JUDAEAN AND CHRIST-FOLLOWER IDENTITIES: 
GROUND FOR A DISTINCTION 
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Abstract. In NTS 62:3 (July 2016) David Horrell argued that certain passages in 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3 showed ‘ethnicising’ traits among the early Christians. He set this result against an alleged trend in scholarship that would distinguish and disparage a closed ethnic Judaism in relation to a new spiritual-universal Christianity. The work of the authors was proffered as representative of this trend, even though no evidence was cited for such a connection and their work moves in a very different direction. Leaving aside Horrell’s interpretation of the New Testament passages for reasons of space, this article takes up the larger question of Judaean and Christ-movement identities by reconsidering the position of Ioudaioi and Christ-followers in the early Roman Empire. Using different but convergent (social-scientific and historical-philological) methods, we find that ethnos-language was everywhere applied to the Judaeans, that this reflected normalcy and exchange with the world, and that Judaeans thus met the criteria of an ethnic group. Early Christians had no such recognised place. Their voluntary associations largely rejected ethnos- and polis-commitment or identity. Neither Judaean openness to the world nor Christian alienation supports the position that Horrell attributes to us.

Key words: ancient Judaism, Christian origins, ethnos, ethnic group, ethnicise, voluntary association, Paul, Pliny the Younger, Minucius Felix, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Celsus, Porphyry, Julian.
In NTS 62:3 (July 2016) David Horrell presented an elegant study of selected phrases in 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3 that show, he argued, early ‘ethnicising’ tendencies among early Christians. The study’s elegance comes in part from the ease with which Horrell changes the level of zoom: from a remote perspective on large questions of our world—ethnic identity, neo-liberalism, and ingrained Christian bias against Judaism—to a minute analysis of these New Testament phrases and then back to the big issues. Fully half of the study discusses the global stakes of Horrell’s exegesis, in debate with scholars who allegedly maintain a quasi-Marcionite (this is our label) dichotomy between a merely physical, local Judaism and a transcendent, spiritual Christianity.

Between those exospheric questions and the tropospheric exegesis of Paul and Peter, so to speak, Horrell finds an unwholesome mesosphere in New Testament scholarship. This consists of ‘a recurring and persistent depiction’, ‘namely a dichotomy between an ethnically particular Judaism and a trans-ethnic, inclusive, universal Christianity’. Invoking the need for ‘critical vigilance’ against such a dichotomy, given the appalling history of Jewish-Christian relations, Horrell means to unravel it. He offers his readings of 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3 as evidence for the ‘ethnic reasoning’ that others have found in early Christian texts. A brief survey of ethnicity theory in conjunction with the exegesis leads him to posit the constructed nature of ethnicity and, hence, the ever-present possibility of new ethnic formations. This encourages him to find in 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3 ethnic groups in the making.

Horrell stresses that he is not arguing simplistically that early Christianity was ethnic, but rather that everything was ‘fuzzy and overlapping’ and complex, and that

2 Horrell, ‘Ethnicisation’, 443–44.
this situation renders any clear category distinctions doubtful. The fuzziness does not inhibit him, however, from concluding forcefully:

By finding in earliest Christianity the paradigm of supposedly trans-ethnic inclusion, such scholarship, against its explicitly tolerant and ecumenical intentions, may both reflect and legitimate the assumed superiority of a Christian model of ‘tolerant’ social inclusion promoted in secularised form – and often with ‘intolerant’ force – by the globally powerful countries of the white Christian West.

Had Horrell confined his argument to 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3, we would not have responded. But we were amazed to find our publications completing a short list of ‘landmarks’, from F. C. Baur through J. D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright, which supposedly perpetuate ‘this dichotomy’. Horrell’s proposal that no matter what we have actually argued, our investigations can ‘both reflect and legitimate a Christian model’ of superiority over ethnic Judaism, is deeply unsettling. Evidently communication has failed. We have indeed found that everyone in antiquity knew Judaeans and Christ-followers to be two different kinds of group, but that this difference was not in the Christians’ favour. We cannot accept that to make any such distinction, on sound historical grounds, is to play with the fire of global white exploitation. Our historical research gives no consolation to supersessionist or any other anti-Jewish views.

Our actual biases, to the extent we are aware of them, are along the following lines. If we may take as a reference point Mason’s scheme of history’s bifurcation

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4 Horrell, ‘Ethnicisation’, 460.
5 For a recent attack by one of us on supersessionism, see P. F. Esler, ‘Giving the Kingdom to an Ethnos that will Bear Its Fruit: Ethnic and Christ-Movement Identities in Matthew’. In In the Fullness of Time: Essays on Christology, Creation and Eschatology in Honor of Richard Bauckham, ed. D. M. Gurtner, G. Macaskill, and J. T. Pennington (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 177–96, at 196.
during the nineteenth century into social / social-scientific (aggregative, model-, type-, and pattern-seeking) and humanistic (historicist, particularist, philological) streams. Esler’s boat is in the former and Mason’s in the latter. We are both concerned with how things actually were two thousand years ago, but we ask different kinds of questions and use different criteria to answer them.

Since readers may easily consult our earlier work, we have not recycled it here. Instead we re-examine in our different ways the two sides of the dichotomy that Horrell laments: Judaean vis-à-vis Christ-follower identities. To keep the article within manageable limits, we respond on this issue alone, not to his ethnicising interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3. Suffice it to say that we understand both passages to be preoccupied with the imminent overturning of this world and the creation of a new one, a frame that would be hard to square with an ethnicising Christ-movement settling in to the world.

We hope that this investigation will both respond to Horrell and contribute to the larger discussion about ‘ethnic reasoning’ in ancient Christianity, which he also mentions. Our questions, in the works that Horrell cites, are not theological – though Esler pursues theological interests elsewhere. They are not about the ‘essential’ nature of Christianity or Judaism, in the mind of God or a social scientist. They are about the real conditions that existed two millennia ago. Mason tends to ask about ancient

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discourse, Esler about fruitful social-scientific models, but we agree in seeking to understand an alien ancient landscape. It should quickly become clear why our work could not promote a notion of Christian sublimity over against merely ethnic Judaism.

1. The Judaean Ethnos: Particular but not Particularist

Before the Christians’ rise, Judaeans were renowned for their homeland, for their mother-polis Jerusalem as the jewel of the Orient (Pliny, H.N. 5.70), for their close ties with Julio-Claudian imperial power, for their wars from CE 66 to 136, and for their flourishing, diverse, and widespread civilisation. These associations continued long after Jerusalem’s destruction.

