

In Honor of Mark Nanos

On the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Publication of *The Mystery of Romans*

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ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον...

So Homer opens the *Odyssey*, *Sing to me, Muse, of the clever man...*

What, oh Muse, to sing of my friend Mark Nanos? Tonight, we sing of the businessman turned scholar, of a revolutionary thinker, of an up-ender of conventions, of a questioner of sacred tradition, of a *clever* man.

But what is it to be a scholar? It is to make it through a Ph.D. program— *sure*, to be invited to teach, to do the research, to have that research deemed plausible and therefore publishable... But what is it to be a *great* scholar? Is not the ultimate test of greatness the ability to persuade one's peers? And our friend Mark Nanos has proved nothing if not persuasive.

Granted, it took him 30 years from the publication of *The Mystery of Romans* in 1996 – time he filled writing 8 more books, 9 including the publication of his dissertation, 66 articles, 32 book reviews, the founding of an SBL section, speaking engagements both domestic and abroad, Enoch Seminars, and podcasts – arguably it has been an arduous campaign. But we are here this evening in the Hynes Convention Center in Boston acknowledging, reflecting, celebrating the influence Mark's work has had on our field.

Now one might note that it took Mohammed only 20 years, by contrast, to subdue the Arabian Peninsula... and it took Alexander the Great a mere 13 years to secure the territory from the Balkans to northwestern India... However, I think we should pause to appreciate *who* it was Mark was attempting to persuade in the last 30 years – *Pauline scholars*. Pauline scholars are a breed to themselves. Sure of their ideas, invested in their interpretations, never such a contentious group of, let's admit it, mostly men, have there been. But persuade many of us he has and, where there were but a handful of scholars three decades ago discussing *whether* Paul could be read within his tradition there is now a movement, a movement that reaches well beyond Paul to the whole New Testament, a founding of a perspective for which all textbooks on Paul and the New Testament will have to contend with forever after.

But what exactly has Mark persuaded us of? Quite simply, perhaps quite bluntly, he has persuaded many of us that the culture of classical Pauline studies that reads Paul against his tradition is bankrupt.

Nanos, however, was not created in a vacuum.

A century before Mark was born, F. C. Baur had called for a historical-critical reading of Paul (1845). A generation before Mark wrote *Mystery of Romans*, Krister Stendahl

published *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (1976). The following year, E.P. Sanders published *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977). Stendhal and Sanders heralded the dawn of a new age of Pauline scholarship, one that saw a hole blown at the waterline of the Lutheran reading of Paul. Scholars citing the ‘paradigm shift’ or claiming to write from ‘the New Perspective on Paul’ began to abound.

Sanders’ masterful demolition of the traditional reading of Judaism as the legalistic foil for a grace filled Christianity, however, laid the fault for this misinterpretation of Judaism at the feet of the 1st century Apostle himself. Paul, Sanders surmised, misunderstood his tradition at best and misrepresented it at worst. Taking Sanders’ point regarding Judaism, John Gager in *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (1985) and Alan Segal in *Paul the Convert* five years later (1990) understood Paul to be *culturally* Jewish but *religiously* a Jewish apostate. Others followed suit regarding Paul implicitly, or often explicitly, as some manner of ‘anomalous Jew’ – tradition adjacent.

It is against Paul’s excommunication from Judaism or alternatively his marginalization within Judaism in the realigned world of Sanders’ making that the work of Mark Nanos stands in sharp contrast. In *Mystery of Romans* Mark argued for ‘a thoroughly Jewish Paul, functioning entirely within the context of Judaism.’ That Paul *could* be read as a Jew within Judaism was an idea Mark drew from an observation in undergrad that the ancient Israelite prophets were not thought to have ceased to be part of the community by virtue of the criticism they levied against the people’s moral or cultic practice. Nanos wondered if Paul too may have been part of an intermural/intercultural debate equally within Judaism.

If one wishes to overturn the tables in the temple of Pauline theology, the strategic revolutionary knows to flip Romans first. Romans has been traditionally interpreted as the theological manifesto for Paul’s critique of Judaism, the stronghold of the ‘Lutheran’ reading of Paul. In *Mystery of Romans*, Nanos deftly locked in on chapter 11 in which Paul critiqued the boasting of gentile-Jesus-followers over unbelieving Jews. Of course, Romans 11 had not gone unnoticed by other commentators. However, Paul’s correction of the ex-pagan converts was generally relegated to the place of afterthought tacked on to the larger, central theological teaching of the law-free gospel in Romans. By pointing out that Paul himself was at some pains to address “an early manifestation of the (mis)perceptions of Israel and Jews among Christian gentiles,”¹ Nanos adroitly recruited Paul as his confederate in the cause, an ancient ally, *the within Judaism OG*. Paul too recognized same misunderstanding, perhaps the same danger (?), in the idea that the inclusion of gentiles meant the exclusion of Jews. In Romans 11 Paul writes his gentile readers, *I ask, then, has God rejected his people?* Nanos took seriously Paul’s ancient answer μή γίνομαι, *By no means!* That μή γίνομαι proved a load bearing wall for the construction of what would become the *Paul within Judaism* perspective.

