

Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Milestone in New Testament and Early Jewish Studies

In 1977, E.P. Sanders published a book that would change the way that New Testament scholarship approached both Judaism and, in consequence, the NT texts themselves.

Until that time, scholars, like churches, had construed Jesus, his early apostles, the movement that they inaugurated, and the texts that they eventually inspired against, not within, Second Temple Judaism. Sanders' magisterial study showed with painful clarity that the monolithic and hostile Judaism presupposed by this approach could not be defended by an historical understanding of the primary sources. His work revealed the degree to which Christian scholarship on Christian origins had, for centuries, constructed a putatively historical Jewish "other" to serve the apologetic purpose of framing post-Reformation Christian identities and theologies.

But if the comparative material — ancient Jewish texts from around the turn of the era — were seen anew, Sanders both urged and demonstrated, then our understanding of the New Testament and Christian origins is bound to change too. Our historical imagination is dependent on how ancient literary (and archaeological) artefacts are defined and positioned in relation to one another. Indeed, the validity of our reconstructions hinges upon the appropriateness and relevance of the comparanda we choose after we have selected our object of study. It is the light from the side that determines the way we perceive the object in front of us.

In *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion (PPJ)*,¹ Sanders built on previous research that had never really made it into mainstream New Testament studies. He added significantly to this research through his rigorous, first-hand engagement with the vast and diverse source material. Sanders' formidable erudition and incisive insights really moved mountains. He retrieved Second Temple Judaism as the meaningful context, in positive ways, of Paul's life and work.

One of the key points communicated by *PPJ* is the need for NT scholars to deal directly with the Jewish primary sources rather than, as often had been

¹ SCM Press and Fortress Press. A forty-year anniversary edition was published by Fortress in 2017, with a foreword by Mark Chancey.

the case, simply quoting and so transmitting what the secondary scholarship claimed the texts said.² At McMaster University in Canada, where Sanders taught between 1966 and 1984, this principle of historical research — engagement with the primary sources — led to an institutional insistence on the student’s studying Early Judaism if s/he majored in the New Testament, and on studying the New Testament if s/he majored in Judaism. This “both/and” methodological principle has influenced many religious studies departments and theological schools in and beyond Canada since then. No revolution, true, is ever completely realized. Even today it is not uncommon that the study of Paul (or other NT texts) is approached with only limited or indirect knowledge of first-century Judaism. Forty years after its first appearance, *PPJ* still needs to be read, its clarion call answered.

A lot has happened in Pauline scholarship since 1977, precisely because many researchers have indeed done just that. Some have taken Sanders’ work further, building on the research trajectory he laid out; others have critiqued it; others have sought to undermine it. This intellectual ferment — in Pauline studies as in any other historical field — is all a sign of good health.

For many of those wanting to move Sanders’ reconstruction of Pauline thought forward, standing on his shoulders, the light shed on Paul by Jewish textual comparanda is no longer coming in from the side, projecting Pauline writings against a background accentuating the distinctiveness of “Judaism” and “Christianity,” respectively. Rather, placing Paul within the diversity of the first-century Jewish landscape, background merges with foreground, transforming comparanda into contextually shaped variants on a common theme — Judaism — and Paul into an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews (Phil 3:5). Indeed, from such a vantage point, the historical Paul materializes as someone who construed the revelation of the risen Christ as consonant with the ancient traditions of his own people.

At the 2017 Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, the Pauline Epistles Section organised a panel in celebration of the fortieth anniversary of *PPJ*’s publication. It featured scholars whose own research has been propelled by Sanders’ work. They discussed what *PPJ* has meant for them, and reflected on how they have built upon its legacy. At the same 2017 meeting, this Section also offered a session exploring the most recent inflections of this interpretive

² Here Strack-Billerbeck’s commentary on the New Testament, and its specific selection of parallel texts for illustration of NT texts, has had an enormous influence on scholarship.

trajectory within Pauline studies, focussing on two major monographs: John Gager's *Who Made Early Christianity? The Jewish Lives of the Apostle Paul* (Columbia University Press, 2015), and Paula Fredriksen's *Paul, the Pagan's Apostle* (Yale University Press, 2017).

JJMJS is very pleased that the members of these two panels agreed to rework their papers for publication, as we believe that their contributions serve admirably well the purpose of celebrating this milestone in the study of Paul and Judaism through reflection on its impact, past and present. We offer these papers in this Special Issue on Paul.

The first gathering of these papers reflect on *PPJ* and its impact on the study of Paul and Judaism, with contributions by Matthew Thiessen (currently a professor at McMaster University, where Sanders began his career), Neil Elliott (who, as editor at Fortress Press, published the special anniversary edition of *PPJ*), and two of Sanders' former students, Adele Reinhartz (University of Ottawa), and Gregory Tatum, O.P. (École Biblique).

Papers in the second gathering focus on Fredriksen's and Gager's contributions. Professors Margaret M. Mitchell (University of Chicago), Matthew Novenson (University of Edinburgh), and James Crossley (Centre for the Social-Scientific Study of the Bible, St Mary's University, London) offer their analyses and responses to these two works, followed by a response by Paula Fredriksen (Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

With this special issue, *JJMJS* wishes to honour E.P. Sanders, one of the foremost scholars of his generation, through furthering the quest to which he dedicated his luminous career. As the reader will discover on the pages that follow, this quest shows no signs of slowing down. On the contrary, it has entered a new level of intensity and strength.

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