

# Circumcision in Galatia: Why Did Some Gentile Christ Followers Seek Circumcision in the Early Jesus Movement?

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## Abstract

This article aims to answer the question of why gentile Christ followers in the Galatian *ekklēsia* wanted to get circumcised. I suggest that one part of the answer can be found in the fact that Paul reshapes their ethnicity in two ways. First, Paul incorporates the gentile Christ followers into Abraham's family and gives them a new genealogy in Christ. The gentile Christ follower is no longer a gentile but has become one in Christ with Jewish Christ followers, a son of Abraham, son of the god of Israel, and a child of Sarah, the free woman. Second, by belonging to the Galatian *ekklēsia* gentile Christ followers have joined a new cult, a cult which in many ways required them not to engage in their previous cults to the same degree as before. The most important cultic requirement Paul asks of his gentile Christ followers is that they only worship the god of Israel as their god, no other gods. By reshaping the gentile Christ followers' identity in this way, Paul makes them more Jewish. Hence, I argue that for these gentiles, it would seem quite natural that getting circumcised would be the next step in their journey as Christ followers.

## Keywords

Galatians, 1 Corinthians, Circumcision, Ethnicity, Cult, Genealogy

## 1. Introduction

Paul's letter to the gentile Christ followers in Galatia is arguably the apostle's most pointed letter.<sup>1</sup> The problem, as Paul sees it, is that the Galatians are abandoning his message for another (Gal 1:6–9). Moreover, the key issue for

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<sup>1</sup> On the gentile audience of this letter, see Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 75–85; Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 4. Pace Verena Jegher-Bucher, *Der Galaterbrief auf dem Hintergrund antiker Epistolographie und Rhetorik Ein anderes Paulusbild*, ATANT 78 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991), 98–115; Bas Van Os, "The Jewish Recipients of Galatians," in *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, *Pauline Studies* 5, (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 51–64.

Paul lies in the Galatians' wish to fully adopt the Jewish law, which includes getting circumcised.<sup>2</sup> Much has been written regarding why Paul opposed circumcision in the case of the Galatians and his attitude toward the Jewish law.<sup>3</sup> Hence, my focus lies elsewhere. Whereas it is clear that Paul argued against circumcision in the case of the gentile Christ followers in Galatia, it is unclear *why* the Galatians wanted to get circumcised in the first place.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I explore one possible motive that may have been behind the desire of the gentile members of the *ekklesia* to get circumcised, namely that Paul rewrites these gentiles' genealogy so that they become Abraham's offspring and that their membership in the Jewish Jesus movement required them to change their cultic, and therefore also social, customs.<sup>5</sup> Given the proximity between genealogy and cult and their bearing on one's ethnicity in antiquity, I argue that when Paul incorporates his gentiles into Abraham's line of descent and instructs them to follow certain Jewish customs, he is also making them "more Jewish." Consequently, this made the gentile Christ followers more susceptible to a message that required them to adopt the Jewish law and get circumcised since they were already well on their way to adopting a more Jewish way of life.

## 2. Constructing Ethnicity through Genealogy and Cult

In the modern West, we often view religion, ethnicity, and one's personal life or customs as three separate spheres. During Paul's time, things were different,

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Philip F. Esler, "Group Boundaries and Intergroup Conflict in Galatians: A New Reading of Galatians 5:13–6:10," in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 215–240, esp. 215; Nils A. Dahl, "Galatians: Genre, Content, and Structure," in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 117–142, esp. 136; William S. Campbell, "'I Rate All Things as Loss': Paul's Puzzling Accounting System. Judaism as Loss or the Re-evaluation of All Things in Christ," in *Celebrating Paul: Festschrift in Honour of Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.*, ed. Peter Spitaler, CBQMS 48, (Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2011), 39–61, 46; Paula Fredriksen, "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2," in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 235–260, esp. 235.

<sup>3</sup> For a concise overview of scholarly approaches to Paul and the Jewish law, see Panayotis Coutsoumpos, "Paul's Attitude towards the Law," in *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Pauline Studies 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 39–50.

<sup>4</sup> On some of the common explanations why Paul argued against circumcision in Galatians, see Ryan D. Collman, *The Apostle to the Foreskin: Circumcision in the Letters of Paul*, BZNW 259 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 56–60.

<sup>5</sup> I use the word "cult" rather than "religion" when discussing the Jesus movement and other groups that worshiped a god or several gods.

and lines were blurrier. “Religion,” a concept that did not exist at the time, and ethnicity went hand in hand, shaping and influencing each other.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, one’s personal life and customs could not be distinguished from the culture and cultic life (“religion”) of the city—especially not since virtually every household, at least in the Roman empire, would have their own deities (the *Lares* and *Penates*) and to which parts of food and drink were offered during dinners.<sup>7</sup> Paula Fredriksen aptly captures the sense of the ancient understanding of ethnicity, cult, and social life: “In antiquity, gods were local in a dual sense. They attached to particular *places* ... and gods also attached to particular *peoples*; ‘religion’ ran in the blood. In this sense, one’s *genos* was as much a cult-designation as what we, from a sociological or anthropological

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<sup>6</sup> The issue of the anachronism in applying the modern concept and word “religion” to ancient people has become increasingly recognized in scholarship. John S. Kloppenborg (*Christ’s Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019], 10–18) points out two of the major flaws in applying the modern term “religion” to antiquity. First, our modern concept and word “religion” does not correspond to any word in Greek, Latin, or Hebrew. The closest word to the English “religion” is the Latin *religio*, but *religio* does not mean religion in our modern sense but refers rather to “rites” or “worship.” The problem, however, goes beyond semantics since not only did those writing in Greek, Latin, or Hebrew not have a word for “religion,” but they did not have the concept of religion in mind when writing. For many modern people, “religion” is on the one side of the spectrum and on the other we find “secularism.” Consequently, we can divide the world into religious and secular parts. Ancient people did not. For Cicero (*Nat. d.* 2.28.71–72; cf. 1.42.117), the opposite of *religio* was *superstitio* (which, in contrast to secularism, entailed carrying out rites and worship to the extreme). Moreover, many things we today would deem secular were closely connected with the gods in antiquity, e.g., politics, wars, and family life. The second problem with applying “religion” to antiquity, Kloppenborg notes, is that religion today often refers to an individual and intrinsic belief. In antiquity, the outward life of the cult—with its processions, prayers, festivals, and perhaps most importantly, its sacrifices—were the key features of a pious life. On the modern concept of religion and how the modern concept of religion cannot be applied to antiquity, see Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: The New American Library, 1964); Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> For mentions of the *Lares* and *Penates* in the house, see Tibullus, *Elegies* 1.3.34–35; Juvenal, *Sat.* 12.83–92. More generally on these divine beings, see Beth Severy, *Augustus and the Family at the Birth of the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2003), 97, 119–123. On the role of cults in Roman households, see John Bodel, “Cicero’s Minerva, *Penates*, and the Mother of the *Lares*: An outline of Roman Domestic Religion,” in *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, ed. John Bodel and Saul M. Olyan, *The Ancient World: Comparative Histories* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 248–275.

perspective, see as an ‘ethnic’ one: ethnicity expressed ‘religion’.... And religion expressed ‘ethnicity’.<sup>8</sup>

