

DesiCrit in New Testament Interpretation

Paul's Ambiguous Identity in Acts

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Abstract

This article explores how biblical criticism is enriched through the analytical tool of DesiCrit, a dimension of critical race theory proposed by Vinay Harpalani. DesiCrit emphasizes the racial ambiguity of South Asian Americans and the malleability of their ascribed and asserted racial identities in different historical and social contexts, also called “microclimes.” Leveraging DesiCrit, I analyse how the book of Acts represents the ambiguity of Paul’s religious, national, and geographic identities in three distinct microclimes. In Damascus (Acts 9), the divine voice to Ananias selectively emphasizes Paul’s shared background in a large Greek diaspora city. On Paphos (Acts 13), two sets of double names communicate positive and negative forms of belonging: the name “Paul” reflects greater capital before Roman audiences, and the translation from “Bar-Jesus” to “Elymas” serves to distance a persecutory form of Judaism from the Judaism of the Way. Finally, in Jerusalem (Acts 21), a precarious social context leads to Paul’s ambiguity being construed negatively as a danger to the Roman military. Paul, however, is able to establish an alternative and less threatening identity. As Paul asserts *and* is ascribed varying social classifications, his ambiguity both increases and constrains his ability to control his self-representation.

Keywords

Acts, Paul, ambiguity, critical race theory, South Asian Americans

Introduction

Asian American biblical criticism has engaged biblical texts with a wide range of analytical tools, including conversations with Asian American scholarship and attention to modern Asian American contexts.¹ One potential and underexplored analytical tool is critical race theory (CRT), which originated in the field of law but has been employed in many other fields as well, including studies of early Christianity (Haley 2009, 27-29; Smith 2018, 45-49). For over four decades, CRT has contested the common

¹ For the various approaches to Asian American biblical interpretation, and to minoritized biblical interpretation more broadly, see for example, Foskett and Kuan (2006, xvi); Yee (2006, 156-159); Liew (2008, 7); Bailey, Liew, and Segovia (2009, 385); Segovia (2009, 279, 283, 310); Kim and Yang (2019).

notion that law is a neutral space, instead reckoning seriously with the ways that the legal system in the United States has codified racism against people of colour and African Americans in particular.² From its inception, CRT has included all people of colour in a broad coalition, but additional dimensions of CRT have also been developed with a focus on specific ethnic groups: LatCrit, with a Latinx focus; AsianCrit, with an Asian American focus; TribalCrit, with a Native American focus; and most recently, DesiCrit (Crenshaw 2002, 1350; Harpalani 2013, 86). DesiCrit was introduced by Vinay Harpalani in 2013 to focus on South Asian Americans—or Desis, a self-designation among some South Asian Americans—since South Asian Americans are often racialized differently than East Asian Americans and Southeast Asian Americans. Harpalani’s article emphasizes the racial ambiguity of South Asian Americans and the malleability of their ascribed and asserted racial identities in different historical and social contexts, also called “microclimes.” He extends his analysis to racial ambiguity in other groups and individuals, including multiracial people. Harpalani’s analysis problematizes the white/black binary, affirming the existence of individuals and groups outside these binary categories. At the same time, Harpalani does not disregard the continuing significance of this false binary, analysing how racialization can be transferred as racial “capital,” moving individuals and groups up or down the racial hierarchy. Harpalani’s attention to how racialization fluctuates in different microclimes is urgent in the current American context, as the COVID-19 pandemic impacts various racial and ethnic groups in ways that reflect both long-standing histories of oppression and brand-new global realities.

This article summarizes and then leverages DesiCrit to analyse how Acts represents Paul as a religiously, nationally, and geographically ambiguous diaspora Jew.³ The modern notion of race does not map directly onto any ancient notions. Nevertheless, when we attend to the way that modern racial categories are inherently unstable and frequently ambiguous, we can better appreciate how identities in antiquity could similarly be experienced unstably and ambiguously. In Acts, Paul both asserts and is

² For introductions to CRT, see for example, P. J. Williams (1991); Delgado and Stefancic (1993); Bell (1995); Crenshaw (2002); Delgado and Stefancic (2013, 2017).

³ Other scholars have attended to the complex identity of the character of Paul in Acts, although they have framed that complexity in slightly different terms. Justo L. González compares Paul’s experience as a Hellenistic Jew to the modern experiences of Hispanics in the United States; just as Paul was situated in between Gentiles and Judean Jews, Hispanics in the United States are situated in between Americans and Latin Americans (2001, 157-158). Rubén Muñoz-Larrondo draws on the postcolonial concepts of hybridity and mimicry to describe how Paul is a figure who is “almost, but not quite” in regards to particular identity categories (2012, 163-174). My analysis here does not disagree with González or Muñoz-Larrondo, but proposes another lens through which Paul’s identity can be richly described, i.e. through South Asian American experience as ambiguous and malleable in a hierarchical system. For Paul’s ethnic self-identification in his letters, see for example, Duling (2008); Stanley (2011); Concannon (2014). Taking a different angle of approach, there is also a wealth of scholarship on the rhetoric of ethnicity present in Paul’s writings.

ascribed varying identities in varying contexts, or “microclimes,” and binary categories are malleably transferred to his ambiguous identity in order to afford him more or less capital. This dynamic process is highly visible in the three passages of Acts that are analysed in this article. When a divine voice discloses elements of Paul’s identity to Ananias in Acts 9, Paul’s ambiguous geographic identity is tipped in favour of his diasporic roots, allowing him to stand in solidarity with Ananias in the diaspora city of Damascus. In Acts 13, Paul appears in Paphos with a curious Roman proconsul and an oppositional Jewish magician; two sets of name changes in the narrative establish that the name “Paul” reflects his opportunities for greater capital before Roman audiences, while the persecutory figure of Bar-Jesus/Elymas is to be viewed by the audience as unconnected to the mode of Jewishness pursued by Paul and Barnabas. Finally, during Paul’s encounter with a Roman tribune in Jerusalem (Acts 21), his ambiguous appearance leaves him vulnerable to being ascribed a negative identity, but also affords him the chance to make a strategic counterproposal, which assembles positive elements of his identity. Paul’s ambiguity both increases and constrains his ability to control his self-representation, helping him at some times and hindering him at others.

