

**E. P. Sanders**  
***Paul: The Apostle's Life,  
Letters, and Thought***  
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Imagine sitting in a lecture hall listening to one of the twentieth century's greatest scholars of Paul of Tarsus holding forth for one last semester. He reconstructs historical circumstances; carefully explains texts, often connecting them to the work of other ancient Jewish, Christian, and pagan writers; and stresses what he finds most significant, difficult to decipher, or hard to swallow in the modern or postmodern world. Such is the nature of this book, and thus also the experience of reading it.

E. P. Sanders is widely identified as one of the principal architects of the "New Perspective" on Paul that emerged in the late 1960s to the early 1980s. His 1977 book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* sparked a revolution in Pauline studies and, indeed, in early Jewish and early Christian studies more broadly. One might even say that it established part of the foundation for a sea-change in Jewish-Christian relations, at least among academics and well-educated religious leaders. Sanders then published additional studies, academic as well as more popular, that both furthered the new perspective and exposed it to wider audiences.

Thus the publication of this book is the capstone of a long and distinguished scholarly career. (Sanders turns 80 in 2017.) Many people have been awaiting the publication of another big Sanders book for a long time, and for that reason some may find this volume simultaneously worthy of the wait and not quite what they had hoped for. It is indeed a big book, but it is designed primarily for undergraduate students and educated general readers.

The Sanders revolution made the obvious a scholarly non-negotiable: that Paul was a late Second Temple-period Jew and must be interpreted as such. What Second Temple Judaism(s) actually looked like, and how Paul fit within that context—the more specific concerns of Sanders—remain active, wide-ranging, and highly disputed scholarly issues. The primary disappointing aspect of the book is that Sanders does not really enter into the contemporary fray.

The book itself is almost exclusively an historical treatment divided into two parts: four chapters on Paul's life and nineteen on his letters, followed by a conclusion, two appendices, a glossary, and three indices. Of the thirteen New Testament letters bearing Paul's name, Sanders treats only the seven that are "undisputed" as to their authorship by Paul. He dates the letters a few years earlier than many scholars (early 40s to mid-50s CE versus late 40s to late 50s CE; see pp. 157-61), and he generally discusses them in chronological order, arguing (in contrast to some of his earlier work) for some development in Paul's thinking over time.

Sanders is a first-class historian who writes in a straightforward but engaging, lecture-like style. He sets as his goal to identify the topics Paul deals with and Paul's conclusions about those topics, but he devotes the greatest effort to analyzing the arguments for those conclusions (how Paul interprets Scripture, for example). Sanders repeatedly claims that Paul's main point is normally quite clear, even when his argumentation and / or ultimate rationale are not, so Sanders also wants to explain the reasons behind those conclusions and arguments.

Part I on Paul's life is a fascinating study of Paul's world and of Paul himself. Sanders describes Paul as a "full-time religious zealot, first as a persecutor of Christianity, next as an apostle on its behalf" (p. 5). Throughout the book he emphasizes that Paul was a diaspora Jew, which explains a lot of his basic theology and ethics (especially sexual ethics). Yet unlike some scholars, Sanders does not hesitate also to call Paul a "Christian" or to speak of Paul's "conversion to Christianity" as historically appropriate descriptions (pp. 9-10; 100-102).

In line with his early, groundbreaking work, Sanders again stresses that Judaism was not a religion of "works-righteousness" (a Protestant term for "self-salvation") but of grace that includes both human responsibility and divine discipline within a covenant relationship. A "major point" (p. 498) of the book is the sharp difference between "works of law" such as circumcision (unnecessary for entry into Christ) and "good deeds" (required of all who are in Christ). However, Paul, a "renegade Jew" of sorts (p. 111), differs from his fellow Jews by believing that everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike, needs to be saved through Christ and enter the (new) covenant (p. 48).

Paul, says Sanders, sees himself as the preeminent "*apostle to the gentiles in the Messianic era*" (p. 105; emphasis in original), working to fulfill the prophetic promises that the nations will one day worship the one true God. This discussion raises the question of Paul's relationship to the synagogue and his mission, if any, to Jews. Sanders argues that Paul did spend time in synagogues, exhorting Jews to accept Jesus as Messiah (e.g., pp. 110-11).

Part II is a careful study of the letters, guided by what Sanders calls "two interpretive threads" (pp. 171-72): (1) the link between justification by faith and participation in Christ (Paul's "mysticism" and the "heart" of his soteriology [p. 666]), and (2) the assumption of development in Paul's thought.

The former concern goes back at least to his 1977 book, and in light of its importance in current scholarly discussion, is a welcome feature, though it could have received even more robust analysis. Sanders rightly argues that Paul sees

justification by faith and participation in Christ as essentially synonymous (e.g., pp. 568, 720-25). The latter concern (development in Paul's thought) makes for interesting reading, but also for some rather speculative interpretations that may sometimes misinterpret contingent differences in emphasis as more substantive developments.

Throughout the book, Sanders is especially sensitive to the impressive rhetoric of Paul's writing. Of Paul's various rhetorical and theological claims, the one that seems to grasp Sanders most passionately is the notion of divine power in human weakness (e.g., pp. 251-66, 716-20). His most thorough discussions of Paul's theology, however, are of the theme of resurrection (chs. 13-14) and of Romans (chs. 21-23).

As one would expect, Sanders's historical reconstructions and exegetical interpretations are always carefully worked out, informative, and plausible, if not always fully persuasive. The book also contains some oddities, however, such as devoting 60 pages to homosexuality. And there is relatively little attention (especially in contrast to, say, N. T. Wright) to how this diaspora Jew's worldview was reconfigured by his experience of Jesus and the Spirit. What is most disappointing, however, is the book's overall lack of interaction with contemporary scholarship in general; with other proponents of the new perspective; and with recent developments in Pauline studies that stress Paul and politics, Paul and apocalyptic theology, and Paul within Judaism in ways that go beyond the new perspective.

Nonetheless, anyone looking for a solid, historical treatment of Paul the Jewish-Christian in his first-century context will benefit from this fine study.