‘Ex-Pagan Pagans’? Paul, Philo, and Gentile Ethnic Reconfiguration

Denys N. McDonald
University of Exeter, UK

Abstract
In Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle (2017), Paula Fredriksen reminds us that gods and their cults were intertwined with ancient ethnic groups so much so that, when Gentiles committed themselves exclusively to Israel’s God, some Jews considered this ‘tantamount to changing ethnicity’. Fredriksen claims, however, that Paul’s Gentile addressees – whom she terms ‘ex-pagan pagans’ – remain separate ethnically from Jews despite forsaking their ancestral gods for Israel’s. Given that gods and ethnicity were intertwined, this article examines if it is reasonable to conclude that Paul thinks Gentile Christ-followers remain strictly Gentiles after they have abandoned their ethnic gods and entered into a relationship with Israel and its God. I argue that, similar to Philo’s proselyte inclusion strategy, Paul incorporates Gentiles-in-Christ into ethnic Israel. As Abraham’s ‘offspring’, Paul suggests that his addressees not only gain membership in Israel’s covenant on account of Israel’s messiah, but that they also acquire a new ethnic identity despite that their prior identities as ‘the Gentiles’ are not erased. This study, then, seeks to destabilize the binary that Fredriksen posits between ethnic Israel and Paul’s Gentiles-in-Christ as ethnic ‘other’. In the end, I demonstrate that Paul’s ethnic reconfiguration of Gentile identities resembles Philo’s proselyte discourse and is more disruptive ethnically than Fredriksen’s phrase ‘ex-pagan pagans’ would suggest.

Keywords
Paul, Philo, Gentiles, ethnic identity, Abraham, conversion

1. Introduction
Paula Fredriksen’s Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle (2017) raises important questions about the extent to which Paul believes the pre-existing ethnic identities of
Gentiles continue or are disrupted because of their new relationship to Israel’s God. Fredriksen reminds us that ethnicity was not ‘religiously neutral’ in antiquity since gods were inherently linked with particular ethnic groups: ‘Ancient peoples were born into their relationships with their gods. Cult was an aspect and a statement of a people’s family connection, of their peoplehood, of their ethnicity’ (2017: 34). As she later puts it, ‘gods, like their cults, ran in the blood’ (2017: 37). Fredriksen notes that Jews also viewed their God in ethnic terms, where Israel’s ‘relationship with God is frequently expressed in the language of family descent: “Israel is my first-born son”’ (Exod. 4.22) (2017: 18). This relationship was so fundamental to Jewish identity that, when Gentiles committed themselves exclusively to the Jewish God during the Second Temple period, some Jews considered this to be, as Fredriksen writes, ‘tantamount to changing ethnicity’ (2017: 54-55). She adds that, when these non-Jews rejected their native gods for Israel’s, they were essentially reconfiguring their pasts and ancestries, severing both human and divine ties.

Fredriksen contends, however, that Paul thinks Gentile Christ-followers remain Gentiles ethnically even though they turn from their traditional gods and commit themselves exclusively to Israel’s God. She argues that these ‘ex-pagan pagans’ should be distinguished from Jewish proselytes who are no longer Gentiles but Jews ‘of a peculiar sort’: ‘Like proselytes, these pagans would worship exclusively the god of Israel; unlike proselytes, these pagans would preserve their own ethnicities and – another way of saying the same thing – they would not assume the bulk of Jewish ancestral custom (such as, for males, circumcision)’ (2017: 74, emphasis original). Important to Fredriksen’s argument is that Paul includes these Gentiles in Israel’s eschatological redemption, but they do not join Israel as covenant members themselves. Instead, they join with Israel as Gentiles, since ‘inclusion is not “conversion”’ (2017: 75, emphasis original; cf. 73-77).

As insightful as Fredriksen’s work is for understanding ethnicity in the ancient world, this article examines her claim that Paul’s gospel ‘preserves’ non-Jewish identities and tests whether it is consistent with her description of ancient ethnicity. Given that gods and ethnicity were intertwined, as Fredriksen demonstrates, is it reasonable to conclude that Paul thinks non-Jewish Christ-followers remain Gentiles after they have abandoned their ethnic gods and entered into a

1. Fredriksen (2018: 209-10): ‘When we think “ethnicity”, we need to see how gods function as active members – indeed, as the supreme member(s) – of human kinship groups’.
2. Translating Ἰουδαῖος as ‘Judean’ can help to reinforce the reality that the Ἰουδαῖοι were an ethnic group like others in antiquity whose ‘religion’ was only one aspect of its identity. However, I render it as ‘Jew’ in this study to be consistent with Fredriksen and because, as Cynthia Baker (2011) has demonstrated, the term ‘Jew’ has never been an ‘extra-ethnic phenomenon’ and thus can function as an ethnic category in the same way as ‘Judean’ (174).
relationship with Israel and its God? To this end, I engage with Fredriksen by comparing Paul to Philo of Alexandria, who also speaks of non-Jews who reject their ancestral gods and practices for those of the Jews. Similar to Philo’s proselyte inclusion strategy, I argue that Paul incorporates Gentiles-in-Christ into ethnic Israel. As Abraham’s ‘offspring’ (σπέρμα), Paul suggests his addressees not only gain membership in Israel’s covenant on account of Israel’s messiah, but they also acquire a new ethnic identity despite that their prior identities as ‘the Gentiles/nations’ (τὰ ἔθνη) are not erased. This study, then, seeks to destabilize the binary that Fredriksen posits between ethnic Israel and Paul’s Gentiles-in-Christ as ethnic ‘other’. In the end, I demonstrate that Paul’s ethnic reconfiguration of Gentile identities resembles Philo’s proselyte discourse and is more disruptive ethnically than Fredriksen’s phrase ‘ex-pagan pagans’ would suggest.

2. Ethnic Reconfiguration in Philo and Paul

2.1 Ancient Ethnicity

Before looking at how Philo and Paul reconfigure non-Jewish identities, a few methodological considerations about ethnicity are necessary. Although there is no agreed-upon definition of ‘ethnicity’, scholars typically include a ‘sense of kinship, group solidarity, and common culture’ (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 3). However, they disagree about the criteria and the processes that shape it, including the way ancient people understood and communicated their ethnic identities. Since Fredrik Barth’s (1969) landmark volume, social scientists have tended to view ethnicity as a social construct even though it is commonly perceived to be a fixed category. Barth’s constructivist approach shifted the study of ethnicity from the idea that immutable human traits generate ethnic groups (i.e., a primordialist approach) to the notion that ‘Socially relevant factors alone become diagnostic for membership’ (1969: 15). Barth describes ethnicity as something that depends on ‘social processes of exclusion and incorporation’ in which actors establish and maintain ethnic boundaries they deem significant (1969: 10; cf. 9-15). Constructivists since Barth have refined this approach, but the common thread among them is that ethnicity is contingent on changing social circumstances that force group members to interpret and to respond to those situations, thereby (re)creating their group identity in the process (cf. Buell 2005: 5-10; Cornell and Hartmann 2007: 84-87; Hall 2002: 9-19).

Despite this consensus, Barry Matlock (2012: 310-11) cautions interpreters to avoid ‘Barthianizing’ Paul (and, for our present purposes, Philo) by confusing our external analysis with Paul’s internal view as though he is a ‘self-conscious social scientist’. Matlock demonstrates that Paul speaks of ethnicity in conventional ways (e.g., genealogy, language, culture) and should be characterized as a
primordialist, ‘not in any theoretical sense, but in the unreflective or folk-anthropological sort of way that ethnic actors tend to be’ (e.g., Rom. 9.1-5; Phil. 3.4-5) (2012: 311; cf. Fredriksen 2017: 35). Even so, we should not create a dichotomy between primordialist and constructivist approaches when examining ancient ethnicity. Matlock’s warning, as he points out (2012: 311-12), does not rule out the possibility that a first-century Jew could conceive of some type of ethnic reconfiguration for non-Jews who attached themselves to Israel’s God. While some Jews appeal strictly to birth to define Jewish ethnicity (e.g., Jub. 15.25-30), others think that Gentiles can acquire this identity (e.g., Josephus, Ant. 20.34-48) (cf. Cohen 1999: 140-74; Donaldson 2007: 483-92). In other words, Jewish ethnicity was more than just ‘blood ties’; other criteria such as beliefs or customs became indicators not only to reinforce, but also to create ethnic ties.

