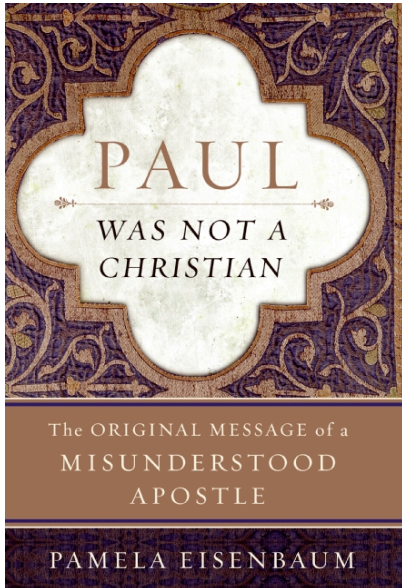


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Eisenbaum, Pamela

Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle

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Eisenbaum, in her book *Paul Was Not a Christian*, argues that Paul and his letters can be best understood from a Jewish perspective of covenant theology rooted in Torah, not from a later Christian perspective. Thus the book title suggests that Paul was not a Christian in the sense that he founded a new religion of Christianity in opposition to Judaism or the law (Torah). To buttress this point throughout, the entire book is divided into thirteen chapters in which the traditional interpretation of the Reformation (“justification by faith”) is vigorously rejected and an alternative reading of Paul, a position of “two-ways salvation,” is proposed.

Chapters 1–3 deal with issues of Paul’s identity and Pauline interpretation. In chapter 1 Eisenbaum begins with the statement that “Paul lived and died a Jew—that is the essential claim of this book” (5), then rejects the term *Christian* being applied to Paul, because he is “unambiguously Jewish—ethnically, culturally, religiously, morally, and theologically” (9). Then Eisenbaum moves onto chapter 2, where two kinds of problems in understanding Paul’s identity are discussed and explained: “problems of evidence” and “problems of interpretation” (10). Regarding the former, only Paul’s seven undisputed letters can be used to reconstruct Paul’s identity; otherwise, the book of Acts and disputed letters are excluded in understanding Paul’s identity because they are considered not

written by Paul and their description of Paul's theology is biased. In chapter 3, Eisenbaum shows how Jewish Paul became a Christian as time passed by after Paul's death. Here the traditional interpretation of Paul (by the influence of Augustine and Luther) is critiqued and challenged by a new perspective on Paul, according to which Paul was misunderstood or misrepresented by later Christians (especially Augustine and Reformers) who read Paul through the lens of the "introspective conscience of the West" (43).

Chapters 4–8 further challenge the traditional reading of Paul by placing Paul in the very context of Jewish covenant theology whose epicenter is God's promise of unconditional love of Israel ("election") and the role of Israel as a light to nations. With support of the New Perspective on Paul, Eisenbaum reaffirms this perspective as follows: Paul did not leave Judaism or reject the law because of Christ (ch. 4). According to Jewish covenant theology, Israel or Jews are already God's people and are justified already (chs. 5–6). Unlike New Perspective scholars, however, Eisenbaum claims that there is no need of Christ for Jews because they are already justified before God. Paul, as the apostle to Gentiles, is called by the same God of Jews only to bring the Gentiles into the household of God through Christ (chs. 7–9).

Chapters 10–13 extend into the discussion of Jewish monotheism within which Paul's thought and gospel are grounded and explained. That is, Paul senses an urgency of the Gentile mission because of an imminent end-time expectation by his Christ experience (chs. 10–11). Paul's mission is limited to Gentiles only; otherwise, Torah works for Jews and atonement works well within the system of Judaism. But Gentiles, having no Torah, need Christ, who made expiation for them. This is the view of "two-ways salvation" (chs. 12–13).

I concur with Eisenbaum's reading of Paul's identity that he did not leave Judaism or reject the law *per se*. There is no reason for Paul to do so because the very mission of the Gentiles can be seamlessly understood from a Jewish line of thought based on Jewish monotheism and the extension of God's grace to Gentiles. But I disagree with Eisenbaum's view that Christ is only for the Gentiles (with a notion of "two-ways salvation"). There are plenty of verses in Paul's letters that do not support such a view of "two-ways salvation." For example, in Rom 9:2–3 Paul laments the fact that his fellow Jews do not accept Christ ("I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh"). Many times Paul emphasizes "all" (both Jews and Greeks) more than the Gentiles: "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (Rom 3:9); "all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham" (Rom 4:16). What about the nature of a different gospel that Peter and other apostles were supposed to preach to Jews? Paul acknowledges that

another gospel works well for Jews: “the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised” (Gal 2:7). The issue for Paul in terms of Gentiles is that they do not need to become Jews (Jewish way) to become God’s people. Paul also speaks about his earlier life experience when he was “violently persecuting the church of God” (Gal 1:13) and refers to the unenlightened Jews having “a zeal for God” (Rom 10:2) and seeking “their own righteousness” (Rom 10:3). In Rom 10:4 (“Christ is the *telos* of the law”), it can be understood in a way that Christ fulfills the principle of the law (which is love of God) for all people. In 1 Cor 8:6, as one God is the God of all, one Lord can be the Lord (Christ) of all, Jews and Gentiles.

The other comment I want to make is that Eisenbaum’s view of Christ’s faithfulness (a subjective genitive of *pistis christou*) is limited in the way that it is confined to Christ’s death on a cross, which serves only as theological expiation for sins of Gentiles without considering the diverse aspects of his faithfulness in historical, political, ideological contexts under the Roman Empire, including Palestine. Because of this limitedness, what is sacrificed is a lack of participating faith of both Christ and the believers in a far wider context of sociopolitical lives under the Roman Empire. For example, Christ’s faithfulness can be broadly understood as a counterimperial, transformative message of peace and justice in God’s kingdom against Caesar’s kingdom. In terms of the role of individual Gentiles, it is unclear how Gentiles are incorporated into God’s people other than through Christ’s faithfulness. In other words, are individual Gentiles justified (incorporated) by their faith in Christ just like the traditional doctrine of “justification by faith”? Does the inclusion of Gentiles into God’s children happen “once and for all” because of Christ’s faithfulness and their faith in Christ? Or is it possible by participating in Christ’s faith? Although Eisenbaum mentions that Gentile believers are to emulate Christ’s faithfulness, this aspect of participating faith of the believers was not developed enough.

Therefore, in the end, Eisenbaum makes only a “half success” in this book: succeeding in making Paul more Jewish than normally expected, in light of his radical monotheism and covenant theology, but failing to persuade this reader to have sympathy with the “two-ways salvation.” From a Jewish perspective today, Paul may be critiqued if he deviated from a Jewish understanding of the Messiah, but it is doubtful that Paul held such a view of “two-ways salvation.” Despite all this, I believe that this book will be a very useful resource for those who seek to understand Paul and his letters in view of Jewish monotheism and covenant theology along with apocalyptic vision for a new world.