

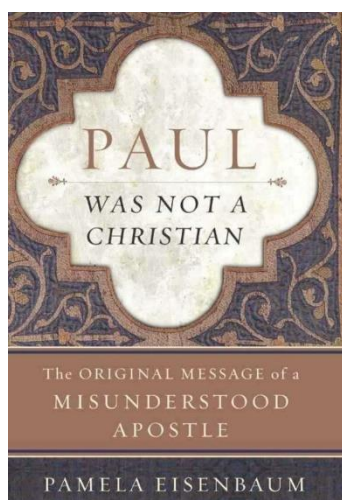
PAUL WAS NOT A CHRISTIAN

The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle

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Introduction



At a Christian meeting, a Jewish young man gave his testimony. It categorised his previous life, as a practising Jew, as a life of struggle and sin, but now he had given that up and become a Christian.

This echoes the way Paul has traditionally been viewed: as liberated from his frustrating Jewish ‘works’ religion to find freedom and life in Christ. He is viewed as ‘Paul the convert’. History has seen him as the one who opened up the doctrine of justification by faith, by which other sinful humans may have a similar experience.

This book challenges that 2000-year-old portrait of Paul. It will present him as ‘called’ rather than ‘converted’. He was a Jew on a divine mission. He was not a ‘Christian’ because that term had not yet been coined, and Christianity had not yet emerged as a religion separate from the Judaistic background it grew out of.

In grappling with Jewish particularity against a background of the universality of God’s desire to embrace all people, the way he managed it may help us better manage the issues of pluralism in the modern world.

Chapter 1: Was Paul really Jewish?

Yes, Paul lived and died a Jew—a Hellenistic one. This governed everything he said, did and wrote. He was a Jew not just ethnically but religiously as well. His letters are now considered Christian, of course, having been canonised, but in their original context they were examples of Jewish sectarian literature. Any Jew or Gentile intercepting one of Paul’s letters in his lifetime would immediately have recognised them as written by a Jew.

The fact that Paul followed Jesus would not in itself have made him seem any less Jewish in the eyes of fellow-Jews, because a messianic saviour-figure was a very Jewish idea.

Chapter 2: Paul the Problem

We face two sets of problems when seeking to understand Paul: problems of *evidence* (which historical sources are relevant) and the more difficult problems of *interpretation*. The latter are caused by the fact that he wrote 2000 years ago in a culture very different from our own.

Problems of Evidence

Here we will confirm which sources inform this study of Paul, and note how his letters relate to the Book of Acts.

Acts versus Paul’s letters

Most biographical books on Paul rely heavily on Acts, written by Luke. It is a highly readable and dramatic adventure story, in chronological order. In it, Paul can sometimes appear a bit larger than life.

Acts has him preaching first in synagogues and only then, when rejected there, reaching out to Gentiles across the Roman Empire. It never mentions his writing a letter, though that was clearly an important part of his ministry strategy. He is portrayed simply as a key figure in the early development of the church.

Is Acts history? Not in the modern sense. Ancient historians preferred oral sources over written ones. And they did not hesitate to impose on their material slants that favoured their aim. Speeches like those of Paul, for instance, were not recorded at the time—the means did not exist—so Luke had to ‘compose’ them. By contrast, Paul’s letters contain his very own words. So, in this book we will not draw on the stories and speeches in Acts.

Disputed letters

Just seven of Paul’s letters are universally recognised as being from his hand: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. This study will draw only on these as the primary documents. The other six are disputed; they are pseudonymous, that is, ascribed to Paul, but a majority of scholars believe he didn’t write them himself.

They are rejected on the grounds of both external and internal evidence. An example of external evidence: several manuscripts of Ephesians omit ‘those in Ephesus’ as the recipients. Another: the Pastoral Epistles are missing from the Chester Beatty codex.

Internal evidence concerns the text itself and whether its style, content etc. fits with what we know for sure about Paul. Ephesians, for example, connects with no particular context; it seems like a generic letter. The Pastorals are more specific but match the context of local churches some fifty years after Paul, mentioning the offices of elder and deacon, whereas Paul favoured the emerging of charismatic gifts to determine who did what. Paul’s staccato style of writing, with ellipses, rhetorical questions etc. is absent from the disputed epistles.

‘Even if some or all of the disputed letters were written by Paul’s disciples or by those who were part of a circle of followers who believed themselves faithful to the apostle’s teachings, the disputed letters most likely do not reflect the direct, unmediated words of Paul.’ (p21)

Problems of interpretation

With written material from ancient times, ignorance of the background and context can make interpretation difficult. Unless we know the ‘cultural codes’ that people of the day had, we can be left in the dark.

Ambiguity

Reading Paul’s letters is like reading someone else’s mail, in that we have only one side of the conversation. So, we face problems in understanding, for instance, ‘The law...was added because of transgressions’ in Gal 3:19. Various possibilities have been suggested, but none of them make the following verses much clearer. We lack the cultural codes required to get a clear picture.

Even more straightforward statements can be ambiguous, like Gal 3:28, which has been used both to support the maintaining of the status quo and to advocate its overthrow.

