



This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document and is licensed under Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 license:

Esler, Philip F ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4889-4889> (2022) Religion, Race, Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities. *Expository Times*, 133 (7). pp. 284-289. doi:10.1177/00145246211068346

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00145246211068346>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00145246211068346>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/12450>

Disclaimer

The University of Gloucestershire has obtained warranties from all depositors as to their title in the material deposited and as to their right to deposit such material.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation or warranties of commercial utility, title, or fitness for a particular purpose or any other warranty, express or implied in respect of any material deposited.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation that the use of the materials will not infringe any patent, copyright, trademark or other property or proprietary rights.

The University of Gloucestershire accepts no liability for any infringement of intellectual property rights in any material deposited but will remove such material from public view pending investigation in the event of an allegation of any such infringement.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.

Religion, Race, Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities

David G. Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities* (Grand Rapids, Michigan. Eerdmans, 2020. \$55.00. pp. xxiv + 424. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7608-9).

Ethnicity and Inclusion is a superbly researched and impeccably fair-minded book on a major issue relating to Christian origins. David Horrell explores 'possible connections' between how New Testament interpreters since the early nineteenth century have construed 'early Christian identity in its relationship to Jewish identity' and 'the epistemological foundations of Western European self-identity, with all its wider implications for ideologies of religious and racial difference' (p. 7). Above all he is concerned with portrayals of 'Christian universal-ism' versus Jewish particularism, especially if they have played a causative role in recent anti-semitism, with instances of which he begins the book's Introduction.

To understand the book, it needs to be situated in its intellectual context. In the early 2000s, a complex of ideas for understanding the identities involved in 'Judaism' and early 'Christianity' emerged with the following elements:

- (a) 'religion' as we understand it was unknown in the ancient world (proposed in William Cantwell Smith's 1962 work *The Meaning and End of Religion*);
- (b) 'race', an eighteenth-century pseudo-scientific invention, involving the bogus creation of groups based on observable and inherited physical characteristics (e.g. skin colour and cranial shape)—alleged to be natural categories—which were then hierarchically arranged with 'Anglo-Saxon', 'Aryan', or some other 'race' on top, had rightly been rejected following the Holocaust, and should not be attributed to ancient peoples;
- (c) groups exhibiting an identity recognisably ethnic existed in the ancient world and that while such identity is best understood as constructed (not natural), ascribed and processual (following a 1969 essay by Frederick Barth), certain diagnostic features (suggested by John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith) indicate its presence, namely, a common name, a myth of ancestry, shared history, a common culture (that includes religious phenomena), a homeland, and a sense of communal solidarity, with no role for inherited physical characteristics as in 'race';
- (d) the ancient *Ioudaioi/Iudaei* were such an ethnic group, not adherents of a religion called 'Judaism', and are appropriately designated not 'Jews' but 'Judeans', an ethnonym based on their homeland of Judea (like the names of most other ethnic groups of their period); and
- (e) early Christ-groups, especially when embracing members from different ethnic groups, had an identity that was not ethnic, indeed was quite different in character.

This complex of ideas first appeared in the present writer's *Conflict and Identity in Romans* (2003). Some of them—elements (a), (c, but without reference to Barth, or Hutchinson and Smith), (d) and, crucially, (e)—featured in an important article by Steve Mason in the *Journal for the Study of Judaism* in 2007. Similar ideas were soon appearing across New Testament studies and are now widely accepted. But not by everyone. David Horrell's book is a comprehensive, response to this project, taking issue in particular with elements (b) and (e). His basic thesis is that the identity of early Christ-followers was not different in kind from that of first-century Judeans (whom he refers to as 'Jews') but shared an identity similar (in some respects) with theirs (which he calls 'ethnic' and

sometimes 'racial'), and that scholarship which seeks to distinguish these Judeans as an ethnic group from a non-ethnic early Christ-movement reflects and perpetuates the denigration of a 'particularist' Judaism vis-à-vis a 'universal' Christianity, risks contributing to anti-Semitism today and reflects the 'white', 'racial' identity of its proponents. Horrell published an early version of the book's thesis in *New Testament Studies* in 2016, which attracted a joint response from Steve Mason and the present author in that journal in 2017.