Social-Scientific Considerations

From a social-scientific viewpoint, Judaeans were thus an ethnic group. Current understanding of ethnic identity is still indebted to anthropologist Fredrik Barth, who proposed that an ethnic group’s sense of itself as a group came first, with the members selecting (changing) cultural features (as a boundary) to separate themselves from other groups. So understood, ethnicity was a field of ascription and identification used by certain groups to organise their relationships with other groups. But what made a group ethnic? Barth suggested that an ascription of someone to a social category was ethnic in character ‘when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background.’ Yet there are more indicators of ethnic identity than this, and John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith have suggested the following:

(a) a common proper name to identify the group;

10 Barth, ‘Introduction’, 13 (emphasis added).
(b) a myth of common ancestry;
(c) a shared history or shared memories of a common past, including heroes, events
and their commemoration;
(d) a common culture, embracing such things as customs, language and religion;
(e) a link with a homeland, either through actual occupation or by symbolic
attachment to the ancestral land, as with diaspora peoples; and
(f) a sense of communal solidarity. ¹¹

These must be regarded as diagnostic, not constitutive, of ethnic identity to accord
with Barth’s ascriptive and interactive approach. ¹²

The Smith and Hutchinson scheme includes ‘religion’ among the elements of
indicator (d), a common culture; in other words, ethnic identity is more inclusive than
‘religion’ and different from it. ‘Religion’ is, however, a problematic category when
applied to the ancient Mediterranean world. ¹³ Nevertheless, phenomena involving
belief in the interactions between gods and human beings (which some might label
‘religious’ and others not) certainly were an important part of life at various levels in
the first century CE Mediterranean world: especially the empire, ethnic groups, city-
states, voluntary associations, and families.

The role of divine-human interactions in ethnic groups can be illuminated by
comparison with modern phenomena. Claire Mitchell, for example, has written of the
part religion plays in the Unionist and Nationalist ethnic identities of Northern
Ireland. ¹⁴ Her basic point is that religion can be more important than has generally

¹² Esler, Conflict and Identity in Romans, 43.
published 1962); B. Nongbri, Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept (New Haven and
London: Yale University Press, 2013); and Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, Imagine No Religion:
been recognised. Nevertheless, ethnic identity and religion remain separate: some
Unionists are Roman Catholics and some Nationalists are Protestants. Similarly, the
recognisably ethnic Kurds (for whom the homeland is the dominant ethnic indicator)
include Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis.\(^\text{15}\) It makes little sense in social-scientific
terms to homologate ethnic and ‘religious’ identities in the manner that Horrell
assumes.

Claire Mitchell found some Northern Irish Protestants downplaying or
eschewing aspects of their ethnic identity as they became more ‘religious’, with a
focus on saving souls and conversion, in what they regarded as the ‘end times’, of
which the Good Friday Agreement could be a sign.\(^\text{16}\) While this focus upon the
‘religious’ aspects of an ethnic identity is understandable, the prospect that a
‘religious’ identity could become an ethnic one, which is central to Horrell’s notion of
‘ethnicisation’, seems implausible in social-scientific terms, if indeed if ever occurs.

Horrell uses the term ‘ethnicisation’ to designate the process whereby writers
like Paul and the author of 1 Peter allegedly attributed ethnic features to the early
Christ-movement. This is a strained use of ‘ethnicisation.’ The word is, indeed,
employed in social-scientific discussion, but usually in relation to either the
development of an ethnic self-understanding\(^\text{17}\) or the use of ethnic markers to
legitimate national identities.\(^\text{18}\) Horrell derives the concept from a work by S. Cornell
and D. Hartmann, Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World.\(^\text{19}\) But
Cornell and Hartmann describe the development of an ethnic identity in the service of

\(^\text{15}\) On the Kurds, see D. E. King, Kurdistan on the Global Stage: Kinship, Land and Community in Iraq
(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014).
\(^\text{17}\) W. L. Yancey, E. P. Ericksen and R. N. Juliani, ‘Emergent Ethnicity: A Review and Reformulation’,
\(^\text{18}\) J. Hogan, ‘Staging the Nation: Gendered and Ethnicized Discourses of National Identity in Olympic
Opening Ceremonies’, Journal of Sport and Social Issues 27 (2003): 100–123. Also see F. Holst,
\(^\text{19}\) Horrell, ‘Ethnicising’, 445.
nation building, in line with these approaches, not the transformation of ‘religious’ to ethnic identity. ‘Ethnicisation’ has at times been used in relation to religion, but in a very restricted sense. Thus Bassam Tibi, while acknowledging that Islam is not an ethnic identity, uses ‘ethnicisation’ to explore how Islam can be presented in Europe by outsiders. And F. Holst shows how religion can become subject to processes of ethnicisation to support nationalism. Accordingly, the notion that the members of a ‘religious’ group such as the early Christ-movement would themselves use ethnic indicators – other than in a fictive sense aimed at appropriating and re-deploying aspects of Judaean collective memory and tradition (as Paul does in Galatians and Matthew in 21.43) – to explain their identity seems at odds with the social-scientific literature on ‘ethnicisation’.

Horrell is right in stating that our investigations, using different methods, found ancient writers distinguishing the Judaean ethnos from Christ-worshipping groups, as different kinds of phenomena. We were both reacting against the continuing scholarly practice of comparing Judaism and Christianity as two religions, or two species of a recognised genus – as mother vs. daughter, legal vs. illegal, legalistic vs. spiritual, closed vs. missionising ‘religions’, or as overlapping Judaisms and Christianities. By our different paths we found ancient Judaeans and Christ-

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22 F. Holst, Ethnicisation.
24 E.g., J. Parkes, The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1934), seeing them as ‘two religious organisations’ (33), though Christianity as a sect of Judaism that gradually became a religion and in turn reduced Judaism to a sect; E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion (London: SCM, 1977); A. F. Segal, Rebecca’s Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986): ‘The time of Jesus marks the beginning of not one but two great religions of the West’ (1); T. M. Finn, From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity (Mahwah: Paulist, 1997): ‘Out of the innumerable religions and religious movements of the Greco-Roman world, only two – one the mother, the other the daughter – outlasted the Roman Empire to survive into the present: Judaism and Christianity’ (91); to similar
followers viewed in antiquity as different kinds of group. In our view, the word ‘Judaism’ is a distraction from first-century realities. But a crucial point missed by Horrell is that it was the millions-strong ethnos, the Judaean ethnic group in social-scientific terms, that enjoyed a universally acknowledged place and general respect. The mere scores (?) of Christ-followers who met in private houses or (as Edward Adams insists) in other buildings in a polis, whose leaders at least faced ongoing problems with local authorities, obviously struggled to explain what kind of group they were. They knew that they seemed bizarre, inward, secretive, and dangerous to the moral order of the polis (below). Our explorations of this distinction in ancient thinking did not, therefore, elevate a sublime Christianity over a restrictive Judaism, much less place one religion over against another, as a review of some representative evidence will now show.

