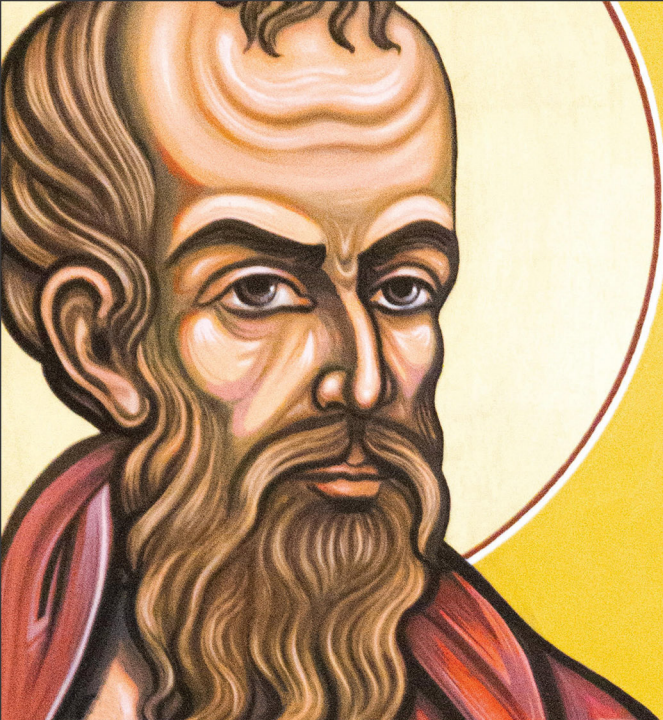




The
Messiah's
Herald
to the
Gentiles

A Jewish Paul

Matthew Thiessen

“Scrupulous in its fairness to Judaism and immensely helpful in correcting noxious Christian misrepresentations of it, this readable and engaging little book succeeds remarkably in locating Paul, the Christian apostle to the gentiles, within the Judaism in which he was formed and which he never thought he had altogether left. Both Christians and Jews have much to gain from reading *A Jewish Paul*. Highly recommended!”

—Jon D. Levenson, Harvard University

“Since the middle of the twentieth century, debates have raged in academia over the question of Paul’s relationship to Judaism. Yet these debates remain scarcely known to the public. Matthew Thiessen seeks to remedy that situation in this book, and he succeeds admirably in clear and cogent prose. But the book is not *merely* an introduction to debates over Paul and Judaism; Thiessen does not plod neutrally through various scholarly positions. He makes a strong case that Paul remained fully and firmly within Judaism from birth to death. Thiessen is not the first to make this argument, but he does it with a notable twist: he argues that the best framework for understanding the historical Paul lies in the portrait bequeathed to us by the author of Luke-Acts. It is a compelling argument, sure to hold the attention of seasoned scholars while providing uninitiated readers a clear introduction to this important debate.”

—Pamela Eisenbaum, Iliff School of Theology

“Ever since E. P. Sanders’s pioneering work, the role of Judaism has been an important dimension of work on Paul’s letters. In this very readable volume, Thiessen provides the reader with a portrait of Paul that takes his Jewishness with the seriousness it deserves. The debate on many issues he engages will not be brought to closure, but he charts directions that all scholars will need to consider going forward.”

—Gary A. Anderson, University of Notre Dame

“God bless Matthew Thiessen! It is so difficult to give a historically compelling account of the apostle Paul that is, at the same time, helpful to readers of Christian Scripture and, on top of all that, readable and accessible. I know because I have tried. Now, though, I will be very happy simply to refer people to this wonderful book.”

—Matthew V. Novenson, University of Edinburgh

“This is an excellent introduction to Paul. It is concise, clear, and nuanced. It will be a real feast to scholars, students, and interested readers. The book can be used in various contexts (seminaries, religious studies programs, or church Bible studies). I cannot recommend Thiessen’s *A Jewish Paul* enough for serious and important conversations between Jews and Christians.”

—Ronald Charles, University of Toronto

“In *A Jewish Paul*, Matthew Thiessen offers an introduction to Paul that is genuinely fresh, thoroughly stimulating, and highly accessible. Drawing on some of his signature contributions to Pauline studies as well as new material, Thiessen offers provocative readings that challenge long-standing interpretations that fail to recognize Paul’s identity as a first-century Jewish thinker. All who consider themselves students of Paul—whether the beginner or the scholar—will find themselves engrossed in this book’s pages.”

