

BROADENING THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL:  
PAUL AND THE ETHNOGRAPHICAL DEBATE OF  
HIS TIME—THE CRITICISM OF JEWISH AND PAGAN  
ANCESTRAL CUSTOMS (1 THESS 2:13–16)\*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Within the New Perspective on Paul, the universal nature of his view on emerging “Christianity” and his criticism of the ethnocentric identity-markers of Judaism such as circumcision and food regulations, have been much emphasized.<sup>1</sup> In Paul’s historiography this universality was already characteristic of pre-Mosaic Judaism and was exemplified in the figure of Abraham, who received God’s promise that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Paul draws this picture of Abraham in his Letters to the Galatians (Gal 3:8 = Gen 12:3; 18:18) and the Romans (Rom 4:17–18 = Gen 17:5) and in doing so construes Christianity as essentially identical to “the religion of Abraham.”<sup>2</sup> In this way Paul, in his discussion with Judaizing Christians in Galatia, and with a self-consciously Jewish section of the Christian community in Rome, tried to answer the question of what difference the coming of Jesus Christ makes to a traditional understanding of the covenant, which used to identify itself by markers such as circumcision, food laws, and the Sabbath. According to Dunn:

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\* This essay is dedicated with gratitude to James D.G. Dunn on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, albeit appearing after the event.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the participants in the TBN conference in September 2008 in Groningen, notably Martin Goodman and Birgit van der Lans, and those involved in the 2008 British New Testament Conference in Durham, in particular John Barclay for his constructive and interesting response to my paper. Translations from the Bible are normally taken from the NRSV, with small alterations where necessary, and those from classical authors are normally derived from the Loeb Classical Library or from M. Stern, ed., introd., trans., and comm., *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (3 vols.; Jerusalem 1976–1984) = Stern, *GLAJJ*, again with occasional changes.

<sup>2</sup> On the construction of Islam as “the religion of Abraham,” see the fascinating contribution to this volume by Gerald Hawting.

In brief, Paul's new answer is that the advent of Christ had introduced the time of fulfilment, including the fulfilment of his purpose regarding the covenant. From the beginning, God's eschatological purpose in making the covenant had been the blessing of the nations: the gospel was already proclaimed when God promised Abraham, "In you shall all the nations be blessed" (Gal 3:8; Gen 12:3; 18:18). So, now that the time of fulfilment had come, the covenant should no longer be conceived in nationalistic or racial terms. No longer is it an exclusively Jewish *qua* Jewish privilege. The covenant is not thereby abandoned. Rather it is broadened out as God had originally intended—with the grace of God which it expressed separated from its national restriction and freely bestowed without respect to race or work, as it had been bestowed in the beginning. This is roughly the argument of Gal 3–4, as also developed later in Rom 3–4.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, this portrayal of Abraham is but one expression of Paul's underlying universalizing thought. Already in his oldest preserved correspondence, his First Letter to the Thessalonians, we find an inverted expression of it in Paul's criticism of the Jews who "oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the nations so that they may be saved" (1 Thess 2:15–16). Paul's universalism here takes the form of a criticism of Jewish ethnocentricity which resists a Jewish-Christian reaching out towards the nations.

In this paper we will not rehearse the extensive treatment which the explicit passages on Abraham's universalistic religion have found in the *New Perspective on Paul*, but concentrate rather on the passage from 1 Thess 2 which may help us to appreciate the full scope of Paul's universalism, which—as we will learn—took shape not only in response to Jewish ethnocentrism, but also in reply to the Greco-Roman protection of pagan ethnic, ancestral customs. The passage from 1 Thess 2:15–16 has recently found exemplary treatment by Barclay in his paper on "Hostility to Jews As Cultural Construct" (2007).<sup>4</sup> Barclay rightly draws attention to the fact that in his criticism of Jewish ethnocentricity Paul takes up an anti-Jewish argument from the contemporary pagan discourse on Judaism. Barclay takes care to demonstrate that this discourse is part of a larger ethnographical debate in Antiquity and should not be under-

<sup>3</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (WUNT 185; Tübingen 2005); quoted according to the revised edition, J.D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich., 2007), 114; cf. further p. 251.

<sup>4</sup> J.M.G. Barclay, "Hostility to Jews As Cultural Construct: Egyptian, Hellenistic, and Early Christian Paradigms," in *Josephus und das Neue Testament: Wechselseitige Wahrnehmungen: II. Internationales Symposium zum Corpus Judaeo-Hellenisticum*, 25.–28. Mai 2006, Greifswald (ed. C. Böttrich and J. Herzer; WUNT 209; Tübingen 2007), 365–385.

stood, as scholars such as Schäfer tend to do, as a virulent anti-Semitic discourse which is distinctively different from other ethnographical discussions. Yet, as I will argue, ultimately Barclay also seems to sketch a too limited setting to Paul's criticism of Jewish ethnocentrism. As I will contend, the passage from 1 Thess 2 not only contains Paul's criticism of the pagan discrimination against and harassment of pagan converts to Christianity in Thessalonica, but at the same time compares the persecution of these Christians by their fellow countrymen to that of Christian Jews by Jews in Judea. Paul construes a point of comparison between the Christian experience of Jewish and pagan attitudes towards them. In that sense, Paul is not simply anti-Jewish, but against every ethnic intransigence, regardless of whether it is Jewish or Greek. This will make us aware that, contrary to what one would perhaps assume, there is no antithesis operative in Antiquity between Jewish ethnocentrism versus Greek universalism; rather both sides are basically ethnocentric, focused on the continuation of their ancestral customs.

In the following, I will first examine the text from First Thessalonians (section 2). Secondly, I will explore the pagan views on Jewish ethnocentric misanthropy and the fuller ethnographical discourse in which it is subsumed (section 3). Finally, I will explore the double-sidedness of Paul's critique, which not only applies to Judaism but also to paganism, and points to a larger issue in Antiquity, that of the perceived sacrosanct nature of any ancient or traditional customs of the respective nations, races and tribes (section 4). This view was clearly voiced by Celsus in his critique of Christianity as a revolutionary and universal movement, and it seems that against this background we might be able to understand why Paul is able to compare Jewish and pagan attitudes towards Christianity.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF 1 THESS 2:13–16

In the passage from First Thessalonians Paul says that the pagan converts to Christianity in Thessalonica “became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews” (1 Thess 2:14: ὑμεῖς γὰρ μιμηταὶ ἐγενήθητε, ἀδελφοί, τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν τοῦ θεοῦ τῶν οὐσῶν ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ὅτι τὰ αὐτὰ ἐπάθετε καὶ ὑμεῖς ὑπὸ τῶν ἰδίων συμφυλετῶν καθὼς καὶ αὐτοὶ ὑπὸ τῶν Ἰουδαίων). I will first continue with Paul's subsequent detailed description of the Jews, but it is essential for a correct interpretation of the entire passage that the

comparison which Paul draws between the ex-pagan, Christian Thessalonians and the Christian Jews elsewhere (2:14) is noted. As regards the Jews, Steck, in his classic study *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten* (1967), has already pointed out that Paul describes the Jews in the vocabulary of an internal Jewish struggle.<sup>5</sup> The Jews, according to Paul:

... killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the nations so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.