Chapter 1 (pp. 21-46) charts scholarly landmarks in what Horrell calls 'a persistent structural dichotomy' between Jewish ethnic particularism and Christian inclusivism. He starts with Ferdinand Christian Baur, who negatively stereotyped Judaism in comparison with 'German' Christianity in an expression of nineteenth-century European 'racial' superiority. Baur contrasted *christliche Universalismus* and *jüdische Particularismus* (p. 26). Then come scholars including E. P. Sanders, James Dunn, the present writer, Aaron Kuecker, Joseph Hellerman, Larry Hurtado, William Campbell, Brian Tucker, Kathy Ehrensperger, Caroline Johnson Hodge and Alain Badiou. While acknowledging the efforts of Sanders and Dunn to extract ancient Judaism from accusations of being a religion of 'legalistic' works-righteousness and noting that some of us (e.g. the present writer and William Campbell) expressly acknowledge the efforts of Paul to build a new ingroup identity in Christ while maintaining Judean and non-Judean ingroup identities, Horrell finds in all much the same 'structural dichotomy' in the contrast between 'ethnic' and 'trans-ethnic' to categorise Judean vis-à-vis Christ-movement identities.

In Chapter 2 (pp. 47-92) Horrell traces the use of the notions of 'ethnicity' and 'race' in recent scholarship on ancient Greece and Rome, Judaism and early Christianity. He registers the problematisation of 'religion' in relation to the ancient world inspired by William Cantwell Smith and the growing insistence that the *Ioudaioi* represent an ethnic group, like the many other ethnic groups of their time, now often called 'Judeans' not 'Jews' (pp. 47-55), although he prefers 'Jews'. He next surveys research employing the idea of ethnicity, often in conjunction with 'race' (e.g. Denise Kimber Buell (pp. 56-58); Love Sechrest) or in contrast with 'race' (e.g. several German and Swiss scholars he mentions, including Wolfgang Stegemann, Kathy Ehrensperger and Michael Wolter). Horrell appropriately contrasts the US position where the language of 'race' 'carries certain connotations and evokes a specific history', with that in Germany where, he notes—rather coyly perhaps—that 'the term *Rasse* has its own particular history, loading its contemporary usage in quite different ways' (p. 65).

Chapter 3 (pp. 67-91) addresses first ethnicity and 'race', then 'race' and its relevance to antiquity and, finally, religion and its relationship to ethnicity and 'race', with Horrell explaining his position on these concepts. He notes the recognised problems with 'race' but indicates he will keep using it (pp. 67-69), then discusses ethnicity, highlighting Frederick Barth and noting the importance of changing interactions across boundaries in the construction of a group's ethnic identity (pp. 69-71), before describing Hutchinson and Smith's components of ethnic identity (pp. 71-72) and mentioning Rogers Brubaker's warnings against essentialising groups (pp. 72-74). He defends the use of 'race' on the basis that theorists realise it is 'constructed and believed rather than biologically or objectively real', and this realisation (allegedly) distinguishes it from pernicious racial theories of the past (p. 75). 'Racialising' means classifying people into 'races', while 'Ethnicisation is the making of an ethnic group' (p. 79). Although Horrell argues ethnicity and 'race' overlap, he prefers to use 'ethnicity' (p. 82). He argues there were 'proto-racist' phenomena in antiquity (p. 82) and those who insist that modern ideologies like race had no direct counterpart in the ancient world 'can too easily serve to remove them . . . from critical consideration.' He agrees with Buell that 'Thinking beyond race in a world that is deeply racist' is utopian and neo-liberal (p. 83). Finally, he points to connections

between religion (which forms part of 'common culture' in the Hutchinson and Smith list) and ethnicity.

