

Sanders' Jesus

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If anyone needed any convincing that study of the New Testament at Oxford and in the United Kingdom has been given a considerable boost by the appointment of Ed Sanders to the chair of New Testament at Oxford University *Jesus and Judaism** will surely provide it. After two important contributions to the debate about Paul's theology Sanders has turned his attention to the thorny question of the message and mission of Jesus and his relationship to Second Temple Judaism. As well as demonstrating that he is one of the world's leading New Testament exegetes, he has used his wide-ranging knowledge and clarity of mind to provide a book of great historical conviction. Some will find his presentation of Jesus as a 'reasonable visionary' of the first century very disturbing. Others will find it strangely conservative: not only does it use the gospels to say more about Jesus than many contemporary exegetes would allow, but its main thesis is reminiscent of another great contribution to the debate about Jesus, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* by Johannes Weiss. Whatever one's point of view, evident throughout this book is the great ability to cut through muddled thinking in a provocative and stimulating way, to disentangle complicated issues and rigorously to pursue the truth wherever it may lead.

The method adopted is unconventional, in that it eschews preoccupation with the detailed analysis of Jesus' sayings in the gospels because of the uncertainties surrounding the precise contexts of some of the most important sayings. Rather, Sanders has concentrated on ascertaining a bedrock of tradition which will explain why Jesus ended up conflicting with the priesthood in Jerusalem, dying at the hands of the Romans and initiating in primitive Christianity an eschatological movement which in due course admitted Gentiles on the basis of faith in the Messiah. The thesis is that this Jesus associated himself with the Jewish eschatological preaching of John the Baptist, and his whole career is to be understood in the light of Jewish restoration eschatology: the hope for a new Temple, the gathering of the Twelve Tribes and the glorious hope of the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus' major offences were to call sinners to accept his message without the prior need of repentance; and to have acted in the Temple precincts in such a way as

to have indicated that the present Temple would have been destroyed. In arguing his case Sanders carefully articulates a position which brilliantly elucidates the relationship between sinners and the common people in Second Temple Judaism, showing that Jesus' offence lay in his offer to sinners of participation in the Kingdom without proper repentance and restitution and without the consent of those who would normally have allowed restitution and readmission. These were the issues which led to conflict and paved the way for primitive Christianity. It was the fact that Jesus had arrogated to himself the right to call sinners (and thereby to help to initiate the final gathering of the people of God) without recourse to official approval which was resented. Similarly, his action in and words about the Temple were offensive to a people for whom that building and its worship was the focal point of their culture. Sanders sides with many recent commentators in playing down Jesus' differences from the Pharisees (the gospel conflict stories are retrojections of church problems into the life of Jesus). He succinctly outlines the complexities of recent debate about the Pharisees and their relationship to the rabbis. Jesus' major difference of opinion is with the priesthood, with the Temple, the dominant factors in Second Temple Judaism. The one incident in the gospels which Sanders considers a threat to the Law is Jesus' uncompromising response to the would-be disciple in Matt. 8.21.

Sanders does not reject the study (often detailed and exhibiting wide knowledge of the secondary literature) of the words of Jesus, but his vast knowledge of the complexities of the exegetical debates about words and phrases has left him convinced that real clarity is not likely to be found in the minute traditio-historical enterprise. He uses the sayings tradition to flesh out the bare bones of his historical framework, and by and large it is done to very good effect. The picture that emerges is of an eschatological prophet, akin to certain others known to us from Josephus' writings, who predicted the end of the present world order and the imminence of another. Sanders does not believe that the sayings collection can allow us to know whether Jesus believed the Kingdom was already present, a cautious attitude which is to be welcomed amidst all the assumptions made about inaugurated eschatology. Jesus is regarded as a miracle worker whose miracles were part and parcel of the function of an eschatological prophet. Readers will notice significant gaps in the choice of sayings discussed. Little is said about the vexed problem of the Son of Man and Jesus' interpretation of his death. Perhaps Sanders is right to play down the importance of the Son of Man debate and with it New Testament theology's preoccupation with christology, though a little more might have been said about the words of Jesus at the Last Supper.

