

Did Paul Find Anything Wrong with Judaism?

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The first time I read *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*,¹ I had the intellectual equivalent of a Wesleyan warming of the heart: E. P. Sanders had successfully contextualized Paul in the first century rather than the sixteenth. But what I found in this book and its author was not only rigorous historical analysis, but intellectual honesty; a real sympathy and concern for ordinary people going about the business of living godly lives; a firm resolution to examine all the pertinent evidence; a strong emphasis on praxis and the practical; a passion to combat anti-Semitic caricatures of any kind; and a lively sense of humor. I could not think of another scholar with whom I so earnestly wanted to study. When I visited him before my last year in Rome, he could not have been more gracious, and has never ceased being so. As a small contribution to the discussion, let me offer this revisionist essay as a tribute to Ed in gratitude for his example, his scholarship, and his friendship.

Forty years ago, a youthful and rebellious Texan by the name of E. P. Sanders wrote a book that revolutionized the field of Pauline scholarship. His assault on the field was two-pronged. First, he challenged the easy anti-Semitism that caricatured Second-Temple Judaism without examining the evidence. Second, he updated Schweitzer's understanding of Paul's "mysticism" in terms of "participationist eschatology." Sadly, this two-pronged campaign is still necessary today. Many Pauline scholars pay only lip service to the advances made in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, falling back to demanding Paul find something wrong with Judaism or the Jews on the one hand, or falling back to anachronistic juridical reductionisms of Paul's thought on the other.

In *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Sanders famously wrote:

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

In short, this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity.²

Despite its kernel of truth, this quote has not weathered well. The terms “Judaism” and “Christianity” have both become problematic in many circles with reference to the first century C.E.³ The notion that Paul’s religion was something over and against the religion of other *Ioudaioi* has been rightly contested. And indeed, the very notion of “religion” has caused much ink to be spilled.

Nevertheless, the characterization of Paul’s soteriology as “participationist eschatology,” and the recognition that Paul argues backwards from solution to plight, represent real advances for the field of Pauline scholarship. In other words, instead of saying that Paul finds something wrong with the Torah or Judaism, it is more accurate to say “Paul holds that the Circumcision and the Foreskin outside the *ekklēsia*, because they lack the *pneuma* of God and his Messiah, are in the process of perishing.” Or again, “Paul holds that *goyim* and *Ioudaioi* who do not share the communal praxis of his particular eschatological sect are not in the process of being saved.” In other words, for Paul, the primary thing “wrong” with pre-eschatological humanity is precisely that it is pre-eschatological. For Paul, there is nothing particularly “wrong” with other *Ioudaioi*; indeed, they have immense privileges not shared by the *goyim*. The multiform and unstable plight of pre-eschatological humanity is not the point of departure; God’s revelation of his Son in Paul is.

In Paul’s undisputed letters, the *goyim* are by nature lawless sinners (Rom 2:14); the *Ioudaioi* are not (Gal 2:15). The Gospel is proclaimed first to the *Ioudaioi* and only then to the Greeks (Rom 1:16-17). Only after the full number of the *goyim* enter in will all Israel be saved by the removal of impiety (Rom 11:25-26). Israel *kata sarka* gets a last chance at salvation not on offer to the *goyim*. *Ioudaioi kata sarka* enjoy lavish gifts from their ethnic God: the name “Israelites,” legal adoption by God, the divine glory dwelling in the Temple, the

² Sanders, 552.

³ To avoid unhelpful semantic baggage that certain terms have accumulated over the centuries, I have transliterated a certain number of Greek words or chosen an unusual translation: *Ioudaios/i* for “Jew/s” or “Judean/s”; *goyim* for “Gentiles” or “non-Jews/Judeans”; Foreskin for “uncircumcision”; *ekklēsia* for “Church”; *pneuma* for “Spirit” or “spirit”; *kata pneuma* for “according to the spirit” or “according to the Spirit”; *kata sarka* for “according to the flesh”; *sarkikos* for “carnal” or “fleshly”; *en Christō* for “in Christ” or “in the Messiah”; *pistis* for “faith” or “faithfulness.”

Covenants, circumcision, the oracles of God, the giving of the Torah, Temple-worship, sacrifices that sanctify, the promises of salvation, and the persons of the patriarchs and the Messiah (1 Cor 10:18; Rom 3:1-2; 9:4-5). God's opulent generosity toward his people, Israel, is complete. Indeed, the "inclusion" of the *goyim* is eschatological imperialism in fulfillment of the prophecies of the prophets of Israel rather than some kind of abstract post-Enlightenment universalism.⁴ For Paul, his mission to the *goyim* is only possible because Israel's Messiah is fulfilling the promises made to Israel by Israel's God.

On the one hand, the Judaecentric distinction between *Ioudaioi* and *goyim* plays an essential eschatological role in that the *goyim* precisely qua *goyim* join together with the *Ioudaioi* in worshipping Israel's God, as evidenced by the *peroratio* to Romans (the catena in chapter 15), not to mention the very *raison d'être* of Galatians. On the other hand, in Romans, the sacrifice of the Messiah makes the carnal distinction (*diastolē*) between the Circumcision and the Foreskin moot (Rom 3:22; 10:12). After all, the *pneuma* of God and his Messiah elevates both groups cosmologically above human nature (cf. 1 Cor 3:1-4). In other words, the distinction *kata sarka* between the Circumcision and the Foreskin is and is not eschatologically relevant.

