Jew or Judaean?

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What’s in a name? The question of how best to translate the ancient Greek term ἰουδαῖος and its cognates is hardly new, although it has recently sustained renewed attention.¹ Some scholars, most notably Steve Mason, insist that, when used prior to the third century C.E. the term always connotes geographic origin or “ethnicity” and thus should best be translated as “Judaean.”² Others, though, while not denying that such a

¹ Special thanks to my colleagues David Konstan and Ross Kraemer for their help with this paper.

translation is appropriate at times, point to other instances where the term has a “religious” rather than “ethnic” or “ethnic-geographic” sense, and thus they prefer the translation “Jew.”

There are two issues at the core of this disagreement, one theoretical and one empirical. The theoretical argument is about the applicability of modern categories to antiquity. There is wide agreement that “religion” in the sense that it is most commonly understood today was not a comprehensible category in antiquity; practices that we would call “religious” were not typically disembedded from a wider cultural framework. On the other hand, some maintain, this does not mean that such practices, and in a loose way the identities associated with them, could move between “cultures” or “ethnicities.” The empirical issue is more straightforward. Were there ancient uses of the term Ἰουδαῖος that patently cannot be understood as denoting ethnic-geographic origins?

Despite the occasional sharpness of the debates between these positions, they mostly share the understanding that there is a choice to be made: choosing between “Judaean” or “Jew” is a choice about the nuance that the ancient author put on the original Greek, ethnic-geographical or religious. To be a Ἰουδαῖος meant to be understood (by self and/or others) as a member of a defined group, as against other groups defined along similar criteria. The question, then, is the nature of those criteria. A significant part of Steve Mason’s somewhat reductionist position, for example, rests on the argument that since “religion” did not exist as a comprehensible criterion of identity in antiquity, Ἰουδαῖος must be understood as an ethnic designation.

Yet did “ethnicity” exist in antiquity? A growing body of scholarship suggests that we rethink the very nature of “ethnicity.” Ethnicity, this scholarship argues, is fluid and perspectival rather than composed of fixed group boundaries. It is fluid in the sense that every evocation of the language of ethnicity performs and creates it anew. It is perspectival in the sense that every participant in this performance, as well as its audience,
might understand it differently. The implications of this position, which radically change the way we might understand the application of the category “ethnicity” to antiquity, are only just beginning to be felt.

This article is a preliminary attempt to reassess understandings of ethnicity among Greek writers in the second century B.C.E. to the second century C.E., and to suggest how this reassessment might contribute to the discussion of whether to translate ἰουδαῖος as “Judaean” or “Jew.” The primary argument of this essay is that “ethnicity,” as a category for understanding ancient Jewish identity is no less problematic than religion. ἰουδαῖος is neither a “religious” nor an “ethnic” term. It is also not usefully understood as a hybrid of the two. It is, rather, largely a flexible, ethnographic trope—a term that, like the modern “Jew” or “Jews,” is inherently ambiguous.

There were a variety of Greek terms in antiquity to indicate what we would term “ethnicity,” but the two most prominent are ἔθνος and γένος. This study is structured around an analysis of two ancient and influential Greek historian/ethnographers, Polybius and Diodorus Siculus. How did these two authors deploy the language of ἔθνος and γένος? Were the two terms interchangeable? How do they relate to the way that individuals presented their own identity? Do they represent hardened or porous group boundaries (i.e., could people easily move or “convert” from one group to another)? These writers provide us with a vantage point for understanding the ways in which such categories were used in antiquity.

One of our primary ancient witnesses for the instability of “ethnicity” and its susceptibility to manipulation is Paul. The distinguished scholars in this volume are far more qualified than I to make sense of Paul’s tangled discussion of ethnicity and descent. This Festschrift does, however, provide me with an opportunity to express my gratitude to one of our generation’s primary expositors of Paul, my colleague Stanley Stowers. I write this article as a token of appreciation for all he has taught me.

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7. See P. M. Fraser, Greek Ethnic Terminology (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2009), 1–11.

'Ἕθνος, Groups, and Territory

Ancient ethnographers most commonly use the language of ἕθνος to refer to a politically organized community residing in a particular territory. In this meaning, whether the members of the ἕθνος are connected by descent (real or fictive) or share a set of ancestral customs is largely immaterial. Herodotus, for example, uses the term to denote "a geographical, political or cultural entity, often in relation to the time of the narrative context." As C. P. Jones notes, Herodotus’s choice of representing a group as an ἕθνος is "determined not only by the object referred to or ‘referent’ (‘extension’) but by the way he wishes to present them (‘intension’)." That is, the narrative context determines how a group is designated.

