



ICCJ Philadelphia Conference 2016



"The Dynamics of Religious Pluralism in a Changing World:
The Philadelphia, United States and International Contexts"

PLENARY SESSIONS

PLENARY ON PAUL:

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The Understanding of Paul's Theology and Christian Anti-Judaism

Reflections on the contribution of E.P. Sanders' work to Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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Hearing Ed Sanders speak today takes me back about forty years to the fall of 1975. Ed had just sent off the manuscript of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, and I had just begun my masters program in early Judaism at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Then, and now, the McMaster graduate program in biblical studies required those studying early Judaism to do coursework and comprehensives in New Testament, and vice versa. And so it happened that throughout the fall of 1975 my classmates and I sat around a small seminar table in University Hall, reading and translating Galatians, and absorbing the truths that Ed has laid out before us today. Among these truths were two points that have stuck with me. The first is that Paul was driven first and foremost by the idea that Christ was the solution but nowhere does he say that Judaism is the problem. The second is that Paul believed deeply that Gentiles could come into the covenant people as Gentiles, without becoming circumcised, but nowhere does he repudiate his own Jewish identity. As Ed's students, we also absorbed the idea – unusual for the time – that the offensive description of Judaism as an outdated, barren, legalistic religion of works-righteousness was a function of centuries of primarily Protestant theology that owed much to Martin Luther.

It is difficult to engage critically with a position that has been so formative in my own education. Instead, I will devote my time to reflecting on the impact of Ed's work for the field of Jewish-Christian relations, which is the focus of our gathering here this week. I will concentrate on three books: *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), *Jesus and Judaism* (1985), and *Judaism: Practice and Belief* (1992).

Paul and Palestinian Judaism

Ed's overarching aim in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* was to engage in a wholistic comparison between Pauline and the early Jewish "patterns of religion." To prepare for the project, he spent years studying Hebrew and a range of sources from 200 BCE to 200 CE: Tannaitic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. In itself this was novel; few New



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Testament scholars at the time put the time and effort into studying early Judaism aside from the works of Josephus and, to some extent, Philo.

Ed concluded that Paul’s pattern of religion differed from that of early Judaism. Whereas early Jewish sources displayed a pattern he called “covenantal nomism,” focused on getting into the covenant and staying in, Paul’s “pattern of religion,” focused on participation and transfer. As Ed put it, “Righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the group of the elect; in Paul it is a transfer term” (p. 544). Paul’s perspective was profoundly apocalyptic, not because he counted down the days until the end times, but because his thinking was imbued with a belief in Christ’s imminent return to transform the world order. Although some early Jewish sources were also deeply apocalyptic, the literary corpus as a whole displayed a strong interest in how one entered the covenant community and stayed within it.

Unlike most works of its time, however, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* did not create an absolute dichotomy between Paul and his Jewish context. Aside from the differences in their patterns of religion, Paul and the Jews who produced the other texts that Ed had studied had much in common. In both worldviews, “salvation is by grace but judgment is according to works; works are the condition of remaining ‘in’, but they do not earn salvation” (p. 543); and in both, “God saves by grace but within the framework established by grace he rewards good deeds and punishes transgression” (p. 543). For all these Jews, Paul included, there was an implicit distinction between the commandments that govern human relationships and the ones that govern one’s relationship with God.

Ed’s book was instrumental in launching the so-called New Perspective on Paul, which was also a new and refreshing perspective on ancient Judaism, or, at least, on Paul’s views about Judaism. Since then the New Perspective has been accepted, extended, challenged and defended. I’ve even heard rumours of a *new* new perspective though I am not sure what that entails. From the point of view of Jewish-Christian relations, the first and most obvious point was Ed’s persuasive challenge to the view that Paul was critical of Judaism as a religion based on a condition – complete and perfect observance of the law – that no human being could fulfill. Ed understood what all Jews but few Pauline scholars of his day knew: that Jewish covenantal thought took full account of human fallibility by providing regular opportunities for repentance, atonement, and divine forgiveness. As a Jew himself, Paul surely knew this; as an apostle to the Gentiles, he was not motivated by a lack within Judaism but by a mission to bring Gentiles into right relationship with God through participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

But equally important, I would argue, was the very fact that Ed took Judaism seriously, on its own terms. While today we might want to emphasize that Paul was not a Christian but a Jew, Ed refused to take the step that so many others before him had taken, of using Judaism as the negative foil against which Paul’s own light could shine all the more brightly.

