

An Interview with E. P. Sanders “Paul, Context, & Interpretation”

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At the occasion of Syracuse University’s Postmodernism, Religion, and Culture conference, titled “Saint Paul among the Philosophers”, Michael Barnes Norton sat down with religious scholar and historian E. P. Sanders to discuss the issues at stake in philosophical interpretations of the enigmatic writings of Paul, and in general the contemporary use of ancient texts.

E. P. Sanders: I think context is the crucial issue. In light of what are we reading this? I’m a person of very limited brain, and I’m going to read Paul in light of what I have studied and what I know—i.e., Palestine in the first century and especially first century Judaism. You could ask, “Can he be lifted out of that context?” and I would start stumbling. I do not want to say that what I do is the end all and be all and that everyone who wants to read Paul must do it the way I do it. On the other hand, when I see a sentence that had a perfectly clear meaning in its original context taken out of that context and used some other way in a later context, then I kind of shudder.

With the modern appropriation of Paul, I feel like I’m stuck. Readers have been appropriating him into their own contexts since at least the Epistle of James (which misunderstood him!). The epistle says [in argument with Paul], “Faith without works is dead.” But Paul was entirely in favor of good works. The works he had in mind, against which he was polemicizing in Galatians and Romans, were those works that make you Jewish and distinguished you from Gentiles. So, the author of James takes

it that Paul is against works, i.e., good deeds. Paul loved good deeds! He recommends them to people all the time. But if you take his statement, “righteousness by faith, not by works,” out of its context—the question whether or not Gentile converts need to be circumcised—if you take it out of that context and put it in another context, I always kind of shudder at this. But it makes me go through life shuddering! I shudder when James does it, I shudder when Luther does it, I shudder when a more modern person than Luther does it. But I take these to be my own limits rather than the fault of everybody else.

JPS: Isn’t there a certain limitation wrapped up with the original context, or even with the task of interpretation in general? For instance, the way Alain Badiou interprets Paul as a kind of prophet of universalism, while possibly valid, is valid only in a limited sense. We’re in a very different situation today. What we think of as a universal incorporation of different cultures under a kind of liberal umbrella is very different than the universalism that Paul preached under the umbrella of Christianity.

EPS: I think Paul basically felt what most of us think: that the whole world ought to be like we are. Then everything would be fine. He thought the whole world should be like he was. He recommends himself as the model to his churches in letter after letter. If you go through his letters looking for the first-person (“I do it this way”), you always find the implied imperative (“this is the way you ought to do it”). So, his universalism is patterned on his own conversion experience: “Of course you’re suffering. Suffering is good, Christians suffer. Christ suffered. Prophets suffer. Look at me, I suffer. So, you should suffer. What’s your problem?” His view of what people should be is highly autobiographical. I don’t know how that actually plays—this autobiographical side of Paul, this “Do things the way I do!”—in a multicultural situation.

JPS: Also, Paul is often read against the background of an assumed Greek-Jew distinction, i.e., the idea that there are Greek people and there are Jewish people, and that Paul is trying to find a space for them to co-exist. In the actual situation of the first century, however, it was much more complex than that. There were mutual influences and interconnections between cultures, and in a certain sense this milieu was already universalized.

EPS: The Greco-Roman world was highly universalized, and it had a kind of universalist vision. But you don't actually detect this precisely articulated, as far as I know, by Gentile thinkers as early as Paul. I think you first begin to see a notion within Rome that Romans have a universal mandate ("everyone should be like us") with the emperor Hadrian. He wanted the Jews to stop being circumcised. He wanted everyone to have temples of the sort he liked. He toured the empire and tried to stitch it together into a kind of unity, and he wanted to build a fence around it and keep other people out. So, this sort of unified empire wouldn't actually take on the entire world. He built a wall across the narrow part of England to keep the barbarians to the north out of his civilized world.

But to your average thoughtful Gentile, the people who appeared to be opposed to universalism were (a) the Jews and (b) the Christians, because they would not fit in. The Jews retained their autonomy and their national characteristics; they wouldn't just surrender them to Greco-Roman sameness. Josephus, the great Jewish historian, points this out. He wrote, "No people hold on to their customs the way we do. Even the Spartans gave them up! They did not cling to their constitution the way that the Jews cling to their constitution." It was the Jews who held out against the merger of Greco-Roman identities, and the Christians followed them. Christians wouldn't merge either, and so they got persecuted for a while—until they took over the empire. Then they started persecuting everybody

else. They were not at all concerned with getting along with everyone or having something into which everyone fits. Christians started persecuting people who were not Christians, and then they started persecuting one another for being the wrong kind of Christian. So, I would say there's a kind of anti-universalism in the Biblical tradition. It accepts universalism, but only if everyone would be like the dominant group.