One of the earliest extant and most well-known articulations of ethnicity in the ancient world comes from the Greek author Herodotus (fifth century BCE). He writes: “Being Greek (Ἑλληνικός) is sharing the same blood (δαιμός), same language (ὁμόγλωσσος), the shrines of the gods (θεῶν ἰδρύματα), common sacrifices (κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι), and the same customs (ἥθεά τε ὁμότροπα).”<sup>9</sup> This brief text aptly illuminates how some thought ethnicity, cult, and customs were all intertwined and could not easily be separated.<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that to be Ἑλληνικός does not seem to be a strictly static thing, but “Greekness” is made up of genealogy, language, cult, and customs.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 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 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 35–63, 39 (emphasis original). I think David G. Horrell (“Religion, Ethnicity, and Way of Life: Exploring Categories of Identity,” *CBQ* 83 [2021]: 38–55, 45) is correct in noting that “‘running in the blood’ should not be taken to imply that ‘ethnicity’ (and ‘religion’) are thereby fixed or determined from birth. On the contrary ... both were part of a fluid and flexible field of identity construction.” Ethnicity, or kinship, also had a profound impact on other parts of ancient societies, e.g., politics (which, in turn, also was dependent, so ancient Greeks and Romans thought, on good relationships with the gods). Cf. Christopher P. Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World*, *Revealing Antiquity* 12 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> *The Persian Wars* 8.144 (my translation). See also Rosalind Thomas, “Ethnicity, Genealogy, and Hellenism in Herodotus,” in *Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity*, ed. Irad Malkin, *Center for Hellenic Studies Colloquia* 5 (Washington: Center for Hellenic Studies: 2001), 213–233; Rosaria Vignolo Munson, “Herodotus and Ethnicity,” in *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Jeremy McInerney, *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 341–355.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan M. Hall (*Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 39) argues that cults and rituals often played one of the most crucial roles when it came to ethnicity in ancient Greece: “Even more significant than common customs were the cults and rituals that were thought to unite the members of an ethnic group.” Albrecht Dihle (“Response,” in *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World*, ed. Anthony W. Bulloch et al., *Hellenistic Culture and Society* 12 [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], 287–295) corroborates this emphasis on cult: “Being conscious of one’s own Greek identity was brought about through participation in the cult of the city.”

<sup>11</sup> According to Hall (*Ethnic Identity*, 47), the Persian Wars constituted a shift in how Greek ethnicity and self-definition were created: “If, from the fifth century, Greek self-definition was *oppositional*, prior to the Persian Wars it was *aggregative*. Rather than being defined ‘from without’, it was constructed cumulatively ‘from within’. It was a definition based not on difference from the barbarian but on similarity with peer

Consequently, Herodotus displays what modern scholarship on ethnicity refers to as a subjectivist understanding of ethnicity.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it is plausible to think that if one were to alter any of these components, one would also alter the degree to which one was Greek.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, I argue that when gentiles joined the Jesus movement they altered aspects of their genealogy, language, cult, and/or customs.

Joining the Jewish Jesus movement during the first century CE as a gentile not only meant that you now belonged to a new group; it meant that you, in many ways, had to leave behind your old way of life.<sup>14</sup> Several texts

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groups which attempted to attach themselves to one another by invoking common descent from Hellen.” On the Greek-barbarian antithesis, see Hyun Jin Kim, *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China* (London: Duckworth, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> On the two predominant understandings of ethnicity in modern scholarship, objectivist and subjectivist, Rogers Brubaker (*Grounds for Difference* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015], 48) comments that there has been a significant shift “from *objectivist* to *subjectivist* understandings [of ethnicity]. For the former, race and ethnicity exist independently of people’s beliefs and practices; for the latter, they are *generated* by such beliefs and practices. For the former, racial and ethnic divisions are prior to the classification practices through which they are subsequently recognized (or misrecognized); for the latter racial and ethnic divisions are *constituted* by classification practices. For the former, in short, race and ethnicity are *things in the world*; for the latter, they are *perspectives on* and *constructions of the world*” (emphasis original). As an example of this shift, Jeremy McInerney (“Ethnicity: An Introduction,” in McInerney, *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, 1–16, esp. 3) writes in the introduction: “What ethnicity is emphatically not is a fixed biological entity based on primordial ties of kinship.” Further on the topic of modern developments in research on ethnicity, see Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor, “Ethnic Identity Research: How Far Have We Come?” in *Studying Ethnic Identity: Methodological and Conceptual Approaches Across Disciplines*, ed. C. E. Santos and Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2015), 11–26.

<sup>13</sup> Denise Kimber Buell (*Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2005], 38) points out that the criteria of Greek ethnicity that Herodotus mentions were also called upon in later Greek texts. Nevertheless, Buell further notes, “We should not presume that these criteria are either *essential* to Greek ethnicity or the only criteria ever cited” (emphasis original). On the topic of how the criteria Herodotus employs were used, altered, or dropped by later authors, see Suzanne Said, “The Discourse of Identity in Greek Rhetoric from Isocrates to Aristides,” in *Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity*, ed. Irad Malkin, Center for Hellenic Studies Colloquia 5 (Washington: Center for Hellenic Studies: 2001), 275–299.

<sup>14</sup> The difficulties in leaving the old life behind can be readily seen in 1 Cor 8, where Paul urges some Christ followers who frequent cultic meals to consider not doing so for the sake of those Christ followers who perceive the dinners to amount to idolatry. On 1 Cor 8, Jason T. Lamoreaux (“Ritual Negotiation,” in *Early Christian Ritual Life*, ed. Richard E. DeMaris, Jason T. Lamoreaux, and Steven C. Muir [London: Routledge, 2017], 133–145, esp. 143) comments: “Participation in sacrifice and sacrificial meals

produced in the early stages of the Jesus movement, Paul's included, demonstrate the notion that non-Jewish members had to abandon at least some of their previous customs.<sup>15</sup> For example, Acts 21:25 (cf. 15:29) makes it clear that gentile Christ-followers must abstain from a number of things: "Concerning the faithful gentiles (πεπιστευκότων ἐθνῶν), we send this judgement: they are to stay away from food offered to idols (εἰδωλόθυτος), blood (αἷμα), meat from strangled animals (πνικτός), and sexual immorality (πορνεία)."<sup>16</sup> The Didache also mentions the ban on εἰδωλόθυτος. In 6.3, we read: "Now concerning food, endure what you are able. But make certain to stay away from food offered to idols; for it is the worship of dead gods."<sup>17</sup> Like Acts, the Didache is unambiguous in its ban on food offered to idols. Indeed, Huub van den Sandt and David Flusser argue that Did. 6.2–3 is a later addition to the Didache—which is grounded in Acts 15—made by Jewish and gentile Christ followers in order to inform the latter that they need not keep the whole of the Jewish law, only what they are able to and to avoid food offered to idols.<sup>18</sup> Paul, too, discusses the concept of food offered to idols and whether Christ followers can eat of such food or not (more on this below). For him, however, the main aspect of their previous life gentile Christ followers had to leave behind was the worship of gods other than the god of Israel. As Fredriksen puts it: "We should see clearly what Paul is asking of his pagans, and what (so far as we know) absolutely all of the apostles in the early years of this messianic movement were demanding of their gentile followers: No λατρεία to native gods."<sup>19</sup>

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establishes and maintains familial ties and identities. In asking the Corinthians to abstain from idol meat, Paul does not simply ask the knowledgeable to avoid idolatry or contamination from such things.... If ritual is an indicator of identity, Paul is asking—commanding, really—the knowledgeable to distance themselves from familial activities and their ties to households outside of the Jesus group.... So, what Paul demanded of them amounted to social violence, an act that would cut them off from social, as well as material, resources."

<sup>15</sup> On this topic in Paul and other Christ following authors, see Michele Murray, "Romans 2 Within the Broader Context of Gentile Judaizing in Early Christianity," in *The So-Called Jew in Paul's Letter to the Romans*, ed. Rafael Rodríguez and Matthew Thiessen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 163–182.

