**How Do the Nations Relate to Israel?**

**Family, Ethnicity, and Eschatological Inclusion**

**in the Apostle Paul**

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This volume asks the question to what degree Graeco-Roman notions of citizenship provided a model for ideas of community, solidarity and self-definition. In other words, how did civic institutions, civic life and ideological discourses about citizenship inform the dynamics of identity? Alongside the civic construction of community, other notions could play an important role in defining a group, notions that could complement a membership in a civic community, but also be independent from any form of citizenship. Among these criteria would be a) common descent, whether real or imagined; b) unity under the same ruler, be that ruler human or divine; and c) “voluntary association” with sectarian or philosophical groups.

In this chapter I propose to consider one specifically Jewish conceptualization of boundary-crossing, affiliation, and communal identity: that of the apostle Paul, mid-first century CE, when he worked to incorporate pagans (*ta ethnē*) into the impending messianic redemption of Israel. As our examination will reveal, Paul’s efforts at cross-ethnic “outreach” draw deeply on Jewish scriptural and extra-scriptural customs and textual traditions. And he sees both his native community (Israel) and his eschatological community (the *ekklēsia*) as contrasting sharply to contemporary pagan culture. Yet to a surprising degree, Paul’s ideas on gentile incorporation into Israel’s redemption draws profoundly and specifically on a Roman -- thus, pagan -- cultural practice.

1. *Gods and Humans in Mediterranean Antiquity*

Before I begin, however, I would like to emphasize that in Graeco-Roman antiquity, peoplehood/descent/kinship and relations with divinities were not *alternatives* to constructions of citizenship, but came bundled together *with* them. This was so first of all because, in Mediterranean antiquity, gods and humans together formed family groups. To phrase the same thought slightly differently: from the micro-level of the individual *domus* or *oikos* to the macro-level of the city, ancient gods ran in the blood.[[1]](#footnote-1) There was no word for or concept of what moderns call “religion,” the individual’s assent to certain propositions about divinity based on notions of “belief.” [[2]](#footnote-2) Relations between heaven and earth, from the level of the household to the level of the city and, eventually, beyond, were community concerns, often expressed through inherited protocols, that were maintained through cult. [[3]](#footnote-3)

In this context, where people-groups, notionally bound together by shared “blood” (*sungeneis* in Paul’s term, Rom 9.4), also shared a family relationship with their god(s), “worship” – enacted fealty to the god – was accordingly imagined as an inheritance, “ancestral custom”: τα πάτρια ἔθη, *mos maiorum*, οἱ πατριοί νόμοι, αἱ πατρίκαι παραδόσεις (Paul again, Gal 1:14). These customs connected humans not only to their gods but, across generations, to each other. Since humans were born into their obligations to their gods, these observations were a piece of their cultural patrimony: cult and ethnicity defined each other. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Ethnicity mapped not only onto heaven but also onto earth, not only in terms of lands and languages but, in the Hellenistic period, more specifically onto the city. Citizens were often imagined as forming a single *genos*/descent group; hence, at Acts 18.24, Apollos is described as “an Alexandrian by γένος,” that is, a citizen. Similarly, some Roman aristocratic families (especially the Julio-Claudians) presented themselves as *Aeneadae*, descendants of Aeneas and, thus, descendants of Venus as well.[[5]](#footnote-5) The city itself, post-Alexander, was thus a kind of family-based religious institution. Urban wellbeing depended on heaven’s beneficence, and thus the organs of city government were in effect media for showing respect to the presiding god(s).