JPS: Some would want to defend certain ineptual figures, like Paul or the historical Jesus or the apostles, saying that that wasn't really their message, that that was the message of an institution, a church that grew up after them.

EPS: Well, this is true. Paul doesn't ever say anything in favor of persecuting non-Christians. Of course not! I wouldn't mean to attribute this later movement to him. On the other hand, I think his view of the world is that he's going to find a space, as you put it, between Jew and Gentile by making them all part of a new third entity. This is an old debate among scholars: did Paul actually have a conception of a third race, which is what it came to be called in the second century—Christians as the third race, neither Jew nor Greek but a new nation? I think the answer to this question is, "Yes, but he didn't articulate it precisely." It's quite clear that he is constructing new social circumstances, that his church members did not go to synagogues on the Sabbath, and that they also did not go to pagan temples. They're definitely a third creation—neither Jew nor pagan—and he thought everyone should join it. That was his form of universalism, his social form of universalism.

JPS: In your work, you emphasize the non-systematicity of Paul's thought. It's undeniable that he's not trying to construct a philosophy or a theology that would be doctrinal. He's addressing specific concerns, and sometimes his answers seem to contradict each other. I wonder if that non-systematicity will

always end up being a tough spot for those who do want to appropriate a Pauline message or a Pauline program into a philosophical or even a theological system.

EPS: It doesn't slow them up at all, because they just take parts! The great thing about saying that you accept a figure or that you accept a text—for example, the modern fundamentalists who say that they accept the entire Bible—is that you can choose which bits and pieces you will make use of and ignore the bits and pieces that you don't want to make use of. So, that's the way it is with appropriating Paul: I can say that I accept the entire Paul, while only taking bits of Paul. I'm sure that the Lutheran theologians of the post-Reformation period thought that they were doing justice to the whole Paul, but they were leaving out such important things as sacramentalism and mysticism and so on, which are part of the whole Paul. So, you can pretend to do it and yet not actually do it.

JPS: In Luther's own use of Paul, you can see certain historical circumstances; the uses are appropriate to a certain situation. Whereas in Lutheranism, what becomes orthodox Lutheranism...

EPS: It goes downhill. Lutheranism is much farther away from the historical Paul than Luther himself, who actually was somewhat sympathetic to the mystical parts of Paul. I always hate to criticize Luther himself. He did give certain biases to his reading of Paul, but what happened was that they became solidified into dogma in later years, as you were just saying.

JPS: Would you say there's a similarity between Paul's (and Luther's) attention to specific, historical circumstances and what Daniel Boyarin sees operative in the ancient sophists, viz. the recognition that human knowledge stands at an impassable distance from absolute or universal truth?

EPS: Yes, and I'd be inclined personally to sympathize with the sophists as well. It's very hard for me to think that the human mind actually can comprehend absolute, ultimate truth that can somehow be true through all circumstances over thousands of years. I think our minds are simply too strongly conditioned by who we are, where we live, what we do and what we know, and I don't see how we're ever going to be able to transcend all that. People, as far as I know, who believe in transcendence—true transcendence—believe in revelation. And that somehow the revelation that gets into the human mind is not corrupted by it, that it stays over and above. But I think that's impossible. I think that whatever one makes of revelation, it's still apprehended by people, and people all have their limitations. I love reading Plato, but I'm not a Platonist. I think if there is an absolute Truth, an absolute Good, or an absolute Beauty out there somewhere, we would never know it. What we have to do is do the best we can with the resources we have from time to time.

I wouldn't wish to say that there are no principles. I think there are principles, but the problem with principles is knowing which principle to apply when. God loves all humans, he wants us to do good to all humans—let's say we have this as a principle. How do you apply it, say, faced with Nazism? The devil is in the details; the devil is in the application of ideas. And I don't think anything helps us with it. I don't think there's some sort of truth that helps us with these things, that helps us know how to apply things.

JPS: You would have to apply this same sort of outlook methodologically when you're reading texts, when you read scripture, to say that you can't assume any kind of unilateral system or ideology behind an author. Especially in the case of biblical studies, when you're dealing with multiple authors from multiple times and multiple traditions, but even in the case of one author—Paul for instance—in

every case of interpretation, one has to proceed case by case.

