

Judaean Ethnicity and Christ-following Voluntarism?

A Reply to Steve Mason and Philip Esler*

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In *NTS* 63 (2017), Steve Mason and Philip Esler responded to an earlier article of mine by setting out their grounds for a categorical distinction between Judaean ‘ethnic’ identity and Christ-following voluntary association and by rejecting the idea that drawing this contrast could reflect or legitimate modern notions of implicit Christian superiority. In this reply, intended to clarify the issues at stake and the grounds for disagreement, questions are first raised about various aspects of the approach to ethnicity that Mason and Esler adopt, illustrating the main points with brief examples from relevant texts and contemporary scholarship. Specifically, I consider the value of multiple rather than singular categorisations, the idea that ethnicity should be seen as multiple, fluid and hybrid in character, the relationship between ethnicity and religion, and the contrast between real and fictive kinship. Finally, I return to the issue of the ways in which scholarship may reflect its contexts of production and the need to probe this critically, offering specific illustrations of the reasons for my claims. Whether my particular suggestions concerning the implications of the dichotomy between Judaean/Jewish ethnicity and ‘trans-ethnic’ Christian identity are right or wrong, I argue for the importance of critical reflection on the impact of contemporary location on historical reconstruction.

Keywords: ethnicity, Judaean/Jewish identity, early Christian identity, ethnic hybridity, ethnic fluidity, religion, kinship, contemporary ideologies

* I am very grateful to John Barclay, Denise Kimber Buell, Teresa Morgan, and Matthew Thiessen for comments on a draft of this essay. I would like to stress, however, that their willingness to comment does not imply agreement with my position nor any particular stance on this broader area of debate. Responsibility for the arguments made and any weaknesses or errors remains mine alone. I would also like to express my thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK for their support of the research project on which this essay draws (grant reference AH-M009149/1).

In a recent issue of *NTS*, Steve Mason and Philip Esler present a weighty and substantial case for drawing a clear category-distinction between ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower identities’: the former is that of an ethnic group, the latter that of a voluntary association.¹ Since their essay is framed directly as a response to an earlier essay of mine, it invites a reply.² In offering one, I have tried to avoid simply reiterating earlier arguments, and have concentrated instead on trying to highlight key issues which I see as crucial in this debate. Before I turn directly to these issues, however, I want to clarify two points by way of introduction.

First, I should make clear that I did not – and do not – dispute that ancient Judaism (or Judaean identity, if one prefers)³ may be seen as a kind of ethnic identity (though as we shall see, what we might mean by that is open to more discussion). It is, as Mason and Esler richly document, indisputable that both Jewish and non-Jewish authors frequently and standardly depict this group as a ‘people’ – an *ἔθνος* or *γένος* – with ancestral customs and norms, distinctive cultural and religious practices, a link with a particular territory, and so on. Equally, I did not claim that early Christianity should be seen as constituting ‘an ethnic group’, although I did point to certain ‘ethnicising’ tendencies in both discourse and practice, that suggest some impulses in the direction of ‘becoming a people’ – again, the phrasing may indicate in advance how I think the categories of ‘ethnic’ and ‘non-ethnic’ need to be problematized and differently conceptualised.⁴ (Since the New Testament texts I focus on deal with issues such as the

¹ Steve Mason and Philip. F. Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities: Grounds for a Distinction’, *NTS* 63 (2017): 493-515.

² David G. Horrell, ‘Ethnicisation, Marriage, and Early Christian Identity: Critical Reflections on 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Peter 3, and Modern New Testament Scholarship’, *NTS* 62 (2016): 439-60. Although Mason and Esler present their essay as a contribution ‘to the larger debate about “ethnic reasoning” in ancient Christianity’ their main focus is on responding to my essay, though they list in a note some other major works in this area (Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 495 with n. 8; cf. Horrell, ‘Ethnicization’, 444 nn. 16-17)

³ I do not want to enter the debate about the best translation of *Ioudaios* here, since this would require another lengthy consideration, though see the literature cited in n. 72 below. I retain the established convention of using ‘Jew’ and ‘Judaism’ partly as a default position, and partly due to a sense that the ‘religious’ and ‘ethnic’ dimensions of this identity cannot easily be pulled apart – on which see further below. I also retain the default language of ‘Christian’, ‘Christianity’, etc.

⁴ So Horrell, ‘Ethnicization’, 458: ‘We should not, however, hastily and simplistically conclude that early Christian identity “is” therefore “ethnic”, or that the early Christian groups were “ethnic groups”; such box-like categorisation is unlikely to be either cogent or illuminating. Indeed... it is much

passing on of Christian identity from parents to children, the household as the focus for nurturing the next generation in the faith, and the construction of a Christian ‘way of life’, I find it difficult to see how these *particular* texts can be seen as ‘preoccupied with the imminent overturning of this world and the creation of a new one... hard to square with an ethnicising Christ-movement settling down in the world’, however much that characterisation might broadly capture the orientation of at least the very earliest Christian movement.⁵) To some extent, then, we seem to be talking past each other; there do indeed seem to be failures of communication.⁶ What I did question, following Denise Kimber Buell and others on this point⁷ – and here we come closer to the heart of our disagreement – is the drawing of a clear and categorical distinction, a ‘dichotomy’, between Judaeon ethnicity and early Christian voluntarism. It is precisely this distinction that Mason and Esler want to defend.

Secondly, it is clear from Mason and Esler’s essay that the particular provocation for their response was my suggestion that the tendency to draw a sharp categorical dichotomy between Jewish/Judaeon ethnicity and Christian trans-ethnic inclusiveness might have some connection with the location of that (long) scholarly tradition within the white, Christian West, and with the particular ideology of implicit Christian superiority combined with ‘tolerant’ inclusion promoted in that context.⁸ My inclusion of their works among a series of selected ‘landmarks’ to illustrate the tendency to draw that dichotomy is a specific cause of amazement.⁹ I was careful in my article to frame these claims tentatively, and to associate them with a broad scholarly tradition rather than

more likely that the categories are fuzzy and overlapping: ethnic, religious, cultural and social facets of group-identity intersect in complex ways. What is more relevant is the conclusion that in both discursive and practical ways, the texts we have examined indicate how ethnic categories and features are deployed in the construction of Christian group-identity and that it is apposite to speak of this identity-construction as in some respects a form of ethnicisation, “the making of a people”.’

⁵ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaeon and Christ-Follower Identities’, 495.

⁶ Cf. Mason and Esler, ‘Judaeon and Christ-Follower Identities’, 494: ‘Evidently communication has failed.’

⁷ See esp. Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), a work which has influenced a series of further studies, cf. n. 2 above.

⁸ Cf. Horrell, ‘Ethnicization’, 459-60; Mason and Esler, ‘Judaeon and Christ-Follower Identities’, 494.