<sup>16</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>17</sup> Based on the Greek text from *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). Greek: Περὶ δὲ τῆς βρώσεως ὃ δύνασται βάσασον ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ εἰδωλοθύτου λίαν πρόσεχε λατρεία γὰρ ἐστὶν θεῶν νεκρῶν.

<sup>18</sup> Huub van den Sandt and David Flusser, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and Its Place in early Judaism and Christianity*, CRINT 5 (Assen: Royal Van Gorcul; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 238–270.

<sup>19</sup> Paula Fredriksen, "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel," *NTS* 56 (2010): 232–252, esp. 251.

I now turn to two key tenets regarding the creation of ethnicity in antiquity: genealogy and cult. First, I go through several examples of how these two facets created and maintained ethnicity; second, I turn to Paul's letter to the Galatians to see how Paul reshapes the genealogy and cultic life of his gentile Christ followers and why that might have led them to seek circumcision.

### 3. Genealogy

Genealogy, kinship (συγγένεια), and descent (γένος) were important facets of creating ethnicity in the ancient world. This is evident in an account from 1 Macc 12:19–23. This account tells how the king of the Spartans, Areios, sends a letter to the high priest Onias with the information that “it has been found in writing about the Spartans and the Jews that they are brothers (ἀδελφοί) and that they are from the offspring of Abraham (ἐκ γένους Αβρααμ).” This purported discovery on the part of the Spartans further leads the king to claim that everything the Jews own now belongs to the Spartans and vice versa. We find the same letter in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* (12.226). In this version of the letter, Areios writes that he discovered in a writing that Jews and Lacedaemonians are of shared descent (ἐξ ἐνὸς εἶεν γένους) and related through Abraham (ἐκ τῆς πρὸς Ἀβρααμ οἰκειότητος).<sup>20</sup> By claiming a shared ancestry, the Spartans claim that they are now genealogically connected to the Jews, and they can both therefore expect certain things from each other.

Now, this claim of shared Abrahamic descent should be taken with a grain of salt. John Bartlett notes that “the Spartan correspondence must surely belong to the genre of diplomatic fiction.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the examples from 1

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<sup>20</sup> The Spartans in 1 Macc 12:19–23 and the Lacedaemonians mentioned in Josephus's work refer to the same thing: Lacedaemon was the city-state in which Sparta was the main settlement.

<sup>21</sup> John R. Bartlett, *1 Maccabees*, Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 95. Bartlett (ibid) suggests that the reason why the Jewish author of 1 Maccabees wanted to associate the Jews with the Spartans was because “the Spartans were famous in the ancient world for their militarism, and for their laws, and perhaps for these reasons the Jewish author was anxious to associate the Jewish state, founded on the law and on the military successes of Judas, Jonathan, Simon and John Hyrcanus, with such a famous exemplar.” For a fuller analysis of the accounts in 1 Maccabees and Josephus, see Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy*, 75–79; Erich S. Gruen, “Jewish Perspectives on Greek Culture and Ethnicity,” in *Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity*, ed. Irad Malkin, Center for Hellenic Studies Colloquia 5 (Washington: Center for Hellenic Studies: 2001), 347–373, esp. 361–363; idem, “The Purported Jewish-Spartan Affiliation,” in *Transitions to Empire: Essays in Greco-Roman History, 360–146 B.C., in Honor of E. Badian*, ed. Robert W. Wallace and Edward M. Harris, Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture 21 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 254–269.

Maccabees and Josephus show that ethnic ties could be altered based on a newly discovered shared descent.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the shared descent was deemed genuine as long as both parties accepted it, regardless of how factually or biologically accurate the claim was.<sup>23</sup>

We find another example of the malleability of ethnicity in the writings of Philo.<sup>24</sup> In his *On the Virtues*, Philo turns to Moses' instructions vis-à-vis the foreigner (ἐπιλύτης) who wants to join the Jewish community. Philo writes:

[Moses] holds that the foreigners also should be accorded every favour and consideration as their due, because abandoning their kinsfolk by blood (γενεὰν μὲν τὴν ἀφ' αἵματος), country (πατρίδα), customs (ἔθη), temples (ιερά), and images of the gods (ἀφιδρύματα θεῶν), but also the tributes and honours paid to them, they have taken the journey to a better home, from idle gables to the clear vision of truth and the reverence of the one and truly existing God (τοῦ ἐνός καὶ ὄντως ὄντος θεοῦ).<sup>25</sup>

These foreigners, Philo continues, should be treated “not only as friends and kin (ὡς φίλους καὶ συγγενεῖς), but as themselves.” In a similar passage in *On The Special Laws*, Philo writes that non-Jews who have decided to join the Jewish community have left “their country, friends, and kinsfolk (πατρίδα καὶ φίλους καὶ

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<sup>22</sup> The malleability of descent could work both ways. On the one hand, one could include people in it, like 1 Maccabees and Josephus show; on the other, one could exclude people from it. For example, according to Philo, Abrahamic descent was only passed on via Isaac and then Jacob (Cf. *Praem.* 57; *Virt.* 207). Paul makes a similar statement in Rom 9:7: “Because not all Abraham’s children are his descendants, but ‘in Isaac a descendant will be named for you’ (οὐδ’ ὅτι εἰσὶν σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ, πάντες τέκνα, ἀλλ’ ἐν Ἰσαὰκ κληθήσεται σοι σπέρμα).”

<sup>23</sup> Rather than creating shared kinship through connections between gods and humans, Hellenistic Jews, who worshiped a god who did not leave any offspring behind, instead drew on connections to the patriarchs to get as close as possible to the Greco-Roman way of creating kinship between peoples. Cf. Paula Fredriksen, “The Question of Worship: Gods, Pagans, and the Redemption of Israel,” in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Lanham: Fortress, 2015), 175–201, esp. 179.

<sup>24</sup> In this article, I focus on those ancient writers who thought ethnicity was malleable. However, not everyone agreed with this idea. For example, Matthew Thiessen (*Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 108) has shown “that there was a constant stream of Jewish thought,” opposing the idea non-Jews could become Jews.

<sup>25</sup> *Virt.* 102–103 (slightly altered from LCL).



συγγενείς) because of virtue and piety.”<sup>26</sup> It is clear from these two passages that Philo envisioned that the foreigner who wanted to be a part of the Jewish community at the expense of any other would consequently give up his or her ancestors and kinsfolk in order to do so. Philo then goes on to appeal to his fellow Jews that the foreigner who wants to become a part of the Jewish community must not be denied “another citizenship, family, and friends (ἐτέρων πόλεων καὶ οἰκείων καὶ φίλων).” Even though Philo does not explicitly say that these foreigners gain a new ethnicity—although he strongly alludes to it—when abandoning their old way of life for a new one with an exclusive commitment to Jewish laws and customs, David Horrell is right to point out that “Philo’s description of the welcome that should be accorded to ‘incomers’ to the Jewish community...constitutes a rich description of a transition that encompasses a number of features commonly associated with ethnic identity.”<sup>27</sup> I now turn to discuss the importance of cult in the creation of ethnicity.

