A CRITICAL REVIEW OF E. P. SANDERS JESUS AND JUDAISM AND GEZA VERMES

JESUS THE JEW.

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One of the strong advantages of the “Third Quest” for the historical Jesus\(^1\) is a willingness to fit Jesus within the contemporary Judaism of his day. In other words, this particular quest (which to a certain extent is a reopening of what Schweitzer tightly shut over century ago)\(^2\) seeks to understand Jesus in his own context.\(^3\) Proponents of this particular movement come from a wide range of backgrounds, but they are united in a common commitment to serious history.

Amongst the many Scholars who share this commitment are two who are particularly eager to situate Jesus in a Jewish context. The works of Vermes and Sanders have both been absolutely pivotal in Jesus scholarship. The two are eminent scholars and among the world's leading experts on second-temple Judaism. The purpose of this essay is to compare how these two scholars have contributed to the study of the historical Jesus. Although both have now published extensively in the field, their pioneering contributions were *Jesus the Jew* (Vermes, 1973)\(^4\) and *Jesus and Judaism* (Sanders, 1985).\(^5\) It is these two works, in particular, which we shall be reviewing here. Obviously, due to lack of space an extensive review of each work will not be possible, but after a concise summary of both books we shall compare these scholars' conclusions on a few key points as well as commenting on some of the short-comings of these works.

Vermes' 1973 contribution to the study, if anything, has had the merit of encouraging scholars to focus on Jesus as a first-century Galilean Jew. According to Wright, the idea was novel at the time, and ever since scholarly pictures of Jesus have been thoroughly Jewish.\(^6\) Vermes' book is divided into two halves. In the first half, after a brief summary of the evangelists presentation of Jesus' life

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(pp. 19-41), he analyses the Gospels and second-temple evidence which support that Jesus' homeland, Galilee, had an awful reputation for brigands and insurrectionists (pp.42-57). According to Vermes, the very fact that Jesus came from this area would be enough for the Jerusalem authorities to be suspicious of him. In fact he claims that '[z]ealot or not, Jesus was certainly charged, prosecuted and sentenced as one, and that this was due to his country of origin […] is more than likely.' (p.50). Having presented this historical backdrop, he situates Jesus within charismatic Jewish beliefs and states his main thesis that he was a hasid just like Honi or Hanina ben Dosa (pp.58-80).

In the second half of the book he tests this thesis by analysing the titles which the evangelists attribute to Jesus. Firstly, he claims that the title 'Prophet' is in fact descriptive of Jesus, but that it is not therefore necessary to assume that he was the eschatological prophet (p.86). Next, he detaches the title 'Lord' (Gk. κύριος most likely translating the Aramaic מֶלֶךְ) from any later christological understandings. Vermes argues that is most likely to be associated with his status as a charismatic hasid and teacher than anything greater (p.127). He also deals with the title 'Messiah', which he argues that Jesus never claimed for himself, and concludes that 'the success of the Messianic idea probably owed more to polemical convenience than to theological usefulness.' (p.156). Vermes then asserts that the expression 'son of man' was a circumlocutional self-reference (pp.160-8). The explicit allusions to Daniel 7.13, in his view, are inauthentic. There is therefore nothing to suggest that this was a title (pp.184-6). Finally, he rejects both the messianic overtones of the expression 'son of God' in Jesus' ministry (p.202) as well as its possible divine connotations (pp.213-3). It is more likely, in his opinion, that the expression should be understood as the title of a miracle-worker, since most of the 'son of God' sayings are connected closely to Jesus' miracles (pp.206-10). He concludes that once these titles are analysed, their meaning conforms with his thesis that Jesus was a hasid, a charismatic Jew (pp.223-5).

Sanders, as the title of Jesus and Judaism indicates, shares the same concern as Vermes. However, if his concerns are similar, his conclusions certainly aren't. Jesus, according to Sanders, considered himself to be a prophet of Jewish restoration. He believed that he was God's final messenger before

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7. Cf also Josephus' account of Zealotry led by Judas the Galilean in Ant. 18.6.23.
8. The words 'I am' in Mk. 14.62 are, according to Vermes, an editorial addition: Vermes, Jesus the Jew, 148.
the ushering in of the kingdom (p.319). Sanders divides his work into three parts: (I) 'The restoration of Israel', (II) 'The kingdom' and (III) 'Conflict and death'. After giving primacy to Jesus' actions over his sayings in a historical reconstruction (pp.10-11), he begins, in part I, by treating Jesus' action in the temple (pp.61-76). In his view, what is commonly called “the cleansing of the temple” was not in fact a cleansing but rather a symbolic enactment of an attack on the temple (pp.70-1). Furthermore, he claims that by virtue of enacting the impending destruction of the temple, Jesus was very likely implying that a new eschatological temple would be built (p.71). This, as Sanders further argues, fits in with the Jewish expectation of a new temple being built (pp.77-90). Along with other evidence (pp.91-119), such as the choosing of the twelve, this indicates that Jesus saw himself as announcing the restoration of Israel.