Contradictions

Paul sometimes seems to contradict himself. Notably, at times he condemns the law while, on other occasions, he praises it in the highest terms. Most Christians have tended—using sixteenth-century Reformation ‘filters’—to ignore the positive statements and highlight the negative ones. We will return to the law issue in Chapter 12.

Paul’s views on women seem equally contradictory, moving between an egalitarian approach (e.g. 1 Cor 7:3-4) and a hierarchical one (e.g. 1 Cor 11:7).

Some explain this phenomenon by saying his ideas developed over time, but we can have no idea when significant changes may have taken place, or why, so we are not much further forward. But laying aside Reformation perspectives can help us reconcile seeming inconsistencies in some cases.

Chapter 3: How Paul became a Christian

Paul's 'Christian' identity has been constructed over many centuries.

Ancient views of Paul

People have assumed the pseudonymous letters to be by Paul, and that the accounts in Acts mesh with what we find in the letters. For instance, the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 is seen as 'matching' the meeting Paul describes in Galatians 2. Other sources, like the First Letter of Clement, also helped shape the forming picture of the apostle. Then two second-century apocryphal sources added to it: the *Acts of Paul* and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. In time, this accumulated material determined how the essential Christian message got unlocked.

Paul's exemplary life

Unlike the other apostles, Paul encountered Christ only after his crucifixion and resurrection, which made him a better candidate than them as a paradigm for the Christian life generally, especially for people in later generations, who were even more separated from Jesus time-wise. Up until the NT canon was finalised, people drew on all the extant works attributed to Paul, finding emphases that suited them and attributing them to his authority. There were strong debates on marriage and celibacy and the place of women, for example, all based on competing images of the apostle and his thinking.

Eventually, the image that became dominant was that of 'Paul the convert', drawn not so much from his own writings but from Acts and the Pastoral Epistles. His perceived 'sinner to saint' transformation became the paradigm of Christian conversion. In particular, emphasis grew on his persecution by Jews as a follower of Jesus, indicating his rejection of Judaism in favour of Christianity.

In his letters, Paul presents himself as good-living and 'blameless', but 1 Timothy, a disputed letter, has him declaring himself the 'chief of sinners', thus styling himself as the convert. This latter emphasis was widely embraced, to the neglect of the former.

Augustine

The NT canon stabilised in the fourth century, setting the stage for Augustine to solidify the 'convert' picture. He read back his own radical conversion into Paul's experience and saw Paul's struggles described in Romans 7 as reflecting his own yearnings after holiness, and those of every human being in their struggles born of a sinful nature. A century earlier, Origen had seen Paul here using the rhetorical technique of 'speech in character', but Augustine insisted Paul was speaking of himself.

Also, Augustine saw the questions prompted by his own espousal of Manicheanism for a while reflected in Paul's problems with Judaism. Neither could meet the soul's deepest needs; only conversion to Christ could do that. Due to Augustine's strong influence, this model became the standard by which Christian experience in the West came to be measured. It contrasted with the previous paradigm, where people in Christendom saw themselves as 'Christian' from birth and lived in a Christianised society.

As Augustine saw it, acceptance of Christ meant, for Paul, the need to reject Judaism, and so he emphasised Paul's negative statements about the Law. Meanwhile, he developed the 'doctrine of witness'. This meant that Jews could be allowed to live in Christendom, where their existence served as both witness and foil. Witness in that their preservation and honouring of the OT, with its prophecies of Christ, made them a witness to the truth of Christianity. Foil in that their insistence on relying on the 'works' of the Law to win God's favour helped show up the superiority of the way of Christ and the centrality of faith.

Luther

Medieval mendicant friars, however, believed that Jews should be actively evangelised. Luther continued this by actively praying for Jews—though later on his attitude changed to one of blatant hostility. He came to see both Jews and Papists as agents of the devil. If Paul, as a Jew, had needed to be converted, other Jews also certainly did.

Like Augustine, Luther had a dramatic, transformative experience triggered—again just like Augustine—by reading a passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Having been long terrified by the phrase ‘the righteousness of God’, he came to see it not as God’s grim demands but as the righteousness that God would impute to the believer on the grounds of faith. This became the basis of the Reformed doctrine of salvation—justification by faith—all allegedly based on Paul.

Luther’s espousal of the doctrine of original sin meant we can do nothing good and can never therefore merit God’s favour. Only God’s gracious provision in Christ, received by faith, can accomplish that. Thus, justification by faith came to be seen as the central doctrine taught by Paul. This has dominated Protestantism until very recently. The twentieth century, however, saw another paradigm emerging. This said that Paul did not in fact reject his Jewish identity on the grounds that it represented ‘salvation by works’, and that justification by faith was not the gospel Paul preached.

Chapter 4: Reading Paul as a Jew—Almost

Modern Jewish interpreters of Paul

Jewish scholars who studied Paul in the last 200 years have largely perpetuated the ‘Christian convert’ picture of him. Prominent were Leo Baeck (d. 1956) and Martin Buber (d. 1965), both of whom saw Paul as having left Judaism for Christianity—the view that Luther had taken. More recent Jewish interpreters have claimed a truly Jewish Jesus but an apostate Paul, whom they portray as the real founder of Christianity.

