

Climbing the Ethnic Ladder: Ethnic Hierarchies and Judean Responses

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This article considers ethnic hierarchies in the ancient Mediterranean world, exploring the ways in which minorities such as the Judeans Philo, Paul, and Josephus engaged in discourses of ethnicity and ethnographic culture. I propose two main strategies by which such minorities sought to claim a more desirable position in relation to other ethnic groups, both adopting and challenging hegemonic categorizations.

Please do not resent my comparing myself to a man of royal status [Anacharsis], for he too was a barbarian, and no one could say that we Syrians are inferior to Scythians. (Lucian, *Scyth.* 9.6–7)

This study explores how colonial subjects engaged both socially and rhetorically in attempts to establish a more favorable position for their own people within ethnic hierarchies. Our literary sources happen to present us with educated subjects who themselves identified in a variety of ways as they navigated indigenous, rival, and hegemonic ethnic categorizations under Hellenistic and Roman hegemony. The Syrian Lucian's comment that *no one* could claim that Syrians are inferior to Scythians points to commonly held representations of a hierarchy of ethnic groups, a sociocultural phenomenon that social scientists have been studying for some decades. Such comments by a Syrian also bring into relief the competitive character of ethnographic discourses as educated members of subjugated groups sought to gain a more favorable position for their own people in relation to other groups.

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In fact, I would suggest that minorities in the Mediterranean such as the Syrian Lucian and the Israelites or Judeans (Ἰουδαῖοι/*Ioudaioi*)¹ dealt with in this article—Paul among them—were in some important respects participants in a broader ethnographic culture. Recent research helpfully highlights the prominence of ethnic or ethnographic discourses in literature produced by followers of Jesus, for instance.² Yet seldom have scholars paid careful attention to the ways in which groups were ranked and how both Judeans and foreigners who adopted the Israelite God (e.g., Jesus-followers), as minorities and subject peoples, reacted to such ethnic hierarchies.³ The fact that a member of a particular ethnic or cultural minority would sometimes claim superiority to other peoples is somewhat unremarkable, but what we are interested in here are the techniques and mechanisms involved not only in claiming superiority but also in struggling with a low position in other people's ethnic hierarchies. Such struggles sometimes involved actually adopting hegemonic categorizations. In other words, in this article I aim to illuminate the cultural machinery behind claims of superiority when such claims do occur. Despite variations that will become clear, I would suggest that Philo, Paul, and Josephus instantiate common strategies adopted by minorities in the ancient Mediterranean world, and the social-scientific literature on ethnic hierarchies helps us to understand how complicated and polyvalent such strategies were.

Members of ethnic minorities who self-identify as Israelites or Judeans in the Hellenistic and Roman eras demonstrate at least two main strategies for positioning one's own group on a higher and more favorable rung on an ethnic ladder, strategies that are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, the process sometimes entailed adoption of a widely accepted hegemonic ladder while knocking some other ethnic group down to a lower rung on the ladder, like the low rung the Scythians occupy in the Greek (or Greco-Roman) ethnic hierarchy that Lucian and

¹On this translation of Ἰουδαῖοι/*Ioudaioi*, see the discussion and bibliography in Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 14–17, 151–52.

²Here I employ the term *ethnic group* to refer to a group that subjectively shares a sense of belonging together based on group members' notions of distinctive cultural practices, of shared ancestral origins (whether fictive or otherwise), and of connection to some real or imagined homeland or territory. See further Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 6–14. On ethnicity and early Christianity, see Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Laura Salah Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010); Maia Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); Todd S. Berzon, *Classifying Christians: Ethnography, Heresiology, and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

³But see the discussion of an “honor scale” in John M. G. Barclay, “The Politics of Contempt: Judeans and Egyptians in Josephus' *Against Apion*,” in *Negotiating Diaspora: Jewish Strategies in the Roman Empire*, LNTS 45 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 109–27.

others reflect. Subjects of culturally hegemonic powers could jostle for a position by taking on the categories or representations of a dominant group, in this case Greeks or Romans.⁴ On the other hand, a second strategy adopted by the likes of Philo, Paul, and Josephus was also possible, a strategy in which members of subordinated groups formulated an entirely different hierarchy with the person's own group at the pinnacle, thereby implying a lower status for all other peoples, including Greeks and Romans. In some respects, the latter strategy has a long heritage that is rooted in Judean Scripture (with its "chosen people") and in the Septuagint translation's characterization of other peoples, a heritage that plays a role for all three of these Judeans. But special attention also needs to be given to the particular ways in which these same authors react to hegemonic categorizations that are specific to the Hellenistic and Roman eras.

I. SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC INSIGHTS ON ETHNIC HIERARCHIES

Social scientists interested in how ethnic groups maintain a sense of belonging tend to emphasize two interrelated factors: internal identifications by members of the group and external categorizations or stereotypes formulated by outsiders.⁵ It is the latter of the two factors—stereotypes—that are so instrumental in understanding socially shared representations within a particular society that result in the ranking of specific ethnic groups. These representations are what Louk Hagendoorn and others call an ethnic hierarchy.⁶ As Hagendoorn explains:

In a multi-ethnic context, each group will have stereotypes about several outgroups [outsiders] accentuating negative differences from the ingroup [insiders]. Outgroups will be placed further away from or further below the ingroup, the larger and more important these differences are. This means that the process of differentiation unavoidably entails a rank-ordering. In this way stereotypes generate an ethnic hierarchy.⁷

⁴On "barbarians," see Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*, OCM (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); and Jonathan M. Hall, *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁵See Richard Jenkins, "Rethinking Ethnicity: Identity, Categorization and Power," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17 (1994): 197–223. On the use of "identification" and related categories rather than "identity," see Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 28–63.

⁶Louk Hagendoorn, "Ethnic Categorization and Outgroup Exclusion: Cultural Values and Social Stereotypes in the Construction of Ethnic Hierarchies," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16 (1993): 26–51; Hagendoorn, "Intergroup Biases in Multiple Group Systems: The Perception of Ethnic Hierarchies," *European Review of Social Psychology* 6 (1995): 199–228; Hagendoorn et al., "Inter-Ethnic Preferences and Ethnic Hierarchies in the Former Soviet Union," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 22 (1998): 483–503.

⁷Hagendoorn, "Ethnic Categorization," 36.

A particular ethnic hierarchy may reflect priorities of a culturally hegemonic group. Yet studies by Hagendoorn and others show that the process of intergroup interactions sometimes results in the hierarchy being taken on and shared by subordinated ethnic groups, even though such groups may initially be placed low in the hegemonic ranking.⁸ In some cases, therefore, both the hegemonic group and subordinated ones in a particular society may have consensual rankings of specific peoples while, simultaneously, subordinated groups still struggle with one another for a more favorable position on lower rungs of the ladder. In other cases those ranked low in a common hierarchy may construct alternative hierarchies that benefit their own people's position. We will encounter both of these processes in the ancient context. Sometimes those competing for lower rungs rhetorically or socially ally themselves with those at the top of the hegemonic ladder as a strategy to move up.

II. THE STARTING POSITION OF JUDEANS AND EGYPTIANS ON THE HEGEMONIC LADDER

Why would the likes of Philo, Paul, and Josephus feel a need to jostle for a higher position for Israelites or Judeans in a commonly shared ethnic hierarchy or to assert an alternative stratification? Why would the relative position of Judeans be connected with that of another people such as the Egyptians? A few words about how ethnic hierarchies were constructed in antiquity will set the stage for noting the low starting position of both Judeans and Egyptians in common hegemonic hierarchies.