Chapters 4-8 (pp. 95-296) contain 'com-parisons of Jewish and early Christian perspectives' in a number of areas: Chapter 4: Shared descent: ancestry, kinship, marriage and family; Chapter 5: A common life: culture, practice, and the socialization of children; Chapter 6: Homeland: territory and symbolic constructions of space; Chapter 7: becoming a people: Self-Consciousness and Ethnicisation; and Chapter 8: mission and conversion: joining the people. These chapters argue against drawing a distinction between a Judean ethnic group and a non-ethnic Christianity largely on the basis that Christianity was often ethnic in character; it was being 'ethnicised'. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 deploy the second, third and fourth of the Hutchinson and Smith abovementioned indicators of ethnic identity.

In Chapter 9, entitled 'Implicit Whiteness and Christian Superiority: The Epistemological Challenge' (pp. 299-345), Horrell, after recapping his argument, first explains the perspective of 'whiteness', which has largely developed in the USA as a reaction to endemic discrimination against African Americans (pp. 310-318). He claims "'whiteness" is not an objective or "essential" characteristic of those to whom it is assigned but rather a socially constructed, historically contingent, and ideologically loaded category'. The 'division of people into white and non-white' is an 'arbitrary line' bifurcating human diversity (p. 312). Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, a standpoint for looking at oneself and others and a set of unnamed and unmarked cultural practices (p. 314). He argues that whiteness 'forms the context that shapes the discipline's modes of thinking' (pp. 325-334). He also critiques 'Christianness', the Christian commitment and 'sense of Christianity's superiority' that are 'dominant in the discipline' (pp. 319-325, at p. 324).

Chapter 9 concludes with 'Moving Forward' (pp. 341-345). He notes his own 'primarily historical and exegetical study' (i.e. in pp. 95-296) is subject to critique; maybe, he suggests, he is too wedded to 'the master's tools' to take part in the critical dismantling of 'the master's house' (p. 341). To solve the problem he has pursued through 340 pages, he first suggests that we should juxtapose and critically evaluate different readings, including by 'listening desperately' to marginalised traditions of interpretation, including African American (p. 342-343). We also need to 'recognize and address the ways in which our discipline and its conventions, research foci, career structures, language-traditions, publishing opportunities, and so on shape our interactions' (p. 344), although he offers no practical suggestions as to how this might be achieved. The task boils down to giving due weight to interpreters not sharing 'a white, Western, Christian location' (p. 345).

How plausible is Horrell's innovative and impressive response to the complex of ideas set out above? Has he proved his case—especially its gravamen that the differentiation of first-century Judean and Christ-movement identities reflects the 'white' and Christian identity of its proponents—in accordance with the usual standards of scholarly argumentation? The remarkable answer is no, because he has not even tried; in fact, he expressly dispenses his argument from those standards. What was implied in his 2016 New Testament Studies article now becomes his programme. In the last chapter (having earlier acknowledged [p. 11] that this was where he would make his 'major claims'), he states that 'critical probing' of the alleged contrast between Judaism and Christianity in the New Testament period 'will inevitably and necessarily entail considering something other than the explicit intentions and arguments any of us presents' (p. 309). All that is needed is a 'correspondence' between certain historical constructions and contemporary perspectives (p. 310). Our 'potential enmeshment' in how our thought has been shaped by our intellectual and social context 'cannot be removed simply by declarations of intention or personal conviction' (p. 310). That context is then formulated in relation to 'whiteness'.

This position abrogates scholarly argumentation (and its underlying principles of logic) in three respects. Firstly, Horrell's position is non-falsifiable, since no 'arguments' (his word), nothing we might say, can contradict it. This may explain why he never addresses the detail of exegetical arguments for the trans-ethnic character of early Christ-movement identity. Secondly, by discounting the view he opposes on the basis that its proponents are enmeshed in 'whiteness', Horrell is running an ad hominem argument on a grand scale. Thirdly, by maintaining that all he needs is a 'correspondence' between the past and pre-sent perspectives, Horrell falls into the logical fallacy of assuming correlation implies causation; in fact, correspondences may be interesting but they prove nothing. Also symptomatic of his abnegation of causation in historical research is the ominous frequency with which he advances propositions as 'possible' (e.g. 'possible connections' on his p. 7, noted above) in contrast to the vanishing rarity of the required 'probable'. Accordingly, the main question for New Testament interpretation posed by this book does not so much concern its contents as whether it will become generally acceptable for researchers to mount particular positions in this way.