DesiCrit

Vinay Harpalani’s DesiCrit examines both the legal history of South Asian Americans in the United States and the documented narratives of South Asian American lives in order to understand how they have been ambiguously racialized for over a century. The region of South Asia includes such countries as India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives Islands (Harpalani 2013, 90). Although South Asian Americans are currently considered part of the larger category of Asian in the US Census, as well as in Asian American biblical criticism, they have both asserted *and* been ascribed a variety of different racial labels in varying social contexts. For instance, in the early 1900s, South Asian Americans were simultaneously called “Hindoos” in common parlance,⁴ “Caucasian” in pseudoscientific racial classification, and alternatively “white” or “not white” in legal immigration cases (Harpalani 2013, 122-123, 126, 127-133). The US Census classifications of South Asian Americans have also morphed over time: “Other: Non-White Asiatic/Hindu” (1910), “Hindu” (1920, 1930, 1940), “Other: Non-White/Asiatic Indian” (1950), “Other: Non-White/Hindu” (1960), “White” (1970), “Asian Indian” (1980, 1990), and now “Asian/Asian Indian” (2000, 2010) (Harpalani 2013, 134-137).⁵ These

⁴ “Hindoo” was a racial-religious term for South Asian Americans, created with the assumption that they were Hindu, although, in reality, most at that time were Sikh.

⁵ The 2010 Census also provided the option “Other Asian,” listing “Pakistani” as an example, breaking up South Asian Americans into those from India and those from other countries in South Asia. Harpalani was writing in 2013, prior to the 2020 Census, but on this most

classification debates drew on a variety of racializing factors, including religion, nationality, citizenship, skin colour, hair colour, physical features, class, and caste, as well as the majority opinions of the government, the scientific community, the legal community, and the general public, with the outcomes of these debates always in flux (Harpalani 2013, 122-137).

In addition to experiencing variable formal racialization, South Asian Americans have also been informally racialized in malleable ways. Harpalani, who is South Asian American, shares personal accounts of being teased in school as “Japanese Beetle!” in 1979 and “Saddam!” in 1991 (2013, 80-81). Both cases were instances of racial misidentification in different cultural atmospheres, the former in a time of economic competition with Japan and the latter in the middle of the first Persian Gulf War (Harpalani 2013, 80-81). Sometimes, such informal racialization is genuine misidentification, but at other times it is a conscious transference of the racial meanings of one group onto another. One instance of such transference took place in 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson cancelled visits from the Prime Minister of India and the President of Pakistan after they opposed the Vietnam War, explaining his decision by referring to them with the N-word (Harpalani 2013, 174-175). President Johnson’s remark covered up the inflammatory anti-war sentiment of these two world leaders by using a racial slur to portray them as black during the height of the civil rights movement, thereby transferring to them lower status within a racial hierarchy (Harpalani 2013, 175, 178). The accounts selected here from Harpalani’s analysis briefly demonstrate the range of ways in which South Asian American identity has been externally constructed and ascribed, formally and informally, whether through misunderstanding or intentional transference.

The other sense in which South Asian American racialization is malleable is that South Asian Americans have asserted, explicitly or implicitly, differing racial identities. Explicitly, in the 1990 Census, about seventeen percent of Asian Indian respondents identified themselves otherwise (e.g. as white, black, or American Indian), and the rate was even higher for Asian Indians born in the United States, with twenty-five percent identifying themselves as white and five percent identifying themselves as black (Morning 2001, 75-76). A high-profile instance of an explicit assertion of differing racial identity was the 2011 report that Nikki Haley (then governor of South Carolina) had listed her race as “white” on her 2001 voter registration (Harpalani 2013, 154). On the other hand, when differing racial assertion is implicit, it often relies on non-racial categories that are linked to racialization. Both Nikki Haley and Bobby Jindal (former governor of Louisiana), for instance, choose to use first names that are more readily recognized as Americanized (rather than Nimrata and Piyush, respectively), have converted to Christianity (from Sikhism and Hinduism, respectively),

recent census, again the broader category “Asian” is given, with the two available subcategories for South Asians being “Asian Indian” or “Other Asian.”

and have conservative political platforms in spite of the fact that, overwhelmingly, South Asian Americans are not politically conservative.⁶ This analysis is not to suggest that Nikki Haley and Bobby Jindal have made these personal choices with the intention of portraying themselves as white, but rather to observe how these successful political figures have asserted racialized characteristics that more readily allow transference of whiteness.

But South Asian Americans have also identified with non-white racial categories at times. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many South Asian American men living in the Southern United States chose to marry black women and become part of black communities, because for some, as one man's great granddaughter shared, "you could be one of two things—black or white. He obviously couldn't be white, so he was categorized as black" (Harpalani 2013, 167). Similarly, South Asian American men living in California in the early 1900s often chose to marry Mexican American women, expressing perceived cultural and physical similarities (Harpalani 2013, 124; Leonard 1992, 115-117). More recently, some South Asian American hip hop artists have chosen this form of musical expression after living in predominantly black neighbourhoods and coming to more critical understandings of race (Harpalani 2013, 169-174). The racial malleability of South Asian Americans has thus led to decades of differing racial transference, through formal and informal modes, ascribed and asserted, in explicit and implicit ways. Indeed, racial ambiguity is not unique to South Asian Americans, but similar histories may be drawn up for Latinx and Arab American groups and biracial and multiracial individuals (Harpalani 2013, 83-84). Furthermore, racialization is an inescapable facet of American life, and even individuals and groups who experience relatively less ambiguity still negotiate varying racial assertions and ascriptions. An important contemporary example is the sudden increase in anti-Asian incidents in the United States in the wake of COVID-19, as Asian people and communities of a wide variety of specific ethnicities have been ascribed a Chinese racial identity and harassed on that basis.

