Terry Donaldson has brought to the fore an important concept that influences the way scholars conceive of early Christian origins, especially with regard to the problematic category “Gentile.” My work focuses on the way existing gentile or non-Jewish identities continue within the Christ-movement.1 Obviously, Donaldson’s topic has significance for my larger research program. For example, can something continue in the first century, if it really did not exist in the first place? So, it would be wise for me to engage his claim concerning whether there was a discernible gentile Christ-movement identity (a so-called Gentile Christianity) in the mid-first century.

First, it is accurate to point out that there really was no Gentile (big ‘G’) Christianity in the first century.2 Part of the problem is that the underlying term, τὰ ἔθνη represents a somewhat ubiquitous concept that really does not represent a label that anyone in the first century would use for self-identification—or does it?3 Donaldson is

---

1 Tucker 2010; Tucker 2011.
2 Mitchell 2006: 105. Here I’m in agreement with Donaldson’s four categories of usage for the term, Donaldson notes that “several senses of ἔθνη are present in the NT (and other early Christian literature): [1] ‘nations,’ used in a generic sense that includes Israel; [2] nations other than that of the Jews; [3] non-Jewish individuals; [4] what non-Jewish Christ-believers were before but are no longer.” (Donaldson 2011: 20) I would, however, expand it to include one that sees it as a term describing a group’s previous identity and the transformation that should be occurring to that identity “in Christ.” My understanding of Gentile Christianity follows Boyarin (2004: 29), who defines it “in a sort of subtechnical sense to refer to Christian converts from among non-Jews (and their descendants) who have neither a sense of genealogical attachment to this historical, physical people of Israel (Israel according to the flesh), nor an attachment (and frequently the exact opposite of one) to the fleshly practices of that historical community.” Cited also in Willitts 2011: 144.
correct that the term “Gentile Christianity” in the research framework of F.C. Baur, and those that follow his lead is problematic. There never was a single “Gentile Christianity” that was identifiable in the everyday experience of Christ-followers that could function as the polemical partner to so-called “Jewish Christianities.” The local expressions of Christ-movement social identity were simply too diverse. So, calling into question the uncritical use of the label “Gentile” as a way to refer to non-Jewish expressions of Christ belief is quite an important reminder for those writing on early Christian origins. Furthermore, based on his survey of Roman texts, one might be required to say “non-Roman expressions” as well, though it would seem that the Jewish perspective would be determinative for the NT usage, and the Roman usage for issues of cultural translation.

Second, it seems the problem is that “Gentile” functions today for English speakers as a term that defines the non-Jewish part of humanity, and that it is unlikely that a better term is likely to emerge. Central to Donaldson’s inquiry into the use of επισκόπησις is that the idea of “nation” is present but often occluded in translations, especially when the English gloss “Gentile” is used. To substantiate this claim, Donaldson provides a brief survey of the way Roman authors used τὰ επισκόπησις for their ideological purposes. This

in Christ could be described as “honored non-Jews.” This may be a way forward, but remains to be fully developed. See Kahl 2010: 39, for a consideration of the confusing category of “honorary Jews.” This term was originally in Stendahl1976: 5. Cited in Kahl 2010: 313 n. 20. See also Fredriksen 2007: 7. It could also refer to a non-Roman. Lopez 2008: xii, 4. BDAG 276 cites Appian, Bell. Civ. 2.26.99; 2.28.107, as an example of the way a Roman could refer to a foreign people group.


Horrell (2008: 185-203) has even called into question the use of the label “Pauline Christianity” in that it is not fully clear that those local assemblies that were founded by Paul could in any significant way be seen as Pauline (i.e., embodying a social identity formed by Paul’s rhetorical constructs).

I might even suggest that Donaldson should go a bit further and call for the non-use of the term Gentile Christianity until the second century at the earliest and more likely the fourth century.