Historical and Philological Considerations

That the ancients understood Judaeans to be an ethnos (or Latin gens) is an evidentiary fact. But Hecataeus, Herodotus, Polybius, Poseidonius, Alexander Polyhistor, Strabo, Philo, Josephus, Plutarch, Origen, Eusebius, and dozens of others did not consider such a label stultifying. Ethnos (with correlatives γένος, νόμοι, πάτρια, δίαιτα, μυθρόπολις, τὰ ἱερά) was the default term for a group of people from some place that was unified by ancestry, laws, customs, taboos, diet, and cultic worship – features readily comparable with the ethnic indicators of Hutchinson and

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Smith. Everyone belonged unavoidably to an ethnos, by virtue of their birth (genos). Loyalty to one’s ethnos was an axiomatic virtue. It was a source of pride to be part of a famous ethnos, with a renowned mother-polis, and especially one that attracted admiring interest. Although the (philological) criteria for identifying an ancient ethnos are different from those of the social sciences, the ethnē known from the ancient Mediterranean generally qualify as ethnic groups also in social-scientific terms.27

From Hecataeus of Miletus and Herodotus in the fifth century BCE through Stephanus’ Ethnica in the sixth century CE, surviving ancient texts show a fascination with the ethnē of the oikoumēnē (or orbis terrarum), with their diverse laws and customs. Judaeans obviously belonged in this category and were included without hesitation whenever the opportunity arose. Everywhere they are called an ethnos or genos (cf. Latin gens, natio): in the remains of a statue from the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias reading έθνους Ἰουδαίων, where Judaeans appear alongside other ethnē under Rome’s imperium;28 in Plutarch’s account of Pompey’s triumph, which inscribed the names of fourteen eastern γένη (to recall Latin gentes?), including those of Palestine, Phoenicia, Arabia, and Judaea (Pomp. 45.1–2); in the triumphal inscription for Titus on the arch from the Circus Maximus;29 in Latin literature generally;30 in the Hasmonean court history 1 Maccabees and the thematically different 2 Maccabees;31 in the title of Greek Jubilees;32 throughout the New Testament;33 and – most prominently – in Philo and Josephus.

30 Cicero, Prov. Cons. 10.3; Columella, Rust. 3.8; Pliny, H.N. 5.66–67 (by context and with 7.97–98; 13.47); Tacitus, Hist. 5.8
31 1 Mace 8.23–27; 10.25; 11.30–33; 12.3, 6; 2 Mace 4.35; 10.8.
32 Greek Jub. 1.1: Moses delivers the Law to the Judaean ethnos.
33 Matt 21.43; Luke 7.5; 23.2; John 11.48–52 (4 times); 18.35; Acts 10.22; 24.3, 10, 17; 26.4; 28.19.
According to the TLG, ethnos and Ioudaios appear in the same breath 1091 times by the time of Eusebius, who himself accounts for well over half of these occurrences (623). Another 164 are in Origen. But Philo and Josephus already use ‘the ethnos of the Judaeans’ (τὸ [τῶν] Ἰουδαίων ἔθνος) as a default category. For them there is certainly nothing debilitating about this category. It rather confirms the Judaeans’ established, ancient place among the peoples of the oikoumēnē.

The Letter of Aristeas illustrates the point. Here the Judaeans are both a particular (not particularist) people, with intriguingly distinctive laws, and fully open to the world, their elite class being well versed in the common langue. They are a γένος (Arist. 6) – since Herodotus’ time a virtual synonym of ethnos, underscoring shared descent – with unique ancestral laws, customs, and a homeland anchored in Jerusalem. This story is one of inter-polis diplomacy, which includes the freeing of migrant Judaean slaves and their families. The Ptolemaic court’s campaign of ‘fostering culture’ (8) leads it to desire a copy of the ‘highly philosophical and pure’ laws of the Judaeans (10, 30–31). Jerusalem and its temple, described in loving detail (83–120), are understood to be the home of Judaeans around the world. By a concerted effort (175), scrupulously respectful of Judaean customs (181–82), the king’s men persuade Jerusalem’s high priest to send seventy-two emissaries for the translation of their ancestral volumes (33–46).

34 For Eusebius’ deep interest in ethnos status and (original? Praep. ev. 1.5.3) effort to cast Christians as an ethnos, see Johnson, Ethnicity and Argumentation.
36 Cf. C. P. Jones, ‘ἔθνος and γένος in Herodotus’, CQ 46 (1996) 315–20. Genos is, however, a much more flexible term than even ethnos. In Aristaeas it can refer to the human race (17, 190, 208, 259), the female gender (250), or any class or kind of object (63, 66, 75, 97, 165).
It turns out, of course, that the seemingly peculiar customs of the Judaeans reflect the very laws of nature (143–71). The learned ambassadors from Jerusalem worship the same divine source of life as every other nation, though each uses a different name for that ultimate being (16). In Aristeas we thus encounter a Judaean author’s vision of the dialectic between the proudly distinctive laws of his ethnōs/genōs, which admit of no adulteration (cf. Sparta), and the Judaeans’ fluent participation in a universal human discourse.

That Philo and Josephus write in the same spirit as Aristeas – a text of crucial importance to both, and Josephus’ alleged inspiration for the Antiquities37 – is a point we need not labour. Both writers combine loving interest in the detailed laws and customs of their ethnōs, which cannot be compromised, with confident participation in the great themes of Graeco-Roman culture. They agree that the laws of Moses epitomise the laws of nature, inculcating in Judaeans virtues recognised by all humanity.38 Josephus shares with Philo, and earlier Aristobulus, the conviction that Pythagoras and Plato must have derived much of their wisdom from Moses.39

Philo and Josephus also delight, with the author of Aristeas, in the attraction that their laws and customs hold for other ethnē, who everywhere show signs of wanting to embrace them. Attraction to foreign ways – Greek, Egyptian, Spartan – was a familiar phenomenon in antiquity, if often criticised as disloyal,40 and Josephus shows due contempt for those who abandon Judaean ancestral customs.41 But he and

37 Philo, Mos. 2.25–41; Josephus, Ant. 1.9–13; 12.11–118 (a leisurely paraphrase of the original).
40 Herodotus 4.76–80 with Josephus, Apion 2.269; Thucydides 1.132.1–2; Celsus in Origen, C. Cels. 5.41.
41 Josephus, Ant. 4.131–58; 5.98; 16.176–78; War 7. 47–53 (Antiochus of Antioch); Ant. 20.100 (Tiberius Alexander of Alexandria), 143 (Drusilla, sister of Agrippa II).
Philo stress the welcome that the Judaean ethnوس extends to foreigners who wish to adopt their ways.\textsuperscript{42} Says Philo (Virt. 102–103):

Having legislated for fellow-members of the ethnوس, he [Moses] holds that newcomers must be deemed worthy of every privilege, because they have left behind blood-affiliation, homeland, customs (γενεάν μὲν τὴν ἀφ᾿ αἵματος καὶ πατρίδα καὶ ἔθη), sacred rites and temples of the gods, the gifts and honours too, having undertaken a noble migration. … He directs those of the [Judaean] ethnوس to love the newcomers, not only as friends and relatives, but as themselves in body and soul.