Throughout Harpalani's analysis of the specific history of South Asian Americans, he leverages two major concepts to explain racial malleability: racial microclimes and racial capital. First, South Asian Americans are racially identified in different ways depending on the context in which this identification takes place. Harpalani applies the term "racial microclimes" to these contexts, which he defines as "local historical and political climates that impact racialization, particularly for ambiguous groups and individuals" (2013, 78). He draws this term from Robert S. Chang's account of Keith Aoki's theory of racial microclimes, which states that "we need to pay more attention to the way that race is constructed at the local level ... You have micro-negotiations taking place between individuals; you have

⁶ In 2012, fifty percent of Asian Indians identified as Democrat, forty-seven percent as independent or non-partisan, and only three percent as Republican (Harpalani 2013, 147-154).

micro-negotiations taking place between individuals and local institutions ... Racial orderings are multiple and contextual, temporal as well as temporary” (Chang 2012, 1923-1924). In the stories above, South Asian Americans have had other racial identities transferred to them, not at random, but in some connection to the specific racial dynamics of that time and place. The details of each racial microclimate impact people of all racial identities, but they are especially important to consider for racially ambiguous groups and individuals, whose identifications are more in flux, depending on the surrounding historical and political climate.

The second major analytical concept in DesiCrit is racial capital. Although racial identities and dynamics in the United States are more complicated than a reductive black/white binary would suggest, racial hierarchy persists, such that ambiguous individuals who do not fit into such a binary can claim or be ascribed higher or lower racial statuses. For example, Harpalani cites Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s three categories of American racial hierarchy: “(1) ‘Whites’; (2) ‘Honorary Whites’; and (3) ‘Collective Black’” (Harpalani 2013, 115). Whiteness is a form of racial capital, which, like capital in the economic sense, can be transferred or denied and can confer social benefits through its acquisition. Racial capital can also be transferred through non-racial but racialized factors, such as religion, citizenship, and class. As with the idea of racial microclimates, the idea of racial capital is applicable to people of all racial identities, but has a particular salience for ambiguous groups and individuals whose opportunities for greater or lesser racial capital are more malleable and shift to a greater degree, depending on their circumstances.

DesiCrit for Asian American Biblical Criticism of Acts

The insights of DesiCrit resonate immediately with me as a woman who is a Canadian-American, biracial, third-generation⁷ South Asian (specifically, Indian) person, and whose racial identity has been overwhelmingly perceived in ways that are ambiguous and malleable. DesiCrit also provides me with more precise tools to analyse the ways in which I have seen individuals and groups in biblical texts being represented with varying, ambiguous, and malleable identities. In particular, I have been struck by how the narratives about Paul in the book of Acts depict him, not as a whitewashed and uncomplicated Jewish Christian (as I had most often previously encountered him in scholarship and in churches), but rather as an ethnically ambiguous, multilingual, multinational diaspora Jew who navigates multiple religious belongings as he journeys around the Mediterranean. I use the term “diaspora” intentionally, both to point to the

⁷ The terms first-, second-, and third-generation are used and defined variously. Here, I use first-generation to indicate being born/raised in a South Asian country, second-generation to indicate having parents who were born/raised as such, and third-generation to indicate having grandparents who were born/raised as such.

first-century CE reality of Jewish people living outside Jerusalem in vast and diverse ways, and to connect this historical reality to the continually experienced phenomenon of living away from one's ancestral homeland, an experience common to all South Asian Americans.

Before beginning my analysis of specific passages, I will clarify the sense in which I am engaging in Asian American biblical criticism, as well as the senses in which I am using the modern concepts of religious, national, and geographic identity when discussing this ancient text. First, scholars engaging in Asian American biblical criticism understand their work as falling into this category in different ways. The primary way that I understand myself to be doing Asian American biblical criticism is by deploying an Asian American analytical tool (DesiCrit) developed by an Asian American scholar (Harpalani 2013).⁸ Secondarily, I am intentionally considering experiences associated with modern Asian American racialization when I examine themes in the biblical text (Yee 2006, 159; Segovia 2009, 283). Finally, as an Asian American person, my choice to engage with this tool and this modern history of racialization is impacted by my own ethnic identity (Yee 2006, 159; Liew 2008, 6; Bailey, Liew, and Segovia 2009, 24).

To analyse Paul's malleable and ambiguous identity as a character in Acts, I will look through the lens of DesiCrit to examine how Paul asserts and is ascribed varying religious, national, and geographic identities in three different microclimates as described in three different texts: Acts 9:11, 13:6-12, and 21:37-40.⁹ There are a number of other texts in Acts that also depict Paul's ambiguity, but the three selected here offer a representative sampling of the multiple dimensions of Paul's identity, and of the benefits as well as challenges that he faces because of it.

My examination of these passages in Acts leverages a modern analytical tool, but while modern and socially constructed categories of race and ethnicity do not map onto ancient identity categories,¹⁰ deploying DesiCrit can highlight ways that ancient identities were also unstable and often experienced ambiguously. In this article, I attend to three elements of Paul's identity in Acts: religious, national, and geographic. These three identity categories attend to notions of belonging that are present in Acts, while also connecting readily to modern components of identity that impact racialization and ethnic identity. This is not to claim that either Paul or the author and audience of Acts would have used such nomenclature, but rather is to posit that these three categories provide a generative way of discussing

⁸ Both Liew (2008, 7) and Bailey, Liew, and Segovia (2009, 24) discuss Asian American biblical criticism as involving the use of Asian American analytical tools.

