

## That Which We Value as Special: Mark Nanos as Bridge-BUILDER and Binary-BUSTER

You may have heard of the “evangelical to secular biblical studies pipeline.” For those of us who have travelled it, a Bible-thumping childhood often led naturally to a Biblical Studies undergrad where we expected to be caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body we did not know. But something happened on our way to Damascus.

We began to see texts, through a glass darkly, in their original languages and their historical contexts. Where at first we had been eager to hold the coats of our professors and pastors while they stoned “The Jews” to death by supersessionism, we ended up siding with the accused even more zealously than we had persecuted them.

That is, those of us who read Mark Nanos did.

I only met Mark in person once. We accidentally arrived at an SBL bar at the same time. My spouse and I were star-struck by the weight of influence his work has had over Pauline studies in general and our own teaching of Paul and, by extension, of the whole New Testament and adjacent periods of Judaism and Christianity. But Mark seemed as graciously delighted to find himself sitting next to a grad student and an adjunct as anyone else, of any stature, at the conference. He lingered a long time, speaking warmly and listening eagerly. When he left, one word remained in his wake: mensch. I hadn’t mustered the courage to tell him that his work, with its “radical new perspective,” had provided the final nail in the coffin of my former life in anti-Judaism.

Only a mensch could be so understated and generous as to describe the Paul within Judaism Schule as “a historical reading” that “hold(s) special promise for advancing better Christian-Jewish relations in the years to come.”<sup>1</sup>

As one with a different positionality from Mark’s (i.e. NOT a mensch) I can see several less euphemistic ways to express this.

“A historical reading” could as easily read “**the first actual** historical reading of Paul, as opposed to all the previous out-to-lunch readings that make him Anglican” or “a reading that bothers to take even one Intro To Early Judaism textbook into consideration rather than relying completely on anti-Jewish prejudice, mixed with uncritical swallowing of ancient polemics as though they were investigative journalism.”

Likewise, “advancing better Christian-Jewish relations” is ONE way to put it. But how about: “desperately attempting to communicate to you neanderthals that most of the New

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<sup>1</sup> MarkNanos.com/about

Testament people you piously cite to justify repeatedly throwing Jews under the bus .... ARE JEWS.”

As an insider, I can freely speak with rage, calling my people “Neanderthals” and “out to lunch.” On the Paul Within Judaism website that Mark generously maintains, he specifically positions himself as “an outsider” who “hopes not to offend”. He writes “I believe the Paul within Judaism approach proposed offers useful insights for Christian self-interest: **what if that which Christians value as special can be celebrated without needing a negative binary other by which to define that specialness?**”

If we were to recite the whole of Mark Nanos’ work while standing on one foot, that last sentence might do, with all the rest as commentary. In it we see his signature traits on full display: his free admission of positionality as outsider, his transparent aims and means (reduction of harm through rapprochement), his generous personal ethos (commitment to identifying constructive and positive ways to engage all subjects, even a persistent source of harm directed toward he himself and generations of his kin), and the key to his methodology as a historian and a pedagogue: “without needing a negative binary other.

This cluster of introductory phrases at the doorway to his website sound deceptively simple. But they represent deep knowledge of (and skill at) effective interfaith dialogue and conflict mediation: refining words and framings over and over and over until anger, blame, superiority, retribution, and selfishness are gone, and what remains is an authentic valuing of interlocutors, and a genuine belief that rapprochement and understanding are themselves the prize, not as a temporarily negotiated ceasefire or a compromise where everyone loses, but as a way to better celebrate what each holds special. They also represent a Harm Reduction approach: i.e. that it is better to avoid rigid and idealistic purism against a harm, and thereby actually reduce it, than to take a hardline stance that discourages buy-in and thus fails to have any impact. They represent an intersectional feminist approach, which seeks liberation from all oppression, not just for oneself but for any recipient of systemic harm, including the oppressors who are also harmed by the system, just in different ways. They represent learnings from Indigenous ways of knowing: that no-one exists outside of relationship, and that none of our kin, including the Land, can be healthy when relations are broken. They also display that most essential methodological tenet of the discipline of history (or, for that matter, of every discipline): that every simplistic binary opposition is a lie. To move forward on *anything*, in this case on Paul, “without needing a negative binary other” is the greatest gift of the Paul within Judaism school.

As a student who entered the aforementioned “pipeline” as a firm believer in bold and ultimate dichotomies, and who came out the other end as a scholar of Second-Temple

Judaism whose every class taught and every work published somehow attempts to correct past wrongs of my tradition, it is now inconceivable to me that anyone could possibly pretend to “study” the New Testament NOT “within Judaism.” (I admit that as a non-mensch and a failure at interfaith dialogue, I judge them.) If we do not understand Jesus and Paul as Jews, then that sentence can be shortened to “we do not understand.”

As an insider to Christianity, I am enraged that my tradition raised me up in false dichotomies that resulted in two pathetic caricatures of Judaism and Christianity that clearly paid almost no attention to the very ancient figures they claimed to hold in the highest regard.

As an outsider to Christianity, Mark Nanos would be forgiven for responding to the breathtaking inanity and irresponsibility that has been Pauline studies, especially since Luther, with bitterness and with sharp daggers of superiority. Or with the most common response of all: avoidance like the plague of all things Paul and all things Christian.

