

Taking the Measure of an Earthquake: Comments on the 40th-Anniversary Edition of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*

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It was an honor to be part of the distinguished panel that gathered in Boston on November 17, 2017, to offer critical appreciation of the significance of E. P. Sanders's magisterial *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* on the fortieth anniversary of its publication, and to mark the publication of a new edition of the work, which included a valuable new foreword by Mark Chancey.²

Although, like many biblical scholars, I have known E. P. Sanders as an author for decades, only in the last two years have I had the pleasure of making his acquaintance, and that of his wife, Dr. Becky Gray, and electronically, that of Professor Chancey. As an academic editor at Fortress Press, it was my charge to make sure there was enough “value added” to encourage people who already owned *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* to pick up a new edition. Professor Sanders immediately suggested that Professor Chancey offer a substantial new foreword to the book. As a scholar and a sometimes teacher, I am delighted that the foreword offers a superb description of the importance of the book and a critical review of the forty-year history of its reception. “Value added,” indeed!

What follows are admittedly impressionistic observations about an academic career in the “Sanders era.” (Though it is common enough practice, it

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² I thank the organizers, Professors Paula Fredriksen and Emma Wasserman, for their invitation, and Professors Ed Sanders and Mark Chancey for the occasion.

has always seemed peculiar to speak of a “*post-Sanders*” era, especially — as was the occasion in Boston — when *he’s in the room.*)

Perhaps no one has stated the impact of this book better than Daniel Marguerat, who wrote in 2003 that the landscape of Pauline studies today resembles a city “devastated by an earthquake,” in the aftermath of which “people scurry about in every direction, some assessing the damage, others verifying what still stands. Everyone takes the measure of the changes to come, but no one dares to build again, out of fear of a new shock.”³

Well, that’s not exactly right.

My older son is a seismologist, and he points out that in many parts of the world, after a population has been displaced by a catastrophic earthquake, the humanitarian imperative is to provide adequate housing, quickly. Having strong building safety codes in place only means that fewer people will be able to afford expensive new construction. Having corporate developers in the picture means that there may be plenty of new construction for sale, standards be damned. So, it’s usually *not* the case that “no one dares to build again,” unless there is a clear and coherent public commitment to the highest standards.

There may be a parable in there.

My seismologist son also complains about the sort of crowd-sourced data compiled on websites like “DidYouFeelIt.com,” where, invariably, there’s a small set of responses, even near the epicenter, in which people say, “I was washing my dog” or “playing a video game” or “just got home from the club — and didn’t feel a thing.”

Here, too, I find a parable. It’s amazing, even decades later, how much of Pauline scholarship proceeds as if nothing in particular happened in 1977.

I began my graduate studies just a few years after *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* appeared, at Princeton Seminary, where it seemed that every other dissertation in biblical studies was written on the letter to the Romans (including mine). My cohort studied the architecturally magnificent scholarly works of our professors, some of which had been under construction before the earthquake hit in 1977, and we noticed places where they were newly patched with fresh plaster (if I may overextend the metaphor); I mean, scattered footnotes indicating that Sanders was right or wrong about this or that detail. But no one,

³ D. Marguerat, “Introduction,” in A. Dettwiler, J.-D. Kaestli, and D. Marguerat, eds., *Paul, une théologie en construction* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2003), p. 9; my translation.

it seemed, had stopped construction to inspect their foundations thoroughly; to relocate; or to tear down and re-evaluate and redesign before building again.⁴

Reading and writing as graduate students in those early years, we had a vague sense that our “new construction” would be held to different standards. We had to be particularly alert as we picked our way through the secondary literature. Only a few earlier scholars had noticed the problems that Sanders had put front and center.⁵ Now, suddenly, there was intense effort all around us to shore up aspects of Protestant interpretation, in what was soon branded the “new perspective” on Paul. In his foreword to this anniversary edition, Mark Chancey offers acute and important distinctions between the views of James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, and other champions of the “new perspective” on one hand and Sanders himself on the other, but in the early 1980s, there were precious few voices making such clear discriminations.

