It has been a pleasure to follow Bruce Chilton’s career over the years, from Selly Oak and Anthony Hanson’s seminar on the “Use of the Old Testament in the New” to, most recently, the SNTS Annual Meeting in Anandale-on-Hudson. It is a privilege to be able to show my appreciation of Bruce’s significant achievements by touching on many shared interests.

Contemporary understanding of Paul in relation to his Jewish context and heritage necessarily builds on the monumental work of E.P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism.¹ This book more than any other represents a milestone in the history of research on Paul. Although it is large and comprehensive, it necessarily limits itself to certain key scholars relevant to the topic in hand, such as Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Bultmann (and his school), and W.D. Davies. Sanders began his overview of the state of research with H. St. John Thackeray, The Relation of St. Paul to Contemporary Jewish Thought (1900) as representing typical scholarly views on the topic at this period. He found that “The two elements that constitute Thackeray’s view—on the whole Paul represents the antithesis of Judaism, while being dependent on it with regard to individual motifs.”² Thackeray followed Ferdinand Weber with regard to Paul’s supposed perception of, and opposition to, the Jewish view that righteousness is earned by works.³ Sanders noted how endemic Weber’s view of (Rabbinic) Judaism has become in New Testament criticism: “Wherever it appears, the antithesis between it and Paul is either explicit or implicit. Once Judaism is described as a religion of legalistic works righteousness, the contrast with Paul is as obvious as Thackeray took it to be . . . .”⁴

² Paul and Palestinian Judaism, p. 3.
⁴ Paul and Palestinian Judaism, p. 3. The significance of Weber’s view is that his formulation of the supposed antithesis between Paul’s thought and that of Judaism as “faith versus legalism” provided a (too) neat either/or formulation that encourages a stereotypical representation of
Part of the problem of the easy acceptance of an antithesis between Paul and Judaism is that the latter is facilitated by what might be termed a simplistic view of religions as being capable of being described or represented by their essence. Thus for Bultmann it is a description of the essence of Judaism that enables a direct contrast between this and the essence of Paulinism. Sanders seeks to avoid this over-simplification by comparing entire religious systems with one another (rather than artificially comparing essences or de-contextualized motifs of religions). Thus Paul’s faith is regarded as a religion in its own right. However, while not denying the validity and usefulness of what Sanders has achieved by this carefully executed methodology, there may be residual issues concerning Paul’s own perceived adherence to Judaism while being investigated as representative of an alternative pattern of religion. Does this ongoing adherence somehow facilitate what, to some scholars at least, seems a surprising conclusion that Paul does not, after all, fall as might have been anticipated within the category of covenantal nomism but rather of “participationist eschatology”? If Paul were regarded as leading a reform movement within Judaism, might this not have led to a differing conclusion?

However, for the purpose of this essay, we have taken Sanders as our starting point in order to set the scene for discussing some of the crucial issues with which he had to deal in his comparison between Paul’s pattern of religion and that of Palestinian Judaism. In the succeeding discussion we will consider both Judaism and Paul. It is also significant that a faith/works dichotomy similarly represents the two religions in terms of essences!


6 “What is clearly desirable, then, is to compare an entire religion, parts and all, with an entire religion, parts and all;” *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 16. Sanders elaborates as follows: “by ‘pattern of religion,’ I do not mean an entire historical religion—all of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and the like—but only a given, more or less homogeneous, entity. For our purposes, ‘Paulinism’ is a religion.” “A pattern of religion, defined positively, is the description of how a religion is perceived by its adherents to function. . . how getting in and staying in are understood; the way in which a religion is understood to admit and retain members is considered to be the way it ‘functions.’” (p. 17).

7 Cf. pp. 548–549, where Sanders concludes that despite substantial agreements, Paul does not really fit this mould; there is a fundamental difference.

8 I raise this issue mainly to challenge Sanders’ depiction of Paul’s relation to covenantal nomism, but I recognize that Paul must be viewed as only indirectly seeking reform within Judaism. His mission relates to gentiles and their association as a new entity in relation to Judaism. This clearly results in raising serious questions concerning Jewish identity where gentile identity and practice impinge upon Judaism. But I think Paul regards these as inevitable consequences of the mission to which he was called rather than as the object and goal of his apostleship.