1. The discussion of the Law

In his contribution to his Danish colleague N.H. Søe’s Festschrift in 1965 Bent Noack grapples with the question of Paul’s understanding of the Law, as presented in Romans, and reaches the immediate conclusion: “It appears quite hopeless to describe Paul’s view of the law”.

In his address to the Paul Symposium on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Aarhus University in 1978 Heikki Räisänen accused Paul of giving “a totally distorted picture of the Jewish religion . . . connected with the mistaken view of the Law as the basis of salvation in Judaism”. Paul thus stands as the primary source of the false portrayal of Judaism as a legalistic religion that for many centuries has characterised the Christian polemic. Räisänen has since intensified his attack on Paul in strongly critical terms.

---

With this evaluation Räisänen is largely in agreement with E.P. Sanders, who more than anyone in recent years has left his mark on scholarship concerning Paul’s understanding of the Law, primarily through his book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977). This new departure dissociates itself from what he and a number of others regard as the continental interpretation of Paul, based on Luther’s distinction between the Law and the Gospel. The view is that within this Pauline interpretation, with Rudolf Bultmann as its most influential representative in the 20th century, Paul’s confrontation with the Mosaic Law is regarded as a declaration against justification by deeds, of which the Jewish religion in particular is regarded as an exponent.

From his examination of the Palestinian material within the Jewish tradition (minus especially the Aramaic targums) in the two centuries before and after the beginning of the Christian era Sanders concludes that with the exception of 4 Ezra the Jewish position is everywhere characterised by God’s selective covenant with Israel being the precondition for obeying the Law. Jewish life in obedience to the Mosaic Law is thereafter the inherent condition of the covenant agreement (Deut. 6:20-25; 9:4-6; 30:15-20; cf. j.Ber. 2,2). Sanders calls this understanding of the Law “covenantal nomism”, meaning that the Law derives from the covenant.

*He* further claims that we find in Paul the same structural distinction between the Law as the condition of salvation (“getting in”) and as the state of salvation (“staying in”). Paul speaks negatively of the Mosaic Law when it is seen as the path to salvation. On the other hand the apostle’s positive exhortation to keep the Law applies to its role as an expression of the terms of salvation. The real reason for

---

5. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, 6-10.