

Judaism and Christianity in the Beginning: Time for a Category-Reformation?

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Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants: The First One Hundred Years of Jewish-Christian Relations. By Jack T. Sanders. Valley Forge: Trinity, 1993. ISBN 1-56338-065-X.

Related Strangers: Jews and Christians, 70-170 C.E. By Stephen G. Wilson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995. ISBN 0 8006-2950-7.

Covering the same subject in the same way, these two books, the one incompetent, the other exemplary, present a striking contrast but also share a massive flaw. Since, as I shall explain, we cannot attribute the flaw to individual idiosyncrasy, we must assign its origin to a common source. Both books turn out to ask questions that can be imagined, then investigated, only if we adopt premises and pre-suppositions that, in fact, contradict the character of the evidence. Neither book can have been written if the author did not invoke categories that, in fact, do not apply, in the investigation of questions the sources do not answer, for a purpose the ancient authorities would not have comprehended to begin with.

Asking about relationships between Jews and Christians, each author shows what he can do. Wilson writes elegantly and lucidly, presenting a clear and compelling account; Sanders writes like a barbarian, loses his way constantly, and ends up casting his never-to-be-tallied ballot in every contested opinion. The one is controlled, civil, interesting, well-conceived, and nicely crafted. The other wanders purposelessly hither and yon, shamelessly declaring at the end that this entire piece of academic busy-work served as an utter self-indulgence. So Sanders confesses, "It has been a long road from the Apostolic Conference to social evolution. . . . I hope that I have left a reasonably legible map and that others can now take the journey with greater ease. But if that should prove not to be the case, probably such following is not the most important thing. I had loads of fun finding the way. Why else do we undertake historical investigations?"

The answer is, to learn something important—and that must mean more than the author's casual, space-filling opinions about everything and its opposite.

Let us begin with the bad book. Sanders shows his hand at the end: "This study began with a historical problem that I had: Why did the author of Luke–Acts portray Jews generally in such a negative way? . . . I concluded that the answer must lie in the author's own environment, in some aspect of Jewish-Christian relations in his own place and time. . . . Other scholars have tended to avoid this question. . . ." That allegation must astonish, among a legion of scholars, Lloyd Gaston, "Anti-Judaism and the Passion Narrative in Luke and Acts," R. I. Brawley, *Luke–Acts and the Jews*, not to mention Wilson himself, "The Jews and the Death of Jesus in Acts."

To portray "Jewish-Christian relations," Sanders proceeds to describe "Palestine before 70," with attention to literary evidence (Acts, Paul, the Synoptics), Jewish literature, and material remains; then the situation between 70 and 135, Christian literary evidence comprising the Fourth Gospel, "the stoning of Jewish-Christian missionaries," and later Christian writers; then Jewish literature, *birkat hamminim* (the curse of sectarians), and Rabbinic (Tannaitic literature). After "material remains," comes a long chapter of "explanations," in these rubrics: cultural (theological) explanations (Christianity increasingly Gentile, the unity of holiness, Jesus as magician, Christology, criticism of the Temple and of Mosaic tradition); social science perspectives (social science approaches not useful for this problem, sect movements, conflict theory, defiance, with attention to Howard Becker, Kai Erikson, "on the universality of the principle," early Christian deviance and its punishment, and test cases, Samaritans and Chinese Jews). Next comes a chapter on Syria and Asia Minor, followed by Greece and Rome and "further explanations" (chapter six matching chapter three), in these parts: Jewish denunciations of Christians: perverting Jewish traditions, self-protection, Jewish-Christian opposition to the gentilizing [sic!] of Christianity, the response of deviants, the middle—on the way to the *Grosskirche*. This chapter treats new religious movements, with stress on the example, for Sanders's theory, of *Soka Gakkai*, gradual accommodation of new religious movements, early Christianity as a new religious movement, and, finally, the evolution of social groups. Clearly, Sanders treats an enormous agenda here.

But the book presents much less than meets the eye, for at each point, Sanders's method is the same: introduce a topic, identify a scholar who has written on the topic, set forth a meandering, stream-of-consciousness commentary to that scholar's findings, then pass judgment on the matter and go on to the next item. This procedure makes for a very boring book, one that is hard to follow unless the

reader knows the item under discussion and what it actually says and why it matters. Then Sanders's discussion takes on some interest. As I shall explain with a specific case, where I know firsthand the sources and the scholarly literature treated by Sanders, I found his discussion uninformed, inaccurate, and misleading. But Sanders covers many topics, and I have worked on only a few of them; I suspect that every other reader will find himself in the same uncomfortable position: believe or walk away. Alas, Sanders simply does not succeed in winning for himself that position as arbiter and final judge of all questions that he aspires to hold. For having investigated only a tiny portion of the problems on his own, he ends up setting forth one unsustained and often inane opinion after another. Anyone who doubts it should try to follow his uncomprehending and often incomprehensibly obtuse expositions and then critiques of Bruce Malina, on the one side, and Mary Douglas on the other—among many!

