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Response to Hans Leander: The Complexity of Ethnicity

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Hans Leander makes several interesting observations and raises many critical questions in his paper on "hybrid ethnic identities." I generally agree with his main conclusions, and will therefore concentrate this response on making some observations that have to do with the complexity of dealing with "ethnicity" in the first century C.E. and in the biblical texts. In particular, I will point out the hazard involved in the task of tagging the position of Paul in clear-cut categories when it comes to issues of ethnicity.

1. The Complexity of Defining "Ethnicity," in Particular "Jewish Ethnicity"

As Leander points out, to investigate and elaborate on the meaning and definition of "ethnicity" is a complex and challenging enterprise: What do we actually mean with the terms "ethnic" and "ethnicity"? What is the difference between "race" and "ethnicity"? Is "ethnicity" something static or something fluid? Who is defining who, when we talk about "ethnicity"?

Anyone operating in the field needs thus to define the meaning of "ethnicity." Leander correctly says that "ethnicity" is a social construct that is both static/stable and fluid, something that is both coherent and contingent, something that has to do both with descent and culture (Steve Fenton); it is both pedagogical and performative (Homi Bhabha). "Ethnicity" has thus to do with both ancestry *and* common behavior, with both shared genealogy *and* certain customs and practices. For example, Jewish identity in the Diaspora was neither merely a matter of ancestry nor simply a question of cultural practice, but was based on a combination of these two interlocking factors.

Above all, in my perspective, the term "ethnicity" by definition belongs to the sphere of "otherness."[1] In fact, it can be said that an ethnic group is made by its boundaries; ethnic identity is constituted by opposition to other ethnic identities. This was particularly true in a group-orientated and ethnocentric milieu such as the Ancient Mediterranean culture. Accordingly, it is interesting to observe that the term "Jew" from the start was predominantly a terminology used by outsiders, and when it occurs as a self-designation, it does so in contexts that speak of dealing with outsiders (e.g., 2 Macc 2:21; 6:6; 8:1; 11:25; 14:38).[2] Thus, the Jewish authors used the term "Jew" as a way of identifying themselves by way of emphasizing exclusiveness and distinction from others.[3] (I think the same goes for the term "Christian"; it is from the beginning an "outsider" term.[4])

This highlights the questions of the identity of the one who is defining "ethnicity." Is he/she an insider or an outsider? This becomes particularly salient when it comes to the complex task of defining Jewish identity.[5] As is well known, first-century Judaism is best described in the plural, as Judaisms (at least in an ideological meaning). Hence, there were several Jewish groupings in the first century that claimed to be "Jews" but did not accept the self-definitions of other Jewish groups.

Moreover, there were obviously Jews who manifestly no longer practiced Judaism and non-Jews who did. On the one hand, there were Jews by birth in the Hellenistic era who assimilated to the non-Jewish world to the extent of abandoning Jewish customs (e.g., 3 Macc 1:3). And they

[1] Cf. Lieu 2004, 286–293.

[2] For example, in 2 Maccabees the climax of oppression is reached when "it was not possible to observe the Sabbath or to keep the ancestral festivals, or even to admit to being a Jew" (Ἰουδαῖον ὁμολογεῖν εἶναι, 6:6). By their minds and manners the Jews erected a boundary between themselves and the rest of humanity, the non-Jews (i.e., "the Gentiles"). At the core of Jewish Diaspora, identity was found in the notion of shared ethnicity or in the ethnic bond, expressed in the combination of ancestry *and* custom. The Jews in the Diaspora claimed their right to be different, to be free "to live according to their ancestral customs" (2 Macc 11:25).

[3] So Dunn 1999, 180.

[4] See Horrell 2007.

[5] In a lengthy discussion about the central thread of Jewish identity in the Diaspora, John Barclay (1996, 399–443) draws attention to several factors that belonged to and articulated Jewish Diaspora identity: a common sense of ancestry and history, of being a "nation," common festivals and feasts, Sabbath gatherings and observance, collection of temple dues, links with the "homeland," Jerusalem and the temple, the Law/Jewish Scriptures, the figure of Moses, the rejection of alien, pluralistic and iconic cults, separatism at meals and male circumcision.

were still counted as "Jews."[6] On the other hand, there were people without Jewish ancestry, non-Jews, who joined themselves to the Jewish community to such a degree that it became possible to talk of such "becoming Jews" (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.38; the example concerns the Gentile ruler Izates). Thus, J. M. G. Barclay concludes, "if it was possible to be a Jew yet abandon one's heritage, or to be a non-Jew and yet somehow become one, the old one-to-one correspondence between the nation and the Jewish way of life could no longer hold."[7]