⁹ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaeon and Christ-Follower Identities’, 494: ‘We were amazed to find *our* publications completing a short list of “landmarks”, from F.C. Baur through James Dunn and N. T. Wright...’

with the commitments or purposes of specific individuals. But I want to acknowledge at the outset of this reply that I appreciate how such claims – sweeping and generalized as they may appear – may be found objectionable and unreasonable, particularly when they go against the intentions and explicit arguments of those cited as indicative of the scholarly trajectory. This is an important issue to which I will return towards the end of this essay.

Before returning to those broader contemporary socio-political issues, however, I turn to outline various reasons why – without denying the categorisation entirely – I find the stark categorical dichotomy between Judaeian ethnicity and Christ-following voluntarism problematic.

1. Multiple not singular categorization(s)

Combining their social-scientific and historical-philological perspectives, Mason and Esler set out an established list of ‘indicators of ethnic identity’, derived from the work of contemporary social scientists, and highlight ancient evidence that shows that Jews/Judaeans were recognised as a ‘people’ (ἔθνος). Since the various characteristics of ethnic groups fit this evidence, ‘Judaeans were thus an ethnic group’.¹⁰ By contrast, early Christ-followers ‘were something else entirely, and had no such place in the world’; they were ‘a voluntary association alienated in crucial ways from the *oikoumenē*’.¹¹ Ethnicity seems here to form a clearly defined and stable category (which cannot be said simply of the word ἔθνος in itself), into which one does or does not place any particular group. There are various risks, I think, with this kind of approach, some of which will emerge further below. One risk highlighted in recent social-scientific work on the subject is that it can reinforce the objectification and reification of the category of ethnic or racial group, which may be a feature of subjective experience on the part of social actors, but which analysis shows to be subjective, constructed and flexible. Thus Rogers Brubaker, for example, questions the tendency to assume ‘groups’ as the fundamental unit of analysis and directs our attention to the specific and variable ways in which social

¹⁰ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaeian and Christ-Following Identities’, 496.

¹¹ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaeian and Christ-Following Identities’, 511 and 515.

experience may be *interpreted* in racial or ethnic terms.¹² In terms of historical analysis, one risk is of a selective reading of the evidence and a neglect of the other categories that might also be relevant to understanding the character and identity of a group or of individuals. Let us immediately acknowledge that the deployment of (modern) categories is inevitable in historical work, as is the selection of relevant evidence, but this is precisely why ongoing critical scrutiny remains vital.

For example, Mason and Esler highlight the ways in which Clement of Alexandria presents ‘a frontal attack on *ethnos* identity and loyalty... In the circle of Christ’s truth, *ethnos* allegiance is dissolved’.¹³ What this focus does not highlight, however, is the frequency with which Clement designates Christianity precisely as a new kind of ‘people’, distinguished from Jews and Greeks, using what Buell, following Jonathan Hall, calls an ‘oppositional’ kind of ethnic reasoning.¹⁴ For example, Clement refers to ‘three polities... that of the Jews... that of the Greeks... and that of the Christians’ (τρεῖς πολιτείας... Ἰουδαίων... Ἑλλήνων... Χριστιανῶν, *Strom.* 5.14.98.4)¹⁵ and he repeatedly affirms the declaration of 1 Pet 2.9-10, that Christians form ‘the elect race... a holy nation, the people of God’ (τὸ γένος τὸ ἐκλεκτόν... ἔθνος ἅγιον... λαὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, *Prot.* 4.59.3 [GCS]).¹⁶ A particular way in which Clement challenges established ‘*ethnos* identity’, moreover, is through what Buell, again following Hall, calls an ‘aggregative’ or ‘universalising’ kind of ethnic reasoning to insist that all may potentially join this new ‘people’.¹⁷ As Buell puts it, Clement ‘positions Christianity as an *ethnos* – but one that encompasses and erases all others, by referring to humans as one *genos*, unified by their common condition as created beings’.¹⁸ For example, Clement announces how both

¹² See Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004); Rogers Brubaker, *Grounds for Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), esp. 48-84.

¹³ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Following Identities’, 508-509.

¹⁴ Jonathan M. Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997); Denise Kimber Buell, ‘Race and Universalism in Early Christianity’, *J ECS* 10 (2002): 429-68 (441-42).

¹⁵ Cf. also *Strom.* 6.5.41.6-7, part of which quotes from the *Kerygma Petrou*, but it is nonetheless clear that Clement himself affirms the threefold classification of Greeks, Jews, and Christians.

¹⁶ Cf. also *Paed.* 1.6.32.4; *Adumbr.* (on 1 Pet. 2.9); *Strom.* 7.7.35.2; 7.10; 58.6; 7.12.73.5. For discussion of this reception of 1 Pet 2.9-10, see David G. Horrell, *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity* (LNTS/ECC 394; London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 145-52.

¹⁷ Buell, *Why This New Race*, 138-65.

¹⁸ Denise Kimber Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 106.

Greeks and Jews have been brought together into what he calls ‘the one race of the saved (τὸ ἓν γένος τοῦ σωζομένου)’ (*Strom.* 6.5.42.2; cf. *Strom.* 3.10.70.1-2; 6.13.106.4).¹⁹ This does not by any means imply that Clement simply locates ‘Christian’ identity amongst the various established ‘ethnic’ groupings in his world – one reason why the simple dichotomy between ‘ethnic group’ and ‘not ethnic group’ is unhelpful – but it does suggest that his discourse participates in the realm of ethnic identity, deploying its key terms in negotiating Christianity’s competitive quest for success. To separate this off from the realm of ‘ethnicity’ and ethnic discourse seems artificial. Indeed, some of the other examples Mason and Esler cite to support their case for category-distinction also seem to reflect not so much this clear categorical difference but rather the difference between an established and recognised *ethnos* on the one hand, and a would-be *ethnos* on the other, which is, partly on account of its novelty, suspicious and dangerous. Eusebius, for example, announces that Christ has brought into being ‘a new people’ (νέον... ἔθνος), which is ‘the most populous of all nations’ (πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν πολυανθρωπότατον).²⁰ If we asked whether early Christians were ever seen, by themselves or by others, as a ‘people’, that might better signal the ambiguities and complexities of the issue.²¹ Insofar as early Christian texts deploy precisely the language of πόλις and ἔθνος or γένος, we should acknowledge that their constructions of group-identity are at least competing within the realm identified by *polis* and *ethnos* loyalties, rather than in a sphere easily separated from them.²²

Other examples might also help to highlight the risks of focusing on one particular categorisation of both Jewish and Christian identities. While Mason and Esler

¹⁹ See further Buell, ‘Race and Universalism’, 446-50.