The New Perspective on Paul

Post-Holocaust, some Protestant scholars pioneered the ‘new perspective’ on Paul (NPP). It questioned the previously unquestioned premise that Judaism was a ‘works’ religion, with its corollary that ‘justification by faith’ in Christ is the required antidote. The new perspective also noted that Paul specifically addressed Gentiles, which changes the way one reads his comments on the law. E.P Sanders’ 1977 *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* was a key book in promoting the new thinking.

It also showed that grace was the basis of Israel’s covenant relationship with God and that their ‘good works’ in the keeping of Torah were in response to that grace rather than a way to win merit. Sanders retained the typical Christian view of Paul in many aspects, however, while subsequent scholarship has moved towards a more Jewish perspective.

Chapter 5: Paul’s Jewish Inheritance

This chapter looks at the components of the late Second Temple Judaism that was Paul’s background.

Greek thought had a huge influence on Judaism, giving us ‘Hellenistic Judaism’. Many of Paul’s views are clearly coloured by it.

God and worship

The term *aniconic monotheism* describes the Jews’ basic view of God: he is one, and he must not be ‘imaged’ in any way. Jews were mostly admired for it by their Gentile neighbours. It stood in contrast to the widespread polytheism and idolatry in the Roman Empire. The Temple in Jerusalem, up to its destruction in AD 70, continued to be the focus of Jewish worship, with many people travelling there for the three annual festivals, but for many in the *Diaspora* that was impracticable.

Evidently the Jews treated their neighbours’ worship of other gods with increasing tolerance and looked for features of overlap. But the bottom line was that they looked down on their idolatry as the source of every other sin.

Torah and election

For Jews, the Torah (normally a synonym for what Christians call the Pentateuch) was God’s instruction on how to live well. It was the basis of his covenant with them. This included their obligations to him, but also his commitment

to them. The dietary and purity laws are examples of requirements that applied only to Israel and marked them out from the nations as separate.

Under the law there was both ritual and moral impurity, the former having nothing to do with sin and applying exclusively to Israel. But Jews saw the law's moral requirements as binding on all people. Both sets of requirements highlighted the fact that Israel were God's chosen people. That election was by his grace alone and not because of any superiority in them. Their striving to be obedient to him was a response to that gracious choice, so that there was no grace/works divide in Jewish thinking at this period. They saw even his punishment of their sins as a sign of his favour. The Torah stressed what the people should do, not what they should believe.

The LXX used the Greek *nomos* for the Hebrew *torah*, and English usually translates this as 'law'. But neither the Greek nor the English carry the same range of meaning as *torah*. Jews saw echoes of their law in some aspects of Greek philosophy, and this was a far commoner attitude than a Jewish nit-picking attention to the law's details. Some modern scholars have read into many OT passages a role for the law that it probably never played. Daniel, for instance, likely declined the royal food in Babylon not because it wasn't kosher but because it had routinely been offered to idols.

Redemption

'Ancient Judaism is not what one would call a religion of salvation. This is perhaps the most fundamental misconception that informs the Christian view of ancient Judaism' (p88). Personal salvation is rarely in the picture, and certainly never in a context of works versus faith. Nor was any prominence given to eternal life, resurrection or post-mortem reward and punishment. Instead, the deliverance from Egypt was the big redemption picture, representing deliverance from enemies in the nations around. Salvation was seen in communal rather than individual terms, often looking to a time of blessing, harmony and prosperity for not just Israel but for the whole world.

Only in the second century BC did belief in life after death begin to appear in some Jewish texts, but it had become common by Paul's day. Even then, however, the concept of earning one's post-mortem salvation never came to prominence. Instead, the widespread view was that participation in the covenant *was* salvation.

Along with this, the notion of 'the merit of the fathers' was common: that all Israelites benefited from the outstanding righteousness of the patriarchs, especially Abraham. God's covenant, after all, was with him *and* his descendants. Those descendants saw themselves as simply needing to display a proper humility and repentance in order to benefit.

All Israelites, it was believed by Paul's day, would have a share in the world to come because of God's grace and covenant faithfulness. As for non-Jews, certain OT texts pointed to their sharing in Israel's blessings (e.g Isaiah 2:2-4; Zech 8:21-23). Many Jewish post-biblical texts echo this theme. The inclusion of Gentiles was not seen as meaning they would convert to Judaism, just that there would somehow be a whole world redeemed.

Chapter 6: Who Is and Who Isn't a Jew?

How open were Jews in Paul's day to non-Jews? On the whole, surprisingly open.

Jews did not view Gentiles as inherently 'unclean' or a source of defilement. Gentiles were not susceptible to ritual impurity, and Jews did not contract impurity by contact with them. The law urged Jews to treat Gentiles living among them with love and care (Lev 19:18, 34). Many Jews were in reality virtually indistinguishable from Gentiles, marked out only by keeping company mainly with other Jews and observing practices like Sabbath rest and abstaining from pork.