#### 4. Cult

On the close connection between cult and ethnicity during the Roman era, Larry Hurtado comments: “For at least most people of the Roman era, their ethnic identity was basically given at birth, and gods linked to that ethnic group came as part of the package.”<sup>28</sup> We see the connection between belonging to a people and worshiping that people’s gods in Josephus’ two writings, *Against Apion* and *The Jewish Antiquities*. In the first text, Apion, commenting on the Jews in Alexandria, is baffled at the idea that these Jews, though citizens, do not worship the same gods as the other Alexandrians do.<sup>29</sup> In *Antiquities*, Josephus records how the Ionians plead with Marcus Agrippa that if Jews were to become kin (συγγένεια) to the Ionians, the former should also worship the Ionians’ gods.<sup>30</sup> The logic at work in both these accounts is

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<sup>26</sup> *Spec.* 1.52.

<sup>27</sup> Horrell, “Way of Life,” 49. On this passage in Philo, Shaye J. D. Cohen (“Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” *HTR* 82 [1989]: 13–33, esp. 26–27) comments: “It is striking that Philo does not explicitly associate the process of conversion with the observance of the special laws, notably circumcision; we may presume that Philo would have required the proselyte, upon acquiring membership in the Israelite polity, to observe all the laws observed by the Israelites.”

<sup>28</sup> Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016), 78.

<sup>29</sup> *Against Apion* 2.65. Josephus answers Apion by saying that he should not be surprised by the fact that the Jews in Alexandria obey their own ancestral laws, even when in Egypt.

<sup>30</sup> *The Jewish Antiquities* 12.126. On conflicts between Jewish communities in Asia Minor and other people groups, see Christopher D. Stanley, “‘Neither Jew Nor Greek’: Ethnic Conflict in Graeco-Roman Society,” *JSNT* 64 (1996): 101–124. On the role of

that if one people group are to be a part of the people they live among, they should also participate in the worship of the local gods.<sup>31</sup>

The notion that cult and ethnicity were interconnected during the first century CE, Denise Kimber Buell argues, was widely held in the Mediterranean:

By the first century C.E., religion was well established as a public discourse that was especially useful for asserting, contesting, and transforming ethnoracial as well as civic identities across the Mediterranean basin. How and who one worshipped could *indicate or create* one's ethnoracial and/or civic membership, even as it was viewed as a product of that membership.<sup>32</sup>

One can see the transformation of ethnicity via cult in 1 Peter.<sup>33</sup> The author of the letter implores the members of the Christ cult to live their new life in fear

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cultic participation in the Greek world Albrecht Dihle ("Response," in *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World*, ed. Anthony W. Bulloch et al., Hellenistic Culture and Society 12 [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], 287–295, esp. 295) comments: "The traditional cult of the traditional city gods turned out to remain the main factor of social integration for many centuries."

<sup>31</sup> In both texts, Jews are accused by non-Jews for not worshipping the gods of the place where they live and are citizens; however, it should be noted that in both cases, they are free to continue worshipping their own ancestral god and not forced to adopt the gods of others. Even though some maintained that people who were part of a particular city or country should worship the local deities, this was not enforced on everyone. Fredriksen ("Judaizing the Nations," 239) comments on this topic: "Refusal to worship the gods was the public behavior that pagan critics universally associated with Jews. It offended them. Nonetheless, majority culture, by and large, tolerated this singular aspect of Jewish behavior precisely because it was a demand of the Jewish god and was therefore ancient and ancestral." On the relationship between Jewish customs and the life of the Greco-Roman city, Tessa Rajak (*The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction*, AGJU 48 [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 302) suggests: "Jewish *nomoi* were not formally incompatible with city requirements, though they could become contentious if the populace of the officials wanted to make life awkward. That was when the authorities might create difficulties with Sabbath observance, close special food markets, deny ownership of meeting places, and prevent the export of funds. But it was not in the very nature of the *polis* to exclude such activities, and in the normal course of events, they must have proceeded without question."

<sup>32</sup> Buell, *New Race*, 49 (my emphasis).

<sup>33</sup> Likely written c. 80–90 CE. Cf. Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 43–50. For more on 1 Peter and ethnicity, see Janette H. Ok, *Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Who You Are No Longer*, LNTS 645 (London: T&T Clark, 2021).

(ἐν φόβῳ) of their heavenly Father (1:17). They are to adopt this new way of life since they have been liberated from their vain manner of life, which they had inherited from their ancestors (πατροπαράδοτος), by the precious blood of Christ.<sup>34</sup> “The result of this moral and religious change,” Buell points out, “is portrayed ethnographically.”<sup>35</sup> This is perhaps most clear in 1 Pet 2:9–10: “But you are a chosen γένος, a royal priesthood, a holy ἔθνος, a λαός for his possession.... Those who were once not a λαός are now the λαός of God.” The denseness with which these ethnicity-related terms occur in these two verses suggests that the author wishes to emphasize that a real ethnic change had occurred when these Christ followers had abandoned their ancestral cults and customs for those of the Jesus movement.<sup>36</sup> This is further suggested by the reference to rebirth in 1:23: “You have been born again, not out of a perishable seed (σπορά) but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”<sup>37</sup> John Elliot makes the following remark on this theme: “The image of birth ... symbolize[s] not only an event of religious conversion but also the termination of previous social ties and the commencement of new associations.”<sup>38</sup>

Combining both the idea of genealogy and cult, Nancy Jay demonstrates how the ritual of sacrifice can create patterns of descent.<sup>39</sup> Focusing on patrilineal descent, Jay writes: “Sacrificial ritual can serve in various ways as warrant of, and therefore as means of creating, patrilineal descent—as a principle of social organization, not as a fact of nature.”<sup>40</sup> She

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<sup>34</sup> The previous lifestyle of the Christ followers addressed in 1 Peter is further explained in 4:3: “For you have already spent long enough time doing the will of gentiles (τὸ βούλημα τῶν ἐθνῶν), living in licentiousness, desire, drunkenness, feasting, drinking, and lawless worship of idols (ἀθεμίτοις εἰδωλολατρίας).”

<sup>35</sup> Buell, *New Race*, 45.

<sup>36</sup> On these verses, Horrell (“Way of Life,” 54) remarks: “It is notable too that 1 Peter takes particularly emphatic steps toward identifying Christians as a ‘people’ in the climactic declaration of 2:9–10.... Drawing on various scriptural phrases, the author here combines all three people words—γένος, ἔθνος, and λαός—in a single verse, and initiates what became an influential designation of Christians as a γένος.” Cf. idem, *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, LNTS 394 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 133–163.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. 1 Pet 1:3.

<sup>38</sup> John Elliot, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 119.

<sup>39</sup> Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 30–46. This seems to have been especially important when it came to how men established their parenthood. Cf. Stanley K. Stowers, “Greeks Who Sacrifice and Those Who Do Not: Toward an Anthropology of Greek Religion,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 293–333, esp. 300–306.

<sup>40</sup> Jay, *Throughout Your Generations*, 37. Caroline Johnson Hodge (*If Sons, then Heirs*:

also points out that “when a form of social organization [such as patrilineal descent] is dependent on sacrifice for its identification and maintenance, it can also be lost by failure to sacrifice, and improper sacrifice can endanger it.”<sup>41</sup> Since the ancients could not guarantee biological patrilineal descent, unlike matrilineal descent, sacrifice was a powerful tool to create social patrilineal descent.<sup>42</sup> It was the latter type of patrilineal descent that was the most important in the Roman world. Caroline Johnson Hodge’s remark is instructive: “In Rome, legal descent passed through the *pater*, the socially recognized father, not the *genitor*, the biological father, a distinction even reflected in the language by these two words for father in legal contexts.”<sup>43</sup>

Having illustrated how genealogy and cult were essential components in creating and maintaining ethnicity in the Greco-Roman world, I now focus on how Paul used these two concepts to reconstruct the Galatians’ identity.

