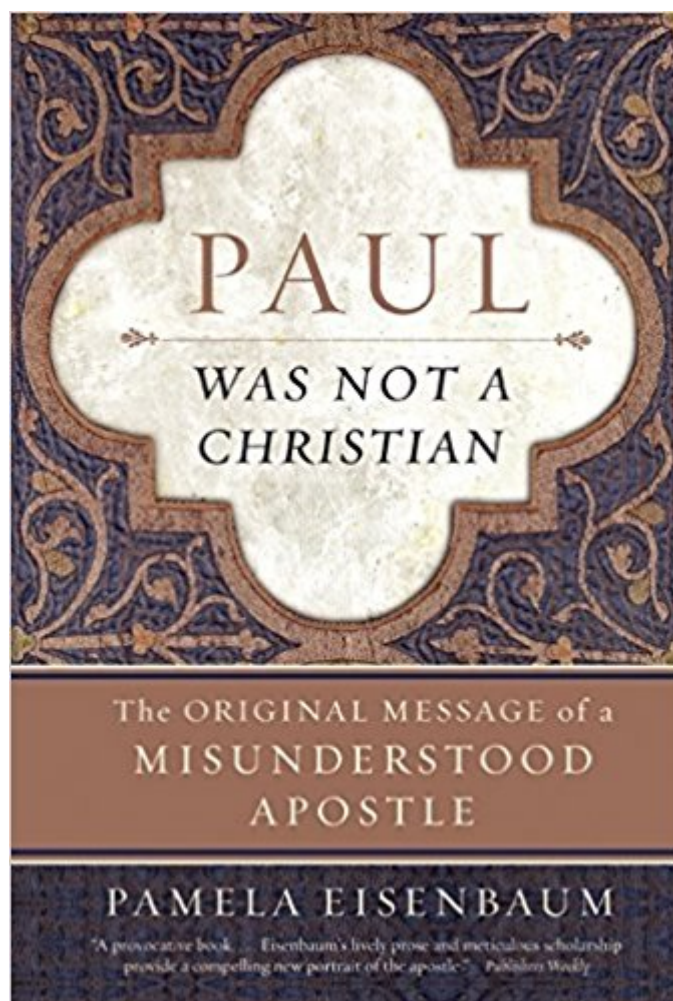


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# Paul Was Not A Christian: The Original Message Of A Misunderstood Apostle



## 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

Eisenbaum shows the implausibility of the common interpretation of Paul that pits a Christian essence against a superficial or rejected Jewish hull. The book's great accomplishment is to show us a historically plausible picture of a fully Jewish Paul who was also fully committed to Christ. (Dr. Stanley Stowers, Chair of Religious Studies, Brown University, and author of *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles*) Eisenbaum is one of a few important voices drawing our attention . . . to the continuing tensions and contradictions in Christian readings of Paul . . . This book does more than challenge and inform: it changes the way we think about Paul [and] the origins of Christian faith. (Neil Elliott, Author of *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle*) Pamela Eisenbaum's *Paul Was Not a Christian* is a clear and effective presentation and extension of the view . . . that Paul remained fully identified with Judaism

and the Torah throughout his life. . . It will repay careful reading by interested layfolk and by scholars as well. (Dr. Daniel Boyarin, Jewish Theological Seminary, UC Berkeley) “Paul was not a Christian is well worth careful reading. It is a serious and very clear exposition of what changed and what stayed the same in Paul’s religious life. This book is very highly recommended to both scholars and laypersons as all will gain from it.” (Alan F. Segal, Professor of Religion and Jewish Studies Barnard College, Columbia University, Author of Paul the Convert) “In this provocative book, biblical scholar Eisenbaum points out that the traditional Christian portrait of Paul as a former Jew . . . is a misreading of Paul’s life and religious work . . . Eisenbaum’s lively prose and meticulous scholarship provides a compelling new portrait of the apostle.” (Publishers Weekly) “Professor Eisenbaum offers the general reader the most realistic first-century portrayal of the Apostle Paul ever written.” (Jewish Book World) “According to traditional teachings, Paul rejected his Judaism for the new, improved version: Christianity. Bible scholar Pamela Eisenbaum says this interpretation of Paul is not only wrong, it’s dangerous.” (Interfaith Voices)

The True Identity of the Bible’s Most Divisive Apostle Paul is not the founder of Christianity or a zealous convert from Judaism, as is often claimed. Nor did he contend that Jesus superseded the Torah. Paul, Eisenbaum persuasively argues, remained a devout Jew who believed Jesus would unite Jews and Gentiles and fulfill God’s universal plan for humanity. Meticulously researched and far-reaching in its implications, this is a much-needed corrective to misconceptions held by Christians and Jews, liberals and conservatives, alike.

