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# Challenges and Strategies for Speaking about Ethnicity in the New Testament and New Testament Studies<sup>1</sup>

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My scholarship on the study of ethnicity and race has focused on the reconstruction of early Christian self-definition in the second and third centuries.<sup>2</sup> I have thought about writing a companion volume to *Why This New Race* that centers canonical texts and have published a little about how what I call “ethnic reasoning” functions in Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Romans, 1 Peter, and Acts of the Apostles.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I explain my hesitations about tackling ethnic reasoning in the New Testament, let alone the Bible, and sketch an approach that I think could address these concerns, an approach that calls for a stretch from historical criticism to attending to what haunts biblical and early Christian studies.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Originally entitled “In Our Minds and/or in the Texts? What Does It Mean to Speak about Ethnicity in the Bible?,” this talk was delivered in the “Ethnicity in the Bible and Biblical Studies” Symposium of the Swedish Exegetical Society, September 30, 2013, Lund. My thanks to Samuel Byrskog and Blaženka Scheuer for the invitation and generous hospitality. Shelly Matthews and Stephanie Dunson provided valuable feedback on drafts of the talk.

<sup>2</sup> See Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); see also Denise Kimber Buell, “Race and Universalism in Early Christianity,” *J ECS* 10 (2002): 429–68; Denise Kimber Buell, “Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition,” *HTR* 94 (2001): 449–76.

<sup>3</sup> See Denise Kimber Buell, “Early Christian Universalism and Modern Forms of Racism,” in *The Origins of Racism in the West* (ed. M. Eliav-Feldon, B. Isaac, and J. Ziegler; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 109–31; Denise Kimber Buell, “God’s Own People: Specters of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Christian Studies,” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza and L. Nasrallah; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 159–90; Denise Kimber Buell and Caroline Johnson Hodge, “The Politics of Interpretation: The Rhetoric of Race and Ethnicity in Paul,” *JBL* 123 (2004): 235–52.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the usefulness of haunting to biblical studies, see Buell, “God’s Own People,” 159–90; Denise Kimber Buell, “Cyborg Memories: An Impure History of Jesus,”

Writing about ethnic reasoning in the New Testament gives me pause for three reasons. First, ethnicity and canonicity are historically situated and shifting practices; we must consider the way both get invoked belatedly. Second, the writings collected as the New Testament do not have a stable relationship to collective religious or social identities; considered in the first century contexts, most of these texts are Jewish, while considered in their later contexts of usage, they are Christian. We must account for this shapeshifting character of the texts, depending on readers and historical usage. Third, given the histories of ethnocentrism and racism, we must take into account the ethics of interpretation when undertaking any study of ethnicity, including of biblical texts; doing so means challenging narratives of Christian origins that insist that early Christian collective self-understandings are and were not legible as “ethnic.” I will explain each in turn.

## Ethnicity and Canonicity

When contemplating a project that explores ethnic reasoning in the New Testament one must ask how the writings collected as the New Testament relate to modern notions of ethnicity and race. The category “New Testament” itself implies a retrospective vantage point, after the individual texts have been gathered together as a collection. And there is no timeless ethnicity “in” the New Testament. I am not suggesting for a moment that either ethnicity or race is a timeless, static reality; nonetheless both are terms that we use to speak about material, historical forms of interactions among humans and self-understandings of individuals and groups about human belonging. An example from the very different context of science studies helps illustrate what I mean. Donna Haraway writes about her doctoral work in biology:

I remember an argument with a fellow graduate student about what a cell was. I was arguing that, in a very deep way, the cell was our name for processes that don't have boundaries that are independent of our interaction. In other words, the boundaries were the result of the interaction and naming. It wasn't that the world was 'made up,' that there weren't cells,

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*BibInt* 18 (2010): 313–41; Denise Kimber Buell, “Hauntology meets Post-Humanism: Some Payoffs for Biblical Studies,” in *The Bible and Posthumanism* (ed. Jennifer Koosed; SemeiaSt; Atlanta: SBL Publications, forthcoming).



but that the descriptive term ‘cell’ is a name for an historical kind of interaction, not a name for a thing in and of itself.<sup>5</sup>

When we speak about ethnicity we are also striving to speak about historical kinds of interactions that have real, material, embodied forms, but, as Haraway cautions, we should not mistake our speaking about ethnicity with a “thing in and of itself.”

Informed especially by anthropological studies, ethnicity has usually been defined in relationship to two alternatives: first, a so-called *primordialist* view, that ethnicity is something one has by kinship or place of origin, and indexed by custom—including possibly language or religion; second, a so-called *constructivist* view, linked especially with sociologist Fredrik Barth, that ethnicity is one form of group self-definition that may appeal to ties of kinship or place but whose boundaries and meaning are malleable—individuals participate to construct and maintain or alter ethnic identities over time.<sup>6</sup> My position is closest to the constructivist one. Like “the cell,” I see ethnicity as a name “for processes that don’t have boundaries independent of our interactions.” But I would go further than Barth. We must consider the social historical contexts in which these actors operate, but we must also consider how the very naming of any process as “ethnicity” in modern social theory is entangled with defining intra-European difference and with defining differences among colonized groups, especially in Africa, to facilitate European goals of colonial rule, as well as with attempts to find alternatives to the noxious connotations of the category “race.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *How Like A Leaf: An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 24–25.

