



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:

WEDNESDAY, JULY 13, 2016 - SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY - DOYLE BANQUET HALL NORTH

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

Deconstructing the dichotomy

A response to Prof. E.P. Sanders

Rev. Dick Pruikma

Dear Professor Sanders,
ladies and gentlemen,

June 4, 1987 was a remarkable, if not historic day in my life. On that Thursday, almost thirty years ago, I bought my first book written by Professor E. P. Sanders: *Jesus and Judaism*. I brought my copy with me today. I paid no less than 61 guilders and 50 cents in that pre-Euro era. Moreover, I must have been very impressed by Professor Sanders' work: I bought another of his books that very day. I also became the proud owner of *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*. Which upped the price of my purchase to a whopping 96 guilders and 35 cents. I can assure you, ladies and gentlemen, these books have been more than worth every cent they cost. Let me not forget to mention some other books: *The Historical Figure of Jesus* - in Dutch translation: Jezus, mythe en werkelijkheid – and most certainly *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

Why did I buy these books? Well, simply because for me a new world was opened; a really new perspective on Paul, and not only on Paul. Dear Professor Sanders, you may not have been aware of it every day, yet it is true that you have been accompanying and guiding me on my theological ways for almost thirty years now. Me, a Dutch Protestant pastor, serving his congregations. And as I offer you, ladies and gentlemen, a few reflections this afternoon, I would like to start with outlining a little bit of my background as a Protestant pastor in the Netherlands to explain why the work of Professor Sanders has been so important in that theological environment.

As a second step in my reflections, I would like to say something about how his theological innovation has been developed in my church and in the field of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Or not.

And last but not least, a third step. Being a former General Secretary of this organization, I would like to share with you a few thoughts about how we could integrate in our international dialogue work the perspectives Prof. Sanders and others have introduced to us. And all this in great



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gratitude to Professor Sanders and many others for what they taught us. They have paved the way.

Obviously it was not sheer coincidence that I bought those books written by Prof. Sanders that 4th of June 1987. The purchase was not entirely without history, completely out of the blue. I am of course part of a tradition. And I am proud of the many and early attempts that were made in Protestant circles in the Netherlands in order to reduce the theological gap between Jews and Christians by making a radical end to the teaching of contempt. The most important tool obviously was the effort to read the Scriptures over and over again and to re-think Jewish-Christian relations. But this time this work was not done without but *with* our Jewish friends and colleagues. Even before the Second World War, voices were heard in the Netherlands addressing the huge gap between Jews and Christians as not according to Scriptures—as Scripture was then newly understood within the framework of nascent Jewish-Christian dialogue. The aim, even in those early days, was to bridge the gap that had existed for centuries, asserting the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. As Prof. Sanders said this afternoon: Many Christians think that Judaism in Paul’s days was a terrible religion and that its adherents were miserable.

A turning point—though unfortunately not much noticed when published—was the thesis of Dr. J.J. Meuzelaar, published in 1961, entitled *Der Leib des Messias*, in which he explores the metaphor of the body of Christ, the “*sooma tou Christou*” in Paul’s letters. Meuzelaar published his thesis in German because he hoped to influence the not yet published volumes of the *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*. His thesis is remarkable and as it is written in German it is accessible only for the few people who do not speak Dutch.

Meuzelaar’s professor Van Unnik already had said in 1947 that “no serious study of earliest Christianity is possible without knowledge of Judaism, its language, its history and way of thinking.”ⁱ

This view certainly was not commonplace in 1947. In the introduction to the 1979 photographic reprint of Meuzelaar’s thesis, we read that Meuzelaar himself was seriously concerned with insights that unfortunately are even much less commonplace, namely that the schism between the synagogal and the messianic assemblies, the schism that became acute later, not yet had taken place during Paul’s life, and that, on the contrary, most communities or groups to which the apostle wrote his letters, were still entirely part of the Jewish diaspora of those days. The theme of the letters is therefore not determined by the later contrasts between synagogue and church, but by those between Jews and Greeks, or Israel and the nations.ⁱⁱ

It’s amazing to see so many years later now in 2016 that both ideas span the very early period from 1947 to 1961. And it is even more amazing that we, studying theology ten or even fifteen years later at the seminary of my church in the provincial town of Kampen, we were taught nothing about all this. But we bought the books you know. And we rebelled against our professors, inviting representatives of the “Tenach and Gospel” group founded already in 1957 from Amsterdam.ⁱⁱⁱ We organized our own series of lectures to emphasize and explain the necessity that we were aware, while reading, studying and preaching the New Testament, that Testament that the vast majority of these writings originated in and only can be understood within the context of multicolored, first-century Judaism.



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What motivated us students? I think it was a strong intuition that the theological dichotomy,^{iv} to quote Magnus Zetterholm, between Judaism and Christianity, which is so deeply anchored in our theological genes and which fine tunes all our terminology and hermeneutics, is not based on historical facts but on a way of reading Scripture that is determined by a normative theology. And that, consequently, these theologically normative convictions also define “the other”, our partner in dialogue. So the work of Professor Sanders fell on fertile ground, to cite the parable. For here we studied books on *Jesus and Judaism* and on *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, in which the gospels and letters were not placed in a black-and-white scheme against their Jewish background, but in which the New Testament writings were considered very much part of the Jewish world of the first century CE itself.