### **5. The Galatians’ Longing to Adopt the Jewish Law as an Expression of Wanting to Adopt a New (Jewish) Ethnicity**

When non-Jews joined the Christ group, they not only had to give up their native gods for an exclusive relationship with the god of Israel and this god’s Messiah, Jesus from Nazareth, but they also had to give up those aspects of their lives that were inextricably linked to their old gods. Hence, for gentiles, becoming a member of the *ekklēsia* in Galatia meant that they had to change key features of their own identities to become and remain acceptable members, such as ethnic identity and their previous cultic activities and rituals. Karin Neutel puts it well: “Gentiles who gave up their gods [when joining the Jesus movement] but did not circumcise could be seen to enter an ethnic no man’s land. As the hallmark of a Jew and a convert, circumcision would relieve the tension that this situation might be felt to create.”<sup>44</sup>

For the remainder of this article, I focus on how Paul rewrote the Galatians’ genealogy and made new cultic demands of them to provide one reason why they wanted to get circumcised.

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*A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17) points out that “Paul’s kinship logic derives primarily from the ideology of patrilineal descent.” This is clear in Galatians, but Paul’s reference to the Galatians being children of Sarah (4:31) shows that he did not regard patrilineal descent as the only important type of descent.

<sup>41</sup> Jay, *Throughout Your Generations*, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Jay, *Throughout Your Generations*, 36.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Karin B. Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal: Paul’s Declaration ‘Neither Jew Nor Greek, Neither Slave Nor Free, Nor Male and Female’ in the Context of First-Century Thought*, LNTS 513 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 99.

## 6. A New Genealogy in Christ

One of Paul's main objectives in Galatians, I argue, is to rewrite his gentile Christ followers' genealogical background.<sup>45</sup> By doing this, Paul hopes he can convince the Christ followers that what they could gain by adopting the Jewish law, they have already gained in Christ.<sup>46</sup> Put differently, in order to enjoy the blessings bestowed on Abraham, gentile Christ followers do not need to—indeed, should not—adopt Torah or seek to “become” Jews, since they access those blessings via Christ.<sup>47</sup> In fact, as Neutel points out: “it seems likely that becoming associated with Abraham through circumcision would for Paul entail a rejection of the Abrahamic lineage that already exists through Christ.... Paul's argument about alienation from Christ suggests that for gentiles, the two forms of kinship cannot coexist.”<sup>48</sup> But how does Paul rewrite the Galatians' genealogy, and what does he achieve by doing so?

In several instances in Galatians, Paul claims that through Christ followers' being in Christ, they are incorporated into Abraham's family and

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<sup>45</sup> Many readers of Paul have argued that what Paul proclaimed was a non-ethnic, universal “religion.” Several Pauline scholars, however, have started to question such a reading. For example, Johnson Hodge (*If Sons*, 48) writes: “The bifurcation of body and belief, ethnicity and religion, was foreign to first-century thinkers. I challenge this basic dichotomy by arguing that ethnic categories and religious categories cannot be disentangled in Paul. Paul does not reject an ethnic religion for a universal religion but deploys ethnic discourses to realign the relationship between two groups of peoples, *Ioudaioi* and gentiles. Indeed, Paul offers no non-ethnic alternative; even being ‘in Christ’ is ethnically defined.”

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Lloyd Gaston (*Paul and the Torah* [Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987], 32): “The Gentile counterpart to living in the covenant community of Torah is being ‘in Christ’.” See also, Karin B. Neutel and Matthew R. Anderson, “The First Cut is the Deepest: Masculinity and Circumcision in the First Century,” in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 228–244, esp. 238.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew Thiessen (*Paul and the Gentile Problem* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2016], 105) remarks: “Circumcision and adoption of the Jewish law are a dead end for gentiles because God did not intend for the Jewish law to make gentiles into sons of Abraham.” Thiessen further points to Pamela Eisenbaum's observation (“A Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman: Jesus, Gentiles, and Genealogy in Romans,” *JBL* 123 [2004]: 671–702, esp. 700) that the Torah did not even have this effect on Jews.

<sup>48</sup> Karin B. Neutel, “Circumcision Gone Wrong: Paul's Message as a Case of Ritual Disruption,” *Neot* 50 (2016): 373–396, esp. 383. Peter-Ben Smit (“In Search of Real Circumcision: Ritual Failure and Circumcision in Paul,” *JSNT* 40 [2017]: 73–100, esp. 80–81) sees the Galatians attempt to circumcise as a case of ritual failure since the ritual of circumcision in the case of this group of gentile Christ followers would cancel the ritual of being obedient to Christ. On Paul's opposition against gentile circumcision, see Martin Sanfridson, “Are Circumcision and Foreskin Really Nothing? Re-Reading 1 Corinthians 7:19 and Galatians 5:6; 6:15,” *SEÁ* 86 (2021): 129–146.

have a part in the blessing God bestowed on Abraham and his offspring. Paul lays the groundwork for his genealogical reasoning in Gal 3:6–9, and we can construct Paul’s argument that gentile Christ followers are descendants of Abraham in the following way. Paul starts in Gal 3:6 by quoting Gen 15:6 LXX: “Abraham put his trust in God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” From this, Paul concludes that those of faithfulness are the sons of Abraham in the following verse (οἱ ἐκ πίστεως οὗτοι υἱοὶ εἰσὶν Ἀβραάμ). Not only are Christ following gentiles sons of Abraham, but they are also blessed with Abraham, something Paul states that the scripture had foreseen already in Abraham’s own time (cf. Gen 12:3). Consequently, those who are of faithfulness are also sons of Abraham and blessed with the patriarch.<sup>49</sup>

Thus far, Paul has not mentioned Christ’s role in all of this, but in 3:15–18, Paul elaborates on how Christ fits into this picture. God’s promise to Abraham and his offspring, Paul claims, was not to all of Abraham’s descendants but to only *one* offspring.<sup>50</sup> This one offspring is Christ, and it is through him that God promised that the gentiles would be blessed in Abraham. However, as Paul further argues in 3:26, being in Christ does not only mean that the Galatian gentiles take part in Abraham’s blessing and descent, but they also become sons of God (υἱοὶ θεοῦ). Paul then transitions to his famous statement with regard to those who have been immersed in Christ, “there is no Jew or Greek, there is no slave or free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28).<sup>51</sup> He follows this by stating that

<sup>49</sup> I am inclined to agree with Johnson Hodge (*If Sons*, 83–86) and understand the phrase οἱ ἐκ πίστεως in that it refers to the πίστεις of Abraham, but also that of Christ.

<sup>50</sup> Paul here draws advantage of the singular form of σπέρμα in Gen 13:15, 17:8, and 24:7 to make his argument.