EPS: I either am, or wish very badly to be, a historian. In my own case I always start “back there” and focus on what case Paul was arguing in what context. Who were his opponents? What other issues were at stake in the debates? Because Paul’s letters are partially debates, and we can reconstruct another side, or two or three other sides, behind the letters. For instance, there are actually five main actors—either individuals or groups of people—in Galatians, and all we know about them is what Paul wrote in Galatians. But it does appear that there were these five bunches of people. There were people who were persecuting Paul, and those who were persecuting because they feared being persecuted by someone else, and the persecutors of the persecutors, etc. So, there are lots of groups, and we can reconstruct this situation. Then we’ve at least understood why he said what he said when he said it, and after that you might try to think how you could make use of this. I think that my view is that the use of the Bible is long, slow, and tedious, and it would never work if you had to give a sermon every Sunday. You can’t analyze a biblical passage from the ground up every week.

JPS: But even in cases of more laborious study, there arise tendencies in certain scholars to interpret things in one way or another.

EPS: There are tendencies, of course, yes.

JPS: It seems to me that in fundamentalists’ use of scriptures—in the way that they give themselves license, as you said, to pick and choose—there’s a sort of tacit realization of the way that different problems need to be addressed particularly and not in a systematic way. While there may be on the surface of their preaching a sort of systematic table of the ideas they’re going to believe, their use of the text betrays a recognition of the value

of a case-by-case approach, although a less careful or modest one.

EPS: I think that’s right: a case by case approach where you generally resolve a case by referring to a proof text, the origin of which you never analyze. You just use the words on the page.

JPS: So is this maybe a symmetrical reverse of the model for scholarly study?

EPS: Fundamentalism, Protestant Christian fundamentalism, is of course a definite social phenomenon. It has a point of origin: the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, in the Midwestern U.S. And it was deliberately and consciously opposed to biblical criticism, by people who had heard of the four-source hypothesis—J, E, D, and P—and hated it. They formulated fundamentalism against this sort of thing, i.e., the sort of analysis that exposes disagreements and discrepancies and so on. Because these four sources (J, E, D, and P) don’t entirely agree with each other. For instance, there are two tables of ten commandments, and they’re not precisely the same. And there are all kinds of other little rubs. They hated it, so they formulated against that the specific idea that the entire Bible agrees with itself, which will get you into this horrible problem of making Paul and the author of James agree with each other when the author of James says, “No, I’m opposing him.” How is this at all coherent? It’s a dogma—that all the parts of the Bible agree with each other—that simply kills study. The mind studies by comparison and contrast, and if you eliminate contrast from its tools, you’re sunk. So you can’t study it; you can just learn the passages you want to use. It’s too bad. Biblical criticism has its weaknesses, but this is not a good corrective to them.

JPS: I think that often philosophers who draw from scripture tend to do a similar thing, though. They say, “Here’s this complex from this book, and this complex from this other book. They don’t really

have that much to do with each other, but they both seem to me to be making the same point, so I'm going to use them as examples together."

EPS: I think all users of the Bible or any other ancient text do basically the same thing, except historians who try not to (but who doubtless nevertheless sometimes do it too)—viz., read a text as what it seems to them to mean rather than what it would have seemed to someone at the time to mean. The question I always have is whether or not I think anyone except a historian should deal with an ancient text. Can you read it for what it means for me today? Of course, I have to admit that millions of Christians and Jews throughout the ages have read the Bible "for what it means for me today" and have derived enormous benefit from it. I think it can be only salutary for individuals to do this, but when they start using bits and pieces from it out of context in order to build a system, that's where they go astray. So I think the difference is between, on the one hand, an individual reading that asks, "What does this say to me?"—which seems to me perfectly natural and wholesome—and, on the other hand, using bits from the Bible deliberately to build a system that is basically contrary to some of the principles of the Bible.

JPS: Do you think, then, that there is a necessary gap between what you do as a historical or textual critic of a text and what someone does who extracts out of it a normative meaning for today?