<sup>6</sup> For excellent discussions of the debates in defining “ethnicity” that scholars of biblical studies might find especially valuable, see Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jonathan M. Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 17–33; Jonathan M. Hall, *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1–29. See also Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1969). See also Hans Vermeulen and Cora Grovers, eds., *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond ‘Ethnic Groups and Boundaries’* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002); Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History*

Moreover, I think we are insufficiently attuned to how biblical texts have played a role in *constructing* modern ethnicities and conceptions of racial difference.<sup>8</sup> In his work, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Benjamin Isaac rightly notes that the modern shapers of modern ideas of race read and cited classical texts; he identifies concepts he dubs “proto-racism” in these ancient sources. Isaac does not, however, address the possible relevance of biblical texts to this process of shaping modern notions of race and ethnicity, but others have begun to do so.<sup>9</sup>

What complicates our speaking about ethnicity in relation to New Testament writings is that we often miss the way that the ideas in those texts that became canonical have been highly influential in shaping and implementing modern notions of race and ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> We need to account for historical changes, such as the change from individual texts to a collection and changing practices of collective identification, while also accounting for how the past informs this historical change. What is tricky is the feedback loop created by scholars attempting to work with categories such as ethnicity or race, informed by current scholarly frameworks, to study an-

*and the West* (London: Routledge, 2004); Jo-Ann Lee and John Lutz, eds., *Situating ‘Race’ and Racisms in Time, Space, and Theory: Critical Essays for Activists and Scholars* (Montréal, Québec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> For important exceptions, see Peter Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Sylvester A. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2004); Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, (trans. Arthur Goldhammer; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Jared Hickman, “Globalization and the Gods, or the Political Theology of ‘Race’,” *Early American Literature* 45, no. 1 (2010): 145–82; Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Vincent L. Wim-bush, *White Men’s Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); see also Denise Kimber Buell, “Race and Religion in the Formation of the Study of Religion,” paper delivered in Concepts of ‘Race’ in the History of the Humanities Conference, Bucerius Institute, University of Haifa, Israel, October 2010 (unpublished).

<sup>10</sup> In this section, I focus more on “ethnicity” but have explored the notion of “canon” in Denise Kimber Buell, “Canons Unbound,” in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the 20th Century* (ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza; vol. 20 of *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exe-gesis and Cultural History*, ed. I. Fischer et al.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, forthcoming).

cient materials when readings and uses of these ancient materials themselves have informed the very production of these categories. That is, even our modern “secular” thinking about ethnicity and race has been already been forged through engagement with biblical texts. Biblical texts have been used in processes of ethnic differentiation in colonial contexts, to locate various indigenous groups in biblical genealogies. Thus, my hesitation is not so much that modern configurations of ethnicity and race explicitly help to shape the questions posed of the ancient sources in symposia such as this one, but rather that we should not be naïve about viewing modern social theories about ethnicity (or race) as neutral resources for analyzing “ethnicity in the Bible.”

In other words, I hesitate in part because there *does* seem to be a sense in which ethnicity is “in” the Bible because this collection of texts is entangled in modern practices of ethnicity and race, as well as nationality, in ways that deserve further exploration. The legacy of New Testament writings as canonical and culturally authoritative even in secular contexts gives me pause, even as it also makes their study more urgent and relevant.

Any adequate study of ethnicity/ethnic reasoning in the New Testament ought to situate itself in relation to the histories of the Bible’s influence as a collection or in specific ways upon modern notions of collective difference and belonging, including ethnicity and race. This requires an interpretive approach that is sensitive to historical contexts of textual composition but departs from historical criticism by attending also to the contexts of interpretation, both ancient and modern. We need an approach that does not simply emphasize the gap between past and present but also helps account for the transformations and slippages between past and present, and the times between these. We have to attend to the spectral possibilities of the texts as well as the various ways that biblical texts have taken material expression over time.

## Jewish and/or Christian: The Shapeshifting Identifications of New Testament Writings

An important trend in New Testament scholarship of the last 40 years has been to interpret many of the writings in the New Testament as *Jewish* texts that tackle *intra-Jewish* concerns. This trend is connected with considerations of ethnicity in the New Testament because the view that ethnic categories *are* present in New Testament texts has made its way into New

Testament studies especially through the recognition that most of the writings contained in this anthology were composed *as* Jewish texts.

