

Building Boundaries: The Role of Religion in Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian Ethnic Identity

Ethnicity is all about boundaries. In order to be ethnically distinct from another group or individual, there must be some clear demarcation between the groups or individuals. But establishing or identifying these boundaries and thus one's ethnic identity, or the ethnic identity of another, can be a tricky thing. Modern understandings of ethnic identity take into account several factors in determining to which ethnicity an individual or group belongs. National origin, language, ancestry and culture are just a few of the ways people in the modern world understand ethnic identity; as often as not, an individual's race plays a key role in this understanding, as well. The question of religion, however, is not as common in determining ethnic identity today. In a world where religion transcends national, cultural and linguistic boundaries, it is often unable to construct boundaries itself. This has not always been the case. The ways in which ethnicity is determined change over time. Thus, they must be adapted to address specific situations in different ways. In this manner, ethnic identity is a constantly shifting concept. Christopher Stanley, for example, observes that "contemporary social theorists define 'ethnicity' not as a fixed quality that inheres in some objectively identifiable population group, but rather as a fluid aspect of individual and group self-definition."¹ However, when examining specific periods in history, the criteria which determine ethnic identity takes on delete fixity and at the beginning of the Roman Empire in the first century BCE,² religion played a key role in determining ethnicity. The spread of Hellenism under Alexander the Great, and its continued promulgation by the Romans, created an almost universal culture in which everyone in the

Mediterranean region participated. The primary way for one group to distinguish itself from another in this cultural melting pot was through religious practice. This was particularly true of the Jews in the Roman Empire, many of whom lived outside of their traditional homeland and yet still maintained religious separation and thus ethnic distinction from the dominant Greco-Roman society.³ This is-verb agreement? also true of the Christian movement, which emerged and immediately established boundaries to distinguish itself from Judaism, as well as the dominant Greco-Roman world. Speaking of “culture” in the Greco-Roman world is speaking of an overarching Greek culture. Thus, the shifting criteria which determine ethnic identity, in this time period, are reduced to one: religious identity. With this in mind, we can see a distinct Christian ethnic, that is, religious identity in as the first century CE, as evidenced by the Apostle Paul’s letters, especially his first letter to the Corinthian community.⁴ We will first explore ways in which identifying ethnic identity has been adapted to address specific situations by several scholars, highlighting the fluid nature of these criteria over time as well as their fixity at specific points in history, before discussing the universal culture of the Greco-Roman world. An examination of 1 Corinthians will demonstrate the distinctly religious means by which Christianity distinguished itself from the religions, and thus the ethnicities, of Judaism and the Greco-Roman world.

Adapting the Study of Ethnicity

We must begin this investigation by examining a set of criteria which can be and have been used to determine ethnic identity. The most comprehensive list may be found in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith’s book *Ethnicity*, and provides a useful starting point. In the introduction to

their work, Hutchinson and Smith list six indicia by which one may determine ethnic identity, either for oneself or for another:

1) a common *proper name*, to identify and express the ‘essence’ of the community; 2) a myth of *common ancestry*...that includes the idea of a common origin in time and place and...gives...a sense of fictive kinship; 3) shared *historical memories*, or...shared memories of a common past...including heroes, events, and their commemoration; 4) one or more *elements of a common culture*, which need not be specified but normally include religion, customs, or language; 5) a *link* with a *homeland*, not necessarily its physical occupation...only its symbolic attachment...as with Diaspora peoples; 6) a *sense of solidarity* on the part of at least some sections of the...population.⁵

It is important for our purposes to note in particular the fourth indicia, a common culture, under which Hutchinson and Smith include (though they note that it does not necessarily need to be included here) “religion.” As we shall see, I do not feel religion should be included in this category when speaking of the Greco-Roman world; I will return to this later.

These indicia have been adapted and applied by various scholars in various ways. They are, of course, not fixed; Hutchinson and Smith have in fact purposefully left room for adaptations to be made, as noted in their fourth indicia. I maintain that over time, the applications of these criteria shift, while as one examines a particular case, they become fixed. Though many scholars have discussed the ethnic identities of various groups throughout history, we shall here examine only two of them: Gregory Smoak’s study of 19th century Native American ethnicity, and Philip F. Esler’s study of ethnicity in the Greco-Roman world.