By Paul's day, being a Jew primarily meant belonging to a common *politeia*, that is, 'way of life', rather than being defined by geography or ethnicity. Based as it was on this model, Second Temple Judaism was a cultural option rather like, though still distinct from, Hellenism. It was practical for Jews living in the *Diaspora*. This caused some Gentiles to admire and spend time in the company of Jews. Some of these Gentiles became 'God-fearers' (*theosebés*).

In summary, many Jews in the *Diaspora* were well integrated into the social and civic life of the cities they lived in, while still maintaining their identity. Some practices caught on among their Gentile fellows, notably Sabbath observance.

The production of the Septuagint (LXX) made the Jewish scriptures available to all Greek-speaking people. So there was widespread 'outreach' by Jews to the Gentile community even before Paul came along.

Chapter 7: The Flexible Pharisees

Second Temple Judaism had several 'sects', like Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, though these were probably not as exclusive as some have suggested. Many interpreters of Paul have made much of his being a former Pharisee.

The Pharisees are better described as a 'party' rather than as a sect. They engaged wider society more than we have been led to think. Josephus, as well as Paul, was a Pharisee and his writings give us some helpful information to supplement other sources. The Gospels portray them as malicious opponents of Jesus. Matthew 23 has Jesus denouncing them as hypocrites. They were renowned teachers of the law and mingled with ordinary people in that capacity.

They are often thought to be legalistic and literalistic, but the Gospels actually portray them as too lenient—e.g. on divorce. This leniency extended to other issues, like the ritual impact of bodily fluids, and which types of locust could be legitimately eaten. They were so expert at fine-tuning the details of the law that they sometimes ended up defying it while appearing to keep it. On the plus side, they could be regarded as interpreting the law in a way faithful to the 'spirit' of it. But, conversely, Jesus accused them of setting it aside in favour of their 'traditions'.

Unlike the Sadducees, they believed in life after death, and that the moral quality of life before death would determine one's post-mortem experience. And they maintained that the Torah laws addressed specifically to priests were also binding on ordinary Jews. Overall, however, they held a fairly 'loose' view of some commandments, and this might explain Paul's handling of certain issues.

Chapter 8: Paul the (Ex?)-Pharisee

Paul's 'conversion' has become the key element of his story. But if we didn't have the Acts account, would we deduce it from his writings? Almost certainly not, even if we call it a 'prophetic call' (Stendhal) rather than a conversion. But Paul does talk about giving up his past life: Gal 1:11-17 and Phil 3:2-9.

Gal 1:13 could be either 'my *earlier* life in Judaism' or 'my *former* life in Judaism', the latter suggesting a more radical change. The two factors of it he mentions, here and in Philippians, are his persecution of the church and his advanced education in Judaism. But 'the church' is not necessarily 'Christianity'. And he probably mentions the divine revelation on the Damascus road, not because it was a conversion, but because it reminds his readers of his apostolic authority. The same could apply to the Philippians passage. He remained consciously a Jew; his use of various Jewish labels about himself are always in the present tense, not the past.

His claim to be circumcised, a descendant of Abraham and a trained Pharisee remained part of his identity, and he used these status-markers in asserting his authority vis-a-vis the false teachers, who made similar claims. For Paul, they were indicators of status, not of shame. Only if they were valuable to him could he 'count them as loss'. *'What Paul is saying in Philippians 3 is that he no longer values such claims to status, because they pale in comparison to being a follower of Jesus'* (p140).

Paul's Jewish identity, then, was as intact and robust as it had been before his 'conversion'. That event was life-changing, and a key to his subsequent activity, but it was not a conversion from one religion to another. In his letters he never refers to it to explain what it means to believe in Jesus. He never links it with *metanoia*, and he never calls himself a 'proselyte for Christ' or similar.

The main change is that he went from being a persecutor of the church to being persecuted himself. Why did he persecute the church? Jewish leaders had not persecuted adherents of others who claimed to be the messiah, so why the followers of Jesus? Some say it was the idea of a *crucified* messiah that was abhorrent, but the curse of

'hanging on a tree' referred to execution for a capital offence, which didn't apply in Jesus' case. Also without substance is the idea that Paul couldn't accept that some Jews were trying to proselytise Gentiles without requiring circumcision.

More likely is that the pre-Damascus-road Paul persecuted the church because, like his fellow-Pharisees, he was keen to maintain peaceful relations with the Romans, and Jesus had shown himself to be a political threat to that stability by proclaiming the kingdom of God. It certainly wasn't that, as a Jew and Pharisee, Paul saw the Gentiles in the churches as tainted with idolatry, because in turning to Christ those folk had turned from idolatry.

Paul maintained his general outlook as a Pharisee. It was his conviction that, with the resurrection of Jesus, the eschaton had arrived, or at least begun to arrive, that caused him to reach out to the Gentiles. But he did so from within his Pharisaic outlook.

Chapter 9: A Typical Jew

Prejudices

Paul remained a typical Jew even after his encounter with Jesus. This shows in his biases—some of which we might consider distasteful.