—Michael Patrick Barber, Augustine Institute Graduate
School of Theology

“The apostle Paul may need no introduction. Few people—perhaps only Jesus himself—are as widely known as the man from Tarsus. In fact, Paul may be *too* well known, and his robust reputation may prevent us from seeing him with historical or theological clarity. Matthew Thiessen offers students and scholars alike an invaluable resource: an accessible-yet-innovative introduction to a *Jewish Paul*, the herald of Israel’s Messiah to the non-Jewish nations.”

—Rafael Rodríguez, Johnson University

“Excellent scholars who work at the cutting edge of their field and who have a mastery of its history (as does Thiessen on Pauline studies) are sometimes unable to communicate that field to those outside of it. This book is an outstanding exception. It is as readable as it is masterful. This is fortunate, because its message could not possibly be more important if Christians and New Testament scholars alike are to finally escape the gross misreadings of Paul that continuously put Jewish lives in danger of violence.”

—Sara Parks, St. Francis Xavier University

A Jewish Paul

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*The Messiah's Herald
to the Gentiles*

Matthew Thiessen



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For Solomon and Maggie

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Acknowledgments

In the winter of 2020, I was eagerly looking forward to early April because it meant the end of the academic term. Stretched out ahead of me lay not only a long spring and summer of research, hiking, and camping but also a fall research leave to begin a new writing project. Those plans were not to be.

A worldwide pandemic broke out, my university went online, libraries closed, and our kids were required to continue their educations from home. Ultimately, these were but minor inconveniences when compared to the millions who have died from Covid-19 (and who continue to do so), to the many who have lost loved ones, to those suffering from long-term effects from Covid-19, and to those who have faced financial loss or even ruin. But minor as they were, these inconveniences quickly led me to realize that my research and writing goals would need to change.

Instead of breaking into a new area of research, I decided to write an introduction to Paul that showed how he could be read intelligibly but without the common anti-Jewish baggage that attends most interpretations of his letters. This short book, then, is my effort to familiarize a wide range of people to one way of reading Paul that is growing in popularity due to an effort to depict a more historically plausible reading of Paul and one that might just be more theologically

fruitful, especially with regard to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, Jews and Christians.

I want to express my gratitude to the entire Baker Academic staff but especially to my editor, Bryan Dyer, and associate editors, Jennifer Koenes and Melisa Blok, who have helped bring this book to life. Most of this book was written in fits and starts as my spouse and I struggled to juggle the at-home and online education of our two children, her cooking business, and my teaching and research. This book is dedicated to my children, Solomon and Maggie, reluctant hiking partners, curious minds, and relentless troublemakers. I love you both with every cell of my body!

Introduction

The earliest surviving statement about Paul's letters describes them in the following way: "There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16 NRSVue). That might be a disturbing acknowledgment, especially for those who read Paul's writings as sacred scripture. If someone much closer to Paul's day, someone who shared many of Paul's cultural assumptions, considered Paul difficult to comprehend, then how likely is it that we modern readers will understand him? It's a potentially troubling claim for another reason too: it contradicts what some Christians call the "doctrine of the perspicuity" (or in regular English, the "clarity") of the Bible. Consider, for instance, the words of Martin Luther, one of the key figures of the Protestant Reformation, on the Bible's clear message: "It is true that for many people much remains abstruse; but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture but to the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth."¹

Luther here places the blame for any difficulties readers might have in interpreting the Bible on the readers themselves. It's their fault, one arising out of human blasphemy and perversity, not the Bible's fault. But contrary to Luther, the author of 2 Peter states (perspicuously, I might add) that it is Paul's letters themselves that are, at least in places, obscure and therefore challenging to interpret. And it is their

1. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 166.

very obscurity that makes them susceptible to misuse and to being twisted. It is 2 Peter's assessment of Paul's letters that later came to be preserved within the boundaries of the New Testament and consequently stands as a canonical judgment *for Christians* on just how obscure parts of Paul's letters are. To admit, then, that Paul's letters are difficult to understand, and therefore to be willing to question whether common readings of his letters are accurate, is not only fair game but also downright biblical. Beware of any person who claims that Paul's letters are crystal clear or who asserts that they understand everything in them.