In *Ghost Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century*, Gregory Smoak examines the emergence of a religious movement among

the Native American Newe peoples, the Bannock and Shoshone tribes. After briefly citing the above indicia from Hutchinson and Smith, Smoak notes that “[t]he continuity of any ethnic group...depends on maintaining a boundary between it and other groups...,” and that “...ethnic-boundary maintenance was not dependent on isolation but rather on social interaction...between ethnic groups.”⁶ Smoak effectively adds a seventh indicia to our list: interaction with outsiders. He notes that “[b]efore contact, American Indian peoples did not possess a shared identity, racial or otherwise,”⁷ and that “...all of these groups were of the same ‘nation,’ and they came together in large groups first and foremost for defense”⁸ against other hostile Native American groups. Smoak details later in his book how the threat of cultural annihilation and assimilation by European Americans through the so-called “Indian schools” led to “an identity that could encompass [their] ethnic and tribal differences,”⁹ and which ultimately helped create a pan-Indian identity. Religion, in this case that of the Ghost Dance, develops from this identity, as an expression of it; it is not, in and of itself, the means by which boundaries are established. Rather, it is but an expression of identity developed within existing ethnic boundaries. Smoak has adapted the indicia given by Hutchinson and Smith to the particular case of the Native American tribes in the 19th century. Esler, in his discussion of ethnic identity in *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter*, similarly adapts these indicia, with a different emphasis applied to a different time.

The situation to which Esler applies Hutchinson and Smith’s criteria is that of Paul and the Romans in the first century CE. In his application, Esler establishes something of a hierarchy among the indicia, stating that “the most widespread of these features is the myth of common ancestry,” and that “the second most common feature is...connection with a homeland.”¹⁰ Later

in his book, Esler also notes that, at least in the case of Romans ascribing ethnic identity to others, “the key element relied on was...their primary language.”¹¹ Thus, if one primarily spoke Greek, one was a Greek in the view of the Romans. I part ways with Esler, however, in his statement that “religion is often one element in ethnic identity, although it is unhelpful to exaggerate its importance,”¹² especially given his following discussion and the time period which it addresses. Esler sets out to demonstrate that Paul is the bearer of “multiple” or “nested” identities, feeling some claim to more than one ethnic identity, and demonstrating various facets of these identities as different situations required adaptation.¹³ For the purposes of Esler’s argument, it is perhaps beneficial to downplay the important, almost primary role that religion played in determining ethnicity. However, since, as Esler notes, “one needs to observe the boundaries that the group in question relies on to distinguish itself from other groups,”¹⁴ we will see that religion plays a vital role in the establishment and maintenance of these boundaries in the first century CE. In fact, in this context religion becomes the primary distinguishing boundary. By the first century CE, distinct cultures had become so Hellenized as to be subsumed into Greco-Roman culture. Jonathan Hall’s discussion of Greek culture and ethnicity demonstrates that, contrary to Esler’s view, religion becomes the sole distinguishing factor between peoples of the first century.

From Exclusive Ethnicity to Universal Culture

Like Esler, Hall has argued for a concept of “multiple” identities among the Ancient Greeks (Esler, in his work, actually cites Hall). In *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*, he observes that members of a Greek city-state (e.g., Athens, Thebes, or Sparta) could also belong to one of the “intrahellenic” ethnic identities of Ionian, Dorian, Aiolian and Akhaian.¹⁵ An excellent example

of these identities within identities in Greek antiquity may be found in the writings of the historian Herodotus. In his *Histories*, which deals mostly with the attempted Persian conquest of Greece in the fifth century BCE, Herodotus lists those gathered at Thermopylae to repel Xerxes' forces as follows: Spartans; Tegeans; Mantineans; Arcadians; Corinthians; Phlians; Mycenaeans, Peloponnesians; Boetians; Thespians; Thebans; Locrians; Phocians; and Athenians (*Histories* 7.138-239).¹⁶ Each of these groups represents an ethnic subgroup within the larger Greek identity, which is itself suggested later in *Histories* when Herodotus describes the Athenian explanation to Spartans for rejecting an offer of peace from Xerxes, king of Persia, before the battle of Plataea in 479 BCE: "Then there is *the Greek people*, which has *the same blood* and *the same language*, together with *the common cult places, the sacrifices and the similar customs*, which it *would be ignoble* for Athens to betray" (8.144, my emphases). Here, one finds several of the criteria of ethnic identity discussed above: a proper name ("the Greek people"); a sense of kinship ("which has the same blood"); a common culture, which in this case includes religion ("the same language...common cult places, ...sacrifices and...similar customs"); and a sense of solidarity against a foreign entity ("which it would be ignoble for Athens to betray [to the Persians]"). The remaining indicia are implied in this passage, those being a link to a common homeland (in the name for the people, i.e., Greece and Greek, *Hellas* and *Hellenes*), and a common history (in the name, ancestry and culture of the Greeks). Thus, one ethnic subgroup, the Athenians, is explaining to another, the Spartans, that they are allies because they are all Greeks. This, however, is an example of ethnic identity determination from a specific time, the fifth century BCE; our examination is of ethnic identity in the first century CE. Greek ethnicity did not continue to be defined in the same way in the first century, and in fact, Hall himself suggests that Greek ethnic definition changed over time.