The major historians/ethnographers of the Hellenistic period, Polybius (second half of the second century B.C.E.) and Diodorus of Siculus (about a century later), continue this use of the term ἕθνος. In scores of passages, Polybius identifies a territory according to those who inhabit it, for example, the Nucarians (Hist. 3.91.5). Polybius identifies no fewer than eighteen ἔθνη, and there is no indication that he uses any criteria for the use of the term other than territory.11 Individuals, however, are never identified as being members of an ἕθνος; as discussed below, they are identified by γένος.

The same literary pattern can be found in the writings of Diodorus Siculus, whose massive ethnography, Bibliotheca historica, written in the mid-first century B.C.E., circulated widely. Diodorus repeatedly uses the term ἕθνος to refer to groups that reside in their own territory.12 Unsurprisingly, he continues this usage in his mention of the ιουδαῖοι as an ἕθνος, having originated in Egypt (1.28.2; 1.55.5; 1.94.2; 24/25.1.2). Also like Polybius, Diodorus tends to use the term γένος when he mentions individuals, with only a few of those mentioned matching with a group that he calls an ἕθνος.

The ιουδαῖοι, then, are an ἕθνος in this very specific sense of being a politically organized group that occupies the territory known as Ioudaia. As Clearchus of Soli (ca. 300 B.C.E.) states, they are called ιουδαῖοι, "for they inhabit the place called Ioudaia."13

Prior to the second century C.E., papyri and inscriptions rarely refer to

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10. Ibid., 315.
11. E.g., Aetolians (20.5.3); Numideans (1.31.2).
12. Diodorus labels as ἔθνη, among others, Kolchi and Judeans (1.28.2; 1.55.1) and Ethiopians (1.44.3; 1.55.1; 3.3.1; 3.18.4).
individuals as ἰουδαίοι, and when they do, it seems almost always to be in this sense as one from the territory of Ιουδαία.\textsuperscript{14}

The most significant trove of documentary and epigraphic evidence on the use of ἰουδαῖος (and cognates) prior to the second century C.E. can be found in Egypt, where the term appears to designate land of origin.\textsuperscript{15} Egyptian papyri before the second century B.C.E. also use ἰουδαῖος to identify individuals who appear to have migrated from Judaea.\textsuperscript{16}

In this sense, then, ἔθνος is an unstable term. From the perspective of these writers, it did not matter whether one was born to parents who were born in the territory, or even necessarily whether one oneself was born there. All that mattered was that one lived in the territory at that moment, presumably in a way that could be seen reasonably as part of the polity.

\textit{"Εθνος and “Ancestral Customs"}

Ethnicity today, according to many modern theorists, is not a static entity: it is socially constructed through public performance.\textsuperscript{17} This is not significantly different from how “ethnicity” was constructed and utilized in antiquity as well. While ancient authors used the term ἔθνος to denote a specific territory, they also used it with a different meaning to indicate a group with a set of distinctive norms (νόμοι) or customs (ἔθη or πάτρια). In this sense, too, ἔθνος becomes a highly flexible term.

The notion that “culture,” broadly understood, can be a primary factor in determining ethnicity goes back to Herodotus and Thucydides. According to Jonathan Hall, Herodotus defines “Greekness” ("Hellenicity" in Hall’s term) in a way that “promotes cultural criteria (including language and religion) to the same level as kinship.”\textsuperscript{18} Herodotus thus lays the ground for defining an “ethnic” identity that is divorced from both land and descent. A further movement in this respect can be seen in Thucydides, in whose account the Athenian general Nikias addresses his men: “Though you are not really Athenian, you are deemed as such [νομίζομενοι] because of your understanding of our dialect and your imitation of our way of life [τρόποι]” (7.63.3).\textsuperscript{19} “Hellenes,” according to Isocrates in 430

\textsuperscript{14} P.Yadin 10; 12. See Naphtali Lewis et al., \textit{The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters} (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and the Hebrew University, 1989).
\textsuperscript{15} William Horbury and David Noy, \textit{Jewish Inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), nos. 121, 122.
\textsuperscript{17} See n. 5 above.
\textsuperscript{18} Hall, \textit{Hellenicity}, 193.
\textsuperscript{19} Translation from Hall, \textit{Hellenicity}, 205.
b.c.e., “are those who share our culture [παῒδευσις] rather than a common biological inheritance [φύσις]” (Panegyrikos 4.50).20

The Greek “leagues” or political alliances illustrate this use of the term ἔθνος. The Greek word here that is frequently translated as “league” is ἔθνος. According to Polybius, for example, the Achaean ἔθνος, located in the Peloponnesians, was a confederation of peoples who share “laws, weights, measures, and coinage, as well as the same magistrates, senate, and courts of justice” and a central temple of Zeus (Hist. 2.37.10).21 Polybius describes this “Achaean ἔθνος” as being made from other ἔθνη, and wonders why greater ἔθνη, such as the Arcadians and Laconians, sacrificed their own political institutions and name for the lesser Achaeans (2.38.3–4). He goes on to say that “while some of the Peloponnesians chose to join it of their own free will, it won many others by persuasion and argument, and for those whom it forced to adhere to it when the occasion presented itself suddenly underwent a change became quite reconciled to their position” (2.38.7).