There were at least two main interrelated legitimizing ideologies that served to support Greek (and Roman) hegemonic ethnic hierarchies. First of all, there was the notion of geographical distance from a center, with Athens or Rome as the cultural center and a supposed degradation of honor, culture, and society as one got farther away, with the most inferior peoples being most remote. Herodotus of Halicarnassus, who employs the language of honor, shows an awareness of this concept when he explains a tendency of the Persians without necessarily recognizing that the tendency was common among Greeks as well.

They honor [τιμῶσι] most highly those who live closest to them, next those who are next closest, and so on, assigning honor by this reasoning. Those who live farthest away they consider least honorable of all. For they think that they are the best of all people in every respect and that others rightly cling to some virtue [ἀρετῆς] until those who live farthest away are the worst [κακίστους εἶναι]. (*Hist.* 1.134.2; Godley, LCL, adapted)

⁸Hagendoorn, "Intergroup Biases," 216–21.

Still, it is important at least to note exceptional cases when this widely held notion of distance from a center was critiqued or turned on its head, a reverse ethnocentrism of sorts that is witnessed in the cases of Ephorus of Cyme (ca. 350 BCE) and Eratosthenes of Cyrene (third century BCE).⁹

A second main factor that could play a role in legitimizing ethnic rankings pertains to ancient theories regarding the environment.¹⁰ The climate, natural features, and geographical terrain of a place were often considered instrumental in shaping the physical and mental characteristics of a people, something attested as early as the fifth century in both Herodotus's *Histories* and Hippocrates's *Airs, Waters, Places*. A very common expression of this was that a consistently cold environment created courageous people with plenty of spirit, whereas a consistently hot environment created soft, effeminate, or slavish people. Sometimes the contrast was between Europe (the west) and Asia (the east) and, especially with Roman expansion northward, between the north and the south. From the Greek, hegemonic perspective, Athens, Attica, and Greece were considered a well-balanced environment—with a mixture of both hot and cold—that created a superior people, and the Roman literary elites tended to view their own position in a similar manner. These notions continue to echo through literature of the Hellenistic and Roman eras, as Benjamin Isaac shows.¹¹

The tendency to emphasize the relative inferiority of non-Greek or non-Roman peoples can be seen in literature about people from Israel, but it is not peculiar to this people. Isaac's study surveys Greek and Roman negative stereotypes about Persians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Germans, for instance.¹² Mixed in with the negative stereotypes, however, might be positive descriptions on certain points and even stories of interconnections among different peoples, as Erich Gruen emphasizes.¹³

Still, it is the negative characterizations that are most important for understanding why Judeans or some other subordinated ethnic group would seek to assert a higher position. It is precisely negative portrayals of Judeans and Judean customs that sometimes dovetail with negative social relations and occasional violent incidents at a local level. When Judeans or foreigners who adopted the Israelite God (e.g., some Jesus-followers) were accused of human sacrifice or cannibalism, or when Judeans were characterized as “debased and much lower than reptiles [ἐρπετῶν],” this was in essence a way of saying that they were at the bottom of the

⁹ See Strabo, *Geogr.* 1.4.9; 7.3.7–9; 15.1–57.

¹⁰ See, e.g. Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 55–168.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82–102.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*, Martin Classical Lectures (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

ethnic ladder, or even beneath the lowest rung: they were uncivilized even among “barbarians” according to such a view.¹⁴

Some examples will illustrate the hegemonic positioning of peoples from Judea or Israel low on the ladder. On the Greek side, Apollonius Molon (ca. 70s BCE), whose work we know only through Josephus’s rhetorical attack on Apion (*Against Apion*), clearly positions Judeans low on the ladder even in relation to other “barbarians.” According to Josephus, this Greek rhetor from Alabanda in Caria characterized Judeans as “atheists and haters of humankind,” claiming that Judeans were “the stupidest [ἀφυστάτους] of all barbarians” (*C. Ap.* 2.148; cf. 2.258). When Josephus summarizes things, he speaks of the “Molons” that “rail against us as the lowest of humankind” (φαυλοτάτους ἀνθρώπων λοιδοροῦσιν) (*C. Ap.* 2.236). A couple of centuries later, Aelius Aristides from Smyrna (ca. 160s–170s CE) similarly claims that the “impiety” of those who live in Palestine is such “that they do not recognize their betters (i.e. the gods of others)” and that, in this way, they have “stayed away from the Greeks or rather from all the better people” (*Or.* 46).

The fact that a senatorial Roman like Tacitus (ca. 110 CE) was working with a commonly held ranking of ethnic groups, with Judeans placed low, becomes clear at several points in his discussion (*Tacitus, Hist.* 5.1–13). It is perhaps most obvious when he alludes to the shared low position of Judeans in the varying ethnic rankings of different ruling powers: Tacitus claims that Assyrians, Medes, and Persians alike “regarded [Judeans] as the most despised [*despectissima*] of their subjects.” Similarly, the Hellenistic ruler Antiochus failed to improve “this most repulsive people [*taeterrimam gentem*]” in his attempt to introduce Greek ways (*Tacitus, Hist.* 5.8.2). Judeans were positioned low, in part, because they supposedly inverted proper ways of honoring the gods as defined from an elite Roman perspective: “The Judeans regard as profane all that we consider sacred; on the other hand, they permit everything that we consider impure” (*Hist.* 5.4.1; Moore, LCL, adapted). Similar accusations of inverting or distorting proper modes of honoring deities were made against other ethnic groups, including Egyptians (by Greeks, Romans, and Judeans alike) and Greeks (by Judeans like Philo and Paul).

Tacitus’s summary of ancient debates regarding the origins of people in Israel tends to suggest that Judeans were, in fact, Egyptians—though diseased outcasts even among the Egyptians. The underlying assumption here was that Egyptians themselves would be considered inferior to most other peoples. Overall, the views of Greeks and Romans outside of Egypt was often ambivalent with respect to Egyptians.¹⁵ On the somewhat positive side, Egypt was often considered very ancient, with records of kings, cults, wisdom, and institutions going back well beyond those

¹⁴Cleomedes, *On the Circular Motions of the Celestial Bodies* 2.1.91 in *FGrH F* 121R; Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 161–81.

¹⁵See the qualifications by Jane Rowlandson, “Dissing the Egyptians: Legal, Ethnic, and Cultural Identities in Roman Egypt,” in *Creating Ethnicities and Identities in the Roman World*, ed.

of many peoples, including the Greeks themselves.¹⁶ On the other hand, average native Egyptian people and their practices could be viewed quite negatively, and such people could be placed low in hegemonic hierarchies. Certain Judeans could have their own particular reasons for adopting a similar approach, in part because inhabitants of Israel were often thought to have originated as an inferior subgroup of Egyptians, and, therefore, there was a felt need to strongly assert differentiation and superiority in relation to Egyptians specifically.

Alongside positive or neutral evaluations, then, there were several standard negative stereotypes espoused by certain members of the Greek and Roman literary elites, including that Egyptians were supposedly dishonest, greedy, lustful, arrogant, rebellious, hostile toward foreigners, and superstitious.¹⁷ To cite a familiar senatorial voice, Tacitus says that, although Egypt is useful for its produce, it is subject to “civil strife and sudden disturbances because of the fanaticism and superstition of its inhabitants, who are ignorant of laws and unacquainted with civil magistrates” (*Hist.* 1.11; Moore, LCL, adapted; cf. 4.81).

