

Paul's Covenantal Theology in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4
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In *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, a classic work that inaugurated a discussion which James Dunn would later dub the “new perspective” on Paul,¹ E. P. Sanders argued that Paul’s theological formulations should not be characterized as a form of covenantal nomism, but instead transcended covenantal categories altogether. In Sanders’ view, although Paul could speak of the community established after the death of Jesus as participating in a “new covenant,” this language is subsumed within the broader and more theologically germane category of new creation.² The universal scope of Paul’s soteriology is viewed as incompatible with the more limited purview of covenantal nomism, which is predicated on the election of Israel. Although Sanders drew the key phrase, “new covenant” from 2 Cor 3, he did not ground his views on a close investigation of that important text.

In the wake of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, a new perspective has emerged which affirms, in contradistinction to Sanders, that Paul’s theologizing does rely on covenantal categories. The studies that constitute this new perspective have tended to focus attention on what are often considered to be Paul’s most theologically significant letters, Galatians and Romans.³ Although the topic of covenant takes a central place in Paul’s discussion in 2 Cor 3, Second Corinthians has received less attention than might have been expected within the new perspective on Paul. Basic questions pertaining to the interpretation of the

¹ “The New Perspective on Paul,” originally delivered as the Manson Memorial Lecture at the University of Manchester, 1982. Reprinted in James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (rev. ed., Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2005), 99–120.

² *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), 514. Henceforth abbreviated *PPJ*.

³ See for example, the emphases of N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Dunn, *The New Perspective*. The collection of essays presented at the 1994 Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism includes ten titles referring to passages from Romans or Galatians and three mentioning First or Second Corinthians (James D. G. Dunn, ed., *Paul and the Mosaic Law: The Third Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism, Durham, September, 1994*) [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996]).

central passage in 2 Cor 3:6, 7–16 have yet to receive satisfactory answers. Against whom does Paul polemicize in this section? (Jews? Rival missionaries?) What is the “main opposition” that Paul expresses here? (Judaism vs. Christianity? Paul vs. Moses? Law vs. gospel?) What precisely is “being abolished” in 2 Cor 3? (The law? The glory that attended the old covenant? The veil that lies over the hearts of “unbelievers”?) Because the question of covenantal theology is a central concern of the new perspective on Paul, and because Second Corinthians has not yet been fully integrated into the ongoing discussion that characterizes this new perspective, a fresh examination of Paul’s use of covenantal categories in Second Corinthians is necessary.

This paper will address the question of whether Paul’s thought in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 is to be characterized as covenantal. The paper will examine the Biblical traditions and social situation which informed Paul’s discussion and subsequently will outline the underlying theological structure of Paul’s argument. Doing so will highlight the covenantal theology of the traditions which informed Paul, as well as the theology that Paul developed as he strove to interpret those traditions and to apply them in the context of his own social situation. In the final section of the paper, I will briefly address two of the unanswered questions that 2 Cor 3 raises for the “new perspective” on Paul.

I. Does Paul Espouse A Covenantal Theology in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4?

We may begin to answer the question of whether Paul espoused a covenantal theology by sketching the social and theological background in response to which he crafted his arguments in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4.⁴ It is generally agreed that the background of Paul’s

⁴ The problem of literary disjunctions in the canonical form of Second Corinthians has resulted in the emergence of several positions in regard to its literary unity. I favor the hypothesis that canonical Second Corinthians is composed of five originally distinct letters (letter #1: 2 Cor 1:1–2:13; 7:5–16; 13:11–13; letter #2: 2:14–6:13; 7:1–4; letter #3: 8:1–24; letter #4: 9:1–15; letter #5: 10:1–13:10; in addition to a fragment of a Pauline letter or a post-Pauline insertion: 6:14–7:1) and will assume that hypothesis in this essay, although the validity of the conclusions that I reach does not depend on the validity of the hypothesis. For overviews of the partition theories, see Margaret Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (2 vols., ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, 2000) 1:1–49; Hans Dieter Betz, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9: A Commentary on Two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 3–36; Reimund Bieringer, “Teilungshypothesen zum 2. Korintherbrief. Ein Forschungsüberblick” in

arguments in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 was informed by his dispute with a group of rival missionaries who had arrived in Corinth after the writing of First Corinthians, and prior to the writing of the letters now contained in Second Corinthians.⁵ Paul’s theological formulations in Second Corinthians, some of which are unique within the Pauline corpus (as for example, his self-designation as a “minister of the new covenant”), were likely inflected by his interaction with the arguments propounded by these rival missionaries. These missionaries styled themselves “ministers of righteousness” (2 Cor 11:15), “apostles of Christ” (11:13), “ministers of Christ” (11:23) and, some have speculated, “ministers of the new covenant” (cp. 3:6).⁶ This group preached a version of the gospel (11:4) that was at odds in some important respects with Paul’s own preaching.⁷

The arrival of these missionaries in Corinth coincides with a shift that takes place in Paul’s treatment of the new covenant theme. In 1 Cor 11:25, Paul applies “new covenant” terminology to the Lord’s Supper, but does not exploit any connection that he may have understood between that phrase and its Biblical antecedents, in particular Jer 32 and Ezek 36. Since Paul states that he inherited the Eucharistic formulation from tradition (1 Cor 11:23), it cannot be assumed that he himself associated the formulation with the antecedent passage in Jer 32, nor can this association be positively demonstrated on the

Reimund Bieringer and Jan Lambrecht, *Studies on 2 Corinthians* (BETL 112; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994), 67–105.