In part II, Sanders analyses the kingdom in Jesus' ministry. Sanders has already argued in part I that Jesus himself did not ask for national repentance as John the Baptist had done (pp.106-113). Rather, he proclaimed that outcasts and genuine sinners would be included in the kingdom not by usual Jewish repentance, which involved going to the Temple, but by believing his message (204-8). This accounts for the offence that Jesus' association with 'sinners and tax collectors' caused. Sanders also argues that the kingdom is most likely to be imminent in Jesus' teaching rather than present or future. In its essence, it is like the present world, with a social and political structure, 'but it is not just a rearrangement of the present world' (p.232), it involves divine intervention.

Finally, in part III, Sanders deals with the conflict and death of Jesus. Firstly, he claims that Jesus certainly did not wish to reform or even reject the Law, nor did his early followers think that he had told them to (pp.267-9). As for the question 'why did Jesus cause offence and end up being crucified?', he argues that two particular features of Jesus' ministry angered his contemporaries: (1) his temple attack and (2) his message to sinners of acceptance without Jewish repentance. Sanders then offers and ingenious and convincing account of why Jesus was crucified (most likely as a would-be messiah), yet his followers were not. It seems that Jesus was condemned by the Jewish authorities on account of blasphemy, the direct cause being his action in the Temple, and that Pilate crucified him on the recommendation of the Jewish leaders. This would explain why his disciples were not killed, which they would have been had the Romans initiated Jesus' arrest and trial. (p.318)

10. Cf. also Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 131: 'This view, that a sufficiently careful exegesis of the sayings material will lead to a 'correct decision', has lead many a New Testament scholar into a quagmire from which he has never emerged.'
11. Cf. also Sanders, *Historical Figure*, 260-1.
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So how do these two scholars' contributions compare to each other? On one level, they have much in common, especially in terms of their interests. Both writers are concerned with a purely historical reading of Jesus, they seek to place Jesus within his Jewish context and they also both share a conviction that the Christ of Christian faith is a later development of Christian doctrine. However, despite a similarity in motive, there are profound differences between the two scholars' reconstructions.

The two authors differ profoundly in terms of their methodology. Vermes' approach, in line with his area of expertise, is primarily philological. The majority of his work in Jesus the Jew is an analysis of Jesus' titles. This means that despite claiming to be 'a historian's reading of the Gospels', Vermes' work is seriously lacking in historical reconstruction. At best, he has identified Jesus with a particular Jewish group (the hasidim), but the reader is left waiting for more details. Sanders, on the other hand, adopts, in my opinion, a far stronger methodology. His concern that established facts about Jesus should be a historian's starting-point is a strong methodology. Moreover, the primacy of actions over sayings in his reconstruction is definitely warranted. In many cases, a person's actions are far more revelatory than their words. Sanders' list of 8 almost indisputable facts about Jesus provides a decent skeleton to flesh out. Vermes, however, provides no such framework and as such, his Jesus seems incomplete. It is not enough to know what particular group of people a historical person fits into in order to fully understand them; Julius Caesar was certainly part of a class of people known as 'emperors', but for a historian to simply focus on that aspect does not necessarily make sense of all the details in his life. For one, the mere fact that he was emperor does not provide a historical explanation for his murder. The same is true with Jesus. It is one thing to claim that Jesus was a hasid, it is another to make sense of the major historical events which characterised his life.

Although, as we have seen, Vermes' central thesis is that Jesus was a hasid, Sanders challenges this idea. According to Sanders, Jesus' miracles cannot actually teach us anything about who Jesus was. I do not share Sanders pessimism on this issue, but I do think that he is right to contest Vermes' thesis. Indeed, as he points out: 'We see [in the Beelzebub controversy] that miracles would indicate different things to different people, depending on their point of view.' In an article disputing Vermes' conclusions, Jaffé argues that if anything, the New Testament would fit Jesus in

12. Cf. on the last point Vermes, Jesus the Jew 225; Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, 334. See also Vermes' endorsement on the back of the 1986 printing of Jesus and Judaism.
13. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, 11.
15. Ibid.
with the Pharisees.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, we should note some striking dissimilarities between Jesus and Honi and Hanini, whom Vermes cites as examples of \textit{hasidim}. Firstly, whereas the \textit{hasidim} generally prayed fervently for their patients to be healed, Jesus did not.\textsuperscript{17} He is depicted in the gospels as healing simply by a word or touch.\textsuperscript{18} If anything, this surely is meant to differentiate Jesus from these charismatics than define him as one of them. Furthermore, according to Witherington, there is no evidence of \textit{hasidim} gathering disciples.\textsuperscript{19}