Tacitus’s complaint about “superstition” (*superstitio*) here—a term that simply means that the people in question did not subscribe to the imperial elites’ modes of honoring deities at the city of Rome itself—leads us to a key component in Greek and, even more, Roman criticism of Egyptians. One of the most widely attested stereotypes was that Egyptians engaged in improper or even despicable modes of honoring the gods, namely, worshiping animals.¹⁸

Viewpoints of the Roman Cicero (ca. 106–43 BCE) and the Greek Plutarch (ca. 45–120 CE) may be used here to indicate the sort of characterizations that could circulate among the elites, characterizations that will be echoed by Philo, Paul, and Josephus. For Cicero, Egyptians are “infected with degraded superstitions and they would sooner submit to any torment than injure an ibis or asp or cat or dog or crocodile” (*Tusc.* 5.78; King, LCL adapted).¹⁹ Cicero also disparages the “monstrous doctrines of the magians [of Persia] and the insane [*dementia*] mythology of Egypt” (*Nat. d.* 1.15.43).²⁰ Plutarch of Chaironea, whose fondness for the Egyptian deities Isis and Osiris is nonetheless clear, states that, among Egyptians, a “terrible belief develops which plunges the weak and innocent into pure fear of

Andrew Gardner, Edward Herring, and Kathryn Lomas, BICS.SP 120 (London: Institute of Classical Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2013), 213–47.

¹⁶Cf. Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.145–146, critiqued by Plutarch, *Her. mal.* 12–13, 19 (857a–e, 858f–859a). On Egyptomania, see Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13–44.

¹⁷On these stereotypes generally, see Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 352–70; Klaas Antonius Donato Smelik and E. A. Hemelrijk, “Who Knows Not What Monsters Demented Egypt Worships?: Opinions on Egyptian Animal Worship in Antiquity as Part of the Ancient Conception of Egypt,” *ANRW* 17.4:1852–2000.

¹⁸Smelik and Hemelrijk, “Who Knows Not What Monsters?,” throughout.

¹⁹Cf. Cicero, *Rep.* 3.9.14.

²⁰Cf. Cicero, *Nat. d.* 1.29.81; 1.36.101; 3.19.47.

divine forces [δαισιδαιμονίαν] and, in the case of the more cynical and bold, goes off into atheistic [ἀθέους] and beastly [θηριώδεις] thinking” (*Is. Os.* 70 [379e]; Babbitt, LCL adapted). Others, such as Herodotus (*Hist.* 2.65–70) and Diodorus of Sicily (*Bib. hist.* 1.83.1), seem to describe Egyptian animal cults in less negative or even positive terms, so there were notable variations in elite perspectives. Still, in many cases it seems that the native Egyptian practice of representing deities in the form of animals was considered a sign of an inferior people, in part because it implied that Egyptians were inferior to the animals they worshiped. The tendency to place Judeans along with Egyptians low in the hierarchy will be important for understanding rhetorical strategies adopted by Philo, Paul, and Josephus.

III. CLIMBING THE LADDER OR BUILDING A NEW ONE

Philo

It is important to begin by noting ethnic designations Philo of Alexandria (ca. 25 BCE–50 CE) uses to identify himself and others with some connection to Israel or Syria-Palestine, as this will help us understand Philo’s relation to ethnic hierarchies.²¹ The category “Hebrews” (Ἑβραῖοι) is often encountered in Philo’s biblical interpretive works but not very often elsewhere, as he seems to reserve the term for personages of the past. This contrasts to Paul’s and Josephus’s occasional self-identifications (Phil 3:5; Josephus, *B.J.* 1.3) or identifications of other contemporaries (2 Cor 11:22) as “Hebrews,” so we should not necessarily expect consistency from one person to the next in ethnic self-designations. Philo prefers the term “Judeans” (Ἰουδαῖοι) for contemporaries with whom he identifies, as in his writings about the aftermath of the Alexandrian troubles in 38–41 CE.

It is important to remember that Philo was a highly educated Judean trained in Hellenistic philosophy and rhetoric. So it is natural to find him both associating himself with Judeans and/or Greeks depending on rhetorical or social circumstances; multiple and situational identifications were of course possible here as elsewhere.²² Sometimes Philo identifies himself or other Greek-speaking educated Judeans generally with “Greeks” as a superior people, which also relates to his alignment with hegemonic ethnic hierarchies in some instances, as I discuss shortly.

Before analyzing Philo’s approach to Egyptians specifically, it is important to observe other indications of ethnic categorization in his works. David T. Runia’s helpful study argues that, although the opposition of Judeans (“Jews” in Runia’s terms) and non-Judeans is quite consistently important to Philo’s thinking, Philo

²¹On Philo’s self-understanding, see Alan Mendelson, *Philo’s Jewish Identity*, BJS 161 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Maren Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture*, TSAJ 86 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

²²See Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 8–9, 114–20, 145–60.

(unlike Paul) does not develop very consistent terminology for this dichotomy.²³ Philo does reveal his own tendency—based in part on his biblical sources—to place the people of Israel at the height of all peoples, as when he speaks of Israelites as “the most dear to God of all peoples [ἐθνῶν], which in my view has received the gift of priestly services and prophecy on behalf of all of humanity” (*Abr.* 98; cf. Rom 9:1–5).²⁴ Philo here and elsewhere does not reserve the designation “the peoples” (τὰ ἔθνη) for non-Judeans, as does Paul.²⁵

Another key passage about the relative position of ethnic groups in relation to Judeans occurs in the *Life of Moses* (2.17–44). Here Philo asserts the superiority of the Judean people and its customs in relation to all other peoples, both “Greeks and barbarians.” In the process, Philo refers to specific groups, including Athenians and Spartans (for “Greeks”) and Egyptians and Scythians (for “barbarians”). Then he states:

We may fairly say that those from east to west, from every country, people and city, show an aversion to foreign customs [χώρα καὶ ἔθνος καὶ πόλις, τῶν ξενικῶν νομίμων]. They think that they will enhance honor for their own by showing dishonor for those of other countries. It is not so with our customs. They attract and draw the attention of everyone: barbarians, Greeks, inhabitants of the mainland and islands, peoples [ἔθνη] of the east and the west, of Europe and of Asia, and of the whole world from end to end. (*Mos.* 2.19–20)²⁶

Philo quite clearly asserts the highest of positions for Judeans and their cultural practices in relation to all peoples. Note also that Philo frequently uses “Greeks and barbarians” in a nonpejorative sense in order to refer to “all peoples” or “everyone”; at other times the concept of “barbarians” carries a derogatory meaning, as in some passages I discuss here.²⁷ Furthermore, there are also neutral or positive uses of the term, as when Philo takes on hegemonic discourses in categorizing people from Syria-Palestine as “barbarians” but with a subversive twist (discussed below).

²³David T. Runia, “Philo and the Gentiles,” in *Attitudes to Gentiles in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. David C. Sim and James S. McLaren, LNTS 499 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 28–45.

²⁴Translations of the works of Philo are adapted from F. H. Colson in LCL.

²⁵Nonetheless, do see *Mos.* 1.278, where a distinction between λαός (for Hebrews) and τὰ ἔθνη (for other peoples) is evident.

²⁶Cf. Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.168, 281–286.

²⁷See Stephen D. Louy, “Barbarian Jews: Ethnic Identity in the Language of Philo,” *Mary’s Well Occasional Papers* 1 (2012): 1–24, here 6; Katell Berthelot, “Grecs, Barbares et Juifs dans l’oeuvre de Philon,” in *Philon d’Alexandrie: Un penseur à l’intersection des cultures gréco-romaine, orientale, juive et chrétienne: Actes du colloque international organisé par le Centre interdisciplinaire d’étude des religions et de la laïcité de l’Université libre de Bruxelles (Bruxelles, 26–28 juin 2007)*, ed. Sabrina Inowlocki and Baudouin Decharneux, *Monothéismes et philosophie* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 47–61.