Jesus and Judaism

The same is true of Ed’s masterful study of Jesus in his Jewish context. The study of the Jewish Jesus has now become so common and widespread that we might forget how unusual it was even forty years ago. Ed’s conclusion – that nothing attributed to Jesus, including his miracles, his concern for outcasts, his non-violence or his eschatological outlook – was unique turned the



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usual criteria for twentieth-century historical Jesus research on their head. But the idea that one must situate Jesus within Judaism rather than over against Judaism is now a mainstay of historical Jesus research, even if the impulse and desire to proclaim Jesus’ uniqueness still remain, at least in some quarters. Although Ed’s book was not the first to stress Jesus’ Jewishness, it was one of the most influential in modeling an approach that is historically rigorous and, like his Paul book, treats Judaism with respect as a meaningful tradition in its own right. I believe that the recognition of Jesus as a Jew alongside other first century Jews, more than perhaps any other factor, has paved the way towards meaningful exchange between Jews and Christians on many different levels.

Judaism: Practice and Belief 63BCE-66 CE

Ed’s account of Jewish practice and belief focused on what he called common Judaism – those elements that the priests and the people agreed upon, including the feeling of solidarity, the centrality of the scriptures, allegiance to the temple, and participation in the synagogue. The book provides strong support for the idea that there was a common foundation to Jewish identity, and, in doing so, put paid to the notion of multiple “Judaisms” to which some scholars still hold.

While it is likely that *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* had the greatest impact on the field of New Testament studies, I have found the idea of common Judaism to be most important to my own work. In this book, too, Ed provided a refreshing counterbalance to the scholarly tendencies of the time, in this case, the tendency to assume that the entire population of Judea and the Galilee was divided among Josephus’s four philosophies – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots. I would say that this tendency has not entirely departed from New Testament studies, but Ed’s book provides a much more historically persuasive perspective. What I find so exciting about it is that in contrast to most books about early Judaism, it imagines the daily lives of real people and not only, say, the activities of the priests in the temple. In doing so, it expresses the conviction that I find throughout Ed’s work: that Judaism is of intrinsic value and interest, and not solely for its role in what many call Christian Origins.

General assessment of impact

Through Ed’s work over the years, and in his comments today, we can discern some fundamental convictions. One is the point that to engage in historical study of the New Testament requires also a responsible mastery of the Jewish sources, preferably in their original languages. It is not acceptable to rely on compendia such as Strack-Billerbeck, which, in addition to numerous errors, also incorporated the anti-Jewish perspective so pervasive in early twentieth-century German Protestant scholarship. The second, related point, is that one must reject the view of Judaism as an antiquated and outmoded, spiritually barren religion superseded by Christianity. Judaism must be treated alongside Christianity, not as mere background or as a negative foil, but as a worthwhile and viable religion in its own right. Ed’s work has been instrumental in making these points so commonplace that many younger scholars (that is, younger than me) don’t know that the field looked very different just a few decades ago.



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Ed’s influence has also been institutional. At the time of my own graduate studies in the mid-seventies to early eighties, McMaster was the only department to my knowledge where Judaism and Christianity were studied alongside one another, not one as background to the other. I cannot document this but I believe firmly that this structure, which as far as I know was Ed’s doing, had a major impact on the way that New Testament and early Judaism are being taught today. The best programs in the field include the study of Jewish sources and the relevant languages in their requirements for doctoral studies in early Christianity. To a lesser degree, the same is true of programs in early Judaism, though one might argue that New Testament is less essential for Jewish studies than Jewish studies is for New Testament.

And it goes without saying that Ed has had a huge influence on my own career. It is safe to say that had I not studied with Ed, I would not have gone into New Testament studies myself. I might not even have stayed in academia but instead gone off to law school as I had thought I might after my BA. As was obvious from his presentation today, Ed is a dynamic teacher, and studying Galatians and then First Corinthians with him sparked my interest in New Testament, and also helped me to see that a Jewish New Testament scholar with a strong foundation in Jewish Studies could do well in the classroom and in the field itself at the same time as my very presence could help raise awareness about ongoing issues of anti-Judaism.

At the time that I decided to switch my focus from early Judaism to early Christianity, Ed advised me against it. “You’ll never get a job,” he said. A Jewish studies program wouldn’t hire me if I do my doctoral work in early Christianity, and New Testament positions would be closed to me because I was Jewish. Ed was looking out for me, but as a rather stubborn person I did not take his advice. By the time I was on the job market in the early 1980s, the field had changed, due, I am convinced, to Ed’s own work and his institutional influence at McMaster and in the field more broadly. Now there are many of us, enough to fill the pages of the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*.

Thank you to today’s organizers for giving me the opportunity to reflect back on Ed’s impact here today, and, especially, to Ed himself, for the important that he has done and that he continues to do. I refer to his newly released comprehensive book on Paul: [The Apostle’s Life, Letters, and Thought](#), and an about-to-be released new book called [Comparing Judaism and Christianity: Common Judaism, Paul, and the Inner and the Outer in Ancient Religion](#), both published by Fortress, which has also re-issued [Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies](#) and is about to release the re-issue of [Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66 CE](#). In this way, Ed’s work will reach a new generation of students of scholars, some of whom are in danger of lapsing into the old ways of thinking about Judaism and Christianity unless their eyes can be opened.