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# “They spend time upon the Earth, but hold their citizenship in Heaven”: Wandering and the Construction of Christian Identity in the *Epistle to Diognetus*

CHARLES A. CASTANON

The *Epistle to Diognetus* (henceforth referred to as *Epistle*) is a Christian apology from the second-century A.D. that sets forth two primary goals as its mission statement: to explain the Christians’ “reverence for God” and to explain both why and how “this new people or habit of life” had come into being at this particular moment in history.<sup>1</sup> But explanations and defenses require definitions to be effective, and the apologetic literature of the second-century can be seen just as much as a struggle to define Christian identity as a struggle to defend it. The *Epistle* is unique, however, in the fact that it does not seek to defend Christianity in the ways that other early apologetic works do. These other early Christian apologies construct their defenses of Christianity around an appropriation of Jewish or Greco-Roman culture—they insist that Christianity is the true realization of Judaism or of the writings of the pagan philosophers and the poets, seeking to root their new religion in established traditions. The *Epistle* does precisely the opposite, and this is where I propose that it comes into the landscape of early Christian literature. This work does not attempt to appropriate the traditions of either the pagans or the Jews but rather goes to great lengths to separate from these traditions. It attempts to modify the common perceptions of peoplehood as put forth by ancient historians such as Herodotus and Tacitus and seeks to locate Christian identity paradoxically within their status as wanderers. In doing this, the work implicitly provides a new framework for Christians to use in defining their identity as a people, one that emphasizes what they lack and how they differ from other traditions over how they are similar to those traditions.

The *Epistle* has been primarily interpreted as an agonistic and competitive text within the context of the Second Sophistic, an era (traditionally dated from the time of Nero to c. 230 A.D) that saw the resurgence of sophistry and a longing to return to the classical standards of Attic oratory. Benjamin Dunning, the most recent scholar to suggest this, says the following: “Christian identity

in which Christians assume their alien status by not only complying with the norms of their surrounding cultural context, but in fact excelling in them above and beyond social expectations.”<sup>2</sup> While these assertions are certainly not incorrect, they draw attention away from the focal point of the *Epistle* that aims to construct Christian identity around the idea of wandering. The competitive aspect pulled from a reading of the text is secondary to the construction of a working Christian identity, which the work accomplishes by modifying the ways that the ancients typically imagined peoplehood. This examination of the *Epistle* is split into four parts. Part one aims to establish a basic generalization about how the ancients thought about and conceptualized identity and peoplehood, while acknowledging the complexity inherent in dealing with such a topic. Part two examines the struggle of early Christianity in the second-century to establish its identity and a few of the ways that early Christians attempted to make sense of their identity in relationship to both Judaic and Greco-Roman thought. Part three looks at how the *Epistle* breaks from the other Christian attempts to establish identity by divorcing itself from both the Jews and the Greeks and attempting to locate its identity within the Christian’s status as a wanderer and resident-alien. Finally, part four concludes the examination and provides closing remarks on the idea of peoplehood as found in the *Epistle*.

### **Part I: “Peoplehood” in Antiquity**

A basic understanding of peoplehood is needed before one can understand the way that the *Epistle* uses the idea of wandering to establish an identity for Christians. There were many words used to describe people groups in ancient Greek. Some of the most common of these were *genos*, *ethnos*, and *laos*—but none of these had an exclusive or fixed meaning, and many were used interchangeably. Jonathan Hall effectively describes the complexities and difficulties that we encounter when dealing with “peoplehood” in antiquity:

Although the English words ‘ethnic’ and ‘ethnicity’ are derived from the Greek *ethnos* (plural, *ethne*) even the most cursory survey of the ancient sources is sufficient to demonstrate that *ethnos* could embrace a wider variety of meanings than simply ‘ethnic group’. While it certainly can describe groups of people, its use does not appear to be strictly circumscribed in any defined sociological sense.<sup>3</sup>

The reality of the situation is that ancient discussions of peoplehood were nuanced and not as concrete as the ancient writers would have us believe.

The question of what characteristics made a people a people was a pertinent issue among the ancients themselves. Herodotus of Halicarnassus is often seen as the ancient writer who made the first attempt to establish definitional characteristics regarding a people. He sets forth his definition in the middle of his account of the Persian wars, placing it in the mouth of an Athenian citizen responding to Spartan concerns that the Athenians were about to Medize. The Athenian replies thus:

There are many great things that stand in our way of so doing even if we wanted to; there are, first and greatest, the shrines of the gods and their images, burned and destroyed; it lies upon us of necessity to avenge these to the uttermost rather than make terms with him who did these things; and then there is our common Greekness: we are one in blood and one in language; those shrines of the gods belong to us all in common, and the sacrifices in common, and there are our habits, bred of a common upbringing. It would be indecent that the Athenians should prove traitors to all these (Hdt. 8.144, trans. Grene)