These vertical family relationships between gods, citizens and cities put those Jews residing in the cities of the Diaspora in an awkward position: their god was famously demanding, insisting that *his* people restrict cult only to him.[[6]](#footnote-6) Apion’s question was commonsensical and well-observed: “If the Jews wish to be Alexandrian citizens, why don’t they worship the Alexandrian gods?” (Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.65; cf. the similar complaints from cities in first-century Asia Minor, *A.J.* 12.126). Literary and epigraphical evidence, however, attests to Jews’ serving as ephebes and town councilors (thus, citizens), as athletes and actors, as generals and gladiators. Their activities would have involved them in some degree with showing respect – though perhaps not full cult – to the gods of their cities.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Gods through their humans operated politically not only within cities; they also operated *between* cities. When negotiating inter-city treaties, Hellenistic and later Roman diplomats would generate genealogies in order to trace back to shared ancestors -- often, ultimately, to a god. The parties under agreement themselves thus became “kin.” Since the Jewish god did not leave human children behind in the ways that Greek gods did, the Hellenistic Judean kingdom under the Hasmoneans had to mobilize the progeny of the patriarchs to break into inter-city diplomacy. An alliance between Sparta and Jerusalem was accordingly effected and stabilized through the distant union of a granddaughter of Abraham’s with the widely-wandering Heracles. “After reading a certain document,” announces a Spartan king to the Jewish high priest, “we have found that Jews and Lacedaemonians [Spartans] are of one γένος, and share a connection with Abraham” (Josephus, *A.J.* 12.226).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Kinship and cult articulated family hierarchy. At the “micro” level the bride, entering her husband’s household, assumed responsibility for what were for her new ancestors and new gods. So too with an adopted son: his induction into a new family not only established a pattern of inheritance; it also assured the continuation of family cult. And Augustus, positioning himself as the empire’s *pater*, through the worship of his own *genius,* turned his new political unit into a single, vast, multi-ethnic *oikos* or *domus* or “family” (*gens*). [[9]](#footnote-9)

Finally, proper awareness of and appropriate deference to superiors within this numinous-human hierarchy were deemed *pietas* or *eusebeia*; one’s *pistis* or *fides* expressed one’s loyalty to these bequeathed practices and to the divine-human and intra-human relationships that they articulated*.* Harmonious relations – showing respect, and being seen to show respect – began at the hearth and extended outward to the city, to the larger empire and, thence, to the cosmos itself. Enacting these arrangements at the micro-level was pious common sense; at the macro-level, it was tantamount to safeguarding the *pax deorum.*[[10]](#footnote-10) Kinship and cult were thus not separated from politics: rather, and at a fundamental level, they constituted politics.

Against this “genealogical” model of divine/human relations stands the odd phenomenon of what we would call “conversion to Judaism.” Given ancient divinity’s ethnic embeddedness, the term, and the phenomenon, scarcely make sense. To fully change gods, to make an exclusive commitment to the Jewish god and to Jewish ancestral practices was tantamount to changing ethnicity. A pagan’s “becoming” a Jew in effect altered his own past, reconfigured his ancestry and (as Tacitus complained, *Hist.* V.5.1,2) cut his ties to his own pantheon, family, and *patria.* For this reason, what we call “conversion,” ancients saw as deserting ancestral customs for foreign laws.

The political model of configuring divine-human relations, in other words, shaped the discourse of “conversion.” Philo speaks of what we call “conversion” as forming a new political affiliation, a non-Jew’s entering the Jewish πολιτεία(*Spec.* 1.51). So too Justin, mid-second century CE, describes conversion to Judaism as a person’s entering τὴν ἐννόμον πολιτείαν(*Dial.* 46–47). Celsus, a generation later, sounds the themes of disloyalty shading to treason, criticizing those pagans who have “abandoned their own traditions and professed those of the Jews” (*c. Cels.* 5.41). And Domitian executed some members of the Roman aristocracy for “atheism,” that is, for spurning their own gods on account of treasonable loyalty to “the customs of the Jews” (Dio, *Roman History* 67.14, 1–2).

But pagans in fact had a broad range of different degrees of affiliation with Jews and, thus, with the Jews’ god. A.D. Nock called this species of affiliation “adherence.” Literary and epigraphical data referred to it as “god-fearing.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Pagans were free to add the Jewish god to their own native pantheons, dropping in whether to the diaspora synagogue or (up until 66 CE) to the temple of Israel’s god in Jerusalem. This sort of social/religious mixing marked the Greco-Roman city generally. (By turning up in curiae, circuses, odeons et cetera, diaspora Jews frequented pagan places as well). It was the gentile’s step from adherence to “conversion” that brought with it the momentous consequence, for men, of circumcision, and occasioned the loudest disapproval from pagan observers.

2. *Paul and the Nations-in-Christ*

With this brief introduction to orient us, let us look at what Paul is doing.

