

Book Review

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

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A contribution of the “new perspective on Paul” to New Testament Scholarship is that it provides a crucial clue to reconsidering the pervasive misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Judaism widespread among religious scholars. The publication of E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977 triggered controversies over Paul's relationship to Judaism in the new perspective. In his book Sanders attempts a new understanding of Paul and Palestinian Judaism. My paper aims to summarize several key points of his book and suggest some problems with which it may be confronted.

To subvert the persistent view of Judaism as “a religion of legalistic works-righteousness” (p. 59) as shown by Weber, Schürer, Bousset, Billerbeck, and Bultmann, Sanders makes a holistic comparison of patterns of religion of Paul and Judaism, defining a pattern of religion as “the description of how a religion is perceived by its adherents to function” with regards to “how getting in and staying in are understood” (p. 17). To analyze the patterns of religion, Sanders compares Palestinian literature (Tannaitic [Rabbinic] literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha—such as Ben Sirah, 1 Enoch,

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Jubilees, Psalms of Solomon, and 4 Ezra) with Pauline literature.

As Sanders puts it, a pattern of religion has to do with soteriology in systematic theology (p. 17). In this sense, Sanders concludes that the pattern of religion of Judaism appearing in Palestinian Judaism from around 200 B.C.E. to around 200 C.E. is best described as “covenantal nomism”. Sanders defines the pattern or structure of covenantal nomism in what follows:

- (1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both
- (3) God’s promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God’s mercy belong to the group which will be saved (p. 422).

What is remarkable in this explanation is that election and salvation in Judaism is based on God’s mercy, not human achievement.

In the same vein, Sanders understands the pattern of Rabbinic Judaism as “covenantal nomism” in that Rabbinic Judaism views that one’s place in God’s plan is established by God’s election of Israel as his covenant people and that obedience to its commandments is the proper response of man to God’s grace (p. 75). According to Sanders, Rabbinic Judaism cannot be interpreted as a “narrow, formalistic religion” believing either that “salvation depended upon the ability to compile a large number of command-fulfillments” or that “Israel’s situation in the covenant required the law to be obeyed as fully and completely as possible” (p. 81). In the Tannaitic literature, obedience to the commandments is not the means of salvation but that of maintenance in the covenant. Rather, the election and covenant are the bases of salvation. Otherwise put, “getting in” is by the mercy of God,

whilst “staying in” is a function of obedience.

Even though there are little differences in nuance, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls, Sanders holds, are based on the “covenantal nomism” on the whole. In covenantal nomism, salvation is on the basis of God’s election which derives from God’s mercy. It is by means of Covenant that Israel can be delivered. Works, however, cannot earn God’s grace but only maintain one’s position in the covenant. Works are just the means of “getting in”, not “staying in.”

Paul’s religious type, Sanders argues, is participation eschatology, not the covenantal nomism generally prevalent in Palestinian Judaism (p. 552). Paul presents a fundamentally different pattern of righteousness from any Palestinian literature (p. 543). While in Jewish literature the term righteousness is a term related to the “maintenance of status” in election, in Paul it is a “transfer term” (p. 544). In other words, righteousness in Judaism is to obey the commandments and repent of sins, but in Paul it is to be saved by Jesus (p. 544). For Paul, to be righteous means to “get in,” not “stay in” the salvation and works of law cannot transfer one to salvation. According to Sanders, Paul held that it is by union with Jesus that one participates in salvation. Therefore Sanders calls Paul’s pattern of religion “participation eschatology.” In this respect, Sanders argues that Paul’s understanding of the human plight is different from Judaism’s. That is, in Judaism, the human plight precedes the solution to it, but in Paul vice versa because in Paul “one enters by becoming one with Christ Jesus and one stays in by remaining ‘pure and blameless’ and by not engaging in unions which are destructive of the union with Christ” (pp. 548-9). Therefore, Sanders concludes, “Paul in fact explicitly denies that the Jewish covenant can be effective for salvation” (p. 551). “This is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity” (p. 552). In this regard, Sanders describes Paul’s soteriology as “exclusive soteriology.”

Now I shall evaluate the work of Sanders in his book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. One benefit of his work is a reevaluation of Judaism in Paul's day. Sanders' assertion that the pattern of religion of Palestinian Judaism is "covenantal nomism" leads the reader to an awareness that Palestinian Judaism has little to do with merit theology. Another benefit is that Sanders opens up a new possibility to approach Judaism in relation to early Christianity. His claim that Paul's complaint is that Judaism is not Christianity offers the reader a new lens to reassess the relationship between Paul and Judaism. On the other hand, one drawback is that covenantal nomism seems to be a reductionistic category, considering that Jewish literature is too diverse to subsume under one label. Another drawback is Sanders' ambiguous position in his understanding of "Paul and Palestinian Judaism." Even a thorough reading of his book is not enough to precisely figure out Paul's relation to Judaism. To say that the difference between Judaism and Christianity in Paul is insufficient.

Let me finish this paper by raising two questions about the work of Sanders. First of all, is it possible to assume a single Judaism in the first century? There might be "Judaisms," but not one uniform "Judaism" in Paul's time. Jews were spread all over the world. Considering the diversity of Jews in language, society and culture, it is hard to suppose Judaism to be homogeneous, regardless of time and space. Secondly, what is the essential relationship between Paul and Palestinian Judaism? Sanders asserts that what Paul finds wrong in Judaism is just that it is not Christianity. However, the difference between the two is more complicated than it seems. The relation of the two may be a racial problem rather than a religious problem.

Despite some criticisms within the New Testament scholarship, it goes without saying that this book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, is the best introductory text for religious scholars interested in the relationship between nascent Christianity and Judaism.