Central to Sanders' thesis is the idea of inclusion of the 'sinners' within the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{20} Sanders argues convincingly that the sinners should not be understood, as Jeremias had, as the \textit{amme-ha-arets}. However, in his strong commitment to safeguarding Judaism from the charge of petty legalism,\textsuperscript{21} he concludes that those who are referred to as 'sinners' in the Gospels are those who have rejected God's Law completely (i.e. the wicked).\textsuperscript{22} I think Dunn is correct to point out that Sanders doesn't completely hit the nail on the head. Indeed, he ignores the factional nature of some strands of Judaism. The term 'sinners' according to Dunn is very likely to have been a derogatory term used by one party against those who do not follow the Law in the same way as them.\textsuperscript{23} This is visible in the attitude of the Qumran community towards those outside their sect; many Jewish groups in Palestine held to the Law, yet this does not stop those at Qumran seeing them as apostates\textsuperscript{24} and referring to some of them as 'the sons of darkness'.\textsuperscript{25}

Another point of comparison which should be noted is both Vermes' and Sanders' treatment of the cause of Jesus' death, or in the case of the former, lack of treatment. Except a brief admission that Jesus was condemned as a Zealot, Vermes makes no real attempt to explain why Jesus was killed. Although in a later work he agrees with Sanders' thesis that the temple-action was the immediate cause of Jesus' trial and execution,\textsuperscript{26} not to integrate what is an almost undisputed

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} So B. Witherington, \textit{The Christology of Jesus} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 183.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Cf. Mt: 8.3; 8.5-13; 8.14-15; 16; 8.28-34; 9.1-7; 9.18-26; 9.27-30; 12.9-13; 14.35-36; 15.28; 17.18; 20.29-34; Mk. 1.23-26; 1.29-31; 1.40-42; 2.9-12; 3.1-5; 5.21-42; 6.56; 10.51-52; Lk. 4.33-35; 4.38-41; 5.12-13; 5.22-25; 6.9-10; 6.19; 7.1-10; 7.11-15; 8.40-55; 9.37-42; 13.10-13; 17.11-14; 18.35-43.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Witherington, \textit{Christology}, 182.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Cf. Sanders, \textit{Jesus and Judaism}, 174-211.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} This is most clear in Sanders, E. P., \textit{Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion} (London: SCM Press, 1977) where Sanders makes the point that Judaism was not a religion of works-righteousness, but of grace.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Sanders, \textit{Jesus and Judaism}, 179.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, \textit{Jesus Remembered} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 530.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Cf. J. M. Allegro, \textit{The Dead Sea Scrolls} (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1956), 95.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Cf. \textit{IQM} 1.1-2. D. Guthrie, \textit{New Testament Theology} (Leicester: IVP, 1981), 411 points out that the expression 'the sons of darkness' refers to those outside the sect.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Vermes, \textit{Religion}, ix-x.
\end{itemize}
historical fact about Jesus into his reconstruction leaves a gaping whole in his treatment. This reader was left puzzled as to how Jesus the hasid became Jesus the crucifiable Jew. Sanders, on the other hand, devotes a whole section to the cause of Jesus' opposition and death. As Meyers had done 6 years before him, Sandra presses the sheer importance of Jesus' action in the temple as the main cause of his death. Vermes, on the other hand, in *Jesus the Jew*, is completely silent on the issue.

A final word before we conclude. It seems to me that a great weakness of much Jesus scholarship, including the “Third Quest”, is a lack of treatment of the issue of Jesus' resurrection. These two scholars are not exempt. Although both mention it in passing and Sanders correctly claims that it is unlikely that Christianity would have started had the disciples not believed Jesus was raised from the dead, neither of them attempt to explain what actually happened. To claim that Jesus' disciples believed he had been raised is not a sufficient statement. Whatever we conclude, it seems to me that a historian must explain why they believed this and whether this can be traced in some way back to Jesus himself. We cannot argue *a priori* that because miracles, by definition, cannot happen, a study of the resurrection should not feature in treatments of the historical Jesus. Indeed, if we are willing to analyse Jesus' healings and exorcisms in a study of the historical Jesus (whatever we make of them) it seems to me that we should deal with the issue of his resurrection and why, just as Jesus' followers believed that he healed, they also believed that he had been raised from the dead.

In summary, both Vermes and Sanders contributions to the field of Jesus-studies cannot be ignored by anyone who wishes to work on the historical Jesus. Both scholars rightly emphasise Jesus' Jewishness and attempt to integrate him within that world, but with quite different conclusions. In Vermes' case, we have Jesus the charismatic healer who tragically ends up being crucified as a Zealot. On the other hand, Sanders' Jesus is an eschatological prophet of Jewish restoration announcing the coming of God's kingdom and tried and killed for his disruptive action in the temple. On the whole, Sanders' treatment is stronger in terms of its historical reconstruction; his mastery of second-temple Judaism is put to good use, not just in situating Jesus within it, but also in explaining how the various events we know about Jesus make sense in light of it. That being said, Vermes' philological expertise should not be ignored and can prove tremendously helpful in understanding the impact of Jesus' words within his own context.

27. B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 170: 'The cleansing of the temple triggered a sequence of events which brought Jesus to his death on a cross outside the city wall.'
Bibliography


