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Law, Christ, and Covenant: Paul's Theology of the Law in Romans 3:19–20

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Abstract

The fundamental problem of the law in Paul, posed with fresh urgency by the work of E. P. Sanders, remains the separation of the law in Paul's

theology from its gracious covenantal context. Paul's claim of the impossibility of righteousness through the law depends upon a disjunction of law and covenant which appears both logically incoherent and radically un-Jewish. The solution, I propose, lies in a crucial but neglected aspect of Jewish covenant theology. According to a widespread strain within Jewish thought, apart from the grace and forgiveness found within the covenantal relationship, there is no one who is righteous or who can stand before God's judgement. Through echo of Psalm 143:2, Paul's pivotal formulation within Romans 3:19–20 explicitly draws upon this feature of Jewish covenantal thought. Accordingly, the 'works of the law' in Romans do not refer to the law within the gracious framework of the covenant (a covenant which in Paul's thought was operative throughout Israel's history, and had now reached its climax in Christ), but rather to the law's observance *apart from the covenant and its promise of mercy in Jesus Christ*. The distinction between the law's fulfilment considered within or apart from the covenantal relationship of faith is the key which unlocks the coherence and profoundly Jewish character of Paul's theology of the law.

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