As for Josephus, Antiquities’ long exposition of the laws and their after-effects reaches its climax in the nerve-wracking account of Adiabenian royalty’s bold embrace of Jerusalem. Their love of Judaean law puts their lives in peril because local Adiabenian nobles consider such a foreign allegiance treasonous (Ant. 20.17–96). We get a taste of nobles’ grievance from other non-Judaean observers who comment with revulsion on attraction to Judaean laws. They show the opprobrium that such courageous ‘migrants’ could face from their own people.\textsuperscript{43} But there is nothing in this evidence to suggest that being such an admired ethnوس closed the Judaeans off from interaction with the Graeco-Roman world – certainly not in comparison with early Christ-followers.

We pause to summarise thus far. David Horrell’s article deplores a dichotomy in New Testament scholarship between a merely ‘ethnic Judaism’ and a Christianity seen as transcendent: supra-ethnic, spiritual, and inclusive. Inspecting the first half of this dichotomy confirms that Judaeans were understood to be an ethnوس/genos. The

\textsuperscript{42} Josephus, War 2.[454], 463, 560; 7.43–45; Apion 2.280–86.
\textsuperscript{43} Valerius Maximus, On Superstition, in M. Stern, Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences, 1974), 1.357–60 (no. 147); Epictetus in Arrian, Diatr. 2.9.20; Tacitus, Ann. 2.85; Hist. 5.5; Suetonius, Tib. 36; Juvenal, Sat. 5.14.96–106; Cassius Dio 37.1.1; 57.18.5a; 60.6.6; 66/68.1.2 with 67/68.1.2.
category was obvious to writers throughout the Hellenistic-Roman period, Judaeans and others. Anyone who investigates the way ancients thought and spoke will find the same evidence; this is not a hypothesis. But it was good to be a famous and admired ethnos. There was nothing disparaging about the category. As we now turn to the other side of the dichotomy, our question is how the earliest Christians were seen in relation to the stable and accepted category, ethnos.

Ethnos and Ethnicity: How Subjective?

First we must clarify a methodological point. Horrell, we have seen, cites recent theorising about ethnicity and ethnicisation purportedly to establish that new ethnic groups can form from ‘religious’ groups, then teases out ‘ethnicising’ indications from phrases in Peter and Paul. Accordingly, for him, Christians were in the same domain as Judaeans – granted pervasive fuzziness, overlaps, and indeterminacy. By these criteria it seems that any ancient group could, under licence from modern ethnicity studies (on his doubtful interpretation of this research), express feelings of kindred affection and pronounce themselves an ethnos. Our criteria are not so subjective. We cannot see that a Christian author’s phrasing or its possible implications, even Eusebius’ plain assertion that Christ’s arrival initiated a new Christian ethnē (H.E. 1.4.2), altered the conceptual-discursive bank that had led Poseidonius, Strabo, Pliny, and Tacitus, and Aristaeas’ author, Philo, and Josephus to speak of Judaeans as an ethnē.

Our distinct approaches converge on the point that ethnē were not, and ethnic groups are not, just any group of people who felt or feel close to each other. In texts we may still study, even though they offered no definitions of their terms, ethnē were associated with a place, and with the laws and customs that had taken formative shape
there in the homeland (patris). In terms of the Hutchinson and Smith indicators mentioned above, (d), common culture, and (e), a link to a homeland, were prominent everywhere. This does not mean, as is often suggested, that to translate Ioudaios as ‘Judaean’ gives the word a merely ‘geographic’ connotation. Ioudaios was an ethnic designation, referring – like the name of every other ethnic group in the ancient Mediterranean – to a people connected with a homeland, whether they happened to be living there or not.

This place-people link underlies Tacitus’ digression on Judaean laws and customs, which concerns all Iudaei everywhere, when he is about to describe the fall of their mother-urbs Jerusalem (Hist. 5.2), or Cassius Dio’s third-century portrait of the Judaeans (37.1.1–3). Although the simplest kind of environmental determinism – its place of origin determines an ethnos’ character – had been tempered from the start by the realisation that custom (νόμος) and constitution (πολιτεία) could work against nature, the assumption that the homeland of an ethnos (and its mother-polis) uniquely reflected its nature or character remained basic to ethnographic discourse.44 As Pseudo-Scylax’s Voyage (late fourth century B.C.) shows with terse clarity (e.g., 85–106), it was possible for an ethnos to lack a polis, if it had a nomadic or village-agricultural character.45 But the prominent ethnē of the civilised world (throughout Greece and Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt) had πόλεις or μητροπόλεις. The patris was the only place in the world where the unique laws and customs, calendar and festivals, worship, defining institutions, system of governance, citizenship, and magistrates of an ethnos held sway. In other πόλεις they were foreign minorities.

Judaeans fit this discourse in an exemplary way. Just as characterisations of Egyptians, Britons, Germans, Scythians, and Persians – by insiders and outsiders – reverted to their homelands, so too discussions of Judaeans fused the character of the ethnus with its patris Jerusalem and chōra Judaea, the only places where the Judaeans’ calendar, laws, and prohibitions (e.g., of pork and human imagery) held sway.\textsuperscript{46} When they lived outside their defining homeland, Judaeans like other minorities had to make the best of it in each local context.

2. Early Christians not an Ethnos – but not universal or inclusive either

Paul and the First Christian Generation

The earliest Christian texts we possess, Paul’s first letters, provide a vivid sense of the group identity he was cultivating among his new communities. The very first surviving lines from this prominent Christ-follower reveal a rootless itinerant entrusted with what he called The Special Announcement (τὸ ἔοισεν ἐλεύθερον). Its most salient content is that ‘those who trust’ must prepare themselves for immediate evacuation. Despite harassment and ridicule from their townsfolk, they must persevere in trust and lead sexually pure, blameless lives if they are to join the soon-returning Christ in the clouds. In this way these chosen ones will escape the divine wrath that is about to fall on others (τὸν ρυόμενον ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ὀργῆς τῆς ἐρχομένης).\textsuperscript{47}

In the interval before Christ’s return, the urgent hope for tropospheric deliverance creates an oppressive air of conflict with mundane poleis. Paul’s arrival in Thessalonica, he recalls, was framed by enormous pressure and conflict (1.6, 2), after

\textsuperscript{46} Josephus’ Antiquities and Apion, both devoted to explicating the antiquity of the Judaean ethnus and the nobility of its laws, are anchored in Jerusalem, the temple, and the priesthood (albeit that Josephus has been living in Rome for decades).

\textsuperscript{47} 1 Thess 1.4–10; 2.17–3.13; 4.13–21; 5.1–11, 23; cf. 1 Cor 1.7–9; 7.25–35; 15.12–57; Gal 1.4.
he had suffered grievous insult in Philippi (2.2). But this conflict is, he assures his faithful community, the plight of all trusters. There will be enormous pressure to abandon their hope before the day of rescue (3.3–4). They should at least take comfort that they are imitating Paul, receiving the same grief from their compatriots that his, the Judaeans, had given him (2.14–16). Opposition from local citizenry is, indeed, the main reason for this first letter. Paul has been desperately worried that after his departure they might have abandoned their newfound trust in his message (2.17–3.5). Timothy’s return to him with assurances – and their polite questions about when Christ will return and what will happen to any have died beforehand (4.13; 5.1) – consoles Paul. He writes to advocate continuing patience and hope (3.6–13) and to address their questions, albeit with little new information to offer.