We see this position in scholarship on the Gospel of Matthew and on Paul's letters—just to take two examples—starting with Krister Stendahl's important work.<sup>11</sup> Recently, David Sim writes that “ethnicity was therefore part and parcel of Matthean Christianity and the Gospel which represented it” because he understands Matthew as a text of a sectarian Jewish group, open to Gentiles “only after they have first joined the privileged but law-obligated people of Israel.”<sup>12</sup> And Sze-Kar Wan argues that, in Romans, “Paul is engaged in ethnic construction ... attempt[ing] to redefine Jewishness itself” so that “Gentiles, or as Paul prefers in Romans, ‘Greeks’ can be included as full members of the Jewish *ethnos*.”<sup>13</sup> The work of E. P. Sanders, John Gager, Daniel Boyarin, Anthony Saldarini, Mark Nanos, Caroline Johnson Hodge, Pamela Eisenbaum, among others also contributes to this trend.<sup>14</sup> This scholarship intervenes into a legacy of Christian anti-Judaism, insisting that the “founding” authoritative texts for Christians are themselves forms of Roman period Jewish discourse and practice. I support this goal and find it historically persuasive.

Nonetheless, even if the majority of the writings in the New Testament were composed and initially circulated as Jewish texts, this insight leaves suspended or unarticulated how this identification and the ethnic reasoning within these writings relates to later Christian collective self-understandings. In other words, understanding these texts as Jewish and

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> David Sim, “Christianity and Ethnicity in the Gospel of Matthew,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. M. G. Brett; BIS 19; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 171–95 (195).

<sup>13</sup> Sze-kar Wan, “‘To the Jew First and Also to the Greek’: Reading Romans as Ethnic Construction,” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza and L. Nasrallah; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 129–55 (134, 135).

<sup>14</sup> Without trying to be exhaustive, see e.g., E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

the interpretation of, say, Paul's arguments within an intra-Jewish context of debate, does not illuminate the afterlives and transformations of these Jewish writings into Christian ones. Paul's letters *are* those of a "radical Jew" but they also *become* and function as Christian documents.

It is not sufficient to consider ethnic reasoning in New Testament writings as a marker of their Jewishness, as I shall explain further in the next section. We must not simply interpret the writings contained in the New Testament in their first- or early second-century contexts; contrariwise, neither can we treat these writings simply as Christian scripture. We must also lift up the ways that they have been differently interpreted and enacted—with a view to the shifting claims about how and in what ways Christian belonging relates to other forms of collective belonging. Jewish texts such as Paul's letters and the gospels *become* Christian ones in their reception and use. Moreover, ethnic reasoning forms *part* of the discourse of early Christian self-definition. We need an approach that can attend to how these texts can and have sustained shifting collective identifications.

## Challenging Narratives of Christian Origins as Non-Ethnic Universalism

As I have noted, a number of biblical critics have usefully emphasized the intra-Jewish contexts of most of the writings in the New Testament. Nevertheless, moving *away* from ethnic self-construction is still widely held to be a hallmark of Christian distinctiveness. That is, the place of "ethnicity" in biblical studies has primarily been one of mapping and marking the difference between early Christianity as "not ethnic" especially from Judaism but also from various forms of local and indigenous identifications in the early Roman empire. Not only is this framing historically inaccurate, but it produces a troubling ethical paradoxical because these claims sustain both racist anti-Judaism *and* anti-racist activism.<sup>15</sup> I discuss this paradox at length in my earlier work, as it also informs early Christian studies. In New Testament exegesis this paradox is perhaps even more loaded because of the ongoing theological relevance of canonical texts.

New Testament texts are regularly interpreted to support an understanding of Christian origins as anti-racist because open to people of all

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<sup>15</sup> This is a key insight underlying Buell, *Why This New Race*; see also Buell, "God's Own People," and Buell, "Early Christian Universalism."

backgrounds. But this framing is often articulated by contrasting belonging “in Christ” with other forms of Jewish self-understandings precisely in terms of ethnicity or race such that those “in Christ” are portrayed as offering a non-ethnic, or non-racialized, and thus universal collective self-understanding, whereas other Jews are portrayed as particularistic and narrowly ethnocentric in their collective self-understanding. This view is both ethically and historically flawed.

We need to re-examine how the modern narratives about the formation of Christianity have crafted and deployed concepts of ethnicity. Adolf von Harnack and Rudolf Bultmann, to take two influential examples, make universality Christianity’s signal feature, that which epitomizes its break from Judaism.<sup>16</sup> Universalism, and specifically a universalism defined as

