



## Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought

by E. P. Sanders

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A COMPREHENSIVE INTRODUCTION to the apostle Paul and a survey of his letters from a scholar as distinguished as Ed Sanders is a publishing event, and this volume is sure to find its way into many syllabi and bibliographies. Following a substantial overview of Paul's milieu and life, Sanders surveys the contents of the seven undisputed canonical letters in (his proposed) chronological order, isolating the rhetorical occasion of each and tracing the development of Paul's thought thematically over the course of these letters. A brief conclusion takes stock of the primary contours of Paul's theological development (proposed in his earlier scholarship) and two substantial and useful appendices—one on homosexuality in the ancient world and the other an argument for the "North Galatian"

hypothesis—round out the volume. The result is a rich, detailed, often illuminating, and sometimes provocative account of Paul from one of our generation's preeminent Pauline scholars.

Approaching 900 pages, the volume is physically imposing. But this first impression is somewhat misleading. Featuring a larger typeface and more generous white space than is customary for academic trade texts, the style and level of the book are more closely matched to its design than to its dimensions. Pitched to the motivated non-scholar (replete with a glossary), this is more of a *magnus liber* than a *magnum opus*; Sanders does not set out to break new ground or advance an overarching thesis.

Indeed, the primary charm and utility of this volume is the way that it manages to be at once serious and easy-going, comprehensive and detailed, but not the least bit ponderous. The style is informal, often conversational, characteristically modest, and sometimes even wryly humorous. Nowhere is this virtue more apparent than in Sanders's frequent disarming demurrals. He confesses when he is merely speculating, admits it when we probably just do not know, and rests content that the reconstruction of plausibility is sometimes the best we can do. The result is an eminently readable and informative book. Indeed, we are reading a scholar with nothing much to prove but rather much to say, and when read accordingly, this introduction to Paul is a fresh entry into a crowded field.

Since it is impossible even to summarize the volume's far-ranging claims, I shall note instead four predominating features of Sanders's approach, beginning with Sanders's interest in Pauline chronology and development. While the book does not explicitly advance a thesis, there is an implicit proposal, written into the structure of the book, that serves its most salient claim: Paul's letters are best understood when situated in their probable historical order and when developments in his thinking are recognized and traced from his earliest to his final letter. Regarding Acts as insufficiently reliable to serve as a historical framework and the disputed epistles as inauthentically Pauline, Sanders argues for a relative chronology determined strictly from the contents of the

undisputed letters. Following, though without reproducing, the argument of his former student, Gregory Tatum (*New Chapters in the Life of Paul: The Relative Chronology of His Career* [Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 2006]), Sanders orders the (at least eight) letters as follows: 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians 10–13, Galatians, 2 Corinthians 1–9 (allowing that chapters 8–9 originally may have been separate), Philippians, Philemon, and Romans. Sanders treats the letters more or less in chronological order (for the sake of convenience, Galatians is explored after the Corinthian correspondence). Of course, alleging development is a risky venture, since such proposals are inextricably bound to a chronology that is beyond demonstration. Yet, even as I demur from most of Sanders's critical judgments, I regard the attempt to trace development a worthy and stimulating enterprise.

Secondly, and not unexpectedly, the treatment of the religious milieu and Paul's place within it reprises the conclusions of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977) and its briefer sequel, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983). Sanders repeats and builds on the hard-won conclusions already familiar to his long-term readers, but these are worthy of repetition for the sake of this more popular audience. There is no indication here that Sanders has reconsidered his earlier claims. To the extent that he expands on his earlier formulations, his arguments frequently parallel those of James Dunn (e.g., why Paul disavows "works of the law"), though not in explicit conversation. Although the implicit soteriology of Second Temple Judaism makes passing appearances in Sanders's discussions, Sanders does not substantially participate in the conversation he initiated.

Thirdly, we may note the manner in which Sanders engages and assesses Paul's arguments. He is neither Paul's apologist nor detractor, and he is clearly not under obligation to be impressed or persuaded at every turn. Sanders lauds Paul for his fertile mind and his capacity for disputation, but Paul is not infrequently more resourceful than persuasive; some of his arguments fail. Consistent with his famous claim that Paul's thought develops from solution to plight, Sanders will often distinguish between Paul's conclusions (i.e., his ultimate conviction, however arrived at), his reasons (i.e., the actual basis for his convictions, not always stated), and his arguments (the rhetorical strategies used to persuade). Thus, Paul sometimes makes arguments that are opaque to his actual reasons for having settled upon his convictions. This is a useful distinction, and it is hard to deny that it must sometimes be the case. It is admittedly more difficult to discern when this is so, and readers could wish that Sanders articulated the implicit criteria that guide him such that they could be tested. By Sanders's reckoning, it seems that certain of Paul's convictions, especially moral ones, are little more than his Jewish inheritance veritably unconditioned by the gospel of Christ, even if that gospel donates more resources for justifying a stance retrospectively. It remains to ask why Paul would have been so revolutionary in certain instances while intransigent in others.

Finally, readers hoping to see how Sanders weighs in on recent trends and controversies in Pauline studies will be disappointed. Engagement in the scholarly conversation is relatively spare in general, and Sanders's interlocutors tend to be the major voices of previous generations. J.B. Lightfoot, Adolf Deissmann, E.D. Burton, and John Knox are more frequent conversation partners than, say, John Barclay, Francis Watson, Douglas Campbell, N.T. Wright, or Richard Hays. While there is something wholesome in returning to this earlier scholarship, readers may wish to know what Sanders makes of the apocalyptic Paul, intertextuality, rhetorical criticism, "empire" criticism, or even the various permutations of the "new perspective on Paul" that Sanders himself is credited with launching. Yet none of this factors significantly in the book's discourse. If this is disappointing at some level, it is also refreshing in that Sanders's exposition of the letters themselves is largely unmediated and uncluttered by intramural skirmishes. In an era in which the

genius of Paul's interpreters has exposed, if not even amplified, Paul's own genius, readers will decide for themselves whether Sanders's readings of Paul are thin or refreshingly modest and uncontrived.

Sanders's introduction to Paul will secure a wide readership. Scholars will read this book because Sanders wrote it and in it find grist for the mill. Students will read it because it is assigned and may find themselves surprised to enjoy it. It remains to be seen whether a book this imposing reaches its target audience. Perhaps the highest compliment that can be paid is that all readers will find that they must wrestle more with Paul than with the author.

It is necessary to note that editorially and materially, the book disappoints: with an excess of typographical errors, missing words, typography intended but not executed, and so on. Unwieldy and unnecessarily cumbersome to hold open, the book's cover curls up, and the ink is not water-proof. The contents deserve a better home. This may be a rare case in which an electronic version would be preferable.

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