

## The Power of the Exemplar: Exemplarity, Racial Alterity, and Abraham/Moses Stereotypes in Greco-Roman & Judeo-Christian Antiquity

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*Abstract: Abraham and Moses were perhaps the only two figures that non-Jewish authors of the ancient Mediterranean world would have known about and would have associated with the Jews (or Judeans). The Roman world in particular cared a great deal about famous ancestral paradigms – what they called exempla – and the ancient world writ large had a habit of correlating the defining characteristics of particular exempla and particular peoples. Thus Carthaginians, like Hannibal, were seen as perfidious and Romans, like Scipio, were understood to be brave and impassive. This essay explores a similar dynamic wherein exemplarity and racial (and/or ethnic/national) stereotypes coalesced in Greco-Roman presentations of Abraham and/or Moses as embodiments of Jewish traits. It argues that Greek and Roman authors tended to impute to Abraham and Moses a particular theurgic, magical essence, and that this came to be a stereotype used to categorize the Jewish people. By putting this discourse in the frame of symbolic or cultural power, this article seeks to contribute to our understanding of how exemplarity, the rhetoric of race, and discursive constructions of identity and alterity could function in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian antiquity.*

### I Introduction: Exemplarity, Power, Individuality, and Race/Ethnicity

This article attempts to theorize several under-theorized issues by approaching the interrelated dynamics of racial and ethnic identity and alterity, exemplarity, individuality and collectivity, stereotype and prejudice, and discursive power within Mediterranean antiquity. Each of these issues on its own has received a dizzying array of scholarly treatments in recent years. Therefore my bibliography is selective and pragmatic. My overall argument is this: there existed a powerful conceptual connection in much ancient thought between particular individuals—often taken to be racial or national or ethnic figureheads and often dubbed *exempla* by the Romans—and the groups to which those individuals were seen to be attached. So strong could this identification be that the traits or stereotypes linked to a given individual could be mapped onto a collective, and vice-versa. I suggest that this is one of the key ways by which ancient Romans, for example, came to think and talk about various ‘Others,’ the Jews (or Judeans), for example. Abraham and Moses are undeniably the two most famous Hebrew/Jew/Israelite representatives within

the broader Greco-Roman consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Here I use the examples of these two Jewish *exempla* to show this kind of discourse in action. I submit that Moses and Abraham, as apprehended from outside the Judeo-Christian sphere, illustrate the discursive power of personality as it functioned within the ancient Mediterranean, a function that fused exemplarity and racial/ethnic alterity as a means of describing and framing the other, and perhaps the self.

This article proceeds in five sections. In the first, I establish that, among ancient thinkers, certain individuals became conceptual vehicles for describing (stereotype) and thus easily ‘understanding’ (heuristic) other peoples. In the second section, I use Moses and Abraham to exemplify the different variations that such thinking or argumentation could take. In section three, I use the example of Jews as ritual-religious oddballs (or, if you prefer, anomalies) within Mediterranean antiquity to explore the slippage between how Moses and/or Abraham could be described on one hand, and how the Jews writ large came to be defined on the other. This is where one finds the bulk of my argument. It involves a discussion of Pliny, and Strabo, and Julian, and others. In a fourth section I append a few thoughts on rabbinic literature (like the Mishnah tractate *Avot*) and Christian writers (like the church historian Eusebius). Finally, section five discusses a few things one must consider in talking about these kinds of discourses as manifestations of power theorized *per se*. I thus conclude by considering issues of method in approaching questions of power, cultural exemplars, and collective identities within the ancient imagination.

I do not consider my conclusions here surprising, but nor do I see them as *communis opinio* among scholars.<sup>2</sup> My argument resonates with the well-known idea of synecdoche *qua* tropological pre-figuring articulated by Hayden White,<sup>3</sup> and aligns in large part with the idea of leaders as prototypical ingroup members discussed in organizational psychology.<sup>4</sup> I think, therefore, that it is worth pointing out how intertwined 1) exemplarity and 2) racial or ethnic alterity could be. Moreover, there are some helpful ways of thinking about these issues that have not been made as clear as they could be.

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<sup>1</sup> The monikers “Israelite,” “Jew” (or “Judean”), and “Hebrew” were often interchangeable in the ancient world and brooked only a semblance of consistent usage, which in any case is not to be expected among Roman ‘outsiders,’ who would have cared little about such fine distinctions. Begin here with Harvey, *The True Israel*.

<sup>2</sup> The closest scholarship has come to my particular argument is a statement by Siker, “Abraham in Graeco-Roman Paganism,” 199 to the effect that Graeco-Roman pagan authors attributed similar qualities to both Abraham and the Jews, especially those related to astrology and religious cult. But Siker sees the texts he cites as providing “no direct evidence for the view which Graeco-Roman pagan authors had regarding the relationship between Abraham and the Jews (which, one must admit, must have been of no interest whatsoever to these authors).”

<sup>3</sup> White suggests that the historiographical imagination is predisposed towards certain configurations, wherein the “synecdochic” refers to the tendency to make the part represent the whole. See, e.g., White, *Metahistory*, 31–36.

<sup>4</sup> See Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, 45–49.

## 2 Individuals, Groups, and Stereotypes in the Greco-Roman World

Writers of the ancient Mediterranean tended not to be turned off by racial stereotypes. On the contrary, one could argue that the stereotype heuristic was *the way* in which ancient authors were inclined to make sense of groups, especially those of others. When Julius Caesar in his *Alexandrian War* describes Alexandrians as being “a race most prone to treachery” (*aptissimum esse hoc genus ad proditionem*), he is straightforwardly articulating what the Alexandrians are like.<sup>5</sup> This is who they are, as a nation, by nature. The fixity of the group that Caesar here signals, with its apparently ineluctable predisposition to *proditio*, identifies his perspective as something akin to what we might call “racism.” Caesar’s thinking corresponds to a broader collection of sentiments expressed throughout Greco-Roman literature, which Benjamin Isaac has identified as markers of “proto-racism.”<sup>6</sup> The foundations of such stereotypes, however, were not all the same. Caesar bases his ethnographic stereotypes of Gauls, Celts, Alexandrians, etc. on his own wartime experience with each people. Absent such firsthand experience, the grounding of stereotypes needs to be sought elsewhere. One place in which ancient authors sometimes found the key to describing a people’s ‘essence’ was in its founding figures, ancient ancestors whose actions and dispositions could be taken to constitute the core of racial, ethnic, and/or national identity.

Greek and Roman authors often associated ethnic dispositions with reference to particular individuals. This is implicit, for example, in a passage from Book 37 of Livy’s *Ab Vrbe Condita*. There, an envoy of King Antiochus III (Heraclides of Byzantium) approaches Publius Scipio to negotiate terms of peace. He promises Scipio the ransom-free return of his son (who had been captured) as well as a great deal of gold and a portion of Antiochus’ kingdom. He did this, Livy says, being “unfamiliar with Scipio’s personality and the Roman character” (*ignarus et animi Scipionis et moris Romani*).<sup>7</sup> Scipio, Romans, are not swayed by gold. In reply, Scipio says, “I am less than surprised that you are ignorant of all Romans, and of me, to whom you have been sent” (*quod Romanos omnes, quod me, ad quem missus es, ignoras, minus miror...*).<sup>8</sup> As far as Livy is concerned, Scipio Africanus—the bold, stoic military general famous for defeating Hannibal and the Carthaginians at the Battle of Zama (202 BCE) in the Second Punic War—is Rome: his *animus* and

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<sup>5</sup> *Alexandrian War* 7.2: “Yet, as far as I am concerned, had I now the task of championing the Alexandrians and proving them to be neither deceitful nor foolhardy, it would be a case of many words spent to no purpose: indeed when one gets to know both the breed and its breeding there can be no doubt whatever that as a race they are extremely prone to treachery” (*at mihi si defendendi essent Alexandrini neque fallaces esse neque temerarii, multa oratio frustra absumeretur; cum vero uno tempore et natio eorum et natura cognoscatur, aptissimum esse hoc genus ad proditionem dubitare nemo potest*; trans. LCL, Way).