⁵ Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986; trans. of *Die Gegner des Paulus im 2. Korintherbrief*; Studien zur religiösen Propaganda in der Spätantike; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964), 9–18; Jerry Sumney, *Identifying Paul’s Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians* (JSOTSup 40; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 181–84.

⁶ So, tentatively, Annie Jaubert, *La notion d’alliance dans le judaïsme aux abords de l’ère chrétienne* (Patristica Sorboniensia 6; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963), 447–48; Mathias Rissi, *Studien zum zweiten Korintherbrief: Der alte Bund–Der Prediger–Der Tod* (ATANT 56; Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1969), 23–24; Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “A Ministry Beyond the Letter (2 Cor 3:1–6)” in Lorenzo De Lorenzi, ed., *Paolo Ministro del nuovo Testamento (2 Co 2, 14–4, 6)* (Serie Monographica di “Benedictina”: Sezione Biblico Ecumenica 9; Rome, 1987), 105–57, esp. 116–17.

⁷ The sections in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 and 2 Cor 10–13 both present information on the same group of missionaries in Corinth, albeit at different stages of the debate (see Sumney, *Identifying*, 125–26, 180–84).

basis of 1 Cor 11:25.⁸ By way of contrast, in 2 Cor 3–4, Paul does not demonstrably associate “new covenant” terminology with the Eucharistic tradition; instead he associates it with Jer 32 and Ezek 36, to which he alludes in 2 Cor 3:1–3. Two different strands of tradition and two disparate sets of associations inform Paul’s statements in 1 Cor 11:25 and 2 Cor 3:1–3. I have argued elsewhere that Paul’s treatment of new covenant themes in 2 Cor 3 is informed by and constitutes his response to a theologoumenon of covenant renewal preached by his missionary rivals in Corinth.⁹

These missionaries, I have argued, espoused a version of a standard theologoumenon that first appeared in the biblical books bearing the names of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and which was later adopted and modified by the Book of Jubilees, the Qumran Community Rule, and the Epistle to the Hebrews. This theologoumenon is both covenantal, in that it assumes Israel’s gracious election by YHWH, and nomistic, in that adherence to the stipulations of the Torah—the terms of the covenant—are required for individuals to remain within the covenant.¹⁰ The main points of the covenant renewal theologoumenon may be summarized as follows:¹¹

- 1) It is stated or implied that YHWH’s people failed to obey the stipulations of the covenant, bringing upon them the curses attendant on breaking the covenant, including exile (cf. Deut 28:47–68; Jer 31:32; Ezek 36:24, 28; Jub 1:22–23; Heb 8:7–9).
- 2) In response to the failure of the people to keep the terms of the covenant, a renewal of the covenant, or “new covenant,” is envisioned (Jer 31:31; cp. 1QS iv.22; Heb 8:8).

⁸ Contra Scott Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel: The Letter/Spirit Contrast and the Argument from Scripture in 2 Corinthians 3* (WUNT 81; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 119–21.

⁹ “Spirit and Covenant Renewal: A Theologoumenon of Paul’s Opponents in Second Corinthians,” *JBL* (forthcoming); *Constructing a New Covenant: Discursive Strategies in the Damascus Document and Second Corinthians* (WUNT 2/233; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 140–54, 203–4, 237.

¹⁰ Sanders defines “covenantal nomism” as follows: “(1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God’s promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God’s mercy belong to the group which will be saved” (*PPJ*, 422).

¹¹ The list is drawn from Blanton, “Spirit and Covenant Renewal.”

- 3) The ratification of the new covenant entails the forgiveness of prior transgressions against the covenant's terms (Jer 31:34) or alternatively, the removal of impurity contracted as the result of the violation of covenantal stipulations (Ezek 36:25; Jub 1:23; 1QS iv.20-21).
- 4) In order to forestall the possibility that the renewed covenant might, like the former one, be broken, YHWH is described as providing the spirit to his people so as to endow them with the capacity to follow the law perfectly (Ezek 36:27; Jub 1:23–24; 1QS iv.22–23; Heb 8:10–11; 10:16).
- 5) Because the spirit transforms the people's minds so that they become perfectly obedient to the Torah, the new covenant remains in effect in perpetuity (Jub 1:23b; 1QS iv.23–24; Heb 9:15; 13:20).

Each of these points is reflected in Paul's "Letter of Reconciliation" in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4. Paul's (Gentile) converts are viewed as culpable for violating covenantal stipulations (5:19–21; cp. #1 above),¹² Paul refers to himself as a "minister of the new covenant" (3:6; cp. #2 above), the possibility of forgiveness of prior covenantal transgressions is extended (5:19–6:2; cp. #3 above), and the transformation brought about by the spirit takes a central role (3:6, 8, 17–18; cp. #4 above). Due to the fact that it could be broken, the former covenant is viewed as temporally limited in scope (in Paul's treatment, its glory fades, 3:7, 11), whereas the new covenant is viewed as remaining in perpetuity (3:11; cp. #5 above).¹³ Each of these themes in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 corresponds with themes present in the covenant renewal theologoumenon, and all five of the themes of the theologoumenon are present in this section of Second Corinthians.