Rom 1:18-3:20 must enter the discussion at this point. A standard old-fashioned reading of this section is that it is an indictment of the Circumcision for judging the Foreskin while sinning themselves. Such a reading is untenable because Romans is addressed to *goyim en Christō* and not to *Ioudaioi*.⁵ It is

⁴ As for many *Ioudaioi* of the period who are eschatologically focused, the main problem with the Roman Empire for Paul is that the Romans rather than the *Ioudaioi* are in charge.

⁵ I am in fundamental agreement with Thorsteinsson and Stowers that the letter to the Romans is addressed directly and principally to the *goyim* (in the Messiah) who reside there. I disagree in that the Jews are clearly implicated in the purpose of the letter (harmony between *Ioudaioi* and *goyim* among the believers in Rome on the eve of Paul's delivery of the Macedonian and Achaean collections to the pillars in Jerusalem). Indeed, the aggressors in the conflict are identified as *goyim* (Rom 11:13, 14:1, 15:1) and Paul's name has been dragged into the conflict on their side (Rom 3:8). In particular, *Ioudaioi* in the Messiah at Rome are not addressed in the apostrophe to the "one who calls yourself a Jew." At Rom 2:25-29, Paul argues that corporeal circumcision is advantageous only if one observes the *πνευματικός νόμος* (only possible for those who are in Christ). When those who are by nature lawless sinners (Gal 2:15; Rom 2:14) keep the ordinances of the *πνευματικός νόμος* (v. 26; cf. Rom 8:4) written on their hearts (Rom 2:15; cf. the new covenant of Jer 31:33), their foreskin is reckoned as circumcision (cf., Phil 3:3). These

particularly odd because nowhere in Rom 2:17-29 does Paul even mention judging. Another standard old-fashioned reading takes Romans to be a soteriological treatise so that Rom 1:18-3:20 presents an abstract discussion of why human beings, *Ioudaioi* in particular, need to be saved. Such a reading is unpersuasive since Paul is addressing believers who take for granted the standard list of things from which the Messiah is saving them (God's wrath, domination by cosmic powers, the body of death, etc.). They have no need for this section's convoluted, indeed tortured, rhetoric to know that the Messiah died for their sins (among other things). This is shown clearly by Romans 1 and 5 where Paul present two discordant aetiologies for human sin (the refusal by the *goyim* to give thanks to God versus Adam's disobedience). Indeed, if Rom 1:18-3:20 aims as showing that the *Ioudaioi* and the *goyim* both equally need salvation because everyone is a sinner, then the argument obviously fails; God provided his people with repentance, almsgiving, and sacrifice as reparations for sin.

What then is the rhetorical function of Rom 1:18-3:20? The key is Rom 3:7-9, because it provides the reason why Paul's rhetoric takes the form it does. Some had accused Paul of saying "let us do evil things that good things come." In light of the recurring issues of the Torah and the *Ioudaioi* in this letter addressed to *goyim*, the accusation translates, "let us transgress the Torah, so that end-time benefits come." Notice that after the inventory of the sins of the *goyim*, Paul states that not only do such lawless sinners deserve the death penalty, but so does anyone who would approve of their transgressions. Rom 1:32 mirrors Rom 3:8. The first order of business in Romans is to condemn the very group he is alleged to approve. This locates the issue squarely in Romans 14-15. *Goyim*, invoking Paul's authority, had badgered their *Ioudaioi* guests for eating only vegetables and refusing to eat the meat of unclean animals. According to the hosts, such transgression would require those they contemptuously call "weak in *pistis*" to grow in eschatological *pistis*. This dispute

revilers of the *Ioudaioi* (Rom 11:13; 14:1; 15:1) are not *Ioudaioi* in public, they are hidden *Ioudaioi*. Although they cannot boast of their corporeal circumcision before the *σαρκετικοί* — as can the public, corporeally circumcised Jews (cf. Rom 3:27-31; Phil 3:5)—they receive their praise from the God of Israel. This naturally leads to the rhetorical question of Rom 3:1 and its answer. At Rom 4:11-12 Jews in the Messiah follow in the footsteps of their father Abraham so that their circumcision is a sign and seal of their *πίστις*. Runar M. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography* (CBNT 40, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wicksell, 2003); Stanley Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

was badly timed for Paul because it occurred on the eve of his delivery of the Macedonian and Achaian collections to the *ekklēsia* in Jerusalem (Rom 15:25-29). In other words, the occasion of Romans is Paul's response to a public relations nightmare — that is, an intra-sect political crisis. Romans is not an abstract theological treatise. Indeed, the old-fashioned reading of Romans as a theological treatise disparaging Jews and Judaism inverts the very purpose of the letter!