Accordingly, in the setting of the Empire a non-Jew would likely have called a non-Jew practicing Judaism "a Jew." This finds support in the classic passage from Dio Cassius, *Hist. Rom.* 37.16.5–17.1, more or less drawing the conclusion that anyone who is devoted to Jewish practices can be called a Ἰουδαῖος, a "Jew."[8]

However, most Jews would likely *not* have called a non-Jew practicing Judaism or Jewish customs "a Jew," at least not in terms of ancestry. In fact, Diaspora evidence demonstrates that Gentiles were never completely accepted as real "Jews" by other Jews; a non-Jewish proselyte normally never achieved equality with ethnically born Jews.[9] For example, the Mishnah (*m. Bik.* 1:4) separates between a real Jew and a proselyte as it came to how the proselytes ought to pray; a Gentile proselyte should not call the fathers of Israel "their fathers."[10] A non-Jew could thus be a Jew in practice—converting to Judaism and joining the Jewish community—but not in descent.[11]

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[6] For further examples, see Barclay 1998, 83–89.

[7] Barclay 1996, 404.

[8] A similar view may also be found in Plutarch, *Cic*. 7.5–6; Epictetus, *Disc*. 2.9.19–21; Martial, *Ep.* 7.82; Suetonius, *Dom*. 12.2.

[9] Shaye Cohen (1989) identifies seven ways for a Gentile to show respect or affection for Judaism: 1) admiring some aspect of Judaism; 2) acknowledging the power of the god of the Jews or incorporating him into the pagan pantheon; 3) benefiting the Jews or being conspicuously friendly to Jews; 4) practicing some or many of the rituals of the Jews; 5) venerating the god of the Jews and denying or ignoring the pagan gods; 6) joining the Jewish community, and 7) converting to Judaism and "becoming a Jew." For people judging religious practice from the outside (a non-Jewish perspective), it would probably have been enough for a Gentile to express criteria number 4 and 5 to be reckoned as a Jewish convert. Thus, if one only knew what to say and do, it seems to have been rather easy to pass as a Jew in Roman eyes. From a Jewish perspective though, it is doubtful if even criteria number 6 and 7 would have been enough.

[10] A proselyte could not say, "Which the Lord has sworn to our fathers, to give unto us" (*m. Bik.* 1:4).

[11] This is also confirmed by the Aphrodisias Jewish inscription (mentioning altogether 69 names) where gentile "God-fearers" (52 names) are distinguished from "Jews." Further-

Thus, I agree with Leander that in the eyes of a non-Jew, "there was no difference between a Jew and a proselyte." But this non-Jewish perspective must be distinguished from a Jewish perspective. For example, the "mixed multitude" Leander refers to in the Exodus-event, those that followed Israel out of Egypt, may correctly be described as Jewish sympathizers, even as "Jews" by the outsiders, but hardly not by the Jews themselves. When Philo talks about those Egyptians who joined the Jewish people who went out of Egypt, he clearly distinguishes them from real Jews, even speaking of this group as "an illegitimate crowd with a body of genuine citizens" (*Mos.* 1.147).

Concerning the example of the Ethiopian eunuch, I agree with Leander that he was probably regarded as a Jew in terms of religious practices. However, I doubt that he was a Jew in terms of ancestry or that other Jews would ever have accepted him as a "Jew," in particular since Jews in general despised eunuchs.[12] In his commentary on Acts, C. K. Barrett concludes concerning this eunuch that "he was not a born Jew but an Ethiopian," even adding, "as an eunuch he could not have become a proselyte."[13] I doubt that Leander's way of arguing from the story line of Acts that the eunuch must have been a Jew holds true.[14] Here Leander seems to stretch the evidence in order to substantiate his argument about a "hybrid ethnicity."

The same goes for the example of "the midwives of the Hebrews," being called *ivriyot* (העברית, Exod 1:15).[15] Leander suggests that these women were Egyptian women who were regarded as "models of what it means to be a true Israelite." This may be correct, but in the context it is more natural to interpret them as Hebrew women with typical Hebrew names (Shiphrah and Puah).[16]

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more, according to rabbinic law the peculiarity of a gentile proselyte was inherited; the son of a proselyte had the legal status of his father (*t. Qid.* 4:15) unless his mother was a native Jew.

[12] Deut 23:1 ("No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD") was regularly interpreted to mean that eunuchs were to be excluded from God's assembly.