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<sup>16</sup> Here are some examples from each author: 1) Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (trans. Neil Buchanan; 7 vols.; Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1896–1905), trans. of *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (3rd ed.; 3 vols.; Freiburg im Breisgau: Mohr Siebeck, 1894–1897): a) “The Gospel presents itself as an Apocalyptic message on the soil of the Old Testament, and as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, and yet it is a new thing, the creation of a universal religion on the basis of that of the Old Testament” (1:41); b) “Original Christianity was in appearance Christian Judaism, the creation of a universal religion on Old Testament soil ... all Christianity, in so far as something alien is not foisted into it, appears as the religion of Israel perfected and spiritualized ... Wherever the universalism of Christianity is not violated in favour of the Jewish nation, we have to recognize every appropriation of the Old Testament as Christian ... the Jewish religion is a national religion, and Christianity burst the bonds of nationality” (1:287, 288–89). 2) Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* (trans. R. H. Fuller; London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), trans. of *Das Urchristentum im Rahmen der antiken Religionen* (Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, 1949): a) “Old Testament religion was a national religion” (35); b) “Hellenistic Judaism, i.e., the Judaism of the Graeco-Roman world, preserved its racial and national unity and remained loyal to Jerusalem as the focal point of national and religious life” (94); c) “Primitive Christianity arose from the band of Jesus’ disciples ... The eschatological community did not split off from Judaism, as though it were conscious of itself as a new religious society. *In the eyes of their contemporaries they must have looked like a Jewish sect, and for the historian they appear in that light too.* For the resources they possessed—their traditions about Jesus, which were carefully preserved, and the latent resources of their own faith, led only gradually to a new form of organization and new philosophy of human life, the world and history. The decisive step was taken when the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen, the coming Judge and agent of redemption, was carried beyond the confines of Palestinian Judaism, and Christian congregations sprang up in the Graeco-Roman world” (175, my emphasis); d) “[The early Christians] no longer identified the redemptive history with the empirical history of Israel. It is, of course, true that the New Testament sometimes uses the history of Israel as a type for admonition or exhortation (e.g., 1 Cor. 10.1–11; Heb. 3.7–19). The saints of the Old Testament may be regarded as pioneers and examples for the Christians ... *But the history of Israel is no longer their own history.* They ceased, for instance, to regard the Jewish festivals as reenactments ‘for us’ of the events of the past ... *The event by which the Church is constitut-*

not-racial and not-ethnic, continues to be a, if not the, central description applied to Christianity. Jesus may be claimed as that-without-which one would not have Christianity, but universalism is the key watchword on which a very great number of narratives of Christian origins and distinctiveness turn. Harnack and Bultmann both argue for the presence of a prior universalizing tendency in Judaism, notably in so-called Hellenistic Judaism, but they also insist that Judaism remains, in essence, the religion of a distinct nation, racial, or ethnic group—even if conversion to Judaism is possible. They depict universalism to be actually supranational, non-ethnic, and non-racial. By distinguishing Christianity as universal and racially unmarked, Judaism is constructed as its constitutive other—the racially, nationally marked particular.

This assertion, that Christianity's origins—notably its break from being Jewish—and Christianity's essence correlate with its "going universal" and *specifically* contrast with ethnic or racial particularity, has remained stunningly consistent in the last century of mainstream scholarship.<sup>17</sup> Let me consider one example. Wolfgang Stegemann, who shares my concern about Christian anti-Judaism and other forms of racism, writes: "ethnicity or an ethnocentric self-understanding could play no role in the beginnings of Christian communities. For these newly forming groups defined themselves on the basis of their religious identity as a third entity alongside the nations and Judaism."<sup>18</sup> Note how he contrasts ethnicity with religious identity. "It is true," he adds later, "that the awareness of a differentiated ethnic-religious origin of Christ-believers" was present for a long time"<sup>19</sup>

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*ed is the death of Christ. But unlike the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, the death of Christ is not an event in the history of the nation. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper do not cement the Christians into a nation, but into an eschatological community, which, since it is eschatological, transcends the limits of nationality. The wine of the Lord's supper is the blood of a 'new covenant' promised by the prophet Jeremiah in the age to come. This idea of an eschatological covenant—that is to say, a covenant which is removed from empirical history, and removes men from it—is now treated seriously. Of course the Christian community is the 'people of God', the 'seed of Abraham', but not as the 'children of the flesh', but as the 'children of promise' (Rom. 9:8; Gal. 3.29). The Old Testament is still the word of God, though not because it contains his word spoken to Israel in the past, but because it is directly typological and allegorical. The original meaning and context of the Old Testament sayings are entirely irrelevant"* (187, my emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> See Buell, *Why This New Race*, 1, for several specific examples from the 1970s to the present.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Stegemann, "Anti-Semitic and Racist Prejudices in Titus 1:10–16," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. M. G. Brett; BIS 19; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 271–94 (273).

<sup>19</sup> Stegemann, "Anti-Semitic and Racist Prejudices," 274.

but, he says, “urban Christianity ... could certainly not resort to ethnic identities in its self-definition. Ethnicity ... was necessarily unable to play a role in the determination of ‘Christian’ identity.”<sup>20</sup> Why could ethnicity not play a role in the determination of Christian identity? Stegemann’s position relies on two points: first, that joining the Christ-believing *ekklesiai* entailed a transformation, a crossing of ethnic *and* religious boundaries, and second, that the membership of *ekklesiai* was diverse. Implicit in his remarks also is the position that Christian belonging is aspirationally universal. Thus the crossing of ethnic and religious boundaries and the potential universality (multi-ethnic composition) of Christian membership are key factors in Stegemann’s conviction about the non-ethnic character of ancient Christian self-definition and self-understandings.