In Rom 3:8, Paul has been accused of approving transgression of the Torah. In v. 9, He rejects this accusation by arguing that everyone, whether Greek or *Ioudaios*, is “under sin.” The “what then?” binds v. 9 closely to v. 8. The first person plural of v. 9c (προηγουσάμεθα) is most easily understood to be the same as the first person plural of v. 9b (προεχόμεθα). Thus, Rom 3:7-9 can be translated:

If God's truth abounds by my lie for his glory, why am I still judged a sinner? And it is not the case as we are reviled and as some say we say, “let us do evil things that good things come.” Their condemnation is deserved. So what then? Are we making excuses? Not at all. We have already charged everyone, *Ioudaioi* and Greeks both, to be under sin.

In other words, in the midst of ethnic conflict among Roman believers, Paul is accused by some of approving transgression of the Torah. His response (Rom 1:18-3:20) is to condemn everyone, whether Circumcision or Foreskin, of being under sin. He firmly denies that he is making excuses for transgressions of the Torah.

Moreover, notice the central position of Rom 2:1-16 between the extended condemnation of the sins of the *goyim* (Rom 1:18-32) and the fictive appeal to obey the Torah addressed to the fictive interlocutor who calls himself a *Ioudaios* (Rom 2:17-29). The central section at the beginning of chapter 2 threatens with final punishment anyone who judges another, whether Greek or *Ioudaios*. Since the letter addresses *goyim* and the aggressors are identified as *goyim* (Rom 11:13, 14:1, 15:1), Paul is rhetorically pulling his punches by condemning everyone involved in the conflict, whether Foreskin or Circumcision, while directly addressing only the Foreskin. Moreover, Paul rhetorically demands that the *goyim* become “doers of the Torah” (Rom 2:13) instead of revilers of the *Ioudaioi* for observing it (chapters 14-15). Rom 1:18-3:20 does not support the old-fashioned proposals, but is part self-defense and part exhortation to the Roman *goyim en Christō*.

Sanders cogently argued that Paul thought backwards from solution to plight. In other words, the point of departure for Paul's soteriology was the

encounter with the Risen Lord commissioning him to be an apostle to the *goyim* (Gal 1:16; 1 Cor 9:1). Let us examine this encounter more closely.

Before Paul was commissioned to be an apostle, he persecuted the *ekklēsia* and plundered it (Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6). I find Paula Fredriksen's analysis of the socio-political problem created by the "ex-pagan pagans" persuasive.⁶ Paul's persecuting and plundering the *ekklēsia* consisted of preaching circumcision to the *goyim* in the *ekklēsia* to avoid persecution of *Ioudaioi* by other *goyim* (Gal 5:11; 6:12). *Goyim* who stopped worshipping their ethnic gods to worship the God of Israel exclusively are clearly socio-political traitors subverting the *pax deorum*. Circumcision remedied this socio-cognitive dissonance. But why did Paul stop "preaching circumcision" and embrace the Messiah's cross (Gal 5:11; 6:12)? At Gal 1:16, Paul speaks of God revealing his son in Paul (*en emoi*) so that (*hina*) he can preach the Gospel to the *goyim*. Obviously, God's son was revealed in Paul by the *pneuma* of God. In other words, God gave Paul the *pneuma* of his son, the *pneuma* of the Messiah, a.k.a. the *pneuma* of adoption, so that Paul could cry out, "Abba, Father" in a new way (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). Thus, the *koinōnia* of the *pneuma* brings about the *koinōnia* of the Messiah. This lavish eschatological/cosmological endowment caused Paul to cease preaching carnal circumcision to *goyim en christō* and to begin preaching the Gospel to the rest of the *goyim* instead.

For Paul, there are two types of people: those who are being saved and those who are perishing. The end of the process of being saved is the participation in Christ's resurrection glory (1 Cor 15; Phil 3; Rom 8); the end of the process of perishing is bodily death. For Paul, the salvation of the eschatological *ekklēsia*, composed of both *Ioudaioi* and *goyim*, is only possible through participation in the *pistis christou* by means of the indwelling *pneuma* of God and his Messiah. Now, my presentation is tidier than Paul's because he was making ad hoc arguments about concrete issues to particular communities. On the other hand, this essay in a certain sense has merely interpreted Rom 9:4-5 and Gal 3:21 in the light of 1 Corinthians 15, Philippians 3, and Romans 8.

To hold that Paul finds something particularly "wrong" with his people or their communal practices and beliefs is simply false. On the contrary, *Ioudaioi kata sarka* have privileges not vouchsafed the *goyim*. Again, the only problem with pre-eschatological humanity is that it is pre-eschatological. This problem is fundamentally and primarily cosmological and eschatological in nature because for Paul, salvation is primarily the teleological process toward the resurrection/

⁶ Paula Fredriksen, *Paul, the Pagan's Apostle* (New Haven, Yale University Press 2017).

glorification of bodies *en christō*. Those outside, whether Circumcision or Foreskin, cannot fulfil the Torah *kata pneuma*, not because of some moral failing, but because of the absence of the *pneuma christou* in their bodies. And Paul proclaims that after the full number of the *goyim* enter into the eschatological *ekklēsia*, all Israel will receive the *pneuma christou* promised to them so that they share the glorified risen life of their Messiah (Rom 11:25-27).