In *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (1985), John G. Gager published with permission a personal message from Lloyd Gaston in which Gaston wrote,

⁴ In J. Christiaan Beker's magisterial work, to take just one (particularly erudite) example, there are nine citations of Sanders, several of them apparently added after typesetting (so included as footnotes, not endnotes that would have required renumbering: *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). There is a single extended discussion (pp. 235–43) where Sanders is mentioned several times, in passing, as one among a host of scholars dismissed for failing to grasp Paul's *Christian* understanding of Judaism. It is only at p. 340—in another late-added footnote—that we read that “one of the great merits” of Sanders's work is that “he destroyed the anti-Jewish bias in scholarship once and for all.” That is remarkable news, surely, to many of us working in the twenty-first century. My more immediate point is that this “great merit” did not apparently lead Beker—himself keenly sensitive to the importance of representing early Judaism accurately—to reconsider either his argument or the organization of his book.

⁵ Sanders himself points to the work of G. F. Moore (*Judaism in the first Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927]), among others, as an important predecessor. Another scholar alert to the rampant prejudicial slant to Protestant Paul scholarship was William S. Campbell, who has written that “the literature on Romans was very different” in the 1970s, when he began his research—far narrower, and constrained by a presumed theological agenda—than in the 1990s (*Paul's Gospel in an Intercultural Context* [Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991], iii.) In the 1980s, we could at least rely on Campbell—and on Sanders.

I suddenly find that I have great difficulty in reading the standard literature on Paul: Why do other interpreters miss the obvious while spending much time on matters not in the text at all? I find that I cannot even trust such “objective” works as lexica on some points. It’s almost paralyzing when it comes to writing, for so little can be assumed and all must be discussed.⁶

I copied that quote onto an index card that I carried with me on every trip to Speer Library, to work on my own dissertation. But of course, the lesson is right there on every page of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*: every primary source must be examined, and examined again, on its own terms and in its own context. The “assured results” of scholarship need always to be measured against the evidence; “received wisdom” may be anything but wise. And given the history of Christian anti-semitism and supersessionism, the more confident the generalization, the more heartwarming the doxological gloss, the greater the need to test for implicit biases, to read with suspicion. Although I never studied with Professor Sanders, this book (and others of his books that would follow) taught me — as they taught many in my generation — what scholarship would require of us. If the landscape is different today, it is in no small part a measure of the importance of Sanders’s work.

The “New Perspective,” especially identified with the work of Dunn and Wright, remains a powerful and alluring paradigm for many, in part because it promises to restore something that Sanders seemed to remove from the Christian theological arsenal: a theologically coherent, rhetorically compelling apostle. But others have raised protests that (in Thomas Deidun’s words) the New Perspective allows “practically all the old Lutheran demons” of Jewish caricature “to return unabashed to the Judaism which Sanders had by all accounts meticulously swept and put in order,” though now “exclusivism” and “ethnocentrism” replaced works-righteousness as the fatal flaw at the heart of Judaism — a flaw that Paul alone could allegedly diagnose.⁷

⁶ John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 198.

⁷ Thomas Deidun, “James Dunn and John Ziesler on Romans in New Perspective,” *Heythrop Journal* 33 (1992), 79–84; see also Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 88–95; Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 209–24.

For a brief while, the work of René Girard held out the promise of revealing Paul as the master diagnostician of lethal mimetic desire — again, nestled at the heart of Judaism.⁸ In more recent years, the enthusiasm of Neo-Marxists Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek for the apostle Paul has offered Pauline scholars the prospect of sudden relevance, if they will look beyond the way these authors trade in theologically prejudicial caricatures of Judaism.⁹ To the question at the heart of Sanders’s simple formula — for Paul, what was wrong with Judaism? — there are still crowds of theologically minded Christian scholars who reject his succinct answer, “it was not Christianity,” and stand ready to explain just what really *was* wrong with Judaism that Paul alone so brilliantly exposed. (It seems it’s easy enough to deny an earthquake if *your* people weren’t involved in it.)

There are other scholars, however, who have presented new possibilities for interpreting Paul that both respect and presume the destruction caused in 1977. I wish to name four different approaches — we might say, four architectural schools — that didn’t exist before the publication of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, and that quite possibly would not have emerged, at least as quickly or coherently, without the stimulus Sanders’s book offered.

First is an approach that simply follows the consequences of Sanders’s argument. Here the chief example is Heikki Räisänen, for whom the apostle remains theologically “incoherent.” What Sanders could *understand* as the rhetoric of a convert, Räisänen rejects as rhetorical question-begging: only another convert would find Paul’s twisted and caricatured depiction of Judaism convincing. We should get along without him.¹⁰

⁸ Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul’s Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); the book was criticized by several scholars for its almost-covert anti-Judaism at the 1992 Colloquium on Violence and Religion and, memorably, by Daniel Boyarin at the 1993 Annual Meeting of the SBL. I offered a critique in “Paul and the Lethality of the Law,” *Foundations and Facets Forum* 9:3–4 (1993), 237–56.