In *Hellenicity*, Hall traces the development of Greek ethnic identity from the fifth to the first century BCE, and suggests that it evolves from an exclusive ethnicity to an inclusive culture. By the end of the fifth century BCE we can see in the writings of Isocrates that the definition of “Greekness” was beginning to change:

And so far has our city distanced the rest of mankind in thought and in speech that her pupils have become the teachers of the rest of the world; and she has brought it about that the name ‘Hellenes’ suggests no longer a race but an intelligence, and that the title ‘Hellenes’ is applied rather to those who share our culture than to those who share a common blood.”
(*Panegyricus* 50)¹⁷

Contrary to Herodotus’ list of what makes one an ethnic Greek, Isocrates has applied the name “Greek” to “those who share” Greek culture, rather than those who share Greek blood or descent. Within a century of this writing, Philip II of Macedonia would unite the disparate Greek city-states under his rule, and his son Alexander the Great would proceed to conquer most of the Mediterranean region around Greece. This, Hall believes, began in earnest the transition from Greek ethnicity to Greek culture.¹⁸ By the first century BCE, “the...literary critic and historian Dionysios of Halikarnassos (*Roman Antiquities* 1.89.4) defined Hellenicity...as speaking the Greek language..., having a Greek way of life..., acknowledging the same gods and having fitting, reasonable laws.”¹⁹ As Alexander and the Greeks conquered and settled throughout the Mediterranean, the different peoples they encountered and ruled over began to adopt features of the Greek way of life; Greek became the common spoken language; Greek laws were put into effect throughout the world; and the philosophical and intellectual prominence of the Greeks was taken up by others. The only feature of the Greek way of life that did not become almost universal throughout the conquered areas was Greek religion. As portrayed in *Roman Antiquities*, religion became the primary way that other groups kept themselves distinguished

from the Greeks; as seen above, “acknowledging the same gods” was part of being, ethnically, a Greek. Perhaps the best example of this available to us from antiquity is the Jewish people, who kept themselves distinguished from the dominant groups around them for centuries. They are particularly germane to our discussion, given that Christians in the first century CE are often viewed merely as a sect of Judaism; by demonstrating a clear ethnic, i.e., religious identity for the Jews, we will also observe such an identity for the Christians.

Following his death, Alexander’s empire was divided among his generals into several kingdoms. Judaea came first under the control of the Ptolemy kingdom, based in Egypt, and later, that of the Seleucid Empire of Syria. Based on Alexander’s policy of religious tolerance, the Jews enjoyed many years of peace and freedom in which to practice their traditions. In 167 BCE, Antiochus IV of Syria tried to suppress the religious practices of the Jews, and to dedicate the Jerusalem Temple to Zeus, head of the Greek pantheon.²⁰ The Jewish revolt that followed, led by the Maccabees, demonstrates how important religious distinction was to the Jews; they were ultimately successful, and allowed to continue their traditional religious practices. Jewish resistance to religious incorporation continued following the Roman conquest of Judaea in 63 BCE. However, despite the fact that the Jews resisted the religions of the dominant culture around them (note the singular, culture), all Jews in the Greco-Roman world were influenced by Hellenistic culture to one degree or another; as Hall demonstrated, it was encountered by everyone in the Mediterranean in their daily lives.²¹ Greek continued to be the common vernacular under Roman rule, imperial law was enforced by Greco-Roman officials, and the Romans continued Alexander’s policy of religious tolerance, allowing the Jews to maintain their community boundaries through their sacred traditions.²²

Moving into the first century CE, Hellenistic influence can be seen in two of the most prominent Jewish writers of the time, Flavius Josephus and Philo Judaeus. Writing during the latter half of the first century CE, Josephus “was characteristically an advocate of Hellenistic culture, yet...was also a vigorous defender of Judaism.”²³ A native of Judaea, he participated as a military leader in the Jewish revolt against Rome between 66-70 CE, when he was captured by the Roman forces. Following Vespasian’s rise to imperial power, Josephus began to write his famous works, *Jewish Antiquities* and *The Jewish War*. That he was a native of Judaea, and yet wrote entirely in Greek, speaks volumes about the heavy influence of Hellenism over the region. Philo Judaeus, on the other hand, was a Diaspora Jew, and the leader of a large Jewish community in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, named after Alexander the Great and a center of vast Hellenistic influence and culture. Writing in the early-to-mid-first century CE, Philo, like Josephus, was an apologist for Judaism to the larger Greco-Roman world; in his work *Legatio ad Gaium*, Philo details the delegation of Alexandrian Jews he led to the Emperor Gaius Caligula to sue for Jewish rights. However, “unlike Josephus, who was a Jew attracted to the Hellenistic culture of Rome, Philo was a thoroughly Hellenized citizen of cosmopolitan Alexandria who was also a Jew.” So great are both the Jewish and Hellenistic aspects of Philo’s writings that one scholar, Ellen Birnbaum, has gone so far as to write that “[s]o prominent is the mix of Greek and Jewish elements in his works that scholars have often debated whether Philo was more a Greek or a Jew.”²⁴ This blurred distinction is not unique to Philo, but can be applied to nearly all Diaspora Jews; Hall, near the end of his discussion about ethnicity and culture, observes that