Notoriously, Paul not only does *not* preach circumcision; he preaches *against* circumcision – which is another way of saying that he is going to and writing to outsiders, *ta* *ethnē*.[[12]](#footnote-12) Yet he works to incorporate these *ethnē* into a *Jewish* religious institution or association, the *ekklēsia* (“assembly”), dedicated rigorously to the sole worship of Israel’s god (e.g., 1 Cor 8.6). By immersion, these *ethnē* receive the spirit of Israel’s god, or that of his son, the Christ (Gal 4.5-7; Rom 8.9-15). They thereby remain *ethnē*, although *ethnē* with a difference. They must have absolutely abandoned *latreia* to images, and they may no longer worship their native gods. Receiving this spirit in turn enables these *ethnē* to do God’s ordinances, which are themselves part of Jewish culture, what Paul calls the *nomos.*[[13]](#footnote-13)

Paul does *not* use the language of citizenship to articulate the new relationship that these *ethnē* have with his god. They do *not*, through immersion, thereby become members of Israel. (To do that would require circumcision which, he says, would mean that the messiah was of no advantage to them, Gal 5.2). On the contrary, these *ethnē*, uncircumcised, remain precisely that: gentiles (see, for example, Rom 11.13). How then does Paul construct this new, eschatological non-Jewish Jewish assembly?

By appealing to the utterly Roman model of *huiothesia*, son-adoption. Paul charismatically constructs a new lineage for these gentiles-in-Christ as *aldelphoi kata pneuma*. They may remain ethnically distinct from Israel, distinct *kata sarka* (thus, no circumcision). But they become brothers *ek pisteos* (not *ek nomos,* the more “political” model), brothers *kata pneuma*.

Why does Paul use this very Roman idea of adoption? For a very Roman reason: adoption affects these Christ-following gentiles’ status as “heirs.” They too, thanks to spirit, can inherit. Inherit what? An idiosyncratically Jewish patrimony: the *basileia tou theou*.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Paul in fact presents *two* different lineages to account for this gentile inclusion in God’s kingdom. The first, and the one more prominently discussed in New Testament scholarship, is the one traced through Christ back to Abraham (Gal 3 and Rom 4). This new gentile patrimony is not presented consistently. Sometimes Paul positions himself as his gentiles’ father (1 Cor 4.15: “I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel”). Sometimes he refers to “our father Abraham” (Rom 4.1; cf. Gal 3.29: “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s *sperma*”). But most dramatically – one of the rare Aramaic outcroppings in New Testament literature – Paul speaks of *God* as the gentiles’ new father, their “Abba” (Gal 4.7; Rom 8.15). Inheriting the Abrahamic promise of redemption *ek pisteos*, out of steadfastness or conviction, these gentiles live by hope. As is the case with all human adoption, they remain distinct with respect to physical genealogy. (They are of different “flesh” from Paul’s *sungeneis*, who already have sonship apart from Christ, Rom 9.4). According to the Spirit, however, they are *adopted* sons, responsible to and for the new patrilineal cult. Thus they are heirs too, according to the promise, legitimate co-inheritors together with Israel of God’s kingdom.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Note, also, how this Roman metaphor resonates with the larger pan-Mediterranean construction of divine/human relations: Gods and their humans form family groups. If these *ethnē* now worship Israel’s god, then they are adopted into that god’s family. (I should add that they worship this god according to the dictates of the first table of his Israelite law: no other gods, and no images).

The other lineage that Paul constructs for these *ethnē* is more biblically traditional, and the salvific function of Christ is accordingly reduced. This lineage is evoked at the crescendo of Paul’s argument in Romans 11:25-26, and he again conjures it as he closes, in Romans 15:9-12, with a cento of citations to the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Paul says in Romans 11, “A hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the fullness of the gentiles comes in, and so all Israel will be saved.” *Plerōma tōn ethnōn* and *pas Israēl*. Paul’s language here echoes that of the Table of the Nations in Gen 10 – traditionally imagined as totaling seventy nations. This idea is reprised in Isa 66:18-20, an incandescently eschatological vision of “all nations and tongues” coming to see God’s glory in Jerusalem. From there this trope threads through Jubilees (8-9), the Qumran Genesis Apocryphon (16-17) and the War Scroll (1 QM 2.10-14), book 3 of the Sybilline Oracles, Josephus (*AJ*  1.120-147), the rabbis and the Targumim: it bespeaks “all humanity.” In this cluster of associations, *Noah* is the primal ancestor. From him come three sons, whose sons have sons who have sons in turn, until, with Johab, the full number reaches 70 (or 72, if refracted through Deut 32.8 MT).[[16]](#footnote-16)

Here Paul nowhere mobilizes his adoption metaphors; and the “Redeemer who comes from Zion” might be as easily read as Israel’s god, not his messiah (Rm 11:26).[[17]](#footnote-17) The *ethnē* are *ethnē*, not *adelphoi*. Their “fullness” together with Israel, is Paul’s way, too, of saying “all humanity” – especially, given the way Isaiah provides the prophetic substructure of the entire letter, “all eschatological humanity.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Reprising his argument in Romans 15, Paul concludes, “Christ became a servant to the circumcised in order to show God’s truth, to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and in order that the *ethnē* might glorify God for his mercy.” The gentiles then praise God together with Israel, and they hope in the messiah, the root or shoot of Jesse (Rom 15:9-12).

