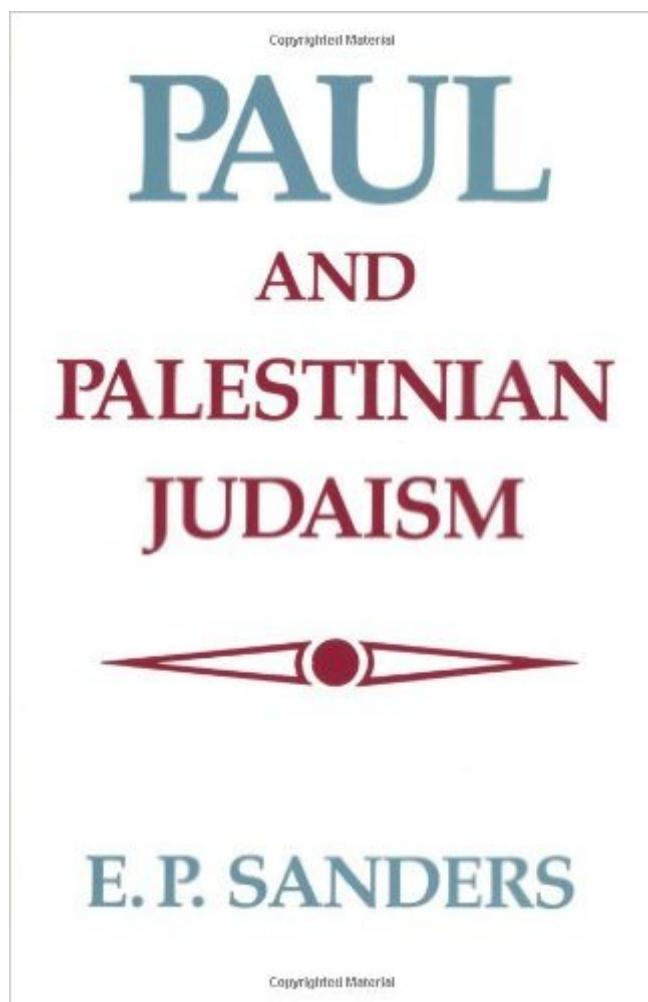


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Paul And Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison Of Patterns Of Religion



Synopsis

In the past three decades reasons have accumulated for a transformation of our whole picture of Judaism in first-century Palestine. Sanders has listened to those reasons; he has done his homework; and he undertakes here to shift the question about Paul's relation to that Judaism into a fundamentally different perspective...

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Customer Reviews

EP Sanders delivers a memorable and convincing book on the subject of traditional Palestinian Judaism and Pauline theology. The major thrust of this book revolves around the idea that Judaism was not a works-righteousness legalistic religion which many 20th century scholars have attempted to prove; Instead, Sanders argues that traditional Judaism is a covenant religion where one maintains his status within the elect group through his piety and obedience. To bolster and support his argument Sanders relies on textual support from Rabbinical sources, Qumran literature, and several apocryphal texts. Sanders argues that Jews believed their obedience did not earn their salvation but maintained their status within the covenant group. In other words, obedience was the condition and not the cause of salvation. This covenantal nomism as Sanders dubs it makes for an interesting argument and deconstructs the idea that Judaism is a works-righteousness religion. Although Sanders' treatment of Paul leaves something to be desired, he does devote some serious time to reworking and understanding Paul's beliefs. Sanders sees many similarities between Paul and traditional Judaism, but also many huge differences that separate the two camps.

According to Sanders, Paul believes that the only righteousness that matters comes from Jesus. Paul doesn't believe that the law cannot produce righteousness, but that the righteousness it produces isn't adequate. Paul's soteriology is extremely Christocentric and because of this the law has become irrelevant. Also striking is Sanders' belief that Paul argued for a participatory function in Christ's death and resurrection. Sanders sees more than just an expiatory or forensic meaning in Paul's theological language.

If anything is to be said about this volume, its impact has changed Pauline scholarship until the present time. Many distinguish between pre-Sanders and post-Sanders Pauline scholarship. This was in many ways the beginning of the movement now known as the "new perspective on Paul." Most of this volume is an evaluation of second temple Judaism. Sanders believes that in the second temple period there was a united pattern of religion. This falls into the rubric of soteriology. This pattern of religion Sanders calls Covenantal Nomism. This idea is that those in the covenant with Israel are in the covenant by grace, and they remain in by obedience to the law, however, not in such a way as to say salvation is earned. Obedience does not earn but maintains ones covenant status. Sanders fights against the idea that Jewish soteriology was simply a "weighing of the scales" where one's merits and demerits were weighed against one another. This idea was popularized by Weber and despite the fact that several Jewish scholars have fought against it, it was universally accepted. Sanders certainly has valid criticisms of previous second temple scholarships, however, he overreacts. Rather than seeing Judaism as a religion of works, Sanders sees Judaism as a religion of grace. When looking at the evidence from this period however, neither picture is accurate. There is a much greater diversity of opinions in second temple literature than either position will admit. For example, Josephus, who seems to be entirely ignored in this volume does not talk in terms of national covenant. Also, Philo talks in very different categories. Books like IV Ezra (which Sanders admits) and II Enoch do portray a type of legalism.

Sanders has written a big book with lots of details. Obviously, there is still a lot of research and discussion to be done to come up with an accurate description of the patterns of religion exhibited by each form of Judaism. But at a general level, I thought his case was more-or-less convincing. Evangelicals who pick this up to read for the first time will be amazed at how little is said about Martin Luther or about traditional Protestant dogma. Sanders is aiming for specific historians of rabbinical thought. These men were not from the reformation but from liberal Protestantism, as far as I can tell from Sanders footnotes. The impression gathered from his book indicates that these

people would have no real commitment to the "particularity" of the Christian religion--specifically the claim that Jesus' death and resurrection really happened in space/time history and that they even constituted the liberation of the world from sin, guilt, and death. Instead, Christianity was reduced to an abstract confidence in the benevolence of God and his willingness to forgive. To explain the divide between Christianity and Judaism, then, required that the latter be understood as an abstract need to earn God's favor by being good enough. According to Sanders the Rabbis were massively misunderstood, even to the point of claiming that they had a doctrine of "a treasury of merits" by which people could be forgiven because of past works of supererogation done by the fathers. Obviously the most superstitious forms of Medieval Roman Catholic theology were being imposed on these people. Of course, this hardly means that the Rabbis were good Protestants in how Sanders claims they formulated their doctrine.

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