The state of the academic study of Paul almost two thousand years after Paul wrote proves just how accurate this early evaluation of his thinking was. Readers of Paul's letters live around the globe and in the twenty-first century, not in the first-century Mediterranean world. His world, his culture(s), his language are not ours. The assumptions and knowledge that he shared with many of his first readers and hearers are not necessarily our own. Like paleontologists, we can dig into Paul's context through other ancient texts or through archaeological remains,² but much of his world and much of his thinking will forever be lost or obscure to us.

Likewise, *our* assumptions, *our* cultures, and *our* knowledge were not Paul's. The expectations you and I as modern people bring to our readings of Paul without even knowing it would probably surprise us. It is as impossible for us to shed these expectations when reading Paul as it is to be aware of them all. We know how the last two thousand years have turned out, and we read and write and live in light of that knowledge. We know that the small groups that Paul organized and to whom he wrote letters grew into something we now call *the church* and *Christianity*. And we know that the church and Christianity are distinct from another religion: Judaism.³ We know that Christianity soon debated things like the precise relationship between Jesus and

2. For instance, see the impressive work of Nasrallah, *Archaeology and the Letters of Paul*.

3. This statement oversimplifies things, as it ignores messianic Jews, who see no contradiction in following and worshiping Jesus and living as law-observant Jews.

Israel's God and the contents of what would come to be called the New Testament (and the Old Testament). Paul knew none of this, since he, to quote Paula Fredriksen, “lived his life—as we all must live our lives—innocent of the future.”⁴ Given the fact that some of Paul's earliest readers found his letters difficult to interpret, what are modern readers to do, since we neither share many of Paul's assumptions nor have full access to the broadly shared “encyclopedia” of information available to both Paul and his first readers? Should we give up Paul's letters as ancient relics whose meaning is now lost to us? Or is there a way to help make sense of them?

Most people, perhaps even a good percentage of Christian clergy, likely remain unaware of the fact that people who spend their careers studying and writing on Paul disagree quite strongly with each other about what he says.⁵ Even those of us who have dedicated parts or all of our careers to thinking and writing about Paul struggle to make sense of Paul's different letters, to take occasional writings and provide a coherent, if inevitably incomplete, account of what he thought. In recent decades we have seen longer and longer books outlining Paul's thinking. To get a sense of this exegetical (and theological) arms race, where longer seems to be equated with better, take these three examples: in 1997 James Dunn published *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (844 pages), in 2009 Douglas Campbell published *The Deliverance of God* (1,248 pages), and in 2013 N. T. Wright published *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (1,700 pages). I don't believe there exists a longer treatment of Paul's theology, but given this trend, the next big book on Paul should be at least 2,100 pages in length.

This little book does not seek to be exhaustive. I won't discuss every verse or even every theme in Paul's letters. Instead, I seek to introduce readers to one particularly thorny question: How does Paul relate to the Judaism (or, perhaps better, Judaisms) of his day? This is a historical question, but for modern Christians (and any interested Jews) it is a historical question that has theological and ecumenical relevance.

4. Fredriksen, *Paul*, xii.

5. For one recent attempt to bring some of these interpretations into conversation, see McKnight and Oropeza, *Perspectives on Paul*.

Does Paul condemn and abandon Judaism? Does he view it as something inferior or at least outdated in the wake of Jesus? If so, how should Christians today think about Judaism and relate to Jews? Looking back over the last two thousand years, we know that most Christians have viewed Judaism as inferior or even pernicious, something left behind or something that has died.⁶ Consequently, many Christians have treated individual Jews and Jewish communities with contempt, revulsion, hatred, and violence. Paul's letters have frequently served as scriptural support for Christian anti-Judaism.

Is it possible that there is a different way to read Paul's letters, one that does not denigrate Judaism? The question of Paul's relationship to Judaism has dominated Pauline scholarship over the last several decades, resulting in (at least) four ways that academics have tried to make sense of Paul's writings as they relate to Judaism; these four ways are commonly called the "Lutheran," "new perspective," "apocalyptic," and "radical new perspective" (or "Paul within Judaism") readings. Some of these "schools" may be more familiar to readers than others. But remember, familiarity doesn't necessarily mean that such a reading is correct.