This variegated reality does not mean that Jews defined their ethnic identity arbitrarily. Like other ancient people, they adopted various markers for group membership while still claiming a myth of common descent (Johnson Hodge 2007: 85-86; cf. Hall 2002: 11-13). For example, Torah observance was a salient ethnic criterion for most Jews, yet it was one that they understood to be rooted in a common ancestry reaching back to Abraham (e.g., Jub. 6.19-22; CD 3.2). As a result, the construction of Jewish identity takes advantage of the idea of ‘perceived essentialness’ even as new contexts reorganize and create new identities around various criteria (Johnson Hodge 2007: 28). Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann (2007: 93-95) call this dynamic ‘constructed primordiality’. This two-fold perspective illustrates that there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ primordialist identity, yet it also draws attention to the actors themselves who experience and express their ethnicities through the ‘rhetoric and symbolism of primordialism’ (2007: 94-95). Therefore, rather than reducing the discussion to whether first-century Jews are either primordialists or constructivists, we need to make sense of the evidence that reveals that some Jews think Gentiles can acquire Israelite and/or Jewish identity even if they understand it to have originated in a primordial past.3

Considering the multi-layered nature of ethnicity, how do we determine whether Paul and Philo reconfigure non-Jewish ethnic identities? Building on Fredriksen’s work, I start with the assumption that, although ‘religion’ should not be collapsed into the category of ‘ethnicity’, the gods and their associated cults played such an integral part of ancient life that they were wrapped up in ethnic identities themselves.4 Consequently, changes in divine allegiances could potentially be a way that ancient people reconfigured ethnicity. From this, a

3. Although scholars often employ the identities ‘Jew’ and ‘Israel’ interchangeably, some Second Temple Jews understood the former as a subset group of the latter (cf. Staples 2021).
4. I use ‘religion/religious’ to refer to the divine and cultic aspects of an ethnic group, not as a modern category associated with a belief system (cf. Horrell 2020: 83-89).
second assumption is that some Second Temple Jews regarded ‘conversion’ as an
ethnic transformation (Fredriksen 2017: 54-55). Observing this interrelationship,
scholars have noted at least three steps required for Gentile conversion: (1) the
exclusive worship of Israel’s God, (2) incorporation into the Israelite/Jewish
people and (3) Torah obedience (e.g., Donaldson 2007: 488-90; cf. Cohen 1999:
156-62). These three steps will serve heuristically to analyse how closely Philo’s
and Paul’s inclusion strategies fit this conversion pattern and how these measures
might reconfigure non-Jewish ethnic identities.

2.2 Philo and Ethnic Reconfiguration

Step 1: Turning to Israel’s God. Philo is one writer who suggests that Gentiles acquire
a Jewish identity when they join a Jewish community because of their exclusive
loyalty to its God, their new kinship ties to its people and their observance of the
Mosaic Law. Concerning the first step, Philo often portrays ‘proselytes’ (προσήλυτοι) and ‘incomers’ (ἐπηλύται)6 as those who have forsaken temples, images of and tributes to the gods and instead ‘have taken the journey to a better
home’ that involves ‘the worship of the one and truly existing God’ (Virt. 102; cf.
105-108). He also uses this pilgrimage motif several times in Special Laws to
indicate that the proselytes’ ‘judgement led them to make the passage to piety
(πρὸς εὐσέβειαν’) (Spec. 1.51; cf. 1.309; 2.116-19; 4.176-78). According to Philo,
these ‘refugees to the camp of piety’ (καταφυγαὶ τοῖς πρὸς εὐσέβειαν) are bound
to Jews because they honour ‘the one God’ (τοῦ ἑνὸς θεοῦ) (Spec. 1.52). As such,
the Jewish people include ‘all who spurn idle fables and embrace the truth in its
purity’, both those who ‘have been such from the first’ (i.e., Jews by birth) and
those who have come ‘through conversion’ (μεταβάλλεσθαι) (1.51). Philo rein-
forces this communal boundary a few lines later when he contrasts existing
members and proselytes to all those whom he says are deserving of discipline for
having ‘betray[ed] the honour due to the One’ and for turning away from ‘the
ranks of piety and religion’ (εὐσεβείας καὶ ὁσιότητος) (1.54).

Step 2: Incorporation into a Jewish Community. The social dynamic Philo envisions
between Jews and incomers is not one where proselytes stand at the margins of
the community now that they worship the Jewish God. Instead, they are incorpo-
rated into the community with all the same rights and responsibilities as Jews by

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5. As these steps reveal, ancient ‘conversion’ reoriented a person’s entire life and, therefore, was
not simply an exchange of beliefs about god(s) (Fredriksen 2017: 54-55).
6. Philo uses ‘proselytes’ and ‘incomers’ synonymously to refer to non-Jews who join a Jewish
community (Birnbaum 1996: 195-99).
7. Translations of Philo are adapted from the Loeb Classical Library edition, Colson and
Whitaker (trans.) 1929–1962.
birth – step two of the conversion pattern. Philo uses ‘citizenship’ imagery (πολιτεία; see Berthelot 2017: 37-41) to argue that proselytes ‘have joined (τοῦ προσεληλυθέναι) the new and godly commonwealth (καινῇ καὶ φιλοθέῳ πολιτείᾳ)’ (Spec. 1.51) and should be granted equal rank, privileges, honour, respect and consideration given to ‘the native-born’ (τοῖς αὐτόχθοσι) (1.52). The reason, he notes, that they should ‘not be denied another citizenship (ἐτέρων πόλεων) or other ties of family (οἰκείων) and friendship (φίλων)’ is because they have left their families (συγγενεῖς), country (πατρίδα) and friends (φίλους) ‘for the sake of virtue and religion (δι᾽ ἀρετὴν καὶ ὁσιότητα)’ (1.52). Philo states that this relationship creates an unbreakable bond between the incomer and the native-born as their lives ‘honour the one God’ together (1.52).

The same symbiotic relationship between ethnicity and religion exists in Virtues, where Philo again includes the proselyte’s abandoning of family and country, but he adds the forsaking of ancestral customs, strange laws, temples and idols (102-104; cf. 214, 219). It is because incomers have renounced previous relations, both human and divine, that Philo insists that they ‘too should be accorded every favour and consideration as their due’ (102). He thus urges ‘all members of the nation (τοῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ ἔθνους) to love the incomers, not only as friends (φίλους) and kinsfolk (συγγενεῖς) but as themselves both in body and soul’, so that ‘they [and the native-born] may seem to be the separate parts of a single living being (ἐν ἑναί ζώον) which is compacted and unified by their fellowship in it’ (103). Therefore, consistent with step 2 of the conversion pattern, Philo considers proselytes as those who are integrated into the Jewish people.

Before moving on to the third step, it is important to note that the pilgrimage motif Philo uses to depict the proselyte’s journey into a Jewish community echoes Abraham’s migration out of Chaldea. Philo says that Abraham became ‘the most ancient member of the Jewish nation’ (τοῦ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἔθνους ὁ πρεσβύτατος) (Virt. 212) after leaving ‘his native country (πατρίδα), his race (γενεὰν) and paternal home (πατρῷον οἶκον)’ (214). Like the incomer, Abraham came from a ‘total absence of nobility in the soul’ (213), but that after ‘[craving] for kinship with God’ (218) and ‘abandoning the ignobility of strange laws and monstrous customs’, he established a new ‘commonwealth (πολιτείαν) full of true life and vitality’ (219). For Philo, Abraham established ‘the Jewish nation’ when he rejected all false gods and idolatrous customs ‘to discover the one true God’, and he thus became ‘the standard of nobility for all proselytes (ἐπηλύταις)’ who join this same people (219) (Berthelot 2017: 39).

Step 3: Torah Observance. As for step 3 of the conversion pattern, Philo may have a multi-layered view of how the Torah relates to non-Jews in general (see

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8. Fredriksen (2017: 208-209 n. 7) suggests that Philo considers proselytes to have become Jews.
Najman 1999), but concerning proselytes, he expects their obedience to the Mosaic Law and demands they be disciplined if they break it like other ‘members of the nation’ (ἀπὸ τοῦ ἔθνους) (e.g., Spec. 1.54). More importantly, Philo believes that proselytes are now part of a community whose members have been reared and instructed in the Law (Spec. 1.314). He describes this group as a people whom God called ‘to the service (θεραπεία) of Himself’ (1.303) and whose members have ‘feasted to the full on virtue’s draught’ (1.304). He then presents these virtues as the result of the exposure to the ‘special laws’ of Torah, saying that Jews are ‘born as citizens of a godly community, reared under laws which incite to every virtue, trained from our earliest years under divinely gifted men …’ (1.314) (Donaldson 2007: 239; cf. Birnbaum 1996: 214). Philo explains that, since proselytes forsook the ancestral laws and customs ‘in which they were bred’ when they ‘crossed over to piety’, they too are to render to God ‘the supplication and service (θεραπευταί) which are God’s right’ (1.309). Proselytes must be re-socialized and re-educated, and so, like the native-born, the path to a Jewish way of life is through the same life of virtue found in the Torah (Donaldson 2007: 239-40). Altogether, Philo agrees with many of his contemporary Jews when he describes proselytes as those who, along with observing the Mosaic Law, forsake all other gods for the Jewish God and are incorporated into the Jewish people. His work, therefore, gives evidence that these three steps in effect constitute an ethnic reconfiguration, one in which ‘religion’ cannot be easily separated from ethnicity.