<sup>6</sup> Isaac, *The Invention of Racism*, 38: “The term proto-racism ... may be used when Greek and Latin sources attribute to groups of people common characteristics considered to be unalterable because they are determined by external factors or heredity.” See 358–359 with n. 41 on the Caesar passage quoted above, to which he likens comments by Florus (2.13.60), Propertius (3.11.33), and others. Caesar was not alone in his prejudice.

<sup>7</sup> Livy 37.36.2.

<sup>8</sup> Livy 37.36.3.

Roman *mores* map onto one another seamlessly. And this went both ways. It is not a coincidence that, in the Roman imagination of authors like Livy and Cicero, Hannibal was the quintessence of faithlessness and disloyalty—Livy famously attributed to him a “perfidy more than Punic” (*perfidia plus quam Punica*)—and the Carthaginians were the paradigmatically faithless race.<sup>9</sup> Hannibal *was* Carthage, just as Scipio *was* Rome. Ancient authors often thought in such terms.<sup>10</sup>

This phenomenon of transference, whereby representative individuals are made to embody stereotypes characteristic of the group, exposes an important vein of identity discourse as it pertained to the Jews (or Judeans), and eventually Christians, in late antiquity. This trajectory will take us in and out of the bounds of what scholars of the ancient world refer to as “exemplarity”—the use of paradigmatic figures, usually ancient and usually ancestral, to motivate or evaluate or define actions or dispositions, of self or others, whether good or bad.<sup>11</sup> We have thus before us a distinctive kind of exemplarity-turned-ethnography that came to populate certain forms of discourse in the late ancient world.

### 3 Abraham, Moses, and the Hebrews/Israelites/Jews

Abraham, the first individual identified as a “Hebrew” in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>12</sup> and Moses, the putative author of the Torah itself, were indelibly linked to the Jewish people in the ancient imagination.<sup>13</sup> While this linkage could take different forms, I isolate one here, and it goes like this: Moses and Abraham are characterized as certain types of people—individual stereotyping—whose defining features are then mapped onto their perceived descendants, the Jews—national or ethnic stereotyping. This rhetorical move (or cultural assumption) is not made as often as one might guess; one can often infer it on the basis of context, but writings that make this connection explicitly are rare. This does not mean that the idea was uncommon, nor that it was common, but only that it existed. We are not looking at what was necessarily a/the *main way* that Jews were understood in the

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<sup>9</sup> Livy 21.4.9; Cicero *Pro Scauro* 19.42. This famous phrase points to another important aspect of ancient exemplarity, of which a peer-reviewer of this paper rightly reminded me: namely, the propensity of individuals and groups to attempt to outstrip the ancestral models against which they were measured. Thus, ‘Hannibal was Carthage *and more*’—there is an aspect of scaling, then, attached to this article’s topic.

<sup>10</sup> For a social-scientific perspective on the dynamics of stereotypes as applied to groups versus individuals, see Horwitz and Rabbie, “Stereotypes of Groups.”

<sup>11</sup> As an introduction to recent scholarship on exemplarity see Langlands, *Exemplary Ethics*; Roller, *Models from the Past*; Bell and Hansen, *Role Models*.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham is called “Abraham the Hebrew” (אַבְרָם הָעִבְרִי) at Gen 14:13.

<sup>13</sup> The bibliography that touches on Abraham and Moses vis-à-vis Jewish identity in antiquity is far too vast for a footnote (or an article, or a book) to recount. For a few recent research directions: on Abraham’s itinerancy and travelling as a historical foundation for Jewish identity, one with striking resemblances to Roman origin myths, see Levinson, “The Travels and Travails of Abraham.” On Abraham traditions as fodder for identity formation and for establishing textual or narrative authority within early Judaism, see Carstens and Lemche, *The Reception and Remembrance of Abraham*. The classic work on Moses’ influence on Jewish textual authority, with major implications for Jewish identity in the Second Temple period, is Najman, *Seconding Sinai*.

Greco-Roman world; rather, we are dealing with a feature of social understanding that operated in regard to ‘others’ in certain ancient Mediterranean imaginaries and which was, at times, applied to the Jews as well.

We can visualize how particular individuals (Abraham/Moses) were sometimes used as ‘power tools’ within ancient Jewish stereotypes. Table I depicts how Abraham and/or Moses could theoretically be presented as like/unlike the Jews (or others) in the past, present, and/or future in ways that are either constative or potential. I will refer back to this chart as a heuristic in the following discussion.

TABLE I: Abraham and Moses as like/unlike the Jews

	<b>Were</b> (would have been)	<b>Are</b> (could be)	<b>Will be</b> (should be)
<b>We/Us</b> (I/Me)	Abraham = like we were <i>or</i> Moses ≠ like I would have been	Moses = like we are <i>or</i> Abraham ≠ like I could be	Abraham = like we will be <i>or</i> Moses ≠ like I should be
<b>Y'all</b> (you)	Moses = like y'all were <i>or</i> Abraham ≠ like you would have been	Abraham = like y'all are <i>or</i> Moses ≠ like you could be	Moses = like y'all will be <i>or</i> Abraham ≠ like you should be
<b>They/Them</b> (he/she, him/her)	Abraham = like they were <i>or</i> Moses ≠ like he would have been	Moses = like they are <i>or</i> Abraham ≠ like she could be	Abraham = like they will be <i>or</i> Moses ≠ like he should be

In the next section, we move on to look at a few specific examples of how Abraham/Moses were deployed to characterize later Jews by ancient authors. In so doing, I will refer to this chart by way of reminder that all such exemplar-stereotypes were not the same, even if their effects seem equivalent. A final caveat: here I pay attention not to what Abraham or, more frequently, Moses *taught*. Many ancient authors talk about Moses’ teaching and how Abraham and/or Moses established customs. I am interested in characteristics that are taken to epitomize Abraham or Moses as individuals, defining things that they *habitually did* or *were like*. It is these essentializing features, as they become immovable characteristics of the Jews, that is the particular object of our analysis.

#### 4 Ritual Weirdos: The Jews as Magicians in the Greco-Roman Imagination

Several ancient texts attribute a foreign, odd religiosity or theurgical knowledge/inclination to the Jews. Good or bad or neutral, the Jews are basically cast as ritual weirdos.

They are so cast via connection to ancient forebears, depicted as what we would call ‘magical.’

Deep into his extensive *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder makes an enigmatic statement about Moses and the Jews:

*est et alia magices factio a Mose et Janne et Lotape ac Iudaeis pendens, sed multis milibus annorum post Zoroastrem.*

There is yet another branch of magic, derived from Moses, Jannes, Lotapes, and the Jews, but living many thousand years after Zoroaster.<sup>14</sup>

To appreciate what Pliny is implying, one must understand the broader history of magic that he presents in Book 30 of his work. Pliny does not like ‘magic.’<sup>15</sup> The reason he gives for providing a history of magic is that, having often “refuted ... the fraudulent lies of the Magi” (*magicas vanitates ... coarguimus*), he desires still further “to expose” (*detegemus*) them.<sup>16</sup> Pliny’s take on magic is very modern: he thinks it silly, “the most fraudulent of arts” (*fraudentissima artium*), and can scarcely believe anyone has ever given credence to what he labels a *superstitio* and *ars portentosa* (“monstrous craft”).<sup>17</sup> In tracing the history and spread of magic, Pliny firmly locates its origin in the East, first of all in Persia. In a way, Pliny’s study of magic is an ancient Roman form of what Edward Said would call “orientalism,” the creation of an alien, Eastern ‘other’ from a Western perspective, simultaneously distasteful and exotic.<sup>18</sup>

Pliny’s statement implies that both Moses and the *Iudaei* generally practiced magic. The famous man and the foreign race are grouped together as those from whom magic came, its foundational practitioners, perhaps inventors. In Pliny’s mind there were certain defining habits of Moses and the *Iudaei* that qualified them as *magici*. In the terms of our chart, for Pliny Moses *was like they* (*the Iudaei*) *are: the Iudaei now, like Moses once upon a time, are quintessentially associated with magic*. The stereotype of the ancestral paradigm has been transferred to the Jews as his descendants.