In his earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians, he expresses his assumption that the Gentile believers had previously been mired in idolatry. Similarly with the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:2) and Romans (Rom 1:21-25). Jews believed that idolatry was the chief sin that inevitably led to other sins, and this comes out strongly in Romans, especially sexual immorality (Rom 1:25-27), expressing the typically Jewish view that Gentiles were all sexually licentious.

God, Ethics, Purity and Sex

The essentials of Paul's Jewish value system remained after he came to believe in Jesus, along with typical Pharisaic flexibility. Monotheistic theology was of course the fundamental element.

He also continued the close Jewish link between holiness and purity, and stressed this in the churches. The believers are a holy, that is 'separate', community, to be demonstrated in their lives of moral purity. They are a 'temple', reflecting the belief that the Jerusalem Temple was the epitome of holiness. Christians enter this state of holiness/purity through baptism.

Ritual impurity was not the issue for Paul's Gentile believers; it was moral impurity, which Jews saw as linked to three main particulars: idolatry, sexual immorality and bloodshed. Not surprisingly, therefore, we see him stressing the purity angle in connection particularly with immorality. As in Judaism, he sees this as marking a clear boundary between the Jesus community and society around. They stand out because of their sanctification. This comes out most strongly with the Corinthians, particularly 1 Cor 5:1-13. Such defilement stains the whole believing community and must be dealt with robustly for that reason. That's why Paul says it is OK to mix with immoral people outside the church, but not inside it.

The same 'community boundaries' aspect of Jewish thinking can be seen in his treatment of marriage relationships in 1 Cor 7. There, the children of a mixed marriage are 'clean', as is the non-believing partner. Here, the line between moral and ritual purity becomes rather blurred.

Pharisees were more lenient in the application of the law than some others, and we see this in Paul's treatment of divorce, which is more lenient than that of Jesus.

Scripture and Tradition

The Pharisees were known for incorporating non-written traditions into their interpretation of the Torah, and could be creative in applying the law to changing circumstances. Paul mainly uses the Greek *nomos* for that law, which he continued to hold in high regard, not regarding it as stripped of its authority with the coming of Christ. He *never* condemns or degrades it.

All he objects to is its strictly-Jewish requirements being loaded onto Gentiles, and all his negative comments on it, including the ones on circumcision, are in that context. He recognised, as did all Jews, that there are moral aspects that could helpfully be taken on board by Gentiles, but other parts were exclusively for the Jews.

Chapter 10: A Radical Jewish Monotheist

Paul never wrote a systematic theology; his letters are all occasional in nature. Nevertheless, one can discern a coherent message from those letters. We could call the framework Jewish Apocalyptic, which focuses on the reign of God that climaxes history and inaugurates the messianic age. *'I assert that the most important theological force motivating Paul's mission was a thoroughgoing commitment to Jewish monotheism and how to bring the nations of the world to that realization as history draws to a close' (p173).* His theology is thus fundamentally theocentric rather than christocentric.

Paul probably saw himself as being in the mould of Abraham, called from his familiar surrounding to a nomadic life in the service of God. This fitted well with the portrait of Abraham popular in Paul's time. Part of that was that the people of Abraham's day opposed him for his monotheism.

God at the Center of Paul's Thought

Paul's monotheism as a Jew was central to his sense of mission. Muslims and Jews have long criticised him for allegedly having forsaken monotheism for Christian polytheism expressed in the Trinity, but they miss the point. This was long before Nicaea.

Paul's letters display a high Christology, anticipating Nicaea, for sure, but the one God remained his focus. It was God who raised Jesus from death and gave him a new, eschatological quality of life, exalted him to heaven as Lord, and provided people like Paul with encounters with him to propel them out to inform the world that the eschatological moment of redemption had arrived.

Jesus' resurrection is primarily a testimony to the power of God. Paul uses 'gospel of God' almost as much as 'gospel of Christ'. Many passages in his letters make it clear that God is in charge of the unfolding of history. Also words of prayer and worship are directed 'to' God exclusively, while Paul offers them 'through' Christ (e.g. Rom 7:25; Phil 2:10-11).

At the same time, Paul refers to Jesus as *Kyrios*, probably picking up on the pre-Pauline tradition formed by the first generation of believers. This was the term by which Jews referred to God by Paul's time. *'In recent years, several scholars have commented in regard to 1 Corinthians 8 that it is astonishing that Paul invokes the Shema—thus unequivocally embracing traditional Jewish monotheism—and then unself-consciously uses it as the basis on which to defend the lordship of Christ' (p183).*

Intermediary figures between God and his creatures were common in Jewish literature of the period, and Jews would see Jesus as presented by Paul in this light (see 1 Cor 8:4-6). This is especially true as some such figures seemed to partake of parity with God himself, like the character of Wisdom—and its Hellenised form, the Logos. But clearly the Jews did not see this as threatening their fundamental monotheism. Certainly Paul never referred to Jesus as *theos*.

In Philippians 2:6-11 it is important to note that it is God who exalts Jesus, and this exaltation serves to glorify God the Father. *'A shift in devotional focus from God to Christ may have already begun with other New Testament writers, but these writers come at least a generation after Paul' (p188).*

The Faith of versus the Faith in Jesus Christ

When Paul urges faith (Greek *pistis*) upon his charges it is not faith in Jesus but faith in God. That God is often specified as the one who raised Jesus from the dead (e.g. Rom 4:24).

