



Book Review

E. P. Sanders. *Paul: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 165 pp. Paperback. (First published 1991 as *Paul* in Oxford University Press Past Masters series. Published 2009 with new illustrations and additional text as *Paul* in Sterling Publishing A Brief Insight series).

Reviewed by Lyn Nixon

Introduction/Summary

E. P. Sanders' short introduction to Paul begins with chapters covering Paul's mission, his life, and his missionary strategy and basic message. Following this are chapters outlining certain key theological topics or themes in Paul's writings: the return of the Lord and the resurrection of the dead, righteousness by faith and being in Christ (a chapter each for Galatians and Romans), Christology, the law, (correct) behavior according to Paul, and the salvation of Israel and of the world as presented in Romans 9-11. Between chapter 4 on the return of the Lord and the two chapters on righteousness by faith, Sanders includes a chapter on Paul's theological presuppositions, specifically monotheism and providence.

Although this book is billed as an "introduction," this is something of a misnomer. From the outset, the language of the book is quite technical and presumes a basic understanding of Judaism and early Christianity, which many students in public secondary school may not have. The book even looks technical, since the typeface is very small, the paragraphs are flush left with a single blank line between them, the chapter headings are in gray scale, and there are only seven illustrations, all black-and-white. (Those considering using the book might take a look at the 2009 hardcover edition, which has standard paragraphing plus more—and color—illustrations).

Another problem with using this book as an introduction to Paul is that it is not a balanced presentation of Pauline scholarship. Sanders is Arts and Sciences Professor of Religion Emeritus at Duke University and before moving to Duke was Dean Ireland's Professor of Exegesis at Oxford and Fellow of The Queen's College. His field of special interest is Judaism and Christianity in the Greco-Roman world, and he is perhaps best known for introducing what has become known as the "New Perspective" on Paul. (For those unfamiliar with New Perspective, www.thepaulpage.com says that "at its core is the recognition that Judaism is not a religion of self-righteousness whereby humankind seeks to merit salvation before God. Paul's argument with the Judaizers was not about Christian grace versus Jewish legalism. His argument was rather about the status of Gentiles in the church.")

But although scholarship in many fields owes a debt to Sanders for asking questions about first-century Judaism and Paul's theological relationship to it, many of his conclusions have stirred up controversy. Notably, his running argument against Luther's emphasis on imputed "righteousness," which Sanders terms "fictional" and which he says "has often been shown to be an incorrect interpretation of Paul" (p. 58; cf. pp. 58, 79, 81, etc.), has provoked criticism from many modern theologians and pastors, including Douglas Moo and John Piper. Other elements of Sanders' theory have also been challenged. For example, although scholar and Anglican

churchman N. T. Wright would also argue against imputed righteousness, he believes that Sanders' notion that Paul "was not concerned with the meaning of the biblical passages in their own ancient context" (Sanders, p. 66) is not borne out by the biblical texts.

Furthermore, the book is a little dated in several respects. For one, Sanders uses the 3rd person masculine pronouns (he, him, his) when referring to God (cf. pp. 41, 49, 97). Additionally, although Sanders does provide some very helpful suggestions for further reading in the back of the book, these apparently have not been updated since the first release of the book in 1991 since the latest publication date mentioned is 1989.

Therefore, although Sanders covers an impressive amount of ground in a very short book, the usefulness of this book in secondary education is limited. Some situations in which the book or parts of it may have value are indicated below.

Pedagogical Possibilities

One of the strengths of the book is Sanders' ability to locate Paul within first-century Judaism. Because of this, certain chapters of this book could be useful in public secondary education in courses on ancient, classical or world literature, on the Bible as literature, on comparative religions and/or their literature, and on philosophy. For such courses, the chapters on Paul's mission (chapter 1), his life (chapter 2) and on his theological presuppositions: monotheism and providence (chapter 5) may be helpful background reading to supplement reading of the primary source material, which presumably would be part or all of one or more of Paul's letters.

In any of these courses, the two examples in the beginning part of the section in chapter 6 entitled "Preliminary Difficulties" (pp. 53-57) would be an excellent introduction to those problems of translating ancient Greek into English which arise from the fact that modern English had two "parents," Norman French and Anglo-Saxon. For example, the Greek words translated into English as "faith" (a noun) and "to believe" (a verbal form) come from the same root in the Greek. This relationship is lost in the English translation since English uses the noun form inherited from the Norman French and the verbal form inherited from Anglo Saxon.

A course on Ethics might also use the first few sections of chapter 10 (Behavior). Unfortunately Sanders devotes the rest of the chapter (more than 2/3 of the total) to sexual behavior; this book may not be an appropriate way to present that topic in public school.

The section on Providence in chapter 5 might offer some good background for a course in Greco-Roman history or the cultural geography of the Mediterranean Basin. However, a more helpful resource might be the chapter from Wright's more recent (and also short) book, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) on "Gospel and Empire."

Sanders' book as a whole could be used in religious private (or charter) schools in a course with a significant focus on Paul's writings generally or on a more specific topic such as Paul and Judaism/the Law or on one or several of Paul's letters, such as Romans and/or Galatians. In such courses, this book would be a valuable tool in surfacing some of the issues in Pauline theology and in developing critical thinking abilities in students. However, given that Sanders is both an advocate of the New Perspective and is also theologically quite liberal (which can be seen, for example, in his chapters on Christology, the law, and Romans 9-11), it would be important to also present the views of other New Perspectivists as well as the traditional Reformed and Lutheran views. For the latter, the best overviews may be found in a resource dictionary, such as the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Walter A. Elwell). For the former,

one helpful summary of the development of the New Perspective and the views of its various adherents is Mark M. Mattison, "A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul," which can be found on-line at <http://www.thepaulpage.com/a-summary-of-the-new-perspective-on-paul/>. Another good resource is Michael B. Thompson's short work (under 30 pages) *The New Perspective on Paul* (available from Grove Books in either paperback or as an e-book). The latter also summarizes some of the major points of the traditional Lutheran position.

In general, teachers in either public or private schools will find it valuable to have some grounding in the New Perspective (and possibly the traditional views as well) before using Sanders' book in the classroom or even before engaging with the book personally.

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<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>