Scroggs, Lüdemann (many times), Malina and Douglas, and pretty much everyone else maligned ("criticized") by Sanders may speak for themselves on whether or not Sanders accurately portrays and pertinently addresses their views. But in the area in which I work, I can say, he does not know the territory. A single instance of his failure to acquire firsthand scholarship suffices, in my case, predictably, involving the use of Rabbinic evidence for historical purposes. Here he announces, "When we turn to Tannaitic literature, by which I mean the Mishna and other literature approximately contemporary with it, we shall be able better to fill out the picture that we have been able to draw of Jewish-Christian relations in Palestine between the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and Bar Cochba's revolt." But the Mishnah reached closure approximately a century after that period, so Sanders has to explain why he deems it a valid account of things actually said and done 100 years earlier or how stories and sayings have been formulated and transmitted to preserve those historical facts. This he does not even pretend to do. But the problem proves still more ominous, when a second glance shows that Sanders treats not the Mishnah, but the Tosefta. Now that document, as everyone who has opened it knows (and not just consulted a handbook of stories, as Sanders admits by giving credit to Herford, "Our canvassing of this literature is greatly facilitated by the existence of Travers Herford's compendium of relevant passages!"), depends upon the Mishnah, cites the Mishnah verbatim and glosses it, and reached closure some time after the Mishnah. So if the Mishnah stands a century after the events under discussion, the Tosefta must come from a still later period.

Why both documents should not tell us about the age in which they came to closure and viewpoints held at that time, rather than the long-ago times of which they speak, Sanders does not say. For

instance, they describe the Temple and its cult, and no one in contemporary scholarship opens the Tosefta for a picture of exactly how things were two or more centuries earlier. But that does not stop Sanders from citing the composite (treated as two separate stories, not a unit) at Tosefta *Hullin* Chapter Two that narrates two stories about rabbis' views of Jesus. The former involves an Ishmael and Jacob in the name of Joshua ben Pantera, the latter the trial of Eliezer on the charge of *minut*. Now, as scholarship has long recognized, *minut* may stand for a variety of matters, depending on the context. But with no ado at all, Sanders leaps to these conclusions: "Herford argues that the setting of this story must have been the time of a general Roman sweep of the area for Christians. . . . We therefore have before us evidence of an innocent Galilean rabbi accused of being a Christian in the process of a general persecution of Christians during Trajan's reign." (I cannot explain why Sanders has moved Eliezer from Lud, to which all pertinent sources assign him, to Galilee.)

And, in a further leap of enthusiasm, Sanders proceeds, "If rabbis of only modest prominence have to be coaxed back from contact with Christians by the most eminent of the sages, what will have been the situation with the common people?" I find the characterization of Eliezer (if that is Sanders's focus at all) puzzling, since all stories identify him as one of the two most prominent figures of his day, and make Aqiba, who figures in the story, his disciple. But those are minor quibbles, important only to those who have examined and studied the actual sources in vast detail, not only what people say about them. The upshot is, Sanders finds in the stories at hand a stenographic report of what was actually said in court; he even knows the private conversations that supposedly took place among masters and their disciples. Outside diminishing circles of the faithful, attempting a kind of pseudo-scholarship for an apologetics lacking all plausibility, nobody works that way anymore in these documents, anymore than, for 200 years, biblical scholarship has pursued the chimera of what Moses really said to Pharaoh that day. So if the title of the book, *Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants*, leaves the reader puzzled about Sanders's proposition, the title accurately captures the quality of the work: utter confusion, the intellectual chaos brought about by pretentious omniscience about everything in general, but nothing in particular.

Everything bad about Sanders's book finds its mirror-image in Wilson's work. If the one is disorganized and aimless, opinionated, vacuous, and in the end indeterminate, the other is well organized and purposeful, rich in reflection, and well focused. Let me start with a specific chapter of remarkable lucidity and compelling argument,

which can then stand for the whole. I state flatly that anyone who wants to know about the Jews and Judaism in the Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke–Acts, and John) had best start with Wilson's chapter on that subject, which clearly states the facts and astutely lays out a coherent and comprehensible picture of what they mean. This model of scholarly exposition and argument, written with grace and intellectual poise, shows us how mature learning reaches its final statement. And the rest of the book follows suit. The program is as cogent as Sanders's is diffuse: the political and social context; Jews and Judaism in the canonical narratives; apocrypha; supersession: Hebrews and Barnabas; Jewish Christians and Gentile Judaizers; Jewish reactions to Christianity; Gnostics and Marcionites; patterns of Christian worship; dialogue and dispute: Justin, and an overview.

