

NT 504: Greek Bible and Western Mediterranean World – Spring 2021

Professor: Dr. Glen Shellrude

Weekly Summary: E. P. Sanders, *Judaism* on “2nd Temple Judaism” - Week 7

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E. P. Sanders' book *Judaism* has to do with Judaism operating in the first century, otherwise called the early Roman period. The author aims at placing Judaism in the correct historical context and giving a focus on religious practice. Considering how diverse Judaism was during the first century, Sanders sets out to address, as a primary task, the understanding of how Jews arrived at their belief as to what constituted their Jewishness. In his preview, Sanders noted that Jews sometimes cooperated and sometimes compromised to arrive at a consensus on their practical beliefs. Sometimes they didn't, and their conflicts may be so fierce that there has even been bloodshed. One thing that 2nd Temple Judaism maintained was the priority of the practice of their religion over a body of beliefs as did early Judaism.

The Jews of Palestine had two questions that faced them – how to handle the Mediterranean foreign powers and who should control their institutions at home. It was always a question of politics and religion – two sides of the same coin. In Sander' words, “There was no simple distinction between ‘church’ and ‘state’ or ‘religion’ and ‘politics. God, in the eyes of Jews cared about all aspects of life; no part of it was outside ‘religion’.”

Josephus was the main source that Sanders chose to use. His record of history provides the knowledge of 2nd Judaism that will be gained from Sander's work. Josephus was a priest of the aristocracy, who was assigned military command over a section of Galilee when war broke

out. The Jews lost and Josephus was captured. During captivity, his effort to gain the favor of the Roman general, Vespasian, was successful. Later, when the general became emperor, he freed Josephus (pp. 6-7).

It was the priests who had political and religious power, however, when the Romans took over, the power was diminished. They continued, nonetheless, to focus on their three principal elements – the Pentateuch, the Temple, and ordinary Jews. The Diaspora Jews were also loyal to the Torah and the Temple. For first century Jews, the temple, the synagogue (house of prayer), and the home were their three centers of activities. Loyalty to God was of course their utmost priority, so 2nd Temple Jews received exemption from pagan practices. They practiced giving regularly to the temple. Philo wrote about their collection of money as sacred, calling it the “first-fruits” (p. 77). He spoke very highly of the giving, how it was done cheerfully and sacrificially. It is noteworthy that he did concede that some priests were “impoverished” on account of neglectful giving (p. 79).

First Century Jews were diverse, and E. P. Sanders made it his goal to address in his book how the Jews came to an understanding as to what made them Jewish. Despite their difference, one common denominator was present, and that is that their focus was the practice of their religion over their beliefs. They wanted to practically live out their belief in God in every facet of life. When faced with matters of foreign powers or interior rule of their institution, they sometimes cooperated and sometimes compromised. Josephus, the Jewish priest, proved to be a dependable source of the historical information needed for this study. So, E. P. Sanders has drawn from his writings, on 2nd Temple Judaism, with the aim of exploring and achieving a workable understanding of First Century Judaism.