Since the Reformation, 'faith' has been key to Christian understanding, experience and teaching. It is pitted against 'works'. Paul never equated faith with mental assent to some belief. To him it denoted 'trust' or 'faithfulness', expressing loyalty, devotion and commitment.

‘Every instance in which the phrase “faith in Christ” (or its variants) appears in the undisputed letters would be better translated “faithfulness of Christ”’ (p191). The failure of most English translations to do this reflects the influence of the Reformers, and especially Luther’s German translation of the New Testament. But in the phrase *pistis Iesou Christou*, the second word makes more consistent sense as a subjective (not objective) genitive.

On this basis, the phrase ‘faith in Christ’ never occurs in the undisputed Pauline letters. Paul’s monotheism remains uncompromised.

Chapter 11: On a Mission from God

Unfortunately, Pauline scholars have often pitted Israelite particularity against Christian universality. Ancient Jews saw tensions between God as God of the whole universe and as God of Israel. They resolved these by seeing themselves as agents for mediating the knowledge of God to those outside; their election fitted them to be mediators.

Paul shared this view. Aware that the eschaton was dawning, *‘Paul understands his role as Apostle to the Gentiles to be a microcosm of Israel’s role as God’s servant to the nations’ (p197).* Unlike writers such as Philo and Josephus, who were happy to sit back and let the eschaton come in God’s good time, Paul was motivated to act.

Abraham and the Gentiles

Abraham is consistently seen as the founding father of the Jewish people. Jews, by being his descendants, could expect a share of the inheritance promised to him. Outsiders might enter the community by marriage or by conversion. But *‘Paul emphasizes Abraham’s divinely promised role as the father of a multitude of nations, instead of the father of the Jewish people in particular’ (p200)*—the outworking of which Paul saw happening imminently. In Galatians 3-4 and Romans 4 and 9 he says that Gentiles can thus claim Abraham as their father.

Abraham is father of both Jews and Gentiles, and both will be united in a single family—the family of God. Paul himself ‘fathers’ the Gentiles through his preaching (1 Cor 4:14-15). In that sense, he is a ‘founding father’, just like Abraham. Modern interpreters have overlooked this patriarchal emphasis with Abraham, stressing instead his being an example of faith and demonstrating that we are justified by faith. But both times Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, he links it to Abraham’s status as patriarch.

Abraham (before his calling) and the Gentiles had much in common as idolaters and polytheists. Paul uses the same word ‘ungodly’ of them both (Rom 4:5; 1:18). And Paul wants to see the Gentiles renounce idolatry for monotheism as Abraham did. Today, Christians, the children of the Reformation, often fail to see this ‘family connection’ and assume that all the Abraham material is to do with justification by faith.

In Gal 3:7, 9, English versions render the unusual phrase *hoi ek pisteos* as ‘those who believe’. More exactly, it means ‘those descended of faith’. It indicates origins or derivation (as in Phil 3:5) and here refers to Abraham’s faith, from which the Gentiles benefit on the basis of the ‘merit of the fathers’. Paul’s mission is to make that a reality.

Chapter 12: ‘On the Contrary, We Uphold the Law!’

The traditional view has been that Paul rejected Torah once he embraced faith in Jesus. He is taken to hold that Christ fulfilled the Law only in the sense that he superseded it. But his clear statement in Romans 3:31 (this chapter’s title) contradicts that.

True, he makes some statements that denigrate the Law, like Galatians 3:13; 5:2; Romans 7:5-10; and Galatians 3:23-25. From this, the view grew that people couldn’t keep the Law’s demands; it merely convicted them of sin, thus becoming a ‘curse’ that would condemn them to death. Christ became the answer to this grim scenario. People could be forgiven/justified through faith in him alone, never by works of the law. This has been the main theme of Protestantism since the Reformation. This is the traditional Paul-the-convert, faith-versus-works framework.

If Paul didn’t convert from Judaism to Christianity, how do we explain his negative remarks about the law? The truth is, he makes as many positive statements about the law (like Romans 2:13) as negative ones, but reading him through the ‘conversion’ lens makes us blind to them. There have been some unhelpful suggestions: (1) that Paul

was a phony, never a Pharisee and ignorant of the law; (2, Sanders) that Paul moves backwards from solution to plight, so that meeting Jesus turned him against the law; (3, Dunn and other NPP scholars) that Paul criticises not the law *per se* but its ethnic nationalism aspect only. None of these can stand up to serious scrutiny—reasons given.

This book espouses the view of what might be called ‘radical new perspective’ scholars. It will present five tools for interpreting Paul: four in this chapter and one in the next. These are:

1. *Paul’s audience is made up of Gentiles, so everything he says about law applies to Gentiles, unless specified otherwise.*

He is not speaking to a universal audience and making categorical statements about Judaism and the law. Paul is called to deliver his message to ‘Greeks and barbarians’ (Rom 1:13-14), not to Greeks and Jews. He makes it abundantly clear in both Romans and Galatians that Gentiles are his audience. This clarifies some often-quoted statements, such as Gal 5:2 and 3:13.