Interesting but overly polemic.

I often read mythicist material so when I see a book titled "Paul was not a Christian" I immediately start to suspect that this is the kind of material I’m going to be looking at. I must say I was pleasantly surprised. She is actually a rarity in that she is a Jewish New Testament scholar and she does have a Ph.D. in the field. If someone comes here thinking they will find something along the lines of a mythicist argument or conspiracy theory nonsense, they will not find it. Instead, one will find interaction with other leading scholars in the field and a scholarly argument from Eisenbaum’s side. And yet, if the title is an indication of the message she wants us to get, I ultimately think she fails. Before I say why that is, let’s look at what she does say. Eisenbaum is rightly concerned about a negative view of Judaism that too many Christians have. In this, she is correct. We often have this

idea that Jews were suffering under the weight of the Law and wondering how they could be holy before a God who was just demanding so much of them and would have loved any chance of grace. This in spite of the fact that the OT regularly speaks about forgiveness and grace. This despite the fact that in Philippians 3 Paul describes himself as blameless with regard to the Law. Sure, there were disputes in Judaism over who was and wasn't a Jew and what got one to be considered a Jew, but it was not really the legalistic system that some Christians make it out to be. More power to Eisenbaum in critiquing this view. I also agree with Eisenbaum that too often we make the central message of Paul to be justification by faith. Is this a message of Paul? Yes. Is it the main message? No. His message would have also been that of Jesus and justification by faith was an outworking of that message. Paul's message would have centered around Jesus being crucified and resurrected. The emphasis on justification by faith assumes the point above being contested, that Paul lived in a world where Jews were struggling under the Law and that they just wanted a way to be righteous before God. Most of them already saw themselves as righteous before God. The Law was not followed so they would be righteous, but to show that they were righteous. Eisenbaum is certainly also right that we should take Paul's identity as a Jew seriously, especially since he himself said he was one. Paul should be seen as a Jew who was well-learned in the Hellenistic culture of the time. One of the great realities that has had to be learned in the quest for the historical Jesus is that Jesus was a Jew. The same needs to be said about Paul as well. Paul was a Jew. It's important also to note that while Eisenbaum wants to make sure Paul is not seen as anti-Jewish, and he is not, Eisenbaum herself is not anti-Paul. Nothing in the book is meant to put Paul in a negative light. In fact, Paul is highly respected throughout Eisenbaum's work and she seriously wrestles with what he says. Eisenbaum does say that the social context Paul wrote in was not monolithic or homogeneous due to multiple writings going around and the canon was a fourth-century development, but this could be a kind of all-or-nothing thinking. Were there disputes and factions and such? Yes. Were there however unifying beliefs that we find? Yes. We could be sure Paul would not include anyone in the body who did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus in a bodily sense. After all, in 1 Cor. 15 if Jesus has not been raised then our faith is in vain, which has the assumption that the faith of all of us is that Jesus has been bodily raised. Eisenbaum is also right that Paul does not use the language of conversion. Does he speak of a call of Jesus and the appearance of Jesus to Him? Yes. Eisenbaum is certainly right that this does not mean that Paul ever ceased to be a Jew and too often we have used the language of conversion. In fact, Richards, Reeves, and Capes in their book *Rediscovering Paul* also agree and say we should speak more of the call of Paul than we should speak of the conversion. I also agree with Eisenbaum that Romans 7