There are other issues which are not explored which, I would have

thought, would have contributed to Sanders' portrait. Sanders himself notes the tension which exists in the gospels themselves between the historical framework's eschatological and nationalistic thrust and the individualism and sectarian quality of many of the sayings. That tension might have been teased out, particularly if the tension between the initial optimistic message of the Kingdom and its pessimistic conclusion on the cross had been examined. The success of an eschatological prophet depends to a large extent on the response of his hearers. While it may be true that Jesus did not believe that the fulfilment of the eschatological promise depended on human response, we may be justified in supposing that rejection and opposition to his mission would have been bound to cause readjustment and rethinking (as it did for Paul). In this situation the kind of tension noted by Sanders could have emerged: individualistic sayings more appropriate for a sect would have been coined to meet the needs of the group which *had* responded to the message over against indifference and rejection with which Jesus was forced to come to terms. This is the sort of issue noted long ago by Albert Schweitzer: how did Jesus come to terms with opposition and possible failure of the initial high hopes of his ministry? Eschatological prophets with the kind of message which Sanders attributes to Jesus do tend to elicit hostility as well as support, a fact which one might expect to see reflected in the tradition. This is something which the gospels report Jesus doing e.g. in the parable of the Sower, at the Last Supper, in Gethsemane and possibly in the journey to Jerusalem. No doubt this is an area into which historians of early Christianity are unwilling to stray because of reluctance to speculate what might have been going on in the mind of Jesus, and yet it seems to me to be a central issue to the whole Jesus story. The tradition does not allow us to believe that Jesus stumbled unwittingly into an establishment trap. While we may not want to think in terms of a 'passover plot' engineered by Jesus, we surely do not want to minimise the importance of the strategy of the eschatological prophet, influenced as it was by Scripture and events. Sanders himself wants to speak of Jesus as one working according to a particular plan. The problem is that plans have a nasty habit of going wrong. What happens, for example, when the long term goal and the impossibility of immediate achievement are seen to conflict with one another?

In one area Sanders' clarity and incisiveness does seem to desert him. He suggests that Jesus' gospel was 'otherworldly' and its aspirations 'apolitical', by which he means 'not involving a plan to liberate and restore Israel by defeating the Romans and establishing an autonomous state' (p. 298). That is a view which would receive nods of approval from many quarters; but I do not happen to believe that millenarianism, however otherworldly (and I certainly would not

accept that description in the case of Jesus' message), is an apolitical position. Indeed, when one enquires further into Sanders' own view, his assessment of Jesus' eschatology explicitly affirms that it looks forward to a concrete social order. If Sanders tends to convey that Jesus rejected the Zealot option of a violent insurrection initiated by Jews to remove the Romans from the land of Israel, then I agree with him. If, however, he considers that the restoration of Israel could be contemplated without the overthrow of the Romans and that Jewish and early Christian hopes were 'otherworldly' and non-material, then I think that the bulk of the Jewish and early Christian eschatological material points against him. In the new age there is not room for both God and Caesar. The latter would have to go, even if the hand of God (however that may be conceived; whether it be through a sudden cataclysmic irruption into history or through the due process of history) was the means of his removal.

It is often supposed that otherworldly means 'another world' (perhaps heaven or new heaven and earth) will be the arena of the eschatological drama. This is the position frequently argued by those who suppose that there is another, otherworldly, eschatology in ancient Judaism which functioned as an alternative eschatological focus to the materialistic eschatology of the rabbis. Sanders knows his Jewish material too well not to realise that the evidence for this is slight (he quotes the Testament of Moses 10). What he seems to want to argue for is not an otherworldly hope, but a hope for another age. Thus for him (and in this I would agree) the difference lies not so much in the sphere of eschatological activity but in its radical newness and the *means* of its accomplishment. The fulfilment of the hope comes through God's hand (in all likelihood the working out of God's purposes through the vicissitudes of human history) in a new age or world *order* but not in a new world. Of course, New Testament interpreters have to deal with the fact that it is the New Testament texts which so consistently seem to deal with discontinuity between old and new as well as sudden irruptions into the old order. What needs to be investigated, however, is whether such beliefs reflect alteration of established patterns of thought in the light of specific circumstances of early Christian experience: Jesus had departed temporarily to heaven (Acts 3.20f) to return in glory to establish God's reign on earth. Just as Paul rewrote Jewish eschatological expectation with regard to Jews and Gentiles in Rom. 9–11, so in its Parousia doctrine the early church may have developed a messianism which arose from its convictions about Jesus' resurrection as the first fruits of the harvest of the dead, which still awaited completion in the near future.