“[t]he Jews of Egypt represent an interesting case. In some respects they were barely distinguishable from Hellenes, especially with regard to language.... In others - notably religious profession and the preservation of specific customs such as observance of the Sabbath, dietary laws,

circumcision and pilgrimage to Jerusalem - they maintained a fairly distinct identity.”²⁵

Note that each of the “notable” differences Hall lists as allowing the Jews to maintain a “distinct identity” are aspects of Jewish religion: Sabbath observance, dietary laws, circumcision and pilgrimage all find their sources in Hebrew Scripture. John M. G. Barclay creates a similar list to describe “the bond which held Jews together” as a community: “aniconic monotheism,” circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath observance.²⁶ Similarly, Stanley lists several of the indicia laid out by Hutchinson and Smith, and adds to his list of “regularly used boundary markers” a “physical difference that sets groups members apart from others,”²⁷ before applying it to the Jews. He writes that for both Diaspora and Palestinian Jews, there was a sense that they were “a *single people* united by a *common history* and a *shared culture* (derived for the most part from their sacred Scriptures), and set apart from their neighbors by the *physical mark* of circumcision.”²⁸ In discussing what is commonly referred to as Jewish “cultural” identity, scholars consistently cite these criteria as “cultural” features which are used to identify Jewish ethnicity. However, these “cultural” features were not cultural at all for the Jews, who participated in Hellenistic culture: Greek language, philosophy, government, and society. The so-called “cultural” features of Judaism which are used to distinguish ethnic Jews from ethnic non-Jews at this time are, in fact, all religious customs or practices, though this is often overlooked. Even those scholars who acknowledge the key role religion plays in determining ethnic identity seem hesitant to draw this distinction between “culture” and “religion” in the Greco-Roman world.

Perhaps the best understanding of the ethnic as religious identity of the early Christians can be found in Denise Kimber Buell's book, *Why This New Race*. Citing many Christian authors, Buell demonstrates that Christians thought of themselves as a distinct ethnic group based on their religious beliefs; she even notes that, according to the second century CE *Epistle to Diognetus*, "...language, customs, and place of residence (if not origin)...fail to determine Christian difference...."²⁹ Instead, it is the religious beliefs of the Christians that distinguish them from other groups. Buell, however, rejects the notion that culture and ethnicity may be distinguished from each other. She states that her "approach to race/ethnicity as dynamic concepts calls into question any sharp distinction between ethnicity/race and 'cultural identity,'" and that her investigation will "analyze ethnicity/race under the broader umbrella of cultural identity."³⁰ I agree whole-heartedly with Buell's view of ethnicity being in large part determined by religious identity, and to some degree with her view of the fixity and fluidity of ethnic/religious identity. As we have seen, the criteria for determining ethnic identity are not fixed; Stanley, Smoak and Esler have each applied the indicia discussed above in different ways to create a portrait of ethnic identity in different situations, and even add their own aspects to the list. I disagree, however, with her stance on the inseparability of culture and religion.

We have also seen that in the Greco-Roman world, Greek ethnicity had evolved into the common culture; thus, to speak of a distinct culture in terms other than religious would be incorrect, and to speak of religion as inseparable from culture at this time would be equally incorrect. The Jews, whether living in Palestine or in Diaspora, participated in Greco-Roman culture while actively maintaining distinct boundaries around their community through entirely religious means. I am not suggesting, as Buell worries, that "Greekness becomes a cultural identity and

ceases to be conceivable as an ethnoracial identity.”³¹ A study of the ethnic identity of first century CE Greeks would, no doubt, provide us a portrait of a distinct Greek ethnicity within the widespread culture of the Greco-Roman world, much as our examination of first century Jews has; indeed, Dionysios’ inclusion of worshiping Greek gods in his list of Greek ethnic criteria suggests that religion was also the primary means to determine Greek ethnicity. Our examination now shifts from first century Jewish ethnic identity to the ethnic identity of the emerging Christian movement for the third part of this paper. Can we demonstrate a clear Christian ethnic identity in the first century CE, bearing in mind that ethnic identity is, in the context of the unicultural Greco-Roman world, religious identity, and the prominent Jewish themes found in Christian beliefs? Any such study of early Christianity would fall short if it did not address the writings of Christianity’s most famous author, Paul.