Thanks to Joel Willitts for that reminder concerning the determinative context. Runesson suggests that what is needed is a discussion of emic/etic terminology. (Both from personal communication)

brings to the fore an interesting point with regard to cultural translation and the way this discourse would have originally been interpreted.\textsuperscript{10} For example, as mentioned by Lopez, the Romans could use τὰ ἔθνη to reinforce the defeated status of those whom they have subjugated.\textsuperscript{11} This is most evident in \textit{Res Gestae}.\textsuperscript{12} In this way, though τὰ ἔθνη functioned, for some Jewish authors,\textsuperscript{13} as a way to organize humanity, it appears that the Romans could do this as well. However, this raises an important identity question—if non-Jewish members of the Christ-movement heard its Jewish leaders referring to them as τὰ ἔθνη, and they also were aware of similar discourse used by the Romans, then does this not bring to the fore their subaltern identity status?\textsuperscript{14}

Even though there are questions as to whether the non-Jewish members of the Christ-movement would have referred to themselves this way—it does not follow that such chronic social categorization was not functioning as a subgroup label for them, one that we know Christ-followers from a later time embodied (and we should at least pause and ask whether this suggests connections with earlier social identification by some as gentiles, who belong to Christ).\textsuperscript{15} The concept of “chronic social identifications” comes from Turner’s Self-categorization theory, and contends that the continual communication of a group identifier may “exert a secondary influence on one’s

\textsuperscript{10} Cf. Ehrensperger 2010; Runesson 2010; Stanley 2011.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Res Gestae} 3, 25-33.
\textsuperscript{13} Yee (2005: 74 n. 8) lists the following: “Gen. 49.10; Exod. 33.13; Deut. 4.19; Rom. 3:29; 9:30-1; 10.19; 11.11-12, 25; 15:8-12; Gal. 3.28; Eph. 3.1-10; 4.17; also Tobit 1.10-12; Judith 4.12; 1 Macc. 1.11-15; 5.63; 13.41; 2 Macc. 1.27; 4.9; 14.38; 3 Macc. 6.9; 2 Esd. 4.23; 9.7; also \textit{T. Sim.} 7.2; \textit{T. Jud.} 22.2; \textit{T. Aser} 7.3; \textit{T. Jos.} 19.9; \textit{T. Benj.} 3.8; \textit{Apc. Sedr} 14.5.”
\textsuperscript{14} That is, as persons of inferior status, from both a Jewish and Roman perspective. See Arnal (2008: 75, 100-1) for a discussion of what occurs when this subaltern identity is recognized and acted upon.
immediate experience.”  

If we add to this, findings from Brewer’s optimal distinctiveness theory that chronic “high levels of identification with specific groups” results from the equally important need for “inclusion and assimilation” as well as “differentiation,” then it is likely that הָעַרְתָּנִי became at least a secondary group identifier describing those who were worshipping the God of Israel without becoming Jews.  

The same could be said for the term “Christianity” that initially served as an outgroup label, but was eventually internalized and ‘owned’ by the broader movement. However, it should be noted that Townsend contends that the original use of ὁι του χριστου in 1 Cor 15:23 and Gal 5:24 functioned as a self-description for “Gentile Christians,” and her argument requires engagement for those who wish to reserve this label for a later period. So, at least we can say that, just as “Christianity” is a self-identification label that should be reserved for a later period, likewise, we should consider “Gentile” (capital ‘G’) as a label for a later period, as well. A period when, as described by Boyarin, when Christians not only hijacked the “Old Testament” but hijacked the “New Testament.”