Shaye J. D. Cohen has pointed to the relevance of this passage for interpreting the ἔθνος of the Ἰουδαῖοι. According to Josephus, John Hyrcanus subdued the Idumaeans and allowed them to continue living in their land if they were circumcised and agreed to live according to the ways of the Jews (τοῖς Ἰουδαίων νόμοις) (Antiquities 13.257). Despite the pains that Josephus takes in this passage to assimilate Idumaeans to Ἰουδαῖοι, one can sense his own confusion in his avoidance of either the term ἔθνος or the term γένος. Following a suggestion of Morton Smith, Cohen has proposed that the confederation of lands conquered by the Hasmoneans be thought of as a “Judean League,” or ἔθνος, analogous to the Achaean ἔθνος discussed by Polybius.22 In this context I am less interested in whether the Hasmonean confederation had a “Greek character” than in how it was seen as described by these later authors. “Ἔθνος” was kind of the right word to describe it, a loose confederation of ἔθνη who can in some contexts use the same name.

An otherwise unknown author named Ptolemy confirms this usage:

ἱουδαῖοι are those who are so by origin and nature (ἀρχῆς φυσικοί). The Idumaeans, on the other hand, were not originally Ἰουδαῖοι, but Phoenicians and Syrians; having been subjugated by the Ἰουδαῖοι, and having been forced to undergo circumcision, so as to be counted among the Jewish nation (ἔθνος) and keep the same customs, they were called Ἰουδαῖοι.23

20. Translation from Hall, Hellenicity, 209.
21. Translations of Polybius are by W. R. Paton, LCL.
23. Stern, Greek and Latin Authors, 1:356.
Are Idumaeans part of the ἔθνος of the ιουδαίοι? Ptolemy is not entirely sure. It is clear that they are not of the γένος (indicated here by the term φυσικοί). Like Josephus, he observes that Idumaeans are (sometimes) called ιουδαίοι. This, along with conformance to the practices of the ιουδαίοι, seems to make them part of the same ἔθνος.

In his discussion of the royal house of Adiabene, Josephus also understands the community of ιουδαίοι in cultural terms. According to Josephus’s account, both the queen of Adiabene, Helena, and her son, the king Izates, εἰς τὰ Ιουδαίων ἔθη τὸν βίον μετέβαλον. L. H. Feldman (LCL) translates this as “became converts to Judaism” (Antiquities 20.17). While this translation is not entirely unjustified, the difficulty of rendering this clause into English illustrates the very problem of balancing our categories of “religion” and “ethnicity.” The verb μετέβαλον is not commonly used in this fashion in ancient Greek writings, and where it does appear it addresses the taking on of inappropriate gender roles. Elsewhere in his account, Josephus refers to the “ancestral custom” (πάτριον) of the ιουδαίοι, as well as their νόμοι, laws or customs (20.34-35). Later, when Izates’ brother Monobazus and his family seek to follow Izates’ example, he is described as “leaving [his] ancestral customs to adopt the ἔθεσι of the ιουδαίοι” (20.75). The customs themselves are not detailed, except for circumcision: Izates thinks that he needs to be circumcised in order “to be surely a ιουδαίος” (εἶναι βεβαίως Ιουδαῖος) (20.38).

Josephus’s different ways of describing what it means to “become” a ιουδαίος are difficult to parse. It is probably safe to say that Josephus does not mean to say that Izates became a ιουδαίος by γένος. Did he (and his mother and brother), though, join the ἔθνος of the ιουδαίοι? Unlike the situation with the Idumaeans, for whom Josephus does use ἔθνος language, Izates and his relatives are individuals rather than a community. To “be” a ιουδαίος in this case (as for Nikias, in Thucydides’ account, “being” an Athenian) means to adopt “traditional practices” (which are undoubtedly themselves not particularly stable), not necessarily to “join the ἔθνος” of the ιουδαίοι. Philo also subscribes to a notion that ιουδαίος is connected to behaviors rather than to land or birth (De virtutibus 198).