Paul cites the central new covenant oracle of Jer 31:31–34 in 2 Cor 3:2–4 and alludes to the Ezekielian version of the covenant renewal theologoumenon (Ezek 36:24–28) in the same passage. Here I quote an earlier discussion of the passage:

¹² The view that Gentiles were culpable for violating the stipulations of the Torah was fairly widespread in Second Temple Judaism, see Paul J. Duff, "Glory in the Ministry of Death: Gentile Condemnation and Letters of Recommendation in 2 Cor 3:6–18," *NovT* 46.4 (2004), 313–37; Blanton, *Constructing a New Covenant*, 41–43.

¹³ Although the traditional covenant renewal theologoumenon assumes that covenant renewal ("new covenant") is contingent on non-adherence by one party to a prior covenant, and that there is no chronological overlap between the periods in which the prior covenant and the "new covenant" are in effect, Paul's comparison between two *ministries* (and not two covenants) in 2 Cor 3 may allow for a temporal overlap between the "ministry of the ancient covenant" and the "ministry of the new covenant." See n. 45 below.

Paul juxtaposes a reference to the “stone tablets” on which the law was written with an apologetic reference to an issue which had arisen in Corinth involving letters of reference. Whereas Paul’s missionary opponents had been able to produce letters of recommendation written on their behalf (2 Cor 3:1), Paul carried no such credentials. In an effort to forestall the questions that this might raise for his own apostolic legitimacy, Paul adduced the members of the Corinthian house-churches themselves as his recommendation letter (ἡ ἐπιστολὴ ἡμῶν ὑμεῖς ἔστε...). In the course of this juxtaposition, Paul alludes to the new covenant theologoumenon: “You are our letter, written in your hearts... written not with ink but with the spirit of the living God, not on stone tablets but on tablets of fleshly hearts.”

The letter that is described as “written in your hearts” is generally recognized as an allusion to Jer 31:33 (“I will set my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts”). The reference to the “spirit of the living God” which writes “not on stone tablets but on tablets of fleshly hearts” is less frequently, although no less rightly, seen as alluding to Ezek 36:26–27, in which God’s spirit is identified as the agent through which God will “remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh (or, “fleshly heart”).¹⁴

Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 are not the only narratives of covenant renewal to which Paul alludes. The Moses narrative from Exodus 34 that Paul creatively reinterprets in 2 Cor 3:7–18 was itself a story of covenant renewal. As Moses was bringing the tablets of the law, “written by the finger of God” (Ex 31:18), down from Mount Sinai where Moses had received them, the people were in the act of breaking the first commandment (Exod 20:4–6) by casting an image of YHWH in the form of a golden calf (Exod 32:1–20). Subsequently in Exod 34, “YHWH, merciful and gracious...” has Moses write the terms of a renewed covenant (cf. 34:10) on stone tablets (34:1–4, 28), whereupon Moses, face gleaming as the result of his proximity to YHWH on the mountain, delivers the law to the people (34:29–35). When he cites traditions from Exod 34 in 2 Cor 3, Paul cites the paradigmatic example of covenant renewal in the Hebrew Bible. The references to Jer 31, Ezek 36, and Ex 34 indicate that covenantal categories, and in particular covenant renewal, form the background of Paul’s thought in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4.

The terminology that Paul uses in 2:14–7:4 reflects covenantal conceptions. Paul refers to himself as a minister of the new covenant in 2 Cor 3:6. He refers twice to the tablets on which the terms of the first covenant were inscribed (3:3, 7) and to Moses, the

¹⁴ Blanton, “Spirit and Covenant Renewal.”

mediator of the “ancient” covenant, three times (3:7, 13, 15). He refers to the penalty stipulated for covenantal violation, condemnation and/or death (3:7, 9) as well as the covenantal categories of reconciliation and the forgiveness of former transgressions (5:19; cf. #3 in the list above), and refers to his own ministry as one that imparts righteousness (3:9, cf. 5:21). “Righteousness” characterizes one who adheres to covenantal stipulations.¹⁵

Thematically, Paul’s discussion in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 includes issues related to the covenant renewal theologoumenon, his scriptural references recall narratives of covenant renewal, and the vocabulary that he employs throughout the section includes covenantal terms. Formally, Paul’s language in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 corresponds with that which we encounter in contexts in which covenantal theology plays a determinative role.

However, formal parallels do not necessarily amount to a Pauline acceptance of covenantal theology. Sanders seems to imply as much when he states, “although Paul uses the term ‘new covenant’ to describe the community established by Christ’s death, here doubtless following traditional Christian terminology (I Cor 11.25; II Cor 3.6), he can also speak of ‘new creation’ (II Cor 5.17; Gal 6.15).”¹⁶ Sanders seems to imply that theologoumena that are “traditional,” since they were not Paul’s own formulations, ought not be considered germane when evaluating “Pauline theology.” Is it possible that Paul has employed “traditional” language here, but has incorporated it into a theological structure that has been evacuated of covenantal theology? In other words, is Sanders correct in stating that Paul’s own theology “transcends covenantal categories”? In order to answer this question, we must examine the theological framework within which Paul interprets inherited traditions in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4. Even though it is possible that individual terms, motifs, and scriptural references may have been taken over by Paul,

¹⁵ When the terms of the covenant between YHWH and Israel are issued in the form of a legal code, judicial and covenantal aspects of righteousness are indistinguishable (cf. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], 146–157).