What then are the metaphors of outsiders’ belonging within Israel’s redemption that Paul appeals to for his gospel? “Citizenship” does not come into play. Rather, Paul avails himself of two other metaphors, one Roman, thus pagan; the other biblical and, thus, Jewish. With the “Roman” *domus*-model, he speaks of adoption and inheritance achieved through a constructed lineage, though that lineage is effected *kata pneuma* via Christ to Abraham. With the biblical model, Paul speaks of descent from Noah, Genesis 10 – all seventy nations – refracted through Isa 66. Israel and the *ethnē*, together in the charismatic *ekklēsia* that expects imminent redemption, thus do and do not form the same family; they are and are not under the same *nomos* or *dikaiōmata*.[[19]](#footnote-19) But both people-groups hope in the same promised inheritance; and together, under the god of Israel and his son, the messiah, they form a single eschatological community of the saved.

1. See P. Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2010), 3-15; eadem, “Mandatory Retirement: Ideas in the Study of Christian Origins whose Time Has Come to Go,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 35 (2006) 231-246, at p. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the problems with importing the modern concept of “religion” into Mediterranean antiquity, see Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion. A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2013; idem, “The Concept of Religion and the Study of the Apostle Paul,” *Journal of the Jesus Movement in its Jewish Setting* 2 (2015) 1-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the cultic maintenance of good divine-human relations, John Scheid, *Quand faire, c’est croire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005) and, more recently idem, *The Gods, the State, and the Individual* (Philadelphia” University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); for domestic cult, *Household and Family Religion*, edd. John Bodel and Saul M. Olyan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We see a classic statement of this cluster of ideas around ethnicity and cult – gods, family, culture, cult – in a famous passage of the Greek historian Herodotus (fifth century BCE). There, Herodotus defined “Greekness,” *to hellēnikon*, in terms of shared blood (*homaimon*), language (*homoglōssa*), sancturaries and sacrifices (*theōn hidrumata koina kai thusiai*), and customs (*ethea homotropa*; *Histories* 8.144.2-3). Half a millennium later, in his letter to the Romans, Paul will define “Jewishness” with much the same categories. Israelites are his *sungeneis*, “kinsmen” (a shared “blood” term: *syn*- “together with;” *genos*, “family”). To them, Paul says, belong the “glory” (*doxa*), the covenants (*diathēkai*), the giving of the Law (that is, the Torah, *nomothesia*), and the “worship” (*latreia*; Rom 9.4-5).The English of the Revised Standard Version obscures two of Paul’s key identifiers here, *doxa* and *latreia.* Behind Paul’s Greek word for “glory” stands the Hebrew *kavod,* which refers specifically to God’s glorious presence, thus to the location of that presence, namely his temple in Jerusalem. And *latreia* (“worship” or “offerings”) points to the Hebrew *avodah*: Paul here names the sacrificial cult, revealed in scripture and enacted around Jerusalem’s altar, as a defining privilege of Israel. Paul’s two words, *doxa*  and *latreia*, in brief, correspond exactly to Herodotus’ “sanctuaries and sacrifices.” Despite the six centuries standing between them, both of these Greek thinkers, pagan and Jew, define cult via ethnicity, and ethnicity via cult. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On the civic construction of divine lineages, and the ways that diplomat mobilized these to secure and to stabilize intra-city agreements, see especially C.P. Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World* (HUP 1999). Jones comments on Romans as “Aeneadae” on p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ex 20.3-4; Deut 5.6-21, the first commandment in these two iterations of the Decalogue. On the elasticity of Hellenistic Jewish interpretation of this commandment, see Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations. The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” *NTS* 56 (2010): 232-52, at pp. 236-38; and the following note. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Pagan complaints of Jewish *asebeia* are assembled in M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1974-1994); for anti-Jewish ethnographic slurs more generally, B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 440-491. The principle of Jewish exemption from public cult was so well established that emperors, attempting to recruit Jews into onerous service in the civic curiae, stipulated that civic liturgies should not “transgress their religion,” *Digesta Iust.* 50.2.3.3, text with translation and analysis in A. Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987)103-07; and Jews were explicitly excused from worship of the emperor, jAZ 5.4 (44d). Inscriptional material on Jews as ephebes, town counselors, and officers in gentile armies is assembled in M. Williams, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans: A Diasporan Sourcebook* (Baltimore 1998) 107-31. Two recent discussions of Hellenistic Jewish acculturation may be found in J. Barclay, *Jews in the Western Mediterranean Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) and in E. Gruen, *Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