2.3 Paul and Ethnic Reconfiguration

Step 1: Turning to Israel’s God. Although Paul does not fit neatly into the conversion pattern we find in Philo, he portrays a similar kind of inclusion strategy for Gentile Christ-followers that involves a new divine allegiance, new kinship ties to a particular ethnic people and new ethical demands. To begin, Paul often characterizes Christ-followers as those who have rejected their ancestral deities and who now give their exclusive loyalty to Israel’s God (Fredriksen 2017: 112). For instance, Paul mentions the Thessalonians’ reputation for having ‘turned’ (ἐπεστρέψατε) from their former idols ‘to serve (δουλεύειν) the living and true God’ (1 Thess. 1.9), both aspects drawing on traditional Jewish ideas related to ‘conversion’ (Horrell 2020: 143). Paul employs the same language in Galatians, revealing that he is concerned that his addressees are ‘turning’ (ἐπιστρέφετε) away from God and then warns them not to be enslaved (δουλεύειν) again to other gods (Gal. 4.9). To the Corinthians, Paul states that, ‘when [they] were Gentiles’ (ὅτε ἔθνη ἦτε), they were enticed by idols (1 Cor. 12.2), but now no

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9. All scriptural translations are adapted from the NRSV unless stated otherwise.
longer worship their ancestral gods (cf. 6.9-11; 8.4-6). These few examples suffice to demonstrate that, even though Paul may not use the same language as Philo, he describes a similar response consistent with the first step in the Jewish conversion pattern (Horrell 2020: 143-45).

**Step 2: Incorporation into an Israelite Community.** Despite having abandoned all other gods for Israel’s, Gentile Christ-followers, Fredriksen (2017:114) maintains, continue to be distinct ethnically from Jews. Paul, she contends, thinks that the ‘ethnic-theological’ differences remain in the Eschaton because the ‘sharp dichotomy [between Israel and the nations] is resolved theologically, but not ethnically’ (2017: 116, emphasis original). Problematic with Fredriksen’s argument is that Paul not only claims that these Gentiles have turned from their ancestral gods, but that in joining the Christ movement they have also acquired a new identity – they are descendants of Abraham, Israel’s first patriarch. In both Romans and Galatians, Paul appears to be faced with interlocutors who are urging Gentiles-in-Christ to be circumcised if they want to be counted as Abraham’s offspring. Paul responds by claiming that, apart from the Law and circumcision (Rom. 4.9-15; Gal. 3.11, 18), Abraham is the ‘father’ (πατήρ) of all who share his ‘trust’ (πίστις) in Israel’s God (Rom. 4.11-12; Gal. 3.5-7) and thus are his ‘seed’ (σπέρμα) (Rom. 4.16, 18; Gal. 3.29). Paul also contends that those ‘in Christ’ (Rom. 3.21-26; Gal. 3.22-29), both Jews and ‘Gentiles’ (τὰ ἔθνη) (Rom. 4.17-18; Gal. 3.28), are co-heirs of the promises given to Abraham and his ‘seed’ (Rom. 4.13-16; Gal. 3.18; 4.1-7). I will return to these claims below, but for now I suggest that, in identifying Gentiles-in-Christ as Abraham’s divinely promised ‘seed’ (σπέρμα), Paul’s inclusion strategy parallels Philo’s description of the proselyte’s incorporation into the Jewish people. Paul incorporates Gentiles into a kinship group that provides them with the same privileges as its existing Jewish members, and, therefore, his inclusion strategy corresponds to step 2 of the Jewish conversion pattern.

Is it plausible, however, that Paul would think a ‘fictive’ kinship to Abraham makes Gentiles part of Israel’s covenant people and/or reconfigures their ethnic identities in a similar way to Philo’s proselytes who join a Jewish community? Regarding the first claim, Fredriksen (2017: 148-51) insists that, despite being co-heirs with Jews, Paul still situates Gentiles-in-Christ outside of Israel’s covenant because God only promises them redemption. As for the second, Fredriksen argues that Paul differentiates between spiritual adoption and ethnic adoption whereby Gentiles-in-Christ retain their ethnic differences with Israel ‘according to the flesh’ (κατὰ σάρκα) (2017: 148-51). For Gentiles, Abraham becomes their adopted father ‘through the spirit of his sperma, Christ’ (2017: 149). For ‘ethnic Israelites’, however, they have many fathers and, ‘quite apart from Christ, already have huiothesia [adoption]’ (2017: 150).
To be sure, Paul’s portrayal of Abraham as a father of ‘the nations’ is not unique in Second Temple literature. Sirach 44 is often cited as a text that portrays Abraham’s fatherhood of Gentiles similarly to Rom. 4.10

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations (πατήρ πλήθους ἐθνῶν), and no one has been found like him in glory. He kept the law of the Most High, and entered into a covenant with him; he certified the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he proved faithful. Therefore the Lord assured him with an oath that the nations would be blessed through his offspring (ἐνευλογηθῆναι ἔθνη ἐν σπέρματι αὐτοῦ); that he would make him as numerous as the dust of the earth, and exalt his offspring (τὸ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ) like the stars, and give them an inheritance from sea to sea and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth (Sir. 44.19-21).

Clearly, Ben Sira follows the same general structure of Genesis as Paul concerning Abraham, the ‘seed’, and the Gentiles. Abraham is a ‘father of many nations’ (44.19a; cf. Rom. 4.17, 18; Gen. 17.5), in covenant with God (44.20a; cf. Rom. 4.11; Gen. 17.7-14), recognized for his faith/faithfulness (44.20b; cf. Rom. 4.3; Gen. 15.6), given the promise of numerous descendants (44.21b; cf. Rom. 4.18; Gen. 15.5) and an inheritance (44.21c; cf. Rom. 4.13; Gen. 15.18; 17.8). But a closer look reveals that the differences between Sir. 44 and Rom. 4 are more telling than their similarities. The most striking of these is that Ben Sira differentiates between the identity of Abraham’s σπέρμα (‘offspring’) and that of the ἔθνη (‘Gentiles/nations’). The entire pericope centres on the covenant between God and Abraham and his ‘seed’ (σπέρμα), one he notes was confirmed by circumcision (ἐν σαρκὶ αὐτοῦ ἔστησεν διαθήκην) (Sir. 44.20c). As for the nations, the only part they play is that they will be blessed by Abraham’s offspring (44.21a).

In contrast, Paul conflates the promises to Abraham and his covenantal offspring with his fatherhood to ‘the nations’. He reasons that, because Abraham trusted God before he was circumcised (Rom. 4.9-10; cf. Gen. 15.6), he is the ‘father’ (πατήρ) of both the circumcised and the uncircumcised (4.11-12). Consequently, God guarantees ‘the promise’ (ἡ ἐπαγγελία) to inherit the ‘world’ (κόσμου) to Abraham and ‘to all his offspring’ (παντὶ τῷ σπέρματι), Jews and Gentiles who are ‘of the faith of Abraham’ (ἐκ πίστεως Ἀβραάμ) (4.13-16c).11

Paul then offers his rendition of the genesis of Abraham’s paternity:

For [Abraham] is the father of all of us, as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations (πατέρα πολλῶν ἐθνῶν)’ – in whom he trusted, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he

10. E.g., Fredriksen 2017: 193 n. 11; Johnson Hodge 2007: 88, 188 n. 30.

11. Robert Jewett (2007: 331) notes that Paul’s phrase ‘not only those of the law but also those of the faith of Abraham’ (Rom. 4.16) is not a ‘neat antithesis’ between Jewish and Gentile Christ-followers since Jews also belong to the category of ‘faith’.
trusted that he would become ‘the father of many nations (πατέρα πολλῶν ἐθνῶν)’ [Gen. 17.5], according to (κατὰ) what was said, ‘So numerous shall your offspring be (οὕτως ἔσται τὸ σπέρμα σου)’ [Gen. 15.5] (Rom. 4.16d-18).

Significant to Paul’s argument is that, unlike Sir. 44, these particular Gentiles are not distinct from Abraham’s σπέρμα (‘seed’). Instead, along with Jews (4.16c), Paul claims that they are Abraham’s σπέρμα, which in biblical and related literature is an identity reserved for ethnic Israel. Terence Donaldson underscores just how unusual Paul’s decision to ascribe this designation to Gentiles-in-Christ is from a Jewish standpoint:

[Paul] makes an exegetical move that lands him on untenable ground. He attempts to square the covenantal circle by applying to uncircumcised ἑθνὲς an identifier to which non-Jews were not entitled unless they ceased to be ἑθνὲς and became proselytes. The move seems not only to be one that could have been easily avoided, but also one that Paul was determined to make. (Donaldson 2015: 297-98)

Donaldson adds that Paul could have avoided this tendentious stance simply by appealing to the uncontroversial Second Temple inclusion strategies that Abraham would be a ‘father of many nations’ or that he and his ‘seed’ (σπέρμα) would be a blessing to them (e.g., Sir. 44.19-21). Donaldson does not tease out the implications of what applying Abraham’s σπέρμα might mean for the identities of ‘uncircumcised ἑθνὲς’. But it would be peculiar for Paul to conflate two promises that were commonly viewed as distinct if he did not consider Gentiles-in-Christ part of Israel’s covenant and if ‘preserving’ ethnic differences between Jews and his Gentile addressees were critical to his eschatological framework, as Fredriksen contends (2017: 113-17). We must, therefore, ask why Paul conflates an Abrahamic promise about Israel’s ethnic ‘seed’ (σπέρμα) (Gen. 15.5) with one about ‘the nations’ (τὰ ἔθνη) (Gen. 17.5) and how he uses this strategy to reconfigure the identities of Gentiles-in-Christ vis-à-vis ethnic Israel.