¹⁶ *PPJ*, 514. Compare the statement of James Dunn, “The problem is not simply that Paul uses the term [‘covenant’] relatively infrequently, but that his usage seems to be more reactive than expressive of his own cutting edge reflection...” (“Did Paul Have a Covenant Theology? Reflections on Romans 9.4 and 11.27,” repr. in James Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* [rev. ed., Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2005], 429–45).

albeit in a form evacuated of their original covenantal connotations, it would be more difficult to deny that the theological framework that structures the argument in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 was Paul’s own construction.

II. Theological Structure of 2 Cor 2:14–7:4

Although Paul’s “Letter of Reconciliation” in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 is structured according to epistolary and rhetorical conventions, and not as a series of ordered logical postulates, nonetheless a logical theological structure is evident in the letter. Simply stated, the logic involves five main points, each of which depends on the previous one: 1) Paul’s ministry 2) imparts the spirit 3) which brings about transformation and 4) effects reconciliation between God and humans. A positive response to this ministry results in 5) future resurrection, eternal glory, and acquittal before God at the final judgment—in a word, σωτηρία, “salvation.” We will look at each of these points in turn, indicating the relation of each to the traditional covenant renewal theologoumenon which constituted the social/theological matrix within which Paul’s discourse was crafted. We will then evaluate whether the theological structure that emerges from the coordination of these points may be characterized as covenantal nomism according to Sanders’ definition.

A. Minister of the New Covenant

Paul describes himself as an “minister of the new covenant” (διάκονος καινῆς διαθήκης)¹⁷ in 2 Cor 3:6, only a few lines after citing Jer 31:33 and alluding to Ezek 36:26–27, two central biblical texts relating the covenant renewal theologoumenon. Paul adduces his Corinthian converts as a “letter of Christ” “administered” (διακονηθεῖσα) by Paul himself (3:3). The verb that Paul uses here shares the same stem as διάκονος and διακονία (“minister”/“ministry”).¹⁸ The verbal form is rarely used in Pauline literature;¹⁹

¹⁷ It should also be pointed out that the text reads the plural form in 3:6, “[God]... made us fit to be ministers of the new covenant.” The plural noun forms here are an example of what Hans-Josef Klauck has labeled the “schriftstellerische Wir,” see Klauck, 2. *Korintherbrief* (Die Neue Echter Bibel; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1986), 12–13. Paul often uses first person plural verb forms (and here the plural noun form) when referring only to himself.

¹⁸ It is to highlight Paul’s association between διάκονος, διακονία, and δαικονέω that I translate the former term “minister,” and not “agent” or “intermediary” (cp. DBAG, s.v. διάκονος), while translating the latter terms “ministry” and “administer,” respectively.

its use here resonates with the “ministry” language spread liberally throughout 2:14–7:4.²⁰ The letter administered by Paul is written by the spirit of the living God (3:3b). In 3:6, Paul says that God has made him fit to be a minister of the new covenant, “not of the letter, but of spirit,” adding the warning that “the letter kills, but the spirit makes alive.” In the same vein, Paul’s ministry is connected with the legal category of righteousness, and distinguished from the “ministry of condemnation” in 3:9. In 4:1–2, Paul again refers to his ministry, this time in an apparent attempt to refute the charge that he has, in his preaching, “distorted (δουλοῦντες)²¹ the word of God.” In 6:3, Paul obliquely refers to complaints against his ministry (ἵνα μὴ μωμηθῆ ἡ διακονία) but reiterates that he functions as a minister (διάκονος) of God (6:4).²² Even though it is possible that Paul borrows the designation “minister of the new covenant” from his missionary rivals in Corinth, he has nonetheless worked the conception into his own theology here.

B. Ministry of the Spirit

In keeping with the tenets of the covenant renewal theologoumenon, Paul connects his new covenant ministry with the imparting of the spirit.²³ Paul’s διακονία, which had already been connected with the spirit of the living God by way of the verb διακονηθεῖσα in 3:3, and again in his statement in 3:6 that his ministry was one “not of letter, but of spirit,” is similarly specified as a “ministry of the spirit” in 3:8. The function of the spirit is specified in 3:18: it is responsible for transforming individuals gradually

¹⁹ Appearing only in 2 Cor 3:3 and 8:20, Rom 15:25, and Philem 13.

²⁰ The term διακονία occurs in 3:7, 8, 9 (twice); 4:1; 5:18; 6:3 (it appears outside of 2:14–7:4 in 8:4; 9:1, 12, 13; 11:4), while διάκονος appears in 3:6 and 6:4 (and outside of 2:14–7:4 in 11:15, 23).

²¹ Note again the plural verb form, although only Paul is in view.

²² The Greek reads ἀλλ’ ἐν παντὶ συνιστάντες ἑαυτοὺς ὡς θεοῦ διάκονοι, another example of Paul’s use of plural forms when the primary referent is himself.