In an interesting turn, Philo takes on a common Greek hegemonic categorization in speaking of the original language of the Bible—described as “Chaldean” by Philo—as a “barbarian” language in contrast to Greek (*Mos.* 2.27). This categorization may be an exception for Philo, if Katell Berthelot’s argument is correct that Philo would more consistently place Judeans with Greeks and not barbarians in the dichotomy.²⁸ Still, there is one other significant discussion where Philo speaks of wise men among barbarous peoples, listing Persian magians, Indian gymnosophists, and, finally, Judean Essenes (*Prob.* 73–75).

Philo somewhat consistently portrays Greeks in a neutral or positive manner, sometimes placing this people at the height of human civilization. A Greek hegemonic hierarchy of ethnic groups is clear when Philo points—in *On Providence*—to the irony that, while the lands of the barbarians are more fertile than those of Greece, this apparent superiority is “counterbalanced by the inferiority [ἐλαττοῦται] of those who are fed by the produce.” For “Greece alone can be truly said to produce humanity” in its pursuit of true knowledge (*Prov.* 2.66). There are hints that Philo adopts Greek environmental reasoning (as in Hippocrates, *On Airs, Waters, Places*) for positing this intellectual inferiority of barbarians and relegating these peoples to a lower position in the hierarchy (see Philo, *Prov.* 2.68).

Philo’s use of the binary categories of “Greeks” and “barbarians” and his alignment with hegemonic ethnic hierarchies also become clear in his *Embassy to Gaius*. There he critiques Gaius by praising Augustus, who “brought civilization and harmony to unsociable and beast-like peoples, who expanded Greece with numerous new Greeces and hellenized the barbarian world in its most important regions” (*Legat.* 147). So Greeks are portrayed as a civilizing influence (via the actions of a Roman emperor). Elsewhere it is clear that Philo employs the term *barbarian* in a derogatory manner, sometimes juxtaposed with Romans instead of Greeks.²⁹ So, as Runia also argues, it seems that there are two general oppositions that play a role in Philo’s approach to ranking contemporary ethnic groups: Judeans versus other peoples, on the one hand, and Greeks versus barbarians, on the other.³⁰ Yet the two dichotomies are never fully integrated: for instance, we never find Philo expressly speaking of “Judeans and barbarians” (instead of “Greeks and barbarians”) even though his usage implies such thinking.

Among *specific* ethnic groups mentioned by Philo, Egyptians are most prevalent.³¹ This is due, in large part, to Philo’s own context as a Greek-speaking Judean settled in Alexandria in Egypt under Roman rule. But it also has something to do with a difficult history of relations between people associated with Israel and the

²⁸ Berthelot, “Greco, Barbares et Juifs,” throughout.

²⁹ E.g., *Spec.* 3.163; *Abr.* 184; *Legat.* 116.

³⁰ Runia, “Philo and the Gentiles,” 42.

³¹ See also Mendelson, *Philo’s Jewish Identity*, 116–22; Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Philo’s Flaccus: The First Pogrom; Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, PACS 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 17–18, 48, 105–6, 121, 172.

people of Egypt. Philo himself lived at a time when ethnic rivalries were at a fever pitch between at least three different groups in Alexandria itself. These rivalries were due, in part, to the way in which the Roman authorities had reorganized Egypt, including the division of the population into a threefold political hierarchy with Roman citizens at the top, Greek citizens of the cities below, and native Egyptians at the bottom, with Egyptians alone being subject to a poll tax.³²

One of the consequences of this situation was a tendency for people on either side of a conflict to categorize opponents as “Egyptians” or accuse adversaries of living like, or having an equivalent status as, “Egyptians,” with attendant derogatory implications (e.g., Philo calling Alexandrians “Egyptians,” Josephus calling Apion an “Egyptian,” Isidoros calling Judeans “Egyptians,” as in *CPJ* 2:156c). We know about rivalries involving Judeans primarily because, around 38–41 CE, there were significant incidents of violence involving both Judeans and other inhabitants of Alexandria, violence that also entailed the destruction of Judean places of prayer and significant injury or loss of life on both sides.³³

Here we are concerned not with details of the riots but with Philo’s negative stereotypes about Egyptians in these accounts. These show how Philo elevates Judeans above the Egyptians while also aligning himself with some hegemonic perspectives in the process. In *Against Flaccus*, Philo draws on several common Greek and Roman characterizations of Egyptians that echo elsewhere in order to place Judeans in a higher position in an ethnic hierarchy in relation to Egyptians specifically. First of all, in Philo’s view, Egyptians are by nature “rebellious” and favor “sedition” (στάσις). They “are naturally excited by quite small and ordinary occurrences” and accustomed “to blow up the tiniest spark into grave seditions” (*Flacc.* 17–18). He laments that Judeans were unfairly treated as the equivalent of Egyptians when the Roman authorities sought to collect the Judeans’ weapons to prevent a potential revolt, as the Romans had previously done with the Egyptians who “often revolted” (*Flacc.* 93). Philo paints a picture of inferior, seditious Egyptians and superior, loyal Judeans, as when he speaks of the Judeans’ habit of honoring emperors and the imperial family (see *Flacc.* 48–49). This notion that Judeans should not be treated on a par with the lowly Egyptians also comes across clearly when Philo complains about the “Egyptian” form of punishment given to Judeans, which meant that “Alexandrian Judeans . . . fared worse than their *inferiors* and were treated like Egyptians of the lowest rank” (*Flacc.* 78–80). These are glimpses into one side of a struggle among (at least partially) marginalized ethnic minorities to secure a higher position in the context of the Greek city of Alexandria under Roman rule.

A second main characterization of Egyptians that is also common to Josephus

³²See Richard Alston, “Philo’s ‘In Flaccum’: Ethnicity and Social Space in Roman Alexandria,” *GR* 44 (1997): 165–75.

³³See John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 48–91.

is that they were prone to “envy” (φθόνος) in relation to their betters, with Judeans assumed to be the betters in this case. Philo explains that it was an incident involving the visit of Agrippa I—received as a Judean king by the Alexandrian Judeans—that sparked the Alexandrian Egyptians’ “jealousy” and “innate hostility [ἀπέχθειαν] to the Judeans.” And they “considered that any good luck to others was misfortune to themselves” (*Flacc.* 29).³⁴

A third stereotype about Egyptians pertains to their approach to deities. On the one hand, Philo frequently (in at least five writings) complains of the “godless” (ἄθεος) Egyptians who were guided by bodily and earthly “passions” (ἐπιθυμίαι) and, therefore, chose to worship earthly things rather than the true God (cf. Rom 1:18–27).³⁵ Yet it is with respect to the focus on animal worship specifically that Philo clearly shares common ground with some hegemonic characterizations of Egyptians as an inferior people. According to Philo, for instance, the emperor Gaius turned to the Alexandrians (here evidently cast as Egyptians) specifically in order to seek divine honors because “the Alexandrians are adepts at flattery.... How much reverence is paid by them to the concept of god is shown by their having allowed it to be shared by the indigenous ibises and venomous snakes and many other ferocious wild beasts” (see *Legat.* 161–166).³⁶

Elsewhere, in the *Decalogue*, Philo clarifies the peculiarity of this trait of the Egyptians, expanding the critique.