Wilson's treatment of the Jewish evidence is judicious and informed, beginning with the obvious point: "there are, even on the most optimistic count, very few allusions to Christianity or its founder in rabbinic literature, and most of these are uncertain and obscure." A sample of Wilson's discussion reveals the quality of his mind. In explaining why we have so little evidence, he offers paragraphs beginning with the following sentences:

First, the rabbis . . . address themselves in a highly idiosyncratic fashion to a limited range of issues. . . . In addition . . . there would have been much less reason for Jews to concern themselves with Christians than the reverse. . . . A third obstacle is that rabbinic traditions were censored by both Jews and Christians. . . . It has been noted, fourthly, that the inherent problems of rabbinic traditions have been compounded by the simplistic or false assumptions that scholars have frequently brought to them. A common error, for example, is to assume that rabbinic Jews = Judaism. . . .

Even if we are alert to the drawbacks of the evidence and the weaknesses in its interpretation, there is still the broader methodological issue to confront: Of what value is rabbinic evidence, dating in its earliest written form from ca. 220 CE, for reconstructing Judaism in the first two centuries?

Clearly, we find ourselves in reliable hands. But that does not prevent Wilson from expatiating on the *birkat hamminim*, citing the enigmatic story behind the equally-enigmatic curse, as the Talmud of Babylonia, ca. 600 CE, tells it. Now all of his judicious warnings about the difficulty of utilizing stories in later Rabbinic documents as evidence of the period of which they speak fall away, and the remainder of the discussion goes over familiar ground as though critical considerations need not apply. Wilson would have done better to study the solid scholarship of Judith Baskin, whose *Pharaoh's Counsellors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition*, which I published

in *Brown Judaic Studies* in 1988, does not appear in his index. Baskin has produced results that are not only pertinent to the issue but also solid and well crafted.

What a contrast! Two books, the one abysmal, the other incandescent! Yet they have in common a crippling flaw. Both take for granted a single set of premises, which render the results of each indeterminate and inchoate. That is the three-part assumption: (1) we may speak of Judaism and Christianity as coherent religious entities; (2) we also may speak of "the Jews" and "the Christians" as coherent social entities, subject to generalization; (3) we may derive from literary evidence facts concerning not the opinions of the writers but the social world beyond the pages of the documents.

In order to write books on "Jewish-Christian relations" or on "Judaism and Christianity" as coherent religions that once were the same but then parted company, people must hold these assumptions. If we do not know in advance that two free-standing and cogent religions, Judaism and Christianity, may be defined and described, we also cannot formulate as a problem how the two religions related, one on one so to speak, and where, when, and why the two parted company. If we do not take for granted that "the Jews" and "the Christians" constituted well-delineated social groups, we cannot speak of how the two "groups" related at all. And if we do not take as our generative principle the notion that documents report not the author's opinion (e.g., theology, viewpoint, perspective, and the like) but the facts of the social order beyond the limits of the writing, we cannot write books about how things were and opinions widely held, only about how various bits and pieces of evidence portray matters.

Wilson may rightly claim that he does read the evidence piece by piece, and it is his portrait of each piece that forms the principal ornament of his elegant book. But Sanders does the same, if clumsily and uncritically. Both intend to join the parts into a coherent account: "Jewish-Christian," "Judaism-Christianity," "parting of the ways," and similar usages abound. Both scholars, moreover, in the end have in mind an account of how things really were, and each provides an account of not the evidence but the social world to which, both assume, the evidence in some way or other attests. For both, the categories "Judaism" and "Christianity" assume the reality of givens, and those data, however subtly refined they are by Wilson, remain paramount. And neither could have undertaken his study without the clear aim of accounting for the division of Judaism and Christianity. That, after all, is the point of both books.

Here it is Wilson, not Sanders, whose flaw gapes, for he announces at the outset a position that he ignores for the rest of the book, which is, that there was no single Judaism or Christianity. He says in so many words that matters are far more complex:

There have been attempts to reduce the story of Jewish-Christian relations to a core issue. . . . [Rosemary Ruether's fine study] . . . has been rightly criticized because . . . it underestimates the extraordinary range of ideological and pragmatic reasons why Jews and Christians parted company. If I began with a conviction, it was that the story is far more complex and interesting than is suggested by the identification of any single issue as the key to all else. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it has been confirmed. . . .

Now here we find two contradictory positions: (1) there were Jews and Christians, treated as diverse, but there also is a "they" that "parted company." The use of the language "parted company" proves plausible only if we deal with two coherent groups, originally joined, that ultimately separated. Otherwise the formulation is gibberish.