²³ Compare Ezek 36:26: “And I will give you a new heart and set a new spirit within your inward parts...”; Jub 1:23: “I will create a holy spirit for them and will purify them in order that they may not turn away from me...” (trans. by James VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum Aethiopicum, t. 88; Louvain: Peeters, 1989], 5).

into “the same image” (τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μεταμορφούμεθα)²⁴ as that of Christ, whose face, like Moses’ is associated with the glory of God (4:6).²⁵ In an important caveat, Paul indicates in 3:17 that, although the spirit is responsible for the glorification of those who “turn to the Lord” (i.e., by aligning themselves with Paul’s ministry),²⁶ it does not entail the necessity of adhering to all of the precepts of the law of Moses: “where the spirit of the Lord is, is freedom” with respect to the law (i.e., the spirit obviates the necessity of obedience to the precepts of the law as such; cf. Gal 2:4; 5:1).²⁷

Paul takes up theme of transformation again in 5:17, this time using the category of καινὴ κτίσις as the guiding metaphor. Here, the one who is “in Christ”²⁸ is described as a new creation: “The old things have passed away. Look! The new has come!”²⁹ The metaphor of new creation parallels other metaphors of transformation used in 2 Cor 3–5 including transformation by degrees of glory in 3:18, the renewal of the “inner human

²⁴ The use of the demonstrative adjective in the phrase, τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα, is problematic for as Thrall notes, “[t]here has been no previous reference to an image, but in all probability the allusion is to the image beheld in the mirror” (*Second Corinthians* 1:285).

²⁵ On the passage, see Jan Lambrecht, “Transformation in 2 Cor 3:18” in Bieringer and Lambrecht, *Studies on 2 Corinthians*, 295–307. This statement is clarified by 2 Cor 4:4, which refers to the “the enlightenment of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is an image of God” (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ), while 4:6 speaks of “the enlightenment of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Moyer Hubbard points out the important parallels between 3:18, 4:4, and 4:6 (*New Creation in Paul’s Letters and Thought* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 158).

²⁶ The phrase, “to turn to the Lord” used here is generally understood as a reference to conversion to Christianity, but this wrongly assumes that Paul is polemicizing against Judaism. If, as I argue later in this paper, Paul’s polemic is directed not toward Jews, per se, but toward a rival version of the gospel, then “turning to the Lord” here implies turning away from the preaching of those rival ministers and toward Paul’s own.

²⁷ Commentators interpret the “freedom” mentioned in 3:13 either as a reference to 1) freedom from the law; 2) freedom from the noetic effects of the “veil” referred to in vv. 14–15; 3) a reference to or synonym for the παρρησία of 3:12, or a combination of these. The references to freedom/slavery in Gal 2:4 and 5:1 argue strongly in favor of the view that 2 Cor 3:17 refers to freedom from the obligation of fulfilling all of the stipulations of the law.

²⁸ That is, one who has been incorporated into the body of Christ through baptism (Gal 3:27–28; Rom 6:3–4) and/or one in whom the spirit of Christ dwells (Rom 8:9–10). For a discussion, see Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 390–412.

²⁹ εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις. “[I]t is natural to take καινὴ κτίσις as describing the τις, should the condition of being ‘in Christ’ be fulfilled... Paul is saying that if anyone is ‘in Christ,’ that person is a newly-created being” (Thrall, *Second Corinthians* 1:427).

being” (ὁ ἔσω ἄνθρωπος)³⁰ in 4:16, and the hope of receiving the “clothing” constituted by an awaited heavenly body in 5:2–4 (cp. 1 Cor 15:42–49). These metaphors refer to acts of transformation accomplished through the agency of the spirit (3:18; 5:5; cp. Rom 6:5–14; 8:2).

We may note in passing that, *pace* Sanders’ view that Paul’s covenantal theology is subordinated to his new creation language, the theme of new creation here does not supersede or negate the covenantal category. On the contrary, it depends on and presupposes it. It is only Paul’s ministry of the new covenant that has imparted the spirit that brings about transformation. New creation is contingent on new covenant.

In terms of his relation to the traditional covenant renewal theologoumenon, Paul retains the close association between spirit and covenant renewal, but he has introduced a major modification as well. In terms of the traditional theologoumenon, the spirit makes possible perfect fulfillment of the precepts of the Torah (cf. #4 in the list above), whereas for Paul the presence of the spirit effects a state of freedom with respect to the law in that the fulfillment of all of its precepts is not considered obligatory. This modification has important implications for the question of whether Paul can be said to espouse a “covenantal” theology, a question to which we will return shortly.

C. Reconciliation

The metaphor of transformation employed in 5:17 is immediately connected with reconciliation in the following verse. “All of this” (τὰ δὲ πάντα, referring to Christ’s sacrificial death and the concomitant life of service that this entails for believers in vv. 14–17)³¹ is the work of “God who has reconciled himself to us through Christ” by entrusting Paul with the “ministry of reconciliation.” As in 5:17 (καὶ νῦν κτίσις), Paul applies cosmological language to an anthropological issue: “God was, through Christ, reconciling the world (κόσμος) to himself.” God reconciles the world (i.e., human beings) to himself by not counting their covenantal transgressions (τὰ παραπτώματα)

³⁰ See Hans-Dieter Betz, “The Concept of the ‘Inner Human Being’ (ὁ ἔσω ἄνθρωπος) in the Anthropology of Paul,” *NTS* 46 (2000) 315–41.