They have granted divine honors to irrational animals.... [Egyptians] have actually gone to a further excess by choosing the fiercest and most savage of wild animals—lions and crocodiles and among reptiles the venomous asp—all of which they dignify with temples, sacred precincts, sacrifices, assemblies, processions and the like.... What could be more ridiculous than all this? Indeed foreigners on their first arrival in Egypt—before the delusion of the land has registered in their minds—are likely to die laughing at this. (*Decal.* 76–80)

This tendency to worship animals is seen to align closely with the supposed stupidity of the Egyptians (see *Contempl.* 8–9). There are also slight echoes of such views concerning animal worship in a letter of Paul.

Paul

A comparison of Paul’s ranking of ethnic groups with Philo’s and Josephus’s approaches is complicated by the genre of our sources and the rhetorical situations. Whereas some writings of Philo and Josephus are expressly concerned with

³⁴Cf. *Legat.* 166–170, 205, on “Egyptian venom” aimed at Judeans.

³⁵See *Legat.* 161; *Her.* 203; *Leg.* 3.212; *Fug.* 180; *Ios.* 254; *Mos.* 2.194–196. Cf. *Leg.* 3.38; *Somm.* 2.255; *Congr.* 20, 85.

³⁶Cf. Wis 12:23–27 and 15:18–19; Sib. Or. 3.29–34; Let. Aris. 137–138, perhaps also reflecting Alexandrian Judean perspectives; Artapanus in Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 9.27.4.

addressing the position of Judeans in relation to other specific peoples, especially Egyptians, Paul's letters tend to have few explicit references to specific ethnic groups (e.g., 2 Corinthians; Philippians). Instead, there are many passages dealing with the more generic category of non-Judean "peoples" or "nations" (ἔθνη), traditionally rendered "gentiles."³⁷ Moreover, Paul's own categorizations and hierarchies are dependent on the situation he addresses in a particular letter—they are rhetorically contingent.

Paul, like Philo and Josephus, clearly identifies himself using ethnic and geographic descriptors for those connected in some way with Israel, Palestine, or its component parts: "Judean," "Israelite" (or simply "Israel"), and "Hebrew"³⁸—this despite the fact that Paul's letters themselves show him to be a Greek-speaking Israelite who was highly educated in Hellenistic rhetoric and modes of communication. Paul often seems less concerned to compete with other peoples that were commonly placed low along with Judeans (e.g., Egyptians, Syrians, Phoenicians, Phrygians) than to assert an alternative to the hegemonic ladder of the Greek or Roman literary elites. This alternative ranking has Israelites or Judeans on the top rung and well above all others. This is in some sense an inversion of the usual hierarchy as a barbarian group becomes the superior people, a technique sometimes evident in the cases of Philo and Josephus as well. In Paul's case this focus on an alternative hierarchy also fits with his overall concern to promote the foreign (or "barbarian") Israelite God in a Greek context and to continue his contacts with these primarily Greek-speaking groups devoted to a Judean messiah, something that Heidi Wendt explores at length.³⁹

In writing to devotees of Jesus at the Roman colony of Philippi, Paul claims that he has reason to be confident in *human* terms because he comes "from the people of Israel" (ἐκ γένους Ἰσραήλ) and is "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Ἑβραῖος ἐξ Ἑβραίων; cf. Josephus, *B.J.* 1.3). This clearly implies a superior status for these identifications in comparison with other ethnic identifications, presumably including self-identifications of his audience (e.g., "Philippians" or "Macedonians" or "Greeks" or "Romans"). This despite the fact that Paul claims he also counts his status as Israelite and Hebrew as dung (σκύβαλα) *in comparison with* the superior status of "knowing Christ" (Phil 3:4–6). Similarly, when faced with competition at

³⁷For a recent discussion of "gentiles" in Paul with bibliography, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi and Adi Ophir, "Paul and the Invention of the Gentiles," *JQR* 105 (2015): 1–41 (though I am not convinced by their argument). For an overview of the traditional problems, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

³⁸For Paul's implied identifications of himself or his kin with "Israel," sometimes citing Judean Scripture, see Rom 9:6, 27–31; 10:19–21; 11:2, 7, 25–26; 1 Cor 10:18; 2 Cor 2:13; 3:7; Gal 6:16; Phil 3:5. Here I am concerned with explicit self-identifications. For Paul's identification as "Judean," see Gal 2:15; Rom 9:24; 1 Cor 9:20.

³⁹Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Corinth, Paul playfully and angrily boasts that, like the “super-apostles,” he too is a “Hebrew” and an “Israelite” and, by implication, not to be considered inferior (to his opponents) as if he belonged to some lesser people (2 Cor 11:21–23).

With regard to the situation in Rome, Paul seems to be dealing with non-Judeans looking down on those who choose to follow Judean ancestral customs (at least food customs as discussed in Rom 14–15). Here Paul clearly places his fleshly kin (τῶν συγγενῶν μου κατὰ σάρκα), the “Israelites,” highest among peoples due to what the Israelite God gave them: the covenants, the law, the promises, the patriarchs, the Messiah (Rom 9:3–5). This positioning aligns with Paul’s continuing argument in this letter that Judeans are first and, by implication, foremost: “to the Judean first and also to the Greek [Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι]” (e.g., 1:16; 2:9–11). Here, like Caroline Johnson Hodge and others, I take Paul’s “first” or “foremost” (πρῶτον) to have a hierarchical sense (instead of, or as well as, a temporal one); it is important to remember the tendency among people in the ancient world to think that older or earlier is better or superior, as Josephus’s strategy will also show (Rom 11:11–24).⁴⁰ In other words, Judeans are, in this rhetorical context, placed higher on Paul’s ethnic ladder than Greeks. The image of Israelites as the original tree and branches, and the Greeks or peoples as branches grafted on later (and more easily broken off) fits with this priority for Judeans. Of course, at the same time Paul is also concerned to posit that there is, in some other sense, “no difference between a Judean and a Greek” in terms of potential adoption or inclusion in God’s people, if people “call” on the Lord or are “baptized into Christ” (Rom 10:12; cf. Rom 3:1–18, 22; Gal 3:28).

The lack of distinction also relates to Paul’s notion that both Judean and Greek are equally condemnable and equally savable. In this respect I am in agreement with Hodge’s point that, in Paul’s letter to Rome, Judeans and Greeks “are separate but hierarchically related peoples. Paul’s olive tree metaphor ... enables Paul to describe an affiliation of connected but separate ethnic peoples, all of whom are now loyal to the God of Israel.”⁴¹

In his letter to those in Galatia, Paul is dealing with a situation where the membership of his uncircumcised non-Judean or Greek audience is at issue, and he emphasizes his principal aim of including “the peoples” without requiring circumcision. There are still clear signs of Paul’s general characterization of non-Judeans as “failures” or “sinners” nonetheless (Gal 2:15). Such incidental phrasing implies a placement of Judeans at the top of the ladder, despite his assertion in this same letter that there is “neither Judean nor Greek” among those who are initiated into his own groups (Gal 3:28). Some of Paul’s identifications, therefore, plainly assert or imply the superiority of the people of Israel even though he does not reveal a clear ranking for specific groups. Instead he tends to generalize about the inferior

⁴⁰ Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 137–48.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

“peoples” (ἔθνη) from which some turned to the superior ethnic God of the Israelites.

Unlike Philo and Josephus, whose works contain significant material on the Egyptians, Paul employs very few *specific* ethnic categorizations. Instead, in keeping with the Septuagint’s terminological distinction (e.g., Exod 33:16) between God’s “people” (λαός) and the rest of “the nations” (τὰ ἔθνη), Paul often tends to clump together all non-Israelite peoples (or at least Greek-speaking peoples) under a common category.