‘When Paul says, “It is clear that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘the righteous one shall live by the faithfulness’” (Gal 3:11, citing Hab 2:4), he does indeed mean all people—Jews and Gentiles alike—are made righteous by faithfulness, but his point is that Jews always stood righteous before God because of God’s faithfulness to the covenant, not because Israel observed the law in perfect obedience’ (p218).

Paul argues against the false teachers in Galatia who, though they followed Jesus, were insisting that this required Gentiles to be circumcised and become Jews.

2. *Torah is for Jews but provides a standard for all.*

There has been a view down the centuries that Jews were more sinful than other peoples, which is why God imposed Torah on them to tame their sinful nature, but that this only made them more sinful. They thus failed to be a light to the Gentiles, and their sins ‘heaped up’ on them (Rom 3:25). But this ‘heaping up’ was on the Gentiles, not the Jews, because the Gentiles didn’t have the sacrificial system of atonement, with prayers and repentance. If God punished the Jews for their own sins, it was because he was faithful to his covenant with them (Rom 3:1-2). The Gentiles had no such covenant.

The Torah is the Jews’ exclusive possession, but God is the God of Gentiles also (Rom 3:29), so Gentiles are accountable for the moral conduct it requires (Rom 2:14). With few exceptions, they fall short of that, especially by worshipping other gods and idols. But Paul held that God had provided an answer. It was not in the detailed observance of Torah, which was Israel’s only. It was in Christ, who atones for the Gentiles’ accumulated sins. That’s why Paul never speaks against the Jews’ observance of Torah but speaks strongly against Gentiles taking on circumcision etc.

3. *The law is not meant to condemn humanity; it serves a positive pedagogical function.*

Luther held that human nature was totally depraved—the doctrine of ‘original sin’—and that the law’s only function was to impress this on people, who found themselves unable to keep its demands. It exacerbated their sinfulness. Paul does not share this cynical view of human nature. Among Jews of his day, the view was that people all sin, yes, but that does not make them all constitutionally ‘sinners’.

The law was not given to condemn, but to show people how to live righteously. The oft-quoted Romans 5:20 means only that when the law was given at Sinai there was accountability that there had not been before. If the law was meant to exacerbate sin, then God himself is guilty of exacerbating sin, which is not his character at all.

Those who support ‘original sin’ quote Romans 7, showing Paul’s struggles with that very problem, on the assumption that he is writing autobiographically. This assumption dates from Augustine and was perpetuated by Luther. But Paul is speaking as someone else, using the rhetorical device of *prosopopeia* or ‘speech in character’. He is likely speaking as a Gentile. It is part of his strategy for talking the Romans out of observing the Israel-only requirements of the Jewish Law.

This is suggested also by his use of ‘coveting’ or ‘desire’ (Greek *akrasia*, ‘uncontrolled desire’) as an illustration of sin. This chimed perfectly with the widespread Hellenistic striving for self-mastery. Some Gentiles looked to Judaism to help them in this, only to find that the standards it upheld served to make them even more aware of their failure. It is with such a Gentile that Paul is conversing in Romans 7. The law effectively condemns a striving Gentile *now* because the world is coming to an end, signalling the time for God’s judgment, and it is too late for the law to be their salvation.

4. *The doing of good works is not the opposite of having faith.*

Interpreters of Paul don’t usually define the phrase ‘by works of the law’ (*ex ergou nomou*), assuming the meaning to be obvious: the fruitless attempts of sinful humans to win God’s approval and acceptance (e.g. Gal 2:16). They have broadened it from its original Jewish context to indicate any kind of human effort or achievement.

But when Paul says, addressing Gentiles, that no-one can be justified *ex ergou nomou* it is probably more specific, meaning ‘from prescriptions of the Torah’. The Torah does not benefit Gentiles the way it does Jews. At one time it might have, but now it is too late as the end is at hand. Paul is not against good works *per se*; indeed, he has some good things to say about them (e.g. Rom 2:6).

Romans 2:12-13 are hard verses to harmonise with the traditional Lutheran view of ‘works versus faith’. Paul there says it is the doers of the law who will be justified. His view was typically Jewish in that he thought ‘*about faith, works, and grace as part of an integrated theological vision for how one relates to God*’ (p237) rather than setting out a systematic theology. The Jews were expected simply to respond to God’s covenantal grace by living ethically upright lives, and God honoured that.

Covenantal theology does not set faith and works in opposition, and neither does Paul, in spite of the efforts of some to convince us that he does. Luther erred when he added the word ‘alone’ to ‘faith’ in Romans 1:17. In Romans 13:8-10, Paul upholds the teaching of the Torah, naming four of the ten commandments.

Chapter 13: Justification through Jesus Christ

Here we come to the fifth and final tool for interpreting Paul, and it concerns faith.

In summary: ‘*The Pauline notion of justification by faith does not mean that one is justified by one’s own faith in Jesus; rather, Jesus’ faithfulness puts right Gentiles and incorporates them into the family of God*’ (p240).

