

A Tribute to E.P. Sanders (1937–2022)  
By Stephen Hultgren

We have learned of the passing of Professor Ed Parish (E.P.) Sanders, at the age of 85 years. The field of New Testament studies has lost a giant. I pass on my condolences to those who were closest to him and knew him best. I had the privilege of learning from Ed and getting to know him, first as my teacher and supervisor of my doctoral dissertation at Duke University (1997–2001), and then, when I held a limited-term teaching contract (2001–2004), as a senior colleague in the Department of Religion at the same institution. Others who knew Ed will have their own memories and reflections on his contributions. This is not the place to assess his work. Rather, it seemed like a good idea, as a former student, to say something about what I shall remember most about him, and what I received from him.

First, he instilled in his students a commitment to careful and sympathetic study of primary texts, in the original languages. Whether it was the intricacies of the synoptic problem, the history of the Pharisees according to Josephus, the reasoning of the tannaitic rabbis, or concepts in the thought of the apostle Paul, the first task was always to gain an intimate knowledge of the primary texts, towards the goal of sober, informed, and unprejudiced historical judgments, and of a clear grasp of concepts. Secondary literature must be engaged, of course, but that could never replace direct engagement with the primary sources. Ed modelled such engaged, indeed passionate, work with the sources in his scholarship and also in seminars, which were almost exclusively dedicated to reading and discussing primary (Greek and Hebrew language) texts. Indeed, it was this attribute that drew me to study with him in the first place. Ed modelled a commitment to loving and careful study of classic texts, even and perhaps especially those that might not be one's "first language," or those that might challenge one's preconceptions. Whatever one's other commitments might be, theological or otherwise, this is a *habitus* that is simply all too rare in the academy today.

Second, I shall remember his good humor. Although Ed took his work seriously, he did not take himself (too) seriously. He was not above wearing a funny necktie or (when the Masters Tournament was on) a green jacket on campus. I wonder how many readers of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, a work of great erudition and earnestness if there ever was one, know that, if they look up "Truth, ultimate" in the subject index, they will be directed to pages 30, 32, and 430, all of which are blank! I think that this authorial wink at the reader, no doubt written with a twinkle in the eye, epitomizes something about the man: Although he could have strong convictions about certain things, that did not stop him from being open to revisiting old questions, with an appropriate awareness of the limitations of our knowledge—an openness that he exhibited in an exemplary way in his own scholarship, as well as in his approach to students.

And that leads to the third thing that I shall remember about Ed: his humanity. I found him to be a humane person and teacher. He was appropriately critical and did not suffer fools gladly, but he was generous in his critique. He did not seek disciples, at least not in a narrow sense—the topic was always central, not personalities—nor did he expect me to arrive at the same conclusions of research that he might reach. Certainly one of the things that he will be most remembered for was his commitment to fostering a more sympathetic and accurate understanding of Judaism on the part of Christians. The recognition that he received from Jewish institutions and from organizations dedicated to mutual understanding between Jews and Christians testifies to that.

Ed spoke sympathetically of Judaism as a “neat religion.” I am fairly sure that one of the things that attracted him to the study of the rabbis was a feeling of kinship with them as persons who held strong convictions, but who did so without dogmatism. At any rate, that is what he found in the thought and life of the apostle Paul. He ends a smaller book on Paul with these questions: “[M]ust a religion, in addressing diverse problems, offer answers that are completely consistent with one another? Is it not good to have passionate hopes and commitments which cannot all be reduced to a scheme in which they are arranged in a hierarchical relationship?” I suspect that in this characterization of Paul, for whom he clearly had great sympathy, Ed saw something of himself, or at least something that he hoped to see in himself. In a field that has often been excessively and unfairly hostile to Pharisaism and its alleged legalism, Ed could appreciate the Pharisees’ reputation for fair-mindedness and leniency, and for what Josephus identified as their superior *akribeia*, their concern for precision or “getting it right.” Ed also wanted to get it right, but he wanted to do so by way of patient study and persuasion.

Whether Ed got Paul (or other things) right will undoubtedly be debated for years to come. One thing that should not be lost, however, is the spirit that animated his work on Paul, on Jesus and the gospels, on Judaism, and on all the other topics that he studied: the pursuit of excellence, curiosity, and an appreciation for the best of humanity’s achievements and possibilities; alongside of that, due humility in the face of inevitable failures and human limitations, buoyed by hope, humor, and good will.

Ed appreciated the rabbis and encouraged New Testament scholars to read them for themselves, and not rely on what others have said about them. It may be appropriate, then, to conclude with some rabbinic wisdom. In tractate *Avot*, Rabbi Hillel is quoted as saying: “Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving mankind and bringing them nigh to the Law” (Danby translation). Ed sought to bring others close to the texts that he cherished, and in doing so, he showed love for humanity in his own, unique way. Whether they agree with him on particular topics or not, New Testament scholars will long remain in debt for the contributions of Professor E.P. Sanders.

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