Pliny’s example presents a case where a negative stereotype associated with Moses is also associated with the Jews, and this from an outsider’s perspective. Jumping forward

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<sup>14</sup> Pliny the Elder *Historia Naturalia* 30.2.11 (trans. Rackham, LCL). Tradition holds Jannes as the “Egyptian wizard who resisted Moses,” whereas Lotapes “has been a *crux interpretum* ever since the publication of Pliny’s text in the fifteenth century.” Gero, “Enigma,” 304.

<sup>15</sup> This does not prevent him by any means from proffering a series of what are effectively ‘magic’ cures and techniques in his work. This “amusing fact” was discussed long ago by Riess, “Pliny and Magic.” Important recent work on Pliny and magic has been and is being done by two faculty members at Florida State University, Trevor Luke (in Classics) and Drew Durdin (in Religion); interested parties should look out for emerging publications.

<sup>16</sup> Pliny *Hist. Nat.* 30.1.1.

<sup>17</sup> Pliny *Hist. Nat.* 30.2.6–8.

<sup>18</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 202 mentions how a discourse “like Orientalism has a cumulative and corporate identity, one that is particularly strong given its associations with traditional learning (the classics, the Bible, philology) ... and generically determined writing (travel books, books of exploration, fantasy, exotic description).” In other words, Said’s thesis was directly expressly at just the kind of thing we find Pliny doing here.

three hundred years, and switching from Latin to Greek and from Moses to Abraham, we find a related case with the Emperor Julian in his *Against the Galileans*. Here, the stereotypes are much more subtle, the rhetoric much more intricate, and the arguments much more explicit. Still, Julian is making many of the same moves as Pliny had centuries earlier.

Beginning in fragment 354B of Julian’s polemic, discussion focuses for a moment on Abraham. Arguing with his imagined interlocutors (i.e. Christians), Julian states that, while he himself does not keep Jewish festivals, he does worship the traditional Jewish God, namely “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”<sup>19</sup> These three, he says, were “Chaldeans, of a sacred race, skilled in theurgy.”<sup>20</sup> A few sentences later he says that “Abraham used to sacrifice even as we Hellenes do, always and continually. And he used the method of divination from shooting stars.”<sup>21</sup> And then, “for higher things he augured from the flight of birds.”<sup>22</sup> Even his household steward set “signs” (συμβολικόν) for himself. Julian employs stereotype transference in his accusation: “You do not imitate Abraham by erecting altars to him [i.e. God], or building sacrificial altars and worshipping him with sacred offerings.”<sup>23</sup> For Julian, Abraham was a theurgist at heart, theurgy representing the right discharging of sacred ritual. This was who he was, who his progeny were (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob). This stereotype, in turn, is used negatively to define the Christians. Abraham exemplifies the un-Christian.<sup>24</sup> To return again to the words of our chart, *Abraham was like you all are not*: unlike Abraham, you “Galileans” (again, Christians), are not theurgists.<sup>25</sup>

But Julian goes further: his essentializing portrait is used not only to frame the Christians (as unworthy acolytes of Abraham) and Julian himself (as a better version of what Abraham *et al.* stood for), but also the Jews. Julian imputes a similar kind of defining attribute to Moses, and this he applies more positively to the Jews than to the Christians. In fragment 305B of *Against the Galileans*, Julian cites Moses’ prescriptive statements about sacrifice to show that “Moses knew the various methods of sacrifice.”<sup>26</sup> A few lines later he concludes from other instructions: “So cautious is Moses himself with regard to the eating of the flesh of sacrifice.”<sup>27</sup> Julian casts Moses not as a vehicle of divine instruction, but as a conscientious practitioner who both knew and characteristically

<sup>19</sup> Julian *Cont. Gal.* 354B: ἀεὶ δὲ προσκυνῶν τὸν θεὸν Ἀβραάμ καὶ Ἰσαὰκ καὶ Ἰακώβ (trans. Wright, LCL).

<sup>20</sup> Julian, *Cont. Gal.* 354B: οἱ ὄντες αὐτοὶ Χαλδαῖοι, γένους ἱεροῦ καὶ θεουργικοῦ (trans. Wright, LCL).

<sup>21</sup> Julian *Cont. Gal.* 356C: ἔθνε μὲν γὰρ Ἀβραάμ, ὥσπερ καὶ ἡμεῖς, ἀεὶ καὶ συνεχῶς. ἐχρήτη δὲ μαντικῇ τῇ τῶν διαπτόντων ἀστρῶν (trans. Wright, LCL).

<sup>22</sup> Julian *Cont. Gal.* 356C: οἰωνίζετο δὲ μειζόνως (trans. Wright, LCL). Julian will go on to “prove” this later by citing Gen 15:7–11 (*Cont. Gal.* 358D).

<sup>23</sup> Julian *Cont. Gal.* 354C: οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸν Ἀβραάμ μιμεῖσθε, βωμούς τε ἐγείροντες αὐτῷ καὶ οἰκοδομοῦντες θυσιαστήρια καὶ θεραπεύοντες ὥσπερ ἐκεῖνος ταῖς ἱερουργίαις (trans. adapted from Wright, LCL).

<sup>24</sup> A very similar argument is employed against the Christians using Moses at *Cont. Gal.* 343C, but Moses is not associated there with sacrifice as a defining feature as is Abraham.

<sup>25</sup> The context of Julian’s argument is the Passover and Christian non-observance of Jewish festivals. Thus, another way to state Julian’s argument is that ‘Galileans’ are liturgical, not theurgical.

<sup>26</sup> Julian *Cont. Gal.* 305B: τοὺς τῶν θυσιῶν ἠπίστατο τρόπους Μωυσῆς (trans. Wright, LCL).

<sup>27</sup> Julian *Cont. Gal.* 305B: αὐτὸς οὕτως εὐλαβῆς ὁ Μωυσῆς περὶ τῆν τῶν ἱερῶν ἐδωδῆν (trans. Wright, LCL).

observed the right ways to handle blood, sacrifice, and ritual consumption within Israel's cult. As above, he uses Moses' caricature to chastise the Christians: *Moses was like you all are not*.<sup>28</sup> But this time, he positively aligns the Jews with Moses: inasmuch as Mosaic law equaled Jewish practice, *they (the Jews) are like Moses was*. Anticipating the argument that "The Jews too do not sacrifice," which he despises as erroneous and idiotic, Julian states forthrightly that "the Jews do sacrifice" (θύουσι ... Ἰουδαῖοι) and describes them doing it with the same kind of punctiliousness that he attributed to Moses.<sup>29</sup> Moses and the Jews can all be attached to the same collection of seemingly-fixed attributes represented by and embodied in ritual action. Julian makes very explicit his overall concern: "the Jews agree with the Gentiles" except in the matter of monotheism, which is "peculiar to them and strange to us." It is the Galileans, the Christians, who are the true oddballs, monotheistic ritual oddballs though the Jews still may be.<sup>30</sup> The point is that the line drawn in the sand here consists of fixed traits adhering to Moses and Abraham.