The book's contents also require critical assessment. Horrell's adoption of Denise Kimber Buell's ideas in *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (2005) plays a central role. Buell recognised the objections to 'race' mentioned above and the 'damage this modern concept has wrought and continues to wreak' but asserted that by 'provocatively using race interchangeably with ethnicity in this book, I am challenging readers to be account-able to the terms we use for interpreting cultural differences in antiquity' (p. xi). This view is problematic—rather like smacking instead of admonishing children to alert others of the evil of smacking, or laughing uproariously at funerals to warn people how inappropriate is such behaviour. It is submitted that accountability means avoiding 'race' as a useful category, not employing it. Yet Horrell fully accepts Buell's position (pp. 56-58). He also accepts her other main argument, that 'ethnic' (and 'racial') can be used of early Christ-movement reasoning.

Horrell's attempt to rehabilitate 'race' involves arguing that 'racial identities are constructed and believed rather than biologically or objectively real' (p. 75) and that today we are confident there is no biological basis for 'race'. This is unpersuasive. 'Race' has never had an actual existence; the problem with past racists was that they believed it did. Modern racists still do. If, like Horrell, one does not believe 'race' actually exists, what is the content of a belief held in relation to it that might justify its continued use? How can one seriously claim 'race' is 'constructed' (which ethnic identity is) when it is tied, such as with 'whiteness', to physical, observable, inherited characteristics? The conclusion seems inescapable that 'white-ness' (however understandable the US politics that generated it) represents the reinstatement of a racist ideology but with the hierarchical order changed, even though that is certainly not Horrell's intention. He also tries to find 'rac-ism' in the ancient world by citing some ancient writers who tied alleged negative and positive qualities of peoples to physical characteristics occasioned by differing climates (p. 81). Yet this material does not even remotely resemble the modern hierarchical categorization of people by inherited physical characteristics and the resultant widespread and gross discrimination by certain groups against others such as to justify his application of 'race' or 'racial' to groups, like the Judeans, in antiquity.

Moving to ethnicity, also questionable are his 'ethnicising' arguments in the exegetical section (Chapters 4-8). It is axiomatic that the mere appearance of an arguably similar social feature in two groups does not make the groups similar. Each such feature exists in, and reinforces, its own distinctive social complex. If a feature such as 'ancestry' from Abraham existing among ethnic Judeans (where it largely means physical descent) is taken over by Christ-followers and given a new, figurative meaning, that is not a sign that the two groups are similar or that the Christ-movement is

being 'ethnicised' in a Judean direction. The reverse is true. Non-Christ-following Judeans, who claimed Abraham as their father (Luke 3.8; John 8.39), would have regarded Paul's argument in Gal 3.6-29 that Christ-followers were Abraham's descendants as preposterous, which is why he draws back from it in Romans 4. In Galatians, Paul contests the meaning of Abraham by eliminating the element of physical descent central to Judean ethnic identity as he deploys the patriarch's significance in a new manner. This is not 'ethnicisation' but 'de-ethnicisation' and 'de-ethnic reasoning.' Nor is the result 'fictive' or 'figurative' ethnicity, but no sort of ethnicity at all.