... τῶν Ἰουδαίων, τῶν καὶ τὸν κύριον ἀποκτεινάντων Ἰησοῦν καὶ τοὺς προφήτας, καὶ ἡμᾶς ἐκδιωξάντων, καὶ θεῷ μὴ ἀρεσκόντων, καὶ πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ἐναντίων, κωλύοντων ἡμᾶς τοῖς ἔθνεσιν λαλῆσαι ἵνα σωθῶσιν, εἰς τὸ ἀναπληρῶσαι αὐτῶν τὰς ἀμαρτίας πάντοτε. ἔφθασεν δὲ ἐπ' αὐτοὺς ἡ ὀργὴ εἰς τέλος.  
(1 Thess 2:15–16)

In his monograph, Steck clearly outlined the traditions internal to the Jews in which fellow Jews are accused by others of killing the prophets. It is against this background that he also offers a separate treatment of 1 Thess 2:15–16.<sup>6</sup> In this passage the tradition of violence against prophets, internal to the Jews, is now christianized, with Jesus also included in the fate suffered by previous Jewish prophets. To this point, Paul's accusation of the Jews is not anti-Jewish but rather internal to the Jewish tradition. Barclay, however, has rightly pointed out that this internal Jewish tradition is here transformed because it is joined with elements of the pagan, anti-Jewish discourse, according to which Jews, as Paul puts it, "oppose everyone," they "killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God *and oppose everyone*" (2:15). This misanthropic attitude expresses itself in the Jews hindering Paul "from speaking to the nations." Barclay is absolutely right that "both Hellenistic and Judean traditions are here adopted and adapted in the service of a new logic for hostility to Judeans":<sup>7</sup> "they displease God *and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the nations so that they may be saved*" (2:15–16). I fully agree with Barclay that indeed the passage from Paul borrows heavily from Hellenistic anti-

<sup>5</sup> O.H. Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferung des deuteronomistischen Geschichtsbildes im Alten Testament, Spätjudentum und Urchristentum* (WMANT 23; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1967).

<sup>6</sup> Steck, *Geschick der Propheten*, 274–279.

<sup>7</sup> Barclay, "Hostility to Jews," 381.

Judaism and that attempts at distancing Paul's anti-Judaism here from Hellenistic anti-Judaism are flawed.<sup>8</sup> Yet one might ask why such an anti-Judaism is developed by Paul. Why did he draw on anti-Jewish Hellenistic traditions? In Barclay's view it is not

... accidental that the Hellenistic charge of Judean antisocial behaviour should continue to be employed: By placing Jewish / Judean opposition to the Christian mission within the wider framework of their hostility to humanity, Christians can feel that their complaint is not simply partisan, but common to all "decent-living" residents of the empire.<sup>9</sup>

This purpose, however, does not fit the context of Paul's passage particularly well, as he has just spoken of the crude behaviour of these "decent-living" residents of the empire" towards the pagan converts at Thessalonica. The Thessalonian Christians suffered equally from their own compatriots as did the Christian Jews in Judea from the Jews. As a matter of fact, in this passage Paul develops a point of comparison between the Jews and the pagan *συμφυλέται* of the Thessalonians, their pagan fellow countrymen. It would be difficult to understand how Paul could lessen the pain of their experience of being persecuted by pagans by adopting Hellenistic anti-Jewish views; the letter is addressed to the ex-pagan Christians at Thessalonica, not to Christian Jews in Judea. Something more must be at issue here, and we will now take a closer look at these Hellenistic anti-Jewish traditions, see how they are embedded in the general ethnographical literature of the period, and examine how this general ethnographical discourse is of relevance both to Christian Jews in their relationship to fellow Jews and for ex-pagan Christians vis-à-vis their fellow countrymen. First, we will focus on Hellenistic charges against the Jews on account of their supposed misanthropy (section 3), and subsequently, we will see how Paul, although he draws on these anti-Jewish Hellenistic traditions, detects a common anti-Christian denominator in paganism and Judaism, as both turn against the Christians in their midst; it seems likely that this common attitude is a response to Christianity's reserved attitude towards ethnic, ancestral religions, which was strongly shaped by its universalism (section 4).

<sup>8</sup> Barclay, "Hostility to Jews," 380n44.

<sup>9</sup> Barclay, "Hostility to Jews," 381.

## 3. THE PAGAN GREEK CHARGE OF JEWISH MISANTHROPY

3.1. *Hecataeus of Abdera*

It seems that the writings of Hecataeus of Abdera (ca. 360–290 BCE) contain the first preserved mention of Jews by a Greek author. Hecataeus' comments on the Jews are embedded in an ethnographical account of the Egyptians. The relevant passage for the present purposes reads:

The sacrifices that he [i.e., Moses] established differ from those of other nations, as does their way of living, for as a result of their own expulsion from Egypt he introduced an unsocial and intolerant mode of life.

τὰς δὲ θυσίας ἐξηλλαγμένας συνεστήσατο τῶν παρὰ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἔθνεσι καὶ τὰς κατὰ τὸν βίον ἀγωγὰς· διὰ γὰρ τὴν ἰδίαν ξενηλασίαν ἀπάνθρωπόν τινα καὶ μισόξενον βίον εἰσηγήσατο.

(Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 11: Hecataeus of Abdera, *Aegyptiaca apud Diodorus Siculus, Bibliotheca historica* 40.3.4)

The remark about Jewish sacrifices differing from other nations, as Stern noted, fits the genre of ethnographical literature in which the way sacrifices were offered is a fixed component. For that reason, Stern is right in pointing out that “[w]e should not see an expression of anti-Semitic feeling in Hecataeus' description of the peculiarities of the Jewish system of religion, but rather the traces of ethnographical literature.”<sup>10</sup> Hecataeus' wording that the Jewish sacrifices and way of life “differ from those of other nations” (ἐξηλλαγμένας . . . τῶν παρὰ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἔθνεσι) closely resembles Paul's remark that the Jews are opposed to all people (1 Thess 2:15: πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ἐναντίων).

The ethnographical genre can also be clearly detected in the remark that the Jews' “unsocial and intolerant mode of life” is the result of the fact that they themselves suffered ξενηλασία (“expulsion of foreigners”) at the hand of the Egyptians. The notion of “expulsion of foreigners” is important in ethnographical literature. In a sense, the Jews are being excused for their unsocial and intolerant mode of life because they are but the victims of a misanthropic, unsocial kind of expulsion: “as a result of their own expulsion from Egypt he introduced an unsocial and intolerant mode of life” (διὰ γὰρ τὴν ἰδίαν ξενηλασίαν ἀπάνθρωπόν τινα καὶ μισόξενον βίον εἰσηγήσατο).

<sup>10</sup> Stern, *GLAJJ*, 1:30.

The act of expelling foreigners was regarded as characteristic of the barbarians, as a passage from Eratosthenes, preserved in Strabo's geography, makes clear: "According to Eratosthenes, the expulsion of foreigners is a custom common to all barbarians" (Eratosthenes *apud* Strabo, *Geogr.* 17.1.19: φησὶ δ' Ἐρατοσθένης κοινὸν μὲν εἶναι τοῖς βαρβάροις πᾶσιν ἔθος τὴν ξενηλασίαν). As an example of barbaric peoples who performed such expulsions, Eratosthenes mentions the Egyptians, the Carthaginians, and the Persians.