So, for Pliny, Moses and the Jews are both 'magical,' and that is not really a good thing. For Julian, on the other hand, the Jews' inherent/inherited theurgical-ness is a positive trait. While their respective assessments diverge, I see a family resemblance between the ideological contents and the discursive methods of Pliny's and Julian's rhetorics. Both authors stereotype founding figures and use this to configure their putative descendants: the Jews (and Christians) are or are not like their presumed ancient ancestors, as the case may be. In terms of content, there is reason for thinking that *magica* and *θεουργία* occupied contiguous, if not identical, real estate in the ancient Greco-Roman imagination. Indeed, a passage in Strabo's *Geography* lumps these things together. Significantly, this passage also mentions Moses and the Jews.

In the sixteenth book of his influential *Geography*, a guidebook to the diverse peoples and places of the ancient Mediterranean imagination, Strabo enters a discussion about those who put stock in oracles and mythology:

Such were Amphiaräus, Trophonius, Orpheus, Musaeus, and the god among the Getae, who in ancient times was Zamolxis, a Pythagorean, and in my time was Decaeneus, the diviner of Byrebistas; and, among the Bosporeni, Achaeacus; and, among the Indians, the Gymnosophists; and, among the Persians, the Magi and the necromancers, as also the dish-diviners and water-diviners, as they are called; and, among the Assyrians, the Chaldaeans; and, among the Romans, the Tyrrhenian nativity-casters. Moses was such a person as these, as also his successors, who, with

<sup>28</sup> See Julian *Cont. Gal.* 305D–306B.

<sup>29</sup> Julian *Cont. Gal.* 306A: "the Jews do sacrifice in their own houses, and even to this day everything that they eat is consecrated; and they pray before sacrificing, and give the right shoulder to the priests as the first fruits" (θύουσι μὲν ἐν ἀδράκτοις Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ νῦν ἔτι Ἀπάντα ἐσθίουσιν ἱερά καὶ κατεύχονται πρὸ τοῦ θῆσαι καὶ τὸν δεξιὸν ὄμιον διδόνασιν ἀπαρχὰς τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν; trans. Wright, LCL).

<sup>30</sup> Giorgio Scrofani ("Like the Green Herb") uses this passage to show that Julian's paralleling of Jews and Hellenes is strategic and a way to illustrate Christian wrong-headedness and exclude Christianity from his program of public piety. More recently, Ari Finkelstein has suggested that it is not only that Jewish worship helps Julian delegitimize Christians, "but also to define Hellenic orthopraxy" itself (*Specter of the Jews*, 4).



no bad beginning, turned out for the worse (τοιούτος δέ τις ἦν καὶ ὁ Μωσῆς καὶ οἱ διαδεξάμενοι ἐκεῖνον, τὰς μὲν ἀρχὰς λαβόντες οὐ φαύλας, ἐκτραπόμενοι δ' ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖρον).<sup>31</sup>

Strabo conflates Persian Magi, Chaldeans, and Moses together with other tradents of prophecy and necromancy. Strabo's attitude toward such things is like Pliny's—he says earlier in this passage: “whatever truth there may be in such things, they have been believed and sanctioned among men.”<sup>32</sup> Translation: people have actually believed in all this mumbo-jumbo and hocus-pocus. But more important for our purposes is that here Strabo is in the middle of describing Judea. Thus he identifies Moses with other practitioners of a sort—many of which Julian would label ‘theurgical,’ no doubt—but states that Moses was unlike his inheritors. He describes the latter, the contemporaneous inhabitants of Judea, again later on:

Such, then, is the fact in the case; but according to Poseidonius the people are sorcerers and pretend to use incantations, as also urine and other malodorous liquids, which they first pour all over the solidified substance, and squeeze out the asphalt and harden it, and then cut it into pieces.<sup>33</sup>

Strabo is describing the Jewish fall from Mosaic purity of practice at *Geography* 16.36–37. The ancient exemplar was sincere, his descendants less so, but both are still stigmatized as belonging to a class of people who habitually behave in strange ways. *Moses was like they are not* AND *Moses was like they are*, both at the same time, it would seem.

I think that Pliny, Julian, and Strabo sufficiently illustrate one particular type of discourse that existed among ancient authors of the Roman world. In it, Abraham and/or Moses are stereotyped as ‘magical’ or ‘theurgical.’ This stereotype is then transferred onto later groups, usually Jews but also sometimes “Galileans” (Christians). The identification can be apophatic or kataphatic, denoting positive or negative correlation, and has the capacity to shape perception of the objectified group. Below I sketch out a few more important ways to think about such discourses, and in conclusion I will suggest that such discourses hold a particular form of power worth pondering. But first, I want to argue that the dynamic of stereotype transference between ancestral *exempla* and later racial/ethnic/national groups that I have demonstrated is, while extant, generally *uncommon* in ancient literature about the Jews.

Humans tend to see groups of others as monochromatic, but their own groups as diverse and complex. For that reason, one might hypothesize that what we have witnessed in the Roman authors above—alterity-driven stereotypes attached to founding ancestral figures of others (Jews) and projected onto descendants—would be expected in writings

<sup>31</sup> Strabo *Geographica* 16.39 (trans. Jones, LCL).

<sup>32</sup> Strabo *Geog.* 16.39: Ταῦτα γὰρ ὅπως ποτὲ ἀληθείας ἔχει, παρὰ γε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐπεπίστευτο καὶ ἐνενόμιστο (trans. Jones, LCL).

<sup>33</sup> Strabo *Geographica* 16.43: Τὸ μὲν οὖν συμβαῖνον τοιοῦτον· γόητας δὲ ὄντας σκήπτεσθαί φησιν ἐπωδὰς ὁ Ποσειδώνιος τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ οὖρα καὶ ἄλλα δυσώδη ὑγρά, αἱ περικαταχέαντας καὶ ἐκπιάσαντας πῆττειν τὴν ἀσφαλτον, εἶτα τέμνειν (trans. Jones, LCL).

of outgroup members (i.e. non-Jews) but not those of ingroup members. And this is what we find. Jewish authors of the Greco-Roman world—take Philo and Josephus as prominent examples—do not often stereotype figures like Abraham and Moses (though they will stereotype the Jews at times).<sup>34</sup> They do attach clear characteristics and quintessential traits to them, but not in the simple, immovable, heuristic ways typical of stereotypes, which by definition do not address individuals as such. Authors like Philo and Josephus generally talk in terms of what exemplary figures like Abraham and Moses taught or modeled (or, for Philo, allegorically typified) and focus on how this is imitated better or worse in subsequent generations. But the rigid one-to-one correspondence between individual and group, and between identity and trait, is more familiar to the etic writings of non-Jewish inhabitants of the Roman world; and since Jews appear relatively infrequently within that extra-Jewish literary milieu—Abraham and Moses are the most often-cited figures—the phenomenon I am identifying is a rarity in ancient Mediterranean literature.<sup>35</sup> Yet I think we *do* find *hints* of *contiguous* notions in the more emic writings of ancient Jews (and Christians).<sup>36</sup>

Rabbinic Judaism proffers an interesting case. At the very beginning of the Mishnah's *Pirkei Avot* (*Chapters of the Fathers*), we find a statement programmatic for later tradition:

Moses received the Torah (קִבַּל תּוֹרָה) at Sinai and transmitted it (מָסַרָהּ) to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples and make a fence round the Torah.<sup>37</sup>

While Moses is not stereotyped per se, he is presented foremost and fundamentally as 1) a learner of Torah and 2) a teacher of Torah.<sup>38</sup> Moses is quintessentially both adherent to and purveyor of tradition. Since the readers of this text will have known intimately Moses'

<sup>34</sup> An example of in-group stereotyping is Josephus' statement in *Contra Apionem* 1.42–43 that Jews possess an “innate” (σύνφυτον) loyalty to the Mosaic law and are routinely faithful to them, even to the point of death.

