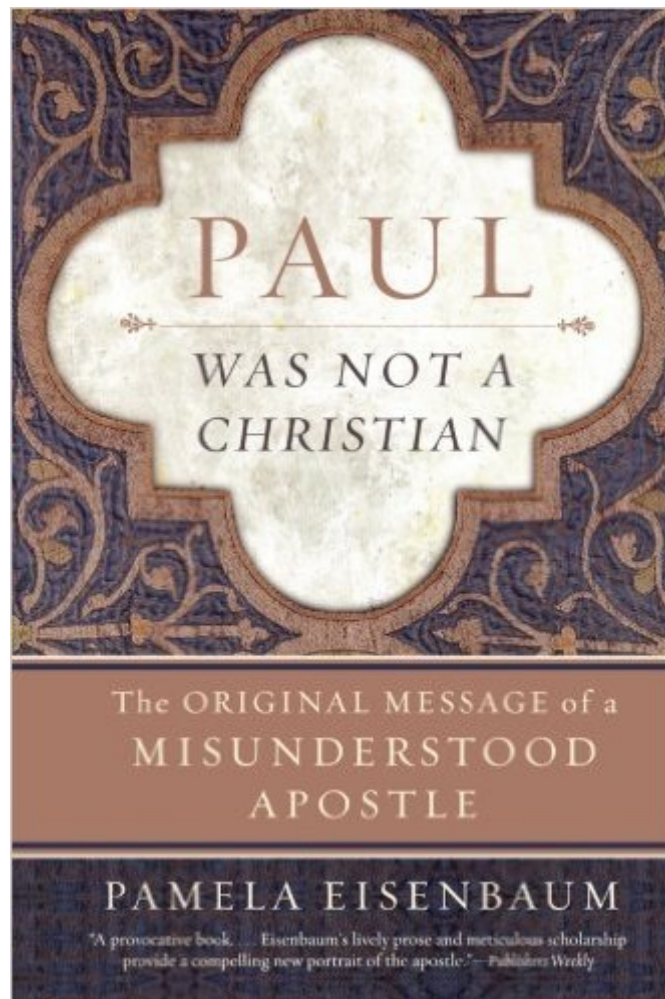


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# Paul Was Not A Christian: The Original Message Of A Misunderstood Apostle



## Synopsis

Pamela Eisenbaum, an expert on early Christianity, reveals the true nature of the historical Paul in *Paul Was Not a Christian*. She explores the idea of Paul not as the founder of a new Christian religion, but as a devout Jew who believed Jesus was the Christ who would unite Jews and Gentiles and fulfill God's universal plan for humanity. Eisenbaum's work in *Paul Was Not a Christian* will have a profound impact on the way many Christians approach evangelism and how to better follow Jesus' and Paul's teachings on how to live faithfully today.

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## Customer Reviews

I'm deeply indebted to HarperOne, division of Harper Collins for providing this book, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle*, by Pamela Eisenbaum, for review. Catchy title huh? It surely will cause most Christians to pause and pick it up. And pick it up they should. This is simply a new way (for most laypersons at least) of looking at Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, and commonly thought of as the major force in creating Christianity. Pamela Eisenbaum, a practicing Jew, has all the credentials in the world, and teaches at a Iliff School of Theology in Denver. She is a biblical scholar with degrees from both Harvard Divinity and Columbia. She claims as mentor the acclaimed biblical expert Krister Stendahl. Her premise here is a startling one for most Christians: Paul, far from renouncing his Jewish faith and "converting" as we are wont to believe on the road to Damascus, remained throughout his life a staunch Jew, follower of the Law. And, he preached the Lord Jesus Christ as savior. How can this be we ask? Eisenbaum takes