To begin, it is not just that Paul identifies Gentiles-in-Christ with an Israelite-specific identity. Even more importantly, he says that they share a lineage with Isaac, the covenantal descendant. This claim may be puzzling to those who

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12. E.g., 2 Chron. 20.7; Ps. 104.6 (LXX); Isa. 41.8; 4 Macc. 18.1; Pss. Sol. 9.9; Lk. 1.55; Heb. 2.16; cf. Philo, Somn. 1.3. Although not explicit, Matthew Thiessen (2018: 67-71) finds an allusion to Gentiles as Abraham’s seed in the Animal Apocalypse (1 En. 85–90). In the eschatological age, Thiessen argues, a white cow (the ‘seed’ of Abraham) will transform the wild beasts (Gentiles) into white cows (90.37-38), making them like Abraham and Isaac who were the last white cows in the story before Jacob was born as a sheep (Jews) (89.10-12).

13. I limit my analysis in this section to Romans; however, Paul argues the same in Galatians (4.21-31; cf. 3.16, 29), which differs from other Second Temple literature, where Abraham is depicted as an ancestor to Gentiles through Hagar (Ishmael) and Keturah rather than Sarah (Isaac) (e.g., Josephus, Ant. 1.193, 214, 221, 238-39; cf. van der Lans 2010: 308-309).
reflexively presuppose that ‘the nations’ must always be categorically distinct from Abraham’s ethnic offspring (i.e., Isaac and Jacob/Israel).\(^{14}\) However, as Francis Watson (2016: 192) observes, the references to ‘the nations’ in Gen. 17.4-6 are ‘left unexplained’. Even so, Watson goes on to argue that the promises related to ‘the nations’ in Gen. 17 conflict with the motif of ‘seed’ and ‘land’ associated with the people of Israel in ch. 15 (cf. Fredriksen 2017: 14-17). But is it not possible that Paul takes advantage of the ambiguity in Gen. 17.4-6 to include his addressees in Abraham’s ethnic offspring? When we examine the evidence in Rom. 4, it appears that Paul does include Gentiles-in-Christ as Abraham’s ethnic descendants since he (re)interprets the Abrahamic promise to which they are co-beneficiaries with Jews precisely in *ethnic* terms: descendants and land inheritance.\(^{15}\)

Concerning descendants, while Paul cites the promise that Abraham would be ‘the father of many nations’ (Gen. 17.5), he claims that the nature of the patriarch’s paternity to Gentiles-in-Christ should be interpreted ‘according to what was said’ (κατὰ τὸ εἰρημένον) to him about his ‘seed’ in Gen. 15.5 (Rom. 4.18) (Dunn 1988a: 219). This signals that the identity of the seed and its related promises in Gen. 15 determine how Paul reconfigures the identity of these particular Gentiles. Looking at Gen. 15, it describes God’s promise to give Abr(ah)am an heir (i.e., the ‘seed’). Abr(ah)am complains to God that he is still childless and suggests that his slave Eliezer be his heir. God responds by telling Abraham that one who descends from him (lit. ‘from you’; ἐκ σοῦ) will be his heir (15.4), which the narrative later reveals is Isaac (Gen. 17.18). To reassure Abr(ah)am,

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14. Fredriksen is not alone in ‘de-Israelizing’ Paul’s Abrahamic descent language. Aside from a few notable exceptions (e.g., Garroway 2012), scholars from various perspectives typically treat Paul’s references to Abraham’s ‘seed’ and other Israelite markers as ‘ethnic’ only when he uses them to refer to ‘ethnic’ Jews. But when he identifies Gentiles-in-Christ with the same ethnic-specific categories, interpreters claim that Paul has redefined them into non-ethnic or trans-ethnic markers (e.g., Ophir and Rosen-Zvi 2018: 152-61; Watson 2016: 192-95) or that he still considers Gentiles-in-Christ as the ethnic ‘other’ portion of Abraham’s descendants (e.g., Thiessen 2016: 114, *et passim*; Tucker 2018: 80, *et passim*). However, the Abrahamic narrative itself does not necessarily require that ‘the nations’ always be interpreted as Israel’s ethnic ‘other’ since Abraham is not the only Israelite patriarch in Genesis who is promised a progeny described in terms of ‘seed’ and ‘nations’. Similar promises are reiterated to Sarah (re Isaac) (17.15-16), Jacob (28.3-4; 35.9-12) and Joseph (48.4). This, at least, provides the scriptural currency for some Jews to interpret Abraham’s ‘seed’ and ‘the nations’ as related covenantal identities. Some rabbinic traditions, for example, associate Abraham as ‘the father of many nations’ with (circumcised) proselytes rather than collective ‘nations’ (y. Bik. 1.4, 64d) (cf. Ophir and Rosen-Zvi 2018: 143 n. 15).

15. Along with the myth of common ancestry, John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (1996: 6-7) list a connection to a homeland as one of six features of an ethnic group, even if this link is not a ‘physical occupation by the *ethnie*, only its symbolic attachment to the ancestral land, as with diaspora peoples’ (cf. Horrell 2020: 178-216).
God ‘brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them”. Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring (τὸ σπέρμα σου) be”. And Abram put his faith (ἐπίστευσεν) in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’ (Gen. 15.5-6; cf. Rom. 4.3, 18; Gal. 3.6). Paul uses this context to argue that it was Abraham’s trust (πίστις) that inaugurated his paternity. He thus links ‘faith’ (πίστις) to lineage (σπέρμα), whereby those who are ‘of the faith(fulness) of Abraham’ (ἐκ πίστεως Ἀβραάμ) are his ‘seed’ (4.16; cf. Gal. 3.6-9). Caroline Johnson Hodge (2007: 79-91) explains that the term ἐκ regularly appears in ancient kinship discourse and it, along with πίστις, is used to denote notions of ancestry and descent (e.g., ‘come out of’; ‘descends from’). She explains that ‘Paul affirms that (1) kinship based on lineage is the vehicle for God’s promises (not law-keeping or circumcision), and (2) Abraham’s trustworthy response to God constitutes the human action which generates this lineage’ (2007: 87). In other words, the ‘faith’ (πίστις) that initiated Abraham’s paternity and covenantal relationship with Israel’s God continues to create subsequent generations of Abraham’s ‘seed’, including Gentiles-in-Christ. Paul illustrates this by highlighting God’s creative initiative, noting that, despite the hopeless situation that Abraham and Sarah faced when she was barren, he put his trust in a God ‘who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist’ (Rom. 4.17 [cf. 18-21]). For this reason, Paul claims that the same creative power God used to provide Abraham and Sarah with a son is currently being worked out through Christ to create ‘sons’ in another seemingly improbable situation – out of uncircumcised Gentiles (Barclay 2015: 479).

In terms of the promise of land inheritance, Paul states that Abraham and his offspring (τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ) would inherit the ‘world’ (κόσμου) (Rom. 4.13). Although this promise is often interpreted as trans-ethnic, there is good reason to conclude that Paul has a territorial inheritance in mind. To start, in Jewish thought, being Abraham’s σπέρμα (i.e., an heir) is intimately tied to land inheritance (Gen. 12.7; 13.14-17; 17.8; 24.7; 26.3; 28.3-4, 13-15; 48.4-6; 50.24; cf. Jub. 15.3-10); both elements are fundamental to Israel’s covenantal relationship with God (Dunn 1988a: 213). Granted, Paul transforms the land inheritance into cosmic language, but he still bases it on the original promise to Abraham and his seed in Gen. 15 (vv. 7, 13-21). This interpretative move is no different from
other Jewish writers during the Second Temple period who extend the patriarchal land promises beyond Canaan (e.g., 1 En. 5.7; 2 Bar. 14.13; 4 Ezra 6.59; Philo, Somn. 1.173-75; cf. Gen. 28.13-14) (cf. Dunn 1988a: 213). Therefore, Paul’s claim that Abraham’s offspring would inherit the ‘world’ should not be de-territorialized any more than it is for other Jews,19 such as Ben Sira, who expands the Abrahamic land promise to the ‘ends of the earth’ (Sir. 44.21).20

With the above discussion in mind, we can return to what Paul’s conflation of the promises to the ‘seed’ and to the ‘nations’ (Rom. 4.18) demonstrates about how he views the identities of Gentiles-in-Christ. First, Paul has undertaken a sustained exposition of Gen. 15 in Rom. 4, claiming that God’s covenant people consists of the circumcised and the uncircumcised, whose membership is generated and maintained ‘through the righteousness of faith’ (Rom. 4.13; cf. 3.21-31) (Jewett 2007: 332). Second, despite the ‘universal’ scope of his argument (Jews and Gentiles), he does not speak about Gentiles-in-Christ as Israel’s ethnic ‘other’ the way ‘the nations’ are typically depicted in Jewish eschatological literature, whereby they are often an afterthought and usually play a subservient role to Israel (e.g., Pss. Sol. 17; 2 Bar. 72) (cf. Donaldson 2007: 499-506). Instead, Paul bases their group identity on a lineage that makes them Abraham’s covenantal ‘seed’ (σπέρμα), an identity he, like other Jews, deems as ethnic Israel (Rom. 9.7; 11.1). As the promised seed, along with Jews, Gentiles-in-Christ are the fulfilment and beneficiaries of God’s ethnic promises to Abraham: (reconfigured) offspring and (reconfigured) land inheritance. This suggests that, rather than de-Israelizing (or de-ethnicizing) a portion of the ‘seed’ of Abraham, Paul incorporates his Gentile addressees into a reconfigured ethnic Israel (Garroway 2012: 57-61, 136-59; cf. Donaldson 2006: 236-47). That is, Paul considers Christ-followers from ‘the nations’ to be part of the same ethnic group that began with Abraham and continues to exist through his offspring, except he – to put it in Barthian language – expands its group boundaries to include the uncircumcised as co-heirs with the circumcised.