³¹ So Thrall, *Second Corinthians* 1:429; Furnish’s argument that τὰ πάντα refers to “all things” (i.e., the universe) is less likely (*II Corinthians* [AB; New York and London: Doubleday, 1984], 316).

against them and by commissioning Paul as the mediator of the message of reconciliation. Immediately after that statement, Paul fulfills his commission by making a direct appeal to the Corinthians to be reconciled to God (5:20–6:2). This reconciliation is made possible through the sacrificial death of Christ, “the one who knew no sin,” whom God “made to become sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (5:21). The theology espoused here is both covenantal and nomistic: the use of the terms “transgression” and “sin” assumes a legal standard whereby transgressions or sins could be defined and therefore identified,³² the reference to Christ as a sacrifice for sin assumes an established mechanism for the maintenance of covenantal relationship despite occasional breeches of covenantal stipulations,³³ and the state of justification that this sacrifice produces assumes a legal standard for the conviction or acquittal of the wrongdoer.

Although at first glance, it may appear that Paul has transcended the covenantal category here in that the covenant was established between God and Israel, whereas the reconciliation that Paul envisions is described as cosmic in scope, a closer inspection reveals that this universal scope was already a standard feature of the covenantal nomism of Second Temple Judaism. Texts of the Second Temple period declare that God has a covenant lawsuit with all humanity,³⁴ since Gentiles in particular were viewed as guilty of violating the first commandment. The universal reconciliation that Paul envisions does not presuppose a prior or more germane covenant than the covenant between God and Israel. “The nations” needed reconciliation with God because they had transgressed the stipulations set forth in God’s covenant with Israel.³⁵

³² Note that “sin” denotes rebellion against covenantal stipulations in the early treaty forms; see Moshe Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90.2 (1970), 189; idem, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 138, n. 1.

³³ Cf. items #6 and 7 in Sanders’ definition, n. 10 above.

³⁴ CD 1:2: רִיב לֹו עִם כָּל בֶּשָׂר; “He (i.e., YHWH) has a covenant lawsuit with all flesh”; Jer 25:31: רִיב לִיהוָה בְּגוֹיִם; “YHWH has a covenant lawsuit with the nations.” See also the literature cited in n. 12 above.

³⁵ IV Ezra 7:21–22, 24: “For God strictly commanded those who came into the world, when they came, what they should do to live, and what they should do to avoid punishment. Nevertheless, they were not obedient... They scorned his Law, and denied

Paul adheres to the terms of the covenant renewal theologoumenon, albeit in Christianized form, as Christ appears as the sacrifice by which the new covenant is ratified (cp. Heb 9:12, 15). In the covenant renewal texts, God is merciful concerning unrighteous acts (Jer 31:34 [=LXX 38:34], cited in Heb 8:12: ἴλεως ἕσομαι τοῖς ἀδικίαις αὐτῶν) and/or cleanses people from impurity as a concomitant to the restored covenantal relationship. Paul adopts this idea, although he does not employ the standard language of divine mercy (ἴλεως ἕσομαι), but instead uses the less likely term “reconciliation” (καταλλαγή). As Reimund Bieringer has cogently argued, Paul’s own social interest to be reconciled to the Corinthian congregation has likely influenced his word choice in Second Corinthians.³⁶

D. Final Judgment and Salvation

The outcome of Paul’s appeal to be reconciled with God, should it be accepted on the basis of a positive reception of Paul’s proclamation, results in future resurrection (4:13–14), eternal glory (4:17), the promise of dwelling in an eternal home in the heavens (5:1), being clothed with immortality (5:4; cp. 1 Cor 15:35–49), and dwelling with the Lord Jesus (5:6–8). On that day in which all will be judged for their deeds, “whether good or bad,” at the judgment seat of Christ (5:10), those who have been reconciled to God through Paul’s preaching will be declared righteous by God (cf. 5:21: ἵνα ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη τοῦ θεοῦ), since their transgression will not be counted against them (5:19). This future salvation may be claimed proleptically on the basis of a positive response to God’s offer of reconciliation now extended through Paul (6:1–2: “Look! Now is the day of salvation.”).³⁷

his covenants, and they have been unfaithful to his statutes and have not performed his works.” (Trans. of Bruce Metzger in *OTP* 1:537.)

³⁶ “2 Korinther 5,19a und die Versöhnung der Welt,” repr. in Bieringer and Lambrecht, *Studies on 2 Corinthians*, 429–59; idem, “Looking Over Paul’s Shoulder: 2 Corinthians Evidence for Paul’s Theology in the Making,” paper delivered at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in Boston, Nov., 2008.

³⁷ Paul’s themes echo aspects of the covenant renewal theologoumenon texts: 1QS iv.23: “all the glory of Adam will be theirs”; Ezek 36:28: “you will be my people and I will be your God”; Jer 31:33: “I will be their God and they will be my people.” However, he proceeds beyond far beyond these texts in his level of specificity.

III. Conclusions

An analysis of the line of argument in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 indicates that from start to finish, Paul’s theology is both covenantal and nomistic. The Biblical resources from which Paul drew, namely Jer 32, Ezek 36, and Exod 34, constituted salient examples of the covenant renewal theologoumenon. Paul uses covenantal language when he designates himself a “minister of the new covenant.” The transformative spirit imparted by Paul’s ministry is construed as that to which Ezekiel looked forward³⁸ in his own iteration of the covenant renewal theologoumenon.