Ἰουδαῖος, then, can be used to describe both a local identity and a super-identity. That is, the very same writers can deploy the term to indicate an ἔθνος as traditionally understood—the polity occupying a territory—or a group of people, living hither and yon, who share a set of common practices.

There is nothing particularly unique about this dual usage. By the first century B.C.E. the terms “Greek” and “Roman” could be used in this way. It is in this sense that ἔθνος becomes a fluid heuristic, both to the writers

25. For a discussion of the notion of cosmopolitanism in Philo and other ancient sources,
who deploy it and, to the extent that it reflected more common understandings, to those who lived it.

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The word ἔθνος is almost uniformly applied to collectives rather than individuals. Ancient authors almost always identified individuals by their γένος, birth, whether by lineage or location. One’s γένος was understood to be largely immutable, a fact of life that does not allow for change. Both Polybius and Diodorus use the term in this way. In only a few cases do these authors mention a single group as both an ἔθνος and a γένος.

Ancient writers also sometimes used γένος to refer to something like a distinct “class” of people. Writing about Alexandria, for example, Polybius says, “it is inhabited by three γένη of people, first the native Egyptians, an acute and civilized race; secondly by the mercenaries, a numerous, rough, and uncultivated set . . . thirdly there is the γένος of the Alexandrians, a people not genuinely civilized” (Hist 34.14.4). Diodorus notes that there is a special γένος of people, Satyrs, who live in Ethiopia (1.18.4); the Colchi are of Egyptian γένος because that is where they originated, and so on.

When living outside of Judaea, Ἰουδαῖοι too could be classified as a γένος in this way. Strabo of Amaseia, writing in the late first century B.C.E.–early first century C.E., provides a good example of how these usages could be combined and deployed:

There were four [classes] in the state of Cyrene; the first consisted of citizens, the second of farmers, the third of resident aliens (metics), and the fourth of Jews. This people has already made its way into every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received this nation [φυλον] and in which it has not made its power felt. And it has come about that Cyrene, which had the same rulers as Egypt, has imitated it in many respects, particularly in notably encouraging and aiding the expansion of the organized groups of Jews, which observe the national Jewish laws [τοῖς πατρίοις τῶν Ἰουδαίων νόμοις]. In Egypt, for exam-


26. An exception is the first line of Euripides’ play Phrixus, but this is almost certainly meant to shock. See Augustus Nauck, Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta (2nd ed.; Leipzig: Teubner, 1889), Euripides, frag. 819 (p. 627).

27. E.g., the Veneti, in Polybius, Hist. 2.17.5–6.

28. Polybius apud Strabo 17.1.12. Translation modified from Paton, LCL. Polybius also uses γένος to refer to a “kind” of person, as, for example, the miscreants who flocked to Nabis in Sparta (Hist. 13.6.4).

29. For Colchi, see Diodorus 1.55.4-5; for Romans, 8.26.1.
ple, territory has been set apart for a Jewish settlement [χωρίς], and in Alexandria a great part of the city has been allocated to this nation [τῶι ἔθνει]. And an ethnarch of their own has been installed, who governs the people [ἔθνος] and adjudicates suites and supervises contracts and ordinances, just as if he were the head of a sovereign state [πολιτείας ἄρχων αὐτοτελοῦς].

The word γένος is missing from this passage but implied in the description of Cyrene. There the Ἰουδαῖοι form an organized political group like the citizens, farmers (better, rustics or noncitizens), and metics. This is a group that, like Diodorus’s Diaspora Boetians, maintains “ancestral customs” away from its native land while also asserting its common descent, as implied in the term φῦλον. Strabo’s discussion does seem to mirror the extant evidence for πολιτεύματα of Ἰουδαῖοι in Cyrene.

In describing the Ἰουδαῖοι of Egypt, though, Strabo switches to ἔθνος language. Here Strabo clearly wants to emphasize that the Ἰουδαῖοι formed a “state within a state” rather than a loose political organization based on descent. Whether the Ἰουδαῖοι of Egypt actually functioned in this manner is less important in this context than the fact that that is how Strabo wished to portray them. They even have their own designated territory. For Strabo, the Ἰουδαῖοι of Cyrene and Egypt clearly overlap but also subtly differ.

It was through γένος rather than ἔθνος (at least on the local level) that individual Ἰουδαῖοι seemed to identify. Josephus and Paul are here instructive. Both use the term Ἰουδαῖος and its cognates scores of times. Yet when they represent themselves, they use other terms.