The response is grounded first and foremost in the Athenians’ duty to avenge the shrines of the gods that had been ruthlessly destroyed by the Persians—a natural response that would have been nothing out of the ordinary in the Greek mindset. What is striking about this passage, however, is the idea that Herodotus puts forth of “common Greekness” and how the Athenian uses this as evidence of their loyalty to the Greek cause. The Spartans can trust that the Athenians will not betray them on multiple accounts: shared blood, a shared tongue, shared gods and sacrificial practices, and shared customs. In addition to these, there was one more aspect that Herodotus consistently used to define different people groups: shared land. Boundaries and borderlines were pivotal in Herodotus’ accounts of people and helped him to contrast the different people groups that he observed.<sup>4</sup> As already mentioned, there was no clear rubric for defining a people in antiquity, and efforts to establish a crystal clear definition of peoplehood may be fleeting—but based on the general patterns that occur in ancient discussions of race and ethnicity, we can delineate two descriptive

categories of peoplehood: culture (the language, customs, worship, etc.) and land (physical places associated with the people).

This broad outline for thinking about peoplehood can be seen in the later historical writings of Tacitus, a Roman historian who wrote during the latter part of the first-century A.D. into the first two decades of the second-century. Tacitus begins to chronicle the siege of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 A.D., but concedes that he ought to describe the origins of the city before he relates its downfall. He first describes the customs of the Jewish people themselves, mentioning their abstinence from pork, their inclination to spend the Sabbath day in rest, their numerous fasts, and their sacrifices of rams and oxen. He continues, saying “whatever their origin, these rites are maintained by their antiquity: the other customs of the Jews are base and abominable, and owe their persistence to their depravity (Hist. 5.5).” Tacitus relates these practices both because they contribute to his larger understanding of the culture of the Jews (even if that culture is something that he personally finds revolting) and because they have been a long-established part of that culture.<sup>5</sup> After expressing his opinions on the degeneracy of the Jews, he describes the physical attributes of Judea itself, paying special attention to the borders, the rivers running through it, the climate, and the resources it produces. His description of the Jewish people relies as much on their ancestral customs as it does on their physical and ancestral homeland, since both play a role in giving a complete picture of who the Jews are as a people. In antiquity, physical land was just as pivotal to the formation of identity as culture was.

## **Part II: The Struggle to Define Christian Identity in the Second-Century**

These broad ideas of what constituted a people in the ancient world can help us to understand the struggle of second-century Christians to understand and define their identity. In the first-century, Christians had been able to root their identity within the larger tradition of Judaism, identifying themselves as a subset of that religion, namely Jews who had come to accept the Gospel message of Christ. Mark Nanos describes this phenomenon:

[In Paul’s time]...Christ-followers were still identifying themselves in Israelite/Jewish terms based on covenant affiliation with the one God who created a people from Abraham’s descendants. Those who shared

Paul’s commitment to Christ were addressed and discussed, in terms of ethnicity, as Jews or non-Jews/Greeks, Israelites or members from the other “nations” ...circumcised or foreskinned, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Christianity was never a static entity, however, and had changed much in the decades between the letters of Paul and the writings of the second-century Church. Christianity had slowly but surely, by its development of doctrine and theology, separated itself from the Jewish origins to which it had tightly clung in the years after its inception. This divorce from Judaism consequently meant a divorce from the ability to use the culture and the land of the Jews in their search for identity as well. The Christians had neither an ancestral homeland nor ancestral customs and had to figure out new ways to give roots to their identity. Some early Christians sought to solve this problem by anchoring Christianity within the traditions of both pagans and Jews. Justin Martyr gives us one example of this in his *First Apology*:

Moses is more ancient than all the Greek writers. And everything that both philosophers and poets have said concerning the immortality of the soul or punishments after death, or contemplation of heavenly things, or doctrines like these, they have received such hints from the prophets as have enabled them to understand and expound these things (1. Apol. 44, trans. Barnard).

Martyr seeks to defend Christianity’s lack of ancestral culture by establishing it in relation to both Judaism and Greek intellectual culture. His logic is as follows: Greek intellectual culture stole its ideas from Judaism, and Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism—therefore Christianity by extension holds an ancestral culture, one that is in fact more ancestral and venerable than that of the Greeks and Romans. Martyr explicitly claims notable figures from both sides as Christians without Christ (whom he sees as the *logos*).

They who lived with the *logos* are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and the people like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham and Ana-

nias and Asarias and Misael, and Elias, and many others (1 Apol. 46, trans. Barnard).