This is, perhaps, the source of my greatest disagreement with Buell’s work on early Christian identity; while she provides a very thorough examination of early Christian texts from “the historical period before the legalization of Christianity in 313 CE,”³² few of her sources are from the first century CE, and none of Paul’s writings are addressed in a meaningful way. However, there is plenty of scholarship available on Paul and his epistles, and an examination of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church will demonstrate not only that Paul is reacting against Jewish and Greco-Roman religious rather than cultural differences, as is often suggested, but also that, in doing so, he is creating a distinct Christian ethnic identity. If we examine the Christian community in light of the indicia listed by Hutchinson and Smith, we find that it is almost impossible to apply any of them outside of a religious context: 1) a common proper name, Christian, is derived from the title “Christ,” applied to the central figure of Christian religion,

Jesus; 2) a myth of common ancestry is mostly absent from early Christianity,³³ unless, of course, one assumes that early Christians considered Jesus, again a religious figure, to be an ancestor; 3) shared historical memories are absent from the Christian community, whose members were drawn from many different backgrounds, though the memory of Christ's crucifixion may again place this criterion spelling change squarely in the religious realm; 4) elements of a common culture we have already discussed, and I state again that religion was the key feature here, which Paul addresses in his writings; 5) there is no purely Christian homeland to which the Christians, each coming from different traditions, might feel a connection; and 6) a sense of communal solidarity, if not present already within the Christians, is something that Paul is trying to create by emphasizing the uniqueness of Christianity's religious beliefs, particularly in 1 Corinthians. For the purposes of this paper, I will address only a few sections of 1 Corinthians which illustrate Paul's reaction against the Greco-Roman and Jewish religions of either his followers or the larger Greco-Roman society, or in which Paul demonstrates a clear Christian religious, i.e., ethnic identity. These are: 1 Corinthians 6:1-11; 8:4-8; 7:18-19; 1:22-24; and 15.

1 Corinthians and Christian Identity

In the first half of 1 Corinthians 6, Paul advises the Corinthian Christian community that, should any arguments arise between members, they should be settled among the community and not in the Corinthian courts. I admit, on first reading this section of the letter, it appears to be a warning not against Greco-Roman religion, but against participation in the legal aspect of Greco-Roman culture in Corinth, and thus the Roman Empire. This, of course, runs counter to my argument. However, a thorough understanding of Greco-Roman religion reveals that the courts

of the Roman Empire were, in fact, part of the religious system. Indeed, there was very little about Greco-Roman culture that was not, in some way, religious. As Edward Gibbon notes:

“The religion of the nations was not merely a speculative doctrine professed in the schools or preached in the temples. The innumerable deities and rites of polytheism were closely interwoven with every circumstance of business or pleasure, of public or of private life; and it seemed impossible to escape the observance of them, without, at the same time, renouncing...all the offices and amusements of society.”³⁴

The Roman Empire, and Greco-Roman society in general, participated in an elaborate system of patronage with the Emperor at its head; the lower class of citizens sought benefits from the higher class, who sought benefits from government officials, who sought benefits directly from the Emperor, and all of whom required some sort of service from those beneath them seeking benefits.³⁵ To be influential in the Greco-Roman world, one had to participate in this patronage system. This applied to the court system as well; as Dale B. Martin observes in *The Corinthian Body*, in order for a lower class citizen (of whom, presumably, the Corinthian church was primarily comprised) to bring a case before the courts of Corinth, they would need the support of a higher-status patron.³⁶ This does not at first suggest the involvement of Greco-Roman religion, but the patronage system, with the Emperor as its head, was religious through and through. The first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, was a religious as well as political leader. In addition to revitalizing a lagging Roman religion, Augustus also “eagerly accepted the post” of *pontifex maximus*, or chief pontiff, upon the death of his former triumvir Lepidus, who had previously held the position.³⁷ Each emperor following Augustus would hold the position of *pontifex maximus*, and even in the time of Augustus (and certainly by the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians, during the reign of either Claudius or Nero³⁸), emperor deification and worship had