These observations caused a New Perspective on Paul. Magnus Zetterholm, in his introductory essay to the volume *Paul with Judaism* summarizes the importance of Prof. Sanders' work as follows:

What he (Sanders) found he labeled "covenantal nomism" by which he meant that there exists a relationship between covenantal theology and the Torah. In contrast to the prevalent view of first-century Judaism, Sanders found that the pious Jew does not observe the Torah in order to earn his or her righteousness, but to confirm his or her willingness to remain in a covenantal relationship with the God of Israel.^v

So far so good. Let us take a second step. How did all this develop where I live? Unfortunately, I can be brief as far as my own setting is concerned. Because it did not develop that much at all. And regrettably, this is mainly due to the distance between academia and ecclesia. Of course, scholars like Peter Tomson with his *Paul and the Jewish Law* and others from Holland and Belgium absolutely contributed to the continuing theological process. Peter Tomson for instance focuses on the role of Halacha in Paul's letters and is convinced that the first letter to the Corinthians is much more important than the letter to the Romans.

But within the churches and their departments for Jewish-Christian dialogue, the focus was for many years mainly if not only on the Middle East, burdening the dialogue and hindering the theological process. So many of us, pastors and priests, busy in our congregations and parishes, missed out on a lot of important issues.

For instance, the developments from the New Perspective on Paul to a radical new perspective on Paul, now preferably called "Paul within Judaism." If it is correct that Judaism is NOT about work righteousness but can be characterized as covenantal nomism, and when indeed Paul found nothing wrong with the Torah, as Prof. Sanders explained this afternoon, then why would Paul have left Judaism?

I come back to the previous quote from Meuzelaar's *Der Leib des Messias*: “The theme of the letters is not determined by the later contrasts between synagogue and church, but by those between Jews and Greeks, or Israel and the nations.”^{vi} In my own words: it is not the opposition, the contrast, the contradiction between covenantal nomism and justification by faith/salvation by Christ, but between Jew and Greek or Israel and the nations that is fundamental to Paul. Living as a Jew, Paul does not distinguish three categories on our way to salvation. It is not about Jews



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and pagans as the basis dialectical contrast and Christians as the synthesis. It is all about Jews and non-Jews. We need to re-invent our vocabulary.

Anders Runesson rightfully points out the dangers that hide in our use of words that we think are absolutely clear.

We must ask ourselves whether the earliest followers of Jesus would have recognized themselves as belonging under the umbrella term "Christianity", the companion word of "Christians". Paul offers no evidence that he had ever heard of "Christianity." Christians occurs only three times in the entire New Testament: two are in Acts and one in the first letter of Peter, both texts postdating Paul.^{vii}

Step by step, Christian scholars, here in the United States more closely cooperating with their Jewish colleagues than in Europe and elsewhere, are deconstructing the theological dichotomy of Judaism and Christianity in the first century.

And on the Jewish side? In an article called "Where Do We Go from Here? Unresolved issues and Suggested Solutions" Rabbi Gary Bretton-Grantor writes:

Franz Rosenzweig's notion that, while it is possible to understand oneself as a Jew absent knowledge of Christianity, it is impossible to understand oneself as a Christian absent knowledge of Judaism, must now be challenged. In this serious reading of the New Testament, Jewish scholars are coming to understand that one of the sole records of the debates of the Jewish community in the first and second century of the Common Era is found in the New Testament. If Jews are to gain an understanding of the development and flowering of the rabbinic period, evidence of who we were and who we were not - and what we debated about - evidence is found in this primary source. And we Jews must lose our fear of reading, and learning from, the Christian scriptures.^{viii}

When I come as a third step to a brief conclusion to these reflections, I can easily follow Rabbi Gary's thoughts. It is indeed of utmost importance that the theological expertise present in ICCJ be used to strengthen this process of deconstructing the theological dichotomy of Judaism and Christianity.

The ICCJ is the platform par excellence where Jewish and Christian scholars (can) come together in an international context not only to summarize what has been discovered so far but even more to make this scholarly debate accessible to grassroots interfaith workers in our member organizations.

The paradigm shift in the past decades is amazing. After Jesus has come home *Die Heimholung Jesu*, it is now time for Paul and others to follow him. What we now call Christianity started as a specific form of Judaism. Mark Nanos and Anders Runesson have suggested naming that specific form of Judaism "Apostolic Judaism." And the so-called parting of the ways, well, we know how long that took.

My concluding plea therefore is to bring scholarly expertise together, from this side of "The Pond" and from other parts of the globe, Jews and Christians, academia and ekklesia in a new theological project. We do not call that project of course "Paul within Judaism". That is the specific Christian way of speaking. But bringing Judaism and Christianity—what later became



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Rabbinic Judaism and non-Jewish Christianity—to the point they are not two separated, let alone hostile, entities, but are part of one, multicolored Jewish world. This process of deconstructing the theological dichotomy can really move Jewish-Christian relationships forward today.

We could enter into a deep theological, hermeneutical dialogue. Let's do it.

Notes:

i Quotation by K.H. Kroon in his introduction to the 1979 photographic reprint of J.J. Meuzelaar, “Der Leib des Messias”, Kampen, 1979, V.

ii *Ib.*

iii The institution still exists. See <http://leerhuisamsterdam.eu/>, date of consultation: July 2016

iv See M. Zetterholm, “Paul within Judaism: the State of the Questions”, in Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (eds.), *Paul within Judaism, Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, Minneapolis: Publisher 2015, 33

v Zetterholm, *ib.*, 43.

vi J.J. Meuzelaar, “Der Leib des Messias”, Kampen, 1979, V.

vii A. Runesson, “The Question of terminology”, in Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (eds.), *Paul within Judaism, Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, Minneapolis: Publisher 2015, 59

viii Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, *Where Do We Go From Here? Unresolved issues and Suggested Solutions*, http://archive.adl.org/main_interfaith/nostra_aetate1bd4.html#.V3ZxubiLSLI, date of consultation: July 2016