Paul’s characterization of “the peoples” (τὰ ἔθνη) often draws on common discourses found among Judean literary elites concerning the inferiority of ethnic groups beyond the Israelites.⁴² Frequently, this inferiority is expressed by way of certain Judean stereotypes about the behavioral tendencies or common failures (“sins”) of these other peoples. The two most important ones are that non-Judean peoples tended toward (1) improper relations to their gods and rejection of the “true God” in the form of honoring created objects, creatures, or “images” (εἰδωλα), that is, “idolatry” (e.g., 1 Cor 12:2); and (2) improper sexual behaviors (πορνεία).⁴³ The two faults could be closely related, as when the Wisdom of Solomon states that “the idea of idols was the beginning of fornication” (Wis 14:12–13) or when Paul asserts that God hands non-Judeans over to sexual perversion because of their idolatry (cf. Rom 1:22–25). This idea of non-Judean peoples’ inherent tendencies, which result in alienation from the true God, is what likely underlies Paul’s summary statement about his own ethnic group in relation to all others: in Galatians he uses the phrase “we ourselves, who are Judeans by birth and not failures from among the peoples [ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔθνῶν ἀμαρτωλοί]” (Gal 2:15).

Paul’s assumption of these stereotypes about non-Judeans results in a generally negative portrayal of “the peoples” unless they had “turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9): in other words, that they had adopted worship of Israel’s ethnic God, had rejected worship of their own ancestral deities, and had been initiated into groups devoted to the Israelite God’s Messiah. I would suggest that this is the context in which to understand Paul’s repeated comments to those in Rome about there being “no difference” between Judean and Greek and his comment to the Galatians that, for those baptized into Christ, there is “neither Judean nor Greek” (Gal 3:28).

Beyond these stereotyped generalizations about non-Judeans, Paul refers to a few more specific ethnic identifications. Thus, for instance, he makes passing reference to the “mindless [ἀνόητοι] Galatians” (Gal 1:11). Yet he offers no further clarification of what other stereotypes he may intend concerning this category of

⁴²See Stanley K. Stowers, “Paul’s Four Discourses about Sin,” in *Celebrating Paul: Festschrift in Honor of Jerome Murphy O’Connor, O.P., and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.*, ed. Peter Spitaler, CBQMS 48 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2011), 100–127.

⁴³See 1 Thess 4:5, 1 Cor 5:1, 6:12–20, 12:2, Rom 1:18–32; cf. Wis 13–14.

potentially “barbarian” people in the event that he is referring to “Gauls” or “Celts” rather than merely Greek inhabitants of cities in Galatia.⁴⁴

Unlike Philo and Josephus, Paul does not directly denigrate “Egyptians” in lifting up the Judeans. He uses the slave Hagar (expressly an “Egyptian slave” in Gen 21, at least) as a negative example with whom his Galatian addressees are not to identify (Gal 4:21–31). Furthermore, there are hints of ethnographic discourses regarding Egyptians, for example, when Paul characterizes the failure of other peoples to infer from nature the prime importance of the creator God of the Israelites. Paul does so, in part, by speaking of the process of the peoples exchanging “the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles” (Rom 1:23: εἰκόνας φθαρτοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ πετεινῶν καὶ τετραπόδων καὶ ἔρπετῶν). The final three terms are most significant here, since they suggest that Paul has recognizable negative assessments about Egyptians foremost in his mind. This may be a hint that Paul too sometimes adopted the commonly accepted ethnic ladder in positioning Egyptians low on the rungs as a strategy to place Judeans—usually also placed low on the hegemonic ladder—higher than a people with whom they were sometimes identified.

There are further signs of Paul’s adoption of Greek or Roman elite approaches to categorizing other peoples. He clearly shows an awareness and, in certain respects, an acceptance of common Greek perspectives that divided humanity into “Greeks,” on the one hand, and “barbarians,” on the other. Of course, this division mirrors Paul’s own, more common opposition between Israelites or Judeans, on the one hand, and every other people, on the other. In other words, the Judean category of “the peoples” is functionally similar to the Greek category of “the barbarians” (although usually encompassing Judeans from the Greek point of view). Both reflect ingroup language for some other people(s) and not terms that anyone would use to identify themselves unless they were adopting the perspective of the dominant or ostensibly superior ethnic group.

The Greek–barbarian dichotomy is employed by Paul at least occasionally and for certain aims. Just before his argument in the letter to those in Rome concerning the responsibility of non-Israelites to recognize the Creator from God’s creation, Paul states, “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, to the wise and the mindless” (Rom 1:14: Ἐλλησὶν τε καὶ βαρβάρους, σοφοῖς τε καὶ ἀνόητοις ὀφειλέτης εἰμί).⁴⁵ The derogatory implications for the barbarians seem clear in their being paired with mindlessness while the Greeks are paired with wisdom in a traditional manner reflective of the Greek hegemonic ladder. It is possible that Paul, like Lucian in our opening passage and Philo as well (*Mos.* 2.27), is temporarily or playfully adopting the Greek or Roman categorization of Judeans as barbarians (cf. 1 Cor 1–4 in the juxtaposition of Greek “wisdom” and supposed “foolishness”).

⁴⁴ On Gauls or Celts as mindless, see Strabo, *Geogr.* 5.32.4–5; cf. Vitruvius, *De arch.* 6.1.4).

⁴⁵ 1 Cor 14:11 does not seem to have this negative connotation.

However, the following argument concerning salvation “to the Judean first and also to the Greek” suggests rather that he is working with a threefold division of Israelites (superior), Greeks (inferior, at least until they adopt the Israelite God), and barbarians (most inferior). He is, in a sense, mixing his usual Judeans-and-peoples dichotomy with the Greeks-and-barbarians dichotomy to create a hybrid ethnic hierarchy.

This brings us to Paul’s specific references to “Greeks,” which occur regularly only in his letter to those in Rome and occasionally in his letter to those in Galatia and those in Corinth.⁴⁶ While the “peoples” (ἔθνη) was not an ethnic self-designation but rather an external label for those who were not Judeans or Israelites, “Greeks” was an ethnic self-designation, though a more general one and thus less common than civic or regional ethnic identifications. Paul’s usage of “Greeks” in the letter to Rome, however, suggests fluidity between his use of the generic “peoples” category and his use of “Greeks.” In the letter it seems clear that Paul uses these two terms almost interchangeably. A possible and momentary exception seems evident when he states that his overall goal is to “reap some harvest among you [Greeks in Rome] as well as among the rest of the peoples.” This statement is immediately followed by the duo of “Greeks” and “barbarians,” thereby implying that the “peoples” includes more than just the Greeks whom he addresses (Rom 1:13–14). Still, that Paul usually employs “Greeks” and “peoples” synonymously seems clear in the ongoing argument concerning the “Judean first and also the Greek,” which is interspersed with his reversion to the generic term *peoples* for the Greeks in Rome who are his main focus. This suggests a likelihood that, when Paul employs “peoples” (ἔθνη), he does indeed usually have in mind “Greeks” specifically. This is, in part, because he is most active in cities where inhabitants spoke Greek and might self-identify (though secondarily) as “Greeks” after other, more specific ethnic identifications (Athenians, Ephesians, Thessalonians, Macedonians, etc.). A more-specific cultural context may be in mind when Paul generalizes in his letter to those in Corinth (1 Cor 1–4) about the “Greeks” who “seek wisdom.” There he seems to have in mind those who align themselves with Greek philosophers among the literary elites (cultural Greeks, if you will) more than Greeks as an ethnic category.