Other parts of Romans also point in this direction. As noted above, it is significant that, in identifying Gentiles-in-Christ as Abraham’s σπέρμα in Rom. 4, Paul gives them a designation he later equates to ethnic Israel (Rom. 9.7; 11.1). Why is Abraham’s σπέρμα often considered a trans-ethnic or ‘spiritual’ identity

19. Though Paul extends the land inheritance, Jerusalem (Judea) continues to be the centre of his world. David Horrell (2020: 196-202) notes that not only is Paul’s ministry oriented towards Jerusalem (Rom. 15.19; Gal. 1.16-24), but that he also considers Gentiles-in-Christ ‘a people whose identity is spatially (re)configured, as it were, around Jerusalem’ (Rom. 15.15-27; Gal. 4.21-31) (201).

20. See Tucker 2018: 72-80, who shows that Paul does not abandon the notion of Israel’s covenantal land inheritance in Rom. 4.13. In contrast to my argument, however, Tucker contends that the inheritance Paul’s Gentile addressees receive is different from Israel ‘according to the flesh’ (79).
in Rom. 4 when it is understood as an ethnic identity in Rom. 9.7 and 11.1? To be sure, Rom. 9.1 signals a new direction in Paul’s letter, one that reveals his anguish over the rejection of Christ by his ‘kindred according to the flesh’ (τῶν συγγενῶν μου κατὰ σάρκα) (9.3). But Paul’s new focus does not require that he envisions Abraham’s offspring as two separate ethnic groups any more than it does when Philo discusses matters related to the Jews in some of his writings, while in other places he talks about how proselytes fit in this people. Paul’s argument in both Rom. 4 and 9 revolves around the same issue: who belongs to God’s covenant people (i.e., the heirs to the promises), whom he understands as Abraham’s σπέρμα (i.e., Israel).

Although Paul’s discussion in Rom. 9 turns to Jews who reject the Christ and how to understand this in terms of God’s faithfulness to Israel, it actually grounds several themes in Rom. 9–11, including that the covenant people consists of both Jews and Gentiles. Starting at v. 6, Paul explains that, although some Jews reject Christ, this does not negate God’s faithfulness since there has always been a faithful Israelite remnant among the unfaithful: ‘It is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all those who descend from Israel are Israel (οὐ γὰρ πάντες οἱ ἐξ Ἰσραὴλ οὗτοι Ἰσραήλ), and not all children (τέκνα) are Abraham’s offspring (σπέρμα Ἀβραὰμ); but “It is through Isaac that your offspring (σοι σπέρμα) will be called (κληθήσεται)”’ (9.6-7, my translation). Paul then parses various types of Israelite ‘children’, stating that the covenant ‘children of God’ are not the ‘children of the flesh’ (i.e., by birth) but the ‘children of the promise’, whom he specifies as Abraham’s ‘seed’ (σπέρμα) (9.8). In other words, Paul contends that God’s elective purposes for Israel/Abraham’s offspring are not tied – or at least not limited – to a person’s birth, but rather to God’s promises. He then brings up Ishmael and Esau, whom he says are Abraham’s ‘children’ (τέκνα) but not his ‘seed’ (σπέρμα) like Isaac and Jacob (9.9-13).

Paul’s discussion about Israel’s promissory offspring leads to his claim that Gentiles-in-Christ are also Abraham’s covenantal descendants. This is evident in the ‘call’ (καλέω) language he uses throughout the chapter (Rom. 9.7, 12, 24, 25, 26) (Wagner 2003: 78). Just as God has ‘called’ Isaac (9.7) and Jacob (9.12), Paul states that God has ‘called’ (ἐκάλεσεν) ‘not only from the Jews (ἐξ Ἰουδαίων) but also from the Gentiles (ἐξ ἐθνῶν)’ (9.24). Ross Wagner (2003: 79) notes two aspects in this verse that are important in setting the parameters of Paul’s argument. First, in stating that God calls ‘not only from the Jews’, Paul presumes Israel’s election continues (cf. 9.27-29; 11.1-5, 28). Second, he asserts that God has also called some ‘from the Gentiles’ to be members of the covenant people.21 Paul supports his reasoning by citing Hosea:

21. James Dunn (1988b: 580) argues that ἐξ ἐθνῶν (‘from Gentiles’) does not refer to ‘the Gentiles, as a class, but (some) Gentiles’ distinct from a larger body (cf. Ophir and Rosen-Zvi 2018: 141 n. 9).
‘Those who were not my people (οὐ λαόν μου) I will call (καλέσω) “my people” (λαόν μου), and her who was not beloved (οὐκ ἠγαπημένη) I will call “beloved” (ἠγαπημένη)’ [cf. Hos. 2.25 LXX]. ‘And in the very place where it was said to them, “You are not my people” (οὐ λαός μου), there they shall be called (κληθήσονται) children (υἱόι) of the living God’ [cf. Hos. 2.1 LXX] (Rom. 9.25-26).

In Hosea, ‘my people’ refers to Israel and ‘not my people’ to the covenant-breaking children of Israel who now find themselves relegated to the realm of the nations (Foster 2016: 191-200). But as he did with Abraham’s σπέρμα in Rom. 4, Paul takes the Israelite-specific identity ‘my people’ and redefines it to include Gentiles. Both Hosea and Paul are speaking about people who were either covenant-breaking Israelites or Gentiles who were previously excluded from the covenant (‘not my people’), but who now are numbered among Israel (‘my-people’) (Wagner 2003: 81; cf. Foster 2016: 199-200). Throughout Rom. 9, then, Paul reconfigures Israel’s covenantal identity by including those called ‘from the Gentiles’ along with those called ‘from the Jews’.

This reconfiguration of Israel does not imply that he envisages a new Israel. Instead, as Johnson Hodge (2007: 77) writes, ‘The adoption of gentiles incorporates a new people into an already existing kin group. The gentiles become like sons in the household, not to replace those who are there, but to share the inheritance with them’ (emphasis added). Paul’s olive tree metaphor in Rom. 11 exemplifies Johnson Hodge’s comment: while Paul acknowledges that his addressees are branches from ‘a wild olive shoot’ (ἀγριέλαιος), referring to their Gentile origins, more important is that they have been grafted into ‘the cultivated olive tree’ so they can ‘share the rich root of the olive tree’ with the ‘natural branches’ (τῶν κατὰ φύσιν κλάδων) already there (Rom. 11.17-24; cf. Philo, Agr. 6) (cf. Donaldson 2006: 218). In other words, Gentiles-in-Christ may retain aspects of their pre-existing identities (see below), but they are still integrated into Israel’s ‘ethnic family tree’ (Buell and Johnson Hodge 2004: 249; cf. Donaldson 2006: 237-38). Paul’s imagery is meant to denote one family that includes, as he has been saying throughout Romans, Jews and Gentiles. In fact, just a few verses later, Paul describes this people as ‘one body in Christ’ (ἡν σῶμα ἐσμεν ἐν Χριστῷ) (Rom. 12.5; cf. Gal. 3.25-29), revealing that Israel’s messiah (Rom. 9.5) establishes unity that is anchored to and continuous with the people of Israel (cf. Rom. 1.1-4; Gal. 3.16, 29). Together, then, the olive tree and the body of Christ metaphors, along with the presence of Gentiles-in-Christ in Abraham’s σπέρμα and ‘my-people’, reveal that Paul envisions one covenant people that consists of Jews and Gentiles whose sub-group identity is distinct, not from each other, but from those not ‘in Christ’ (Horrell 2020: 119 n. 99). Like

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22 Johnson Hodge (2007: 146), however, argues that Paul considers Jewish and Gentile Christ-followers as related but separate ethnic groups.
Philo, who believes that Jews ‘by conversion’ are joining an ethnic community with Jews ‘by birth’, Paul argues that Christ-followers ‘from the Gentiles’ are incorporated into an existing ethnic group with those ‘from the Jews’. For this reason, Paul’s Gentile inclusion strategy is analogous to the second step of the Second Temple conversion pattern.

