

Christianity and the Historical Jesus

Controversy continues to rage around the historical Jesus and the nature of the movement named after him. How did Jesus and the early Christians view themselves in relation to Judaism? To what degree was the eschatological hope of the early Church influenced by Jewish Messianic expectation? How was Jewish apocalyptic refurbished in the Christian experience?

In this issue, Anthony Buzzard argues that Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God is firmly grounded in the hope of the prophets of Israel. The founder of Christianity was not merely an enigmatic religious figure or teacher of individual morality; he was God's chosen Messiah, heralding the Kingdom to be established on the earth. Ray Mattera fleshes out this eschatology by helping to define the kingdom community of Jesus' followers. If Jesus' gospel message went far beyond individual inner transformation, what are the ramifications for Christian involvement in the socio-political order?

Marvin Wilson continues to argue that Hebrew spirituality must remain the staple of Christian self-understanding. Without it we are left with a less-than-desirable Gnostic mystery religion, a dualistic and shattered remnant of an illegitimate Jewish sect. For the editors of this journal, the type of Paul described by Hyam Maccoby remains no Paul at all.

Yet some questions remain about Paul's relationship to the Judaism of his day. If Paul never ceased to be a Pharisaic Jew, how does one explain the intensity of the Judaizing controversy in which Paul was engaged? Much of the difficulty revolves around the question of how Paul viewed the law, a question which continues to perplex modern inquirers. How could Paul speak with such apparent disparagement of the law yet with such praise?

In his revolutionary work in this area, E. P. Sanders has brought us a step further in this direction by exploding traditional Christian notions of Palestinian Judaism.¹ Paul's polemic against his Judaizing opponents was

not fueled by the conviction that the law was impossible to keep. That is rather a misrepresentation of Judaism caused by reading back Luther's experience into Paul. Paul's polemic was not directed at legalism; it was directed rather at the insistence that Gentiles had to Judaize before they could become part of the people of God. Sanders then applies Paul's negative statements about the law to entry requirements and his positive statements to the subsequent Christian life.

Sanders' Paul, however, is still lacking. Reading through Sanders' works one gets the impression that Paul had no coherent concept of the law at all. Whether the law is a positive thing depends upon whether one is talking of entrance requirements. James D. G. Dunn, however, has brought us a step further in reconstructing Paul's thought.² Dunn builds on Sanders' insights about Judaism yet corrects him at important points. Unlike Sanders, Dunn makes the important distinction between "the works of the law" and "the law" itself. It was not the law in and of itself which Paul was criticizing, but its use as a sociological barrier; and it was not adherence to works of the law simply as an entrance requirement to which Paul objected, but adherence to those exclusivistic "works" as requirements, period. This accounts for Paul's positive statements about the law *and* preserves the consistency of his thought.

This thesis, recent as it is, doubtless remains to be further debated and investigated more thoroughly in the academic community. Wherever the discussion takes us, however, it does demonstrate that we are perhaps coming closer to unravelling some of the knotty questions surrounding early Christianity's relationship to Judaism.

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¹ Cf. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977; *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983.

² James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990; see also Dunn's masterful commentary on Romans in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series.