Mark has not been alone in attempting to orient Paul to Judaism. Rather the distinction of Mark’s work (to my mind) is that instead of trying to make first century Judaism stretch to encompass Paul’s aberrant ideas about gentile reclamation, Mark posits that Paul actually

¹ *Mystery of Romans*, 16.

functions entirely within the context of Judaism. “Functions” not “gets by” or “passes” if you turn your head sideways and squint hard enough but rather that Paul makes organic, logical, quintessential Jewish sense in the first century.

Nanos anchors Paul’s thought and mission in the Shema, *Hear Oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one*. This central grounding claim – a prayer and a theology – bound and constrained Paul’s thought regarding gentiles Mark argues. There was only one God, Lord of all. The eschatological telos of creation (Mark believes Paul believed) would resolve in a world in which *all peoples* worship that one God. Jesus initiated this turn toward the universal recognition of Israel’s God. Propositionally, Mark contends, Paul needed to demonstrate the turning of the plurality of peoples that was the hallmark proving his conviction that the end of the age was nigh.

Against the “old perspective” that viewed Paul as a convert from an inferior Judaism, Nanos insists that it was Paul the Jew converting *pagans* to *Judaism*. Contrary to the widespread assumption that the early Jesus movement broke with strict Torah observance founding a new religion, Nanos points out it was incumbent on the ex-pagan converts being enculturated into Judaism to follow the halakhah of the synagogue, to ‘meet the minimal requirements’ for community engagement.² One God, one ethic, one revealed law. It was Paul’s objective, believing he stood at the dawn of the messianic age, to call gentiles to act like Jews in community with Jews, without *becoming* Jews.

Of course, it was already possible in the first century for gentiles to become Jewish proselytes and therefore to have some standing in the community. What then changed for Paul with the coming of Jesus? In Mark’s understanding, while proselytes were welcomed in the community, they could not possess equal standing with Jews shy of full conversion.³ Proselytes were in effect Abraham’s guests, not Abraham’s children. What baptism into the Jesus movement provided was a full conversion into a new kind of gentile identity – an identity and life fully submitted to the God of Israel alone, obedient to its ethical demands, Judaism adjacent, thereby becoming Abraham’s gentile children. The gentile converts possession of the Spirit (Mark argues Paul argued) was a divine endorsement and proof of full membership in the community of the righteous. Thus, contrary to the “New Perspective” reading of Paul as a universalist Jew struggling against misguided, racist Jewish particularism, Nanos contents the absolute value of Judaism, its rituals, ethics, and cult remained unimpeached for Paul. Paul’s project was rather to build an adjacent identity for ex-pagan-gentiles of equal value motivated out of a conviction that the end of the age was upon them and the final form of the world would see a multitude of peoples worshiping Israel’s God.

It was problematic. It proved messy. But humans are problematic and humans are messy. What Nanos accomplishes in this reorientation is a way to read Paul as an authentic Jewish thinker. I say – well done sir! For those of us here tonight who have self-selected into this SBL session, the idea of Paul within Judaism may function as a truism. I know it does for me. This is

² Mystery of Romans, 36.

³ Mystery of Romans, 167.

the mark of how well Nanos has made his case that we who have been persuaded take what was a revolution 30 years ago as now self-evident.

Of course, it is the privilege and the burden of the fathers of both *humans* and *ideas* alike to watch the world interact with their babies. Those of us who claim affiliation with the *Paul within Judaism* perspective vary widely in how we have appropriated Mark's baby (#notacult). We are very much doing the science of intellectual inquiry – experimenting with what this orientation *within Judaism* will cause us to see differently, debating what theories can hold water. And this I think it is worthy of note – Mark fostered this kind of community. Intellectually rigorous – *yes*, but generous, open to challenge, welcoming, committed to the best ideas.

I have read we all struggle with imposter syndrome. If you ever find yourself, however, on the other side of that complex – thinking yourself to be a god and a gift to the guild – and your partner finds you insufferable and you are in need of a slave to ride behind you in the chariot of your glory whispering some version of “memento mori” let this serve as a sobering thought – *this was only Mark's hobby.*