Most well known, and likely an interpretation of Paul's letters that many readers think is the only way one could possibly understand him, is what scholars frequently refer to as the Lutheran perspective on Paul. Outside of a few circles, people reading this book have probably not heard a sermon or been in a Sunday school where they heard someone claim they were preaching the *Lutheran* view of Paul, so I find this name unhelpful. Instead, I prefer to use the same sort of language that the "Lutheran" view uses in its attempt to summarize or make Paul's thinking coherent. For this reason, I call this dominant reading the anti-legalistic or anti-works-righteousness reading of Paul. Briefly put, this reading of Paul argues (or assumes) that ancient Judaism was a religion of works righteousness and legalism. Supposedly, Jews believed that they needed to do enough good deeds to merit God's saving acts, and so they focused their efforts on keeping the Jewish law.

6. Newman, "Death of Judaism."

According to this view, at one time Paul too held this conviction, but he came to the realization that all people had sinned. Or as he put it, “All have sinned and lack the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Consequently, he concluded that no person could possibly earn God’s deliverance. Again, in Paul’s own words, “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law” (Gal. 3:11); “all flesh will not be justified by the works of the law” (Gal. 2:16); “for ‘all flesh will not be justified in his sight’ by works of the law” (Rom. 3:20). Here Paul quotes from Psalm 143:2 (Septuagint [hereafter LXX] 142:2), which states, “Do not enter into judgment with your slave, because every living being [Greek: *pas zōn*] will not be justified before you.” Paul’s assessment, then, of the human predicament was exceedingly bleak.

But he found the solution to the sinful human condition in the realization that God would save people apart from human works and through faith in Jesus: “We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah” (Gal. 2:16); “we consider that a person is justified by faith(fulness) apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). What humans could not do to earn God’s blessing and gifts, God accomplished in the Messiah.⁷ The anti-legalistic reading of Paul, then, regularly assumes that Jews believed one needed to and could earn one’s deliverance through good deeds. Paul condemned this purportedly Jewish view as legalistic and as a form of works righteousness, both of which were odious to God. In contrast to this Jewish legalism, Paul advocated that one needed only to believe that Jesus saved people through his atoning death on the cross.

But in 1977 E. P. Sanders argued that there was a fundamental problem with this common understanding of Paul: it depended on an account of ancient Judaism that was both historically inaccurate and theologically dismissive. Many Jewish texts demonstrate that at least some Jews did not think people could simply earn God’s saving action or that anyone could live a sinless life.⁸ For instance, the Chronicler states, “There is no one who does not sin” (2 Chron. 6:36

7. To my mind, the most careful argument for this general position is Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*.

8. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

NRSVue). Qohelet (or Ecclesiastes) makes a similarly dreary claim: “Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning” (7:20 NRSVue). And in the second century BCE, the author of the Book of Luminaries avers that “no one of the flesh can be just before the Lord” (1 Enoch 81.5). This latter statement is remarkably similar to Paul’s repeated claim that no *flesh* will be justified before God (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16). Such examples could fill pages, but these three pithy statements prove that at least some Jews believed *all* humans were guilty of sinning.⁹ Other Jews, such as the author of the Prayer of Manasseh, believed that there were a righteous few but that most people were sinners and desperately needed God’s unmerited grace and mercy:

O Lord, according to your great goodness
you have promised repentance and forgiveness
to those who have sinned against you,
and in the multitude of your mercies
you have appointed repentance for sinners,
so that they may be saved. (Prayer of Manasseh 7 NRSVue)

For this and other reasons, Sanders argued that early Judaism was neither legalistic nor a religion of works righteousness but could be described as a system of covenantal nomism. That is, Jews believed God had graciously chosen Israel prior to and apart from any good works they had done. Israel’s covenantal response to God’s election was to respond with faithful and grateful law observance. For Sanders, Judaism stressed that keeping the Jewish law was the right response to God’s prior and gracious election of Israel. But even this response to God’s grace was not expected to be perfect. The entire wilderness tent complex (and later temples) and its rituals and sacrifices, which were at the heart of life for many Jews, imply that errors and sins would occur regularly. For this reason, God gave Israel the merciful means to deal with any such sins through the cultic prac-

9. For a rich account of the varieties of ancient Jewish thinking on sin and evil, see Brand, *Evil Within and Without*.

tices related to the wilderness tent and temple, especially the Day of Atonement.