⁹ Alain Badiou, *St. Paul the Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). The literature on these and other contemporary philosophers expands monthly; I commented on Badiou’s reliance on old (one wishes one could say, *obsolete*) stereotypes of Judaism in “Ideological Closure in the Christ Event,” in *Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers*, ed. Douglas Haring (Engene: Cascade, 2010), 135–54.

¹⁰ Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983). Räisänen’s resolute effort to interpret the New Testament historically, independently of theological bias, was well honored in the volume *Moving beyond New Testament Theology? Essays in*

A second “school” is represented by John G. Gager and Lloyd Gaston. Both scholars follow Sanders’s lead and argue that Paul was not diagnosing an actual defect in Judaism. Both foreground as a methodological principle that everything Paul writes to Gentile churches should be read as addressing Gentile-Christian theology and practice, often as a theological corrective, and that nothing Paul writes should be read as a criticism of Jews or Judaism. That’s an important methodological divergence from Sanders’s work; it constitutes a decision point for interpreters. Gager and Gaston went on to propose that Paul imagined two “tracks” of salvation: salvation through the covenant in Torah for Jews, salvation through Christ for non-Jews; and most scholars have found this “two-track” model unconvincing.¹¹

A third approach is well represented by some of the scholars on the panel or present in the room in Boston; I think of Professor Fredriksen as first laying out its basic lines, and Mark D. Nanos as perhaps its most indefatigable apostle. It has more recently been labeled the “Paul within Judaism” approach. Advocates also respect and assume Sanders’s demonstration that Paul was not analyzing a genuine defect in Judaism, but they demur from the conclusion that Paul “thought backward, from solution to plight.” On this view, Paul continues to think — coherently — as a Pharisaic and apocalyptically minded Jew, who believes he is living in the day, long prophesied, when the nations would turn in obedience to the Messiah; indeed, Paul thinks he is the instrument of that turning. All his fulminations about the Torah are aimed at preventing non-Jews from blurring the lines by adopting marks of Jewish identity. For these scholars, as for Gaston and Gager, the “fault” Paul exposes lies not in Judaism, but in the temptation to Judaize in the nascent Gentile church. Instead of “two tracks,” however, we might imagine that the “Paul within Judaism” crowd envision one track, but two different cars on the train, one for Israel, another for the nations, and Paul as the conductor trying to keep everyone in their separate compartments until everyone reaches their destination.¹²

Conversation with Heikki Räisänen, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

¹¹ Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*; Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987).

¹² Perhaps the most energetic advocate of this approach has been Mark D. Nanos, in *The Mystery of Romans* and subsequent publications, most recently the collection he edited with Magnus Zetterholm, *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). The four volumes of *Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos* are being published now by Wipf & Stock: *Reading Paul within Judaism*

So far, so good. I would identify a fourth school of interpretation that emerges from the aftermath of Professor Sanders's work: what has come to be called "empire criticism" or, more colloquially, the "Paul-against-empire" crowd. I realize this claim sounds counter-intuitive: Professor Sanders is on record in finding precious little justification for any political argument in Paul's letters. The apostle himself was a "social conservative"; his un-nuanced exhortation to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1–7) is "enthusiastic, idealistic, or perhaps naïve," but hardly troubled by shadows of unjust tyranny. Paul expected an imminent end, and "while Christians awaited the return of the Lord, they should not attempt to change the status quo by (for example) campaigning for the freedom of slaves and opposing unjust laws and rulers."¹³

That has proved a sturdy enough reading in modern interpretation, and it's not my purpose here to quarrel with it.¹⁴ My point is that some people who spend their time detecting implicit or even "hidden" political agendas in Paul's rhetoric have *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* to thank, in part, for the inspiration. At least, I do.

I'm aware that's not how the guild views empire criticism. No less omniscient a scholar than N. T. Wright has explained that political interpretation of Paul originated in "below-the-tracks university" life in Boston, just as other specialized perspectives have a readily identifiable social location

and *Reading Corinthians and Philippians within Judaism* (2017); *Reading Romans within Judaism* and *Reading Galatians and Corinthians within Judaism* (forthcoming). The general approach I am describing was pioneered by Paula Fredriksen, however, in *From Jesus to Christ: New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), a work that makes transparent the significance of Sanders's argument. Also relevant here are Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2009), Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); and Gabriele Boccaccini and Carlos A. Segovia, eds., *Paul the Jew: Rereading the Apostle as a Figure of Second Temple Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).