<sup>51</sup> Regarding this statement, some have argued that Paul is doing away with those things that differentiate between peoples (e.g., ethnicity and social status). Cf. Martinus C. De Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 245; N. T. Wright, *Galatians*, CCF (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 194. One can question this reading of Gal 3:28. First, Paul elsewhere differentiates between people groups (cf. Rom 1:18–32; 9:4–5; Gal 2:15) and seems very aware of his ethnicity (Phil 3:5). Second, I think Gal 3:28 should rather be understood as Paul’s way of saying that whatever identity markers a Christ follower may identify with (i.e., being Jewish, Greek, slave, free, male, or female), these markers are second to their identity as being in Christ (cf. Rom 6:3; 1 Cor 12:13). This understanding of Gal 3:28 is favored by, *inter alia*, Johnson Hodge, *If Sons*, 126–131; John M. G. Barclay, “‘Neither Jew Nor Greek’: Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 197–214; Patrick McMurray, *Sacrifice, Brotherhood, and the Body: Abraham and the Nations in Romans* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021), 97. See also Stanley K. Stowers (“Does Pauline Christianity Resemble a Hellenistic Philosophy?” in *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], 81–102, esp. 89–90) who compares the Pauline version of the Jesus movement to

those who are of Christ are Abraham's seed (τοῦ Ἀβραάμ σπέρμα) and heirs according to the promise of God. Christ, then, is the key in Paul's reasoning when it comes to the question of how gentiles can take part in the blessings previously only bestowed on Israel and be incorporated into Abraham's offspring.<sup>52</sup> As Buell and Johnson Hodge argue: "Paul establishes a kinship for gentiles with Israel that is based not on shared blood but on shared spirit. This kinship is portrayed as even more 'real' than that of blood, so it is a mistake to interpret Paul's rhetoric in terms of a mere metaphor. At baptism gentiles receive something of the 'stuff' of Christ when they receive his *pneuma*. Christ serves as the link for the gentiles to the lineage of Abraham."<sup>53</sup>

At this point, there should be little doubt that Paul deliberately rewrites the gentile Christ followers' genealogy. These gentiles are no longer whatever they were before they joined the Jesus movement and the Galatian *ekklēsia* but have now become one in Christ, sons of Abraham, sons of God, children of the promise, and children of Sarah, the free woman.<sup>54</sup> Paul's

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Hellenistic philosophies and argues that, like some Hellenistic philosophies, Paul worked with a hierarchy of 'goods,' of which the highest good was being in Christ. As Denise Kimber Buell and Caroline Johnson Hodge ("The Politics of Interpretations: The Rhetoric of Race and Ethnicity in Paul," *JBL* 123 [2004]: 235–251, esp. 238) point out: "If we interpret Paul by viewing ethnicity as a dynamic discourse that negotiates between the poles of fixity and fluidity, then Gal 3:28 can be seen as an attempt to define a communal vision in terms of ethnicity—not over against ethnicity. Paul uses 'ethnic reasoning' to solve the problem of excluding gentiles from God's promises to Israel. He constructs his arguments within the scope of ethnoracial discourse but shifts the terms of membership and the relationship between existing groups—Greek and Judean—such that they can be brought into an ethnoracial relationship with one another. Ethnic reasoning serves Paul well, offering a model of unity and connection among peoples while maintaining differences. He preserves the categories of Greek or gentile and Judean while uniting them, hierarchically ('first the Judean, then the Greek'), under the umbrella of Abraham's descendants and God's people."

<sup>52</sup> The comments of Buell and Johnson Hodge ("Politics of Interpretation," 245) are apt: "Paul formulates his central theological problem in terms of ethnicity: gentile alienation from the God of Israel. Not surprisingly, then, Paul conceives of the solution also in terms of kinship and ethnicity.... Through Christ the gentiles receive a new ancestry and a new identity. Far from treating ethnicity as something merely fixed which Christ has broken, Paul portrays Christ as an agent of ethnic transformation."

<sup>53</sup> Buell and Johnson Hodge, "Politics of Interpretation," 245. Cf. Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 105–106. Albert Schweitzer (*The Mysticism of Paul*, trans. William Montgomery [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931], 206) rightly notes that it is not πίστις per se that makes the gentile Christ followers righteous; it is the fact that they are in Christ that makes them righteous.

<sup>54</sup> On Paul's interpretation of Hagar and Sarah, Daniel Boyarin (*A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], 34) writes: "All of the antitheses that he [Paul] has set up to until now work together to convince

rewriting of genealogies is not unique to Galatians but can be seen in his other letters as well. In Romans 4, Paul makes an argument similar to the one in Gal 3:6–9. Later in Romans, he describes how gentile Christ followers are grafted into the same olive tree as Israel springs from (11:17–24).<sup>55</sup> In 1 Corinthians, too, Paul is in the process of rewriting genealogical backgrounds. First, he includes the gentile Christ followers in the story of the Israelites by writing, “our fathers (πατέρες ἡμῶν) were all under the cloud, and all crossed the sea” (10:1).<sup>56</sup> Paul takes this one step further in 12:2 by saying that the non-Jewish Christ followers in Corinth who used to worship idols are no longer gentiles (ὄτε ἔθνη ἦτε).<sup>57</sup> Hence, the ethnic language in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and

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the Galatians that they have but one choice, to remain in the spirit and not recommit themselves to the flesh, to remain in the covenant that was made according to the promise to the one seed of Abraham, the (spiritual) body of the risen Christ, and not return to the slavery of the covenant with Sinai.... By undertaking to fall into the fleshly hermeneutic of literal interpretation of circumcision.”

<sup>55</sup> On this passage, see Caroline Johnson Hodge, “Olive Trees and Ethnicities: Judeans and Gentiles in Rom. 11:17–24,” in *Christians as a Religious Minority in a Multicultural City: Modes of Interaction and Identity Formation in Early Imperial Rome*, ed. Jürgen Zangenberg and Michael Labahn, JSNTSup 243 (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 77–89.

<sup>56</sup> The *ekklesia* in Corinth was most likely made up of both Jewish and gentile Christ followers (cf. 7:18; 12:2, 13). On this question, see Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 84–85; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 308. Hans Conzelmann, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 11th ed., KEK 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), 151. On 1 Cor 10:1 and Paul's use of πατέρες ἡμῶν, Cavan Concannon (“When You Were Gentiles”: *Specters of Ethnicity in Roman Corinth and Paul's Corinthian Correspondence* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014], 159–160) comments: “The pasts of the Corinthians, like that of the Israelites, were always open to being recast, rewritten, and reinterpreted as part of constructing ethnic and civic identity in the present.... 1 Cor 10:1–13 write[s] new Corinthians into a history that was not originally theirs, but Paul uses that history as an example to encourage his audience to mark boundaries between themselves and others based on particular cultic and dietary practices.”

<sup>57</sup> On this verse, Erich S. Gruen (*Ethnicity in the Ancient World—Did it Matter?* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020], 191) comments: “Paul, in other words, implies that a transformation from the status of *ethnos*, which included (perhaps preeminently) the worship of idols, to that of Christ-worshipper entailed the shedding of a previous identity.” Even though Paul does claim that gentile Christ followers are descendants of Abraham and are no longer gentiles, he does nowhere write that they have become Israel or Jews; gentile Christ followers are still a separate (and somewhat ambiguous) group in Paul's mind. As Caroline Johnson Hodge (“The Question of Identity: Gentiles as Gentiles—but also Not—in Pauline Communities,” in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, 153–173, esp. 172) notes: “To be in Christ, gentiles give up their gods and religious practices, profess loyalty to the God of Israel, accept Israel's messiah,



Galatians show that Paul had an active interest in the gentile Christ followers' genealogy.