When we observe that early Christ-followers were a different kind of group from the Judaean ethnos, in relation to ancient and social-scientific categories alike, this is part of what we mean. A single-issue salvation circle located themselves, and were placed by outsiders, in fundamental opposition to settled ethnos-polis life, which the Christ-followers expected soon to go up in flames. Other Christian leaders would see things differently, to be sure, and settle in for the longue durée, while accommodating themselves in various ways to life in the world, but Paul’s vision of Christ-following would remain prominent – until today.

His other letters find him in custody and facing torture, from local authorities or Judaean expatriate communities,48 as he denounces a world rapidly disintegrating before the ‘day of Jesus Christ’.49 All that counts in the interim is the ‘new creation’ in Christ, for which he himself has given up all his former commitments and

48 Phlm 8–23; 1 Cor 4.9–13; Phil 1.13–26; 2 Cor 11.23–27.
49 1 Cor 1.7–8; 1.17–2.5; 3.13; 7.31; 15.12–58.
identities.\textsuperscript{50} To those who tell him to get a life, or perhaps allow his followers to join the established Judaean ethnos by (male) circumcision, he is scathing in reply (Phil 3.2–11). He concludes: ‘Our political community exists in the heavens, from where we are awaiting a saviour, Lord Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3.20).

Paul’s commitment to The Announcement, which promises imminent rescue from the world and its ways, puts him in opposition not only with civic authorities but also or especially with Christ-followers who see things differently. He calls them accursed servants of Satan and false apostles, who from self-serving motives teach a different Jesus. Their end too will be destruction.\textsuperscript{51}

These febrile communities are difficult to compare with the politically engaged intellectual banqueting of Aristaeas, Philo, and Josephus. Although Christ-movement communities offered a new superordinate identity to their Judaean and non-Judaean members, we never imagined that the anti-ethnos and –polis tendencies visible in their texts revealed superior spiritual sophistication or universal inclusiveness. Certainly ancient outsiders did not see them that way.

Pliny the Younger – and Social Science

If Paul’s letters are the first glimpses we catch of Christ-followers, the correspondence of Pliny the Younger (ca. 110 CE) provides the earliest outside impressions. Pliny’s letters are valuable because no one was better informed about imperial affairs. Points of interest in Pliny’s letter to Trajan about the Christians (Ep. 10.96) include these: (a) they are locals of all social ranks (ordines), identifiable as Christians only by the evidence of informers and interrogation – having no distinctive ethnic traits or Judaean connections; (b) there are several varieties of them (plures

\textsuperscript{50} Phil 3.4–16; 2 Cor 4.3–4; 5.16–21; Gal 1.13–17; 3.23–28.
\textsuperscript{51} 1 Cor 3.10–15; 4.14–21; Phil 1.15–17; 3.2–21; 2 Cor 2.1–11; 10–13; Gal 1.6–10; 2.4, 11–14; 4.12–20; 5.7–12; 6.13, 17; cf. Acts 21.20–36.
species); (c) Pliny knows the name Christian and its association with crimes, the
nature of which he hints at, but not what members normally do in meetings; and (d)
they are plainly a voluntary association of local citizens and villagers.

Greek and Latin had several overlapping terms for voluntary groups, clubs,
fraternities, or associations (e.g., θίασοι, σύνοδοι, ἐταυρίαι, αἱρέσεις, collegia, sectae,
factiones, hetaeriae), the connotations of each varying with situation and literary
context. Although the issue deserves closer examination, the members of such
groups undoubtedly derived a distinctive identity from belonging to them. In terms of
the social identity theory of Henri Tajfel and John Turner, each individual gained a
‘social identity’ from membership. Such social identity has three dimensions:
cognitive (the knowledge of belonging to the group and sharing its beliefs), emotional
(how one felt about belonging to such a group), and evaluative (how one rated one’s
membership here in relation to that of outgroups). These variables provide a useful
point of entry into the voluntary associations. Generally speaking, these associations
were ‘organized around an extended family, the cult of a deity or hero, an ethnic
group in diaspora, a neighbourhood, or a common trade or profession.’ Most of
them met for the purposes of sociability (especially focused in regular common
meals) and usually practised some cultic activity. All of them had office-bearers.

The fact that they frequently voted honours to certain members and established

52 On associations, see, e.g.: R. S. Ascough, Paul’s Macedonian associations: The Social Context of
Philippians and 1 Thessalonians (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); P. A. Harland, Associations,
Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society (Minneapolis:
Fortress, 2003); idem, Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans,
and Cultural Minorities (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2009); J. S. Kloppenborg and R. S. Ascough,
Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary. Vol. I: Attica, Central Greece,
Macedonia, Thrace (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011); P. A. Harland, Greco-Roman Associations: Texts,
Translations, and Commentary. Vol. II: North Coast of the Black Sea (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); R. S.
Ascough, Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook (Waco: Baylor University Press,
2012).
53 For an overview of social identity theory, see P. F. Esler, ‘An Outline of Social Identity Theory’. In
54 Kloppenborg and Ascough, Greco-Roman Associations, 1.
55 Ibid., 5.
written membership lists suggests that they afforded their members ‘a sense of belonging, honor, and achievement.’

One could easily discuss—in relation to each association in its context—the cognitive, emotional and evaluative dimensions of belonging in order to investigate the identity of the group and the social identity that members derived from belonging. It is evident, however, that in every instance, except that of an ethnic group meeting in a diaspora setting (the exception that proves the rule), the group identity and the members’ social identity were not ethnic. This is clearly the case even where all members were co-ethnics (such as in the many instances from Athens), since they must have derived an identity different from their ethnic group or there would have been no point in membership.

But the point is even clearer when the membership comprised people from different ethnic groups. For as soon as one asks, ‘What is the ethnic group of these people sitting around the table and partaking of the common meal?’, one realises that the question is meaningless. Such groups were demonstrably trans-ethnic in character. Setting Christ-movement groups alongside Greco-Roman associations immediately brings out the similarities with them, even though we must be alert for differences.

Even if all the members were (originally) Judaean, their group identity must have been different; where the group was a mixture of Judaeans and non-Judaean this must have been the case a fortiori. A remarkable proof of that difference is that only a

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56 Ibid., 6.
57 See, ibid., in pp. 17–280.
58 Examples include a group of Sarapis devotees in Thessalonika (Kloppenborg and Ascough, Greco-Roman Associations, No. 77, pp. 357–62), a group engaged in mysteries in Kyme (Harland, Greco-Roman Associations, No. 105, pp. 86–94), and a group of Anubiasts in Smyrna (Ibid., No. 136, pp. 298–302).
59 As for possible differences, we might ask: Did Christ-movement groups charge membership fees? Did other associations manifest charismatic phenomena in their cultic acts?
few years after the crucifixion Paul was persecuting the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ and trying to destroy it (Gal 1.13).