Thinking about the above dynamics—the positional difference between my unpleasantly harsh and biting stance towards my own people as an *insider* stance, and Mark’s generosity and bridgebuilding as an *outsider* stance—serves as a pedagogical example for why the “within Judaism” approaches not only make better neighbours, they also make better historians. Christianity comes by the fallacy of binaries honestly. Those grossly caricatured “opposites” –Torah versus Grace, Jesus versus the Pharisees, women apostles versus women silenced, Faith versus Works, Jews versus Christians—seem to be a feature of early Christian self-identification even in the first-century texts. But those were *insider* texts. They were doing the WORK of Othering in order to form stronger boundaries between groups that were actually kin. The more we conceptualise the Parting of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism as diverse, locally-determined, messy, and occasionally rejoining and reparting, the more we realise that some of the differences that scholars have claimed to identify between different Christ-oriented and Torah-oriented groups were much more aspirational than descriptive.

To approach first-century Christ-group writings first as *insider* texts is to recast their vitriol and their dichotomizing more in light of the way I rage and hurl insults at my own co-religionists today. Even as we get into the second century (or the late first century if we follow Adele Reinhartz’s work on John’s gospel),<sup>2</sup> and we begin to see the fissures that would become the new religion of Christianity, the worsening vitriol is still that of siblings so close that a majority of outsiders would scarcely have been able to tell them apart. When as a kid I punched my brother, I didn’t get into much trouble, because it was

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<sup>2</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *Cast out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

understood that siblings fight. When I punched someone else's kid on the playground, it was a big deal. In reality, neither punch was good behaviour. But when first and second century communities do it to each other as insiders (or siblings at a stage of boundary-formation) it is fundamentally different than when a later outsider community *appropriates* insider texts and uses them as a divinely-ordained excuse to abuse in perpetuity the descendants of the original insiders, and to strip their most cherished original insiders (such as Jesus and Paul, or even, ridiculously, John the Baptist) of their affiliation with Judaism, despite the fact that we would never have heard of Jesus, Paul, and John the Baptist if not for their outlandish passion about their Judaism.

If I sound like I'm Paulsplaining, that's only because the above has become obvious. But it wouldn't be, without the work of a small group, among which Mark Nanos is chief, who were deemed "radical" not very long ago.

Now, more people than ever are aware of the pernicious damage done by what I like to call "The Paul Without Judaism Schule." Even in the 1970s, when E.P. Sanders was pointing out the inaccuracy of the tired refrain Jews and Judaism were "legalistic," he still assumed Paul had *some* problem with Judaism. For all the nuance and breadth of Sanders' massive "Paul and Palestinian Judaism," he still concludes that "what Paul finds wrong in Judaism" is "it is not Christianity."<sup>3</sup> Sanders may have fast-forwarded knowledge about and interest in first-century Judaism, but he still couldn't help constructing a binary opposition aimed at lifting Jesus and Paul out of it.

Unfortunately, the binary oppositions that force Paul out of Judaism continue to exist. Even if so-called "legalism" was not the problem with Jews, it is assumed that *something* must have been wrong with them, to which nascent Christianity offered the "cure." N.T. Wright as recently as the 90s claimed that Christianity's cure to Judaism was "grace, not race."<sup>4</sup> This shifts the "problem" with ancient Judaism from one particularism (Torah observance) to another (ethnicity). This position might be a little less wrong about Torah-oriented Judaism, but it still constructs Christians in opposition to Jews. (If you are thinking that at least it is a *little* less supersessionist, the title of the book is *The Climax of the Covenant*.)

Even in responding to these New Perspective scholars, Mark Nanos avoids binaries. In his introduction to the *Paul Within Judaism* volume co-edited with Magnus Zetterholm, he spends a generous amount of time covering Terrence Donaldson's alternative readings, finding points of rapprochement, and softening binaries, e.g.:

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<sup>3</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977), 552.

<sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Fortress, 1992), 194, 247.

“The insightful issues [Donaldson] raises do not seem to the editors to represent binary alternatives as much as various strands and emphases.”<sup>5</sup>

Ever the generous bridge-builder and binary buster.

By way of conclusion, I return to Mark’s gentle, teacherly question: “what if that which Christians value as special can be celebrated without needing a negative binary other by which to define that specialness?”

In my own research on gender and the historical Jesus in Q, I have tried to reframe that which Christian feminists value as special (such as gender-egalitarian materials from Jesus and Paul that are possibly authentic) in ways that do not need to distance them from Judaism, but instead embed them within the various streams of possibility open to late-second-temple Jewish women. Most recently, I did this in the new Eerdmans classroom resource, *Judeophobia: and the New Testament*, in the chapter “Feminist New Testament Scholarship and Judeophobia.” When that volume was supposed to go to print, it lacked a chapter on Philippians. Mark Nanos to the rescue. With a ridiculous turnaround, he delivered yet another accessible, generous, bridge-building piece of writing.

There is a verse in Philippians that might be useful to sum up the attitude that comes through in Mark’s radically contextual and attentive scholarship, his care for research that is both historical and moral, his accessible style, his openness to the possibility of change for the better, his grace and skill at interfaith dialogue. I may paraphrase a little:

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in Mark Nanos, do them.”

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Nanos, “Introduction,” in *Paul Within Judaism*, ed. Margus Zetterholm and Mark Nanos (Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 28-29.