⁹ The microclimates that I explore are internal to the narrative world represented in the text, rather than the reconstructed historical world of either the author or the early audience of Acts. Further research on microclimates in biblical texts may profitably extend to analysing the malleability of identity categories depending on authorship and early audiences.

¹⁰ For an introduction to this topic, see for example, Buell (2005, 13-21).

the various fluid components of identity in Acts. This is also not to claim that any one of these three identities is equivalent to race or ethnicity, or that when combined they add up to race or ethnicity. Instead, it is to claim that these elements of identity were arenas in which people in antiquity also navigated socially constructed categories with hierarchical values attached to different statuses. Finally, the choice of these three identities does not deny the value of examining Paul's self-identity in other areas, such as gender, sex, sexuality, class, occupation, education, or ability. The assertion and ascription of racial and quasi-racial identity categories is certainly influenced by all of these factors, as Kimberlé Crenshaw has most famously discussed within the framework of CRT using the language of intersectionality. They all are likewise categories of belonging with which the narrative of Acts is concerned in various ways. However, for the purpose of tailoring the scope of my analysis to a manageable level, I have limited myself here to considering how the character of Paul asserts and is ascribed these three identities, and I hope that further research takes up the invitation to expand the scope of this study.

Before I begin my analysis, I will provide working definitions for these three categories. By "religious" identity, I refer to religious belonging as described in Acts, rather than to modern religious categories or to Roman *religio*. Acts is most attentive to the division between Jew and Gentile, but also recognizes religious identities within and between such categories: "both Jews [by birth] and proselytes" (Acts 2:10),¹¹ and both Gentiles who are "God-fearing" (10:22) and Gentiles who are not (e.g. the worshippers of Artemis in Acts 19). Acts also recognizes sects (e.g. Sadducees, Pharisees, and Christian/followers of the Way) which may also overlap with each other. By referring separately to religious identity, I do not discount how a religious group can be understood as a people, both in Acts itself¹² and also in subsequent Christian writings (Buell 2005, 1-3, 29-33). Instead, I intend to distinguish these concepts sufficiently in order to observe how individuals with the same national or geographic identity can have different religious identities, and how individuals with the same religious identity can have different national or geographic identities. For instance, Paul and the tribune in Jerusalem are both citizens of Rome (same national identity) (22:25-29), while Paul is a Jewish follower of the Way and the tribune is implied to be a Gentile (different religious identity). Conversely, Philip and the eunuch are both followers of the Way by the end of their encounter (same religious identity), while the eunuch is Ethiopian and Philip is implied not to be (different geographic identity) (8:26-40).

By "national" identity, I refer to the formal ties between an individual and a sovereign governing body. This identity can include the governing body a person is tied to; in Acts, this is usually Rome, since the book is set around

¹¹ All citations are from the NRSV.

¹² For instance, the word *laos* can be used to refer to the Jewish religious group (e.g. Acts 26:23).

the Mediterranean, but it can also include governing bodies like ancient Ethiopia, i.e. Kush (Acts 8:27), or the Parthian Empire (2:9). A national identity can also specify what kind of formal tie exists between an individual and the governing body. Within the Roman Empire, this is typically citizenship, existing in varying degrees and being variously acquired. For example, Paul and the tribune share a national identity in the sense that they are both Roman citizens, but their particularities differ in that Paul was born a Roman citizen, whereas the tribune monetarily acquired his citizenship.

Lastly, by “geographic” identity, I refer to the locations with which a person is associated through birth, childhood, or permanent habitation. These geographic identities often accompany people when they are introduced, such as Joseph who is “a native of Cyprus” (Acts 4:36) or “Judas the Galilean” (5:37). People can also have multiple geographic identities, such as Paul who is customarily identified as being from Tarsus (9:11; 21:39; 22:3) but who can also leverage to his advantage his upbringing in Jerusalem (22:3).

Damascus and Metropolitan Diaspora Judaism

After Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, Ananias receives a vision from the Lord, who identifies Paul as “a man of Tarsus named Saul” (Acts 9:11).¹³ This is the first time that Acts associates Paul with Tarsus, having previously only shown him residing in Jerusalem (7:58; 8:3; 9:1-2). On one level, the association with Tarsus may function narratively to specify which “Saul” Ananias is to search for. But at what other levels does this association function? Why might Paul now be geographically associated with Tarsus in the microclimate of Damascus with Ananias, rather than Jerusalem where he was located in previous passages?

In order to better understand the microclimate in Damascus, I begin by analysing how Ananias’s social location may resonate with Paul’s geographic origin in Tarsus. *Religiously*, Ananias is a Jewish follower of the Way, living in a city with a number of fellow Christian disciples as well as a thriving Jewish diaspora community. Christianity spread to Damascus relatively quickly, and some followers of the Way likely fled from Jerusalem, whereas others may have been residents of Damascus who joined a fledgling Christian community. These various Jewish followers of the Way appear, for the most part, able to function amiably within their broader Jewish communities, as Ananias is later described as “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there” (22:12). The presence of a large Jewish community in Damascus is indicated in Acts by the existence of more than one synagogue (9:2), and Josephus too reports quite large

¹³ The narrative switch in how this character is named will be analysed below. He will be referred to as “Paul” in this article for simplicity, while understanding that he is going by “Saul” in Damascus and that he continued to go by “Saul” at other times as well.

