conclusion. Was Carson reading a different version of the essays he then published? He complains that the phrase is “too doctrinaire.” But it seems to be he himself who so regards it; I am not aware of advocates of “the new perspective” who treat it so. Perhaps by presenting it as something rigid it becomes easier to attack. The

⁷ http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1887_3254.pdf

⁸ <http://www.ptsem.edu/koinonia/assets/issues/15/bookreviews2%20--%20for%20web.pdf>

findings of most of the contributors to this volume are in effect that “covenantal nomism” serves well as a summary phrase, so long as one recognizes the variations in emphasis, depending on different styles and circumstances- “variegated covenantal nomism!”⁹

John M.G. Barclay, *Biblical Interpretation* 13:1 (2005),

Don Carson offers heavily-slanted conclusions which suggest that for him the object of the exercise was to reassert a familiar dogmatic contrast: “Over against merit theology stands grace” (p. 544). He thinks his authors may have found “huge tracts of works-righteousness and merit theology” lurking within Sanders “over-capacious category of covenantal nomism.” Fortunately, other members of the team have nuanced the discussion or critiqued Sanders in more interesting and significant ways.

Now, given Carson's jaundiced construal of the contributions to this volume, one is led to wonder why it is that his final chapter so often is recommended by the anti-“new perspectivists” (e.g., J. Ligon Duncan,¹⁰ and, in a hearty self-serving, D.A. Carson himself¹¹). Actually, it shouldn't be baffling, though it is disappointing. Such is the nature of some contemporary Christian polemicists. We've seen this kind of posturing before. It was common among many sects in Second Temple Judaism, each deeming itself *true Israel*. Sectarianism is a very human posture.¹²

⁹ http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3803/is_200404/ai_n9390387

¹⁰ http://www.reformation21.org/Past_Issues/2006_Issues_1_16_/2006_Issues_1_16_Articles/Do_We_Need_New_Perspective/22/

¹¹ <http://www.theologian.org.uk/doctrine/carsonnewperspective.html>

¹² This “review of reviews” was first published online 3 October 2005 and last revised 17 April 2007.