In a well-known letter (Ep. 10.33), Pliny asks Trajan that Nicomedia be allowed a collegium of fire fighters, strictly limited in size and frequency of meeting, to prevent the recurrence of devastating fire. Trajan denies his request, recalling the damage that factiones have wrought (‘whatever name we give them, on whatever justification’). Experience confirms, the emperor reflects, that ‘whenever men are drawn together in a common cause they soon become a tight association / fraternity’ (ἐταιρία), and that means trouble (10.34).

Back in his letter about Christians, Pliny assures Trajan that their influence on the region’s poleis has dropped dramatically since he implemented the order to ban hetaeriae (presumably all collegia in view of 10.34), which stopped Christian meetings also. Their character as a voluntary association is confirmed by details of language. Already former Christians have declared that they abandoned the group three or even twenty-five years ago, and they happily make the customary sacrifices now. Pliny and Trajan agree that people should be given space for repentance (si sit paenitentiae locus), not executed straightaway. None of these attributes matches membership of an ethnos or gens, from which people do not come and go. These are the traits of voluntary association – and dissociation.

What exactly the members of Christ associations should call themselves while living in the world before their heavenward ascent remained unclear. Paul’s ubiquitous ἐκκλησία and ‘brothers and sisters’ language would endure, the latter inviting scorn because of the liberties it suggested among men and women not actually related.60 Noteworthy is the by-play in Acts between Tertullus, who pitches

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60 Tertullian, Apol. 39.8; Minucius Felix, Oct. 9.1–3.
the Nazarenes as a faction or school (ἁρσείς), and Paul, who insists that they are rather The Way (24.4, 17; cf. 9.2; 18.25–26).

Later Christian Perspectives

We conclude this survey by looking at three cultured Christian writers around CE 200 – Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Minucius Felix – and then at four Graeco-Roman authors who describe both Judaeans and Christ-followers. The Christian authors vary considerably in language, style, and literary temperament, but they agree in renouncing the world of ethnē and poleis, which no longer has value in light of the supervening revelation in Christ. All three respond forthrightly to outsiders’ perceptions that Christianity is a recent innovation, and their demand that Christians return to loyalty to ethnos, polis, and ancestral custom.

Clement’s Exhortation is a frontal attack on ethnos identity and loyalty. He argues from a Johannine, quasi-gnostic position that sees salvation largely in terms of spiritual illumination in this world, made possible by the deposit of truth in Christ’s incarnation of the Logos (cf. John 1.1–18). This inner truth brings freedom from the daemons (= gods) of the ethnē. In this scheme, humanity’s problem is the ignorance, darkness, and error of the cosmos, which blind people to the truth, though truth is now available through Christ’s light from heaven (Protr. 11). Although it seems recent, Christian truth is paradoxically much older than what people perceive as ‘ancient’ in mere ethnos custom. Christ’s ‘new melody’ expresses a Reason or Doctrine (Logos) that antedates time itself (Protr. 1). The gods of the ethnē are risible late-comers by

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61 Protr. 1: ‘Let truth shine her rays of light … upon those wallowing in the darkness, and deliver humans from their error … to point them to salvation’ (modified G. W. Butterworth Loeb translation). The final paragraph (in Protr. 12) presents the Christian life as a never-ending series of revelations, and ‘destruction’ apparently as moral-spiritual enslavement to the ways of the ethnē.
contrast, mere deified humans who ‘fell on poleis and ethnē like plagues’ (Protr. 3.1). Clement mocks the ethnē and their competitive claims to antiquity (Protr. 1).

The climax of his work (chap. 10) confronts the demand for ethnos loyalty – namely, that it is unreasonable to abandon ‘custom … handed down from the fathers’ (ἐκ πατέρων ... παραδεδομένον ἡμῖν ἔθος). Clement puns on the contrast between custom (συνήθεια), which is merely a seductive drug, and truth (ἀλήθεια). In the circle of Christ’s truth, ethnos allegiance is dissolved: ‘there is no barbarian nor Judaean nor Greek, nor male nor female, but only a new human being transformed by God’s holy spirit’ (Protr. 11). Clement’s closing exhortation does not hold back (12.1):

Let us then steer clear of custom! Let us steer clear of it like a dangerous headland, the threatening Charybdis, the Sirens of legend. It throttles the human, turns him from truth, leads away from life. Custom is a snare, a trap, a pit, an evil treat.

The mast to which Odysseus bound himself on Circe’s advice, to secure himself against the Sirens’ sweet song (Od. 12.50–53, 153–91), is now the Cross. Clement’s repudiation of the classical ethnos-polis paradigm is complete.

Tertullian agrees in rejecting the ethnos-polis foundations of classical society. He sarcastically challenges ‘these oh-so-pious champions and avengers of laws and ancestral institutions’ about their own scrupulosity (Apol. 5–6), rejecting out of hand any identification of the nations’ various laws with truth. Strikingly he does not deny Christian novelty or strangeness, but embraces them. The Christians are indeed a secta (his preferred term, eighteen times in the Apology) – group, faction, school – and they date only from the time of Tiberius, which ‘most people know to be quite new … as we ourselves openly declare’ (21.1: quam aliquanto novellam, ..., plerique
sciunt, profitentibus nobis quoque). And the secta is named for its recent founder, Christus (3.6; 21.26). Tertullian writes the Apologetic to defend this particular secta, nevertheless, from unfair treatment (1.1). Addressing ‘officials of Roman imperium’, he argues that comparable groups (factiones, hetaeriae) are left in peace even if they behave obnoxiously, whereas the virtuous and harmless Christians face endless harassment.

Comparison groups for Tertullian, tellingly, include philosophical schools and groups of physicians, grammarians, and cooks, which are also named for their founders (3.6) – so that in itself should cause no ridicule. But philosophical groups have a secure place, although they howl against polis norms, the gods, or the emperor himself (Apol. 46). Tertullian pleads that the Christian secta be included among the legal factiones and left alone. The only reason to ban factiones is fear of political agitation, but Christians have no interest in polis affairs. Their factio devotes itself to piety and discipline – in preparation for the imminent end of the age (Apol. 38–39).

Tertullian feels compelled to explain the Christ-followers’ non-observance of Judaean law. The reason he is not embarrassed about the novelty of the Christian secta, it transpires, is that it rests on the foundation of this ancient, formerly great gens or genus (ethnos), which however proved unviable. The Judaean gens used to enjoy divine favour, national greatness (generis magnitudo), and royal splendour, he opines. But that gens-project failed when they lost divine favour. With Jerusalem’s destruction their gens was allegedly replaced by the new voluntary secta established by its auctor Christ. This community is therefore, emphatically, not a gens. It comprises trusters in Christ drawn from all gentes, that is, from all ethnic groups (21.4–6):
How badly they [Judaeans] failed . . . their final state nowadays (exitus hodiernus) would prove…. Scattered, wanderers, exiles from their own sun and sky, they roam the earth without a king either human or divine. They are not permitted to greet their ancestral homeland (terram patriam) even by a provision for visitors—not a single footprint. … God would choose for himself much more faithful worshippers, from every gens, people, and place, to whom he would transfer his favour (ex omni iam gente et populo et loco cultores sibi adlegeret deus multo fideliores in quos gratiam transferret).