EPS: I think there's a gap, and I think there's a tension. And since I'm going through life with this gap very strongly in my mind, it becomes difficult for me to listen to sermons because I keep thinking of what this meant at its time. And the proper business of the clergyman is to make sense of what this could mean for us today. That's his job, and as I said, he doesn't have time to work the issue out from the ground up, to go back to its origin and march forward. So, we all end up lifting bits from the Bible or other

ancient sources and using them as it seems best to us, and I don't think that this is evil. I think it sometimes has unfortunate results, but I don't think Luther was evil to read Paul and be inspired by it, although his Paul is not quite the Paul of the first century. I don't think Calvin was evil to read the Bible and derive from it the majesty of God, which led him from point to point so that he built up this enormous and wonderful structure (with somewhat biblical roots). But this sometimes ends up departing quite widely from what's in the Bible. I think it's a question of the quality of the person who does this. Luther and Calvin were great men, something I can't say about the fundamentalist system-builders.

JPS: Could one say that to the degree to which someone who does devote the time and energy to looking at the sources and going back to the historical circumstances in order to fully explicate what was going on at that time that produced these texts, the degree to which she is able to separate herself from a certain philosophy or theology or any imposed interpretation, the degree to which all that is successful—to that degree will more or better possibilities be opened up for philosophical and theological interpretations that are applicable today? In other words, if the preacher who doesn't have the time to do the historical work can read someone who has had the time...

EPS: Yes, that's the way it ought to work. I think historians and exegetes all toil at their task thinking, "Someone's going to be able to use this." It isn't just of antiquarian interest. The truth is that for pros who spend their lives doing this, they have a lot of antiquarian interest. They want to know the nitty-gritty of what things really were back then, and that becomes a goal in and of itself. But I think in the back of most people's minds who write a commentary on Galatians, a commentary on Romans, a commentary on Genesis, or a book about one of these subjects, is the idea that

someone will be able to use their historical work for some good end. I wouldn't know how to apply this, but I think that's the hope of historians. Whether or not it's ever the outcome, I don't know.

I don't know what information was available to Kierkegaard, for instance, when he wrote *Fear and Trembling*, but I have the impression he could have written it without any information at all about the historical origin of the Abraham story. But again, it's the question of the quality of the individual who's employing it. I don't have a principle that says what Luther did with Paul is good and what someone else did is bad, or what Kierkegaard did was good and what someone else did was bad. This is entirely a humanistic assessment. What are the consequences? How profoundly was it done? What are the points that are made? And so on. One of the things I wish I could live long enough to write a book on (but I won't) could be called the "humanistic evaluation of religion." It has a history: it comes out of Greece and follows the theory of a guy named Euhemerus, who thought that the Greek gods were all humans who had simply become glamorized and glorified with the passing of years. Therefore [according to Euhemerism], the study of Greek religion is something that should be entirely humanistic, because the gods were anthropomorphically conceived. So, you would be evaluating what the benefits are to humans.

Then there's Philo of Alexandria, who asks why Judaism is better than paganism. And of course in part it's because it's revealed by the only true God. He's got a theological view, but his most telling arguments are humanistic. Judaism produces better human beings. "We are sincere," he argues; "in our purification rituals we are really purifying ourselves, whereas in pagan purification rituals they're not really purifying themselves." It's entirely based around things like sincerity, avoiding hypocrisy, the love of humanity instead of

the hatred of humanity, etc. The entire evaluative process is humanistic; it is the notion that human values are those that really count. Philo used that to evaluate his own religion, and found it to be excellent! I think that is very interesting, and I like it. I believe in it. So, I will now confess to you what I think, which is that some people use the Bible out of context and the results are wonderful, and some people use it out of context and the results are awful. My criterion is humanism; the question is whether or not interpretations benefit people.

JPS: It's interesting that you bring up that question in connection with the ancient world, because I think we in our contemporary world tend to think that *this* is the age of humanism...

EPS: Like we discovered it!

JPS: Exactly, that we're shaking off religious ideologies and really *starting* to concentrate on the human. But this is precisely the same age when we ask "Is this *correct*?" rather than "Is this *beneficial*?" Whereas in the ancient world, people wanted to know, "What does this do for me? How does this make the world better?"

EPS: There was the anti-humane move toward dogma, which got Christianity into all sorts of difficulties, I think. You stop worrying about the welfare of humans, because all you're worried about is their souls. So, if they suffer in this life, that's fine. And if they have the wrong idea, and you have to torture or kill them, that's fine because their souls will then be saved—or there's a chance, if they would only confess! Dogma turned out to justify extremely anti-humane treatment of people. I think that's a very bad point in Christianity. I much prefer the ancient (and modern) humane evaluation of religion.