

EHUD BEN ZVI AND DIANA VIKANDER EDEMANN (EDS.)
*Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity
 in the Early Second Temple Period*

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The present anthology is the product of the research group “Israel and the Production and Reception of Authoritative Books in the Persian and Hellenistic Periods” and their two sessions at the European Association of Biblical Studies conference in Thessaloniki, Greece, 2011. The anthology begins with an article by Jeremiah W. Cataldo containing a theoretical discussion of “Othering” and “The Other.” However, nothing is said about the practice of “imagining” in this anthology; the only contribution that touches upon it is Stordalen’s. “Imagining” is not a neutral term and given that it occurs as the first word of the title of the book, it would have been beneficial to discuss possible meanings of the term in the initial theoretical discussion. Is the “imagined other” of the title a fictionalized person? Or imagined because not otherwise heard?

Drawing from critical theorists such as Deleuze, Foucault and Žižek, Cataldo uses the notion of the Other as a sociological concept. Thus, the focus is on what constitutes “us,” the Other being that which differs from us. This discrepancy is discussed partly by Ehud Ben Zvi in his article “Othering, Selfing, ‘Boundarying’ and ‘Cross-Boundarying’ as Interwoven with Socially Shared Memories.” Ben Zvi is concerned with how boundaries are set up, maintained and questioned. He shows that there is an interplay between being “Otherized” and “Israelitized” (his terms), and that biblical texts are sometimes constructed such that foreigners can be read as insiders, and Israelites as Others.

Diana V. Edelman’s article “YHWH’s Othering of Israel” discusses how YHWH uses various strategies in the othering of Israel to threaten and protect the in-group. Edelman incorporates theories from social psychology and anthropology that deal with collectivist cultures, for which boundary maintenance is more important than it is in individualist cultures. In a fruitful way, Edelman shows how theoretical approaches can aid the reading not only of texts, but also of the traits and actions

of biblical characters. Kåre Berge, in his essay “Categorical Identities: ‘Ethnified Otherness and Sameness’ – A Tool for Understanding Boundary Negotiation in the Pentateuch?,” warns of the pitfalls of incorporating theoretical approaches into biblical studies in the wrong way. Berge uses the Canaanites as a case study, an example which reverses the idea of the Other as a marginalized group, and shows what the Other means when applied to a group that no longer exists. The ambivalence involved in understanding who the Other is, is explored by Mark G. Brett in his article “Natives and Immigrants in the Social Imagination of the Holiness School.” Brett examines the different terms for native and immigrant in Hebrew, and how these terms are sometimes applied to the community of the returnees from exile and, at other times, to the people who remained in the land.

Several articles follow that deal with women as Others. Claudia V. Camp shows, in “Gender and Identity in the Book of Numbers,” how the authors of Numbers use gender to construct their priestly agenda: an all-male utopian vision. Camp analyzes cultic behavior with a gendered lens. Carey Walsh, in her article “Women on the Edge,” stresses the importance of analyzing power as well as gender. In this article, Walsh argues that the Other is not the same as the unknown stranger, but is rather the one that we recognize as different from us. This is evident in, for instance, Ruth. Anne-Mareike Wetter, in “Ruth: A Born-Again Israelite? One Woman’s Journey through Time and Space,” uses ethnicity theory to trace how Ruth shifts from being a Moabite to being read as an Israelite. However, in so doing, she becomes assimilated to the point that her original identity is erased. Robert L. Cohn poses similar questions in “Overcoming Otherness in the Book of Ruth,” and argues that Ruth can be said to do what foreigners should do, according to Ezra 6:21 and Isaiah 56:3 – she separates herself from the impurities of her people to become an insider.

In “Imagined and Forgotten Communities: Othering in the Story of Josiah’s Reform (2 Kings 23),” Terje Stordalen addresses how memory can bind a group together. Stordalen considers the story of Josiah’s reform, arguing that stories about the past are used to define the “in-

group.” This consequently means that other stories are forgotten and “othered.”

Additional aspects of “othering” are raised by Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher in “Jonah and the Other: A Discourse on Interpretative Competence.” Gillmayr-Bucher argues that the Other, in the text of Jonah, can appear in several forms, as book, character, place and even YHWH. Gillmayr-Bucher demonstrates that those with power can be understood as Other and not just the marginalized. In “Denial, Deception, or Force: How to Deal with Powerful Others in the Book of Esther,” Jean-Daniel Macchi investigates what happens when the Other, when it comes to power dynamics, is in fact the insider, or the “us” of the story-world, and how those who are dominant are the Others in relation to the readers of the text.

Ezra-Nehemiah is the text most often quoted in studies concerned with identity formation in the Persian period, which is the subject of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi’s article “Imagining the Other in the Construction of Judahite Identity in Ezra-Nehemiah.” Eskenazi considers how the Other appears as both friend and foe in the material, and how the Other as friend is most notably a geographically distant person, such as the king. She notes that the closer the Other is to the in-group, the more that person is read as foe. This results in the outside Other and the inside Other being intertwined. Focusing on later texts, Tobias Funke, in “Phinehas and the Other Priests in Ben Sira and 1 Maccabees,” discusses the priestly group as Other. Genealogy is the determining factor in 1 Maccabees that defines someone as Us or Other. Funke reconstructs the historical setting of the high priesthood in the texts in question and includes the theoretical notion of “othering” only in the final points of his analysis, in contrast to other contributions in the anthology.

The final two articles of the anthology discuss disability in ancient texts, with Rebecca Raphael taking the biblical material as her starting point and Anke Dorman using Qumran texts as the main source for her investigation. In “Disability, Identity and Otherness in Persian-Period Israelite Thought,” Raphael examines disability and disease as markers of

divine punishment and as signs of sin or undesirable behavior. A similar perspective is also the focal point for Dorman, in “The Other Others: A Qumran Perspective on Disability.” Here, too, the image of disability serves the function of marking otherness within the group. According to Dorman, this is because of how Leviticus 21 was interpreted in the Qumran community, where it was taken to imply that disabled persons could render what was clean impure, thus posing a threat to holiness.

Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period constitutes another interesting contribution to the ongoing debate about identity formation in the Persian period. One problem for a scholar working in this area is that this work is an anthology, which is the case with several of the books on this subject that have been published in the past decades. Edelman states in the foreword that it is necessary that many voices be heard on such complex matters. I agree to a certain degree, but it is still unfortunate that some of the insights in the book are not discussed at greater length because of limitations of space.

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