<sup>35</sup> Still the standard survey here is Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*. A look at Stern's glossary (Volume 3) reveals that Moses (3.136–137) appears considerably more frequently than Abraham (3.101).

<sup>36</sup> I find the anthropological notions of ‘emic’ (ingroup) and ‘etic’ (outgroup) perennially useful ideas and adjectives when thinking through interactions among and between Christians and Jews in the Greco-Roman world.

<sup>37</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 1:1 (trans. Joshua Kulp, *Sefaria*).

<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, one comes much closer to stereotype in an expanded version of this passage in Hebrew Union College MS 86, fol. 1: “Our Rabbi Moses, peace upon him, received the Torah from the Holy Blessed one on Mount Sinai, as is said ‘And the Lord said to Moses, go up to the mountain and there I shall give to you the tablets of stone, and the Torah and Commandments which I have written, so that you may teach them.’ And our rabbi Moses, peace upon him, transmitted it to Joshua his student, as is said, ‘but his servant Joshua, son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tent.’ And Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Members of the Great Assembly” (משה רבינו ע"ה קבל) התורה מהקב"ה בהר סיני כמו שנאמר ויאמר יי אל משה עלה אלי ההרה והיה שם ואתנה לך את לוחות האבן והתורה והמצוות אשר כתבתי להורותם ומסרה משה רבינו ע"ה ליהושע תלמידו שנ"א ומשרתו יהושע בין נון נער לא ימיש מתוך האהל ויהושע (לזקנים וזקנים לנביאים ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה). The scriptural additions about Moses and Joshua, from Exod 24:12 and 23:11 respectively, may indeed render the text “more reverential” and provide “scriptural support for the teaching” (Schapera, “A Pirkei Avot”). In the latter case, with Joshua, however, we should

career, such a distillation of his meaning bears resemblance to stereotype exemplarity. Furthermore, as its final statement makes clear, this passage epitomizes the warp of woof of the Mishnah, indeed of Rabbinic Judaism. The rabbis would say: *we are like Moses was*. It would be worth considering, perhaps in a future article, whether this constitutes a kind of performative or embodied stereotype—a positive one, obviously—which illustrates broad continuities and incongruities between outgroup (Roman) uses of ancient Hebrew *exempla* and ingroup (here Rabbinic) usage.

So as not to leave out the group that Julian dubbed “Galileans,” perhaps we can say something briefly about Christians. Christians straddled the ingroup/outgroup divide as it pertained to Jewishness in antiquity. But they were quite comfortable claiming the Jews’ ancient heroes as their own ancestral *exempla* (remember that Christians talked about themselves in racial, ethnic, national terms).<sup>39</sup> Like the rabbis, early Christians rarely stereotyped figures like Abraham and Moses in the same way that Roman authors did, but they did come close, imputing to them traits which then map onto some later groups, but not others. An example: when Eusebius characterizes Moses and Abraham (and Joshua) as pious believers in the first book of his *Church History*, he describes them as monotheists who nevertheless recognized a kind of inter-divinity hierarchy. After citing Psalm 36:6, which seems to imply a second Divine Logos subordinate to God the Father, Eusebius states:

All people from the time of creation of humanity who are said to have been conspicuous in justice and the virtue of piety—those around the time of Moses, the great worshipper [of God], and before him, Abraham, the first [worshipper], and his children and as many just people and prophets as have appeared since then—have pictured him through the pure eyes of the understanding and known him and given him the pious honor appropriate for a child of God.<sup>40</sup>

Abraham and Moses recognized a Father and a *Logos*, a secondary divinity. Before this is stated, both figures are labelled with the indelible characteristics of *δικαιοσύνη* and the *ἀρετή* of *θεοσεβεία*, so much so that they are almost made to represent all people who possess such virtue. Moreover, each is described as a “worshipper” (*θεράπων*). In the context of just this passage, Abraham and Moses are stereotyped as faith heroes. Eventually, Eusebius will conclude that Abraham and Moses *were* fundamentally *like us* (i.e. Christians), but *unlike them* (i.e. pagans and Jews). In this Eusebius was already

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note that this is effected by quoting a verse that serves as stereotype, by describing an action of Joshua as implicitly ongoing, habitual, and characteristic: Joshua’s character is essentialized in the statement that he “did not depart from the tent.” And such metaphorical non-departure is exactly what the passage, and the text overall, are instructing.

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Buell, *Why this New Race?*

<sup>40</sup> Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.2.6 (trans. Schott); Greek from Schwartz, Mommsen, and Winkelmann, *Die Kirchengeschichte*, 12, 14.

anticipated by the Apostle Paul.<sup>41</sup> Aaron Johnson discusses this kind of argument in Eusebius as a mode of “ethnic argumentation,” modeling Christians whilst delegitimizing Jews on the basis of ancient Hebrews.<sup>42</sup>

So, while ancient Jewish and Christian literature sometimes do move between Abraham/Moses as *exempla* and group-level descriptions, some key differences separate these from what we find in authors outside of the Judeo-Christian umbrella. First, the latter are pithier in presentation, their stereotypes and transfers less-informed and thus less-developed. For Pliny and Strabo, if not for Julian, the Jews were one of myriad insignificant backwater folk, and thus they simply cared less, making fertile ground for this type of discourse. Second, Greek and Roman authors tend to be less well-disposed toward the Jews, whereas Jewish and Christian authors celebrate their revered role-models of old. Third, the ‘pagan’ authors agree in portraying Abraham, Moses, and the Jews with the aura of ritual strangeness. Described in terms of magic, theurgy, oracles, prophecy, necromancy, our Greco-Roman authors see the Jews as mysterious, exotic, ritually-inclined, to be associated with (e.g.) the Persians or Chaldeans or Magi. The Jews seem to have accrued a reputation for a peculiar religiosity, something they also share with the Egyptians: the latter also were classed as foreign esoterics from the historian Herodotus in 5th-century BCE Greece to the novelist Heliodorus in 4th-century CE Syria at least.<sup>43</sup> But the Jews, of course, were different. For one thing, they were distinguished by a few ancestral heroes often identifiable to Greco-Roman authors. Before turning to the power dynamics involved in transferring stereotypes attached to these heroes onto the (latter-day) Jews, it might be helpful to suggest a few more frames for the discussion.

## 5 Stereotype & Prejudice: Insiders & Outsiders in Ancient Discourse & Social Psychology

It is now common knowledge that the way humans think about and group others differs from the ways in which they think about themselves and the groups/people with whom

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<sup>41</sup> An Abraham as a positive *exemplum*-stereotype for Christians in Romans 4 and elsewhere, see Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 171–. In Christianity, things are in fact a bit more complicated; the primary difference between what occurs as an emic phenomenon within Christianity and what occurs at an etic level toward Jews (and Christians) in antiquity is the simplicity of the argument, which is actually part of what constitutes the stereotype. Christians, speaking of themselves, are not articulating simple and simplistic correlations between a forebear and later adherents or descendants. The quick-and-dirty nature of the etic move discussed in this article makes it what it is and defines the phenomenon being discussed, which is therefore different from the prototypical social identity theory discussed by Esler.

<sup>42</sup> Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument*.