become common throughout the Mediterranean. The Roman Empire was, for all intents and purposes, a theocracy, wherein the head of the state was also the head of the religious system. The role of the emperor as head of the patronage system tacitly required some profession of Greco-Roman religious beliefs in order to participate in patronage. It is this religious aspect of the courts and the patronage system against which Paul is writing in 1 Cor. 6:1-11, rather than against the laws of the Greco-Roman culture; Paul at no point urges the Corinthian Christians to break the laws of the Empire. I am not suggesting, in light of the religious role of the pervasive patronage system and Gibbon's observation that Greco-Roman religion played a role in most aspects of Greco-Roman life, that Paul intended the churches he founded to be a completely isolated unit; that would be implausible. I am instead suggesting that Paul urged his followers to avoid unnecessary contact with Greco-Roman religion. By urging the Corinthians to settle disputes among themselves, Paul is attempting to minimize this contact; it is not necessary for them to engage each other in the legal system, because they are capable of settling disputes within the church community. Turning now to 1 Cor. 8:4-8, we find a more obvious reaction against both Greco-Roman and Jewish religions in Paul's discussion of eating food sacrificed to idols.

Paul begins with a forceful statement, professing a commonly held Jewish belief: "...we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one" (NIV 1 Cor. 8:4).³⁹ By stating that "an idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "there is no God but one," Paul is rejecting the entirety of Greco-Roman religion which was filled with statues and idols used to represent various deities, and sometimes thought to be divine themselves. He seems to be upholding Jewish religion while he tears down Greco-Roman religion, professing ideas found in

the Hebrew Scriptures.⁴⁰ But as one continues through the text, it becomes clear that this is not the case. He writes: "...food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, no better if we do" (1 Cor. 8:8). His point in saying this is that food sacrificed to Greco-Roman gods may be eaten by Jews because, as stated, those gods are nothing in the world (1 Cor. 8:4-6). In addition to this rejection of Greco-Roman religion, Paul is also discarding space the dietary laws of Jewish religion. Drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures,⁴¹ these religious dietary practices represented one way the Jews were able to establish ethnic boundaries from the Greco-Romans; Paul is removing these boundaries by rejecting the religious traditions which constructed them. Paul also rejects perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Judaism in the Greco-Roman world, the practice of male circumcision.

In the first century CE, circumcision was yet another way for the Jews to distinguish themselves from their Greco-Roman neighbors, an obvious, physical way, as Stanley notes above in his three indicia of ethnic identity. Paul, himself a Jew, addresses the issue of circumcision in several of his letters,⁴² each time insisting that Gentile converts to Christianity need not submit to the Jewish practice of circumcision. However, 1 Corinthians features what may be Paul's strongest statement against the practice of circumcision: "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything" (1 Cor 7:19). It has been suggested that this statement is Paul's attempt to discourage the participation of Corinthian Christians in the gymnasium and synagogue, both social institutions in the ancient world of Greco-Roman and Jewish society, respectively, and to focus on their membership in the Christian community, as in Brad Ronnel Braxton's article "The Role of Ethnicity in the Social Location of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24."⁴³ There is much to be said for this argument, given the

particular attention that is paid to the Greco-Roman context of Paul's writings; I agree with Braxton's sentiment that Paul "de-emphasizes Greek and Jewish ethnicity with respect to the identity that really matters, namely being a Christians....".⁴⁴ However, as many of the authors surveyed here, Braxton overlooks the distinct rejection of Jewish religion in Paul's statement that "circumcision is nothing." Stemming from the Genesis account of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17), circumcision was and remains today a key religious practice in Judaism; in the first century CE, it was a mark of one's membership in the Jewish ethnicity/religion.⁴⁵ Even in Diaspora communities like Corinth, circumcision and other religious traditions were rigorously upheld. As Larry Hurtado notes, "...there were plenty of Roman-era Jews who were ready to negotiate their lives in various Diaspora settings with a firm commitment to their ethnic and religious particularity as Jews, and they were prepared to advocate and defend their traditions vigorously."⁴⁶ By claiming that "circumcision is nothing," Paul is de-emphasizing Jewish ethnicity by de-emphasizing this important aspect of Jewish religion. Further, he claims that "uncircumcision is nothing," stressing that previous religious affiliation, whether it did or did not require circumcision.