Many of my previous observations concerning Paul’s stereotypes about the “peoples,” therefore, apply especially to the “Greeks.” In other words, often Greeks are placed beneath Israelites or Judeans on Paul’s alternative ethnic ladder. Further, Paul seems to have little interest in parsing out who among the “peoples” should be placed lower than some other in part because his encounters were primarily with Greek-speaking inhabitants. This is the case despite the implications of his use of “barbarians” on one occasion and his suggestive references to animal worship—with Egyptians likely in mind—as the epitome of bad behavior by a specific ethnic

⁴⁶Rom 1:14, 16; 2:9; 3:9; 10:12; Gal 2:3; 3:28; 1 Cor 1–4.

group from among the “peoples.” Nor does this exclude Paul’s modified, neither-Judean-nor-Greek perspective on those among the peoples who adopted the Israelite God and were baptized “into Christ.” There the expectation was they would need to continue working to reject both the idolatry and sexual misconduct associated with their ethnic origins.⁴⁷

Moreover, despite the equalizing rhetoric that occurs occasionally (e.g., Gal 3:28, Rom 2:11), there is a sense in which the superior position of Israelites or Judeans in relation to all other peoples is taken for granted by Paul (as also by Philo and Josephus) on a regular basis. In order to understand what is usually taken as “egalitarian” rhetoric, it is perhaps best to think of the process of Greeks (or those from other peoples) joining a Pauline group as the equivalent of “foreigners” adopting worship of the Israelite God and, therefore, of overcoming some of the central shortcomings of their non-Judean ethnic origins as represented in the stereotypes Paul holds about non-Judean ancestral customs (e.g., idolatry and fornication). Those Greeks or peoples who turn to worship the Israelite God, adopting Judean customs, are in some sense treated differently and associated with the Judean people despite origins among other, inferior peoples. These members can then benefit in some way from an elevation of Judeans and Judean customs, even if they (or their ancestors) were not from Judea in the first place. This is because these non-Judean peoples adopted both worship of the Israelite God and at least some other Judean practices, including Judean Scriptures or stories.⁴⁸

Josephus

Josephus directly confronts negative stereotypes about Judeans by Greek, Roman, and Egyptian authors, particularly in his attack *Against Apion*, as we will see presently.⁴⁹ In terms of self-understanding, Josephus emphasizes his origin from a priestly family of Jerusalem (*Vita* 1.1; *B.J.* 1.3), and so in some respects we are getting a perspective from the heart of the Judean elite under Roman rule. Josephus self-identifies as both a “Hebrew” (*B.J.* 1.3) and a “Judean” (*A.J.* 1.4), depending on circumstances, and he prefers the designations “Israelites” and “Hebrews” (rather than “Judeans”) for those of the biblical past (see *A.J.* 1–10), much like Philo. There are at least a few cases where, with different aims, Josephus seems to take on Greek (or Roman) categorizations in identifying himself or other

⁴⁷ E.g., 1 Thess 4, 1 Cor 6:12–20, 10:14–22, Rom 1:18–32, Gal 5:19–24.

⁴⁸ On freelance experts and foreign Scriptures, see Wendt, *At the Temple Gates*, throughout.

⁴⁹ For studies of Apion, see Steve Mason, “The *Contra Apionem* in Social and Literary Context: An Invitation to Judean Philosophy,” in *Josephus’ Contra Apionem: Studies in Its Character and Context with a Latin Concordance to the Portion Missing in Greek*, ed. Louis H. Feldman and John R. Levison, AGJU 34 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 187–228; John M. G. Barclay, *Against Apion: Translation and Commentary*, FJTC 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

Judeans as “barbarians” in juxtaposition with “Greeks,” and one of these will occupy us soon.⁵⁰

Although many ethnic groups appear in Josephus’s *Against Apion*, most prominent is his sustained interest in Egyptians and in positioning Judeans in relation to Egyptians, who were often categorized as barbarians by many literate Greeks and Romans.⁵¹ One of the most noteworthy things about Josephus’s refutation of his ostensibly Egyptian opponent (Apion), for our purposes, is how the work reflects variations on each of the two main strategies that minorities could employ in ranking other peoples. Josephus attempts to counter what he considers an “Egyptian” viewpoint, which places Judeans at the bottom of the ladder, while he also attempts to refute common “Greek” perspectives that may dismiss Judeans as inferior “barbarians.” In other words, Josephus constructs or represents two different ethnic hierarchies, with the rhetorical situation determining which of the two is more prevalent.

In fact, the very structure of the first part of Josephus’s work is founded on these two approaches. In his first section of *Against Apion* (1.6–160), Josephus’s principal aim is to demonstrate the antiquity and, therefore, superiority of the Judean people by appealing to very old, *non-Greek* sources that refer to the people of Judah or Israel. Here Josephus will be largely rejecting the Greek hegemonic ethnic ladder, where Greeks are at the top and all others below, with barbarian nations at the bottom. Instead, Josephus portrays peoples who were usually considered “barbarians” by Greeks (see 1.58)—Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Babylonians or Chaldeans—as the oldest and *most reliable* sources of knowledge and history, even more reliable than Greek historical sources.⁵² Josephus adopts this approach because he wants to establish the antiquity of Judean ancestral customs, and, he must admit, there are very few early attestations of the Judeans in Greek historians but many in non-Greek, eastern (hence “barbarian”) sources.

Josephus’s discussion of these non-Greek peoples’ methods of documentation rings of the “wise barbarian” theme I mentioned earlier (e.g., Ephorus and Eratosthenes), with an inversion of the hegemonic ladder that results in a placement of Greeks lower down. Greek societies, cultures, record keeping, and historiography can be portrayed as new (“from yesterday or the day before”) and therefore inferior (*C. Ap.* 1.6–7). Yet Josephus ranks these other “barbarian” peoples highly only in order to give the top rung of the ladder to the best barbarians of all, the Judean people, which is expressed early in *Against Apion* (1.29–43) and spelled out more fully in the final section of the second book (2.145–296). Judean record keeping and customs are used in order to illustrate this superiority. Even in the first

⁵⁰See, e.g., Josephus, *A.J.* 14.187–188 and 16.174–178.

⁵¹I am particularly indebted to Barclay, “Politics of Contempt,” and Barclay, *Against Apion*.

⁵²Josephus uses the term *barbarian(s)* (pejoratively, neutrally, or positively) forty-four or more times in his works, including six times in *Against Apion* (1.58, 116, 161, 201; 2.148, 282). See Barclay, *Against Apion*, 41.

section of book 1, however, there are points where Josephus begins to hint at his next main strategy, which involves demonstrating that Israelites are *not* descendants of diseased or rebellious Egyptians (as others suggested) and that Egyptians are in fact inferior to Judeans (e.g., 1.104).

It is in the second main section (*C. Ap.* 1.219–2.296) that this other strategy becomes clear. There Josephus aims to establish a high place for Judeans by combating those he categorizes negatively as “Egyptians,” primarily—though not solely—Apion, a Greek-speaking author who may or may not have self-identified as “Egyptian.”⁵³ To do so, Josephus draws on common Greek and Roman ethnographic stereotypes concerning the supposed inferiority of Egyptians and their ancestral customs. At the same time, Josephus must deal carefully with claims (attested in Greek, Roman, and Egyptian sources alike) that Judeans or Hebrews or Israelites are, themselves, originally diseased or rebellious outcasts from among the Egyptian people (cf. *C. Ap.* 1.278). Like Philo, Josephus seeks to bring Judeans up the ladder by carefully distancing them from “low-down” Egyptians and by allying himself with certain Greek or Roman elite perspectives. At the same time, Josephus rejects other aspects of these same perspectives, aspects that were detrimental to Judeans’ status relative to other peoples.

