

# Paul within Judaism: Some Implications for Jewish Evangelism

*Presenting Paul as being within Judaism removes many stumbling blocks for the Jewish community to consider Jesus as the Messiah.*

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One thing that everyone involved in Messianic Jewish ministry shares in common with Paul is that we all want to see the day that he spoke of in Romans 11:26 when “all Israel will be saved.” In this room we agree that salvation, whether thinking on an individual or national level, involves embracing Yeshua as Redeemer and the King of Israel. While we agree and stand united on this fundamental point, within the broader Messianic Jewish movement there is significant diversity when it comes to our framework for understanding Paul in particular and the Messianic faith in general.

Today I would like to encourage us to consider our frameworks for understanding Paul and how that affects our presentation of the gospel message to the Jewish community. I am going to advocate for the idea that Paul is best understood *within Judaism* as opposed to the idea that Paul stood outside of Judaism or even against it. I believe that seeing Paul as a Jewish teacher to Gentiles, *within Judaism*, best positions those involved in Jewish evangelism to present a gospel message that the Jewish community can at least potentially accept.

First, I will present some traditional Christian and Messianic Jewish ideas about Paul’s relationship to Judaism. Interestingly enough, most often my experience has been that Christian and Messianic Jewish frameworks for understanding Paul tend to overlap. The reason for this is that most in the Messianic Jewish movement have formulated their view of Paul from Christian sources. After discussing the traditional perspective I will then proceed to explain and advocate

for a non-traditional framework for understanding Paul as being within Judaism. Finally, I will discuss some implications of the concept of “Paul within Judaism” for Jewish evangelism.

To begin, let’s observe some traditional views of the relationship between Paul and Judaism. From the outset, the way that I just framed this first objective is significant. By saying “Paul *and* Judaism,” I am already assuming or referencing a paradigm that views Paul in some sense as outside of Judaism. There is “Paul,” *and* there is “Judaism.” To be clear, when I refer to Judaism I am referring to Judaism in the classical and widely understood definition of the term, which speaks of the traditional expression of Torah-based religion for the Jewish people.

Arguably, the “godfather” or “rosh” of popularizing an interpretive framework of Paul “against” or “outside” of Judaism is Saint Augustine. I do not have to devote space to explaining how massive Augustine’s influence is in Christian tradition. Many of you are familiar with his work. For the sake of this paper, I am simply going to summarize Augustine’s impact on the development of the Christian view of Paul. Pamela Eisenbaum said this:

Paul’s Judaism was understood by Augustine, and therefore by Western Christianity after him, as an inferior religious option that Paul subsequently rejected when he became a Christian. Much of what Paul says in his letters was thereby construed as a critique of Judaism *per se*, because Paul’s religious transformation was perceived to have involved the discovery of what was essentially wrong with Judaism. Embracing Jesus meant embracing Christianity, and embracing Christianity necessitated the concomitant rejection of Judaism, where Judaism is the stand-in for the wrong form of religious expression in general.<sup>1</sup>

Eisenbaum is saying that Augustine believed that Paul saw Judaism as an inferior religious expression that should be rejected. I cannot overstate how deeply Augustine’s view of Paul has affected the way that Christians have interpreted Paul ever since.

We cannot discuss traditional ways of interpreting Paul without mentioning Martin Luther. Luther was the theologian who had the greatest impact on developing and popularizing the concept of “justification by faith.” Of course, this doctrine became a central message of Protestant Christianity.

In Luther’s mind, a foundational component of justification by faith was a strong (and what I would say was a disproportionate) emphasis upon one role of the Torah—that the Torah serves to show humans how sinful they are. Luther said,

Moses’ true intention is to reveal sin, and put to shame all the presumption of human ability; therefore St. Paul calls him in Galatians 2 and 3, “a minister of sin,” and his office “an office of death;” and in Romans 3 and Romans 7:7, he says, “By the law cometh only the knowledge of sin,” and “by the works of the law no one becomes righteous before God.”<sup>2</sup>

I think we all agree with Paul and Martin Luther that we all fall short of God’s standards of righteousness. However, I wonder how well Luther would have engaged with King David as “the man after God’s own heart” was penning Psalm 119, in which David oozes joy over the goodness and sweetness of the Torah. The main point here is that Luther’s comments on the Torah have embedded an idea in the prevailing Christian conscience that the dominant role of the Torah is to show humanity how sinful we are and our need for a Savior. According to Luther, and the majority of Christian interpreters after him, the Torah shows us our sin; Jesus is the answer to that sin, and once we come to Jesus the law has fulfilled its purpose, and now we live by faith. Generally speaking, that is the space within which historical Christian theology stays as it delineates the past and present role of the Torah in the mind of Paul.