Wilson proceeds with language that I find stunningly inept: "Thus if I use the singular terms 'Judaism' and 'Christianity,' or their equivalents, it is only because the plurals ring unmusically to my ears. In almost all instances the plural should be understood, as I think the context usually makes clear." But that is a distinction that, in the actuality of Wilson's presentation, really makes no material difference. I shall now show that a passage (among a great many) in which "Jewish" stands for "the Jews, Judaism" and "Christian" for "the Christians, Christianity," loses all sense when we follow Wilson's counsel and introduce the dissonant, but real, Judaisms and Christianities:

Yet the events surrounding the Jewish revolts were only one aspect of the political context of Jewish-Christian relations. The broader picture must take into account the overall standing of Jews and Christians in the Roman worlds. . . . To find a niche in the world was thus, for the Christians, an uphill struggle against Jewish superiority and Roman suspicion. The Christian apologists consciously attempted to present their case in terms comprehensible to the outside world, and in the process explicitly contrasted themselves with the Jews.

Now that paragraph, I maintain, becomes senseless if we do what Wilson has counseled and inserted the equivalent of Judaisms and Christianities, e.g., "the political context of relationships among Judaisms and Christianities." Surely that is not what Wilson can possibly intend, and his initial pronouncement that he sees only Judaisms and Christianities merely throws dust in the eyes of the scholars.

Nor do matters become simpler when we turn to the social groups, Jews and Christians. Here too, whatever Wilson says at the outset, in the end he has "the Jews" against "the Christians," as in the following:

When we shift our attention from the political setting, the variety of responses of Christians and Jews to each other becomes even more pronounced. . . . That the Jews often reacted with hostility and

suspicion to Christians is indicated not only by the evidence for their involvement in public harassment, but also by the generally negative attitude recorded in stray rabbinic traditions. . . .

Here again, if Wilson really meant what he said, he could not have framed matters in this way at all. Using "the Jews" for "Judaism" improves matters only slightly. "That Judaisms often reacted with hostility . . . to Christianities . . ." yields nonsense; and how else Wilson can speak of "the Jews" and afford full recognition to the fact he affirms, that not all Jews look, act, or think alike, I cannot say.

But more: the evidence itself is not so much overinterpreted as misconstrued and misrepresented, to say the least. For Wilson in all accuracy should portray the evidence and its results only in words such as these: we have very late stories, recorded centuries after the event, that indicate that (some) sages, centuries later, took a hostile view of what appear to be some teachings attributed to Jesus and told stories about how earlier sages, closer to the time of Jesus, disputed about them (some favoring, some opposing Jesus' power to heal). The stories prove that, much later on, when Christianity had achieved world dominance, rabbis told such stories about their long-dead predecessors. Such an accurate portrayal of the authentic facts—what the source, in its day, has to say about a much earlier time—yields nothing relevant to the categories under discussion, "the Jews, the Christians," let alone "Judaism, Christianity."

How shall we explain these remarkable failures of intellect? It is not because Wilson generalizes wildly. He forms the model of the judicious scholar. It is because bits and pieces of we know not what in the end can leave no room for discourse about "the Jews," "Judaism," "the Christians," or "Christianity" at all. But then how Judaism parted company from Christianity ceases to form a viable category of inquiry, and if we frame matters with the correct and accurate, atomistic representation of the sources—how (some) Judaisms parted company, at diverse times and places and under diverse circumstances, from (some) Christianities—matters lose all cogency. The evidence itself is diverse—Wilson's splendid book demonstrates that fact on every page. But then the evidence speaks only for the people behind it, not for the people (if any) beyond it. And then a book such as this cannot be composed. For (to return to the exemplary case at hand) the "stray rabbinic traditions" are just that, not evidence for "Judaism" let alone for "the Jews."

Consequently, the evidence does not sustain the categories we use for the analysis of the evidence but contradicts those categories. That accounts for the utterly indeterminate, though certainly not inane, conclusion that Wilson reaches: "If variety marks the way Jews and Christians related to each other and envisaged their respective

futures, it is also the hallmark of the ideological and social tensions that separated them." This I find to be true but pointless, a device for masking the simple fact that the evidence supplies support for every conceivable proposition and its opposite. And that is solid reason for insisting, as I do, that it is time for a category-reformation. When categories draw together evidence that produces either contradictory conclusions or vacuous and self-evident but inconsequential ones, then it is time to ask why we are asking the wrong questions. For where, when, and why Judaism and Christianity parted company, how anti-Semitism originated, and similar questions of acute contemporary interest turn out to distort our perspective on the questions the evidence can answer.

Indeed, not only have the available category-formations drastically distorted the character of the evidence, they also have predetermined that we ask the wrong questions to begin with. The documents attest to the world of their authors (in the case of the writings of individuals) or of their authorships (the textual communities that collective and anonymous writings represent)—that alone.