Step 3: Torah Observance. Even though Paul’s inclusion strategy corresponds to the first two steps of the conversion pattern, some may ask how he could think that Gentiles-in-Christ are part of Israel’s covenant people if he does not require their observance of the Mosaic Law for membership (i.e., step 3). The answer to this question lies in Paul’s view of the Law after his call. First, whereas the majority of Jews understood the observance of the Mosaic Law as a defining ethnic boundary for Abraham’s offspring and circumcision as the identifying mark of its members, Paul claims that ‘faith’ (πίστις) produces the righteousness that is demanded by the Law and that the reception of Christ’s spirit is the identifying mark for Gentile inclusion. Despite these two assertions, Paul does not repudiate the Mosaic Law or lessen its demands; rather, his argument is simply that it is not (and never has been) the means of producing Israel’s righteousness. Second, Paul depicts Christ groups as communities that, through the spirit’s power, fulfil the requirements of Torah. Both aspects will show that Paul’s inclusion strategy fits the third step of the Jewish conversion pattern.

In Galatians, Paul reveals that, though he had formerly ‘preached circumcision’ as the final step for Gentiles to fulfil the righteousness required by the Law (Gal. 5.11), he now claims that Gentiles and Jews are reckoned as righteous by ‘faith’ (Gal. 2.15–3.5). He reminds the Galatians that they received the spirit (πνεῦμα) ‘by trusting what [they] heard’ (ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως) rather than ‘by works of the law’ (ἐξ ἔργων νόμου) (Gal. 3.2-5). And since the reception of Christ’s spirit is now the only necessary marker for Gentile inclusion into Israel’s covenant, Paul says it is ‘foolish’ that the Galatians think that they must ‘now finish with the flesh’ (νῦν σαρκὶ ἐπιτελεῖσθε) (3.3; cf. 3.14, 27). Paul continues by

23. Joshua Garroway 2012: 136: ‘The latest version of Israel, and in Paul’s apocalyptic view of the world, the last one, is composed of a Jewish remnant and Gentile adoptees’.
24. Fredriksen concurs that Paul’s view of the Law changed after his call, but only as it relates to Gentiles: ‘when Paul speaks against Law observance, he speaks against non-Pauline construals of gentile Judaizing, not against Jewish Torah observance’ (2017: 130 [122-30]). Although I share many of Fredriksen’s criticisms of traditional scholarship’s treatment of the Law in Paul’s letters, the apostle’s nomistic discourse, even when the encoded audiences consist strictly of non-Jews, is best read when we recognize that his arguments cannot be separated from how the Law relates to himself and other Jews (e.g., Gal. 2.15-21) (see Garroway 2019: 56-59).
25. As Fredriksen (2017: 119-20) explains, Paul uses πιστεύω and πίστις to denote ‘loyalty’ and ‘confidence’.
pointing out that Abraham was reckoned as righteous when he ‘put his faith in God’ (ἐπίστευσεν τῷ θεῷ) (3.6), thereby making ‘those of faith’ (οἱ ἐκ πίστεως) his ‘children’ (υἱοὶ) (3.7; cf. 3.10-14). Therefore, if Abraham’s trust (πίστις) inaugurated the covenant long before Sinai (3.17-18), then law observance is not the stipulation for entry into the covenant for Abraham’s offspring.

Paul then raises a logical question one might ask after hearing that Abraham’s descendants are righteoused apart from the Law: ‘Why then the Law?’ (Gal. 3.19). He responds by indicating that the Mosaic Law is not ‘opposed to the promises of God’ (‘Certainly not!’) but that it was never intended to ‘make alive’ (ζῳοποιῆσαι) (3.21). According to Paul, the Law served an important provisional role of guarding Israel ‘until (ἀχρὶς οὗ) the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made’ (3.19; cf. ‘who is Christ’ [v. 16]):

Now before faith came (Πρὸ τοῦ δὲ ἐλθεῖν τὴν πίστιν), we were confined (ἐφρουρούμεθα) and guarded (συγκλειόμενοι) under the law (ὑπὸ νόμου) until faith would be revealed (εἰς τὴν μέλλουσαν πίστιν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι). Therefore the law was our guardian until Christ came (παιδαγωγὸς ἡμῶν γέγονεν εἰς Χριστόν), so that we might be righteoused by faith (ἐκ πίστεως δικαιωθῶμεν). But now that faith has come (ἐλθούσης δὲ τῆς πίστεως), we are no longer under a guardian (οὐκέτι ὑπὸ παιδαγωγόν), for in Christ Jesus you are all children of [Israel’s] God through faith (διὰ τῆς πίστεως) (Gal. 3.23-26).

As the pericope reveals, Paul argues that life ‘under the law’ has made way for life in Israel’s messiah (see below). Consequently, since both Jews and Greeks are righteoused by faith through Jesus Christ (3.27-28), Paul concludes that, if the Galatians ‘belong to Christ, [they] are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the [covenantal] promise’ (3.29; cf. 3.16, 22; 4.1-7).

In Romans, Paul offers a similar view of the relationship between the Law and righteousness. He argues that the Mosaic Law is not contrary to righteousness (3.31) but that no person is righteoused before God ‘by works of the law’ (ἐξ ἔργων νόμου) (3.20a) since the Law brings the ‘knowledge of sin’ (3.20b). As in Gal. 3, Paul claims that Christ has shifted the way Israel relates to Torah: ‘But now (Νυνὶ δὲ), apart from the law (χωρὶς νόμου), the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law (ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου) and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) for all who have faith (πιστεύοντας)’ (3.21-22 [19-26]). In vv. 27-30, Paul poses a series of questions to reiterate that God righteouses both Jews and Gentiles ‘by faith apart from works of the law’. Therefore, he implies, if Jews themselves are righteoused by faith, why would Gentiles be righteoused by the Mosaic Law (cf. Gal. 2.15-16)?

Paul then provides support to show that ‘faith’ (πίστις) does not set aside the Torah but establishes it (Rom. 3.31): ‘For what does the scripture say? “Abraham put his faith in (ἐπίστευσεν) God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness
It becomes clear, however, that Paul is not only concerned with how a person is righteousnessed, but also who is a legitimate member of Abraham’s covenantal descendants.\(^{26}\) He argues that, since Abraham received God’s promise by faith before he was circumcised, it allowed him to become the ancestor of all who have faith, both the circumcised and the uncircumcised (4.9-16). Paul thus connects the inherited righteous identity of Abraham’s descendants to the patriarch’s initial moment of ‘trust’ in Gen. 15.6, not to the Mosaic Law (4.13-14; cf. Gal. 3.17-18), nor even to Abraham’s own circumcision (4.9-10) (cf. Philo, *Mut.* 175-77). This, of course, puts Paul in a precarious position since circumcision was viewed as a necessary rite to fulfil all righteousness, thereby allowing participation in Israel’s covenant (cf. Gen. 17.9-14). He circumvents this problem by claiming that the ‘sign’ of circumcision was a ‘seal (σφραγῖδα) of the righteousness [Abraham] had by faith while he was still uncircumcised’ (Rom. 4.11). According to Paul, the circumcision described in Gen. 17 did not establish the covenant but merely confirmed what had already been inaugurated in Gen. 15. Therefore, the entry point in the covenant for Gentiles-in-Christ is also their moment of trust since it brings the reception of Christ’s spirit (Rom. 4.23-24) (cf. Thiessen 2016: 108-10).\(^{27}\) In both Romans and Galatians, then, Paul does not deny his interlocutors’ view that Israel’s covenant promises are fulfilled through righteousness, but he makes faith the criterion rather than the Law (Dunn 1988a: 213). As a result, he undermines the interconnectedness between Torah observance and Abraham’s offspring that most Jews presumed (cf. van der Lans 2010: 309-13).

Despite Paul’s claim that faith produces righteousness, this does not mean that he preaches the ‘law-free’ gospel that traditional scholarship often attributes to him.\(^{28}\) In 1 Cor. 7, for example, Paul may indicate that both circumcision and uncircumcision are inconsequential, as they relate to covenant membership, but he makes it clear that he still expects Christ-followers ‘in all the assemblies (ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις)’ to ‘[obey] the commandments of God (τήρησις ἐντολῶν θεοῦ)’ (7.17, 19). Frank Thielman (1994: 101) demonstrates that the phrase ‘obeying the commandments of God’ consistently denotes keeping the Mosaic Law in Second Temple literature (e.g., Sir. 32.23; Mt. 19.17-19; cf. Rom. 7.7-12), and Paul’s audience would have understood it as such. This suggests that Paul understands that the intended way of life the Mosaic Law was to elicit remains the foundation

\(^{26}\) Donaldson 2006: 171: ‘to say that one is righteous is not, in the first instance, to say that the person conforms with some absolute standard of moral perfection, but that the person is a member in good standing of the covenant community’.

\(^{27}\) Jason Staples 2016: 596: ‘Paul has no objections to circumcision per se, only circumcision as a rite of entrance into Israel for gentiles already having received the spirit’ (cf. Garroway 2012: 57-68; Staples 2016: 592-96; Thiessen 2016: 73-101).

\(^{28}\) Fredriksen makes a similar argument (2017: 108-22).
of his addressees’ ethical framework (e.g., Rom. 15.1-7; 1 Cor. 5–6; 10.1-33) (Scott 2009: 271-76). It also reveals that, even though Paul believes righteousness is by faith ‘apart from the law’, the demands of the Law are nevertheless required of those ‘in Christ’.