It is not only the Biblical traditions on which Paul relied that are to be characterized as covenantal. The theological framework that Paul uses to interpret those traditions is also covenantal. Paul’s thought in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 is covenantal, in that it assumes a mechanism whereby breaches of covenantal stipulations may be rectified. God provides the means whereby reconciliation between himself and humans can be achieved, the sacrificial death of Christ. This death is construed as the mechanism by which divine grace is made available. In this way God reconciles himself to the *kosmos*.

Paul’s thought in 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 is also nomistic, in that behavior regulated according to legal standards is necessary for the maintenance of this covenantal relationship. Paul clearly thinks that transgressions against this standard rupture the covenantal relationship (5:19); it is this ruptured relationship that necessitates reconciliation. Paul also views God’s final judgment as one that is rendered on the basis of deeds (5:10). Both the traditions on which he relies and the theology that results from his creative reinterpretation of those traditions are properly characterized by the phrase “covenantal nomism,” as Sanders defines it.

However, an important question remains regarding the issue of whether Paul’s own theological formulation adheres to Sanders’ definition of covenantal nomism. The “nomistic” aspect of Sanders’ definition entails adherence to a specific *nomos*, the Torah. However, in 2 Cor 3:17, Paul indicates that “where the spirit of the Lord is, is freedom” with respect to the stipulations of the law. Paul’s judicial formulations in 5:10, 19, and 21

³⁸ So Hafemann: Paul portrayed “his ministry as a fulfillment of the eschatological new age of the Spirit pictured in Ezekiel 11:19 and 36:26f.” (*Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel*, 139).

assume a legal standard, but 3:17 indicates that the standard is not coterminous with the Torah. In Corinth, Paul seems to have accepted some legal precepts as binding,³⁹ but not others. For example, Paul did not insist that his Gentile converts be circumcised (1 Cor 7:18). From a nomistic perspective, the refusal to accept certain stipulations of the covenant could be characterized as ἀνομία, “lawlessness,” entailing a rejection of the legal framework on which the covenant was based.

Has Paul’s formulation gone “out of bounds” here by stretching the “nomistic” aspect of covenantal nomism too far? Viewed in the context of the covenant renewal theologoumenon, according to which the failure to follow the stipulations of the covenant (i.e., the Torah) resulted in a broken covenant, and thus the need for covenant renewal, this question is particularly relevant. In light of Paul’s statements in 1 Cor 5:13; 9:8–9; 10:6–11, and 14:21, which impute to precepts of the Torah an authoritative status even for his Gentile converts,⁴⁰ a simple “yes” does not provide a sufficient answer nor, in light of his consistent neglect of such stipulations as Sabbath observance and circumcision, does a simple “no.” In terms of the standard covenant renewal theologoumenon, the consistent and repeated failure to enforce *any* of the terms of the covenant constituted a violation of the covenant, i.e., a “broken” covenant. It was in view of such repeated and flagrant violations of covenantal stipulations that the editors of the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel first conceived of the idea of a “new covenant,” one whose terms would be kept because God (or the spirit of God) would cause the humans party to the covenant to internalize its precepts (cf. Jer 31:33: “I will set my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts...”; Ezek 36:27: “I will set my spirit within your inward parts and cause you to walk in my statutes⁴¹ and observe and perform my ordinances...”). Those subject to this transformation would become, in a manner analogous to Philo’s Moses, νόμοι ἑμψυχοί, perfect embodiments of the precepts of the

³⁹ See Peter Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (CRINT 3.1; Assen: Van Gorcum and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

⁴⁰ Although Paul’s rhetoric and theological formulations were subject to significant transformation between First and Second Corinthians, I see no reason to suppose that the practices that he enjoined among the Corinthians underwent a similar change.

⁴¹ וְעָשִׂיתִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכוּ בְּחֻקֵי. Note the causative verbal form. NRSV translates: “I will... make you follow my statutes...”

Paul offers some information on these missionaries: they were Hebrews, Israelites, and Abraham's offspring (11:22), they referred to themselves as "apostles of Christ" (11:13), "ministers of Christ" (11:23), and "ministers of righteousness" (11:15). They preached a message in which Jesus, "spirit," and "gospel" were construed somewhat differently than they were by Paul (11:4). It is the same group of missionaries against whom Paul polemicizes in 2:14–7:4, albeit at a different stage of the dispute.

The "main opposition" in 3:7–18 is not between two religions, but between two *ministries*, one associated with death, condemnation, the stone tablets of the law, the fading glory on the face of Moses (3:7–8, 9), and perceptions "hardened" by Satan (3:14–15; cf. 4:4), and the other with spirit, righteousness, superabundant glory (3:8–10), spiritually enhanced perception (3:16), freedom (3:17), and transformation into the glorious image of Christ (3:18). That the latter of these two ministries refers to Paul's own is guaranteed by his notice in 3:6 that God "made him fit" to be a minister of the new covenant associated with spirit, and his statement in 4:4, "since we have this ministry," which serves to link Paul's own ministry with that described in positive terms in vv. 7–18. The opposing ministry does not refer to Judaism, *per se*, nor is it limited in referring solely to the past ministry of Moses. As 3:14 makes clear, Paul's argument lies not primarily with the Moses of the past, but with the way in which Moses was read and understood ("for until today the same veil remains over the reading of the ancient covenant..."). Moses was not viewed simply as a personality of past history, but also as a metonym for the presently read Torah (3:15: "until today, whenever Moses is read..."). The ministry that Paul opposes was inaugurated by Moses, but it remains "until today."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ So also Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 151–168; Georgi, *Opponents of Paul*, 246–48; Dunn, *New Perspective*, 438–39.