<sup>43</sup> In Herodotus, the Egyptians are depicted as an especially and thoroughly esoteric, ritually-inclined people, the first to have identified the twelve gods by name and set up “altars, statues and temples” for them (2.4). They are also stereotyped routinely, as at 2.39 where one learns that “all the Egyptians behave in the same way with the heads of sacrificed animals and they all practice the same libations of wine.” See further discussion of Egyptians in Herodotus in Hartog, *Mirror of Herodotus* (quote at 177). For the Egyptians as fetishized as religiose in Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica* (or, *An Ethiopian Story*, a late antique novel), see Bay, “Religion, Ethnicity.”

they identify. We tend to apprehend more positively those who come from our own groups, however arbitrary such groupings may be (ingroup favoritism), we tend to define others by characteristics assigned to their groups rather than appreciating individuality (social stereotypes),<sup>44</sup> we tend to attribute traits to other groups in ways that benefit our own groups (group-serving bias), and we react negatively when ingroup members behave in ways that threaten our group's positive image (black sheep effect).<sup>45</sup> Such social realities have still deeper roots, buried within the subconscious. While words like "bias," "discrimination," and "stereotype" carry negative connotations when referring to the treatment of groups, neuroscientists will rightly point out that such capacities also reflect at a basic level how the human brain works.<sup>46</sup> Neurons in the human brain are constantly processing and categorizing information, such that we develop networks of bias, discrimination, and prejudice all the time without knowing it. This does not excuse, but might help explain, things like the Roman stereotype 'Jews are magical.'<sup>47</sup>

This stereotype, of course, did not develop within the subconscious. But it did develop within individual human minds, a network of them. These minds were operating within the Roman social imaginary as it apprehended, piecemeal and in passing, aspects of a foreign, Jewish way of perceiving and acting within the world. This cross-cultural interface seems to have evinced relatively little and superficial understanding of Jews and Jewishness by others. Extant Roman literature reveals a limited and confused appreciation of Jewish tradition. Most authors agree in describing the Jews as exclusivist, tribal, and misanthropic, a charge often associated with Jewish religiosity.<sup>48</sup> Several mention Abraham,<sup>49</sup> and a few more mention Moses. Given the dearth of discussion about the Jews, why is stereotype of 'magical Jews' common, and why are Abraham and/or Moses more than once associated with that assumption? Because the *exempla*-based stereotype transference identified in this article emerges within a larger ancient discourse of Jewish magic.

In addition to the passages from Strabo, Pliny, and Julian above, the 2nd-century philosopher Apuleius, in his *Apology*, mentions Moses prominently when rattling off

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<sup>44</sup> This essay makes the inverse claim, which does not negate the mechanics of social stereotypes: namely, that the characteristics of individuals can become the group-level stereotypes then used to fuel social stereotypes—a vicious circle.

<sup>45</sup> See Chapter 11 of Stangor, *Principles of Social Psychology*.

<sup>46</sup> See Derks, Scheepers, and Ellemers, *Neuroscience of Prejudice*.

<sup>47</sup> To be clear, I see the casting of Jews as *magi* or magicians as effectively cognate to labelling them theurgists, or religious zealots with a proclivity for strange and elaborate ritual, or even a distinctively prophetic or oracle-prone people. I would not say that all these stereotypes are identical in content, but I think that refusing to group them into a family does injustice to the fact that most Romans probably knew and cared very little about Jewish tradition and, indeed, were likely aware of this ignorance and took it for granted.

<sup>48</sup> Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 36–37.

<sup>49</sup> See the recent treatment of Williams, "Abraham in Contemporary Greek and Latin Authors," who explains the absence of Abraham from the main Greek (Diodorus Siculus, Strabo) and Latin (Tacitus) accounts of Hebrew/Jewish history by assuming that these authors naturally saw Moses as the nation's historical fountainhead (165–166). See more comprehensively Siker, "Abraham in Graeco-Roman Paganism," whose first footnote (188) provides a history of research and who notes that Abraham is mentioned by name in only "eleven Graeco-Roman authors" over the "time span of approximately 800 years" (189).

a short list of famous magicians (*magi*).<sup>50</sup> A century earlier, Josephus had defended Moses against the charge of being a “magician and impostor” (γόης και ἀπατεῶν), lodged ostensibly by Apollonius and Lysimachus.<sup>51</sup> A significant testament to the magicality imputed to Abraham comes in Origen’s *Against Celsus*. There, in response to Celsus’ charge that the Jewish race is comprised of dark and dangerous esoteric impostors,<sup>52</sup> Origen states that the names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob can effect much (ὧν τοσοῦτον δύναται τὰ ὀνόματα)<sup>53</sup> and as such are used in a particular formula—“God of Abraham, and God of Isaac, and God of Jacob”—in “prayers to God” (ἐν ταῖς πρὸς θεὸν εὐχαῖς) and the “exorcising of demons” (ἐν τῷ κατεπάδειν δαίμονας).<sup>54</sup> In fact, Origen claims, these incantations are used by “almost all who occupy themselves with incantations and magical rites” (σχεδὸν καὶ πάντας τοὺς τὰ τῶν ἐπωδῶν καὶ μαγειῶν πραγματευομένους).<sup>55</sup> For Origen, such association between Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and multicultural magic serves “to prove the sacred character of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, the fathers of the Jewish race.”<sup>56</sup> (It is not insignificant that Origen’s concern is with how Abraham *et al.*

- <sup>50</sup> Apuleius *Apol.* 90.6–91.1: “Just observe carefully what assurance of my own innocence, what contempt for you I am about to show: if a single reason can be found, however slight, why I should have tried to marry Pudentilla for some advantage to myself, then call me the famous Carmendas or Damogeron, or their predecessors Moses, Iohannes, Apollobex, Dardanus himself, or any other celebrated magician (*quicumque alius ... inter magos celebratus est*) since Zoroaster and Ostanes. I ask you, Maximus: see what a hubbub they have started just because I listed the names of a few magicians (*paucos magorum*)” (trans. Jones, LCL).
- <sup>51</sup> Josephus *Cont. Ap.* 2.145, a passage illustrating the apparently widespread notion of the Jews as atheists, misanthropes, and weirdos (i.e. charged with ἀπίστου). See Cook, *Interpretation of the Old Testament*, 12. Bloch, “Mose und die Scharlatane,” now available as Bloch, “Moses and the Charlatans,” argues that the term γόης in this passage means not “sorcerer” but “charlatan,” based upon a survey of Josephus’ other uses of that term and a survey of the prominence of the Moses = magician stereotype in Greco-Roman antiquity, which Bloch sees as miniscule. However, I suggest that Moses himself played an extremely minor role in Greco-Roman literature, and the fact that he and Abraham are both associated multiple times with characteristic magic-adjacent practices and proclivities speaks to a widespread assumption regarding a figure and the people he represents who were only of marginal significance in the (Greek and) Roman imagination. This could have been, however, a result rather than a cause of Josephus’ defense against Moses being a γόης, as the other sources mentioning a ‘magical Moses’ are usually later.
- <sup>52</sup> Origen *Cont. Cels.* 4.33 (ANF 4:511), where Celsus is recorded as charging that “the Jews accordingly endeavoured to derive their origin from the first race of sorcerers and swindlers, appealing to the testimony of dark and ambiguous words, whose meaning was veiled in obscurity, and which they misinterpreted to the unlearned and ignorant, and that, too, when such a point had never been called in question during the long preceding period” (ἀναισχύντως ἄρα ἐπεχείρησαν γενεαλογεῖν αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ πρώτης σοπράς γοήτων καὶ πλάνων ἀνθρώπων, ἀμυδρὰς καὶ ἀμφιβόλους φωνὰς ἐν σκότῳ που κρυφίους ἐπιμαρτυροῦμενοι καὶ τοῖς ἀμαθέσι καὶ ἀνοήτοις παρεξηγούμενοι, καὶ ταῦτα μηδὲ πάποτ’ ἐν πολλῷ τῷ πρόσθεν χρόνῳ τοῦ τοιοῦδε μηδ’ ἀμφισβητηθέντος).
- <sup>53</sup> Origen *Cont. Cels.* 4.33 (ANF 4:511): that is, when “applied together with the name of God” (συναπτόμενα τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ προσηγορίᾳ).
- <sup>54</sup> Origen *Cont. Cels.* 4.33 (ANF 4:511): the Greek of the formula reads: ὁ θεὸς Ἀβραὰμ καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ἰσαὰκ καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ἰακώβ.
- <sup>55</sup> Origen *Cont. Cels.* 4.33 (ANF 4:511). He continues: “For there is found in treatises on magic in many countries such an invocation of God, and assumption of the divine name, as implies a familiar use of it by these men in their dealings with demons” (Εὐρίσκειται γὰρ ἐν τοῖς μαγικοῖς συγγράμμασι πολλαχοῦ ἢ τοιαύτη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπίκλησις καὶ παράληψις τοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ ὀνόματος ὡς οἰκείου τοῖς ἀνδράσι τούτοις εἰς τὰ κατὰ τῶν δαιμόνων).
- <sup>56</sup> Origen *Cont. Cels.* 4.33 (ANF 4:512): εἰς ἀπόδειξιν τοῦ ἱεροῦς τινος ἀνδρας γεγονέναι τὸν Ἀβραὰμ καὶ τὸν Ἰσαὰκ καὶ τὸν Ἰακώβ, τοὺς πατέρας τοῦ Ἰουδαίου ἔθνους.