We see Paul develop this argument in other assemblies. To the Galatians, he argues that in Christ the righteousness described by the Mosaic Law is fulfilled ‘through the spirit, by faith’ (Gal. 5.5). Paul tells them that, ‘if [they] are led by the spirit (πνεύματι), [they] are not under law (οὐκ ἐστὲ ὑπὸ νόμον)’ (5.18) because the ‘spirit’ (πνεῦμα) allows them to resist the desires of the flesh (5.16-24). Consequently, he exhorts the Galatians to serve one another through love because, in so doing, ‘the whole law (νόμος) is fulfilled (πεπλήρωται) in a single commandment: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”’ (5.14). To the Romans, Paul reasserts that God has dealt with sin and death by sending Christ to do ‘what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do … so that the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled (πληρωθῇ) in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit (κατὰ πνεῦμα)’ (8.4 [1-14]). He later restates the same claim he made in Galatians that ‘the one who loves has fulfilled (πεπλήρωκεν) the law’ (13.8). This demonstrates that Paul does not think that the ethical demands for Israel have changed now that the Christ has come since ‘The internal guidance of the Spirit still leads towards that righteousness which God has been encouraging through Torah’ (Scott 2009: 273).

This last point is critical in understanding that, even though Paul argues that Gentiles-in-Christ fulfil God’s ethical requirements through life in the spirit, it does not indicate that the apostle thinks that (ethnic) Israel has been replaced, nor does it mean that he is separating Christ assemblies from ‘Judaism’. Rather, he claims that the way of life that is required of his addressees after the coming of Christ derives from the same divine source as the Mosaic Law, Israel’s God. That is, Paul believes God is faithful to Israel, not the Sinaitic law code, since he argues that the coming of the spirit has shifted the way that Israel fulfils the law, something he argues is foretold in ‘the law and the prophets’ (Rom. 3.27). This coincides with what Paul says elsewhere where he points out that the same God who gave Israel the Mosaic Law would one day write it on the hearts of the covenant people (e.g., 2 Cor. 3.2-16; cf. Jer. 31.31-34) (see Pitre, Barber and Kincaid 2019: 38-63). Therefore, Paul’s boundary shifting from the Mosaic Law to fulfilling God’s commandments through the spirit is not providing an alternative to Torah but a replication of it (Garroway 2012: 60-61).²⁹

In sum, we have seen that Paul insists that the observance of the Mosaic Law is not required of Gentiles-in-Christ to be members of Israel’s covenant people,

²⁹. For example, Garroway (2012: 62) argues that Paul believes ‘the cross puts an end to the need for circumcision wrought by men precisely because it realizes circumcision wrought by Christ’ (emphasis original; cf. 115-34).
yet he argues that they still fulfil the Torah’s requirements when they live by the 
spirit. If this is the case, it is mistaken to suggest that Paul’s Gentile inclusion 
strategy does not correspond to the third step of the Second Temple conversion 
pattern. That is, we should not expect him to insist that observing the Mosaic 
Law, including circumcision, is a pre-requisite for inclusion in Israel’s covenant 
when he no longer believes it plays the same role now that Israel’s messiah has 
come.\(^{30}\) Therefore, similar to Philo’s description of proselytes, Paul depicts 
Gentiles-in-Christ as those who abandon their ancestral gods for Israel’s, are 
incorporated into a people where they are counted as Abraham’s covenantal 
‘seed’ and, even with a modified third step, can and do fulfil the requirements of 
the Law.

3. ‘Ex-Pagan Pagans’?

In the previous section, I examined Paul and Philo through the lens of the 
three-step Jewish conversion pattern to determine how their inclusion strategi-
ges reconfigure the identities of non-Jews. I proposed that Paul’s description 
of Gentiles-in-Christ parallels Philo’s portrayal of proselytes in terms of the 
type of transition incomers undergo when they join a Jewish community. Along 
with turning to Israel’s God, Paul claims that his addressees, like Philo’s pros-
elytes, are incorporated into an Israelite group whereby they fulfil the demands 
of Israel’s law. This leads to the conclusion that Paul’s identity reconfiguration 
of Gentile Christ-followers is, as Fredriksen says of proselytes, ‘tantamount to 
changing ethnicity’.

Despite the Israelite-specific group identifiers, cultural indicia and ethical 
boundaries that Paul employs in his inclusion strategy, Fredriksen contends that 
he views Gentiles-in-Christ as ‘ex-pagan pagans’ who, unlike proselytes, are 
excluded from Israel’s covenant and from acquiring Israelite identity. At the out-
set of this study, I questioned whether this claim is consistent with Fredriksen’s 
description of ancient ethnicity. Specifically, if ethnicity was not religiously neu-
tral in antiquity, why does Paul’s reconstruction of his addressees’ identities with 
indicia specific to Israel and its God only reconfigure their ‘religious’ identities 
and not their ethnic identities? Fredriksen mitigates this incongruity by arguing 
that Christ-followers ‘preserve their own ethnicities’ based on Paul’s expectation 
that ‘they would not assume the bulk of Jewish ancestral custom’, by which she 
means Torah observance and circumcision (2017: 74). Even when she notes how 
far Gentiles-in-Christ associate with a Jewish way of life, she does not see this as 
substantial enough to transform their ethnicities. For example, Fredriksen writes,

\(^{30}\) Donaldson 2006: 236: ‘Paul continues to believe that the only hope of salvation for Gentiles 
lies in their becoming proselytes to Israel prior to the eschaton, but his Damascus experience 
has led him to redefine Israel (and thus proselytism) in terms of Christ’. 
[Paul’s] pagans were to worship strictly and only the Jewish god. They were to conform their new religious behavior precisely to the mandates of Jewish worship. [. . .] [Paul’s] gentiles were to act ‘as if’ they were Jews without, for males, receiving circumcision. By radically, exclusively affiliating to Israel’s god, Paul’s ethnē were to assume that public behavior universally identified, by pagans and Jews alike, as uniquely Jewish. That is to say, Paul’s gentiles – by the normal and contemporary definition of the term – Judaized (2017: 112).

In other words, Paul’s addressees are ‘to act “as if” they were Jews’, but they remain strictly Gentiles because the males in these Christ-groups are not physically circumcised.

But as I showed in the previous section, Paul does not view circumcision or law-keeping in the same way as he did earlier in his life. According to him, the coming of Israel’s messiah has reconfigured Israel’s cultural indicia so that life in Christ’s spirit is now the way of life for Abraham’s offspring rather than being ‘under the law’ (cf. Donaldson 2006: 207, 241-44; Garroway 2012: 57-58). This suggests that being ‘in Christ’ is comparable to being ‘under the law’ since both Israel’s messiah and the Mosaic Law are Israelite-specific cultural indicia, but not the essential criterion that makes Israel an ethnic group like Abrahamic descent. For this reason, I mentioned earlier that the constructed primordiality model proposed by Cornell and Hartmann is a useful way to approach ancient ethnic discourse. This perspective allows us to appreciate that, although Jews such as Philo and Paul may appeal to the primordial aspects of their ethnic identities, ever-changing contexts force them to reconstruct competing versions of the same myth of descent around varying indicia (cf. Foster 2016: 43-50).

As we have seen, this tension exists in Philo and Paul as they reinterpret the Abrahamic narrative to integrate non-Jews into the life of Israel and/or the Jewish people. Philo does not state explicitly that proselytes are ‘Abraham’s σπέρμα’ as Paul does, but, as we observed, he says they are part of the Jewish people, one with a history reaching back to Abraham himself, ‘the most ancient member of the Jewish nation (τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἔθνους)’ (Virt. 212). This demonstrates that, while Philo acknowledges that Jews have a primordial ancestor, he still thinks that non-Jews can become real members of this ethnic group. Critical to this process is the way he uses Abraham as a prototype for the proselyte’s inclusion in a Jewish community. Like the incomer, Philo presents Abraham as a Gentile by birth who, after forsaking his Chaldean upbringing, was ‘the first person spoken of as believing in God’ (Virt. 212-19; cf. Gen. 15.6). By depicting Abraham as the first ‘convert’, Philo redefines Jewish identity to include those who have followed Abraham’s pilgrimage to the ‘camp of piety’ after forsaking their ancestral gods for the Jewish God (Spec. 1.52). Therefore, Philo’s ethnic reconfiguration displays both primordial and constructed elements since, for him, Jewish identity
can be created not only by birth but also by human response (Birnbaum 1996: 216-19).

Like Philo, Paul does not diminish Israel’s primordial history when including Gentiles in its covenant. When confronted in both Romans and Galatians by interlocutors who question his addressees’ Abrahamic lineage, Paul does not insist that Abrahamic descent is unnecessary, but that physical circumcision and observance of the Mosaic Law is how it is produced. Therefore, even after the coming of Christ, Paul maintains that Abrahamic descent is required, albeit now generated through the reception of Christ’s spirit rather than restricted by birth/circumcision (Garroway 2012: 139; cf. Thiessen 2016: 105-18). And in agreement with Philo, Paul contends that ‘faith’ (πίστις) is Israel’s ‘characteristic family trait’ (Barclay 2015: 479-90).