us through a long and detailed and clear explanation. Based on the work of what are known as the "new prospective" scholars and building upon that from the now "radical" new prospective scholars, Dr. Eisenbaum paints a convincing picture of Paul as a man thoroughly embedded in his Jewish heritage, and remaining in it to the end. Much of what has gone wrong in Pauline interpretation comes from reading him through a lens of "conversion," a conversion Eisenbaum claims never happened. Most all scholars today would agree that Jesus certainly never set out to create a church. He if anything, wished to reform Judaism. Dr. Eisenbaum argues that essentially Paul did the same, and for somewhat the same reasons. In making her case, reference is made to the authentic letters of Paul, those seven that all scholars agree were written by Paul--Romans, Corinthians I, II, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians, and Philemon. The rest are almost universally or substantially agreed upon as not Pauline in authorship and thus not fruitful for this discussion. This is of course nothing new. She then traces a history of Second Temple Judaism, the time that Paul was alive, and determines what assumptions would have been his based upon the current belief structure of Pharisees of his day. Contrary to public opinion, Pharisees were not so much sticklers for adherence to the Law as they interpreted it, but rather they often interpreted it in ways that were novel and supported present day problems. In other words they were opportunists of a sort. Eisenbaum indicates that independent records show that Jews of this period did not consider Gentiles "unclean" or people to be separated from. They were more tolerant than we might suppose. They believed that Gentiles could follow Torah and such people were known as proselytes. Her argument is that Paul, steeped in Pharisaic belief of the apocalyptic end times, came to see in his Damascus experience, evidence that the end times were upon them. He viewed his experience as his call from God to take the message to the Gentiles, that Jesus by his faithfulness, had justified the Gentiles in the same way that Torah justified Jews in righteousness. In other words, time was of the essence. Jews had imputed righteousness through the grace of God in giving them Torah, which, even if badly followed, gave them the way to atone for sins. The Gentiles, having no such covenant, and being outside the covenant, had no means of atonement for the sins that they had accumulated. Following Torah was not enough. Jesus, by his faithful obedience to God, won for Gentiles (the nations of the world as it were), that righteousness, that Jews received by virtue of the covenant. This explains why Paul was so adamant that such things as circumcision and dietary laws need not apply to Gentiles. What is of critical importance, is Eisenbaum's claim that Augustine, then Luther and so forth misread Paul, thinking he had condemned Torah as the way, and substituted Jesus as the only means of salvation. In this reading, then all Jews must one day convert to Christianity. This of course is the belief of many, (especially conservative) Christians

today. Eisenbaum makes clear that in order to read Paul correctly, one must keep in mind a number of things. First and foremost among them, is that at no time is Paul speaking to Jews. He is speaking only to Gentiles. Secondly Torah is for Jews, but sets a standard for all peoples. Perhaps what will most alarm Christians is her claim that Paul did not see Jesus as God, but as God's son, the one sent. Moreover, she would claim that Paul did not call Gentiles to worship Jesus, but rather to have faithfulness as Jesus had faithfulness. She bases this conclusion on a lengthy explanation of the phrase *pistis iesou christou*. Because Christians have so thoroughly seen Paul as "converting" they have almost always translated this as "faith in Jesus Christ" rather than what she contends is the accurate translation, "faith of Jesus Christ." Her claim is that Jesus expressed a faithfulness to God by his perfect obedience, and that Paul calls Gentiles to be "saved" by also following the lead of Jesus, and trying to imitate Jesus faithfulness. Dr. Eisenbaum of course admits that even among radical new prospective scholars, there is still much argument. Her opinions and conclusions are not universally accepted. It is a new way of looking at Paul, and given Paul's general difficulties, there will be years of new exploration ahead. But indeed, this work is a must reading for anyone who wishes to understand that there is much yet to do in unpacking Pauline theology. The test will be, does Eisenbaum's theory explain more satisfactorily than do previous paradigms. There have been, and perhaps always will be passages in Paul that are seemingly contradictory. This is in part the result that he nowhere sets out to put down his theology in any one place. We have letters, written over a fair stretch of time, often addressed to quite disparate problems. The theory that "solves" the most problems will be the one that finds most favor no doubt. This is an important book in current biblical studies of Pauline theology. It is one that all, both scholars and laypersons can benefit from.\*\* As noted, this book was sent to me free of charge for purposes of review. No agreements as to contents of the review were discussed. The opinions here are strictly my own.