Jewish communities in the city (*Jewish War* 2.559-61; 7.368; *The Life* 24; see Hengel and Schwemer 1997, 51-54; Keener 2013, 2:1629). Damascus was a large trade city, located at the meeting of rivers as well as desert trade routes (Losch 2005, 79-80). This great and old city saw its governance frequently in flux, and Ananias's *national* identity is more unclear because the historical evidence from this period is ambiguous regarding the degree of Roman or Nabatean governance.¹⁴ Either way, at this time, it appears that Nabatean governance existed officially at the local or imperial level, and, while there was Roman influence on Damascus, official governance was not strong if it was present at all. There is no mention in Acts of Ananias's connection to these shifting governing bodies; we may imagine that he would likely have been aware of the changes although not heavily impacted by them. Lastly, *geographically*, Ananias is described as currently living in Damascus and is not given any other geographic affiliations. He has been in Damascus long enough to be recognized and esteemed by the city's Jewish community (Acts 22:12), and is familiar enough with the city and its residents to find Paul in a specific person's home without any narrated difficulty (9:11, 17). He has heard about Paul and his activity in Jerusalem from many people (9:13-14), but seems to not have personal experience himself of the persecution in Jerusalem. This suggests that Ananias had not been in Jerusalem recently, and that he had a strong (or even primary) geographic association with the city of Damascus. This investigation of Ananias's social background has therefore indicated that he was a Jewish follower of the Way with strong, positive relationships within his local Jewish diaspora community; that he was geographically tied to Damascus; and that he had only tenuous allegiances to the Roman and Nabatean Empires.

Ananias's background can now be connected to the narrative's depiction of the Lord introducing Paul as a man from Tarsus (Acts 9:11). *Religiously*, Ananias and Paul do share being Jewish, but this connection is immediately soured by what Ananias has heard of Paul's conviction that Judaism is exclusive of Christian discipleship and that followers of the Way may rightly be arrested and harmed (9:13-14). This is extremely different from what Ananias is used to in Damascus, namely, an acceptance or at least tolerance of followers of the Way within the Jewish community. Ananias is already familiar enough with Paul to know without being told that he is Jewish and highly positioned within the Jewish community in Jerusalem (9:14), but it is precisely Paul's particular understanding of Jewish identity that Ananias both fears and disagrees with. Hearing more information about Paul's religious identity would only be a cause for further consternation. Another component of Paul's identity is his *national* one: he is a Roman citizen, a fact that is mentioned for the first time in Acts several chapters later (16:37-38). But this would likely be no reassurance to Ananias either,

¹⁴ For the view that Rome was the formal authority over Damascus with local Nabatean governance permitted, see DeVries (1997, 370); Keener (2013, 2:1678-1679). For the view that the Nabatean Empire was the formal authority over Damascus, see McRay (1992, 8); Losch (2005, 80).

who is living within the Nabatean Empire or within a formally Roman city with local Nabatean governance. In contrast to these first two identities, the *geographic* identification of Paul as being from Tarsus may serve as a humanizing connection between him and Ananias. Tarsus, like Damascus, was a thriving trade city with a Jewish diaspora population, perhaps a significant one (Hengel and Schwemer 1997, 160; Losch 2005, 230; Keener 2013, 2:1651). At this time, Tarsus was a free city within the Roman Empire, a status which allowed for some local legislative autonomy and could also include benefits, such as permission to trade internationally, exemption from taxation, and citizenship (Gasque 1992, 333; Losch 2005, 230; Keener 2013, 2:1649). Like Ananias, Paul is thus a diaspora Jew from a major trade city with Roman influence but also some degree of remove from Roman governance.

Paul sparingly asserts his Tarsan background in Acts (21:39; 22:3). In Acts 9:11, this background is ascribed to Paul in the specific context of Ananias (a man with a similar geographic background) being divinely instructed to overcome his fear and assist Paul. Within this microclimate—whose location in place is Damascus and whose location in time is shortly after the beginning of Christian persecution in Jerusalem—Paul’s Tarsan geographic identity gives him a connection to Ananias, especially more so than his “homeland” tie to Jerusalem could have done. Paul does not easily fit into the binary of either diaspora Jew or Jerusalemite, but rather is ambiguously in between. When he is in Jerusalem, it may be advantageous for him to appeal to his highly-regarded upbringing in this homeland city, which secures his identity as a traditionally raised Jew. But when he is among other diaspora Jews, it may be preferable for him to connect with them on the basis of their dispersed status. The diasporic representation of Paul’s ambiguous origins contributes to the overall strength of God’s appeal for Ananias to not only approach Paul, but to actually welcome him as a “brother” (9:17).

Paphos and Roman Respectability

Several years later and hundreds of miles away, Paul and Barnabas begin their missionary journey (Acts 13), with one of their first stops being Cyprus, specifically the cities of Salamis and Paphos. The narration of their time in Paphos focuses on their interaction with “the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man” and “a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus” (also known as Elymas), who accompanies Sergius Paulus (13:6-8). One significant feature of this encounter is that in the middle of it, Acts begins to use the name “Paul” instead of “Saul.” This does not necessarily imply that this was the moment when Paul changed how he referred to himself, but the decisive narrative transition does suggest that the events taking place here reflect in some sense the import of the variation in Paul’s name. Both Sergius Paulus and Bar-Jesus are described in some detail, and situating the name change in the context of their social backgrounds offers

insight into how their interaction sheds light on why Saul becomes Paul at this precise narrative moment.

Sergius Paulus is not *religiously* identified as either Jewish or a God-fearer, which suggests he may have been a Gentile. His appreciation of Bar-Jesus likely derives from his interest in the exotic features of Judaism, or magic and prophecy more generally (Keener 2013, 2:2012-2013). Sergius's interest in or sympathy to Bar-Jesus' form of Judaism may partly be what prompts him to invite Paul and Barnabas so that he can "hear the word of God" (Acts 13:7). Over the course of his interaction with Paul and Barnabas, his religious identification shifts, most decisively after seeing Bar-Jesus become blind. More constant and clear is Sergius Paulus's *national* identity as the proconsul of the province of Cyprus, an agent of governance for the Roman Empire. As someone holding a magisterial office, he would have been a Roman citizen (Patrucco 2014, 541). His name is also prominently and respectably Roman, with Sergius being his nomen (the second component of the *tria nomina*) and Paulus being his cognomen (the third component of the *tria nomina*). His official Roman identity as a proconsul is emphasized in this passage, being the way that he is referred to after his initial introduction (13:8, 12). Finally, *geographically*, there is no mention of either the city of Rome itself or Sergius Paulus's prior geographic location. Most likely, he is not a native of Paphos or Cyprus more broadly, but has been stationed there from elsewhere after being assigned the province. Cyprus was mostly untroubled by its Roman rule and had a thriving local autonomous governance (Maier and Karageorghis 1984, 248-250).