Building upon the perspectives of Augustine and Luther, the prevailing viewpoint of modern Christian interpreters continues to place Paul outside of or against Judaism. Dr. John MacArthur, who is widely considered one of the most influential and respected Christian voices of the past forty years, has this to say about the relationship between Paul and Judaism:

Paul was yes, in every whit a Christian... but the transition takes time and old features of Judaism died slowly even in Paul's life... Jewish people who come to Jesus Christ, if they've been involved in any depth of Judaism, and certainly Orthodox Judaism or Conservative Judaism in some cases, they become Christians, but it's very difficult for them to break with all of those traditions. They very often hang on to those things...So it's very difficult for the transition from Judaism to Jesus...Judaism in God's eyes is a dead issue, but believe me, the burial took an awfully long time...You see, it was a very difficult thing for the Jews to sever their relationships with Judaism even though they came to Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Though some may express their position on this topic with more sensitive language, I have found Dr. MacArthur's views to be standard and representative of the way that Christians and Christian theology represent the relationship between Paul and Judaism. Within Christianity, for most of the past two thousand years and certainly in today's world, there is not much debate about the accepted fact that Paul left Judaism to enter or begin Christianity.

Of central importance in this discussion is how the Messianic Jewish world has interpreted the relationship between Paul and Judaism. The Messianic Jewish world represents a broad range of perspectives on Paul and Judaism. However, my observation has been that most in the Messianic Jewish world place Paul outside of Judaism in the same general ways that broader Christianity does. I think there is a good reason for that. Most Messianic Jews, including myself, learned the New Testament from mainstream evangelical Christian sources. So, naturally, we have assumed the prevailing Christian view of Paul and Judaism as well.

As a new Jewish believer, I learned my theology from two very popular and standard sources: John MacArthur and Arnold Fruchtenbaum. While these two have some notable differences, their core theology regarding Paul as against or outside of Judaism remains the same. Personally, I have great respect for these brothers in Christ. They are each worthy of much honor. However, despite their well-documented differences when it comes to the Messianic movement, both

Dr. MacArthur and Dr. Fruchtenbaum agree that the Torah and Judaism had its time. But that time ended with Jesus.<sup>4</sup> My experience over the past twenty years has been that the majority of Messianic Jews have embraced this core theological idea. As Dr. Fruchtenbaum and others have emphasized, one can hold a theology that understands the Torah and Judaism as no longer operative, while still valuing the expression of Jewish identity as Christ followers. However, this position clearly puts its adherents into space that is outside of Judaism and inside of Christianity. Consequently, this has resulted in the Messianic movement mostly being a Christianity that has some dose of Jewish flavoring rather than a Judaism that is Messianic. I respect Dr. Fruchtenbaum's integrity with the title of his book from the 1970s called "Hebrew Christianity." I think that title captures the essence of his theology, which is a Christianity that is "Hebrew" or "Jewish" as opposed to a Judaism that is Messianic.

At this point, I would like to present an alternative to the prevailing Christian and Messianic Jewish perspective regarding Paul and Judaism. Rather than seeing Paul and Judaism as polarized religious opposites, I am going to advocate for the position that Paul is best placed *within* Judaism and not outside of it. Among academics and some theologians, this perspective is known as "Paul within Judaism." The following paragraphs will discuss some key components to Paul within Judaism.

First, one of the keys to understanding Paul within Judaism is to acknowledge that his audience was almost entirely non-Jewish. This is not a revolutionary concept. However, my observation has been that prevailing Christian interpretations of Paul tend to apply his Gentile specific instructions as if they applied equally to Jews. One massive contribution that Paul within Judaism seeks to make is to alter the view that Paul intended all of his teachings to be universally applied across all ethnic boundaries.

Specifically relating to Torah observance, which is at the core of Judaism, Paul was not against Torah observance for all humanity. Rather, he was against compelling non-Jews to adopt Jewish identity and Torah observance. Mark Nanos says,

Here's a simple suggestion. To be more faithful to the contextual usage of Paul's language, the interpreter of Paul's rhetoric should add, 'for non-Jewish believers in Jesus Christ' to the end of virtually every characterization of Paul's position. 'Why did Paul oppose circumcision?' misses the point; one should ask 'Why did Paul oppose circumcision of non-Jewish believers in Jesus Christ?' There is no reason to believe that Paul opposed circumcision of Jewish-born children...<sup>5</sup>

A strength of Paul within Judaism is that it seeks to read Paul with attention to the great nuances that his letters contain. Paul is against circumcision but only in the case of non-Jews. This interpretive paradigm challenges us to constantly ask the questions, "who is Paul addressing and what specific point is he seeking to make?"

A second defining contribution of Paul within Judaism is that it sees Paul as living and teaching within Judaism and not outside of it. This viewpoint reads the New Testament data as pointing toward a Paul who is halachically observant to the Torah and expected other Jesus-believing Jews to do the same.