Martyr is not alone in using this tactic. Other early Christian writers such as Athenagoras, Tertullian, and Minucius Felix employ the same appropriation of Jewish and pagan thought to root Christian identity within a set of ancestral customs and to locate Christian identity as the fulfillment of those ancestral customs.

It is striking, however, that Martyr and most of the other early Christian texts concern themselves either in passing or not at all with the other side of the peoplehood coin, the Christians' lack of a physical homeland. The *Epistle* not only addresses this issue but does so in a way that flips the apologetic discussion on its head: it does not attempt to appropriate the Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions but tries to depart from them altogether; furthermore, the text seeks to establish the homeland of the Christians in heaven, attempting to define Christian identity in terms of resident-aliens and foreigners who are wandering until it is time for them to enter their true homeland.

### **Part III: *The Epistle to Diognetus*: Christian Identity through Wandering**

Our examination of the *Epistle* begins in its fifth chapter, when it begins to discuss the identity of the Christians. The text has at this point isolated itself from both the Jewish tradition and the Greco-Roman tradition. The pagans make idols out of lifeless materials and proceed to worship them as gods, but the Jews are no better in that they both perform unnecessary animal sacrifices and fret over inane concerns such as not working on the Sabbath, circumcision of the flesh, and continual feasting and mourning. From what, then, does the work argue that Christians draw their identity? It first aims to disjoint the traditional conceptions of peoplehood as we saw related in Herodotus and Tacitus: "For Christians have been distinguished from the rest of men neither by land nor language nor customs. Neither do they anywhere live in their own cities or employ some changed way of speaking or practice some remarked life (5.1-2)." Contrary to what one would expect, the Christians do not find their identity in an ancestral land (*gē*) or in their own special language (*phonē*) or even in their customs (*ethesi*). The *Epistle* further elaborates on each of these

categories—in addition to lacking these, they do not even have their own cities, dialects, or remarkable customs in their way of life. It continues:

But living in cities both Greek and barbarian (as each one has been assigned) and following the customs of these places in what they wear and in what they eat and in the rest of their manner of life, they show forth the marvelous and confessedly unique state of their own citizenship. They live in their own countries but as resident aliens. They have a share in all things as citizens, yet submit to all things as foreigners. Every foreign country is theirs, and every country is foreign (5.3-5).

Following the earlier line of reasoning, Christians are here portrayed as nothing special on account of the way that they conduct their lives—but the work quickly puts forth the real reason as to why they are different from the Jews and the Greeks. This separation is rooted in the nature of their *politeia* (citizenship), which the text characterizes as both marvelous and contrary to what one would expect.<sup>7</sup> This unordinary *politeia* is exemplified in the next few lines through a set of contrasts: this citizenship means that they live in their own countries as resident aliens (*paroikoi*), and that they participate in all things as citizens, but endure all things as foreigners (*xenoi*). The status of the early Christian is one of contradiction—he is the one who is simultaneously a member of his homeland and a resident alien, simultaneously a citizen and a resident-alien, simultaneously an insider and an outsider. This contradictory existence extends even to the places in which they live: every country that is foreign to them belongs to them, and nevertheless every country is foreign to them.

The *Epistle* then goes on to make sense of these contradictions and explain them: “they spend time upon the earth, but hold their citizenship in heaven (5.9).”<sup>8</sup> Their *politeia* is one that is not realized in any earthly city or land, but rather holds its true value in heaven. While Christians do indeed live upon the earth and follow the customs of the cities in which they live, their status is one that is rooted in heaven. The text later places this newly established identity in stark contrast with both sides of the traditional dichotomy: “They are warred upon by the Jews as foreigners and are persecuted by the Greeks: and those who hate them are not able to give a reason for their hatred (5.17).”<sup>9</sup> Since the *Epistle* has established the fact that Christians do not hold citizenship in any



earthly city (despite living in these earthly cities), it now distinctly separates them from both the Jews and the Greeks. But the work does not stop here—it takes the comparison even further and firmly creates a workable Christian identity that is found in wandering.

The *Epistle*, having thoroughly discussed the treatment of Christians in the world and having constructed an identity around citizenship in heaven, gives an extended metaphor comparing the relationship between body and soul to the relationship between Christians and the world. It tells us the following:

To speak simply, the very thing which the soul is in the body, this thing is what the Christians are in the world. The soul has been spread throughout all the limbs of the body, and the Christians are spread throughout the cities of the world. And although the soul lives in the body, it is not at all of the body—so too the Christians live in the world, but are not of the world (6.1-3).