However, it was not only the barbarians who were charged with the expulsion of foreigners, as it also appears to be an issue within Greek ethnographical rivalries, in which the misanthropic attitude of the Spartans is described. In his *Leges*, Plato is critical of the expulsion of foreigners, which is considered to take place not only among the Egyptians but also among the Spartans. According to Plato, the ideal constitution does not allow the expulsion of foreigners, as the following passage makes clear:

Such are the laws in conformity with which they must receive all strangers, of either sex, from another country, and send out their own citizens; thus doing honour to Zeus, Patron of strangers, instead of expelling strangers by means of meats and ceremonies (μὴ βρώμασι καὶ θύμασι τὰς ξενηλασίας ποιουμένων) as is now done by the nurslings of the Nile, or else by savage proclamations. (Plato, *Leg.* 953e)

In Plato's view it is the Egyptians who forbid the foreigners to be present at ceremonial feasts and expel them. The ideal constitution, however, develops a policy of admitting strangers:

Now for the citizens to refuse altogether either to admit others or to go abroad themselves is by no means a possible policy, and, moreover, it would appear to the rest of the world to be both churlish and cross-grained, since they would get the reputation of adopting harsh language, such as that of the so-called "Aliens Expulsion Acts."

ἔτι δὲ ἄγριον καὶ ἀπηνὲς φαίνοιτ' ἂν τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀνθρώποις, ὀνόμασίν τε χαλεποῖς ταῖσιν λεγομέναις ξενηλασίαις χρωμένους καὶ τρόποις αὐθάδεσι καὶ χαλεποῖς, ὧς δοκοῖεν ἂν. (Plato, *Leg.* 950a–b)

Plato here refers to the law of the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus, one of whose laws forbid strangers to reside in Sparta. Plato more often criticizes this sort of expulsion of foreigners. In a mocking answer to Protagoras in the dialogue of the same name, Plato has Socrates suggest that the Spartans "make pretence of ignorance, in order to prevent the discovery that it is by wisdom that they have ascendancy over the rest of the Greeks" (342b). The Spartans' aloofness goes so far that:

... they pass alien acts against the Spartanizing set [i.e., people who have come to acquire the Spartan way of life, in order to spread it in other cities] and any other strangers within their gates (ξενηλασίας ποιούμενοι τῶν τε λακωνιζόντων τούτων καὶ ἐάν τις ἄλλος ξένος ὦν ἐπιδημήσῃ) ...; while on their part they do not permit any of their young men to travel abroad to the other cities—in this rule they resemble the Cretans—lest they unlearn what they are taught at home. (Plato, *Prot.* 342c–d)<sup>11</sup>

Thus, it is not only the Spartans but also the Cretans who are charged with such a critical attitude towards other people. Some philosophers, however, such as Philostratus, come to the aid of the Spartans. In his biography of Apollonius, Philostratus has him address the policy of exclusion against all foreigners, and defend the Spartans in this:

Let us not assail ... the law-giver Lycurgus; but we must understand him, and then we shall see that his prohibition to strangers to settle in Sparta and live there was not inspired on his part by mere boorish exclusiveness, but by a desire to keep the institutions of Sparta in their original purity by preventing outsiders from mingling in her life.

(Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.20)

At least, according to Philostratus, the exclusion of others could be motivated by the honourable intention to keep one's institutions pure.

It is noteworthy that Jews themselves were very much aware of this ethnographical debate, and drew a comparison between themselves and the Spartans in this respect. In reply to the anti-Jewish criticism of Apollonius Molon, whose views we will encounter in the following section, Josephus describes what he regards as analogies between the laws of Plato and those of the Jews, while paying special attention to precautions which may prevent foreigners from mixing with the citizens under these constitutions:

In two points in particular, Plato followed the example of our legislator [i.e., Moses]. He prescribed as the primary duty of the citizens a study of their laws, which they must all learn word for word by heart. Again, he took precautions to prevent foreigners from mixing with them at random (καὶ μὴν καὶ περὶ τοῦ μὴ δεῖν ὡς ἔτυχεν ἐπιμίγνυσθαι τινὰς ἔξωθεν), and to keep the state pure and confined to law-abiding citizens. Of these facts Apollonius Molon took no account when he condemned us for refusing admission to persons with other preconceived ideas about God, and for

<sup>11</sup> On the expulsion of foreigners in Sparta, see T.J. Figueira, "Xenēlasia and Social Control in Classical Sparta," *CQ* 53 (2003): 44–74.



declining to associate with those who have chosen to adopt a different mode of life. Yet even this habit is not peculiar to us; it is common to all, and shared not only by Greeks, but by Greeks of the highest reputation. The Spartans made a practice of expelling foreigners and would not allow their own citizens to travel abroad, in both cases apprehensive of their laws being corrupted (Λακεδαιμόνιοι δὲ καὶ ξενηλασίας ποιούμενοι διετέλουν καὶ τοῖς αὐτῶν ἀποδημεῖν πολίταις οὐκ ἐπέτρεπον διαφθορὰν ἐξ ἀμφοῖν ὑφορώμενοι γενήσεσθαι περὶ τοὺς νόμους). They [i.e., the Spartans] might perhaps be justly reproached for discourtesy, because they accorded to no one the rights either of citizenship or of residence among them. We, on the contrary, while we have no desire to emulate the customs of others, yet gladly welcome any who wish to share our own. That, I think, may be taken as a proof both of humanity and magnanimity.

(Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.257–261)

In their critical attitude towards others, Josephus explains, Jews are very similar to the Greeks, yet at the same time more moderate than the Spartans. Whereas Spartans allow nobody to reside among them, Jews welcome those who wish to adopt Jewish customs.

What the above passages make clear is that the issue of expulsion of foreigners is an important topic in the ethnographical debate which occurs in the Greco-Roman period. Expulsion could be seen as an act of misanthropy, but also as a way of maintaining the purity of one's institutions and avoiding contamination by outsiders. Consequently, when the Jewish "unsocial and intolerant mode of life" is seen by Hecataeus to be the result of their expulsion—as foreigners—by the Egyptians, there is nothing specifically anti-Jewish about his remark. It is rather part of an ethnographical debate, conducted between Greeks and barbarians, and between various representatives of the Greeks themselves. The passage from Josephus shows that Jews were cognizant of this debate and participated in it.

The same holds true for Philo. In a description of the festival of Pascha, Philo presents the Jews' exodus from Egypt as a case of the expulsion of foreigners (ξενηλασία), and explicitly links it with the inhumanity (ἀπανθρώπια) of the Egyptians:

The festival is a reminder and an offering of thanks for that great migration from Egypt which was made by more than two million of men and women in obedience to the oracles vouchsafed to them. Now at that time *they had left a land brimful of inhumanity which made a practice of expelling strangers* (ἀπολελοιπότες χώραν γέμουσαν ἀπανθρώπιας καὶ ξενηλασίας), and what was worst of all, assigned divine honours to irrational creatures, not merely domesticated animals, but even wild beasts.

(Philo, *Spec.* 2.146)

In a sense, this passage in Philo is an exact inversion of the passage from Hecataeus. Whereas Hecataeus believes that as a result of the Jews' expulsion from Egypt, Moses introduced an inhumane and intolerant mode of life (διὰ γὰρ τὴν ἰδίαν ξενηλασίαν ἀπάνθρωπόν τινα καὶ μισόξενον βίον εἰσηγήσατο), in Philo's view the expulsion of the Jews reveals the inhumanity of the Egyptians.