This viewpoint would argue that Torah observance for Jews was not a question that was up for debate among the apostles. The question of the day was, "What about Torah for non-Jews who have come to embrace the God of Israel, the Messiah of Israel, and who now seek to follow a Jewish standard of righteousness?" Paul and the apostles answered that question essentially by saying that Gentile Christ followers are to live "Jewishly" without becoming Jews. In other words, "Messianic Gentiles" are welcome to enculturate into Jewish space without taking on proselyte conversion and to go "all the way" and become full-fledged, circumcised Jews with all the commensurate requirements.

A third defining characteristic of Paul within Judaism is that Paul continued to practice a Torah-observant, halachic lifestyle as a follower of Jesus, not only for missionary purposes but also out of a sense of covenant fidelity. There is a fairly wide consensus that Paul continued to live as a Jew. The question is, "Why?" Why did Paul continue to live as a Jew? The prevailing Christian view, based primarily upon 1 Corinthians 9, is that Paul continued to be a "Jew to the Jews" for the sake

of his evangelism objectives but when he wasn't among Jews, he had the freedom to live "Torah free." In other words, Paul felt the freedom, as it relates to the Torah, to adapt his standards and conduct based on his audience. Paul within Judaism upholds a Paul who was consistently faithful to the Torah regardless of his audience. This view of Paul sees the apostle as adapting his rhetoric, not his behavior, according to his audience.<sup>6</sup>

Before concluding this paper with some implications for Jewish evangelism, I will provide brief answers to two potential objections to Paul within Judaism.

**Objection #1: In light of Galatians, how can one speak of "Paul within Judaism" or "Paul's Judaism"? Galatians was written to counter the Judaism of Paul's day.**

In Galatians, Paul refers to his "former manner of life in Judaism" (Galatians 1:13). The traditional view of this verse is that Paul meant that he was no longer a part of Judaism. However, there are other ways to read this verse. Mark Nanos says, "The language Paul uses here arguably describes a certain way of living in Judaism that no longer characterizes the way he lives in Judaism now."<sup>7</sup> Paul's Judaism *now* involved the realization that Jesus was the Messiah. Paul's Judaism *now* involved the very controversial viewpoint that, with the dawning of the Messianic Age, non-Jews can be full members of the kingdom community without becoming Jews.

It was for this reason he composed his letter to the Galatians. He was not writing to introduce a new Torah-free religion that had severed itself from Judaism and would henceforth be known as Christianity. Rather, Paul wrote Galatians as a teacher and messenger *within Judaism* to Gentiles who were being told that they had to convert to Judaism to attain salvation. D. Thomas Lancaster says,

In the Holy Epistle to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul argues against Gentile believers in Jesus of Nazareth undergoing conversion to become Jewish. Paul maintained that Gentile believers attained salvation and inherited the blessings promised to Abraham through faith, not conversion.<sup>8</sup>

I would argue that a more Jewish reading of Galatians involves reading it as a letter that was to be applied within Judaism, not outside of it. Put differently, Paul

wrote Galatians to communicate how non-Jewish Christ followers were to live “Jewishly” without becoming Jews.<sup>9</sup>

**Objection #2: By saying that Paul embraced Judaism, or was inside Judaism, or in some sense never left Judaism, are you saying that Paul was an advocate or friendly toward Pharisaic or Rabbinic Judaism?**

There is significant New Testament data that points toward a Paul who continued to live as a traditional Jew in conformity to the halachic standards of his day. In Acts 21, James and the elders testified that Paul “walked orderly, keeping the Torah” (Acts 21:24). In Acts 28, Paul describes his lifestyle as in conformity to “the customs of our fathers” (Acts 28:17). Additionally, Paul speaks of receiving synagogue discipline in 2 Corinthians 11:24. It is reasonable and expected that such discipline would be exercised only toward individuals whom the leaders still considered to be within Judaism and the synagogue community.

A halachically observant, Judaism-adhering Paul does not necessarily mean that he thought the Jewish communal leaders of his day (or our day) were right about everything. Like our Master Yeshua, I have little doubt that Paul would have had issues with certain halachic decisions made by the Jewish community. Also like our Master, I think Paul lived a Torah-faithful lifestyle in conformity with the general community norms of his day. Moreover, as our Messiah expressed in Matthew 23:1-3, I think Paul expected that his Jesus-following Jewish brothers would also continue to live according to the halachic decisions of Judaism.

Before I close, I am going to present a few comments about the positive implications that viewing Paul within Judaism could potentially have for Jewish evangelism. First, in presenting Jesus as the Messiah under this paradigm, we are not asking Jewish people to change religions. Personally, when people ask me what my religion is, I say that my religion is Judaism, and I typically qualify that by saying that I adhere to a Judaism that is Messianic.