Issues also arise in relation to Horrell's exegesis. The use of kinship language fictively among both Judeans and Christ-followers (pp. 106-111) does not advance his argument, given its different meanings in these contexts. His attempt to explain how the child of a mixed marriage (1 Cor 7.14) is holy on the basis that 'Christian identity can be conveyed by either parent' (pp. 123-133, at 131), thus tying Christ-movement identity to ethnic notions of descent, runs up against the Judean belief that the man (here a non-Judean!) provided all the material for the child (the 'seed', a homunculus, in effect: Heb 7.9-10). His careful elucidations of Judean circumcision, food laws and sabbath observance vis-à-vis 'broadly corresponding' (p. 162) and 'comparable' (p. 175) Christ-following baptism, eucharist and Sunday meetings (pp. 155-175) graphically reinforce how different were these identities, in spite of his argument to the contrary (p. 176). Again, his brilliant analysis of the concept of homeland among Judeans (pp. 178-194), a highlight of the book, gives way to strained attempts to apply the concept to Christ-followers. Thus, Luke-Acts is not a text in which, as he asserts, 'Jerusalem continues to function as a focal center' (p. 196), but one where the emphasis moves, as John H. Elliott argued, from temple to household. While Paul could hardly have avoided mentioning Jerusalem (pp. 196-202), given his biography and the collection, his (sorrowful) distance from the *latreia*, the sacrificial cult of the Temple, is manifested in Rom 9.4. The contrast between the two Jerusalems in Gal 4.21-27 is, moreover, a particularly good example of de-ethnic reasoning. As for Abraham and the homeland in Heb 11.8-10, 13-16 (pp. 206-211), Horrell's insightful introduction of modern theories of spatiality should perhaps not distract us from asking just how the vast majority of first-century Judeans—many of whom sent the yearly Temple tax to Jerusalem, journeyed there on pilgrimage or settled there—would have reacted to the suggestions in Hebrews 11 that Abraham never received the land they regarded as their homeland and was not even interested in doing so. John 4.21 (not mentioned by Horrell) contains a similar de-ethnicising replacement of the land, in particular Jerusalem.

Seeking historical truth, and engaging in historical argument to discover it, which entails doing justice to the alterity of the ancient people we investigate, should not be sacrificed on the altar of a modern ideology such as the notion of 'whiteness'. The fundamental difference between Judean and Christ-following identities in the first century CE is a matter of historical truth. The critical point is this. When, in Paul's Christ-groups, Judean and Greek Christ-followers gathered, especially to share the one loaf and the one cup of the *kuriakon deipnon* ('the Lord's Supper'; 1 Cor 11.20) it cannot have been an ethnic group that gathered, since what ethnic group was it? Rather, it was a trans-ethnic gathering. Contra Horrell, it is not an expression of Christian universalism to say so. Nor is it antisemitic. Nor is it a reflection of the present writer's alleged 'white', 'racial' identity. It is simply a statement of the historical reality. An important one, because it was precisely this breaching of the boundary between Judeans and non-Judeans by creating trans-ethnic groups that was the point of issue between Paul and his opponents in Jerusalem (Gal 2.3), in Antioch (Gal 2.11-14), in Galatia, in Corinth (as argued in the present writer's 2 Corinthians: A Social Identity Commentary) and, potentially, in Philippi (Phil 3.2). The new in-Christ group identity embraced Judean and Greek (Gal 3.28) and was thus notably different from Judean ethnic identity.

The present writer fully shares David Horrell's opposition to all forms of racist discrimination, including antisemitism. We differ on how to counter them. During Vatican II Cardinal Bea persuaded Pope John XXIII to ensure that the Council rejected long-standing negative Catholic depictions of the Jewish people. He argued for the need to interpret New Testament texts historically so that their (alleged) meaning was not simply read into later situations. Some of the bishops strongly opposed a statement on Jews for political reasons: it risked pushing the Church too much towards Israel and Zionism and would cause problems in the Arab world. But Bea insisted that the accurate historical interpretation of biblical texts in their original contexts must never be abandoned and that such issues were to be dealt with in different ways. His view prevailed, as reflected in the stirring (and influential) words on the ancient and magnificent Jewish people in Chapter 4 of *Nostra Aetate*, a people whom the 2015 Vatican document *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable* (Rom. 11:25) rightly describes as moving on a parallel path with Christians towards salvation.