A key component in Josephus’s strategy in the second section of *Against Apion* is to focus on what Greeks, Romans, and others alike felt was most disdainful about Egyptians and their customs, especially, as I outlined earlier, their treatment of some animals as gods. In doing this, Josephus is also homing in on Greek and Roman negative stereotypes that positioned Egyptians near the bottom of the ethnic ladder (or below it) because they resorted to worshiping animals and were, therefore, lower than those animals (cf. *C. Ap.* 2.66, 139). All of this is a retorsion meant to counter negative stereotypes about Judeans that, ostensibly, had an origin among “Egyptians” (1.219). The stereotypes he seeks to refute include the idea that Judeans continued an ancestral tradition that combined mistreatment of all other people, destruction of the holy places of others’ gods (as in Lysimachus; see *C. Ap.* 1.309) and worship of an animal—an ass (as in Apion; see *C. Ap.* 2.80–81). Josephus also tries to turn a commonly encountered Greek and Roman stereotype that anyone from the east is likely to have the character of a menial slave away from Judeans and onto Egyptians specifically (2.124–134). Even these stereotypes about Judeans, however, are found in what a modern scholar recognizes as Greek and Roman—not native Egyptian—sources, so Josephus needs to be carefully selective in his adoption of Roman or Greek categorizations.

This overall strategy of Josephus is spelled out quite clearly in his introductory contrast of Egyptian and Judean customs, which he simultaneously uses to explain why Egyptians, out of envy, choose to malign Judeans and to put Judeans low down in their own ethnic rankings.

⁵³ See *C. Ap.* 2.28–31; and Kenneth Jones, “The Figure of Apion in Josephus’ *Contra Apionem*,” *JSJ* 36 (2005): 278–315.

It was Egyptians who initiated the slanders [βλασφημιῶν] against us ... neither admitting the arrival of our ancestors in Egypt as it actually took place, nor truthfully recounting their departure [ἔξοδον]. They had many reasons for hate and envy [τοῦ μισεῖν καὶ φθονεῖν]: ... Our piety [εὐσεβείας] differs from what is customary among them to the same degree that the nature of God stands removed from irrational animals [ζῴων ἀλόγων]. It is their common ancestral tradition [πάτριον] to consider these [animals] gods, but they differ from one another in the honors they pay them in their own particular ways. Empty-headed [κοῦφοι] and utterly mindless [ἀνόητοι] people, accustomed from the beginning to depraved opinions about gods, they did not succeed in imitating the dignity of our discourses about God [θεολογίας], but envied us [ἐφθόνησαν] when they saw us emulated by many. Some of their number reached such a level of mindlessness and pettiness [ἀνοίας καὶ μικροψυχίας] that they did not hesitate to contradict even their ancient records. But they also did not notice, in the blindness of their passion [τυφλότητος τοῦ πάθους], that what they wrote contradicted themselves. (C. Ap. 2.223–226; trans. adapted from Barclay, *Against Apion*)

Since this is Josephus's overall summary regarding those infected by the thinking of "Egyptians" (principally Apion but also many others—Manetho, Chaeremon, and Lysimachus among them), we need not recite many other examples of "Egyptian" accusations against Judeans from the remainder of the work. The point here is that Josephus clearly struggles to gain a higher position for his own people or that people's ancestors by distancing that people from another subordinated ethnic group (Egyptians), a group that is pushed lower down on (or off) the ladder using commonly shared stereotypes from a Greek or Roman hegemonic perspective.

Josephus aligns himself with the Greek and Roman disdain for Egyptians and their ancestral customs, particularly regarding worship of animals. He also aligns himself or his people with both Romans and Greeks in other ways that are detrimental to the status of Egyptians. This can be seen when he speaks positively of the Roman imperial tendency to disallow native Egyptians from having citizen rights—whether Alexandrian (i.e., Greek) or Roman (C. Ap. 2.41)—and when he juxtaposes Judean disdain for Egyptians with the assertion that "we neither hate nor envy" Greeks (2.123). Here there are clear similarities with Philo. With such adoptions of hegemonic hierarchies, we are, in some respects, witnessing what Maia Kotrosits observes concerning "the more subtle though no less disquieting effects of imperial life: the allure of imperial prosperity, the way long-term colonial captivity changes the vectors of one's loyalties, and the ever thinning and sometimes non-existent line between resistance and accommodation."⁵⁴

Finally, Josephus is also careful to explain (at the end of this passage) that, although he earlier (in the first section) used Egyptian records as reliable signs of the antiquity of the Judeans, Egyptians like Apion (who struggled to place Judeans low on the ethnic ladder) did not fully understand their own records. An accurate reading of Egyptian records, he claims, would establish the superiority of Judeans

⁵⁴Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, 12.

and Judean ways. The final section of Josephus's *Against Apion* then positively portrays the superior Judean people, who, contrary to claims by Apion and others, follow their own customs more faithfully than any other people (2.150). Judeans, Josephus argues, put forward a model for other peoples—including the “wisest of the Greeks”—to follow, a model that points to Judeans’ being placed above Greeks on the ethnic ladder (*C. Ap.* 2.168, 281–286, 295; cf. Philo, *Mos.* 2.19–20).

IV. CONCLUSION

Josephus, like Philo and Paul in some respects, both adopts and subverts certain elements of Greek and Roman ethnic rankings. Despite common ethnic identifications, each of these authors lived in a different context. Philo’s time in Alexandria at the peak of tensions between Greeks, Egyptians, and Judeans no doubt played a role in the urgency with which he navigated and sometimes subverted categorizations of Judeans. Likewise in the diaspora, Paul was faced with what he considered a call to include non-Judean peoples within a movement devoted to the Israelite God, and yet, in a less urgent manner, he also demonstrated the mechanisms involved in both reacting to hegemonic categorizations and asserting the superiority of his own people, Israelites or Judeans. We do not know whether the Greeks and others Paul taught in various locales in Greece, Macedonia, and Asia Minor likewise struggled with his ethnic categorizations and placement of Israelites at the pinnacle. Josephus was a descendant of a priestly family of Jerusalem and ultimately found himself active within elite literary circles in Rome. There one of his primary concerns was to establish the antiquity and, therefore, legitimacy of his own people through literary production. Josephus’s *Against Apion*, with its stress on identifying “Egyptians” as a principal source of negative categorizations of Judeans, shows that Josephus was very much aware of the sort of ethnic rivalries that Philo faced on the ground in Alexandria.

At the same time, all three were faced with certain widely disseminated and somewhat consistent hegemonic hierarchies that led them to react in broadly similar ways, though varying in specifics. On the whole, these Judean authors sometimes engage in ethnic categorizations that echo those of elite Greeks and Romans, and at other times they go in different directions, all of this depending on the social or rhetorical situation at hand. Thus, this analysis of roughly contemporary Judeans suggests at least two strategies: one in which hegemonic categorizations were employed or adapted and the other in which clear alternatives to dominant hierarchies were presented. Such strategies were commonly adopted by ethnic minorities in the ancient Mediterranean as they navigated a landscape where, like them, members of other subordinated groups sought to clearly define the people with whom they identified in a way that established a more favorable position for that people in relation to others.