### 7. The Galatian *Ekklēsia* as a New Cult

Cultic belonging played a crucial role in the world Paul was a part of—this included worshipping specific deities, carrying out rituals, and leading a life that was in accordance with the cult's social code.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, as Fredriksen has rightly pointed out, cultic belonging and ethnicity often went hand in hand.<sup>59</sup> As we have already seen, Paul rewrote the genealogical background of his gentile Christ followers in several of his letters, Galatians included. But what kind of cultic obligations did Paul expect of these gentiles, and how did it affect their social identity?<sup>60</sup>

One of the most significant cultic requirements Paul introduced to his gentiles was the exclusive worship of the god of Israel. This demand, which from the extant evidence seems to have been a demand that all early leaders of the Jesus movement made, “was specifically a *Judaizing* demand.”<sup>61</sup> As such, it is plausible that Paul's insistence on exclusive worship of the god of Israel led the Galatians to think that they were living more “Jewishly”—which they were.<sup>62</sup> The apostle himself articulates the shift from the deities the Galatians

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Scriptures, and ancestry. All of these are Jewish ethnic markers, *yet the gentiles do not become Jews*. They are tucked into the seed of Abraham as gentiles and they remain gentiles, of a special sort, after they are made holy through baptism. This complex and mixed status for gentiles-in-Christ is crucial to Paul's argument: their separateness is necessary for God's plan for Israel, as Paul sees it” (my emphasis). Indeed, Terence Donaldson (*Gentile Christian Identity from Cornelius to Constantine: The Nations, the Parting of the Ways, and Roman Imperial Ideology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020], 310) rightly points out that even though Paul says to the Corinthians that they *were* gentiles, “*ethnē* was an essential element of the new identity ascribed to them.”

<sup>58</sup> Failure to adhere to the cult's rules and regulations could result in expulsion. For example, on the communal meal the Corinthian *ekklēsia* celebrated (1 Cor 11:17–34), Kloppenborg (*Christ's Associations*, 156) comments: “The Christ assembly in Corinth used ritual eating to mark belonging and compliance with the group's ethical codes. It is for this reason that 1 Cor 5:11 counsels excluding from the communal meal those who do not comply with the ethical rules of the group.”

<sup>59</sup> Fredriksen, “Parting of the Ways,” 39 (quoted above).

<sup>60</sup> On cultic groups in antiquity, including *ekklēsiai* devoted to Jesus Christ, see Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 44–52; Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 29–32, 86–88.

<sup>61</sup> Fredriksen, “Judaizing,” 251.

<sup>62</sup> On the proximity between the gods one worshiped, on the one hand, and the ethnic group one belonged to, on the other, Johnson Hodge (*If Sons*, 49) comments: “Loyalty to a deity or deities, often manifested in specific worship practices, signaled membership in particular ethnic groups.”

used to worship before they accepted Paul's message to their current relationship with the god of Israel in Gal 4:8–9: "But then, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings which are not gods by nature (τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὐσι θεοῖς); but now, having come to know God, or rather having become known by God, how can you turn back (ἐπιστρέφω) again to the weak and lowly elements, to which you yet again want to be slaves?" In other words, when the Galatians came to know and be known by the god of Israel, there was no other deity or spiritual being to which they should turn.<sup>63</sup>

The understanding that members of the Jesus movement should only worship one god is further seen in 1 Cor 8:5–6: "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (just as there are many gods and many lords), yet *for us* there is one God (εἷς θεός), the Father.... And one Lord (εἷς κύριος), Jesus Christ."<sup>64</sup> Hence, whatever gods, deities, spiritual beings, or idols the gentiles who became Christ followers had previously worshiped, they were now only allowed, Paul said, to worship the one god of Israel.<sup>65</sup> This message

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<sup>63</sup> Throughout his letters, Paul mentions several types of spiritual beings and powers that are active in the world: τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου, 1 Cor 2:8; ὁ θεός τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου, 2 Cor 4:4; ἀρχή, ἐξουσία, and δύναμις, 1 Cor 15:24; δαιμόνιον, 1 Cor 10:21; στοιχείον, Gal 4:9; ἄγγελος, Gal 1:8, 4:14; 2 Cor 11:14; Σατανᾶς, 2 Cor 11:14. On Paul's view of the many powers that inhabited the cosmos, see Fredriksen, "The Question of Worship," 176–177; Dale B. Martin, "When Did Angels Become Demons?" *JBL* 129 (2010): 657–677, esp. 674.

<sup>64</sup> Many have claimed that Paul was a monotheist, but as seen in the previous footnote, the spiritual world Paul imagined was heavily populated with several different beings. Thus, the term "monotheist" (which, like "religion," is anachronistic to Paul's time in the sense we use it today) does not capture Paul's view of the (spiritual) world. For scholarly corrections of the concept of "monotheism" in ancient Judaism and in the early Jesus movement, see Michael S. Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible," *BBR* 18 (2008): 1–30; Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of "Monotheism,"* FAT II/1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 107–126; Peter Hayman, "Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?" *JJS* 42 (1991): 1–15; Paula Fredriksen, "Mandatory Retirement: Ideas in the Study of Christian Origins Whose Time Has Come to Go," *SR* 35 (2006): 231–246; Michael C. Legaspi, "Opposition to Idolatry in the Book of Habakkuk," *VT* 67 (2017): 458–469; Larry Hurtado, "What Do We Mean by 'First-Century Jewish Monotheism?'" in *SBL 1993 Seminar Papers*, ed. E. H. Lovering, SBLSP 32 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 348–368.

<sup>65</sup> Here I do not deal with how Paul viewed Jesus and his relationship to God, the Father. On this question, see Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); idem, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Richard Bauckham, "Confessing the Cosmic Christ (1 Corinthians

was something Paul had preached from the very beginning. In his earliest letter, he writes to the Thessalonians and commends them for having “turned to God from idols to serve a living and genuine god” (ἐπεστρέψατε πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων δουλεῦν θεῷ ζῶντι καὶ ἀληθινῷ).<sup>66</sup>

The exclusive commitment to the god of Israel was perhaps the most significant cultic demand Paul made of his gentile Christ followers. This commitment, however, came with some noticeable changes in the life of these Christ followers.<sup>67</sup> For example, Paul instructs the members of the Corinthian *ekklēsia* in several ways regarding how their membership affects their social life. In 1 Cor 5–6, we find instructions from the apostle to the Corinthians. First, he chastises the Corinthians for allowing a male member of the *ekklēsia* to live in a kind of sexual immorality that is not even practiced among gentiles, Paul claims (τοιαύτη πορνεία ἥτις οὐδὲ ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν). This man is to be handed over to Satan so that his flesh is destroyed. Paul then goes on to further explain the instructions he gave to the Corinthians in an earlier letter in 5:9–13. His point is that the gentile Christ followers can associate with those outside the *ekklēsia*—no matter their moral conduct—but that they must not interact with anyone who is called a brother and who is “sexually immoral, greedy, an idol worshiper, an abuser, a drunkard, or a robber. Do not even eat with such a one” (1 Cor 5:11b).<sup>68</sup> Consequently, Paul seems to have in mind a more or less

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8:6 and Colossians 1:15–20),” in *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Matthew V. Novenson, NovTSup 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 139–171.

<sup>66</sup> Some have argued that 1 Thess 9–10 is a pre-Pauline text, but Morna D. Hooker (“1 Thessalonians 1.9–10: A Nutshell—But What Kind of Nut?” in *Geschichte–Tradition–Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Hubert Cancik, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 3.435–448) has established the Pauline authorship of these two verses. Since Paul already, in his earliest extant letter, mentions the turning from other objects of worship, in this case, idols, it is safe to assume that the turning from idols and other objects of worship was a cornerstone in Paul’s message. Cf. Carey C. Newman, “God and Glory and Paul, Again: Divine Identity and Community Formation in the Early Jesus Movement,” in *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Matthew V. Novenson, NovTSup 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 99–138, esp. 136; Mark D. Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul’s Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus’s Advisors to King Izates,” in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 105–152, esp. 127.

<sup>67</sup> For Jewish Christ followers, the exclusive worship of the god of Israel was nothing new and therefore not something they had to adapt to. As Johnson Hodge (“The Question of Identity,” 172) comments on Jews who joined the Jesus movement: “Jews do not cross ethnic boundaries by virtue of their commitment to Christ; they do not change their God, their ancestry, or their ancestral customs.”