The text is explicit in the comparison of Christians to the soul, using both the intensive relative pronoun *oper* (the very thing which) and the demonstrative pronoun *touto* (this thing) to make certain that the connection is made. It then claims that the soul is spread throughout the body just as the Christians are throughout the cities of the world and further elaborates by telling us that both live in their respective vessels but are not “of” them. There are two things to note here: the verb and the way in which the final statements are worded. The verb translated here as “live” is from the verb *oikeō*, and is the same one used to refer to the cities in which the Christians lived as resident-alien. The meaning here, as previously, indicates dwelling or living in but not necessarily belonging to. This semantic connotation is made clear by the affirmation that the soul is not of the body and that the Christian is not of the world. The text construes both of these statements by using the preposition *ek* with a genitive, indicating the source from which these do (or in this case, do not) come.<sup>10</sup> The *Epistle* takes every pain to emphasize that the Christians are entirely different from the world that they occupy.

However, the work is not content to stop here. It continues a few lines later:

Now the soul has been confined in the body, yet the soul itself holds the body together. So too are the Christians held as in a prison of the world, yet so too do they themselves hold the world together. The soul, which is immortal, lives in a perishable body. So too do the Christians wander among perishable things, awaiting the unperishable in heaven (6.7-8).

The Epistle here gives its most conspicuous construction of Christian identity. Just as the immortal soul lives (*katoikei*) in a perishable body, the Christians wander (*paroikousin*) among perishable things but await the unperishable in heaven. We saw the latter word used of Christians in the last section, when the text mentioned that Christians live in their own lands as resident-alien (*paroikoi*). It is significant that we here see the verbal form of the word in the text for the first time at such a critical point in the argument. This constructs the full picture of Christians as wanderers by tying together the comparisons made in section five with the metaphor related in section six. The text uses the extended metaphor of soul and body to complete its definition of Christian identity: Christians are Christians not only due to the fact that their *politeia* resides in heaven but also due to the fact that they live their lives as outsiders and wanderers and resident-alien, awaiting the time when their heavenly citizenship is actualized.

#### **Part IV: Concluding Thoughts on the Epistle and Christian Peoplehood.**

It is evident that pilgrimage and wandering were central themes in early Christian discourse. By the time of the *Epistle*, nearly 100 years had passed since Paul exhorted his Christian brothers and sisters to abstain from the ways of those whose minds were set on earthly things, and since he had reminded them that their own citizenship was in heaven.<sup>11</sup> The Church, faced with the idea that Christ might not return as quickly as they had thought, needed a practical way to come to terms with their complex standing in the Roman Empire. I have argued that the *Epistle* functions to this end, seeking to locate Christian identity within their status as wanderers in foreign countries, who lack a physical homeland but hold citizenship in their heavenly homeland. The aforementioned construction of Christian identity within wandering modifies the traditional understanding of peoplehood in antiquity, allowing Christians to firmly root their identity (paradoxically) in their lack of an ancestral culture and an

ancestral homeland. Neither can it be overlooked that the text is constructing this identity within the context of the second-century, when Christians were separating themselves from both the Judaic and Greco-Roman tradition and attempting to figure out who they were as a people. While non-believers may struggle and be unsuccessful at finding the ancestral homeland of the Christians, the Christian ultimately knows that his homeland lies in heaven, and that he is only a wanderer among the naturally foreign cities of the world. This construction is one that is rarely found within the corpus of second-century apologetic—thus it only makes sense that the Epistle is to be read and understood within the context of the second-century search for Christian identity.

## NOTES

- 1 “θεοσέβειαν” and “καινὸν τοῦτο γένος ἢ ἐπιτήδευμα” respectively. Reference to the Greek text will be given when it is relative to the understanding of the text or to the formation of my argument. The translations, if not indicated otherwise, are mine.
- 2 Benjamin Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners: Self as Other in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 77.
- 3 Jonathan Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 34.
- 4 For an excellent example of how Herodotus uses space and boundaries in conceptualizing the *Histories*, see Francois Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*.
- 5 Of course, Herodotus constantly does the same in his *Histories*, noting the various customs of the people he records, even if they do make him uneasy or uncomfortable.
- 6 Mark D. Nanos, “To the Churches within the Synagogues of Rome,” in *Reading Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. Jerry L. Sumney (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 11.
- 7 θαυμαστήν καὶ ὁμολογουμένως παράδοξον... τὴν κατάστασιν τῆς ἑαυτῶν πολιτείας.
- 8 ἐπὶ γῆς διατρίβουσιν, ἀλλ’ ἐν οὐρανῷ πολιτεύονται.
- 9 ὑπὸ Ἰουδαίων ὡς ἀλλόφυλοι πολεμοῦνται καὶ ὑπὸ Ἑλλήνων διώκονται· καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν τῆς ἔχθρας εἰπεῖν οἱ μισοῦντες οὐκ ἔχουσιν.
- 10 A “genitive of source,” to talk in grammatical terms.
- 11 Philippians 3:19-20.