I think it is fair for us to consider how the apostles would have answered that same question. The question, “What is your religion?” is certainly anachronistic as



it relates to the apostles. But assuming for the sake of the discussion that the apostles could understand the question, my sense is that they would say that their religion was Judaism and perhaps they would add a qualifier that they believed that Jesus was Judaism's Messiah and Redeemer. For them, following Yeshua was an inner-Judaism concept.

Today, for Jewish people with any connection to Judaism, we have given them every reason to assume that any movement toward Jesus involves a movement away from Judaism. Until we can offer Jews an authentic, coherent, Jesus-centered Judaism, we will lack continuity with the apostolic practice and vision for what the Jesus movement would look like, especially for Jews. There are certainly groups that are trying to rectify and restore this vision. Those efforts are admirable and, God willing, they will enjoy blessings from our Father in heaven in the days ahead.

Another positive implication of Paul within Judaism for Jewish evangelism is that it begins to alter the portrait of Paul, at least in the minds of many Jewish people, as a dishonest or "chameleon-like" Jew. The prevailing Christian view of Paul can and often does lead to a perception of Paul as a rather questionable character. Essentially, that viewpoint (based on 1 Corinthians 9:19-23) says that Paul acted like a frum Jew when among Jews, but when among non-Jews, he stopped presenting himself as a frum Jew and instead presented himself as someone who was no longer under obligation to behave in certain ways that were categorically Jewish. I, along with many other Jews, have a hard time embracing that Paul.

I think there is a much better way to interpret 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 and the nature of Paul's adaptability. As communicated by Dr. Mark Nanos, Paul's evangelistic strategy involved adapting his rhetoric and his argumentative strategy, but not his general [Torah-faithful] behavior when sharing the gospel among different groups. In other words, it is not necessary to read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 as saying that Paul was actually "changing colors" and acting as though he were something that he was not based on his context.<sup>10</sup>

A final implication of Paul within Judaism for Jewish evangelism is that it allows us to get to the root of replacement theology. For many years I have sought to do

my part in combating replacement theology within the Body of Christ. Something that I have learned along the way is that replacement theology has multiple layers. There is the familiar layer that says that the church has replaced Israel. But then there is a deeper, and I would say more pervasive layer, that says that Christianity has superseded Judaism. I want to be clear: Judaism needs Jesus. But the question here is whether Jesus, Paul, and the apostles envisioned a restoration of Judaism or the creation of a new religion that is distinct and divorced from the religion handed to us by our fathers.

I would argue that a Paul that is outside of, or against Judaism leads to the same result that the church replacing Israel leads to. Both of these layers of replacement theology produce Jewish disciples of Jesus that have no enduring connection to the Jewish people. Many of us are acutely aware of how severely this has affected Jewish receptivity to the gospel. The collective response of our people has been that the gospel does not spell “good news” for the preservation of Am Yisrael. Re-locating Paul within Judaism can potentially begin to restore our trajectory towards a destination where the Jewish people can thrive as covenant keeping Jews, with Yeshua as our Master and King.

This paper is only an introduction and involves rather brief reflections regarding the concept of interpreting Paul within Judaism. Nevertheless, one reason I am very passionate about this concept is that I believe this framework for interpreting Paul best positions the message of the gospel to be embraced by the Jewish community.

My observation has been that the standard Christian framework for interpreting Paul outside of or against Judaism has fundamentally undermined Christian and Messianic Jewish efforts to present Jesus to the Jewish people. I suggest that we consider a different approach, which involves presenting Paul as a Jewish teacher to Gentiles *within* Judaism. I believe that a framework that involves “Paul within Judaism,” or “Paul’s Judaism,” or even “Judaism’s Paul” best positions those involved in Jewish evangelism to present a gospel message that the Jewish community can at least potentially accept.

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not A Christian* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Preface to the Old Testament*, Cited online:  
[http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther\\_f8.htm](http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther_f8.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Cited online: <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/1768/from-judaism-to-jesus-part-1--paul-in-transition>

<sup>4</sup> Dr. MacArthur's position on the Torah has already been noted. Here is a statement from Dr. Fruchtenbaum: "The clear cut teaching of the New Testament is that the Law of Moses has been rendered inoperative with the death of Christ; in other words, the law in its totality no longer has authority over any individual." Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1989), 643.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Nanos, *Paul and Judaism*.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Nanos, "Was Paul a Liar for the Gospel?" *Review and Expositor* 110, Fall 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Nanos, *Paul and Judaism*.

<sup>8</sup> D.Thomas Lancaster, *The Holy Epistle to the Galatians* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2011), 1.

<sup>9</sup> This concept of non-Jews living "Jewishly" is a concept that I learned in personal dialog with Dr. Mark Nanos.

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed development of this point, see my article "Did Paul Encourage Deception?" at <http://ffoz.org/discover/theology/did-paul-encourage-deception.html>.