

Reviews

PAUL, THE LAW AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE, by E.P. Sanders, *SCM Press, London 1985*, pp. xi + 227 (*limp*) £8.50.

In 1977 E.P. Sanders, now Dean Ireland's Professor of Scriptural Exegesis, published a brilliant and learned volume, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism (PPJ)*. In it he presented a very thorough study of early Palestinian Judaism from the evidence of the Tannaitic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; and of Paul's theology. The reader was offered not only a compendium on Judaism but also an experience analogous to viewing two superb basilicas, both suitable for a solemn congregation but only one a cathedral. If Judaism is in general a structure of that covenantal nomism which Sanders so well and so fully describes, and if it is of some help to see Paul's theology as a Christian version of that structure, his cathedral is distinguished and dominated by its enshrining the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In 1983 Sanders published the present book in the USA (first published in Britain in 1985). He had in the meantime produced a searching radical study of the Jesus of history in *Jesus and Judaism*.

Clearly Sanders has a mind that must go to the roots of every question. The present book exemplifies this searching manner. As explained in its preface, it is in two parts. The first is on Paul and the Law, viewed under four categories: the Law as an entrance requirement, its Purpose, its Fulfilment, and the Old dispensation and the New. In the first and third the account of Paul's view of the law as sketched in *PPJ* is expanded, clarified and sometimes corrected, and the problem of the law as a whole is discussed. The second part deals with a question not considered in *PPJ*, Paul's thought about and relationship to his fellow-Jews.

A basic principle which guides Sanders throughout is that Paul did not (as Bultmann would) argue from the 'human predicament' to a Christ-centred soteriology, but 'thought backwards, from solution to plight' and his thinking 'was governed by the overriding conviction that salvation is through Christ'. His thought about the law was multiple, and differed from context to context. His positive statements on it show that he believed that Christians should fulfil 'the law' and keep 'the commandments'. When writing about this necessity, Paul does not distinguish between the law which governs Christians and the law of Moses—the law to which those in Christ die and the law which they fulfil. But the law Paul upholds differs from that of Moses: not all his demands have a counterpart in Scripture and he seems clearly to dispense with three of its requirements, circumcision, days and seasons, and dietary restrictions.

Sanders exposes clearly the apparent flat contradiction in Paul: 'the law must be obeyed: we are not under law but under grace'. Understanding of it may perhaps be assisted by a parable from aspects of life distinct from the moral and religious. The expert games player or musician aspires to attain such perfection that he acts 'instinctively', his whole self moving correctly and in harmony; only so will he give an 'inspired performance'. Unless a rare prodigy he must be for a long time 'under the law' and try to perform the correct actions by painful obedience. Blessed is he who one day 'finds himself' fulfilling with ease the correct action. At that time he both fulfils and dies to the law, understanding, perhaps for the first time fully, what it means to obey the law. If there is sense in this

paradox we may win a deeper understanding of *one* of Paul's views about the law. The Jew's obedience to it is bound up with his belief in its divine origin, the Gentile's obedience to law is part of that nature about whose origins he is so ignorant. In Christ either will both fulfil and die to the law, which no longer needs to be called his, or the, law. As Sanders puts it, 'Living in the Spirit results in obeying the law'.

To return to Sanders book, thinking 'backwards, from solution to plight'—and thus conforming to history is illustrated in the subject considered in Part 2, Paul and the Jewish People. From the necessity of the acceptance of Christ Paul deduces that God paradoxically *intended* the disobedience of the Jews to lead to the inclusion of the Gentiles, and that in its turn to the incitement of the Jewish remnant to return. 'He appeals to revelation. God revealed his son to (or in) him, and as a result he knew that it was through faith in Christ that God intended to save the world. That ... had always been God's intention, and he had stated it clearly in advance (e.g. Gal. 3:8). God had never intended to make the law the condition of life (Gal. 3:21). If acceptance of the law were the condition of salvation, Christ would have died in vain (Gal. 2:21). It was the experience of the resurrection which convinced Paul that Christ had not died in vain, and thus it is that experience which is the source of Paul's denial of righteousness by the law, to the degree that we can know it.'

All discerning readers will learn from this book, especially if they have read *PPJ*; criticisms can be only of that sympathetic and tentative kind which desire to provoke the writer to comment on his work a little further. By far the most interesting subject on which we should like to hear more is the just mentioned important place ascribed to Paul's experience of Christ. Is the meaning of Gal. 1:11–12, 15–16 that Paul suffered a conversion as dramatic, as personal and as individual as the thrice-told story in Acts, or simply that there came a time when he became convinced of the truth of the faith which he heard proclaimed? Sanders quotes Beker in *Paul the Apostle* as having criticized his view 'in *PPJ* as being purely theological and as ignoring the dimension of Paul's experience'. In defence he quotes *PPJ* p. 496: 'What is distinctive about Paul's view of the law ... is that Christ saves Gentiles as well as Jews. This was not only a theological view, but was bound up with Paul's most profound conviction about himself, a conviction on which he staked his career and his life: he was the apostle to the Gentiles.' At the end of this note Sanders contends that Beker and he disagree not on their being a connection in Paul's view of the law between theology and experience, but on how to state that experience. It is a matter of experience that the Spirit and faith come by hearing the gospel, not by obeying the law. This seems to imply that Paul's conversion was by hearing. Yet I Cor. 15:8 suggests a supernatural confrontation with the living Christ. Is this a false distinction and if so, why?

We may allow ourselves one further mild complaint. Paul's different uses of the word law in Romans involve Sanders in some discussion of the composite character of the Letter. This seems a fruitful clue to pursue when explaining inconsistencies, but he refers only very briefly to the curious fact that there are so many salutations (16:1–15) to members of a church Paul had not visited and apparently belonging to Ephesus; and the theories (such as a letter in two recensions, one for Ephesus and one for Rome, or indeed embracing the possibility of a general letter for many places) which this and other facts suggest, and which would unite well with a view that Paul brought together a number of already existent letters in the whole.

All students will profit by reading any of Sanders' books. Those deterred by size (and perhaps by such a feast of notes as necessitates a sort of simultaneous double reading) and who want a manageable, enlightening and up-to-date introduction to Paul's main lines of thought could not do better than introduce themselves to Sanders by reading this book (perhaps for such a purpose skipping the notes). It is less than half the length of *PPJ*.

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