Despite his firm foundation in Jewish tradition, evident throughout his letters,⁴⁷ Paul displays a distinct Christian religious/ethnic identity in 1 Corinthians. There are numerous references to the primacy of God in the letter, a distinctly Jewish theology, which suggest that Paul's new Christian identity may merely be a sect of Judaism, from which it emerged. However, the nature of these monotheistic references is distinctly non-Jewish. Take, for example, Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 1:22-24: "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God

has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” By equating Christ with God, Paul proclaims a religious view which is very contradictory to the commandment “I am the Lord your God.... You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:2-3). There are many examples of this motif throughout 1 Corinthians, but the most striking may be found in Paul’s discussion of resurrection in chapter 15. Here, Paul makes it very clear that Christ, as God, is the savior of the world, and through Him believers will live forever. Paul’s theology is set apart from Judaism by the simple fact that Paul’s theology equates Christ with God, ascribing to Christ those things (i.e., salvation, resurrection) which are, in Judaism, ascribed only to God.⁴⁸ This clearly demonstrates that Christianity has a distinct religious identity in the first century CE, which is distinct from Judaism. In light of this discussion, Paul has demonstrated that Christians have a clear ethnic identity at this time, as well.

In Conclusion

Ethnicity, as stated, is all about boundaries. They separate one group or individual from another, and provide members of that identity a unique place in relation to those around them. But there is no one universal way to determine or describe ethnicity; the way in which Ancient Greeks determined ethnicity is very different from the way 19th century Native Americans determined identity, which is in turn very different from the way in which we, today, determine ethnicity. However, though the application may change, the criteria by which ethnicity is determined remain the same. The list provided by Hutchinson and Smith, and adapted by Stanley, Smoak, Esler and others is evidence that the criteria must be applied in different ways to different periods

of time and different situations. In the first century CE context of the Greco-Roman world, the primary means by which to establish boundaries, and thus ethnicities, was through religious identity.

Paul, throughout his writings, emphasizes his desire for Christians to live within the world, but to be a distinct community. As we have seen, he is tearing down existing religious boundaries, while at the same time erecting new boundaries around the new religious/ethnic identity of Christianity. Without this destruction and construction of religious/ethnic boundaries, Christianity would have been indistinguishable from Judaism, from which it emerged, and the traditions of the Greco-Roman world, into which it was born. Though in the modern world religion does not play as important a role in determining ethnicity,⁴⁹ once again emphasizing the shifting nature of ethnic determination, ignoring its important role in ancient ethnic identification glosses the important role religion has played throughout history.

I must conclude this examination with a brief note regarding the New Perspective on Paul. This began in the late 1970s with the work of E. P. Sanders, and furthered by the scholarship of, notably, N. T. Wright and James D. G. Dunn,⁵⁰ this new perspective challenges the long held notion that Paul portrays Judaism as little more than a set of laws that cannot bring true salvation, which is only gained through Christ. Dunn is perhaps the most provocative of early New Perspective scholars, observing that Paul has both positive and negative things to say regarding the law, and that his true objection is to the use of the law as a social barrier to others:

'Works of law'...are nowhere understood here, either by his Jewish interlocutors or by Paul himself, as works which *earn* God's favor, as

merit-amassing observances. They are rather seen as *badges*: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God's people;...in other words, Paul has in view precisely what Sanders calls 'covenantal nomism.' And what he denies is that God's justification depends on 'covenantal nomism,' that God's grace extends only to those who wear the badge of the covenant.⁵¹

There is, then, some overlap between the New Perspective and my position presented above; both deal with the breaking down of social or, as I have argued, religious barriers, and both seek to better understand the original meaning of Paul's writings comma delete within the historical context of the Greco-Roman world. I, however, maintain that while Paul sought to make people of all ethnic, that is, religious backgrounds equal before God through Christ, he did this by deconstructing old and erecting new religious boundaries. The New Perspective continues to be an important point of scholarship regarding Paul, his meaning and methods. These methods, of course, need not be continued today; as discussed, the fluidity of ethnicity and the influence of religion has changed over time. What was true then may not be true now. But overlooking, intentionally or unintentionally, the religious distinctions of the ancient world also overlooks the lessons such distinctions may teach us.

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¹Christopher D. Stanley, "A Baptismal Formula for Racial and Ethnic Justice," in *Biblical Studies Alternatively: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Susanne Scholz (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2003), 179.

²"Roman Empire" is used to mean the period from 31 BCE, when Octavian defeated Antony at Actium and claimed imperial power as Caesar Augustus, until the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century CE. Any references to the Roman state prior to 31 BCE will be rendered "the Roman Republic."

³Similarly, "Greco-Roman" in this sense refers to the time period during which Hellenic influence was at its peak, between the conquest of the Mediterranean by Alexander of Macedonia in the mid-fourth century BCE, until the fall of the Roman empire in the fifth century CE.

⁴Contrary to the more common view that it was not until the second, third, or even fourth century when such an identity may be discerned. For perhaps the most prominent of the recent scholarship on this, see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁵John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5–6.

⁶Gregory E. Smoak, *Ghost Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 6.

⁷Smoak, *Ghost Dances*, 7.

⁸Smoak, *Ghost Dances*, 34.

⁹Smoak, *Ghost Dances*, 113.