In sharp contract to Stegemann’s interpretation, my work on second- and third-century Christian sources has demonstrated that early Christian universalizing claims—that being Christian is open to all people, regardless of background—did not prevent early Christians from describing themselves as members of a group we might call an “ethnic group,” whether or not non-Christians found this claim persuasive. Moreover, I have demonstrated that sharply differentiating between religious and other kinds of collective belonging, especially belonging to a descent group, is not supported by the texts. New Testament writings, such as Paul’s letters to the Romans, Galatians, and first letter to the Corinthians, as well as the writings of Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria among others, assert that baptism with its infusion of holy *pneuma* alters the ancestry of Gentiles, for example. Many texts frame Christian belonging as membership in an ancestral group one can join, as membership in a *genos*, an *ethnos*, or a *laos* with a distinctive *politeia* and customs. This is what I call ethnic reasoning. This ethnic reasoning presumes that becoming a member of a Christian community does indeed entail a simultaneously religious and ethnic transformation and that the resulting Christian community is multi-ethnic in composition but also can be defined as its own people.

Two passages help to illustrate this Christian ethnic reasoning. Justin Martyr, in his mid-second-century *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* writes:

After that righteous one [i.e., Jesus] was slain, we sprouted up as another people (*laos heteros*), and shot forth as new and thriving ears as the prophet said: “And many *ethnē* shall flee to the Lord in that day to become a

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<sup>20</sup> Stegemann, “Anti-Semitic and Racist Prejudices,” 274.



people (*laos*)” (Zechariah 2:15). But we are not only a people, but a holy people ... For this [the Christian *laos*] is the *ethnos* that God long since undertook to give Abraham, and promised to make him the father of many peoples (*polloi ethnē*), not saying father of Arabs or Egyptians or Idumeans. For he also became the father of Ishmael, a great *ethnos*, and of Esau, and there are still a great number of Ammonites. (*Dial.* 119.4; my translation)<sup>21</sup>

In this passage Justin describes Christians as a people (*laos*) who arise after Jesus’ death and are formed from the “many nations” (*polloi ethnē*) promised as Abraham’s descendants. Here, Justin interprets biblical sources to argue that the single, holy people is itself multi-ethnic in origin.

The next example comes from a generation after Justin. In his *Stromateis*, Clement of Alexandria explains the relationship of Christians to Jews and Greeks in this way:

Accordingly then, those from the Hellenic training and also from the law who accept faith are gathered into the one *genos* of the saved people (*laos*): not that the three peoples are separated by time, so that one might suppose [they have] three different natures, but trained in different covenants of the Lord. (*Strom.* 1.42.2; my translation)<sup>22</sup>

Note that each author positions Christianity as something composed of people from multiple human groups, but describes Christian belonging in terms of membership in an *ethnos*, *genos*, or *laos*—that is, terms often translated as nation, race, or people (though this history of translation is its own story). Those who become Christian from different backgrounds change not into members of a non-people but a different people. This is very different from how scholars such as Stegeman and others have reconstructed early Christian self-understanding. In these and other early Christian writings, universality of scope and access does not preclude defining Christians as constituting a people. In all cases, the presumption is that piety and forms of worship index this belonging and that members come from multiple *ethnē* to make up this new Christian people.

<sup>21</sup> For an extended discussion of Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, see Buell, *Why This New Race*, 94–115. See also Tessa Rajak’s splendid essay, “Talking at Trypho: Christian Apologetic as Anti-Judaism in Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*,” in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (ed. Mark Edwards et al.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59–80.

<sup>22</sup> For an extended discussion of this passage and its implications, see Buell, *Why This New Race*, 138–40, 154–57.

I have identified three major uses of ethnic reasoning in early Christian writings: to define what it means to be or become a Christian (to shape a collective identity enacted ritually and reinforced through practice and shared texts), to locate Christian belonging in relation to other forms of collective belonging, and to argue for certain ways of being Christian as more legitimate than other rival views of being Christian. Thus, I challenge the still widespread view that the formation of Christianity, especially in distinction from Jewish self-understandings, entails a move from ethnic belonging to universalized, non-ethnic religious belonging. In contrast to the way that Harnack, Bultmann, and Stegemann define early Christian universalism, early Christian articulations of universalism do not rely on defining it over and against a group identity such as a *genos*, *ethnos*, or *laos*.