²⁰ *Hist. eccl.* 1.4.2 [LCL, alt.], cited by Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 503. On this theme in Eusebius, and specifically the ethnic construction of Christian identity in Eusebius’ *Praeparatio Evangelica*, see Aaron P. Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius’ Praeparatio Evangelica* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: OUP, 2006), esp. 198-233.

²¹ See again the discussion in Buell, *Why This New Race*, esp. 94-115, focused particularly on Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*. For a NT example, note the emphatic deployment of ‘people’ terms - ἔθνος, γένος, λαός - in 1 Pet 2.9-10, and the discussion of this text and its impact in early Christian literature in Horrell, *Becoming Christian*, 133-63.

²² For an extended presentation of the ‘classical paradigm’ for ‘mapping peoples’ in terms of *ethnos* and *polis*, see Steve Mason, *Orientation to the History of Roman Judaea* (Eugene, OR: Cascade/Wipf and Stock, 2016), 97-146. On such loyalties and identities in the context of Corinth, and Paul’s correspondence to the city, see Cavin W. Concannon, ‘When You Were Gentiles’: *Specters of Ethnicity in Roman Corinth and Paul’s Corinthian Correspondence* (Synkrisis: Comparative Approaches to Early Christianity in Greco-Roman Culture; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

contrast Judaeans ethnic identity with Christian (or ‘Christ-following’) voluntary associations, some have argued that (outside the Judean homeland) both groups might well be seen by their contemporaries, as well as by scholars, as belonging to the category of associations.²³ Barbara Borg has recently argued that the (late) emergence of evidence for distinctly Jewish and Christian burial groups in Rome coincides with a wider tendency that emerged in the third century for burial groups to be formed on the basis on common ethnicity – suggesting, Borg argues, that both Jewish and Christian groups were also assuming or claiming some kind of ethnic-like identity.²⁴ To take a more specific example, already in the second century Galen describes Jewish and Christian groups in precisely the same terms, seeing both as a kind of philosophical school: he speaks of ‘the school of Moses and Christ’ (Μωσοῦ καὶ Χριστοῦ διατριβήν) and ‘the followers of Moses and Christ’ (τοὺς ἀπὸ Μωσοῦ καὶ Χριστοῦ μεταδιδάξαιεν), treating them as examples of defective (Greek) philosophies.²⁵ This does not mean that we should then treat Judaism and Christianity as precise equivalents, or specifically as ‘two religions’; I appreciate why Mason and Esler want to push against works that do this.²⁶ But it does suggest that there are *various* categories we might use – and which ancient authors used – in efforts to comprehend Judaism and Christianity in this period: association, philosophical school, ‘people’, and so on. The long-standard category of religion will be considered below. To give pre-eminence only to one risks squeezing the evidence into a single mould – or a singularly dichotomous mould.

2. Multiple, hybrid, and fluid ethnicities

Another aspect of Mason and Esler’s dichotomous categorisation should also, I think, be questioned. Discussing the ancient understanding, they insist that ‘Everyone belonged unavoidably to an *ethnos*, by virtue of their birth (*genos*). Loyalty to one’s

²³ E.g., Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009), esp. 16-18, 25-46.

²⁴ Barbara E. Borg, ‘Does Religion Matter? Life, Death, and Interaction in the Roman *Suburbium*’, in Valentino Gasparini et al. (eds), *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming 2019).

²⁵ Galen, *De pulsuum differentiis* 2.4 and 3.3, cited from Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (Oxford Classical and Philosophical Monographs; London: Oxford University Press/Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1949), 14. See pp. 37-56 for Galen’s view of Judaism and Christianity as ‘defective’ philosophies.

²⁶ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaeans and Christ-Follower Identities’, 498.

ethnos was an axiomatic virtue.’ Thus, when discussing the characteristics of the early Christian movement, they suggest that ‘None of these attributes matches membership of an *ethnos* or *gens*, from which people do not come and go’.²⁷ Without denying that people-groups in the ancient world were of course seen and classified as ἔθνη – as famously depicted in visual form at the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias²⁸ – there are also various reasons to question the notion that such straightforward, singular, and unchangeable categorisation captures the social realities for the people who comprised these groups.²⁹ This may briefly be illustrated in three ways.

First, we may note evidence for what appear to be multiple ethnicities, not least on the part of *Ioudaioi*. Philo, for example, in his treatise on Flaccus, criticising Flaccus’ part in provoking hostility against the Jews of Alexandria, comments concerning the Ἰουδαῖοι that,

while they hold the Holy City where stands the sacred Temple of the most high God to be their mother city (μητρόπολιν), yet those [lands/countries] which are theirs by inheritance from their fathers, grandfathers, and ancestors even farther back, are in each case accounted by them to be their fatherland (πατρίδας) in which they were born and reared, while to some of them [sc. these lands] they have come at the time of their foundation as immigrants to the satisfaction of their founders (*Flacc.* 46 [ET Colson, LCL]; cf. also *Conf.* 78; *Contempl.* 18; *Legat.* 281).

Indeed, part of Flaccus’ crime against the Jews, according to Philo, was precisely to attempt to deny their true Alexandrian citizenship, to cut away their ‘ancestral customs’ (πατρίων) and political rights, and to denounce them as ‘foreigners and aliens’ (ξένους καὶ ἐπήλυδας) (*Flacc.* 53-54). From being both Ἰουδαῖοι and Alexandrians, Flaccus’ actions seek to make them only one or the other.

²⁷ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 499 and 508 respectively.

²⁸ R. R. R. Smith, ‘Simulacra Gentium: The Ethne from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias’, *JRS* 78 (1988): 50-77.

²⁹ Among those who have previously stressed the fluidity and flexibility of ethnicity (and race and religion) – in juxtaposition with appeals to its apparent ‘fixity’ – see esp. Buell, *Why This New Race*, 5-10, *et passim*; also Denise Kimber Buell and Caroline Johnson Hodge, ‘The Politics of Interpretation: The Rhetoric of Race and Ethnicity in Paul’, *JBL* 123 (2004): 235-51.

A similarly multi-ethnic depiction of the Ἰουδαῖοι is found in Luke's account of the 'devout Jews (Ἰουδαῖοι... εὐλαβεῖς) from every nation (ἀπὸ παντὸς ἔθνους)' (Acts 2.5) who gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Weeks.³⁰ Those present are later specified as including:

Πάρθοι καὶ Μῆδοι καὶ Ἐλαμίται, καὶ οἱ κατοικοῦντες τὴν Μεσοποταμίαν, Ἰουδαίαν τε καὶ Καππαδοκίαν, Πόντον καὶ τὴν Ἀσίαν, Φρυγίαν τε καὶ Παμφυλίαν, Αἴγυπτον καὶ τὰ μέρη τῆς Λιβύης τῆς κατὰ Κυρήνην, καὶ οἱ ἐπιδημοῦντες Ῥωμαῖοι, Ἰουδαῖοί τε καὶ προσήλυτοι, Κρήτες καὶ Ἀραβες.

Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians. (Acts 2:9-11, ESV)

Elsewhere, Luke can specify other Ἰουδαῖοι as Ποντικὸν τῷ γένει (18.2 [Aquila]) or as Ἀλεξανδρεὺς τῷ γένει (18.24 [Apollos]), just as Josephus can describe a certain Atomos as both Ἰουδαῖος and as Cyprian 'by race' (*Ant.* 20.142: Ἄτομον ... Ἰουδαῖον, Κύπριον δὲ τὸ γένος). Elsewhere Josephus is explicit about the fact that Jews living in various places are rightly referred to by the names of those places – as Alexandrians, Antiochenes, Ephesians, Romans, and so on (*C. Ap.* 2.38-42). These and other passages are, of course, open to various interpretations.³¹ As Esler has noted elsewhere, commenting specifically on the reference to Atomos, 'dual or nested ethnicity' is not uncommon; this may be one way of accounting for those who apparently hold multiple ethnic identities.³² A similar way of seeing such texts – specifically Acts 2 and Philo's *In Flaccum* – is as evidence for what Cynthia Baker terms 'broad Jewish ethnic diversity', or for 'Jews as a multi-ethnic or multiracial people'.³³ More generally, as Teresa Morgan observes, 'ethnic' designations may be used of groups of various sizes, from cities or groups of cities to

³⁰ Cynthia M. Baker, "From Every Nation under Heaven": Jewish Ethnicities in the Greco-Roman World', in Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (eds), *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 79-99 (91-95).

³¹ See, for example, the discussion of the situation in Alexandria in Mason, *Orientation*, 129-46.

³² Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 72-74.

³³ Baker, 'Jewish Ethnicities', 93 and 81 respectively.

larger regions and kingdoms.³⁴ However we understand them, such references complicate the notion that people clearly belonged, stably and identifiably, to one *ethnos*.

Similar perspectives are also suggested by the evidence for a second kind of complexity: what Michael Peppard describes as ‘ethnic hybridity’. In a study of personal names from late ancient Galilee, Peppard discerns in the onomastic data a crossing of languages, scripts, and traditions that suggests that the people whose identities are recorded in the inscriptions ‘chose to both represent and create their ethnic hybridity’.³⁵ Peppard’s study also probes the tendency of earlier scholarship to interpret such data in the light of particular (and questionable) models of ethnic and religious purity. He remarks, on the interpretation of the onomastic data from Beth She‘arim, that ‘the data that seemed “irregular or awkward” to its original interpreters only seemed so with respect to a conception of late ancient Jewish ethnicity as a well-defined, uniform, and already given category’.³⁶ Peppard’s reference to the way in which data are interpreted through the lens of scholarly constructions and categories bears wider consideration. As William Arnal, James Crossley, and others have suggested, even such seemingly unassailable emphases of recent scholarship as the Jewishness of Jesus are constructed and shaped in the light of contemporary socio-political contexts and priorities.³⁷ In this connection, Halvor Moxnes suggests that newer research on Galilee – and, importantly, our own changing cultural pressures and challenges – might result in a somewhat different depiction of Jesus’ identity as part of the cultural complexity and hybridity of

³⁴ Teresa Morgan, ‘Society, Identity, and Ethnicity in the Hellenic World’, in Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (eds), *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts and in Modern Biblical Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 23-45 (24-26).

³⁵ Michael Peppard, ‘Personal Names and Ethnic Hybridity in Late Ancient Galilee: The Data from Beth She‘arim’, in Jürgen Zangenberg, Harold W. Attridge, and Dale B. Martin (eds), *Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity in Ancient Galilee: A Region in Transition* (WUNT 210; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 99-113 (113).

³⁶ Peppard, ‘Personal Names’, 106; see 105-107.

³⁷ See William Arnal, ‘Jesus as Battleground in a Period of Cultural Complexity’, in Halvor Moxnes, Ward Blanton, and James G. Crossley (eds), *Jesus beyond Nationalism: Constructing the Historical Jesus in a Period of Cultural Complexity* (London and Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2009), 99-117; William Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity* (Religion in Culture: Studies in Social Contest and Construction; London and Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2005); James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century* (London: Equinox, 2008), 143-72; James G. Crossley, ‘Jesus the Jew since 1967’, in Moxnes, Blanton, and Crossley (eds), *Jesus beyond Nationalism*, 119-37.

Galilee's population, a characteristic to which Peppard also draws attention.³⁸ This revised depiction would, like earlier depictions, also be the product of both historical evidence and contemporary contexts – specifically our postmodern concern with the fluidity, complexity, and constructedness of identity – but that illustrates the point that historical scholarship is shaped by both ancient evidence and contemporary context, and that critical reflection should concern itself with both (a point to which I shall return).

Finally, a third kind of complexity arises from the evidence concerning changes in ethnicity, something that Mason and Esler seem to deny ('people do not come and go' from their ethnic identity).³⁹ Some scholars come to virtually the opposite conclusion.⁴⁰ Gideon Bohak, for example, suggests that the ancient world was one 'where the assimilation (or degeneration, depending on one's perspective) of immigrants into natives was virtually taken for granted'.⁴¹ From this perspective, and noting the decline and then disappearance of the ethnic marker *Ioudaios* in Egyptian papyri between 330-30 BCE, Bohak questions the assumption of Jewish 'ethnic continuity' in Graeco-Roman Egypt, arguing that the descendants of Jewish migrants to Egypt during the Hasmonean period 'rarely were identified as "Jews" – either because they migrated back to Judea or because they assimilated into their surrounding environment'.⁴² References to what are traditionally labelled as 'conversion' to or 'apostasy' from Judaism fit a similar picture: while that terminology problematically implies an essentially 'religious' kind of boundary-crossing, the evidence nonetheless suggests that people could, and did, both join and leave the Jewish people, however much such moving might be subject to criticism.⁴³ In a wide-ranging survey of recent scholarship and primary evidence,

³⁸ See the 'postscript' in Halvor Moxnes, 'From Ernest Renan to Anders Behring Breivik: Continuities in Racial Stereotypes of Muslims and Jews', in Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (eds), *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 113-29 (126-28). On the broader issue of identity in Galilee: Halvor Moxnes, 'Identity in Jesus' Galilee – From Ethnicity to Locative Intersectionality', *BibInt* 18 (2010): 390-416.

³⁹ See above, citing Mason and Esler, 'Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities', 508.

⁴⁰ Note the discussion of 'the fixity and fluidity of ethnicity/race in antiquity' in Buell, *Why This New Race*, 37-41, *et passim*.