In Tertullian’s imagination, then, the solution to Judaean failure in their homeland is not a new ethnos in a new homeland, but a voluntary association that is demonstrably trans-ethnic in the manner Horrell decries and is defined solely by common trust in Christ and the promise of deliverance from the classical world order.

Tertullian’s appeal sounds Pauline in its insistence that Christians have no home in this world (Apol. 1.2):

[Truth, veritas] knows that, leading an alien existence on earth, she readily finds enemies among strangers, whereas her pedigree, dwelling-place, hope, reward, and honour are in the heavens (genus, sedem, spem, gratiam, dignitatem in caelis habere).

The liveliest expression of this heavenly orientation comes in Tertullian’s On Spectacles. Here he denounces core institutions and activities of the polis – theatre, drama, games, amphitheatres – as demon-filled pits of disgrace and filth (Spec. 1–28). He can renounce classical life because the greatest spectacle ever is about to be revealed: the coming of the Lord in triumph to establish the heavenly civitas of New Jerusalem (Spec. 30). This event will see the existing world with its proud genealogies
and silly claims to antiquity consumed in a conflagration, which will also liquefy the Christians’ haughty persecutors.

M. Minucius Felix’s Octavius is remarkable for the persuasive rhetoric that the author allows both disputants, the Christian Octavius and his Roman antagonist Caecilius. Although the Roman will ultimately join the Christian secta in a rather anticlimactic ending (40.2), his vigorous opening arguments recall Plato’s Socrates, Epicurus, Cicero, Celsus, and Marcus Aurelius, among others. They marry profound philosophical uncertainty about the real nature of the universe, which leads Caecilius to reject hubristic Christian claims to knowledge, with respect for the multifarious ancestral traditions found in the world – partly on the utilitarian ground that they provide inducements to morality (5.2–5).

Octavius exploits famous philosophers and sharp reason to make the easier, negative side of the Christian case against polytheism and diverse national customs: they cannot all be true! In rebuttal, Caecilius anticipates Neoplatonism – not to mention Edmund Burke against the French Revolution and Benjamin Disraeli against Europhile ‘Gallomania’ – when he insists that each nation’s ancient tradition, which has evolved with its character through uncountable ages, must not be swept aside by a merciless reason. It is right and proper that each nation should cherish its unique gods, cults, calendar, and festivals. These deserve the respect of citizens and outsiders alike (6.1–3; 8.1–4). Caecilius in turn ridicules the motley factiones of Christ-people, who withdraw from polis duties and public life, meet in secret, and avoid the daylight rituals of their homeland (8.5; 9.1–4; 10.1–4). Their belief that the world is about to be consumed in fire, and they alone will survive, is arrogant nonsense (11.1). Octavius counters that nations and peoples (gentes nationesque) are mere human constructions, not recognised by God. God regards humanity as one (33.1).
Minucius Felix’s Octavius thus confirms a general picture, shared by Christian insiders and outside observers around 200 CE, that early Christ-followers rejected the laws and customs of the nations (ethnē, genē, gentes, nationes) that undergirded the classical paradigm. They found their identities in the new, voluntary association of Christ-devotion.

Later Outside Observers

In the space allowed by a journal article we cannot consider every piece of evidence or the possible implications of a particular author’s turns of phrase. But broad confirmation of the distinction we are making comes from four prominent authors who discuss both Judaeans and Christians: Tacitus, Celsus, Porphyry, and Julian. None of them was much enamoured of the Judaeans. In taking their deity to be the only one, Judaeans appeared to them intolerant and unwilling to mix with others. Nevertheless, all four writers recognised the Judaeans as an established ethnōs / gens that enjoyed a respectable place in the oikouμένη. The Christians were something else entirely, and had no such place in the world. They gathered to worship an executed criminal who was supposed to deliver their group alone from the cosmos. For this absurd belief they were willing to abandon their proper obligations to ancestral and polis custom. This was obviously troublesome behaviour.

Tacitus, for example, recognises the Judaeans’ established place in the world. In the fifth book of his Histories, he describes the origin of this gens and its renowned polis (famosae urbis, 2–3), then its customs (4–5) and homeland (6–8), as a prelude to his now-lost account of Jerusalem’s destruction. While admitting that he finds the Judaeans’ customs repugnant, Tacitus allows that their antiquity demands respect

62 Julian, C. Gal. 116a–b, 131b–d, 168b–c, 171a, d–e, 176a–c, 184b–c, 198b.
(antiquitate defenduntur). His use of Egyptians and Romans as comparanda for the Judeans confirms his understanding of their established place, though he laments the attractions of their foreign ways among the ‘worst sort’ of Romans and others (5.5).

Contrast Tacitus’ language when he describes Christians in the Annals (15.44). This ‘mob despised for their shameful acts’ (per flagitia invisos vulgus), called Christians, take their name from a man named Christus, who was executed by Pilate under Tiberius (cf. Tertullian’s defence). The man’s death spawned a ‘lethal superstition’ (exitabilis superstition), which has spread – like Pliny’s contagio – from Judaea throughout the world. Its criminal members undoubtedly deserve severe punishments (sontes et novissima exempla meritos), though Nero’s savagery toward them evoked sympathy. This language is a world away from the same author’s description of Jerusalem, its people, and their ancient laws, which have much more in common with his portraits of Germans and Britons.

The same contrast appears more vividly still in the philosopher Celsus, whose mid-second-century True Doctrine is fortunately preserved in Origen’s third-century rebuttal. Celsus cherished the customs of all ethnē, in their colourful variety and under their various deities. He cherished Pindar’s maxim, ‘nomos is king of all’ (C. Cels. 5.40). Although he regularly slighted the Judaean ethnos for its exclusiveness and allegedly mean origins (1.14, 22–23, 26; 5.41–42), like Tacitus, he was also sure of its place in the world even a century after Jerusalem’s fall (5.25, cf. 41):

The Judaeans, after becoming a unique ethnos (ἔθνος ἵδνον γενόμενον), enacted laws in keeping with their local conditions, and guard them until even now. In preserving their way of worship – which, whatever its actual form, is ancestral (πάτριον ὥ’ οὖν) – they act just like other people. Each pursues its ancestral ways (.FontStyleŋ ἔκαστο τὰ πάτρια), no matter what kind happen to have been
established … and it is not pious to dissolve what has become customary/legal in each place from the beginning (παραλύειν δὲ οὐχ ὅσιον εἶναι τὰ ἐξ ἀρχῆς κατὰ τόπους νεομισμένα).

Contrast the same author’s view of Christians (5.33):

I shall ask them where they came from, and who is the founder of their ancestral laws (πόθεν ἥκουσιν ἢ τίνα ἐξουσιν ἀρχηγέτην πατρίων νόμων). ‘No one’, they state. But that [place, Judaea] is where they issued from, and they themselves can adduce no teacher or leader from any other place. Yet they broke from the Judaeans!

