

***Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 20th Century Context**

Adele Reinhartz

University of Ottawa | adele.reinhartz@uOttawa.ca

The fortieth anniversary of the publication of E. P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* provides a welcome opportunity to assess the impact of this groundbreaking book not only for Pauline studies, but for New Testament studies more generally.

In the fall of 1975, Sanders had just sent off the manuscript of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, and I had just begun my graduate program in early Judaism at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Then, as now, the McMaster graduate program in biblical studies required those studying early Judaism to do coursework and comprehensives in New Testament, and vice versa. And so it happened that throughout the fall of 1975 my classmates and I sat around a small seminar table in University Hall, reading and translating Galatians, and absorbing the perspective that Sanders had developed in his as-yet-unpublished book.

From that initial encounter with Paul — and from Sanders' approach to Paul — I took away three main points that have remained with me. The first is that Paul was powerfully motivated by his belief that Christ was the solution, but nowhere does he say that Judaism is the problem. The second is that while Paul believed deeply that Gentiles could come into the covenant people as Gentiles, that is, without becoming circumcised, nowhere does he repudiate his own Jewish identity. Third, and most important, as Sanders's students, was the idea that the offensive description of Judaism as an outdated, barren, legalistic religion of works-righteousness was a function of centuries of primarily Lutheran-influenced Protestant theology and exegesis that needed to be discarded pronto.

In *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Sanders aimed to engage in a holistic comparison between Pauline and the early Jewish "patterns of religion." To prepare for the project, he spent years studying Hebrew and the full range of available sources from 200 BCE to 200 CE. In itself this was novel; few New

Testament scholars at the time put the time and effort into studying early Jewish literary sources aside from the works of Josephus and, to some extent, Philo. Even fewer took the time to learn Hebrew and Aramaic in order to access Tannaitic sources in the original languages.

Sanders concluded that Paul's pattern of religion differed from that of early Judaism. Whereas early Jewish sources displayed a pattern he called "covenantal nomism," focused on getting into the covenant and staying in, Paul's "pattern of religion" focused on participation and transfer. As Sanders put it, "Righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the group of the elect; in Paul it is a transfer term."¹ Sanders viewed Paul's perspective as profoundly apocalyptic, not because he counted down the days until the end times, but because his thinking was imbued with a belief in Christ's imminent return to transform the world order. This is not to say that apocalypticism was absent from other second Temple sources. Far from it. These sources too displayed a strong interest in how one entered the covenant community and stayed within it. Paul, on the other hand, did not emphasize getting and staying in, but rather preparing for the second coming and the new creation.

Nevertheless, Sanders did not posit an absolute dichotomy between Paul and his Jewish context. Apart from these differences in their patterns of religion, Paul had much in common with other Jewish writers of the time. One shared idea is their broader worldviews, especially the idea that "salvation is by grace but judgment is according to works; works are the condition of remaining 'in', but they do not earn salvation." A second is that "God saves by grace but within the framework established by grace he rewards good deeds and punishes transgression." Third, all these Second Temple Jews, Paul included, distinguished between the commandments that govern human relationships and the ones that govern one's relationship with God.²

Sanders challenged the view that was so prevalent among New Testament scholars: that Paul was critical of Judaism as a religion based on a condition — complete and perfect observance of the law — that no human being could fulfill. Sanders understood what most Jews but few Pauline scholars of his day know: that Jewish covenantal thought takes full account of human fallibility by providing regular opportunities for repentance, atonement, and divine

¹ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 544.

² Sanders, 543.

forgiveness. As a Jew himself, Paul surely knew this; as an apostle to the Gentiles, he was not motivated by a lack within Judaism but by a mission to bring Gentiles into right relationship with God through participation in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Paul and Palestinian Judaism was instrumental in launching the so-called New Perspective on Paul, which was also a new and refreshing perspective on ancient Judaism, or, at least, on Paul's views about Judaism. Since the publication of this book, the New Perspective has been accepted, extended, challenged, defended, reborn, and reframed, but even its fiercest critics owe much to Sanders's work.³

The impact of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, however, extends beyond the field of Pauline literature, and beyond the study of the New Testament, to the ways in which we teach and write about early Judaism, early Christianity, and the relationships between them. First, it is now widely accepted that to engage in historical study of the New Testament requires also a responsible mastery of the Jewish sources, preferably in their original languages. It is not acceptable to rely on compendia such as Strack-Billerbeck, which, in addition to numerous errors, also incorporated the anti-Jewish perspective so pervasive in early twentieth-century German Protestant scholarship.⁴ The second, related point, is that one must reject the view of Judaism as an antiquated and outmoded, spiritually barren religion superseded by Christianity. Judaism must be treated alongside Christianity, not as mere background or as a negative foil, but as a worthwhile and viable religion in its own right.

At the time of my own graduate studies in the mid-seventies to early eighties, McMaster was one of the few religious studies departments in North America in which second temple and early rabbinic sources were studied not as "background" to the New Testament or as part of "Christian origins" but as worthy subjects in and of themselves. I cannot document this but I believe firmly

³ This point has been made in numerous studies of Paul since the publication of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. For one example, see David Starling, *Not My People: Gentiles as Exiles in Pauline Hermeneutics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 3.