The character of Bar-Jesus is less developed. *Religiously*, he is a Jewish person with spiritual expertise, who has come into favour with Sergius Paulus and is simply described as being "with" him (Acts 13:7), rather than having a formal role or title. It is unknown what his standing is within the larger Jewish communities of Paphos, since it is the representation of Acts that he falls outside of normative Jewish practice as a "magician" and "false prophet" (13:6). He opposes the Way, whether because he has become specifically persuaded against it, or because he is merely suspicious of something new, or simply because he does not want to lose his privileged place of favour with the proconsul. His name is first given as Bar-Jesus, and later as Elymas, both names only being listed once. The name Bar-Jesus prominently reflects his Jewish background, but the name Elymas is much less clear and may be a translation of the name Bar-Jesus or of the title *magos* (13:8), with etymological arguments being made either way (Lake and Cadbury 1933, 4:144; Fitzmyer 1998, 502; Keener 2013, 2:2016). Regardless, Acts stresses less the meaning of the name Elymas (which the audience can assume has been explained elsewhere) and more so the fact that this figure has a double name. As for his *national* identity, Bar-Jesus is at least informally a participant in influencing Roman governance. About his *geographic* identity, we know only that he is currently a resident of Paphos.

As mentioned earlier, it is during his interaction with these two characters within their particular context that Saul becomes Paul. It is surely no coincidence that Paul and Sergius Paulus are attributed the same name in the Greek text: *Paulos*. “Paul” is a definitively Roman name, suitable for a proconsul, and also fitting a person freely born. Horace, writing in the 30s BCE, mentions “Paulus” and “Messala” as examples of names which suggest noble ancestry, contrasting them with names that a slave or a freedman might have (*Satires* 1.6.41-42). Acts does not suggest that Paul himself underwent a name change at this point, specifying only that Paul is an additional name in combination with Saul (*Saulos de, ho kai Paulos*, 13:9). But from the standpoint of the narrative, a decisive name change does take place, and its placement within this encounter with Sergius Paulus suggests that the reason for Paul’s usage of this Roman name in some cases was the capital it afforded him with Roman and Rome-aligned audiences. Although double or alternative names were common in some locations and time periods in antiquity (Broux 2015; Coussement 2016), this was fairly uncommon among diaspora Jews during both Hellenistic and Roman periods (M. H. Williams 2007). Having the additional name “Paul” is therefore a particularly distinctive mark of ambiguity in Paul’s milieu. In the modern context, this choice and its attendant positive capital may remind us of the choices of Nikki Haley and Bobby Jindal to use Americanized first names, rather than Nimrata and Piyush respectively, and the greater capital associated with such names in dominant American culture (Harpalani 2013, 150, 153).

Strikingly, Bar-Jesus experiences a kind of narrative name change as well, since the text specifies that when translated, Elymas may also be considered his name (Acts 13:8). Based on the positive connection to Sergius Paulus in the Saul-to-Paul name change, there may be an opposite connection for the negative character, Bar-Jesus. The change may thus either be to connect Bar-Jesus negatively with another negative character, or, more likely, to distance him from a positive character. One possibility is that the name Bar-Jesus is being distanced from Jesus. But if so, Acts avoids the explicit contrast by referring only to “the Lord” in this pericope (13:10, 11, 12), in addition to God (13:7) and the Holy Spirit (13:9), leaving at most an implicit contrast by omission. Another possibility is that Bar-Jesus is being distanced from Barnabas, who is also present during the encounter and who is in fact named in 13:7, right between the naming of Bar-Jesus (13:6) and Elymas (13:8). Acts dissociates the particular variety of Judaism associated with Elymas—with its magic, false prophecy, and rejection of the gospel—from the Christian Judaism of Paul and Barnabas. In fact, no longer Bar-Jesus (Son of Jesus), Elymas is represented instead as a son of the devil (13:10). The Bar-Jesus-to-Elymas name change distances the mission of Barnabas and Paul from forms of Judaism that Acts views as illegitimate, including those that persecute Jewish followers of the Way, as Paul used to do.

Thus, in Paphos, the audience encounters a double set of double names. Both Saul/Paul and Bar-Jesus/Elymas have been persecutors of Jewish Christians, but the direction of their narrative name changes indicate where their ultimate affiliations lie. Paul lives in the uncommon situation of being a Roman citizen as well as a Jewish person. His national identity and religious identity are sometimes perceived as being in conflict, as when he and his followers are accused in Philippi: “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe” (Acts 16:20-21). As he travels throughout different regions in the Roman Empire, he will consistently encounter Roman officials like Sergius Paulus, with whom he can gain positive capital through the use of a very Roman name like Paul, rather than Saul. The function of the Saul-to-Paul name change is very likely not to distance him from Judaism, or to rid himself of associations that would diminish his capital. Paul refers to himself as “Saul” in his narrations of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, during both his defence in Jerusalem (22:7, 13) and his defence before Agrippa (26:14). Neither Acts as a narrative nor Paul as a character hides Paul’s Jewish name. Rather, the use of “Paul” indicates a choice to take advantage of the opportunity for greater missionary capital. In the case of the other doubly named person in this story, the narrative name-change from Bar-Jesus to Elymas distances Barnabas and Paul from persecutory forms of Judaism, from which Paul has just emerged.¹⁵

Jerusalem as Precariously Subject to Imperial Military Power

Nearer to the end of Paul’s missionary career, he arrives tumultuously in Jerusalem, caught up in an “uproar” (Acts 21:31, 34), and is seized by the military figure of “the tribune of the cohort” (21:31), with whom he has a conversation in 21:37-40. This conversation concerns two subjects: Paul’s request to be allowed to speak to the crowd, and the tribune’s confusion over Paul’s identity. The latter concern threatens to prevent Paul from being able to successfully advocate for the former concern. As will be seen in the following analysis, the tribune looks at Paul’s ambiguity and sees in him an identity that reduces his capital. Paul, however, responds by defending himself, clarifying his relationship to the Roman Empire, and preventing himself from being viewed as a military threat.

