'JESUS AND THE SINNERS': SOME QUERIES

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Professor E.P. Sanders is not a timid scholar. In his recent study, 'Jesus and the Sinners' (JSNT 19 [1983], pp. 5-36), Sanders boldly and convincingly refutes several of New Testament scholarship's entrenched views. The prime targets of Sanders's salvoes are the 'supposed experts' Professors Joachim Jeremías and Norman Perrin; Gustaf Aulén is excused as a novice in New Testament scholarship.

First, Sanders coercively dismisses Jeremias's identification of the 'sinners' and the *'am ha-'arets*. The sinners he demonstrates are 'those who flagrantly and persistenly disobeyed the law' (p.11). The *'am ha-'arets* are the unlearned and/or those who did not observe the priestly purity laws in everyday life. The champions of the position that the laity should observe the food-handling regulations of the priests were the *haberim,* whom Sanders says are not to be identified with the Pharisees. But, and this is the first of my queries, did the New Testament use the term 'Pharisees' with this kind of precision? 'Pharisee' in the New Testament seems to include both those who were zealous for the oral laws and those who insisted that the laity act like priests. There is no distinct term for the *haberim* in the New Testament, so 'Pharisee' is probably used inclusively.

Granting that the common people and the wicked (as Sanders designates the *'am ha-'arets* and the 'sinners' respectively) are quite different groups, one still wonders whether the Pharisees' attitude toward the common people was beyond reproach. The fact that the Pharisees did not, or could not, exclude the common people from the venues of first-century Jewish social and religious life is not evidence of a positive attitude toward the common people. An eighteenth-century Anglican may well have been content in his communion despite the censures of an overly conscientious Methodist, as Sanders suggests; but this hardly praises the Methodist's spirit. Just how secure the common people felt within Judaism is beside the point. The pride and disdain of zealous reforming parties is too common both in ancient and modern times to believe that the Pharisees were exceptions.

The frequent contemporary view that Judaism offered no forgive-ness for the wicked is rejected by Sanders who correctly reminds us that repentance and forgiveness were the *sine qua non* of Judaism. Sanders claims that if Jesus had brought the wicked to repentance, first-century Pharisaism would have acclaimed him a national hero rather than have crucified him. One can hardlygainsay Sanders's conclusion that 'the notion that the *conversion* of

sinners was offensive to the Pharisees is, when thought about concretely, ridiculous' (p. 23).

Sanders, therefore, with some warrant, denounces the conventional arguments thatthe Pharisees held such rigid views on merit and punishment that they were unable to offer any hope to the 'sinners', and that Jesus in stark contrast was the unique bearer of mercy for the ungodly. Yet clearly Jesus offended the Pharisees; if it was not his doctrine of grace toward sinners that angered them, what was it? To answer this Sanders is forced to take a most daring position. Sanders suggests that Jesus opened the kingdom of God to sinners *without* any demand of a moral renewal. This rather implausible position is the only option left for Sanders, since he does agree that Jesus was more radical than the Pharisees. However, beginning as he does from a favourable view of the Pharisees, he is forced to understand Jesus more radically than is usual in order to maintain the contrast. At this point it is legitimate to ask Sanders his own question, 'please produce one scrap of evidence' (p. 17). The fact is that the ethical demand of the New Testament is so constant throughout the various strata of tradition as to be almost certainly original with Jesus.

That Jesus offered forgiveness to sinners *before* reformation is considered by Sanders too fine a distinction to have stirred up any controversy in the first century. Sanders's North American pragmatism influences him when he argues that repentance that follows forgiveness is little different in the last analysis from a repentance that precedes forgiveness. It was just such a 'minor ' theological issue that traumatized the sixteenth century. Perhaps Sanders is right in regarding this a trivial difference, but the kind of concrete historical realities that Sanders likes to appeal to demonstrate that religious communities have considered just such a difference serious enough to die for. That Jesus offered forgiveness too precipitously (that is prior to, though demanding, repentance) for the Pharisees cannot, then, be dismissed as the possible bone of contention simply on logical grounds.

Sanders is on surer ground when he suggests that Jesus demanded a repentance that did not involve the usual ritual or restitution that was basic to Judaism's understanding of repentance. This to my mind indicates a different concept of repentance rather than the
abolition of repentance. Some of the implications in Jesus ' love-ethic (an overworked term I grant) need to be considered at this point by Sanders, who says nothing on this in his article.

This is a very stimulating article, and though I think that Sanderstreats the New Testament evidence concerning the Pharisees too lightly, his paper is one that New Testament scholarship cannot ignore. It raised for me a series of questions, and that no doubt was Sanders's intention.