### 3.2. *Posidonius, Apollonius Molon, and Apion*

A similar ethnographical discourse can be traced in the following, cruder debate between Greeks and Jews which becomes visible in Posidonius, Apollonius Molon, and Apion. Although they go so far as to accuse the Jews of the annual murder of a Greek in the Jerusalem temple, this extreme example of anti-Jewish propaganda is also part of the broader rhetoric surrounding the Hellenism/barbarism divide. On the authority of Apion we have it that both Posidonius and Apollonius Molon told the story that every year a Greek foreigner was kidnapped and ritually executed in the Jerusalem temple, a horrible practice which was allegedly discovered when Antiochus IV Epiphanes entered the Jewish temple in 168 / 167 BCE:

They would kidnap a Greek foreigner, fatten him up for a year, and then convey him to a wood, where they slew him, sacrificed his body with their customary ritual, partook of his flesh, and, while immolating the Greek, swore an oath of hostility to the Greeks (*ut inimicitias contra Graecos haberent*). The remains of their victim were thrown into a pit.

(Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 44: Posidonius *apud* Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.79, 89, 91–96 = Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 48 [Apollonius Molon] = Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 171 [Apion])

This story seems to relate to the topic of the barbarian practice of sacrificing strangers. Philostratus, in his *Vita Apollonii*, for example, describes it as a barbarian practice committed by the Scythians (6.20). As the following passage from Apollonius Molon's writings shows, he regards the Jews as an example of the barbarians, although they constitute for him "the dullest of the barbarians" (ἀφουεστάτους τῶν βαρβάρων). This passage from Apollonius Molon, preserved and embedded in Josephus' *Contra Apionem*, reads:

Apollonius, unlike Apion, has not grouped his accusations together, but scattered them here and there all over his work, reviling us in one place as atheists and misanthropes (καὶ δὴ εἶπας ποτὲ μὲν ὡς ἀθέους καὶ μισανθρώπους λαιδορεῖ), in another reproaching us as cowards, whereas elsewhere, on the contrary, he accuses us of temerity and reckless madness. He adds that we are the most witless of all barbarians, and are consequently

the only people who have contributed no useful invention to civilization (λέγει δὲ καὶ ἀφουεστάτους εἶναι τῶν βαρβάρων καὶ διὰ τοῦτο μηδὲν εἰς τὸν βίον εὖρημα συμβεβλήσθαι μόνους).

(Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 49: Apollonius Molon *apud* Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.148)

This passage shows that, serious as Apollonius Molon's accusations of the Jews as misanthropes may be, they function within a larger ideological distinction between the Greeks and the barbarians. Even if Jews are the dullest of the barbarians and have, for that reason, contributed nothing to civilization, their position only constitutes an extreme on a sliding scale of barbarian nations. In that sense the anti-Jewish discourse is not isolated but part of a more general ethnographical discourse about the barbarians, as opposed to Greeks.

### 3.3. *Diodorus Siculus*

As we saw in our discussion of the charge of Jewish misanthropy in Posidonius, Apollonius Molon, and Apion in the previous section, the setting of their story of the annual human sacrifice of a Greek in the Jerusalem temple was the events under Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Whereas the well-known Jewish accounts in Daniel, First and Second Maccabees, and Josephus accuse Antiochus of sacrilege with respect to the Jerusalem temple, the pagan accounts in Posidonius, Apollonius Molon, and Apion accuse the Jews of hostility towards the Greeks and gross impiety in the way in which they run the sacrificial cult in the temple at Jerusalem. A similar point of view is taken by Diodorus Siculus. According to his account, Antiochus finds a marble statue of Moses in the Jerusalem temple:

... the founder of Jerusalem and organizer of the nation, the man, moreover, who had ordained for the Jews their misanthropic and lawless customs (τὰ μισάνθρωπα καὶ παράνομα ἔθη). And since Epiphanes was shocked by such hatred directed against all mankind, he had set himself to break down their traditional practices (αὐτὸς δὲ στυγήσας τὴν μισανθρωπίαν πάντων ἔθνῶν ἐφιλοτιμήθη καταλῦσαι τὰ νόμιμα). Accordingly, he sacrificed before the image of the founder and the open-air altar of the god a great sow, and poured its blood over them. Then, having prepared its flesh, he ordered that their holy books, containing the xenophobic laws (τὰς ἱερὰς αὐτῶν βίβλους καὶ περιεχούσας τὰ μισόξενα νόμιμα), should be sprinkled with the broth of the meat.

(Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 63: Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 34–35.1.3–4)

What is particularly relevant in this passage, is that the charge of Jewish misanthropy is now levelled, not against the exceptional annual practice of kidnapping a Greek but, more generally, against the Jews' misanthropic

and lawless customs (τὰ μισάνθρωπα καὶ παράνομα ἔθη) and traditional practices (τὰ νόμιμα). Diodorus here employs terminology which is characteristic of the contemporary Greek ethnographical debate about traditional practices and customs, the rationale of which we will explore in section 4 below, in a passage in which Celsus reflects on the respectability of traditional customs. It is because these customs are misanthropic that, according to Diodorus, Antiochus IV is determined to dissolve them. This, however, was by no means the only attitude Greco-Roman authors could take with regard to Jewish customs, even if they were critical about them. I will now discuss a passage from Tacitus, in which his esteem and criticism of Jewish customs are nicely balanced, and phrased in the terminology of the general ethnographical discourse of the day. The passage from Tacitus also shows something of what was at stake in this debate; the attraction of some pagans to Judaism.

### 3.4. *Tacitus*

As we have seen in Diodorus Siculus, the charge of Jewish misanthropy concerns Jewish customs and traditional practices. According to Tacitus, however, there were some Jewish customs which were respectable, but only those which could be taken to refer to the god Saturn—the celebration of the seventh day and the seventh year in honour of Saturn, one of the seven planets—or those which had been derived from the Idaeans, the tribe which take their name from Mount Ida in Phrygia or, according to some, Crete:

Others say that this [i.e., the celebration of the seventh day and year] is done in honour of Saturn, whether it be that the primitive elements of their religion were given by the Idaeans, who, according to tradition, were expelled with Saturn and became the founders of the Jewish race, or is due to the fact that, of the seven planets that rule the fortunes of mankind, Saturn moves in the highest orbit and has the greatest potency; and that many of the heavenly bodies traverse their paths and courses in multiples of seven. Whatever their origin, *these* rites are maintained by their antiquity. (Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 281: Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4.4–5.5.1)

According to Tacitus, insofar as Jewish rites are ancient they are respectable. These rites, however, can be distinguished from other Jewish customs which Tacitus, as Diodorus Siculus before him, regards as base and abominable, and as reflecting the Jews' misanthropic hate for humankind:

The *other* customs of the Jews are base and abominable, and owe their persistence to their depravity. For the worst rascals among other peoples,

renouncing their ancestral religions (*spretis religionibus patriis*), always kept sending tribute and contributing to Jerusalem, thereby increasing the wealth of the Jews. Again, the Jews are extremely loyal toward one another, and always ready to show compassion, but toward every other people they feel only hate and enmity (*sed adversus omnes alios hostile odium*). They sit apart at meals (*Separati epulis*) and they sleep apart . . . . They adopted circumcision to distinguish themselves from other peoples by this difference (*ut diversitate noscantur*). Those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice, and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account (*Transgressi in morem eorum idem usurpant, nec quidquam prius imbuuntur quam contemnere deos, exuere patriam, parentes liberos fratres vilia habere*).

(Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 281: Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1–2)

Although he grants that there are respectable Jewish customs, Tacitus emphasizes that there are also quite different Jewish customs which are characterized by misanthropy. Whereas the good customs are held in common with or derived from other ethnic groups (i.e., the Idaeans), the bad customs differ from other nations, and constitute the Jews' *diversitas*. As Tacitus remarks in a subsequent passage, "the founders of the city [of Jerusalem] had foreseen that there would be many wars because the ways of their people differed so from those of the neighbours" (Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 281: Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.12.2: *Providerant conditores ex diversitate morum crebra bella*). This emphasis on the distinctive diversity of particular ethnic customs (*diversitas morum*), is an issue in ethnographical literature and, consequently, not specifically anti-Jewish as such. Indeed, as Stern pointed out, the same view is encountered in the Greek Middle Comedy poet Anaxandrides who, addressing the Egyptians, states:

I couldn't bring myself to be an ally of yours, for neither our manners nor our customs agree, but stand a long distance apart from each other. You worship the cow, but I sacrifice it to the gods. You hold the eel to be a mighty divinity, we hold it by far the mightiest of dainties. You eat no pork, but I like it very much.

(Anaxandrides *apud* Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 7.55, 299F)<sup>12</sup>

This kind of diversity of customs and manners is also stressed in Tacitus' account of the Jewish customs. What seems to be at stake in Tacitus' negative evaluation of Jewish customs comes to the fore in his attack on pagan converts to Judaism. They not only follow the same practice as the Jews, but their conversion forces them "to despise the gods, to disown

<sup>12</sup> Stern, *GLAJJ*, 2:57.

their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account” (*contemnere deos, exuere patriam, parentes liberos fratres vilia habere*). What troubles Tacitus more than the Jewish customs as such, is that pagan converts start “renouncing their ancestral religions” and despising their own customs. In section 4 we will see that this is exactly the view of the pagan philosopher Celsus on the danger of the conversion of proselytes to Judaism. Jewish customs are respectable because of their antiquity, so there is no problem with Jews following their own customs. The real problem is that of the proselytes: “If indeed in accordance with these principles the Jews maintained their own law, we should not find fault with them but rather with those who have abandoned their own traditions and professed those of the Jews” (Celsus *apud* Origen, *Cels.* 5.41).

It is this feature of the ethnographical debate which seems particularly relevant to our understanding of 1 Thess 2:13–16. According to Paul, the pagan converts to Christianity in Thessalonica suffer repression by their own pagan fellow countrymen. It seems that the pagan Thessalonians criticize compatriots who convert to Christianity in the same way in which Tacitus finds fault with pagan converts to Judaism. This is very plausible because the Christians did not yet call themselves “Christians” and would still have been viewed as a Jewish movement. This renders the passage from Tacitus very relevant, because it makes us aware that the conversion of pagans to Judaism was considered highly problematic since it entailed the rejection of the ethnic, ancestral customs which one previously adhered to. In section 4 below, we will see that this is precisely the kind of criticism which Celsus puts forward against Christianity. It also reveals the logic underlying Paul’s point of comparison between the pagan and Jewish censure of Christianity:

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who . . . oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the nations so that they may be saved.

(1 Thess 2:14–16)

Both the Jewish and the pagan converts to Christianity are attacked by their compatriots for transgressing ethnic boundaries and despising their own ancestral customs. Christianity’s position in this ethnographical discourse is ambiguous. On the one hand, from a pagan perspective, pagan converts to Judaism and Christianity are condemned in the same way. This common treatment seems also to be reflected in the fact that Tacitus not only censures the Jews for their hate and enmity

toward every other people (*adversus omnes alios hostile odium*; see above Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 281: Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1), but also levels the same charge against the Christians: after the fire of Rome in 64 CE, Christians are convicted of “hatred of the human race” (Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 281: Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.4: *odium humani generis convicti sunt*). On the other hand, Jewish Christians also attracted the criticism of their Jewish compatriots for no longer respecting the Jewish ethnic identity-markers. In short, both paganism and Judaism criticized former co-religionists who converted to Christianity for renouncing their ancestral, ethnic traditions. In contrast to Christianity, which was distinctively universalistic (in the sense of “open to all”), Judaism and paganism revealed themselves to be religions strongly rooted in ethnic practices and conventions.

### 3.5. *Juvenal*

The pagan criticism of proselytes to Judaism, combined with the charge of Jewish misanthropy, is also found in the early second-century CE Roman satirist Juvenal. In his *Satirae*, Juvenal pictures the gradual Judaization of particular pagan families. This process starts with reverence for the Sabbath, abstinence from pork, and culminates in circumcision and disrespect for “the laws of Rome”:

Some who have had a father who reverses the Sabbath, worship nothing but the clouds, and the divinity of the heavens, and see no difference between eating swine’s flesh, from which their father abstained, and that of man; and in time they take to circumcision. Having been wont to disobey the laws of Rome, they learn and practise and revere the Jewish law, and all that Moses handed down in his secret tome, *forbidding to point out the way to any not worshipping the same rites*.

(Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 301: Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.96–103)

The defiance of the laws of Rome accompanies reverence for the Jewish law, which leads to a total segregation of these converts from their original social setting, as the Jewish law is kept secret from those who do not worship according to the Jewish rites. The issue here, as it also appeared to be in Tacitus, is the increasingly critical attitude of proselytes towards their own ancestral customs. From a pagan perspective this disobedience towards the laws of Rome and their disowning of the country to which they belonged would be very undesirable and accompanied by social segregation, as well as hate and enmity towards every other people.

### 3.6. *Philostratus*

Again, according to Philostratus, the problem with Judaism is that Jews lead an unsociable life because they do not mingle with others:

The Jews have long been in revolt not only against the Romans but against humanity (ἐκεῖνοι μὲν γὰρ πάσαι ἀφεστᾶσιν οὐ μόνον Ῥωμαίων, ἀλλὰ καὶ πάντων ἀνθρώπων); and a race that has made its own a life apart and irreconcilable (οἱ γὰρ βίον ἄμικτον εὐρόντες), that cannot share with the rest of mankind in the pleasures of the table nor join in their libations or prayers or sacrifices, are separated from ourselves by a greater gulf than divides us from Susa or Bactra or the more distant Indies.

(Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 403; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 5.33)

As we have seen in other instances above, the terminology employed is not specifically anti-Jewish but at home in a more general ethnographical debate. According to Strabo, for instance, in the region of Dioscurias, near the Caspian Sea, there live seventy tribes who “all speak different languages because of the fact that, by reason of their obstinacy and ferocity, they live in scattered groups and without intercourse with one another (διὰ τὸ σποράδην καὶ ἀμίκτως οἰκεῖν)” (Strabo, *Geogr.* 11.2.16). It is this ethnographical notion of not mingling with others, which Josephus is also willing to employ in a positive sense. According to Josephus, the unmixed, pure state of the Jews enables them to observe their laws carefully:

Well, ours is not a maritime country; neither commerce nor the intercourse which it promotes with the outside world (ταῖς πρὸς ἄλλους διὰ τούτων ἐπιμιξίας) has any attraction for us. Our cities are built inland, remote from the sea; and we devote ourselves to the cultivation of the productive country with which we are blessed. Above all we pride ourselves on the education of our children, and regard as the most essential task in life the observance of our laws and of the pious practices, based thereupon, which we have inherited. If to these reasons one adds the peculiarity of our mode of life, there was clearly nothing in ancient times to bring us into contact with the Greeks (προσούσης τοίνυν τοῖς εἰρημένοις καὶ τῆς περὶ τὸν βίον ἡμῶν ιδιότητος οὐδὲν ἐν τοῖς παλαιοῖς χρόνοις ποιοῦν ἡμῖν πρὸς τοὺς Ἕλληνας ἐπιμιξίαν).

(Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.60)

Twice in this passage Josephus denies that the Jews promote mixing with others (ἐπιμιξία): they do not mingle with the outside world, nor do they mingle with the Greeks. It is this state of purity and unsociableness (ἀμιξία) which enables them to observe their ancestral laws and pious practices. This view fits nicely with the comparison which Josephus, as we have seen above, draws between, on the one hand, the Jewish practice of “refusing admission to persons with other preconceived ideas about



God, and for declining to associate with those who have chosen to adopt a different mode of life,” and, on the other hand, the Spartan practice of the expulsion of foreigners (ξενηλασία):

... this habit is not peculiar to us; it is common to all, and shared not only by Greeks, but by Greeks of the highest reputation. The Spartans made a practice of expelling foreigners and would not allow their own citizens to travel abroad, in both cases apprehensive of their laws being corrupted (Λακεδαιμόνιοι δὲ καὶ ξενηλασίας ποιούμενοι διετέλουν καὶ τοῖς αὐτῶν ἀποδημεῖν πολίταις οὐκ ἐπέτρεπον διαφθορὰν ἐξ ἀμφοῖν ὑφορώμενοι γενήσεσθαι περὶ τοὺς νόμους). (Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.259)

It is clear from our findings, that both the issue of the expulsion of foreigners (ξενηλασία) and that of purity and unsociableness (ἀμιξία) are part of a general ethnographical debate.

### 3.7. Synesius

Finally, we find in the Christian neoplatonist Synesius (ca. 370–413 CE) a charge which we have also already found in Posidonius, Apollonius Molon, and Apion, the charge that Jews kill Greeks (see section 3.2 above). The latter three accused the Jews of engaging in an annual human sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple. Synesius, in his turn, depicts the Jews, as “a graceless race and fully convinced of the piety of sending to Hades as many Greeks as possible” (Stern, *GLAJJ*, no. 569: Synesius, *Epistulae* 4: ... γένος ἔκσπονδον καὶ εὐσεβεῖν ἀναπεπεισμένον ἦν ὅτι πλείστους ἀνδρας Ἑλληνας ἀποθανεῖν αἴτιοι γένωνται). As in the case of Posidonius, Apollonius Molon, and Apion, this charge serves to delineate a sharp divide between barbarians and Greeks and, for that reason, is probably not specifically anti-Jewish. Although he was a Christian, it is probable that his perspective was shaped by Hypatia, the influential pagan teacher of neoplatonist philosophy at Alexandria.

The observation that the charges which Greeks such as Posidonius, Apollonius Molon, Apion, and Synesius bring forward against the Jews are, in themselves, not specifically anti-Jewish but part of a larger ethnographical debate holds true for most, or even all instances of polemics against alleged Jewish misanthropy which we have studied above. As I have already indicated, it is important to emphasize this and challenge attempts by scholars such as Schäfer to interpret these polemics as an ancient manifestation of anti-Semitism. In this I agree fully with Barclay, who is very much aware of the ethnographical debate of the time.

However, unlike Barclay I do not believe that this anti-Jewish debate is simply employed by Paul in 1 Thess 2:13–16. As we have already seen, according to Barclay:

By placing Jewish / Judean opposition to the Christian mission within the wider framework of their hostility to humanity, Christians can feel that their complaint is not simply partisan, but common to all “decent-living” residents of the empire.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, Paul’s depiction of the Jews as “opposing everyone” is derived from this anti-Jewish debate. However, Paul’s discourse seems to be different. In the same passage, he draws a comparison between, on the one hand, the malign and inamicable Jewish persecution of Jewish Christians because of their reaching out to the nations and, on the other, the pagan harassment of pagan Thessalonians who converted to the universalizing movement of Christianity. The passages adduced above, particularly those of Tacitus and Juvenal which warn against the danger of pagan conversion to Judaism, show that this was seen as involving the spurning of one’s ancestral customs and gods, and the same would apply to a conversion to Christianity.

In that sense, it is not only Judaism which proves ethnocentric in Paul’s view but Greek paganism as well. This observation seems to entail an important expansion of the New Perspective on Paul. According to this perspective, Paul’s universalism stood in stark contrast to ethnocentric, ancestral Judaism. Yet the emphasis on the ethnic, ancestral roots of religion seems to be equally characteristic of Greek paganism. As we learn from First Thessalonians, the ex-pagan Thessalonians are harassed by their fellow countrymen (συμφυλῆται), who belong to the same race or tribe (φυλή). Just as the Jews are opposed to the nations (ἔθνη), and maintain their own ethnic identity, the Greeks, too, warn against transgressing the boundaries of one’s ancestral customs. For that reason, the Christians are mistrusted by both Jews and pagans for the very same ethnic reasons. As such, as we have seen, pagans could appreciate the ancestral customs of the Jews insofar as they were ancient and hence authoritative. The main problem for pagans, however, consisted of the proselytes who increasingly despised their former customs. Christians, in this view, were even worse because they not only attracted pagans who came to neglect their ancestral customs, but also broke with the ancient customs of the Jews. As the example of Paul illustrates, Christians were no

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<sup>13</sup> Barclay, “Hostility to Jews,” 381.

longer zealous about paternal Jewish customs (Gal 1:14). This complex of thought is fully developed in the criticism of Christianity by the second-century CE pagan philosopher Celsus, to whom we now turn.

#### 4. CELSUS' CRITICISM OF PROSELYTISM AND CHRISTIANITY, AND HIS ESTEEM FOR JUDAISM

The various features which I distinguished in my gradual exploration of the ethnographical discourse above are all present in Celsus. First we will comment on Celsus' esteem for Judaism because of its antiquity. Secondly, we will show the rationale for his criticism of pagan converts to Judaism. Thirdly, we will explore his reasons for criticizing Christianity and, finally, I will argue how the rudimentary features of this ethnographical debate are already present in 1 Thess 2:13–16 (section 5).

##### 4.1. *Celsus' Positive Views on the Jews*

In Tacitus, we have already met the view that at least some Jewish customs are to be appreciated because of their antiquity. This viewpoint is strongly endorsed by Celsus. He grants that the Jewish religion may be peculiar, but that it is ancient and, for that reason, respectable:

Now the Jews became an individual nation, and made laws according to the custom of their country; and they maintain these laws among themselves at the present day, and observe a worship which may be very peculiar but is at least traditional (Ἰουδαῖοι μὲν οὖν ἔθνος ἴδιον γενόμενοι καὶ κατὰ τὸ ἐπιχώριον νόμους θέμενοι καὶ τούτους ἐν σφίσις ἔτι νῦν περιστέλλοντες καὶ θρησκείαν ὁποῖαν δὴ, πατριον δ' οὖν). In this respect they behave like the rest of mankind, because each nation follows its traditional customs, whatever kind may happen to be established (ἕκαστοι τὰ πάτρια, ὁποῖά ποτ' ἂν τύχη καθεστηκότα, περιέπουσι).

(Celsus *apud* Origen, *Cels.* 5.25)

Celsus mentions several reasons why it is that each nation follows its traditional customs, the most important one being that there is a relationship between ethnic customs and the divine “overseers” of each particular locality in which these customs are developed:

This situation seems to have come to pass not only because it came into the head of different people to think differently and because it is necessary to preserve the established social conventions (καὶ δεῖ φυλάττειν τὰ ἐς κοινὸν κεκυρωμένα), but also because it is probable that from the beginning the different parts of the earth were allotted to different overseers, and are governed in this way by having been divided between certain authorities.

In fact, the practices done by each nation are right when they are done in the way that pleases the overseers; and it is impious to abandon the customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning (παραλύειν δὲ οὐχ ὄσιον εἶναι τὰ ἐξ ἀρχῆς κατὰ τόπους νενομισμένα).