This discussion brings to the fore our presuppositions with regard to the nature of the Christ-movement at this early stage. Should we understand the Christ-movement as still within Judaism (e.g., Nanos and Runesson’s Apostolic Judaism)? While this is

---

18 Townsend 2008: 215-16, 223. Thus, even though the Latin term Christiani, was imposed from the outside, it was based on the non-Jew’s own self-identification.
19 Not to mention further nuancing the use of “Christianity” with regard to the “-ity” as a way to describe social (and religious) identity prior to the parting of the ways. Thanks to David Rudolph for this insight (in personal communication).
20 Boyarin 2011: np. We start to see this in Ignatius (see Runesson 2008: 84; Townsend 2008: 228 n. 46).
21 Nanos and Runesson: Forthcoming. Willitts (2011: 144) suggests no attachment to the physical people of Israel is an indicator of Gentile Christianity, so, that conclusion that the Christ-movement was embedded within Judaism at this stage argues against a separate identity for Gentile Christianity.
helpful—does this not indicate that these non-Jews were converting then to some form of Judaism? Obviously this raises the question as to what these non-Jews were converting to. What was there to convert to—a non-Torah observant Judaism? I would suggest that these gentiles were not converting to Judaism, but were identified as “righteous gentiles” or “honored non-Jews,” with τὰ ἔθνη functioning as one sub-group identity node. This would then suggest that we retain the gentile label, since they were, “[g]entile actors on a Jewish stage.”

Donaldson’s paper is concerned with τὰ ἔθνη as a self-identifier for non-Jews within the Christ-movement and not primarily with what Paul (or other NT writers) thought about the use of the term. Thus, it is appropriate to focus my remarks on this idea. First, my work focuses on social identity, rather than individual identity, and thus, I would agree with Donaldson that “Gentile” should be called into question as a personal identity label (at least as a primary identifier). However, can the same be said for gentile as a social identity label? That is, a group label rather than a marker of personal identity.

Donaldson notes that we have no evidence that individuals referred to themselves as τὰ ἔθνη and thus it is not a viable label for use within the Christ-

---

23 See fn. 3 above for references. This is a way to indicate a distinct gentile social identity without predating a new religion.
26 Defined by Tajfel (1978: 63) as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his [sic] knowledge of his [sic] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.” Willitts (2011: 144) suggests “ethnicity” and “practices are key factors in defining...who is a Gentile Christian.” I would suggest a more robust consideration of social identity and the converse of the other indicators mentioned by Casey 1991: 12.
27 Donaldson ; Elliott and Reasoner 2011: 12 “The capitalized English word Gentile does not correspond to any specific identity in the ancient world.” Yes if by this we mean an ethnic identity, no if by this we mean a label that could be internalized (i.e., non-Jewish worshipper of Israel’s God; a member of the defeated nations). Nor am I denying an internal-external dialectic Cf. de Brestian 2005: 291; Jenkins 1996: 20.
movement. This raises the question: would we expect to see this in the texts we have? Ethnographic discourse is written from the ideological perspective of the author and at best we have access to the author’s interpretation of the narrative character's identity. Furthermore, if the non-Jew’s subaltern status is taken into account—can subalterns speak? Thus, we can acknowledge that no scriptural actors refer to themselves in this manner, but is there another way to determine if, using Donaldson’s category of gentile self-identification, this was a salient identity node in the first century? Casey suggests that there is.

Casey refers to eight Jewish identity factors during the Second Temple period and the absence of these would indicate the degree to which a person would be considered a non-Jew. These eight include: “ethnicity, scripture, monotheism, circumcision, Sabbath observance, dietary laws, purity laws and major festivals.” He suggests that “anyone who scores 0/8 is clearly a Gentile, and would be universally perceived as Gentile in the ancient world.” If we consider Casey’s framework for identifying gentile identity, combined with Luomanen’s “indicators of Jewish Christianity,” then it is likely that some of the non-Jewish Christ-followers did think of themselves as gentiles since they were part of a community that: worshipped the God of