¹⁰Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 44.

¹¹Esler, *Conflict*, 58.

¹²Esler, *Conflict*, 44.

¹³Esler, *Conflict*, 40–76.

¹⁴Esler, *Conflict*, 44.

¹⁵Jonathan M. Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 7 See also: Esler, *Conflict*, 56.

¹⁶All quotes from Herodotus' *Histories* are taken from the Loeb Classical Library series, translated by A. D. Goodley: Herodotus, *Histories* (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1982).

¹⁷Taken from the Loeb Classical Library series: George Norlin, trans., *Isocrates* (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1966)

¹⁸Jonathan M. Hall, *Hellenicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 220.

¹⁹Hall, *Hellenicity*, 224.

²⁰Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 103.

²¹John M. G. Barclay, "Neither Jew Nor Greek': Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul," in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., 1996), 209.

²²For a thorough examination of the religious traditions of the Roman Empire, see R. M. Ogilvie, *The Romans and Their Gods in the Age of Augustus* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969).

²³Luther H. Martin, *Religions*, 104.

²⁴Ellen Birnbaum, "Philo on the Greeks: A Jewish Perspective on Culture and Society in First-Century Alexandria," *The Studia Philonica Annual XIII* (2001): 38.

²⁵Hall, *Hellenicity*, 222.

²⁶Barclay, "Multiculturalism," 209.

²⁷Stanley, “Baptismal Formula,” 180.

²⁸Stanley, “Baptismal Formula,” 180.

²⁹The citation here is from Buell herself; she follows this statement with a supporting quote from *Ep. Diog.* 5.1-2. Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race? Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 31.

³⁰Buell, *New Race*, 44–45.

³¹Buell, *New Race*, 45.

³²Buell, *New Race*, 169.

³³Paul’s citation of Abraham as an exemplar of faith in Romans 4 is not, I believe, an attempt to convince Gentile converts that Abraham is their ancestor; rather, it is an attempt to convince Jewish converts that, because of Abraham’s faith, salvation is open to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike.

³⁴Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: The Modern Library, 1949), 396.

³⁵John K. Chow, “Patronage in Roman Corinth,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity International, 1997), 105.

³⁶Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 76–79.

³⁷H. J. Rose, *Religion in Greece and Rome* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 255 See also Ogilvie, *Gods*, 112–23.

³⁸Kenneth Barker, gen. ed., *The New International Version Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 1734.

³⁹Henceforth, all Biblical quotations are taken from Barker, *NIV*.

⁴⁰Cf. Exodus 20:1-6

⁴¹For the dietary laws, cf.: Lev. 11:3, 9, 13-19, 22, 29-30, 42-43; Deut. 14:6, 9, 11-18.

⁴²Of the 13 New Testament writings attributed to Paul, seven are considered to be “almost certainly authentic.” These are Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Of these seven, Paul discusses circumcision in some way in four: Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians and Philemon. Additionally, among the “possibly pseudonymous” Deutero-Pauline Epistles (Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians), Paul discusses circumcision in Colossians. Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 243.

⁴³Brad Ronnell Braxton, “The Role of Ethnicity in the Social Location of 1 Corinthians 7:17–24,” in *Yet With a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Randall C. Bailey (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 21–22, 26–28.

⁴⁴Braxton, “Social Location,” 28.

⁴⁵It should be noted that many ethnic groups in antiquity practiced circumcision; it was not the sole purview of the Jews, but practiced also by the Egyptians, and the descendants of Ishmael who would become the Arabs. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., trans. and ed., *The Anchor Bible: Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 379.

⁴⁶Larry W. Hurtado, "Does Philo Help Explain Early Christianity?" in *Philo und das Neue Testament*, ed. Roland Deines and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 84.

⁴⁷This is unquestioned by scholars; Paul's writings are littered with direct references and allusions to the Hebrew Bible.

⁴⁸Larry Hurtado makes a similar argument regarding Revelation 4-5, noting that it is "...the fact that worship is directed both to God and to the Lamb..." rather than God alone, that marks this particular part of the text as distinctly Christian. The same argument clearly applies to Paul's writings. Larry W. Hurtado, "Revelation 4-5 in the Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Analogies," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 25 (1985): 116.

⁴⁹This is not to say, of course, that religion plays no role in ethnic identification today. For example, adherents to Islam and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Muslims and Mormons, often apply religious tenants to distinguish themselves from others. In the vernacular of LDS Christians, non-members of the church are known as "Gentiles."

⁵⁰It was Dunn who coined the term "the new perspective on Paul" in a lecture, reprinted as chapter 7 of James D. G. Dunn, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983).

⁵¹Dunn, *Law*, 194.