(Celsus *apud* Origen, *Cels.* 5.25)

Given the link between local customs and the divine regional overseers it is regarded as impious to abandon these customs. Origen, in his reply to Celsus, further illustrates the notion of divine regional overseers by stating that the division of the regions of the earth is touched upon by Greek history “when it introduces the idea that some of the supposed gods contended with one another over Attica, and makes some of the supposed gods confess in the poets that some places are closely related to them” (5.29). Origen has in mind the legendary contest between Athena and Poseidon for Attica.<sup>14</sup> Origen himself compares this idea to Moses’ view on the division of the nations in the Song of Moses in Deut 32:

We say that Moses ... gives an account of the division of the peoples of the earth in the song in Deuteronomy where he speaks as follows: “When the Most High divided the nations, as he scattered the sons of Adam, he set the boundaries of the nations according to the number of the angels of God; and the Lord’s portion was Jacob his people, Israel the lot of his inheritance” [Deut 32:8–9].

(Origen, *Cels.* 5.29)<sup>15</sup>

Although neither the idea of regional divisions of the earth under corresponding angelic or demonic overseers nor the influence of these divine beings on the local customs plays any role in the sources discussed thus far, Celsus’ emphasis on the sacrosanct nature of local, ethnic customs is in line with what we have seen to this point. Origen’s answer to Celsus also alerts us to the tension between Christianity as a universalizing movement and the observance of these locally and ethnically embedded pagan customs. Origen regards Celsus’ defence of ethnic, local customs as implying that piety is seen as “a matter of arbitrary arrangement and opinion” (5.27). In this way, according to Origen, “piety and holiness and righteousness are reckoned to be relative, so that one and the same thing is pious and impious under differing conditions and laws” (5.28). In the

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Pausanias, *Descr.* 1.24.5; 1.26.5; 1.27.2; Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.14.1.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the same idea in Ps 82:8, with the comments of M.E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC 20; Waco, Tex., 1990), 340.

terminology of Smith, this confrontation is about Christianity as a universalizing movement over against locative forms of religion which even the philosopher Celsus upholds.<sup>16</sup> Celsus' statement that "it is impious to abandon the customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning" (5.25) is deliberately inverted by Origen:

We would not agree with Celsus' opinion when he maintains that because of the overseers that have been allotted to the parts of the earth the practices done by each nation are right. Moreover, we do not want to do their practices in the way that pleases them. For we see that it is pious to break customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning.

(Origen, *Cels.* 5.33)

Whereas Origen criticizes the notion of ethnically defined, local customs, for Celsus the principle that "each nation follows its traditional customs, whatever kind may happen to be established" (5.25) is the basis for his positive appreciation of the ancient customs of the Jews. It is only logical then, that Celsus censures pagan converts to Judaism for abandoning their own ancestral customs.

#### 4.2. *Celsus' Criticism of Pagan Converts to Judaism*

The problem for Celsus does not consist in the Jewish customs per se, peculiar as they may be, but in their adoption by pagans, who, by converting to Judaism, must necessarily abandon their own customs: "If indeed in accordance with these principles the Jews maintained their own law, we should not find fault with them but rather with those who have abandoned their own traditions and professed those of the Jews" (*Celsus apud Origen, Cels.* 5.41). Celsus expresses the same pagan criticism of proselytism as we have already encountered in authors such as Tacitus and Juvenal. This, we may assume, is precisely the kind of criticism which the Thessalonian converts to Christianity received from their pagan compatriots, and probably all the more so as Christianity was an active missionary movement which would attract more converts than Judaism. The material which we have studied in Tacitus, Juvenal, and Celsus reveals why Paul could compare the ex-pagan Thessalonians with the Christian Jews; both encountered the same resistance from their fellow countrymen, who defended their respective ancestral customs

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<sup>16</sup> J.Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (SJLA 23; Leiden 1978), ch. 4.

in the face of converts who denied their binding nature. Pagans such as Tacitus and Celsus were willing to appreciate the Jewish customs as ancient, authoritative traditions for the Jews but, for that very reason, were critical of proselytes who left their authoritative customs behind. Christians, however, in Celsus' view, are by definition converts, either from Judaism or from paganism and have no right to transgress the boundaries of their ethnic customs, regardless of whether they were Jewish or Greek. As we will see, Celsus illustrated his point by means of Herodotus.

#### 4.3. *Celsus' Criticism of the Christians*

Christians, as Celsus explains, lack the right to break with their ethnic customs in the same way as the people of the Egyptian cities of Marea and Apis, which bordered Libya, were not allowed by the god Ammon, the chief divinity of the Egyptian pantheon, to abandon Egyptian customs and follow Libyan customs:

One might also call Herodotus as witness of this, when he speaks as follows: "Now the people of the cities Marea and Apis who live in the part of Egypt bordering on Libya, thinking that they were Libyans and not Egyptians, objected to the worship of the temples, not wanting to abstain from eating cows; so they sent to Ammon . . . . But the god did not allow them to do this . . ." [Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.18]. This is the story of Herodotus. Ammon is not any less competent to give an account of the things of God than the angels of the Jews. Thus there is nothing wrong if each nation observes its own laws of worship . . . . And Pindar seems to me to have been right when he said that custom is king of all [Pindar, frg. 152 Bowra].  
(Celsus *apud* Origen, *Cels.* 5.34)

Origen reads this passage as an implicit criticism of the Christians. Each nation should observe its own laws of worship and Christians, like the people of the cities Marea and Apis, have no right to cease worshipping the traditional gods:

From these facts the argument seems to Celsus to lead to the conclusion that all men ought to live according to their traditional customs and should not be criticized for this; but that since the Christians have forsaken their traditional laws and are not one individual nation like the Jews they are to be criticized for agreeing to the teaching of Jesus.  
(Celsus *apud* Origen, *Cels.* 5.35)

Precisely because Christianity lacks an ethnic basis, in Celsus' view, Christians have no right to forsake their previous religious-ethnic allegiance. Origen acknowledges that Christianity is not an ethnic move-

ment and, for that reason, defines it in a different terminology: he stipulates that Christianity is a philosophy and, in this way, underlines the fact that Christianity is not confined to a local, ethnic space. Philosophers, Origen explains, cannot be expected to keep traditional local customs:

Let him [i.e., Celsus] tell us, then, whether philosophers who teach men not to be superstitious would be right in abandoning the traditional customs, so that they even eat of things forbidden in their own countries, or would they act contrary to moral principle in so doing? . . . If Celsus or those who approve of his views were to try to defend the view which he has set forth by saying that one who has read philosophy would also observe the traditional customs, that implies that philosophers, for example, among the Egyptians, would become quite ridiculous if they took care not to eat onion in order to observe the traditional customs . . . . If one of their sort became a philosopher and were to keep the traditional customs, he would be a ridiculous philosopher because he would be acting unphilosophically. (Origen, *Cels.* 5.35)

As earlier in *Cels.* 5.27–28, Origen criticizes a non-philosophical, superstitious and arbitrary, relative, localized definition of piety. Origen's criticism of traditional customs is subsequently supported and further illuminated by the Stoic distinction between the law of nature and the written laws:

Now there are two kinds of law for our consideration. The one is the ultimate law of nature, which is probably derived from God, and the other the written code of cities. Where the written law does not contradict the law of God it is good that the citizens should not be troubled by the introduction of strange laws. But where the law of nature, that is of God, enjoins precepts contradictory to the written laws, consider whether reason does not compel a man to dismiss the written code . . . even if in doing this he must endure dangers and countless troubles and deaths and shame. (Origen, *Cels.* 5.37; cf. 5.40)<sup>17</sup>