The *national* identity of the tribune is directly linked to his position of military power, which was to be used to protect the stability of the Roman Empire. The tribune relates to the Roman Empire as a leader and protector,

¹⁵ Although Paul’s moment of becoming a proclaimer of Jesus (Acts 9:20) is several chapters removed from this episode in Paphos, the intervening verses of 9:32-12:18 are exclusively concerned with Peter’s activity, and in this sense, Paul has only relatively recently ceased being a persecutor of the church.

and also as a citizen. We learn that he bought his citizenship rather than being born with it (Acts 22:28), and later we also learn that his name is Claudius Lysias (23:26). Whether he gained his citizenship by ascending in military rank or through bribery, the nomen “Claudius” is a distinctly Roman name, which may also indicate that he became a citizen during the reign of the emperor Claudius in 41-54 CE (Keener 2014, 3:3253-3254). His cognomen, “Lysias,” tells a different side of his story; this Greek name suggests that his *geographic* birthplace was in a Greek city (Keener 2014, 3:3253). The tribune is a powerful figure of Roman military authority, but he has risen to this position with a mixed and precarious national and geographic background. *Religiously*, the tribune appears to be a Gentile, but one who is familiar with Judaism and has relationships with Jewish elites of the city (22:30).

When Paul asks the tribune for permission to address the crowd, his question becomes derailed when the tribune expresses surprise at Paul’s Greek. Although it was fairly common to have some command of Greek, Paul seems to express himself in a way that indicates an unusual facility with the language (Haenchen 1971, 619; Witherington 1998, 661). Greek proficiency would have been a source of capital, especially among elite Romans who frequently appreciated and sought to emulate Hellenism. While the tribune’s Greek background is not suggested until later in the narrative when his name is given, his position of authority alone would suggest that he would have acquired some proficiency in Greek. Incorporating the evidence of his Greek name offers the possibility that his Greek was extremely fluent and perhaps even a source of pride and relative capital compared to his peers. The tribune had assumed that Paul did not have this same capital, with the more specific and surprising reason given that he had mistaken Paul for “the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness” (Acts 21:37). Who was this figure, why would he not have been fluent in Greek, and why did the tribune identify Paul as him?

The tribune’s description may refer to the same figure as the “Egyptian false prophet” about whom Josephus wrote in *Jewish War* 2.261-63.¹⁶ According to this account, he led 30,000 people from the desert to Jerusalem, where Roman militia fought him off and scattered the rebels, some of whom either fled, were killed, or were captured, and the Egyptian leader ran away with several of his followers. Josephus’s description is strikingly similar to the tribune’s, and the dating of the event is potentially within a year or two of this encounter between Paul and the tribune, so both events likely took place while Felix was procurator of Judea (Keener 2014, 3:3174). The tribune may have associated a lack of Greek fluency with this

¹⁶ Slightly earlier, in *Jewish War* 2.254-257, Josephus also discusses Sicarii (“assassins” in the tribune’s speech is *tōn sikariōn*). For the view that the tribune or the author of Acts has conflated the two, see Haenchen (1971, 622). For the view that the Egyptian false prophet simply arose in the midst of the Sicarii movement, see Holladay (2016, 418).

revolutionary Egyptian, perhaps because Greek was spoken to varying degrees in Egypt along with Egyptian and even less frequently Latin, or perhaps because of the socio-economic background assumed for someone who would revolt (Keener 2014, 3:3169). It is also possible that the tribune is being depicted as someone who was personally involved with the military defence of the city at the time, and who thus knew from first-hand knowledge how this revolutionary figure spoke. Thus, there are multiple identity categories with which the tribune may have associated a lack of knowledge of Greek, including geographic, national, socio-economic, or personally identifying factors. The many identity categories that were associated with greater or lesser Greek language proficiency suggests the powerful way in which language could confer or deny capital in ambiguous situations.

But the question still remains as to how the tribune came to associate Paul with this Egyptian revolutionary in the first place. Perhaps the tribune was in fact personally acquainted with this figure, and Paul's physical appearance was similar to his. Perhaps someone accused Paul of being this figure within the tribune's hearing (e.g. someone shouting from the crowd in Acts 21:33-34), whether because they were genuinely mistaken or because they were being intentionally inflammatory. In either case, the evidence for identifying Paul as this particular person appears to have been slim. The tribune therefore seems to have been especially susceptible to misidentifying Paul based on this particular socio-political microclimate, with the Egyptian's revolt having been a recent military concern and with Paul having been in the middle of a near riot. Within this microclimate, Paul's ambiguous appearance functions negatively for him, because he is ascribed a geographic identity that aligns him with a recent threat experienced in the microclimate. Paul's misidentification resonates with Harpalani's modern experience of being called "Saddam!" in 1991 in the middle of the first Persian Gulf War (2013, 81). In this instance, Paul's ambiguity has posed a constraint to his activity, so he chooses to respond to strategically.

To address the difficulty presented by the tribune's false ascription of identity, Paul takes the opportunity to foreground the correct details of his background. In making this response, it is unclear whether Paul knows of the Egyptian revolutionary and is working to distance himself from that person, or whether he only reacts to the information stated in the tribune's assumption. Either way, Paul presents a string of identity categories that spell out each component that he has determined to be relevant: "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city" (Acts 21:39). Paul communicates his religious belonging, his geographic origin, and finally his national status. Some of these designations may have been more important than others in terms of distinguishing Paul from the Egyptian revolutionary, but as a whole, they work together powerfully to establish a full personal identity that is humanizing and distinct from the false ascribed identity, painting a picture of Paul as harmless to the city's social order.