⁴¹ Gideon Bohak, 'Ethnic Continuity in the Jewish Diaspora in Antiquity', in John R. Bartlett (ed.), *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 175-92 (191).

⁴² Bohak, 'Ethnic Continuity', 187; see appendix on 192.

⁴³ On this large subject, see, e.g., Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 469-92; John M. G. Barclay, 'Ἰουδαϊσμός: Ethnicity and Translation', in Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (eds),

Morgan also documents multiple instances of individuals who either change their ethnic identity or acquire new identities alongside their existing ones in a process she labels ‘accretive’.⁴⁴ This might be in relation to tax status, rising social status, or decisions to display their identity differently in different contexts or to different audiences – something Morgan labels ‘code switching’.⁴⁵ We cannot legitimately assume that, despite such varied and changeable depictions of identity, people knew that everyone had one ‘real’ and unchangeable ethnicity, determined by birth or ‘blood’, for that would be to import a primordial assumption about ethnicity which the evidence itself does not seem to support. On the contrary, there seem good reasons to question the idea that everyone belonged, stably and identifiably, to one *ethnos*, from which they generally did not and could not depart.

3. Ethnicity and Religion

Another questionable feature of Mason and Esler’s discussion is the separation of religion from ethnicity. They rightly note, following a number of recent publications, that ‘religion’ is a problematic category for the ancient world, where what we might define as ‘religious phenomena’, as Esler elsewhere terms them,⁴⁶ were thoroughly integrated into socio-political life (and indeed into ethnic identity).⁴⁷ Yet at least two things remain puzzling, and – to me, at least – unconvincing with regard to their separation of the two realms of life.

Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts and in Modern Biblical Interpretation (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 46-58; Stephen G. Wilson, *Leaving the Fold: Apostates and Defectors in Antiquity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), 23-65.

⁴⁴ Morgan, ‘Society, Identity, and Ethnicity’, 35.

⁴⁵ Morgan, ‘Society, Identity, and Ethnicity’, 34-38.

⁴⁶ E.g., Philip F. Esler, *God’s Court and Courtiers in the Book of the Watchers: Re-interpreting Heaven in 1 Enoch 1-36* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 15; Philip F. Esler, ‘Giving the Kingdom to an *Ethnos* That Will Bear Its Fruit: Ethnic and Christ-Movement Identities in Matthew’, in Daniel M. Gurtner, Grant Macaskill, and Jonathan T. Pennington (eds), *In The Fullness of Time: Essays on Christology, Creation, and Eschatology in Honor of Richard Bauckham* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 177-96 (181).

⁴⁷ For landmark and recent works making this case, see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991 [1962]), 15-50; Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013); Carlin Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

First, they appeal to contemporary sociological work by Claire Mitchell to illustrate that religion can play an important part in ethnic identities.⁴⁸ But they then assert that ‘ethnic identity and religion remain separate’,⁴⁹ even though this runs counter to what Mitchell herself argues,⁵⁰ and even though ‘religion’ is one of the features that Anthony Smith includes within his well-established list of characteristics of ethnic groups.⁵¹

Second, Mason and Esler’s argument that ‘it makes little sense to homologate ethnic and “religious” identities’⁵² seems difficult to sustain *precisely because* of their (and others’) insistence that in the ancient world ‘religion’ cannot be separated out from other areas of social life, and specifically not from the realm of ethnicity.⁵³ Critiquing the notion that ‘a “religious” identity could become an ethnic one’ could only make sense in a context where ‘religion’ and ‘ethnicity’ are separately identifiable.⁵⁴ As Paula Fredriksen has put it, in antiquity, ‘gods also attached to particular *peoples*; “religion” ran in the blood... ethnicity expressed “religion” (acknowledging the anachronism of both terms for our period), and religion expressed “ethnicity.”’⁵⁵ That bald assertion needs some nuance, not least in terms of the incorporation of ‘foreign’ deities, such as the Egyptian

⁴⁸ Claire Mitchell, ‘Behind the Ethnic Marker: Religion and Social Identification in Northern Ireland’, *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 1 (2005): 3-21; Claire Mitchell, ‘The Religious Content of Ethnic Identities’, *Sociology* 40, no. 6 (2006): 1135-52.

⁴⁹ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 497.

⁵⁰ Mitchell discusses religion as ‘an ethnic marker’ (‘Behind the Ethnic Marker’, 8-10; ‘Religious Content’, 1138-40) and notes widespread agreement that ‘religion *can* be a basis of ethnic identity’ (‘Religious Content’, 1136, original emphasis). Her key argument, against a widespread tendency to downplay religion’s social significance, is that religion is not *merely* a marker of what is ‘really’ an ethnic identity, but is crucial in social identification and community construction, such that ‘religion often constitutes the fabric of ethnic identity’ (Mitchell, ‘Religious Content’, 1137; further 1143-48).

⁵¹ These characteristics are set out in Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 22-31, and more briefly summarised in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, ‘Introduction’, in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds), *Ethnicity* (Oxford Readers; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3-14 (6-7). The list has been widely used, including by Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 496.

⁵² Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 497.

⁵³ On this point, see Buell, *Why This New Race*, 35-62.

⁵⁴ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 497.

⁵⁵ Paula Fredriksen, ‘What “Parting of the Ways”? Jews, Gentiles, and the Ancient Mediterranean City’, in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (TSAJ 95; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 35-63 (39). Cf. also Paula Fredriksen, ‘Judaizing the Nations: the Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel’, *NTS* 56 (2010): 232-52 (234-40).

Isis, into the sphere of popular Roman ‘religious’ devotion,⁵⁶ and the evidence, as we have seen above, that ethnicity was not simply defined by ‘blood’ or birth. But the broader point stands.⁵⁷ As Esler puts it elsewhere, “‘Religious’ phenomena... certainly do occur [in the ancient world] but they are connected with, or rather embedded in, a wider identity that is best described as “ethnic” in character’.⁵⁸

Let us take one well-known example to illustrate the point, Philo’s description of what it is that ‘incomers’ to the Jewish people have both left and joined: ‘their kinsfolk by blood (γενεὰν μὲν τὴν ἀφ’ αἵματος), their country (πατρίδα), their customs (ἔθνη) and the temples (ἱερά) and images of their gods (ἀφιδρύματα θεῶν)’ (*Virt.* 102 [LCL]). Here it is clear that religious practices are inextricably integrated into a broader depiction of ethnic identity. As Esler has elsewhere noted, ‘all six of the diagnostic features [of an ethnic group] described by Hutchinson and Smith are found or implied here’.⁵⁹ But if this is the case, then early Christian depictions – such as Paul’s description of the transition made by gentile converts when they ‘turned to God from idols’ (1 Thess 1.9) and adopted a way of life that was ‘not like the gentiles’ (1 Thess 4.5), or 1 Peter’s characterisation of the turn away from a worthless ‘ancestral’ way of life (1 Pet 1.18) – cannot easily be removed from the same kind of discursive and social context, in which loyalty to, or departure from, an ethnicity-defining way of life is in view. Whatever one labels the early Christian groups, joining them – at least on the kind of basis that the NT letters depict – could hardly not be disruptive of ethnic identities, insofar as these are constituted, among other things, by loyalty to an ancestral way of life including its religious and cultural practices. It may be less neat to admit that the categories of religion and ethnicity blur together in the ancient world (and, indeed, in the modern world too), but it seems to be closer to the truth.