¹³ E. P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 692–96.

¹⁴ On recent developments in "Paul vs. empire" scholarship, see Neil Elliott, "Paul and Empire 1: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians," and James R. Harrison, "Paul and Empire 2: Negotiating the Seduction of Imperial 'Peace and Security' in Galatians, Thessalonians, and Philippians," in *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Adam Winn (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 143–64 and 165–84, respectively.

that produced them.¹⁵ Others have attributed empire-critical readings to the frustration of left-leaning U.S. scholars who were agitated by President Bush's war in Iraq; these scholars are accused of reading their own political preoccupation into Paul's letters and thus drowning out the apostle's voice with their own.¹⁶

Speaking only for myself, I'm happy to own my leftist inclinations. I don't know why they should be limited to opposition to George W. Bush in particular; in between *two* wars in Iraq, launched by *two* Presidents Bush, a Democratic administration conducted an eight-year-long sanctions program that killed half a million Iraqi children, according to United Nations estimates, and from which two U.N. directors resigned, calling its effects "barbaric." I don't know why anyone should be content with those facts. I wonder whether people who attribute politically interested exegesis to opposition to such policies would assume the converse proposition, that "normal," that is, ostensibly apolitical, theological interpretation implied the practitioner's satisfaction with, or indifference toward, such policies. Would I read Paul differently if I stopped worrying and learned to love the bomb, the drone strike, or waterboarding?

That rhetorical question aside: I didn't come to the search for implicit anti-imperial themes in Paul's letters because I was stewing over Republican presidents. Rather, I read *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, close to forty years ago. I quickly came to realize that most of the other books on the library shelves had Paul wrong, at least in significant part. These elaborate treatments of Paul's

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 16–18; he presumably has the work of Richard A. Horsley, retired from the University of Massachusetts in Boston, in mind. Wright doesn't explain how his own ecclesiastical or civil location, for example, occupying a seat in the British House of Lords, might have shaped his perception of the apostle (though in another place he told an interviewer that his episcopacy gave him the distinct advantage over his Peers of knowing just what "ordinary members of the people" thought: "we're coming hot from the coalface, as it were, to say 'This is what's actually going on'" [Oct. 25, 2010, interview with the online resource *Faith and Leadership*, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/nt-wright-working-building>]). To the contrary, he declares that he simply speaks from "[his] own acquaintance with Paul," as do "the vast majority of Christians in the world today" (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 18).

¹⁶ Denny Burk, "Is Paul's Gospel Counterimperial? Evaluating the Prospects of the 'Fresh Perspective' for Evangelical Theology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51/2 (2008), 309–37; Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

theological and rhetorical brilliance were all upended by Professor Sanders's elaborate, methodical demonstration that Paul *should not* have meant what he said, if he was trying to describe the inadequacies of Judaism. But what, I wondered, if Paul had been trying to do something else?

Here I might assign some of the "blame" for my own interpretive wanderings on my dissertation advisors, particularly Paul W. Meyer, who from the start directed me to immerse myself in the rapidly developing field of rhetorical criticism and the "New Rhetoric." I realized soon enough that everything the ancient rhetorical handbooks and contemporary rhetorical theorists alike had to say about rhetorical competency crashed into Professor Sanders's presentation of the apostle Paul as someone who "thought backward, from solution to plight."

It wasn't just that, following Sanders's view, what Christian scholars had learned to read as Paul's theological sophistication collapsed into the rationalizations of an enthusiastic convert. He also would have been rhetorically incompetent before any audience other than a self-satisfied group of converts who already shared all of his conclusions. That judgment is, of course, plausible. In recent history, we've seen bombastic, intellectually incoherent figures amass tremendous popularity and political power on the basis of their ability to incite the emotions of like-minded citizens, in the absence of any but the crudest form of rhetorical ability. It is perfectly plausible — I would argue, *probable* — that the apostle Paul's canonical legacy was shaped, after his death, by a Gentile-Christian church that heard in his letters just what they wanted to hear: congratulatory assurances of their place in God's good favor apart from the law (so much is the message of Ephesians, for example). But that possibility does not require that Paul *himself* meant no more than what the Gentile church took him to mean.