---

29 Gruen 2011: 159-62. Yee (2005: 74 n. 9) points out that the focus here is not on ethnographic research in the contemporary sense, but “the description of the characteristics of an ethnic group from the perspective of another.” I would suggest social rather than “ethnic” but the same point remains.
30 Spivak 2010: 23. It would seem they speak with their bodies. So, bodily practices would be examples of discernible gentile identity within the first century Christ-movement. Ehrensperger (2011: 15-17) suggests that the Lord’s supper is another example of discernible gentile identity emerging within the Christ-movement.
32 Casey 1991: 12-13. He continues (1991: 13) “it would make no difference to this if such a person wrote a *midrash* or contributed to a collection for the poor in Jerusalem.” While Casey may be overstating the way in which this would have been universally recognized it does bring to the fore the ‘lived’ or everyday experience as a means for discerning identity, rather than only linguistic categories.
Israel, followed a person who identified himself as Israel’s messiah, in some cases were instructed by a person who claimed to be their (as members of the nations (Gal 1:15-16)) unique apostle (and addressed them as such (Rom 11:13)), or more broadly were taught by Jewish leaders of the Christ-movement who made a distinction between Jew and non-Jew even if they meant different things by the bifurcation.\(^{34}\) It would seem that this chronic social identification would have given rise to an identity node,\(^{35}\) a micoidentity,\(^{36}\) described as a “from the nations worshipper of the God of Israel.”\(^{37}\) So, Donaldson, while correctly wanting to set aside the label “Gentile Christianity” might want to consider keeping “gentile Christ-followers” as a salient social identity category, one that was open to local identity configurations in the mid-first century.\(^{38}\)

---

\(^{34}\) It is not clear that Paul shares the same division of humanity into binary categories that is evident in other “pre-Christian Jewish usage” (Donaldson 2011: 20). This sounds counter-intuitive since Paul appears to divide humanity into two categories: Jews and gentiles (Ioudaioi and non-Ioudaioi). Building on Stanley, it is not fully evident that “Paul conceived of ‘the nations’ in monolithic terms.” Second, first century Jews did not “routinely divide humanity into two camps without remainder.” Third, Paul’s ethnic discourse was “too varied and creative to support the assertion that he unreflectively adopted the worldview and terminology of his Jewish peers” (Stanley 2011: 119). See Stenschke (1999: 377-93) for Luke’s view, as well as, Wilson 1973: 29-58; Levine (1988: 28-30) for Matthew’s view and a discussion of gentile Christianity, and Slee 2003: 24-35. See Donaldson 1997: 249-60 on Paul’s apostleship.

\(^{35}\) See Bruce and Young 1986: 305-27. Their theory is helpful for the way cognitive processing brings an identity into salience.

\(^{36}\) As seen by some classicists within the Roman Empire. Woolf (2010: 196) notes that In Tacitus, *Germanica* 39, “Tacitus figured his Germani as just one variety of barbarian; they included the Suebi, themselves represented as some sort of super-tribe, which in turn included nested within it groups such as the Semnones, who were themselves divided into one hundred pagi.” Tacitus, *Germ*. 39: “The Semnones give themselves out to be the most ancient and renowned branch of the Suevi. Their antiquity is strongly attested by their religion. At a stated period, all the tribes of the same race assemble by their representatives in a grove consecrated by the auguries of their forefathers, and by immemorial associations of terror. Here, having publicly slaughtered a human victim, they celebrate the horrible beginning of their barbarous rite. Reverence also in other ways is paid to the grove. No one enters it except bound with a chain, as an inferior acknowledging the might of the local divinity. If he chance to fall, it is not lawful for him to be lifted up, or to rise to his feet; he must crawl out along the ground. All this superstition implies the belief that from this spot the nation took its origin, that here dwells the supreme and all-ruling deity, to whom all else is subject and obedient. The fortunate lot of the Semnones strengthens this belief; a hundred cantons [pagi] are in their occupation, and the vastness of their community makes them regard themselves as the head of the Suevic race.” For an expansive exposition of this text see Gruen 2011: 159-78.

\(^{37}\) Either, other than Israel, or the ones defeated by the Romans.