Josephus identifies himself twice. In War (1.3), he calls himself “son of Matthias, by γένος a Hebrew, a priest from Jerusalem.” Josephus passes over his credentials at the beginning of Antiquities but dwells on his noble lineage at the beginning of Life: here he emphasizes his γένος as a priest but says nothing about being a Hebrew or Ἰουδαῖος. When considering the ἔθνος of the Ἰουδαῖοι as a group, Josephus would, of course, consider himself a member. When discussing himself as an individual, however, his language changes.

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31. See the discussion and sources in Stern, Greek and Latin Authors, 1:279.
33. Note that the term “by genos a Hebrew” is absent in some witnesses.
34. See Shaye J. D. Cohen, “ἸΟΥΔΑΙΟΣ ΤΟ ΓΕΝΟΣ and Related Expressions in Jose-
Given the central importance of the ἔθνος of the ἱουδαίοι in the letters of Paul, it is surprising that he never explicitly labels himself a ἱουδαίος.35 “I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe [φυλῆς] of Benjamin” (Rom 11:1 NRSV), he declares in the middle of a long and convoluted discussion of the place of the ἱουδαίοι in the new divine economy.36 “A member of the people [γένους] of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews,” he declares himself elsewhere (Phil 3:5 NRSV; cf. 2 Cor 11:22). When it comes to self-description, Paul avoids the language of ἔθνος and ἱουδαίος that pervades his letters.

The closest that Paul comes to calling himself a ἱουδαίος is in Galatians. After calling Peter (Cephas) a ἱουδαίος, Paul states, “we are by nature [φύσει] ἱουδαίοι, not sinners from the ἔθνος” (Gal. 2:15). Paul applies the appellation ἱουδαίος to Peter not simply because he was in fact born in Judaea but also because he has a literary need to do so. He uses the first person plural in order to draw a communal contrast between two communities, the ἱουδαίοι and everybody else. His point is not to signify individual ethnic identity as much as it is to create for the sake of argument two ethnic communities that he goes on to reconcile (Gal 2:16-21). The language of “nature,” φύσει, echoes Ptolemy’s usage, cited above, as signifying birth.

Jew or Judaean?

What’s in a name? Somewhat less than meets the eye.

There are two primary issues at stake in deciding whether to translate ἱουδαίος as “Jew” or “Judaean.” The first is that of deciphering the message—ethnic or religious—that ancient users of the term were trying to convey. The second, somewhat related issue is that of uniqueness. Were the ἱουδαίοι like every other ἔθνος? The answers to these questions have been thought to have especially sticky ramifications for study of the New Testament and Christian origins.

I have argued here that this issue should be reframed. Most Greek and Roman ethnographers who mention ἱουδαίοι treat them like Istrians or Siceli, a population with its own political structure located within a particular territory; this comes the closest to what we would translate as “Judaean.” For ancient ethnographers who focused more attention on the ἱουδαίοι, though, “ethnicity” was hardly a stable category. The writers

35. See Buell, “Why This New Race”; Johnson Hodge, If Sons, Then Heirs.
36. See Johnson Hodge, If Sons, Then Heirs, 50.
themselves recognized the inherent, emic looseness of the category of ἔθνος and manipulated it for their own ends; this is how the Idumaeans can both be and not be part of the ἔθνος of the ιουδαίοι, depending on the writer’s perspective. This is also a construction of ἔθνος that privileges ancestral customs and thus can sever ἔθνος from γένος. This, however, is a construction of “outsiders,” even when they, like Josephus and Paul, might be considered ιουδαίοι. When referring to themselves, ιουδαίοι chose the language of γένος. The unqualified substantive noun ιουδαίος, without further specification, was inherently vague. It could refer to a worshiper of the God of Israel born in Judaea, a member of a particular organized polity in places such as Egypt and Cyrene, one who adopted practices and customs that were identified with ιουδαίοι, or a worshiper of traditional Greek or Roman gods born in Judaea.38 My own preference, largely following past practice and Ross Kraemer’s early suggestion, would be flexibility in translation that attempts to convey the meaning of the term as implied in its context or, when it is meant to be vague, perhaps to leave ιουδαίος untranslated.39 Ultimately, though, except in specific cases of substantive disagreement, this becomes a semantic and aesthetic choice, not one of substance.

38. This last example is more theoretical than real. I know of no evidence denoting such a person as a ιουδαίος.

39. Kraemer, “On the Meaning of the Term ‘Jew.’” For concurring opinions, see Schwartz, “‘Judaean’ or ‘Jew’?”; Fraser, Greek Ethnic Terminology, 236. Recently Kraemer has stepped back from this position, preferring the standard translation “Judean” for this time period (Unreliable Witnesses, 193–200). Kraemer raises important issues about the relationship of gender to “ethnicity,” although they seem to depend on a rather static understanding of “ethnicity.”