To summarize my hesitations about a study of ethnicity in the New Testament: we should not speak about ethnicity in the New Testament without attending to the influence of the Christian Bible on the very ways of enacting and thinking about ethnicity in the modern period; we should not identify ethnicity as a salient category in the writings contained in the New Testament texts *qua* Jewish sectarian texts but leave undiscussed how this relates to the still common assertion that ethnicity was irrelevant to the formation of Christian self-understandings. And finally, closely related, we should rethink frameworks for conceptualizing ethnicity that get applied to writings in the New Testament so as to reinforce a paradoxically anti-racist but anti-Jewish narrative of Christian origins.

Thus, any study that aims to discuss ethnicity or ethnic reasoning in the New Testament would need at least these three qualities:

1. *To consider the Bible as a collection.* As much as fine-grained readings of individual texts are crucial, we also need to think about the Bible, collectively, as a vector for ethnic reasoning, the material production of ethnic groups, and the conceptual frameworks of defining and identifying “ethnicity” and “race.”

2. *To address the holographic qualities* of those writings that became canonical for Christians—that is, we need an approach that can navigate both the Jewish and Christian character of New Testament writings.

3. *To articulate the contemporary relevance* and stakes of biblical interpretation to make an argument for the persuasiveness of one’s interpretation both in terms of historical soundness and ethics.

In the final section I sketch briefly an approach that can encompass these features.

## Noticing and Responding to Hauntings

Inspired especially by the work of sociologist Avery Gordon and to a lesser extent that of critical theorist Jacques Derrida,<sup>23</sup> I suggest that we devise interpretive lenses that identify and respond to that which haunts New Testament and early Christian studies.<sup>24</sup> Thinking about what haunts enables us to continue to read texts closely in their historical contexts while “also allowing us to consider the evidence for ‘afterlives’ of ancient texts and ideas” as well as the traces of ways of knowing and being that are not “on the surface” or in the dominant rhetoric of a text but are nonetheless recoverable by the shape their absence or silence impresses on a text: “to speak in terms of haunting is to question assumptions about the continuities and discontinuities between the past, present, and future, even as it centers the present (one is haunted in the present).”<sup>25</sup>

Haunting redirects questions about the anachronism or historicity of ethnicity or race; I have argued that race haunts early Christian ethnic reasoning in the futural sense of the specter of communism haunting Europe in Marx’s writings. The language of *genos*, *ethnos*, and *laos* in texts re-membered and interpreted as early Christian (such as the letters of Paul) and overall rhetoric of peoplehood (regardless of specific vocabulary) has been activated in ways that define Christianity paradoxically as a non-ethnic and non-racial and yet the only authentic people of God or full expression of humanness. While not functioning as simply racist or proto-racist, early Christian forms of universalism adapt ancient discriminatory logics and can sustain modern racist interpretations.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time modern racisms also haunt our very ways of engaging biblical texts and writing early Christian history. Shawn Kelley and Susannah Heschel have demonstrated different kinds of modern European

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<sup>23</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Avery F. Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” *Borderlands E-Journal* 10 no. 2 (2011): 1–21; Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (trans. P. Kamuf; London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> I have begun to develop this approach in three essays: Buell, “God’s Own People,” “Cyborg Memories,” and “Hauntology Meets Posthumanism.” See nn. 3–4 above for full information.

<sup>25</sup> Buell, “God’s Own People,” 165, 167.

<sup>26</sup> Buell, *Why This New Race*; Buell, “Early Christian Universalism.”

racialized practices and legacies infusing biblical studies.<sup>27</sup> Focusing on the North American context, Sylvester Johnson has compellingly argued that “to participate in divine identity [such as implied by the concept ‘the people of God’] is to be haunted by the specter of illegitimate existence,” a haunting he confronts by calling for a “Canaanite perspective” that values “the heathen” as “legitimate existents.”<sup>28</sup>

Haunting is an idiom that enables us to speak about holographic character of New Testament writings, as both Jewish and Christian:<sup>29</sup>

Biblical texts haunt with their overflowing potential for being activated and materialized in different ways: Matthew as the quintessential Catholic gospel, yet also a Jewish gospel; the Fourth Gospel encrypts Sophia traditions under the sign of the Logos and is the gospel that has become the poster child for Christian claims to exclusivity—no one comes to the father but through me—but haunted by its status as the apparent favorite of the elusive so-called Gnostics; and of course there are Paul’s writings, the radical Jew haunting the “second founder” of Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

Put starkly: “The possibility that Christianity might never have arisen, or that *christianos* might never have become distinct from [*ioudaios*], haunts the reader’s encounter with ... most ... New Testament writings.”<sup>31</sup>

An orientation to haunting helps articulate the necessity of wrestling with not simply the historical contexts and afterlives of our source materials but also the historical contexts and afterlives of our methods and interpretive frameworks, including in the works of influential figures such as Harnack and Bultmann.<sup>32</sup> Thus, I am advocating an approach that takes seriously modern contexts of interpretation including the relationship between the formation of modern notions of race and ethnicity and religion.

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<sup>27</sup> Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Sylvester Johnson, *The Myth of Ham*, 130, 132; cf. 109–33.