This matter raises for me one of the inevitable problems posed by the sort of eschatology which Sanders so convincingly identifies as central to the early Christian movement. He talks of early Christianity

as 'an orthodox Jewish messianic movement'. Personally, and on the basis of knowledge of similar movements, I would have thought that orthodox was a most inappropriate adjective to describe movements whose rapid growth and development tend to make them highly unpredictable in form and growth. Messianism and millenarianism provoke attitudes and actions of an unstable kind, and adherents might expect to find themselves needing to work out routes for the immediate use with few traditional maps to guide them. This, I would suggest, was as true for Jesus as it was for Paul and the primitive church. Thus attempts to relate the Christian movement to its Second Temple setting needs to take full account of this particular distinctive factor in assessing its development.

Ed Sanders speaks of Jesus as a 'reasonable visionary'. In part this statement must be seen as a rebuttal of the Schweitzerian portrait of Jesus as an eschatological fanatic. I would not dissent from Sanders' description, but the problem is that visionaries are never universally respected. The Beelzebub controversy gives us a glimpse of an assessment of Jesus by those who considered him anything but reasonable. If by 'reasonable' Sanders wishes to exclude the fanatical and outrageous attitudes and behaviour which so often attend the practice of utopianism (e.g. in the excesses committed during the siege of Jerusalem), then few will dissent from his assessment. In the circumstances confronting him it would appear that Jesus of Nazareth did not seek to impose his views on others by force but took a course of action which led to his execution as a martyr for his vision of the Kingdom. That indeed could be regarded as the path of the reasonable visionary.

Sanders asserts that one of his abiding tasks has been to remove the study of early Christian history thought from theology. We have seen this happening in his major works, particularly in the way in which he has exposed the caricatures of Judaism so often used by New Testament specialists. While I welcome this, I think that it is also incumbent upon the historian to recognise that historiography is no less encumbered by a variety of assumptions which inevitably link him or her to a particular culture. I am sure Ed Sanders is well aware of this and can offer pertinent comments on this matter. I hope that he will do so. The fact that I find the portrait of Jesus offered by him not only convincing but also congenial must say something about my own society as well as the complex of religious and political assumptions which characterise my own personal discipleship. Clearly at the beginning of this century the eschatological Jesus was not very attractive to Albert Schweitzer: for him Jesus' cross marked the end of eschatology and the story of primitive Christianity was of an attempt to come to terms with and reinterpret the legacy of Jesus' eschatology. While we must always take care to examine the complex formation of

particular interpretative stances, I do think that we have made some important advances in our quest for the historical Jesus over the last hundred years. If Sanders' study manages to put Christianity's eschatological and millenarian inheritance on the map once again, then it will have not only illuminated one of the most important events in history but rehabilitated the images of Jewish and early Christian eschatology, whose power is much needed in a civilisation where hope for radical change is very much on the agenda. I, for one, am grateful for the wisdom and clarity which make this a major contribution to the study of Christian origins and contemporary use of Christianity's foundation documents.

* E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*. SCM Press, London, 1985. Pp. xiv + 444. £15.00

A Relationship of a New Kind: Marxism as a Transcendental Atheism*

John Hoffman

The atheistic character of Marxism has often been regarded as an obstruction to dialogue and debate between Marxists and Christians. A recent contributor to this discussion suggests that if Marx has anything to offer Christians, it is 'in spite of his atheism', while others have pressed for a *modus vivendi* between science and faith; materialism and religion.¹ Yet the atheism of the Marxist tradition is, I want to argue, an atheism which 'transcends'. It is an atheism which translates the preoccupations of world religions into the language of a dialectical science and in this way offers a way out of the conceptual rigidities in which conventional materialists and believers alike find themselves increasingly trapped. It is an atheism which is far more positive and liberating than is commonly assumed.

I shall begin by presenting the Marxist case for atheism both in historical terms and as I believe it stands in logic. Once this is done, it