   On the famous gymnasium inscription from Cyrene, E. Schürer-G. Vermes, *et al., History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987) 3: 130-31 (hereafter cited as *HJP*); Barclay, *Diaspora*, 234f. On Jews as athletes and gladiators (thus contestants in dedicated events), A. Kerkeslager, “Maintaining Jewish Identity in the Greek Gymnasium: A ‘Jewish Load’ in *CPJ*  3.519,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* XXVIII (1997): 12-33; more recently, Z. Weiss, *Public Spectacles in Roman and Late Antique Palestine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 195-226. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This συγγένεια also appears in 1 Macc 12:21 and in 2 Macc 5:9 and in; for Heracles’ union with Abraham’s granddaughter, *A.J.* 1.24–41. Further on this Spartan/Judean family link, Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy,* 67-80. Paul, with a difference, will also avail himself of this idea of Abraham as “the father of many nations,” Rom 4:11–18; Gal 3:7–14; cf. Gen 17:5; see Stanley Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1994), 227–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “It is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only those gods whom her husband esteems,” Plutarch, *Mor.* 140D. On the protocols of Roman adoption, and the ways that the new son becomes involved with his adopted pantheon, now see M. Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press 2011), 50–60; on the Empire as “family” (gens) united in the worship of pater Augustus’ *genius*, 60-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On enlisting the gods’ – or the god’s – support in defense of the empire, see esp. J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), esp. 292ff. The ritual creation of obligations to new gods and new ancestors through marriage and/or adoption gives us our closest contemporary correlations to the effects of “converting” to Judaism: see Fredriksen, “Mandatory Retirement,” 231-46. On *pistis* and *fides,* explicitly comparing classical with eventual Christian usages, T. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015). According to Plato, *eusebeia* involves proper deference to both gods and to parents, *Rep.* 615c (see discussion in Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 4f.). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. On the pagan presence in the temple precincts, *HJP* 3: 309-13; see too E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE – 66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 72-76; on the pagan presence in diaspora synagogues, P. Fredriksen, “If It *Looks* like a Duck, and It *Quacks* like a Duck. . . : On *Not* Giving Up the Godfearers,” *A Most Reliable Witness. Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer*, edd. Susan Ashbrook Harvey *et al.* (Providence: Brown Judaic Series, 2016), 25-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. All of Paul’s seven uncontested letters are addressed to ex-pagan gentile assemblies: 1 Thes 1.9, “You turned to God from idols;” Philippians 3.2 and Galatians passim: only non-Jewish groups would be candidates for circumcision; the Corinthian correspondence is much concerned with Christ-followers’ relations with their pagan families and larger environment; Romans 1.6 and 11.13 explicitly address *ethnē.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Thus, even in Galatians, Paul’s most intemperate letter against pagan Judaizing, he holds up “fulfilling the whole Law,” 4.14; cf. Rom 13.8-10, where he lists the commandments of the Law’s second table; see also P. Fredriksen, ““Paul’s Letter to the Romans, the Ten Commandments, and Pagan ‘Justification by Faith,’” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133.4 (2014): 801-08. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. M. Peppard, “Brother against Brother: *Controversiae*  about Inheritance Disputes and 1 Corinthians 6.1-11,” *JBL*  133 (2014): 179-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On which see especially C. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs* (New York: Oxford University Press 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This theme is examined exhaustively by James M. Scott, *Paul and the Nations*  (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. So Krister Stendahl, in his lectures on Romans, *Final Account* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1995) 38; see too J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Wagner, *Heralds*, esp. the chart on 342-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. C. Johnson Hodge, “The Question of Identity: Gentiles as Gentiles – but also Not – in Pauline Communities,” *Paul within Judaism*, edd. Mark Nanos and Magnus Zetterhold (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2015), 153-73; and P. Fredriksen, “The Question of Worship: Pagans and the Redemption of Israel,” *ibid.,* 175-201. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)