<sup>68</sup> Derek McNamara (“Shame the Incestuous Man: 1 Corinthians 5,” *Neot* 44 [2010]: 307–326, esp. 320–321) argues “that v. 10 indicates Paul’s anticipation of resistance, or

clear behavioral code for those inside the *ekklēsia*; and the members cannot live like gentiles outside the Jesus movement.<sup>69</sup> As J. Brian Tucker puts it: “[Paul] desires to establish a distinct ethos of identity.”<sup>70</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul reminds the Corinthians that before they joined the Jesus movement, some of them lived a life unworthy of the kingdom of God. However, when they joined the Jesus movement, they were washed, made holy, and made righteous in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the spirit of God (1 Cor 6:11). Even though Paul here credits their new way of life to the work of Jesus and the Spirit, this new life also required a fair bit of commitment from the side of the Christ follower. As an example, the discussion that follows in 1 Cor 6:12–20 makes it clear that Christ followers cannot have intercourse with prostitutes and must abstain from all forms of πορνεία. Later in 1 Corinthians, it becomes evident that some members had frequently been visiting the city’s temples for worship and banquets. In 1 Cor 8 and 10:14–22, Paul instructs them that whereas reclining for dinners in temples (ἐν εἰδωλείῳ κατακείμενον) was acceptable for the most part, taking part in the sacrifices of these cults was unacceptable; one could not, as Paul puts it in 1 Cor 10:21, “drink from the cup of the Lord and the cup of *daimonia*, nor take part in the table of the Lord and the table of *daimonia*.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, gentiles

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it may be actual resistance voiced by the Corinthians.” However, I think this verse is better understood as Paul’s way of establishing clear boundaries for the *ekklēsia* and how they can and should view those inside and outside of it, as is the concern of this whole passage.

<sup>69</sup> On Paul’s vision for the communities he wrote to, Stanley Stowers (“The Concept of ‘Community’ and the History of Early Christianity,” *MTSR* 23 [2011]: 238–256, esp. 242) comments: “Paul did not merely try to persuade those whom he wanted as followers that they ought to become a very special kind of community. He told them that they had in their essence already become such a community.” As 1 Corinthians and Galatians show, the Pauline communities did not always live up to the community Paul envisioned.

<sup>70</sup> J. Brian Tucker, “The Role of Civic Identity on the Pauline Mission in Corinth,” *Didaskalia* 19 (2008): 71–91, esp. 84. Cf. Michael Wolter, “Ethos und Identität in paulinischen Gemeinden,” *NTS* 43 (1997): 430–444; idem, “‘Let No One Seek His Own, but Each One the Other’s’ (1 Corinthians 10,24): Pauline Ethics According to 1 Corinthians,” in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt, BZNW 141 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 199–217.

<sup>71</sup> Scholars interpret 1 Cor 10:21 in several ways. One common interpretation is that Paul here forbids the eating of “food offered to idols” (εἰδωλόθυτος) and that 1 Cor 10:21 is a further qualification of Paul’s discussion on εἰδωλόθυτος in 1 Cor 8. For this view see, e.g., Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed. NICNT, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 521–522; Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, Paternoster, 1995), 226. My view is different, as I do not think Paul forbids the eating of εἰδωλόθυτος in 1 Cor 10:21, but that he forbids the Corinthian

who became members of the Jesus movement had to give up their former way of life for a new, in many ways more Jewish, way of life.

### **8. Conclusion: The Impact of a New Genealogy and Cult on the Gentile Christ Followers in Galatia**

Since the gentile Christ followers in the Galatian *ekklēsia* had been incorporated as descendants of Abraham and had adopted new cultic practices, which meant that they no longer could take part in their old cults to the extent they had done previously, I argue that they were open to the message of those who proclaimed that they should get circumcised. Such a message, ironically, could have been viewed as the natural continuation of Paul's own message.<sup>72</sup> He had made them genealogically connected to the father of the Jews and told them to only worship the god of Israel. Put differently, the apostle to the gentiles had asked his Christ-obedient gentiles to Judaize in no subtle way. As Mark Nanos puts it: "In Paul's arguments, faith(fulness) to God is expressed by Christ-following non-Jews when they choose to turn from the worship of the gods of their nations and concomitant

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Christ followers to actively participate in the sacrifices in the cults of Corinth. I elaborate on my view of 1 Cor 8 and 10:14–22 in Martin Sanfridson, *Paul and Sacrifice in Corinth: Rethinking Paul's Views on Gentile Cults in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10*, WUNT II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, Forthcoming). See also Derek Newton, *Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth*, JSNTSup 169 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

<sup>72</sup> Depending on how one reads Paul's elusive statement in Gal 5:11 ("but if I still preach circumcision"), one could argue that Paul once had preached that gentiles needed to get circumcised if they were to be saved after his call to become an apostle of the Jesus movement. If this was the case, it is not unlikely that some of the gentile Christ followers in Galatia thought that Paul still did preach circumcision. For this argument, see Douglas A. Campbell, "Galatians 5:11: Evidence of an Early Law-Observant Mission by Paul?" *NTS* 57 (2011): 325–347. For a discussion and refutation of Campbell's argument, see Justin K. Hardin, "'If I Still Proclaim Circumcision' (Galatians 5:11a): Paul, the Law, and Gentile Circumcision," *JSPL* 3 (2013): 145–163. The more common view of Paul's statement in 5:11 is that he preached that gentiles needed to get circumcised *before* he joined the Jesus movement as an apostle. Cf. Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 270–284. For a nuanced discussion of various interpretations of Gal 5:11, see Collman, *The Apostle to the Foreskin*, 99–107. Collman (*The Apostle to the Foreskin*, 108–112) argues that "circumcision" does not necessarily refer to the act of circumcising one's penis, but that "circumcision," in Gal 5:11, can refer to the Jewish people. Thus, Collman (*The Apostle to the Foreskin*, 109) suggests that "proclaiming circumcision could mean proclaiming that *only* the circumcised (i.e., Jews) are members of Abraham's family or the people of God" (emphasis original). This message Paul left behind since he "now believes that Abrahamic sonship is also available to gentiles through the work of the Messiah" (ibid, 110).

behavior to the very ideals of righteousness incumbent upon Israelites as articulated in Israel's Torah."<sup>73</sup> Surely, to the Galatians' mind, adopting the Jewish law, and with it, circumcision, was the next step. We know that this was not how Paul viewed things; for him, wholesale adoption of the Jewish law in the case of gentile Christ followers was a serious mistake.<sup>74</sup> But, again, for *them*, it must have made sense since they had already adopted significant markers of Jewish identity. For, as Fredriksen reminds us, "to fully change gods was tantamount to changing ethnicity."<sup>75</sup>

Consequently, the Galatians' openness to a message where they were told to circumcise appears perfectly sensible—especially in the light of how Paul had reconstructed their genealogy and cultic life.

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<sup>73</sup> Nanos, "The Question of Conceptualization," 127.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. William S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 57; Magnus Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Sociological Approach to the Separation Between Judaism and Christianity*, Routledge Early Church Monographs (London: Routledge, 2003), 161. As Nanos ("The Question of Conceptualization," 135) points out, this is not to say that Paul did not want his gentile Christ followers to adopt certain practices and aspects of the Jewish law. As I have argued throughout, Paul envisioned his gentiles to adhere to several customs and practices that were thoroughly Jewish, but he did not want them to seek to "become" Jews. For a succinct account of why Paul did not want his gentiles to circumcise, see Paula Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012), 30–31.

<sup>75</sup> Fredriksen, "The Question of Worship," 183.