But if Sanders is correct, what should we make of Paul's negative statements about works of the law? What was Paul fighting, if it wasn't legalism and vain attempts to curry God's favor? Several interpreters, most prominently James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright, have suggested that Paul's problem with Judaism was that it was ethnocentric, a reading that they call a "new perspective" on Paul.¹⁰ In this reading, Paul's attack on works of the law was an attack not on doing generic good deeds but on Jewish reliance on the *Jewish* law. For both scholars, the phrase *works of the law* refers especially to aspects of the Jewish law that mark one off as Jewish: things like the rite of circumcision, Sabbath observance, and Jewish dietary regulations. According to Dunn and Wright, Jews misused the law both as a basis for ethnic pride and as a means to exclude gentiles from God's saving actions. Both have argued that Jewish ethnocentrism insisted that gentiles could be saved only through conversion to Judaism, in which gentiles took up, among other things, distinctively Jewish practices. For Paul, this problem became particularly acute because Jewish followers of Jesus insisted that non-Jewish followers of Jesus needed to undergo circumcision and adopt the law of Moses (see Acts 15:1, 5).

It is this purported misplaced pride in one's own cultural practices and insistence that other ethnic groups needed to adopt them to be pleasing to God that Paul condemns, not works righteousness. Not *works* versus grace, as in the anti-legalistic paradigm, but *race* versus grace. This reading approaches Paul's letters through an anti-ethnocentric lens: Paul's opponents thought God was the God of the Jews alone, but Paul had come to know better: God was the God not just of the Jews but also of the gentiles (Rom. 3:29).

Another school of interpretation often goes by the name of the "apocalyptic" reading of Paul. While this school draws on the groundbreaking work of Albert Schweitzer,¹¹ the proponents of this reading are

10. Dunn, *New Perspective on Paul*; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*.

11. Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*.

more heavily indebted to Ernst Käsemann and J. Louis Martyn.¹² This school of interpretation stresses that when Israel's God revealed Jesus to Paul, Paul experienced a radical break from his past, including his Jewishness. Consequently, they point to Paul's statement in Galatians where he mentions his former way or conduct in something he calls *ioudaismos* (often translated as "Judaism"), as well as to Paul's claims that "if anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new" (2 Cor. 5:17; cf. Gal. 6:15). The apocalyptic reading of Paul stresses the newness of Paul's message and its radical discontinuity from Judaism: the Messiah's coming dissolves old structures of male and female, Jew and gentile, slave and free (Gal. 3:28).

Numerous elements within these readings are essential to the account I will give of Paul in the following pages. With the anti-legalistic reading, for instance, I believe that Paul does not think that people can earn God's favor. God's gift of deliverance to humanity is of such incomparable worth that no one can merit it. But I don't think that Paul disagreed here with his fellow Jews, since they too believed in God's deliverance as a divinely offered and humanly unmerited gift.¹³ And in agreement with the anti-ethnocentric reading, I believe that one must read Paul's letters in relation to ethnic distinctions, albeit ethnicity as defined by ancient Jews, who divided the world between Jews and non-Jews—a group that they often lumped together under the generic title "the nations," which I will translate as "gentiles."¹⁴ But I don't think Paul's problem with Judaism was that it was ethnocentric. After all, Paul's own writings are just as ethnocentric as any

12. Käsemann, "Beginnings of Christian Theology," and Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*.

13. In general see Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, which shows the diversity of Jewish thinking about grace. In contrast to Barclay, though, I am convinced that most (perhaps all) Jews believed that one could not fully merit God's favor or gifts.

14. When you see the word *gentiles*, think not just in the generic sense—non-Jews—but also, as I will show later, of people who almost always worship the wrong gods and live immoral lives from a Jewish perspective. Additionally, Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, makes a strong case that we should *also* think of gentiles as the defeated and subordinated Other in relation to the Roman Empire. And on the importance of placing Paul's thinking and actions in a diasporic setting, see Charles, *Paul and the Politics of Diaspora*.