\(^{38}\) As a group whose ethnic identity continues to be salient, but who recognize themselves as part of the Jewish symbolic universe, writers and leaders of whom describe them as a unique social group from “the nations.”
By suggesting this I am not arguing for a universalistic understanding of “in Christ” social identity (i.e., the multi-ethnic national Roman discourse described in Donaldson’s paper). I am arguing for the opposite, that the existing social identities of all the members of the Christ-movement continued to retain their fundamental significance (at least in the first century). Thus, Jews should continue to relate to the God of Israel as Jews, and non-Jews as non-Jews. The application of this rule from 1 Cor 7:17-24, would result in diverse expressions of both Jewish and non-Jewish “in Christ” social identity. If we downplay the continuing significance of non-Jewish social identities within the Christ-movement, it would likely contribute to a downplaying of Jewish identities as well—thus reinforcing Baur’s view or the dominant contemporary interpretive tradition that sees no place (during the first century) for existing social identities in the so-called tertium quid of Christianity.

Donaldson is correct that there was no single “Gentile Christianity” in the mid-first century and scholars should discontinue its use so that they do not perpetuate this misunderstanding. The Christ-movement at this stage was a variant form of Judaism, existing within the synagogue community and Jewish sacred space, with local differentiations recognized. However, τὰ ἔθνη did exist as a distinct social identity for members of the defeated nations, and there were constant reminders of this identity in

---

41 It is also likely that the use of the label τὰ ἔθνη moved the Christ-movement along a parallel ideological path that contributed to the eventual alignment with the political power (or diminishing power) of Rome. See Schott 2008: 1-14. Donaldson (2006: 137) elsewhere considers Paul’s contribution to the development of an oikoumenē, which similarly describes the “church as a trans-local fellowship” something “constituting a third race.” See Osterloh (2008: 168-206) on oikoumenē.
43 This applied equally to Jews and non-Jews.
the urban context. Their subaltern status would have contributed to the development of an identity node that a term like τὰ ἔθνη could uniquely encapsulate and mutually reinforce. So, do we set aside the term “Gentile Christianity”? Yes, if by it we mean a monolithic social identity and set of practices clearly discernible and separate from the larger Jewish community in the first century; no, if by it we mean the continuation of localized, expressions, of social (even ‘national’) identity (and sets of practices), a micro-identity nested within the macro-identity of being “in Christ.” The various uses of τὰ ἔθνη created an opportunity for non-Jews (as members of the defeated nations) to create for themselves unique expressions of an “in Christ” social identity, in the spaces between Jewish and Roman discourses.

---

45 As non-Jewish and non-Roman, not to mention the mimicking of aspects of imperial discourse within the Christ-movement.  
46 What you were but also the transformation that should occur now that you are in Christ.  
47 Since this is one of the most explicit mentions of “nation” from my point of view rather than Donaldson’s, it should be noted that I follow Richter (2011: 18) who describes it “in its most basic and limited since of a community based upon natio: lineage and descent. The discursive practices of the nation are local insofar as they insist upon the cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and political discontinuities within the human community.” Avidov (2009: 177) notes that for the Romans the practices are the issue rather than the ethnic identity.  
48 And the macro-identity of the Jewish symbolic universe and Roman imperial ideology. On participation in Christ see Campbell 2010.
Bibliography


Boyarin, Daniel. “Mark and the Torah: A New Perspective.” Public Lecture, Department of Near Eastern Studies, the Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, the International Institute, the Department of History, and the Rackham Graduate School University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, October 27, 2011.


Ehrensperger, Kathy. “All Things are Lawful but Not All Things are Helpful – All Things are Lawful but not All Things Build Up (1 Cor 10.23) – Identity Formation in the Space Between.” Paper presented at the SNTS General Meeting 2011, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY.


________. “Myths and Facts about the So-Called Parting of the Ways between Judaism and Christianity in the first Five Centuries.” http://www.bilda.nu/Global/Bilda%20-%20SCSC/Dokument%20SCSC/F%C3%B6rel%C3%A4sningar/Myths%20of%20Parting%20of%20Ways;%20Article.pdf