It is important to notice that these three categories are all ones in which Paul's identity is, in truth, ambiguous. Paul is Jewish, but he is also a follower of the Way with Pharisaic roots; he is from Tarsus, but he was also raised in Jerusalem; he is a Roman citizen, but he does not name it here and does not make his citizenship explicit, leaving the question open as to whether he is a citizen of Tarsus or elsewhere. These choices function strategically to gain capital for himself. By describing himself as simply Jewish, Paul aligns himself with the unifying religious identity of the city, refraining from calling to mind its sectarian disputes. By describing himself as a Greek diaspora Jew, he distances himself, not only from the Egyptian revolutionary, but also the residents of Jerusalem who are participating in this disturbance, and whose activity the tribune is responsible for regulating. By referring ambiguously to his citizenship status, Paul leverages the positive capital of formal political belonging, while waiting until later (Acts 22:25-29) to nail down his precise national affiliations. Temporarily failing to mention his Roman citizenship may prevent Paul from being perceived as someone who is owed special (and thus burdensome) treatment. Later in Acts, the tribune retells the story in a personally flattering light in his letter to Felix (23:26-30). Here, he claims to have rescued Paul on account of his Roman citizenship (23:27) and to have thus done more for Paul and fulfilled more of the social honours of Roman citizenship than he actually did or was even requested to do. At this juncture, Paul only wishes to be permitted to speak to the crowd, which does not require raising—much less, proving—that his status may oblige the tribune to provide more significant accommodations.

Faced with having his ambiguous identity incorrectly interpreted and being ascribed an identification with reduced capital, Paul returns with a carefully composed summary of his identity, which he asserts for the purpose of being perceived as nonthreatening in order to receive permission to publicly address an already aggravated crowd. In the microclimate of a tumultuous province under the precarious control of the Roman military, Paul's depiction of his own identity paints him as just enough of an insider to be trusted (a Jewish person within a predominantly Jewish province, with a Greek background and respectable political belonging) but also just enough of an outsider to be safe (a non-sectarian person with a diaspora background, not necessarily possessing Roman citizenship and its attendant privileges and burdens). Ultimately, Paul's assertion of identity is successful, and the tribune permits him to address the crowd, in addition to protecting him and investing in him once he reveals the additional strategic detail that he is a Roman citizen.

DesiCrit in Biblical Interpretation

In these three case studies, I have examined how Paul, in all his ambiguity, is ascribed varying identities, responds to others' ascriptions, and leverages and strategically asserts certain components of his identity. He does this in

differing ways depending on the particular microclimate in which he is situated. As Keith Aoki has described, the response in each microclimate changes depending on “micro-negotiations taking place between individuals” and “between individuals and local institutions” (Chang 2012, 1923). In Damascus (Acts 9), the divine voice to Ananias selectively emphasizes Paul’s shared background in a large Greek diaspora city as a form of capital that strengthens the divine appeal. Then, on Paphos (Acts 13), the privileging of one component of a double name over the other leads to positive or negative associations, with the name “Paul” providing Roman capital, and the translation from Bar-Jesus to Elymas serving to distance a rejected and rejecting form of Judaism from the Judaism of the Way. Finally, in Jerusalem (Acts 21), a precarious social context leads to Paul’s ambiguity being construed negatively as a danger to the Roman military, but Paul is able to assert an alternative and less threatening identity.

Drawing on the insights of Harpalani’s *DesiCrit*, this analysis has attended to the specific microclimates in which Paul’s identity is negotiated, as well as the way that Paul’s capital is increased or diminished when his ambiguous identity is aligned with one side or the other of a hierarchical binary. Ambiguous figures like Paul can disrupt and problematize such hierarchical binaries, but they cannot fully escape them, and indeed they continue to benefit from or be harmed by the capital that accompanies them. An ambiguous identity does not exclusively offer opportunities for capital, but can also pose constraints to accessing it. In the narratives told in Acts, Paul is frequently able to claim the capital afforded by his identity and to deflect ascriptions that would diminish his capital. But this dynamic is not guaranteed to him, and we must imagine that there were many other times when he was less successful, as has been the case for other ambiguous groups and individuals throughout history. We may also ask what “success” consisted of for Paul: did it always involve the ascription and assertion of an identity carrying the greatest capital possible in a given microclimate? And if not, what other factors were guiding his desires for self-identification?

There is much to be uncovered in biblical criticism by attending to ambiguity and malleability in ancient identities, as well as the hierarchical binary categories that lead to the transference or denial of capital. Such examination may be applied to the heuristic categories of religion, geography, and nation, as in this article, but also to ancient and modern categories including free/slave status, class, literacy, gender, and sexuality. We must be careful as interpreters not to lean too heavily on binary categories ourselves and thus to reinscribe them and ignore the diversity of experiences that they conceal. At the same time, though, we should not be too quick to discount the continuing salience of hierarchy and capital for people’s lived experiences.

Attending to the ambiguities of modern Asian American people within American racialization is crucial, but this process must consistently contextualize such racialization within the continuing effects of a racial

hierarchy rooted in anti-blackness. Our ambiguous racialization does not exempt us from deconstructing the ways that we perpetuate such hierarchies, which can manifest in forms such as colourism, casteism, cultural appropriation, imperialism, and the perpetuation of the “model minority” myth. It has always been imperative for Asian Americans to understand this, but it is even more pressing in the current national context of a surge in Black Lives Matter protests. Asian American biblical interpretation, theology, and theories of race have not emerged in a vacuum, but are indelibly influenced by the history of systemic racism in the United States, and are indebted to the theorizing of pioneering black scholars. Breaking down a false and destructive binary requires us to account for the full spectrum of its violence.

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