<sup>29</sup> For more details on what it means to call haunting an “idiom,” see the excellent review essay by Joshua Gunn, “Review Essay: Mourning Humanism, or, the Idiom of Haunting,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 77–102.

<sup>30</sup> Buell, “Hauntology Meets Posthumanism,” forthcoming.

<sup>31</sup> Buell, “God’s Own People,” 183.

<sup>32</sup> For one example of this, see Denise Kimber Buell, “The Afterlife is Not Dead: Spiritualism, Postcolonial Theory, and Early Christian Studies,” *Church History* 78 (2009): 862–72.

This is not something we are ordinarily trained to do—especially given the legacy of historical criticism’s emphasis on the gap between the past and present and the prioritizing of scholarly immersion in the ancient texts.

What might such an approach entail? First, one might include attention to one or more contexts of biblical translation projects and conversion efforts in missionary contexts. Let me explain this in relation to a related but different kind of approach, embodied in Jonathan Z. Smith’s use of 1 Corinthians to reconsider the nineteenth-century interactions between Christian missionaries and inhabitants of New Guinea.<sup>33</sup> Missionary records indicate a communication challenge between missionaries and potential and actual converts to Christianity about thinking of Christ as an ancestor Gentiles acquire—language that permeates Paul’s letters, an understanding the missionaries discouraged but is legible in Paul’s reference to his audience as former Gentiles who can now imagine the Israelites as their ancestors in the wilderness.<sup>34</sup> The force of Smith’s argument is about the heuristic value for altering our imagination and possible understanding of Paul’s rhetoric and its reception in the first-century Corinthian context. The New Guinean context reveals that ethnic reasoning has been bound up with the project of missionizing itself, and linked to the way that the Bible as a collection was linked to the transmission of European culture and imperial power.

What I am proposing partly resembles Smith’s argument, but I suggest that studying the missionary history also demonstrates submerged historical alternatives available in Paul’s rhetoric that can be activated to reshape the meaning of Christian membership and belonging—both illuminating the specific Corinthian context and the later, non-causally linked, response of missionized peoples in modern contexts. The communication challenges between Christian missionaries and the indigenous people of New Guinea does not just illuminate but also was also enabled by the ancient ethnic reasoning in Paul’s letters and the kinds of Corinthian reception his teachings received.

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<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 340–61.

<sup>34</sup> See Cavan Concannon’s study of both Corinthian ethnic reasoning and Paul’s rhetoric in the Corinthian correspondence: Cavan Concannon, ‘When you were Gentiles’: *Specters of Ethnicity in Roman Corinth and Paul’s Corinthian Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

An approach to New Testament writings that attends to what haunts brings to the foreground an ethics of interpretation: one is haunted in the present, and a haunting calls for a response—the interpreter can choose to ignore a specter or engage it. Using such an approach one does not deny the central insight of historical criticism—that the past is different from the present—but one’s emphasis is not on foregrounding that cut so much as attending to how the past makes itself known in the present in often surprising and sometimes unsettling ways.

Let me offer another kind of example that emerges from how New Testament scholars have been attempting important interventions into the ongoing ways in which Christianity in the United States participates in racialized and ethnic forms of social marginalization. Chan-Hie Kim interprets Acts 10–11 to challenge white Euro-American norms for Christian belonging, norms that have functioned to marginalize immigrant Christians from Asian countries.<sup>35</sup> This marginalization is both ethnically and religiously inflected. Kim indicts white Euro-American Christians for marginalizing Asian American counterparts by analogizing white Euro-American Christians with some Jews in Acts.

Kim focuses on an encounter between the apostle Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius. Cornelius, whom Acts describes as one who “feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God” (10:2), has a vision of an angel of God commanding him to invite Peter to his house. Before Peter receives his invitation, he too receives a vision in which he is told: “What God has cleansed, you must not call common” (10:15). When they meet, Peter shares this message and Cornelius shares his vision. In response, Peter says, “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every people (*ethnos*) any one who fears God and does what is right, is acceptable to God” (10:34–35).

This passage has been important for many Christians in North America fighting racism, to support the view that anyone, regardless of background, can be a Christian. Kim uses the encounter between Peter and Cornelius to reflect on how many white mainline Protestant Christians treat immigrant Christians, especially from Asia, in the US. He writes that

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<sup>35</sup> Chan-Hie Kim, “Reading the Cornelius Story from an Asian Immigrant Perspective,” in *Reading from this Place: Volume One: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (ed. F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 165–74.

[m]ost of the mainline Protestant churches do not seem to realize that these [the immigrant Christians] are the “gentile” Christians who do not know and are not willing to accept “Jewish” laws and practices ... We cannot claim the superiority of one culture over against another or insist that European culture is the only norm for Christian faith and practice ... Identifying Christianity with a particular cultural pattern and religiosity is a betrayal of the Christian gospel that is expressed in Peter’s confession—“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation [*ethnos*] anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34–35).<sup>36</sup>

Kim challenges the idea that any one group of Christians should be able to dictate the correct forms of Christianity for all Christians.