⁵⁶ On the incorporation of ‘foreign’ cults into Roman ‘religion’ see further Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: Vol 1: A History* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 245-60.

⁵⁷ E.g., Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 82-87, refers to cults such as Isis under the label ‘voluntary religion’, while accepting the broader point made by Fredriksen (see 78-79).

⁵⁸ Esler, *God’s Court*, 15.

⁵⁹ Esler, *God’s Court*, 17.

4. Ethnic identity and fictive kinship

There is one final facet of the categorical distinction Mason and Esler draw that I wish to question. In a closing remark, they accept the value of ‘efforts to find “ethnic reasoning” in particular early Christian texts’, but assert that ‘we consider such language fictive’.⁶⁰ In other words (I assume), the appeal to established *topoi* such as ancestry and siblinghood is, in some sense, ‘real’ in ‘real’ ethnic groups, but fictive when taken up in early Christian discourse or other comparable contexts. Once again, I do not want to deny that some distinctions along these lines might at times validly be made.⁶¹ But I want to question how cogently the category-distinction can be drawn here.⁶²

At least since Max Weber, social-scientific discussions of ethnicity have stressed that the appeal to shared kinship relations is precisely fictive, in the sense that it is *believed* rather than real.⁶³ In other words, it is constructed and believed narratives of shared ancestry, blood, family lineage, and so on, that constitute and undergird a sense of ethnic identity.

Caroline Johnson Hodge has shown how ‘discourses about kinship and ethnicity’ are variously deployed in the ancient world, through what she terms ‘the ideology of patrilineal descent’, to construct and reconstruct family histories and group identities.⁶⁴ Again, we may illustrate the issue with an example. When 1 Maccabees records various letters intended to create alliances between Jews, Spartans, and Romans, appeal is made to the common ancestry of Jews and Spartans – that they are siblings (ὅτι εἰσὶν ἀδελφοί) and of the people of Abraham (ἐκ γένους Αβρααμ, 1 Macc 12.21), a tradition that Josephus also repeats (*Ant.* 12.225-227). Is this fictive or real kinship? The distinction can hardly be drawn: appeals to ancestry and kinship are flexible and malleable, and are deployed for strategic purposes as well as for maintaining a sense of group identity. But if so, as Johnson Hodge shows, Paul’s arguments about converts becoming Abraham’s

⁶⁰ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 515.

⁶¹ For example, there seems a clear difference between the use of ἀδελφός to denote siblings in a familial group (as, e.g., in Gen 37.2; Mk 3.31-32) and the use to express an anticipated relationship between a king and a potential ally (cf. 1 Macc 10.16-18; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.45; cf. 1 Kgs 9:13).

⁶² Cf. also Buell, *Why This New Race*, 9.

⁶³ Max Weber, ‘Race Relations’, in W.G. Runciman (ed.), *Max Weber: Selections in Translation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1978 [1922]), 359-69 (364).

⁶⁴ Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2007), 19-42 (quoted phrases on 19).

seed (Gal 3.29) cannot be so easily separated from other appeals to shared ancestry and kinship. As with the appeals for converts to leave one (ancestral) way of life and begin another, so too in the realm of ancestry and kinship, it is hard neatly to separate early Christian discourse from the wider realm of ethnic discourse among Jews and other people-groups.

5. On Critical Reflection

The preceding sections offer some reasons why I continue to find a clear categorical contrast between Jewish ethnicity and ‘superordinate’, ‘trans-ethnic’ Christian identity at best partially cogent,⁶⁵ and needing significant nuance and diversification. It is clear, however, as noted above, that the particular reason for Mason and Esler’s response to my essay was not simply this claim in itself, but the suggestion that the scholarly tendency to draw this stark contrast might reflect the location of that scholarship in ‘the traditionally Christian countries of the Western world’ and that this perspective ‘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’.⁶⁶ Mason and Esler’s objections are several: that the distinction they draw is a purely historical one, based on the evidence of the sources; that in any case it was a difference ‘not in the Christians’ favour’;⁶⁷ that they explicitly disavow any connection between this historical perspective and Western Christian triumphalism or supercessionism; and that my suggestions are made without evidence.

In making a response to such points, two initial observations seem pertinent, both of which I will build on further below. The first is that I deliberately offered these (tentative) concluding remarks in a general way, relating them to the tendencies and location of the discipline rather than to particular individuals’ work, because – notwithstanding the question of whether the suggestions are found plausible – I do not think it is helpful to personalise the issues. It is also important to note that I did not

⁶⁵ For uses of these terms, see Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 505, 507, 510.

⁶⁶ Horrell, ‘Ethnicization’, 460. Cf. Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 494-95.

⁶⁷ For this phrase, see Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 494.

claim that proponents of the categorical distinction between Jewish/Judaeen ethnicity and Christian trans-ethnic openness were themselves promoting or supporting such contemporary socio-political or religious ideologies – indeed quite the opposite is likely the case; rather, that the persistence of various forms of this dichotomy may both reflect and legitimate the particular contemporary contexts of that historical work. The second observation, closely related to the first, is that attempts to probe the ways in which our discipline’s concepts, categories, historical analyses and reconstructions may be shaped by their location in contemporary socio-political, geographical, religious and ethno-racial contexts will inevitably and necessarily entail considering something other than the explicit intentions and arguments any of us presents. For that reason, indeed, we cannot convincingly dismiss such critical probing simply by asserting that we explicitly reject the ideological or political tendencies in which our work may be implicated, whether this is supercessionism or some other regrettable ‘ism’.⁶⁸ As Arnal comments in relation to the ways in which constructions of the historical Jesus reflect contemporary identity issues, ‘the question of *personal* agenda is irrelevant’; it is the ‘correspondence’ between certain historical constructions and contemporary perspectives that is pertinent.⁶⁹ Our potential enmeshment in such contemporary ideologies cannot be so easily disproven, just as, say, declaring ourselves committed to non-sexism and gender equality does not mean that forms of unconscious and unintended ideological or practical bias – and, equally important, wider conventions and social practices – have thereby been eliminated.⁷⁰

But since Mason and Esler criticise my lack of ‘evidence’ and explicitly call for engagement with their ‘actual arguments’,⁷¹ I will attempt to illustrate more specifically

⁶⁸ This is especially so when, as with the example Mason and Esler cite as indicating their rejection of supercessionism, the statement rejecting this stance comes as a brief coda, entirely separate from the orientation and content of the essay that precedes it. See Esler, ‘Giving the Kingdom’, 196; Mason and Esler, ‘Judaeen and Christ-Follower Identities’, 495 with n. 5.