Paul’s constructed kinship, however, should not be understood as any less authentic than kinship produced by birth. Denise Buell and Caroline Johnson Hodge (2004: 245) write,

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. The dynamism of ethnic reasoning is evident here: baptism encapsulates the fluidity, figured as a ritual of adoption, in which one gains the spirit that imbues the recipient with a new, permanent, nature.

Buell and Johnson Hodge’s comment highlights the importance of adoption in Paul’s inclusion strategy and provides insight into the relationship between the primordial and constructed elements in his ethnic discourse. Fredriksen (2017: 150) also notes,

In reconfiguring gentile lineage via Abraham through huiothesia, adoption through spirit into Christ, Abraham’s sperma, Paul is at his most innovatively Roman: gentiles-in-Christ now count as sons, thus heirs, and they are now responsible to the patrilineal cult of their new adoptive family.

Interestingly, though, Fredriksen argues that Paul thinks Christ-followers remain distinct ethnically from Israel, ‘as indeed is the case with all human adoption’ (2017: 149). Her claim, however, neglects that even though adoption in the Roman world was a ‘constructed paternity’, it could be viewed as a process that changed a person’s lineage in a way that ‘imitates nature’ (Institutes of Justinian 1.11.4) (Garroway 2012: 153; cf. Peppard 2011: 51-57). That is, an adoptee is considered a real descendant because the adoption ritual replicates birth: ‘Birth to the father remains the crucial factor, but such birth is now determined by the adoption’ (Garroway 2012: 153-54). Likewise, Paul uses ‘adoption’ to explain how Gentiles participate in Israel’s ‘sonship’ (Rom. 8.15, 23; Gal. 4.1-7).
Moreover, despite the absence of the word ‘adoption’ (υἱοθεσία) in Rom. 11, the ‘grafting’ imagery Paul uses in his olive tree analogy was a common way to describe adoption in the ancient world (cf. Philo, *Agr.* 6) (Garroway 2012: 153, 204 n. 44). We may debate where Paul situates Gentiles-in-Christ in Israel’s family hierarchy, as is the case with other ancient adoptions (e.g., Seneca, *Controversiae* 2.4.14; cf. Peppard 2011: 55-57); however, Paul indicates that they are nevertheless part of Israel’s household.

The breadth of evidence in this study reveals that Paul does not speak about non-Jewish Christ-followers in the way that Fredriksen insists – strictly as Gentiles. He draws on Israelite ethnic criteria extensively to reconstruct their identities. Although my analysis of Paul focused on the notions of ‘seed’ and descent, he ascribes several other identifiers to his addresses that belonged solely to ethnic Israel: ‘children (τέκνα) of God’ (Rom. 8.16, 17, 21; 9.8), ‘God’s elect’ (ἐκλεκτῶν) (Rom. 8.33), ‘God’s beloved’ (ἀγαπητοῖς θεοῦ) (Rom. 1.7; 9.25b), ‘holy ones’ (οἱ ἅγιοι) (e.g., Rom. 1.7; 16.15; 1 Cor. 1.2; 6.2), ‘the circumcision’ (Phil. 3.3; cf. Rom. 2.26-29) and, though disputed, ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6.16). Furthermore, Paul says that his audiences are the Israelite matriarch Sarah’s children (Gal. 4.21-31); share Israelite ancestors (e.g., 1 Cor. 10.1), sacred texts (e.g., Rom. 15.4) and traditions (e.g., 1 Cor. 5.7-8) with Jews; and their messiah is an Israelite (e.g., Rom. 1.1-5; 9.5; Gal. 3.15-16; 1 Cor. 10.4). This extensive attribution of Israelite identity criteria to Gentiles-in-Christ makes it difficult to see how Paul can continue to regard them as strictly Gentiles (‘ex-pagan pagans’) and not as members of the people of Israel in some sense.

This is not to suggest that Fredriksen ignores this evidence. For instance, she notes that Paul sometimes speaks as though Christ-followers are ‘ex-pagans/ex-Gentiles’ (1 Cor. 12.2). After all, Fredriksen (2017: 117) says, Paul faces an eschatological situation in which his ‘discourse of ethnic dichotomizing accordingly left him with a conundrum: he – like us – has no good term for the *ekklesia*’s non-Jewish ex-idol-worshipers’. Even so, she then points to the last chapters of Romans as the apostle’s ‘final word’ on his view of the ethnicity of his addressees, where she says that ‘*ethnē* remains his term of choice’ (e.g., Rom. 15.8-12). She gives the impression that Gentiles-in-Christ are strictly Gentiles because Paul addresses them as ‘Gentiles’ in Rom. 11.13, for example (2017: 117, 123, 155, 156, 159). At first glance, Fredriksen’s claim appears problematic for my argument. Namely, if Paul thinks Gentiles-in-Christ become Israel ethnically when they turn to its God, why does he still identify them as ‘Gentiles’? However, the reverse question is equally pertinent: If Paul sees Gentiles-in-Christ as strictly Gentiles, why does he describe them with terminology that only applies to Israel in biblical and related literature (cf. Garroway 2012: 62-63)?

Space precludes a full discussion here, but there are ways to approach these questions without emphasizing one strand of evidence at the expense of the other. In short, we will better appreciate Paul’s ethnic discourse if we recognize
that ethnicity is complex, in how it is both (re)constructed and communicated. Teresa Morgan (2018: 35) explains that ancient ethnicity was often accretive and situational: ‘people could acquire new ethnic designations in the course of their lives and make use of old and new identities in different, or even the same, contexts’. Likewise, Paul can imagine the ethnicities of Gentiles-in-Christ to include Israelite identities while also being identifiable in terms of their pre-existing ethnic identities because, depending on the situation, different aspects of a person’s identity, whether ‘ethnic’ or not, will come to the forefront.\(^\text{31}\) Put simply, Paul’s addressees have multiple ethnicities (cf. Johnson Hodge 2007: 117-36).

Understandably, then, communicating these multiple identities is complex since all discourse carries not only the speaker’s meanings or intentions, but also that of the hearers who have their own discursive associations. Joshua Garroway (2012: 155) draws attention to this when he notes that Paul’s letters are set within a world where Israelite identity markers do not apply to uncircumcised Gentiles. If his arguments are to be comprehensible, he must use ‘accepted notions’ of the terms and concepts that he wants to reconfigure (2012: 63; cf. 54-68). As we saw, Paul reinterprets both the identity of the ‘seed’ and ‘the nations’ in the Abrahamic narrative from their typical interpretation to make room for Gentiles-in-Christ in Israel’s covenant. Consequently, interpreters must remember that just because Paul calls his addressees ‘Gentiles’ does not mean that he excludes them from \textit{ethnic} Israel. We see a similar discursive phenomenon in Philo when he urges his readers to care for proselytes with the same concern as they would their ‘natural kin’. While Philo describes proselytes as separate but equal parts of the Jewish people (e.g., \textit{Virt.} 102-104), he must differentiate between some of his readers (Jews ‘by birth’) and the objects of his concern, incomers (Jews ‘by conversion’), for his exhortation to resonate with or to make sense to his readers. His discourse thus communicates the proselytes’ complex identities: on one level they became Jews after joining a Jewish community, but, on another, their pre-existing identities are not erased since being a proselyte carries an intrinsic notion of ‘non-Jewishness’. I suggest that Paul’s Gentile ‘in \textit{Israel’s} Christ’ carries a similar resonance to Philo’s ‘proselyte’.

In the end, after comparing Paul’s ethnic discourse to Philo’s, Fredriksen’s claim that Gentiles-in-Christ are Israel’s ethnic ‘other’ does not adequately represent Paul’s Gentile inclusion strategy. The label ‘ex-pagan pagans’ does not take due account of the kind of transformation that Paul claims these people experience when they forsake their ancestral gods for Israel’s. If, in light of all this evidence, it does not seem convincing that Paul’s non-Jewish addressees

\(^{31}\) Jennifer Eyl (2017: 148-68) demonstrates that Paul takes advantage of his own multi-layered ethnic identity when his apostolic authority is questioned. In such cases, he appeals to his ancient Israelite identity rather than his Jewish one to increase his authority and rhetorical persuasiveness (e.g., 2 Cor. 11.13; Phil. 3.5).
remain strictly Gentiles, then we are faced afresh with the question of what they do become, and what to call them from an etic perspective. In my mind, Garroway’s (2012) proposal that Gentiles-in-Christ are ‘Gentile-Jews’ comes closest since this hyphenated designation takes into account that people can have multiple and/or hybrid ethnic identities and signals the complexities in the communication of them. However, Garroway’s label overlooks that Paul continues to treat Jews and Gentiles as distinct identities. Therefore, a more accurate label must allow for this distinction while treating Jew and Gentile as nested identities within the superordinate identity of Israel (‘Gentile-Israelite’?) (cf. Staples 2016). Regardless of the specific label we use, Paul reconfigures the ethnic identities of Gentiles-in-Christ more than the term ‘ex-pagan pagans’ would suggest.32

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