Origen responds forcefully to this charge of abandoning law and custom, in the vein of Clement, Tertullian, and Minucius Felix. Things began in Zion, yes, but ‘in the last days the worship of God through Jesus Christ has shone out’. This new teaching is for all the nations (πάντα τὰ ἕθνη). ‘We have become sons of peace through Jesus Christ, … rather than of ancestral customs’ (ἀντὶ τῶν πατρίων). Origen plainly agrees with Celsus on the premise: We have indeed abandoned ethnos affiliations. They differ only about the meaning of this fact.

Still Origen gives Celsus his due, and so preserves valuable information about the rejected philosopher’s outlook. Says Celsus: ‘There is nothing amiss when each ethnos worships according to its own customs. We have found considerable difference in each ethnos, and yet each of them appears to deem its own way preferable’ (5.34). Origen even tries to summarise Celsus’ views (5.35):

All people ought to live according to their ancestral ways (τὸ δὲῖν πάντας ἀνθρώποις κατὰ τὰ πάτρια ζῆν), and they are never blamed for this. But the Christians have abandoned their ancestral ways (Χριστιανοῦς δὲ τὰ πάτρια
καταλιπόντας). And since they happen not to be an ethnos like the Judeans, associating themselves with the teaching of [the Judaean] Jesus is culpable.

Celsus had complained that the Christians’ following of Christ – the most ignoble sort of teacher anyway (e.g., 5.52) – was eating away at the social-political fabric. They disdained ethnos and polis obligations in favour of their irrational view that God, like a cook, would burn the rest of humanity and spare them alone (5.14; cf. 7.9)!

The eminent Neoplatonist Porphyry (late third century) followed in the same tracks. Although Jerusalem was by now long since destroyed, his On Abstinence included Judeans alongside Egyptians, Syrians, and various Greeks as examples of the disciplined life ‘by ethnos’ (Abst. 4.2). He much admired Judeans, and their school of Essenes in particular, leaning on Josephus for a lengthy description (Abst. 4.11–14). Porphyry is probably more famous today, however, for his anticipation of modern historical criticism in his lost work against the Christians (Contra Christianos). There he unsparingly mocked Christian beliefs, especially those concerning the return of Christ and the expected heavenly ascent. A small taste:

[Paul] very clearly says ‘We who are alive’ [1 Thess ζέ1ίζορ it is now three hundred years since he said this and nobody – not Paul and not anyone else – has been caught up in the air. It is high time to let Paul’s confusions rest in peace!63

Porphyry dismissed Jesus as an unworthy teacher, exposing contradictions in the gospels.64

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63 Hoffmann, Against the Christians, 68–70 (70).
64 Fragments from Eusebius, Epiphanius, Theodoret, and others are assembled in A. von Harnack, Porphyrius: Gegen die Christen (Abhandlungen der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosoph.-hist. Kl. 1; Berlin: Reimer, 1916). Many scholars think that the pagan philosopher quoted by Macarius Magnes preserves the voice of Porphyry, and on that basis R. J. Hoffmann has produced Porphyry’s Against the Christians: The Literary Remains (New York: Prometheus, 1994).
The Emperor Julian, finally, is important because of his knowledge of both Christian and outsider views. His effort to rebuild the temple was intended not only to destroy a pillar of Christian self-understanding but also to deny Christians the one legitimate reason (by his lights) they might cite for not participating in animal sacrifice: that this was permitted only in Jerusalem’s temple, which is no more (C. Gal. 351d, 324c–d).65

With Caecilius, Celsus, and Porphyry, Julian relishes a world of diverse ethnē, each having produced a constitution suited to its nature. Julian stresses the developing notion that each nation and its ways are protected by its guardian god, the Hebrew deity watching over the Judaeans (C. Gal. 116a–141d). His challenge to Christians is thus to choose an ethnos-affiliation and support it fully: either that of their native Greek poleis, preferably, or that of the Hebrew/Judaeans. This is his opening appeal (C. Gal. 42e–43b) and he repeats until the end (305d): ‘Why is it, I repeat, that after deserting us [Greeks and Romans] you do not accept the law of the Judaeans or abide by the sayings of Moses?’ Again, ‘Why do you not practise circumcision?’ (351a). In Julian’s view, Christians have concocted a bizarre and empty mixture of the worst from Judaean and Greek worlds, without accepting any ethnos’ laws, customs, traditional sacrifice, or honour of a regional god (209d, 238a–b, 253a–291a). They have no place in the world.

Like the others, Julian chides the Hebrew ethnō itself for recognising only its deity and not accepting that each ethnō has its own guardian-god (C. Gal. 141c–d). Nevertheless, he concedes (306b):

The Judaeans agree with the [other] ethnē, except in supposing that there is only one god. That is their peculiar thing, alien to us, but all other matters are in

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common with us: the sanctuaries, sacred spaces, sacrificial altars, purifications, and particular observances, concerning which we differ from each other either not at all or only trivially.

Christians ‘are neither Hellenes nor Judaeans, but of the sect of the Galileans’ (43a, 333d). ‘Just like leeches, they suck the worst blood from that source [Judaeans] and shun the purer [Greek]’ (191c). They must either return to their native ethnos-polis obligations or have the courage of their convictions and join their teacher’s ethnos: the Judaeans. Otherwise their activities are subversive of civilisation.66

Conclusions

Our research suggests that literate antiquity understood the Judaeans to be an ancient ethnos with a famous polis-patris and ancestral customs, or an ethnic group in modern parlance. Christ-followers, whether apocalyptically oriented or not, were seen as a different kind of group. Encompassing members from various ethnic groups, they met in private houses or other buildings to worship their auctor, Christ, perhaps to prepare themselves for his imminent return. That new identity defined them completely and, according to knowledgeable ancient authors on all sides, overwrote their former ethnos-polis loyalties.

While we have no quarrel with efforts to find ‘ethnic reasoning’ in particular early Christian texts, we consider such language fictive. It does not make the Christians an ethnos in common perception or in social-scientific understanding, but represents a bold raid on Israelite tradition to use its topoi in the service of a very different identity.

66 C. Gal. 42e–43b, 49a–c, 96c–e, 100e–106e, 194d–202a, 253a–e, 305d, 314c–e, 319d–20e, 343c–58e.
However that may be, we reject any co-option of our research for triumphalist Christian perspectives. It could with less violence undergird a Zionist outlook, according to which the Jewish people had an ancient and secure place in their land, whereas Christians were a homeless offshoot, worshipping a mere man and widely deemed superstitious. But our aims are neither theological nor political. Wishing to understand the past as it was may seem naïve, but we think it possible to advance understanding through methodical investigations, without despairing that biases render all communication impossible. We welcome criticism of our actual arguments: that Judaeans viewed themselves and were viewed as an established ethnos in the oikouμéνη, fully engaged with it, whereas many early Christ-followers viewed themselves and were seen by others as a voluntary association basically alienated from the oikouμéνη.