⁶⁹ Arnal, ‘Jesus as Battleground’, 104.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Helen Bond’s blog-post detailing the forms of sexism she has encountered in our discipline – most of which, I would think, emanate from colleagues (and I include myself here) who are unaware that this is what they are doing, and whose explicit intentions and commitments run counter to such sexist practice. <http://historicaljesusresearch.blogspot.com/2014/12/helen-bond-on-sexism-and-nt-scholarship.html> (accessed 7 June 2018). The broader issues of sexism and gender bias in, say, SNTS (and other organisations), are more complex, multifaceted, and in part historical and structural, such that they cannot simply be addressed at an individual level.

⁷¹ Mason and Esler, ‘Judaeen and Christ-Follower Identities’, 493, 515.

the basis for my suggestions. I should immediately concede that I am not aware of examples in Mason's work that explicitly draw the kinds of contrast between Jewish ethnicity and Christian trans-ethnicity, and the comparatively positive value of the latter, that might suggest the kind of alignment with contemporary ideologies to which I pointed – though the ongoing discussion of the translation of term *Ioudaios* indicates, in part, how historical and contemporary considerations may come together.⁷² The citation of his work exemplified the dichotomous categorisation of Jewish/Judaeans and Christian identities in historical discourse that *might* – so my suggestions – bear critical analysis in terms of the uses to which such a dichotomy is put. The implications of our historical analyses, the categories with which we conduct them, and the (inescapable) correlations between historical reconstructions and contemporary ideologies, are, I want to argue, concerns that we should include within our disciplinary critical reflection.

Esler's work provides, I think, more relevant illustrations. For example, in an analysis of the Gospel of John, Esler argues that what John is doing in the famous prologue (specifically in Jn 1.9-13) 'is contrasting a new identity that is non-ethnic, strongly marked by fictive kinship and intimate relations with God, with an original identity of an altogether different kind – one that was ethnic in character... the Johannine group... was in the throes of generating for itself... a trans-ethnic identity'.⁷³ Elsewhere, the Gospel of Matthew is analysed along similar lines: 'Matthew is writing for a group or groups of Christ-followers that embrace Judean and non-Judean members sharing a new, trans-ethnic, superordinate group identity in-Christ. This identity is quite distinct from that of the Judean ethnic group...'.⁷⁴ Matthew's Jesus moves beyond his

⁷² Current discussion centres around Mason's seminal article: Steve Mason, 'Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History', *JSJ* 38, no. 4 (2007): 457-512. See esp. Timothy Michael Law and Charles Halton (eds), *Jew and Judean: A MARGINALIA Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of Ancient Texts* (Los Angeles, CA: Marginalia Review of Books, 2014). A recent and mediating assessment is offered by Barclay, 'Ἰουδαῖος'; note too Mason's conciliatory comments in *Orientation*, 278.

⁷³ Philip F. Esler, 'From *Ioudaioi* to Children of God: The Development of a Non-Ethnic Group Identity in the Gospel of John', in Anselm C. Hagedorn, Zeba A. Crook, and Eric Stewart (eds), *In Other Words: Essays on Social Science Methods and the New Testament in Honor of Jerome H. Neyrey* (Social World of Biblical Antiquity, Second Series 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 106-37 (127 and 133 respectively).

⁷⁴ Philip F. Esler, 'Judean Ethnic Identity and the Matthean Jesus', in Petra von Gemünden, David G. Horrell, and Max Küchler (eds), *Jesus – Gestalt und Gestaltungen. Rezeptionen des Galiläers in Wissenschaft, Kirche und Gesellschaft* (NTOA 100; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 193-210 (208).

initial 'Judean ethnocentrism' towards 'a new form of group identity that transcends the boundaries of ethnicity'.⁷⁵

These perspectives are most extensively developed in Esler's earlier major work on Romans, published in 2003. Fundamental to the argument is the categorisation of both Jewish/Judean and Greek identities as ethnic.⁷⁶ What this means with regard to Romans, Esler proposes, is that Paul is confronting a situation of inter-ethnic conflict, rivalry between Judeans and Greeks, with the tensions particularly visible, for example, in Rom 14.1–15.13.⁷⁷ Esler's overall thesis about Romans is that Paul is attempting to construct a new and positive form of group identity, a non- or trans-ethnic identity in Christ, that can encompass but not obliterate diverse ethnic identities: 'In the language of modern social identity theory, Paul's strategy amounts to an exercise in recategorization, the creation (or perhaps invocation) of a common ingroup identity'.⁷⁸ The new identity in Christ 'transcends the fundamental ethnic division among them between Judeans and Greeks'.⁷⁹ Paul allows ethnic difference to remain, but provides the foundations for a new 'common identity'.⁸⁰ With his project cast in this way, Paul might seem to anticipate and embody the modern Western model of multicultural, multiethnic liberalism.

As an 'ethnic' group, on this analysis, Jews come into conflict with other ethnic groups, and, precisely as ethnic groups, offer little prospect for inclusion or broader welcome, for finding modes of peaceable coexistence – despite the evidence concerning the various ways in which Jewish groups might accommodate sympathisers and converts, or be integrated into their local societies, or might themselves be 'multi-ethnic'. The goal of peaceable coexistence seems to depend on the creation of some kind of trans-ethnic new identity, which is precisely what Christ offers. The distinction seems here to be very much in the Christians' favour.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Esler, 'Giving the Kingdom', 188, 190. Cf. also Philip F. Esler, 'Intergroup Conflict and Matthew 23: Towards Responsible Historical Interpretation of a Challenging Text', *BTB* 45 (2015): 38-59

⁷⁶ See Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 54-61 (on Greek ethnicity) and 62-74 (on Judean ethnicity).

⁷⁷ See Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 74-76, 108, 339-56.

⁷⁸ Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 360.

⁷⁹ Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 360.

⁸⁰ Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 355, 65.

⁸¹ Cf. Mason and Esler, 'Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities', 494.