On this basis Origen shows that Celsus is very unreasonable in saying "that each nation worships its native and traditional deities" (*Cels.* 5.38). Christians do not observe the laws which Celsus wants them to follow in sacrificing to daemons:

What sort of laws does Celsus want us to follow in sacrificing to daemons? If he means those in force in the cities, let him prove that they are in

<sup>17</sup> For the Stoic distinction between the national customs or written laws of nations on the one hand, and the laws of nature on the other, see, e.g., Cicero, *Leg.* 1.15.42–16.45.

harmony with the divine laws. But if he cannot do this (for the laws of most cities do not agree even with one another), obviously we must say that they are not strictly speaking laws at all. (Origen, *Cels.* 8.26)

Indeed, for Origen, converts to Christianity should give up their ancestral customs:

... it is not plausible ... that the people who heard them [i.e., the apostles of Jesus] should have been changed from keeping ancestral customs of long standing, unless some considerable force and miraculous events had moved them to change to doctrines so strange and foreign to those in which they had been brought up. (Origen, *Cels.* 8.47)

Interestingly, Celsus is said to recognize the universalistic claim which is inherent in the Christian criticism of ancestral customs:

After this he utters a sort of wish: "Would that it were possible to unite under one law the inhabitants of Asia, Europe, and Libya, both Greeks and barbarians even at the furthest limits." As if he thought this impossible he continues that "he who thinks this knows nothing."  
(Celsus *apud* Origen, *Cels.* 7.72)

## 5. FINAL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

It is this explicit discussion of the importance of local ancestral customs in Celsus, and their subsequent criticism in Origen, which show us what seems to be characteristic for the Christian movement. Not only with regard to Judaism, but also in relation to Greek paganism, Christianity appears to be critical of the observance of ancestral customs. The New Perspective on Paul has rightly emphasized that Paul's criticism of Judaism revolved around its ethnocentric character. However, all the attention devoted to this feature of ancient Judaism by the New Perspective, correct as it may be, has given the impression that it is an exclusive hallmark of Judaism, and not of its purportedly open-minded, tolerant Greco-Roman *Umwelt*, the influence of which Judaism had to resist. As a matter of fact, the strong devotion to ethnic customs is equally characteristic of Greco-Roman paganism.

It seems that this is relevant to a proper understanding of 1 Thess 2:13–16. It is absolutely true that Paul in 1 Thess 2:13–16 continues the internal Jewish debate about the Jews who killed the prophets, as Steck has convincingly shown. It is equally true that Paul, in his depiction of the Jews as those who "oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the nations," draws upon the pagan charge of Jewish misanthropy, as



Barclay has argued. Indeed, as Barclay concludes, “both Hellenistic and Judean traditions are here adopted and adapted in the service of a new logic for hostility to Judeans.”<sup>18</sup>

However, this is not the full picture. Barclay seems to ignore the fact that Paul refers to the actions of the Jews as analogous to the threats which the pagan inhabitants of Thessalonica posed to compatriots who converted to Christianity. If we take the entire ethnographical debate of this period into account, together with its emphasis on the importance of ancestral customs, it becomes clear that Christianity, because of its universalizing tendency, provoked a reaction from both Judaism and Greek paganism. Jews were critical of Christians, and even persecuted them, as is evident from Paul’s own pre-Christian career (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13, 23; Phil 3:6), his own persecution by Jews after he had become a believer in Christ (2 Cor 11:24), and from the experience of the Christian Jews in Judea to whom Paul refers in First Thessalonians as analogous to the experience of the ex-pagan Christians in Thessalonica. The Jews persecuted Christians, either because they were religiously motivated<sup>19</sup> or, as Goodman suggested, because they anticipated the pagans’ response to the conversion of non-Jews to Christianity, which at that stage was still a conversion to a form of Judaism. As Goodman explains:

The problem for Paul’s fellow Jews lay in the hostile reaction to the conversion of gentiles to Christianity to be expected from unconverted *gentiles*, in particular the civic and Roman authorities, and the possibility that, because Paul portrayed himself as a Jew, they as Jews might be blamed for his behaviour . . . . The determination of Diaspora Jews to preserve the privileges which protected them . . . is testimony to their concern that their delicate position might be undermined. The actions of Paul threatened precisely such undermining . . . . The punishment meted out to Paul had a precise purpose. As Paul wrote, “the Jews persecute us . . . forbidding us to speak to the gentiles that they might be saved” (1 Thess 2:15–16). Punishment was intended to prevent Paul from going round Diaspora cities incurring odium for local Jews from gentiles by urging those gentiles to cease their ancestral worship.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Barclay, “Hostility to Jews,” 381.

<sup>19</sup> For Jews persecuting renegade fellow-Jews who had abandoned their ancestral beliefs, see 3 Macc 7:10–15; cf. 1:3 and 3:31–33.

<sup>20</sup> M. Goodman, “The Persecution of Paul by Diaspora Jews,” in *The Beginnings of Christianity: A Collection of Articles* (ed. J. Pastor and M. Mor; Jerusalem 2005), 379–387; repr. in *Judaism in the Roman World: Collected Essays* (ed. M. Goodman; AJEC 66; Leiden 2007), 145–152, at 150, 151, 152 resp.

The Christians' critical attitude was undesirable to the Jews and equally offensive to the pagan world, as negligence of the ancestral customs and the gods would not be tolerated. For that reason it was possible for Paul to draw a comparison between the experience of the ex-pagan Thessalonians and the Jewish Christians; both were oppressed by their compatriots, who could not condone their break with ancestral customs. If read against this background, 1 Thess 2:13–16 is not only testimony to an internal Jewish debate (as far as the killing of the prophets is concerned) and to an anti-Jewish debate (figuring the misanthropy of the Jews), but finally also to an anti-ethnocentric discourse in the broadest sense of the word, regardless of whether this ethnocentrism is Jewish or Greek.

Paul's universalistic conviction is not only expressed in his emphasis on the universal nature of Abraham's religion in his correspondence to the Galatians (Gal 3:8 = Gen 12:3; 18:18) and the Romans (Rom 4:16–17 = Gen 17:5), but already apparent in his oldest preserved Letter, that to the Thessalonians. This should come as no surprise as his belief in the universalistic nature of what was to be called Christianity derives from what he experienced as the moment of his calling in the 30s CE (Gal 1:15–16) and became further articulated in his conflict with Christian Judaizers who visited the Christian community in Antioch at the end of the 40s CE (Gal 2:11–14). When he founds the Christian community at Thessalonica in the early 50s CE and learns of their oppression by their pagan compatriots, Paul draws a comparison between their experience and that of Jewish Christians in Judea, who suffer under Jews who hinder them from speaking to the nations (1 Thess 2:14–16). Indeed Paul only hints and implies that Jewish and Thessalonian Christians all suffer for the very same reason, but if this passage is read in the context of the ethnographical debate of Paul's time it seems likely that the main explanation for Jewish and pagan animosity towards Christians is their criticism and abandonment of ancestral, ethnic customs as a result of their universalistic conviction. It is only a further expression of Paul's universalism when, later in the 50s CE, in his discussions with Judaizing Galatian Christians (Gal 3–4) and with the self-consciously Jewish element in the Christian community in Rome (Rom 4), he reflects on the way in which this universalism is already prefigured in the history and religion of Abraham, in whom the nations were to be blessed.

# Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives  
on Kinship with Abraham

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