⁴ Hermann Leberecht Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament Aus Talmud Und Midrasch* (München: Beck, 1922). It is surprising to find this compendium still used, even after Sanders' trenchant critique and the changing sensibilities in the field. See, for one example of many, Dale C. Allison, *Testament of Abraham* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), passim. For the place of this book in the history of New Testament criticism, see William Baird, *History of New Testament Research: From C.H. Dodd to Hans Dieter Betz* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Press, 2013), 417–27.

that this graduate program structure, which Sanders shaped, helped to shape the way that New Testament and early Judaism are being taught today in many institutions. The best programs in the field include the study of Jewish sources and the relevant languages in their requirements for doctoral studies in early Christianity. To a lesser degree, the same is true of programs in early Judaism, though one might argue that New Testament is less essential for Jewish studies than Jewish studies is for New Testament.

And it goes without saying that, as my doctoral supervisor, Sanders has had a huge influence on my own career. I am convinced that had I not studied with Sanders, I would not have gone into New Testament studies myself. I might not even have stayed in academia but instead gone off to law school after completing my MA, as I had originally planned to do. Ed Sanders is a dynamic teacher, and studying Galatians and then First Corinthians with him not only sparked my interest in New Testament, but also helped me to see that there was room for a Jewish New Testament scholar with a strong foundation in Jewish Studies.

A year or so into my doctoral program, I decided to switch my focus from early Judaism to early Christianity. Sanders advised me against it. "You'll never get a job," he said. He was concerned that Jewish studies programs would not hire me because I had studied Christianity, and New Testament positions would be closed to me because I was Jewish. As a rather stubborn person I did not take his well-intentioned advice. By the time I was on the job market in the early 1980s, the field had changed, due, at least in some measure I am convinced, to the impact of Sanders's work on the field as a whole.

It has recently occurred to me, however, that the salutary move to put Judaism and Christianity on an equal footing has also distorted our discourse on certain historical issues. Sanders's work is not at fault here, but the way in which his insistence on the viability of early Judaism as a religious system alongside early Christianity has been used to address particular questions.

Over the last forty years, the ways in which we think about early Christianity has changed. In particular, we have come to recognize that in the formative years of the Jesus movement, the years to which Paul's letters and most if not all of the other New Testament books attest, there is not yet an entity that should properly be called Christianity. Although the term "Christian" appears in the Acts, a distinct entity called Christianity did not. Sanders's work acknowledged the Jewishness of Paul and other New Testament writers, and did not set Christianity off over against Judaism, but, not surprisingly, he continued to use those terms, which were the idiom of his time. Furthermore, even as he acknowledged the important similarities between Paul and Palestinian Judaism,

he did not fully situate Paul's letters within second temple Judaism. By engaging in a comparative method that framed its results in terms of the similarities and differences between Pauline thought and second temple Jewish thought, Sanders was still working at least implicitly with the idea that, although Paul was Jewish, his letters were not part of the framework of second temple Jewish literature *per se*.

In this regard, the conversation about Paul has begun to shift, as evidenced by the "Paul within Judaism" perspective.⁵ The field of New Testament studies as a whole has also espoused the message about the importance of studying Judaism in its own right, but nevertheless continues to work at least implicitly with the dichotomy between Judaism and Christianity.

One important issue that illustrates this point is the so-called "parting of the ways." The parting of the ways is the metaphor that is currently the most widespread way of referring succinctly to the process whereby Christ-confessors began to take on a corporate identity separate from and over against Jews and Judaism, and thereby become "Christians" who identified with a set of beliefs, practices, and institutions that we call Christianity.⁶

The "parting of the ways" metaphor implies a mutuality to the process by which this new entity was forged, portrays both Jews and Christians as active agents in this process, and ascribes importance to it not only for Christians but also for Jews. This mutuality suits our open western society in which Jews and Christians engage freely with one another and with others; it also reinforces the post-holocaust repudiation of anti-Semitism, the reclamation of Jesus' Jewish identity, and the strong interest in second temple Judaism as such.

If we truly comprehend that the Jesus movement was situated squarely within the spectrum of first-century Jewish groupings, however, then the mutuality implied by the "parting of the ways" metaphor is open to question.

⁵ See, for example, Mark D. Nanos, *Reading Paul within Judaism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017); Paula Fredriksen, *Paul - The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁶ For just a few examples, see Adele Reinhartz, "A Fork in the Road or a Multi-Lane Highway? New Perspectives on the 'Parting of the Ways' between Judaism and Christianity," in *Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity, and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2006), 280-95; James D. G. Dunn, *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135: The Second Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism (Durham, September 1989)* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992); Judith Lieu, "'The Parting of the Ways': Theological Construct or Historical Reality?," *JSNT* 56 (1994) 101-19.

While roadways, and intimate partners, can part from each other, one might consider the possibility that Judaism and Christianity did not. One might suggest, for example, that a group whose hero and first members were Jews might have begun, over time, and perhaps through the accretion of gentile members, to differentiate themselves from Jews who did not share their beliefs. As the movement grew and developed in different directions, it had to disentangle itself from Jews, Jewish institutions, and Jewish practices in order to develop an independent identity.

This way of conceptualizing the “parting of the ways” does not deny the importance of Jews and Judaism for the development of Christianity. It does, however, challenge the idea that valuing non-Christ-confessing second temple Jewish sources on their own terms rather than as background to the New Testament requires Judaism to have been an active and interested party in the emergence of Christianity. The “parting of the ways” metaphor, in my view, has led us down a blind alley at least in part because of an uncritical and perhaps unconscious perpetuation of the view of early Judaism and early Christianity as separate and commensurable entities in the first century.

Paul and Palestinian Judaism was a landmark in the study of Paul in relationship to Jews and Judaism, and a major departure from the anti-Jewish substratum of New Testament scholarship of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is not, however, and was never meant to be, the last word. We honour the contribution of this book, and of the work of Ed Sanders more generally, when we build on his insights, and continue to think through the categories and language that we use in our discourse about the past.