This book offers a very accurate and extended portrait of Judaism in the first century-and one of the fullest to be found in a book about Paul. The book is valuable for that reason alone. It also presents a compelling portrait of Paul as a follower of Jesus who considered himself a Jew and who understood his mission to non-Jews as a vocation within his native Judaism, not a convert from one religion (Judaism) to another religion (Christianity). Clearly, Paul's essential theology and ethics are thoroughly Jewish, as is his interpretive approach to Jewish Scripture. For those who have never read a book on Paul before, it is important to know all this, even though it is not exactly breaking news. When she discusses Jesus, however, Eisenbaum is way off the mark. On the one hand, Eisenbaum is certainly right that Paul's thought is theocentric, that Paul never calls Jesus "God,"

and that Pauline prayer language is addressed to God through Christ, with Jesus filling the role of mediator. On the other hand, Eisenbaum too facetiously claims that Pauline veneration of Jesus in no way infringed on Jewish monotheism. It is very telling that when she discusses the "Christ hymn" in Philippians 2:6-11, she does not discuss verses 6-7, where Paul describes Christ as one who "was in the form of God" and "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form." These lines picture Jesus as the human embodiment of a divine being. One can only conclude that Eisenbaum quietly passes over these verses because they are inconvenient for her Jewish reclamation of Paul. Even more problematic is Eisenbaum's understanding of what Paul says in his letters about Christ in relation to the Torah and non-Christian Judaism. She is certainly right in emphasizing that Paul wrote his letters to Gentile followers of Jesus, not Jews or Jewish followers of Jesus, and that Paul evidently had no problem with Jews who followed Jesus as messiah and Lord continuing to observe Torah. This is old hat by now but still worth emphasizing. But she is clearly wrong in arguing that Paul envisioned two paths to salvation: Jesus for Gentiles, Torah for Jews. Though claiming to offer a "new" framework for understanding Paul, she is rehashing a view that has been around for decades in the work of scholars like Lloyd Gaston and John Gager. Eisenbaum has to avoid major chunks of Paul's letters to make her case. She buries in a footnote a reference to 2 Corinthians 3. She writes, "Readers who know Paul's letters may be wondering about a passage in 2 Corinthians in which Paul seemingly [!] compares the 'new covenant' to a 'written code.' This is the only passage in the undisputed letters in which Paul seems [sic!] to disparage Torah. [Not true]. . . An extended discussion of this text is beyond the scope of this discussion [sic!] . . . . In actuality Paul is contrasting two modes of interpretation" (p. 284, n. 25). In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul speaks of the "old covenant" and calls it "the ministry/service (diakonia) of death" and "the ministry of condemnation." He contrasts "we" with "the people of Israel," who have been "hardened." "Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil [that covered Moses' face "to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside"] is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside, but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed." Jews who do not recognize Jesus as the inaugurator of a new covenant (not a new mode of Torah interpretation!) need to turn to the Lord--that's Paul. More tellingly, there is no discussion of Romans 9-11 -- in a book all about Paul's relation to Judaism! In a few sentences at the very end of her monograph, she says in effect, "Gee, reader, I've run out of space to discuss Romans 9-11. Darn! Only another book could do justice to those chapters. Bye for now." I kid you not. Here is what she writes of this extended section of Romans: "One of the reasons I did not treat it in this book is because there are several good

discussions of it already. Another is that it would require another book. For the sake of manageability, I have tried to stick with more narrowly defined units of text" (p. 251). The problem at issue in Romans 9-11 is that Paul and others who follow Jesus have not succeeded in getting most Jews to join them. Paul attributes this to God's temporary "hardening" of Israel. "Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained it, but Israel, which pursued righteousness with respect to the Law did not attain it. . . . Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the telos (end/goal) of the Law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who has faith. . . . Israel failed to attain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened. . . ." Etc. Eisenbaum's work is a showcase example of the phenomenon known as wishful thinking. She is a Jewish New Testament scholar, and one of her implicit goals (perhaps her chief one) in this book is to make Paul palatable to Jews in our age of religious pluralism. (See the very last sentence of the book.) How I wish she were right about Paul! But it would be more honest to say "I think Paul was wrong" than to dodge every line in Paul letters which indicate that, for him, there is no membership in the covenant people of God, and no eschatological salvation for anyone, Jew or non-Jew, apart from Christ. Daniel Harlow

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