reflect on perceptions of the ἔθνος and γένος of the Jews [Ἰουδαῖοι] writ large). In other words, Origen well knows that Abraham *et al.* have a magical reputation, and that this reputation is taken to reflect the Jewish national, ethnic, and/or racial character. Origen sees this as evidence of these figures' ancient holiness.<sup>57</sup> Yet Celsus sees such figures, and by proxy the race they represent, as foreign, strange, and despicable on the same evidence.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, both Abraham and Moses were oft associated with the realm of 'magic,' broadly understood. It is no accident that both figures figure prominently in the *Greek Magical Papyri*.<sup>58</sup> It is not an accident that John Gager's famous book on *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism* has a chapter on "Moses and Magic."<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, as the example from Origen shows, those who would have considered themselves 'insiders' would not necessarily have distanced themselves from this characterization. They might well have embraced it. Indeed, beyond the salient passages from *Against Celsus*, a growing body of ancient sources has inspired many contemporary scholars to begin speaking of *Ancient Jewish Magic*, exemplified by Gideon Bohak's book of that

<sup>57</sup> This is made doubly clear in the following chapter (Origen *Cont. Cels.* 4.34), which is worth quoting in full: "For we inquire of all those who employ such invocations of God (ταῖς τοιαύταις τοῦ θεοῦ κατακλήσειν), saying: Tell us, friends, who was Abraham (τίς ὁ Ἀβραάμ), and what sort of person was Isaac, and what power (ποίας δυνάμεως) did Jacob possess, that the appellation 'God,' when joined with their name, could effect such wonders (ὡς τὴν θεὸς προσηγορίαν ἀρμοζομένην αὐτῶν τῷ ὀνόματι τηλικάσδε ποιεῖν δυνάμεις)? And from whom have you learned, or can you learn, the facts relating to these individuals? And who has occupied himself with writing a history about them, either directly magnifying these men by ascribing to them mysterious powers, or hinting obscurely at their possession of certain great and marvelous qualities, patent to those who are qualified to see them (εἶτε καὶ αὐτόθεν σεμνύνουσιν ἐν τοῖς ῥητοῖς τοὺς ἄνδρας εἶτε καὶ δι' ὑπονοιῶν αἰνισσομένην τινα μεγάλα καὶ θαυμάσια τοῖς θεωρῆσαι αὐτὰ δυνάμενοις)? And when, in answer to our inquiry, no one can show from what history—whether Greek or Barbarian—or, if not a history, yet at least from what mystical narrative (τινος μυστικῆς ἀναγραφῆς), the accounts of these men are derived, we shall bring forward the book entitled "Genesis," which contains the acts of these men, and the divine oracles (τοὺς τοῦ θεοῦ χρησμούς) addressed to them, and will say, Does not the use by you of the names of these three ancestors of the race, establishing in the clearest manner that effects not to be lightly regarded are produced by the invocation of them, evidence the divinity of the men (μή ποτε τὸ καὶ ὑφ' ὑμῶν παραλαμβάνεσθαι τὰ ὀνόματα τῶν τριῶν τούτων γενάρχων τοῦ ἔθνους, τῇ ἐναργείᾳ καταλαμβάνόντων οὐκ εὐκαταφρόνητα ἀνύεσθαι ἐκ τῆς κατεπικλήσεως αὐτῶν, παρίστησι τὸ θεῖον τῶν ἀνδρῶν)? And yet we know them from no other source than the sacred books of the Jews! Moreover, the phrases, "the God of Israel," and "the God of the Hebrews," and "the God who drowned in the Red Sea the king of Egypt and the Egyptians," are formulæ frequently employed against demons and certain wicked powers (πολλάκις ὀνομάζεται παραλαμβάνόμενος κατὰ δαιμόνων ἢ τινων πονηρῶν δυνάμεων). And we learn the history of the names and their interpretation from those Hebrews, who in their national literature and national tongue dwell with pride upon these things, and explain their meaning (τῶν τοῖς πατρίοις γράμμασι καὶ τῇ πατρίῳ διαλέκτῳ ταῦτα σεμνυόντων καὶ διηγουμένων). How, then, should the Jews attempt to derive their origin from the first race of those whom Celsus supposed to be sorcerers and swindlers (γόητας καὶ πλανήτας), and shamelessly endeavour to trace themselves and their beginning back to these?—whose names, being Hebrew, are an evidence to the Hebrews, who have their sacred books written in the Hebrew language and letters, that their nation is akin to these men. For up to the present time, the Jewish names belonging to the Hebrew language were either taken from their writings, or generally from words the meaning of which was made known by the Hebrew language." See further the beginning of 4.35.

<sup>58</sup> Siker, "Abraham in Graeco-Roman Paganism," 201–206; Edmonds, "You Will Be Amazed."

<sup>59</sup> Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism*, 134–161.

name.<sup>60</sup> Texts, amulets, and Aramaic incantation bowls suggest a magical side to ancient Judaism which can be surprising.<sup>61</sup> This prompts the question: was the Greco-Roman stereotype of the Jews, and/or their famous forebears Abraham and Moses, as ‘magical’ not simply a throwaway caricature but rather a relatively reasonable characterization with some basis in reality? (It is not to be forgotten that most stereotypes have some basis in reality, their faults lying in the concretization and universalization of their assumptions.) And a follow-up question: was it indeed that Abraham and Moses were saddled with some strange magical-ness, which was then mapped onto their putative progeny, or might things have worked the other way around? If the Jews were generally seen to be a people prone to the occult<sup>62</sup>—one might recall here Juvenal’s passing jibe about a trembling Jewess passing herself off as the purveyor of some low-brow hocus-pocus<sup>63</sup>—perhaps the magicalized type-setting applied to Abraham and Moses reflected the Greek and Roman experience of the Jewish people copied-and-pasted onto their best-known progenitors.<sup>64</sup> Or rather, perhaps this confrontation with the Eastern and bizarre led Greco-Roman authors simply to emphasize and exaggerate the magic-adjacent aspects of Abraham’s and Moses’ biblical careers, which undeniably exist.<sup>65</sup> In any case, the rhetoric employed by authors like Pliny and Julian and Strabo moves chronologically from ancestors to race.

Regardless of whether Abraham and Moses were practitioners of some unspeakable arts, and whether or not some inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean experienced Jews as magicians, the stereotype seems to have stuck. Such a stereotype takes on a racial character when it is presented as an unchosen, quasi-genetic, and fixed trait descriptive and definitive of the people it groups. Thus, the discourses under discussion involve racial stereotyping and racial prejudice. This, then, leads us to the question of power. As Greco-Roman authors, often representing the imperial majority, apprehended the

<sup>60</sup> See Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* and, more recently, Harari, *Jewish Magic* and Swartz, *Mechanics of Providence*. David Frankfurter has also been a prominent voice in discussions of (Jewish) magic in the ancient Mediterranean, and the best place to start in the study thereof is now his edited volume: Frankfurter, *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*.