⁴⁶ There is nothing in the text that would require that the "ministry of death" be seen solely as a past phenomenon, as a dispensationalist reading might suggest (RSV consistently translates διακονία as "dispensation" in 3:7–9). The ministry certainly "came to be" (ἐγενήθη; ingressive aorist) in the past, but it is never said to have ceased. Even if the "ministry of death" is considered to be subsumed under the category of τὸ καταργούμενον, "that which was (or, "is") being abolished" (it should be pointed out that the exact referent of this phrase is unclear) in 3:11 and 3:13, Paul nowhere unequivocally indicates that this process of abolition came to its conclusion in the past. Certainly, due to Moses' veil, the sons of Israel were prevented from gazing at the τέλος

Vocabulary and themes that are common to 2 Cor 3 and 2 Cor 10–13 suggest that the ministry that Paul opposes in the former section is to be identified with which he opposes in the latter. Paul’s references to the “ministry” that he indicates is being eclipsed by his own (3:7, 9) use the same term (δῆλον) that he indicates is used in self-designations by his opponents in 11:15, 23. The issue of self-commendation raised in 3:1 in connection with Paul’s failure to produce letters of recommendation as his rivals were apparently able to do is also raised in 10:12, 18; 12:11 in connection with Paul’s opponents. The motif of hardened perception (ἐπωρώθη τὰ νοήματα αὐτῶν) that Paul uses to characterize those who “today” read the “ancient covenant” (3:14) uses vocabulary similar to the ruinous effects on the perceptions of the Corinthians that Paul imputes to his rivals (φοβούμεαι δὲ μή πως... φθαρῆ τὰ νοήματα ὑμῶν...), as he analogizes their teaching to the serpent’s deception of Adam and Even in Eden (11:2–4).

A weaker link, although still worth pointing out, is to be seen in the fact that Paul’s rivals boast that they are Ἰσραηλίται in 11:22, and Paul polemicizes against the manner in which οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ understand the law (i.e., it is understood as binding; 3:13). Paul indicates that his rivals advocated practices that he viewed as a form of enslavement (11:20), and jibes that “their end will be in accordance with their deeds” (τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν; 11:15). If I am correct that these missionaries preached a version of the covenant renewal theologoumenon, these “deeds” would undoubtedly refer to actions undertaken in fulfillment of stipulations of the Torah, which Paul characterizes as a form of enslavement in Gal 2:4. These references form a nice counterpoint to Paul’s statement that his own ministry—one associated with the spirit—is characterized not by enslavement, but freedom with respect to the law (3:17).

The view that 2 Cor 3:6–17 was directed against rival missionaries in Corinth has an advantage over other proposals (i.e., that Paul opposed Jews, per se, or Moses, per se) in that it fits easily into its literary context. It fits, that is, both within the immediate context, in that it is bracketed by references to the ministries of Paul and his opponents in 3:1–3

(“end”) of that which was being abolished (3:13). But in light of the fact that in 3:14 Paul states, “until today the same veil remains over the reading of Moses,” and the same process of abolition is underway (καταργεῖται; present tense), any attempt to limit the “ministry of death” to past history or to indicate that it had *already* come to an end would seem dubious at best.

and 4:1–4, and into the broader context of 2:14–7:4, in which Paul seeks reconciliation with his Corinthian converts after the rupture in their relationship occasioned by the arrival of the missionary “ministers of righteousness.”

Law versus gospel? It is evident on the basis of the foregoing analysis that the contrast in 2 Cor 3 is not one between law and gospel, as exegesis in the tradition of Luther has asserted. Rather it is between two variant forms of the gospel (cf. 11:4) that entailed two different construals of the role of the law (cf. 3:17). If, as I have argued, Paul’s rivals preached a version of the covenant renewal theologoumenon, then Paul’s attempt to deny any connection between them and the life-giving spirit (cf. 3:6, 8, 17–18) and to identify them instead with the letter of the law that kills (3:6, 7, 9) was both inaccurate and unfair. Paul himself indicates in 11:4 that their preaching *did* include significant reference to the spirit. According to the tenets of the covenant renewal theologoumenon, it was this spirit that facilitated life and forestalled or circumvented death by enabling individuals to fulfill the stipulations of the covenant between God and humans, stipulations written down in the Torah. The dispute that Paul addresses in 3:7–18 was an intra-Christian one, and cannot without violence to its context be transposed into a debate between Christianity and Judaism or read as a supersession of law by gospel.

Indeed, the simple oppositions that scholarship has traditionally drawn with respect to 2 Cor 3 are inadequate to capture the nuance and drama of the situation that Paul addressed in Corinth, a situation in which two groups, Paul and the missionary “ministers of righteousness,” both of whom claimed faithfully to represent scriptural traditions and to mediate God’s life-giving spirit, deployed the discursive strategies at their disposal in attempts to convince the members of the Corinthian house-churches to accept the practical and ideological commitments which their respective ministries advocated. Each group construed its own practices and ideology as the appropriate means whereby the effects of humanity’s rejection of the stipulations of the covenant between God and Israel could be redressed, claiming as each did to be mediators of the new covenant established between God and the *kosmos*.