[13] Barrett 1994, 425. Cf. Witherington 1998, 296: "He could not be a full-fledged Jew."

[14] Acts 8 marks a transition from the mission among the Jews (Acts 1–7) to the mission among the non-Jews (Acts 10 and on). Philip first goes to the Samarians (semi-Jews) and then to the Ethiopian eunuch ("a God-fearing half-Jew").

[15] The term עברי was according to BDB the word for an Israelite "put in the words of a foreigner," particularly used in order to distinguish Israelites from foreigners.

[16] So most commentators (see, e.g., Hyatt 1971, 60–61).

2. The Complexity of Defining the "Ethnicity" of Paul

Leander's test case in defining "ethnicity" in the early Christian movement is Paul, the apostle. Leander does this with caution, for as he says, to categorize scholarship is always a risky business. He suggests four different categories:

1. Judaism as ethnic; Paul as non-ethnic
2. Judaism as ethnic; Paul as multi-ethnic
3. Judaism and Paul as ethnic
4. Judaism and Paul as ethnically hybrid

Leander's conclusion is that both Judaism and Paul are hybrids in terms of ethnicity. I find the overview of these categories helpful, although I think that all of these categories may contain some truth. Since it is all a matter of definition, it is not a matter of either or—especially not as it comes to Paul. Paul was definitely a Jew,[17] although a peculiar one. As it comes to defining the socio-ethnic identity of Paul, Paul is a "slippery" person. For example, James Dunn speaks of Paul as a person with an identity "in transition," and John Barclay calls him "an anomalous Jew."[18]

First, I think one may say that Paul is *non-ethnic* in his theology, i.e., Christ-believing Gentiles are not Jews, either in ancestral origin or in religious practice. Paul creates categories that move outside definitions based on origin and religious practice. A classic example of this is Romans 2:28–29:

> For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God. (Rom 2:28–29 NRSV).

In some way or the other, Paul here redefines the concept of "ethnicity." Paul thus moves outside the realm of ethnic definitions as public identity markers into a spiritual and a universal realm. In this meaning I believe it is correct to designate him as non-ethnic.

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[17] "I am a Hebrew" (2 Cor 11:22; cf. Phil 3:5); "I am an Israelite" (Rom 11:1).
[18] Barclay 1996, 381–95; Dunn 1999, 174, 193.

Secondly, I find it also legitimate to talk about Paul as *multi-ethnic*, i.e., Christ-believing Gentiles are Jews in practice but not in origin. Paul advocates Jewish moral standards for the Gentiles and his paraenetical sections are full of Jewish ethics (e.g., Rom 13). Although Christ-believing Gentiles are not Jews in an ethnic sense (i.e., of Jewish origin and ancestry), they are to live in many ways like Jews and adopt certain Jewish customs (refusing public sacrifices, keeping Jewish moral standards, celebrating a day of rest, etc.). Nevertheless, as argued above, they would most likely never have been accepted as Jews by the Jews.

However, at the same time as Paul devalues the meaning of religious practices when he defines the identity of the Christ-believers, he allows people of Jewish origin to continue to circumcise their sons and to keep certain days and food laws, but he reacts when people of non-Jewish origin are required to keep the same customs. He himself takes stance with "the strong" (those who do not keep certain days and foods laws) in Rome—not primarily an ethnic category though—when he urges them to take care of "the weak" ones (Rom 14–15). Furthermore, he strongly reacts when Jewish purity laws keep Christ-believing Jews from eating together with Christ-believing non-Jews (Gal 2:11–14). Thus, it is not certain customs that define the true Christ-believer.

Thirdly, you may also define Paul as *ethnic*, i.e., Christ-believing Gentiles are Jews in origin but not in practice. Paul designates Christ-believing Gentiles as true "heirs and sons of Abraham" (Gal 3; Rom 4). His vision of unity in Christ is thus a vision of Jewish ethnicity, at least in a symbolic universe or in a spiritual meaning. However, I do not think—and Leander also points this out—that this means a rejection of their previous ancestral identity. And, as several Jewish texts indicate, non-Jews would never have been accepted as "Jews" by Jews in general on these premises.

Fourthly, Leander makes an important point when he speaks of Paul as *hybrid*, i.e., Christ-believing Gentiles are a hybrid of ethnic identities. In Christ there are both "Jews *and* Greeks"; together they form an inclusive identity in Christ. Although not applying the terminology of "hybridity," several scholars have made a similar point previously. For example, N. A. Dahl argues in an article from 1964 that Paul does not ask Jews or Gentiles to give up their ethnic identities: "As Christians, Gentiles should remain part of the ethnic group from which they came, Greek, Galatian, or

whatever."[19] But the church, he continues, must embody the principle of impartiality.