<sup>61</sup> See the salient chapters in Part 3 of Frankfurter, *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*.

<sup>62</sup> Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 1.52, 147, 335, 337, 465, 498ff.

<sup>63</sup> Juvenal *Sat.* 6.542–547: “No sooner has he gone than a palsied Jewish woman will abandon her hay-lined chest and start begging into her private ear. She’s the expounder of the laws of Jerusalem, high priestess of the tree, reliable intermediary of highest heaven. She too gets her hand filled, though with less, because Jews will sell you whatever dreams you like for the tiniest copper coin” (*Cum dedit ille locum, cophino fenoque relicto / arcanam Iudaea tremens mendicat in aurem, / interpres legum Solymarum et magna sacerdos / arboris ac summi fida internuntia caeli. / implet et illa manum, sed parcius; aere minuto / qualiacumque voles Iudaei somnia vendunt*; trans. Braund, LCL). Cf. *Sat.* 3.10–18 (where the Jews have rented “the grove and shrine of the sacred fount” [*sacri fontis nemus et delubra*]) and 14.96–106, where Mosaic Law is called a “secret tome” (*arcano volumine*) handed down and Jewish rites (*sacra*) are given a rather mysterious aura; see Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 2.94–107.

<sup>64</sup> Associated with the Jews/magic collocation is the more benign opinion that the Jews were philosophers (thus Clearchus of Soli) who also knew how to sacrifice correctly (thus Theophrastus); Siker, “Abraham in Graeco-Roman Paganism,” 198–99.

<sup>65</sup> See, e.g., Gen 14 (Abraham) and Exod 17 (Moses).



colonized Jewish minority, what was the point of the magic stereotype? What did it do? What power did it hold?

## 6 Conclusion: The Discursive Power of Persons in Antiquity

The linking of ancestral forebears with later descendants in the popular imagination is an unexceptional rhetoric in the ancient Roman world. The Romans celebrated the public heroes of their collective past in ways that informed their basis of ethics, virtue, and morality and which therefore had much to say about how Romans understood themselves, and others, as historical actors. That is to say, in the Roman world *exemplarity* informed *identity* and *alterity*. If this is so, it might well appear natural to find traits attributed to Abraham and Moses—a penchant for the magical, theurgical, and the ritually strange—venerated onto the Jewish people who claimed them as their forefathers. This, then, is part of the power of the *exempla*-based magic stereotype of the Jews: such a discourse tapped into the common sense of Greco-Roman culture. Just like one could ‘know’ something about any Carthaginian based upon who Hannibal was, so one could ‘know’ something about the Jews based upon who Abraham and Moses were. Such an assumption was on the surface culturally normal, and under the surface cognitively efficient.

Ultimately, the power of any stereotype has to do with expediency: if ancient Roman writers and readers cared and thought little about Judeans and their culture, how attractive it could have been to have a ready-made category that allowed one to class and assess any and all members of that group without expending much effort. Who had time to read the Jews’ arcane books written in its inscrutable squiggles, after all? In this frame, Greco-Roman stereotypes of the Jews (and others) represent a social parallel to cognitive heuristics, part of what Daniel Kahneman refers to as “Type 1” thinking—that is, the “fast” thinking that occurs automatically and effortlessly within the human brain.<sup>66</sup> While the expression of stereotypes in literature is a different kind of thing—if anything, it betrays a ‘social’ brain, or ideology—the kinds of stereotypes we have examined here have key features in common with our own neural proclivities. Chief among these is the fact that stereotypes, whether social or cognitive, collapse identity into unity: they deny individuality for the sake of expediency. Kahneman would tell us that Type 1 thinking is incapable of making such fine distinctions—that is what Type 2 thinking, the thoughtful, “slow” form of thinking, does. The power of the stereotypes we have discussed, therefore, is identical to that of cognitive heuristics: they are simple, easy, and quick. They respond to hard questions—what is x group like?—by answering easier questions—what was y individual, their forefather, like? Such arguments would appeal, I suggest, to authors and audiences who knew few if any Jews and little, if anything, about Judaism (Jewishness): authors like Pliny, Strabo, even Julian (whose knowledge of Judaism was basically biblical), and those who read their work. Such stereotypes are

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<sup>66</sup> Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

more difficult to find in knowledgeable authors like Philo and Josephus, and more complicated in rabbinic and Christian literature.

The place of Abraham and Moses in this matrix is, perhaps, not that of the engine of such discourses, but rather the fuel. One can look at Abraham and Moses in such conversations as instances of cultural capital, which discursive agents can leverage to fit groups into particular pictures of the world (Pliny, Strabo), to argue for or criticize right or wrong thought or action (Julian, Eusebius, the Mishnah), to define the self and other, often in terms we would dub ‘racial.’ Drawing upon the ‘theory of practice’ developed by Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>67</sup> one could use exemplary figures like Abraham and Moses to frame particular authors and their ingroups (and outgroups) within particular social fields, and their arguments and ideologies within a certain structure of multiculturalism, apologetic, and identity formation. Bourdieu would discuss action within such a milieu in terms of “symbolic power.”<sup>68</sup>

The social world is both the product and the stake of inseparably cognitive and political symbolic struggles over knowledge and recognition, in which each pursues not only the imposition of an advantageous representation of himself or herself, ... but also the power to impose as legitimate the principles of construction of social reality most favorable to his or her social being—individual and collective, with ... struggles over the boundaries of groups.<sup>69</sup>

Abraham and Moses served as sources of power in this context, because cultural assumptions about exemplarity and identity render them reasonable and forceful mechanisms for describing *what the Jews are like*, which pertains directly to group boundaries.<sup>70</sup> To define and thus create the Other within a broader cultural conversation is what power means in this context. A passage from a late-4th century Roman-Christian author shows explicitly that the assumption of this kind of discursive power existed among ancient Mediterranean peoples: Pseudo-Hegesippus, in his *On the Destruction of Jerusalem (De excidio Hierosolymitano)*, at one point puts a speech into the mouth of the Roman general-then-emperor Titus. Titus asks and answers the overt question, “what kind of race are the Jews? (*qualis ista gens?*),” with recourse to Abraham’s defining deed: inasmuch as Abraham was willing to sacrifice his own son (the famous Akedah of Gen 22), he embodied a religious barbarism that became endemic to the Hebrew/Jewish character. No wonder, concludes Titus, the Jews sacrifice their own people in resisting Rome.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

<sup>68</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*.

<sup>69</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 187, used as the imprint of Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*.

<sup>70</sup> A similar, and perhaps more methodologically-rigorous definition of the kind of power under discussion is given by Michael Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, who counts “ideological” power as one of four types of social power within societies, which he sees not as unitary but as “constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power” (1–2), something akin to Bourdieu’s “structures” and “fields.”

<sup>71</sup> See Bay, “Exemplarity, Exegesis, & Ethnography.”

In so saying, Titus perpetuates a rare but present phenomenon of Greco-Roman antiquity, combining exemplarity and racial stereotyping, whereby Abraham and Moses are saddled with a magical essence, which later comes to define what the Jews are like as a people. And this discursive practice has implications for the exercise of a certain power at that time. By describing the Jews' ancient relatives, non-Jews could define, contain, and control Jewish identity. The Jews become apples fallen not far from the Abrahamic and Mosaic tree of theurgic legacy, an already-strange and already-Eastern folk now associated with the dark arts, an orientaling legacy whose power would manifest in the construction of Jewishness within the Christian Middle Ages and which, arguably, continues even to today.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> For discussion around the present-day idea that Jews "are" and have long been "magical," see Rachel Román, "Season of the Jewitch: The occultists revising Jewish witchcraft and folklore," *The Times of Israel* (30 Oct 2021).

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