Jesus’ faithful obedience is described clearly in Philippians 2:5-8. His death on the cross provided atonement for sin, reconciling the nations to God. ‘*Just as Abraham and the patriarchs’ great acts of faithfulness enabled Israel to enjoy God’s grace through the merit of the fathers, so, too, Jesus’ faithfulness means that God will look favorably upon the nations and not hold them accountable for their accumulated sin*’ (p241). And just as the gift of Torah required a faithful response from Israel, so the gift of Jesus requires a faithful response from Gentiles. Their response of faith, of course, will mean more than mere mental assent.

‘*The death and resurrection of Jesus has achieved the reconciliation between Gentiles and God that was envisioned by Israel’s prophets. To put it boldly, Jesus saves, but he only saves Gentiles. By that I do not mean that Paul believed that Jesus is irrelevant for Jews. Paul hoped his fellow Jews would eventually recognize the cosmic significance of Jesus as marking the beginning of the messianic age. But the significance was not that Jews needed to be saved from their sins. The efficacy of Jesus’ sacrificial death was for the forgiveness of the sins of the nations*’ (p241).

Like the Jews, Gentiles are now the beneficiaries of God’s grace, and Paul contrasts faith and works to show that they are off the hook for law observance.

We need to look at two key phrases that Paul uses: ‘faith in Christ’ and ‘the righteousness of God’. We have already seen (Chapter 10) that *pistis christou* is better rendered ‘the faith[fulness] of Christ’ rather than ‘faith in Christ’. So in the phrase ‘justification by faith’ the reference is not to the person’s faith in him, but Christ’s own faithfulness to his Father’s will and calling, in being obedient to the point of death on the cross.

It is similar with *dikaiosyne theou*. Luther came to believe that this did not refer to God's own righteousness, but to the righteousness he imputed to the believer. Romans 3:22 contains both phrases. The NRSV typically renders it: 'The righteousness of God through faith in Christ for all who believe.' In other words, the righteousness that God imputes to the person who believes in Christ. Instead, Paul is saying that through the faithful act of Jesus God's righteousness has been made known. *'If justification by faith points to Jesus' faithfulness, then the centuries-long understanding of the opposition between Christ and the law no longer stands'* (p243).

In grace, God has provided for the Jews through the Torah and for the Gentiles through Jesus. It is by grace from start to finish.

The key passage for understanding Paul's message to Gentiles is Romans 3:21-30. *'In this one passage the reader may see in the text the interpretation of Paul's message being put forward here in all its aspects: that the "faithfulness of Christ" and "the righteousness of God" are subjective genitives, that Paul's message of justification by faith is targeted specifically to Gentiles, because they are the ones in need of it, and that God's action through Jesus was a gift that enables Gentiles to experience that same grace Jews already enjoyed'* (p247).

Verses 29-31 may be understood as follows: 'Does God belong to Jews alone? Does God not also belong to Gentiles? Indeed, to Gentiles also. Since God is one, it is he who justifies the circumcised out of [his] faithfulness [to the covenant] and the uncircumcised through faithfulness [of Jesus]. Do we then render Torah void through faithfulness? God forbid! On the contrary, we uphold the Torah!'

Chapter 14: It's the End of the World as we Know It

Romans chapters 9-11 is a passage many find difficult. What we have looked at so far can throw helpful light on it.

Do we have here what some critics have called 'two-ways salvation', that is, Torah for the Jews and Jesus for Gentiles? Most would be quick to conclude that this cannot be right because Paul's commitment to Christ seems to be all-encompassing. *'My answer is yes, for those who see Paul from within the traditional paradigm; it is no for those in the new paradigm'* (p251).

The problem is in the question, which presupposes the traditional way of looking at things. It assumes the underlying issue to be 'How can I be saved?' By contrast, the starting point of the new paradigm is that it is not about personal salvation. *'Paul's letter to the Romans is not an answer to the question, How can I be saved? Rather, it is his answer to the question, How will the world be redeemed, and how do I faithfully participate in that redemption?'* (p252). For Paul, it was urgent business, since God, by raising Jesus from death, had already begun the end-time redemptive process. Paul is asking how, since the end of time is at hand, will God reconcile everybody—Jews and Gentiles—collectively?

In the final accounting, the nations will stand before God as nations, not as individual persons. Sins beyond the personal will be up for judgment, like racism, oppression and corporate greed, as in the Roman imperial order. Romans 9-11 needs approaching from this perspective.

Israel failed to be 'a light to the Gentiles'. Their obedience to Torah was severely lacking. The raising of Jesus signalled the time for God to gather in the nations, but Israel failed to recognise this. However, God graciously used even their ignorance and hardness of heart to accomplish the bringing in of the Gentiles anyway. Paul and others like him were a faithful remnant of Israel enabling God to carry out his plan. That hardness was temporary, of course, since God will always honour his covenant and, once the full number of the Gentiles are brought in, 'all Israel will be saved' (11:26). There are strong hints in all this of universal salvation, as Origen, Abelard and many others down the centuries have seen.

In all this, Paul never collapses the Jew/Gentile distinction. God will redeem both and bring them into one great family. It is a story of grace from beginning to end.