However, I wonder why Leander only elaborates on material from Exodus and Acts in this section. When speaking of Paul as "hybrid," why not deal more explicitly with Paul and the Pauline texts? For example, Leander may here have referred to Paul being a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks:

> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. (1 Cor 9:20–22 NRSV)

It is striking that Paul as a Jew here speaks of "becoming as a Jew." Of course, he must refer to religious and cultural practices, not of ancestry. This reminds us of the continuous need to define our use of the term "ethnicity." Anyway, being a Jew and "being a non-Jew" are not incompatible for Paul. Being of Jewish ancestry and behaving like a non-Jew is thus not a contradiction. This must, in some way or the other, have meant an adoption of a "hybrid" ethnicity, at least in practice.

Furthermore, Leander could also have profited from referring to the Lukan texts that speak of Paul as a Jew with both a Greek and a Roman citizenship. Paul was a remarkable mix of ethnicities: a Hellenistic Jew of the Greek city of Tarsus who owned Roman citizenship (Acts 21:39; 22:25–28). One may also consider the passage of Paul circumcising the Greek citizen Timothy (having a Greek father and a Jewish mother) in order to give him a "Jewish passport" (Acts 16:1–3). Here we have several examples of the "hybridity" that Leander is looking for.

Finally, one may wonder if the idea of looking for "hybrid ethnic identities" in Paul is not a rather modern project governed by today's interest in looking for "resources to counter ethnic prejudice and racism" (Leander's conclusion). As Charles Cosgrove concludes his survey of Paul and ethnicity in modern biblical research, "the idea that ethnicities, as cultural heritage, deserve social protection is a modern idea, off the intellectual map of ancient Mediterraneans, including Paul. Nothing in Paul opposes

[19] Dahl 1977, 108. This article was originally published in *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift* in 1964.

it, nothing implies it."[20] Of course, modern interests in the study of ancient texts are not inappropriate—as long as we are prepared to accept that the texts do not always contain the answers and ideas we are looking for.

3. The Complexity of Defining Early Christian "Ethnicity" in the Context of the Empire

The setting of dealing with issues of "ethnicity" in Leander's paper is "the context of the empire." Here it would have been interesting if Leander would have further developed this socio-political setting in defining "ethnicity," i.e., defining "ethnicity" in the context of *the Roman Empire*. This also gives interesting aspects on the complexity of defining ethnicity among the early Christ-believers.

I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere that the socio-political setting of the Empire caused some Gentile Christ-believers to circumcise and to live like Jews in order to be counted as Jews and enjoy the many Jewish social and religious privileges from Rome.[21] They were attracted to Jewish "ethnicity" and Jewish customs not only for religious reasons ("Abraham's sons") but also for socio-political reasons.[22] Thus, I would argue, there were early Christ-believing Gentiles who obtained and adopted a "hybrid" identity in order to escape hardships and persecution. However, Paul seems to warn Christ-believing Gentiles not to circumcise themselves in order to be counted as Jews in the eyes of the civic authorities. It is in this setting, referring to his own Jewish ancestry and diligence in keeping the Jewish customs, that Paul says: "I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him" (Phil 3:8–9a NRSV).[23]

[20] Cosgrove 2010, 96–97.
[21] See Tellbe 2001.
[22] S. J. D. Cohen (1993, 40) explains, "In situations where status as a Jew conferred privileges and/or esteem, that status will have been coveted by outsiders, and we may be sure that as a result some non-Jews converted to Judaism and others simply declared themselves to be Jews. The Jews of Rome and of the cities of Asia Minor and Syria enjoyed a wide range of legal privileges, and at times were socially and economically prominent; in the Roman legal system the Jews of Egypt occupied a place above that of Egyptians. In these environments gentiles would have had strong incentive to declare themselves to be Jews, and it would have been relatively easy for them to do so, especially in places where the Jewish community was large."
[23] See Tellbe 1994.

In this socio-political setting Paul thus seems to urge Christ-believing non-Jews, as well as Christ-believing Jews, not to rely on a Jewish identity—or any other ethnic identity for that sake—in order to escape hardships. In conclusion, as time went by and "the parting of the ways" became a social reality, the early Christian movement developed into a universal movement, a "hybrid" ethnic movement with many ethnic identities and with a well-defined religious locus of their common self-understanding that held them together and made them into a new people, namely their common identity in Jesus Christ.

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