And these positive achievements are not presented merely as historical reconstructions; they are also seen as having positive value for the contemporary world. Esler announces near the beginning of his work on Romans that ‘the contemporary issue driving the current study of Romans is the nature of Christian identity... in a world rent by violent, often murderous conflict between groups, in particular those of an ethnic kind’.⁸² The argument comes full circle when the enduring value of Paul’s strategy for overcoming inter-ethnic conflict is made clear in the closing sentence of the book: ‘In a world still torn by ethnic conflict, this is a message [about the overcoming of ethnic conflict through a new common identity in Christ] that will continue to resonate’.⁸³

All this does *not* mean to imply, I hasten to stress, that Esler is supportive of the neo-imperial actions of the Western nations, or of the particular strategies by which the so-called ‘British values’ of tolerance and democracy are imposed by law, or whatever other contemporary manifestations of Western (post)Christian superiority we might point to. But it does, I suggest, indicate something about the location of the production of this work, which bears, I would argue, a non-coincidental structural similarity with the kind of vision that undergirds the project of Western (post-)Christian political and multicultural liberalism.

Lest this seem an overly personalised or polemical point, let me illustrate how a similar critical analysis might raise questions about my own earlier work on Pauline ethics, *Solidarity and Difference*.⁸⁴ This project too, one might observe, is thoroughly ‘Western’ in its orientation, setting as a methodological framework for reading Paul the liberal-communitarian debate in ethical theory, exemplified by the contrasting work of Jürgen Habermas and Stanley Hauerwas.⁸⁵ The primary conundrum, in a sense, is that central to the Western liberal project: how to nurture forms of communal solidarity while at the same time preserving and tolerating difference and diversity. And it is Paul, and his attempts to foster both solidarity and difference in Christ, who serves as the

⁸² Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 10.

⁸³ Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 365.

⁸⁴ David G. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Ethics* (2nd edn., Cornerstones; London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015) [2005].

⁸⁵ And on the ‘implicit racism’ that may be woven into Habermas’s work, see Cynthia Kaufman, ‘Is Philosophy Anything if it Isn’t White?’, in George Yancy (ed.), *The Center Must not Hold: White Women Philosophers on the Whiteness of Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010), 245-63 (254-57).

primary focus for reflections on how contemporary plural societies might negotiate and sustain their peaceable existence. I am not uncritical of Paul in this study, and I try to make clear that Paul's focus on Christ as the basis for communal solidarity is not superior to, but simply different from, a Jewish focus on Torah as central to corporate life.⁸⁶ But nonetheless it is the Pauline moral vision that stands at the centre of reflection on contemporary social challenges. It is a work, then, which displays the marks of its production in a specific historical, religious, and geo-political context.

Such critical analysis does not mean that I regard either my own earlier work or that of Esler – from which I have learnt so much – as lacking in substantial historical, exegetical, or ethical insight. Nor does it mean that I reject the relevance and importance of reflection on the contemporary issues that clearly lie as motivations behind both our studies. But it does mean that such work can and should be subjected to a critical scrutiny that seeks, in part, to assess not only the historical and exegetical claims, but also the ways in which the knowledge generated is a product of a particular time and place. In Walter Mignolo's words, 'the knower is always implicated, geo- and body-politically, in the known'; and what is known is always known by 'a racially marked body in a geo-historical marked space'.⁸⁷ This kind of particularising of our own work, acknowledging the partiality and specificity of our insight, I have argued elsewhere, following in the footsteps of others,⁸⁸ is crucial both to recognising our need for the insights of other differently embodied interpreters and also to giving equal value to a wide variety of perspectives in biblical studies rather than assigning some a marginal status around an unlabelled but dominant core.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ See, e.g., Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference*, 214 n. 87, 215, 223-24 with n. 100.

⁸⁷ Walter D. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26/7-8 (2009): 1-23 (4 and 2 respectively).

⁸⁸ Among those who have stressed the locatedness and specificity of the dominant approaches in biblical studies, see, e.g., William H. Myers, 'The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African American Biblical Student', in Cain Hope Felder (ed.), *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 40-56; Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds) *Reading from This Place. Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States. Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995); R.S. Sugirtharajah, 'Muddling Along at the Margins', in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Still At the Margins: Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years After the Voices from the Margin* (London & New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008), 8-21.

⁸⁹ David G. Horrell, 'Paul, Inclusion, and Whiteness: Particularising Interpretation', *JSNT* 40 (2017): 123-47, esp. 139-41. Cf. also Denise Kimber Buell, 'Anachronistic Whiteness and the Ethics of Interpretation', in Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (eds), *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities*

Indeed, to end on what I hope is both an irenic and a challenging point, I am quite prepared to admit that I may be wrong in my particular suggestions concerning the ways in which the scholarly dichotomy between Jewish ethnicity and trans-ethnic Christianity may, in part, reflect its contexts of production. But I would reiterate the challenge to probe critically the ways in which our historical categories and analyses are, unavoidably, in some ways shaped by their contexts of production, and that those contexts have geopolitical, ethno-racial, and religious dimensions. This kind of meta-critical analysis is by no means uniquely required of New Testament or early Jewish studies – and it has sometimes concerned the basic configuration and orientation of whole disciplines.⁹⁰ It is, as I have remarked elsewhere, ‘easier to see how the scholarship of the past was enmeshed in the racial and religious ideologies of its time than it is to appreciate how far our own present work continues to be shaped by such ideologies’.⁹¹ Difficult as it may be, part of our critical self-analysis as scholars should be to try to reflect on the ways in which our particular location shapes our work. Our concepts and categories both arise from and take effect within particular contemporary contexts. Probing our biases must therefore go deeper than aligning ourselves with either a ‘humanistic’ or a ‘social-scientific’ approach, and responsible history must do more than proclaim the desire to ‘understand the past as it was’.⁹²

and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts and in Modern Biblical Interpretation (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 149-67; Wei Hsien Wan, ‘Re-examining the Master’s Tools: Considerations on Biblical Studies’ Race Problem’, in Hockey and Horrell (eds), *Ethnicity, Race, Religion*, 219-29.

⁹⁰ For example, consider the debates in Classics around the arguments of Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation* (vol. 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985; London: Free Association Books, 1987); Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation* (vol. 2: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence; London: Free Association Books, 1991), or the critical reflection on the whiteness of philosophy in George Yancy (ed.), *The Center Must not Hold: White Women Philosophers on the Whiteness of Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010) and in the work of Robert Bernasconi (see, e.g., ‘Waking up White and in Memphis’, in George Yancy, ed., *White on White/Black on Black* [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005] 17-25), or the efforts of Anthropology to reconfigure itself away from a traditional orientation towards Western observation of non-Western societies – see, e.g., the early critique by Talal Asad, ‘Introduction’, in Talal Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* [London: Ithaca, 1973] 9-19; and Edward W. Said, ‘Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors’, *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 205-25.

⁹¹ David G. Horrell, ‘Introduction’, in Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (eds), *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts and in Modern Biblical Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 1-20 (16).

⁹² See Mason and Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities’, 495, for the description of their ‘actual biases’, and 515, for the aim of simply understanding the past.