is not an autobiographical account of Paul's personal struggles. I see it more at this point as a description of Adam who was the last named character. Paul would not have described himself as alive apart from the Law for instance and when we read his account in Philippians 3, we see no such idea of a struggle with Paul. This is something in fact that Westerners have read into the text. Throughout the book then, the reader will find relevant material on the new perspective on Paul, what makes a Jew a Jew, and the early Christian view of Jesus. Now there were some points I did disagree with. I disagree with her view on Christology and I think the work of scholars like Bauckham, Tilling, Hurtado, and others have definitely shown that the earliest Christology is the highest Christology. I also disagree with her that the crucifixion would not necessarily have been seen as falling under the Deuteronomic condemnation of those who were hung on a tree. I think Evans has made an excellent case in his latest book, though to be fair this definitely came out after Eisenbaum's writing. So in all of this, why is it then that I disagree with Eisenbaum's claim that Paul was not a Christian? There's a very simple reason. Nowhere did I see Eisenbaum state what a Christian is. It could be tempting to say that of course we all know what a Christian is, but that still needs to be addressed. For instance, if being a Christian means citing the Nicene Creed and affirming a formulaic view of Trinitarian theology, then would we say that it could be there were no Christians and no Christianity until later in church history? This sounds like an absurd position to take. If we say that a Christian for Paul would be someone who saw Jesus as the resurrected Messiah and Lord of all, then we could definitely say that Paul was a Christian. The problem is that Eisenbaum argues throughout that Paul never ceased to be a Jew so he would not have been a Christian, but this makes it be that if one is a Jew, one cannot be a Christian, and vice-versa. Ironically, Eisenbaum who is arguing that Christianity does not mean opposition to Judaism has herself created an opposition to Christianity in her work. That one cannot be a Jew and a Christian both would certainly be news to many Messianic Jews today. This is the main problem then I find. Eisenbaum has written that Christians have imposed a split and she herself has that exact same split the other way. This should not detract from the excellent material in her work and we should take the views of Judaism from such a scholar seriously and we should learn to read Paul as a Jew, but we should still also read Paul as a Christian and in fact, because he was a Christian, he was exceptionally Jewish. After all, if Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, and He is, what could be more in line with being a Jew than believing in the Messiah of the Jews? So by all means go out and read this work for the scholarly insights within, but the main point is still not established. Much of what Paul said has been misunderstood due to what our culture has imposed onto the text, but the dichotomy is not really there and we as Christians should embrace the Jewishness of our Christian brother

Was Paul a Christian? Would that term even have made sense to the apostle? These are questions that come to mind when reading this book. While this book has radically reshaped my views on faith, justification, and the workings of God in salvation, it has provided me with a different perspective and a far more nuanced reading of Paul. It is well worth the read.

By far one of the best written books on the Biblical Paul. The work is well referenced and easy to quote. The information is presented well and best of all, the writing style is easy to read.

A detailed study of Paul's life offers explanations for his actions. An insight that is very helpful when reading his letters.

At last, a way to understand Paul that's less dissociative and morally hollow than the orthodox Protestant interpretation. "Justification by faith" has always felt like a lazy cop-out to me. All you have to do is believe? Good behavior gets you nothing? The Torah was given to Jews only to magnify their guilt, not to save or justify them? If that's the case, it makes God out to be sort of a psychopath, which is a proposition I'm not willing to accept... Now this book argues that these wacky doctrines, based on Paul's letters, were never what Paul meant to say. Thanks to Augustine and Luther, with their guilty consciences, we've been misunderstanding Paul for more than 1500 years. The only problem here is that the argument requires some elaborate recontextualizing of Paul to read the epistles in ways that are not obvious from (in fact are counter-intuitive to) most standard English translations. Dr. Eisenbaum makes her case convincingly enough, but when she has to resort to using her own translation in order to make her point, I wonder... Not having the knowledge nor the access to read the classical Greek texts, I have to just trust what these scholars tell me. The more I learn about the Bible and early Christian history, the less there seems worthy of belief in this sloppy hodge-podge of unreliable, inaccurate, and contradictory documents which we call the New Testament. I fear having to scrap my religion completely because even by its own standards it just does not work. With this new perspective on Paul, Eisenbaum gives me hope that there is a way to hang onto my faith without being intellectually or morally dishonest, but it requires quite a bit of creative and drastic editing of "scripture." This would have bothered me when I was younger, but I've long discarded the notion that the Bible is the "Word of God." It can't possibly be; not if I still want to believe in a God that tells the truth. I think any approach that might salvage a workable

version of Christianity from this mess is worth exploring. I found Eisenbaum's perspective to be extremely uplifting, and the book is easy to read. Highly recommended for earnest seekers and people dissatisfied with the Christian status quo. Conservative Evangelicals, don't waste your time on this one - it will only make you angry.

A thought-provoking writing which gives the reader a new perspective of viewing the Apostle Paul.

The author really contextualizes Paul and his writing. I highly recommend this book for any study of Paul and his writings.

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