Of course, without direct access to Paul's own performance (or that of his representative) and the reaction of the audience, as well as a "thick" understanding of the original rhetorical situation surrounding the composition, sending, and reception of a particular letter, any historically valid judgment of Paul's rhetorical competence is impossible. "Rhetorical criticism" of the New Testament inevitably proceeds on the premise — itself unprovable — of rhetorical competence on the part of its various authors, and Sanders has done us the great service of pointing out the possibility that just that premise may, in some cases, be false.

But before accepting that conclusion, it has seemed to me from the beginning of my scholarly career, we should ask, what if Paul was up to something else than explaining Christianity's superiority to Judaism? What if

talk about “God’s justice” wasn’t primarily a category of religious inclusion, of “getting in” (as Sanders seemed to agree with the established Protestant reading), but instead engaged what other voices around Paul meant when they used the language of justice, faithfulness to divine purposes, or the “obedience of the nations”?¹⁷

I found a pointer to an answer in Professor Fredriksen’s *From Jesus to Christ*. She patiently walked the reader through Sanders’s demolition of Protestant interpretation, with its devoutly intoned caricatures of Judaism, but she went further, to ask what stood behind Paul’s supposed conversion to the perspective of the Gentile church (something that in Sanders’s work seemed to me to remain a black box). She found a ready explanation in Jewish restoration eschatology, which shaped Paul’s insistence that the righteous among the nations remain righteous among *the nations*.¹⁸ (I consider this a cornerstone of the “Paul within Judaism” paradigm.) She also argued, convincingly, that Paul’s former harassment of the churches had been motivated, not by some halakhic objection to Messianic belief, or hostility to an incipient abandonment of Torah observance among the earliest believers in Jesus, but by Paul’s fierce, thoroughly Jewish concern to safeguard Jewish communities in the midst of larger and potentially hostile Gentile populations. “The enthusiastic proclamation of a messiah executed very recently as a political insurrectionist — a *crucified* messiah — combined with a vision of the approaching End *preached also to Gentiles* — this was dangerous. If it got abroad, it could endanger the whole Jewish community.”¹⁹

Professor Fredriksen has elaborated on these early lines of interpretation in her important recent monograph *Paul the Pagans’ Apostle*. Here she gives greater depth and color to her earlier depiction of the fundamental threat the early proclamation of the risen Christ would have posed to Diaspora synagogues — and by extension, the alarm Paul’s own gospel would have evoked on the urban landscape of the Roman world. Fredriksen never speaks of the apostle acting as a “political” agitator, rebuking an Emperor or criticizing an imperial policy, as “empire-critical” interpreters are often thought

¹⁷ These paragraphs summarize my approach in *The Rhetoric of Romans: Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul’s Dialogue with Judaism* (JSNTSup 45; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

¹⁸ Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (Yale University Press, 1988), esp. 165–70.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

(usually unfairly) to do. Rather, the Pauline mission required that residents of a Roman city “make an exclusive commitment to the god of Israel and, thus, to renounce their own gods,” and this constituted a fundamental break of the divine-human bond that everyone understood was the basis of civilization.²⁰ I see no reason to avoid describing the threat so conceived as “political,” since the perceived order of the *polis* was at stake. Others might insist the issue it was “religious” or “theological” — but to polarize these categories as opposites is fatally to miss Professor Fredriksen’s point.

I don’t mean to lay on either Professor Fredriksen or Professor Sanders the responsibility for the directions in which I (or any of the empire-critical cohort) has wandered. It is a matter of fact that the empire-critical approach appeared after their works. I submit that the thoroughgoing search for a political dimension to Paul’s theology was made possible, first, by Sanders sweeping away the standard theological expositions of his thought, and then, by Fredriksen drawing a compelling, if not inevitable, historical conclusion and insisting that theologians take its implications with utmost seriousness.²¹

Suffice it to say that the earthquake of 1977 has been followed by decades of intense new construction, according to a wide variety of standards, tastes, and interests. To adapt a Pauline theme, time will tell what endures (1 Cor. 3:10–15).

²⁰ Paula Fredriksen, *Paul the Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 167–74.

²¹ I refer to the last two paragraphs of *From Jesus to Christ*, which should be recited regularly by Christian seminarians, pastors, and professors.