It is important to note that Kim’s argument is completely intra-Christian in its context and intended force. Indeed, his analysis highlights precisely the paradox that arises when one insists that Christianity is intrinsically separate from ethnicity/race. Any instance of marginalization linked to “race” or “ethnicity” then gets framed as a misfire of “true” Christianity, leaving the door open to characterize racist or ethnocentric Christian practices as deviant in some fashion, whether that be as heretical or “Jewish.” The problem remains, however, that this interpretation reprises, in an intra-Christian framework, a highly problematic legacy of Christian anti-Judaism that has been both violent and racist.

We need to re-examine the assumption that what characterizes the shift from members of a Jewish sectarian Jesus movement to a Christian group is a break with ethnic reasoning. Acts itself deploys a rhetorical strategy of making belonging in Christ as a multi-ethnic universalism that is nonetheless still imagined as being the people of God. As Cynthia Baker has shown, this rhetorical strategy is modeled on the idea that Jews already form a multiethnic people—epitomized in the Pentecost scene of the second chapter of Acts.<sup>37</sup> Reframing an analysis of Acts in this way makes it possible to take Kim’s critique of contemporary ethnocentric Christian practices and retain the ethical imperative to abolish intra-Christian racism and ethnocentrism without building this on a problematic claim of

<sup>36</sup> Kim, “Reading the Cornelius Story,” 172–74.

<sup>37</sup> Cynthia M. Baker, “‘From Every Nation under Heaven’: Jewish Ethnicities in the Greco-Roman World,” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza and L. Nasrallah; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 79–99; see also Buell, “Early Christian Universalism,” 120–28.

“Jewish” perspectives being the cause of such ethnocentrism or racism. What haunts current North American Christian communities is not simply modern racism or deviant (“Jewish”) materializations of an original non-racist Christianity. Instead, what haunts such ethnocentric Christian practices is twofold: first, the rendering invisible of how the rhetoric of a multi-ethnic universalizing potential of belonging in Christ is built precisely upon existing ancient Jewish collective self-understandings; and second, that early Christian universalizing claims themselves have an exclusionary edge insofar as making belonging in Christ potentially available to all opens the door to vilify and marginalize any who resist this invitation.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion: In Our Minds and/or in the Texts?

What if biblical materials, in separation from the question of faith or belief, turn out to have instructive bearing on some of the urgent issues facing our world today?<sup>39</sup>

Benny Liew poses this question as a challenge to biblical interpreters, noting that our work is generally viewed a marginal to matters of contemporary concerns. While expressing some optimism about the potential relevance of biblical studies, Liew rightly insists that the burden rests on biblical interpreters to say why and how biblical studies matters.

We have the potential to consider such relevance when taking up the topic of ethnicity. Ethnicity, along with race, religion, and nationalism, are among the urgent issues facing our world today. The value of biblical studies can include emphasizing the differences between our present and the various ancient contexts in which biblical texts were composed but also in showing the significance of the Bible as a collection of texts that have been variously deployed to enact and reinforce collective identities. The political climate of anti-Muslim action and discourse in the US and Europe has me asking how narratives of Christian origins get crafted to manage and displace possible challenges to Christian claims to epitomize

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<sup>38</sup> For more on this latter dimension, which I call “compulsory mutability,” see Buell, “Early Christian Universalism.”

<sup>39</sup> Tat-Siong Benny Liew, “When Margins Become Common Ground: Questions of and for Biblical Studies,” in *Still at the Margins: Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years after Voices from the Margin* (ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 40–55 (54).



not just the universal religion, but the one best capable of supporting secular ideals.

Breivik's appeal to Christianity in his lengthy *Manifesto* offers a chilling note upon which to conclude. Although expressing considerable disdain for Christian leaders and suspicion about religious adherence in general, Breivik embraces the notion that Christianity is nonetheless a necessary marker of true European identity. Central to his vision for revitalizing "Europe" (even in secular sense) is a project of embracing and properly interpreting the Bible; he also posits that mandatory conversion to Christianity, as he defines it, is the means by which Muslims may become full participants (after three generations, anyway) in Europe. Biblical exegetes have an opportunity to contribute to very pressing conversations about the present and future. Doing so requires being willing to take on how discussions about the intersections of ethnicity/race/religion and nationality in the present, including about Islam and Muslims (even if obviously anachronistic to the historical contexts of the New Testament writings) are nonetheless relevant for biblical studies. We can tackle this challenge by rigorously examining, on the one hand, how our historiographical and exegetical habits are haunted by modern histories of biblical interpretation in social and political contexts and, on the other hand, how the textual content of biblical texts haunts and is haunted by a range of positive and negative possibilities that have or may yet be materialized in one way.