

# THE MESSIAH & THE APOSTLE

## COVENANTAL NOMISM

*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, E.P. Sanders

### Definition of Covenantal Nomism

“Briefly put, covenantal nomism is the view that one’s place in God’s plan established on the basis of the covenant, and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commands, while providing means of atonement for transgression.” (p. 75)

“God’s saving grace evokes man’s answering obedience.” M. D. Hooker

### Pattern or Structure of Covenantal Nomism

(based on survey of Jewish literature 200 BCE -- 200 CE)

1. God has chosen Israel, and
2. Given Israel the Torah,  
which implies both:
3. God’s promise to maintain the election, and
4. The requirement of Israel to obey.
5. God rewards obedience and punishes transgression.
6. The Torah 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.

“An important interpretation of the first and last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God’s mercy rather than human achievement.” (p. 422)

Prior to 1977, NT Scholars tended to read Paul, the apostle of grace, against a backdrop of legalistic Judaism – Jews trying to earn their way into heaven by obeying the Law.

“Legalism”: the position that one can gain God’s favor apart from God’s grace and mercy through the accomplishment of what the Law requires.

### **Ferdinand Weber’s 1880 work on Judaism standard Protestant thinking**

- Views dominated NT scholarship thru 20<sup>th</sup> century
- Wm Bouset; Strack & Billerbeck; Emil Schurer;
- Bouset’s famous pupil, Rudolph Bultmann

### **Weber’s View of Judaism**

- An individual Jew’s destiny was determined b the weighing of his fulfillment of the Law over against transgressions of it, as if on a scale
- The saved do more good than bad; otherwise perish
- Everything depends on personal accomplishment or transgression of what God commanded;
- This led either to self-righteousness
- Or to uncertainty before a distant and unapproachable God/Judge

### **Sanders mapped out picture of Judaism far more grace oriented**

- The Mosaic laws placed within gracious framework of God’s election and covenant with the nation of Israel
- “All Israelites have a share in the world to come” (Sanhedrin 10.1) except those who deliberately forsake their relationship with God
- Jews did not agonize over their salvation
- Obedience to Law was a response to God’s election
- Atonement was provided for repentant, to encourage and console
- Observance of the Law’s requirements, “Nomism,” always embedded in the framework of God’s gracious election and covenant, along with the merciful provision of sacrifice and atonement for failure