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Response to Katherine E. Southwood

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Biblical Studies is an academic discipline that attracts numerous critical questions and theoretical discourses. Throughout its existence biblical texts have been studied as artefacts of theological, historical, literary, political, ethical, and other kinds of value. Although the term ethnicity is not inherent to biblical texts, the phenomenon as such, however described and understood, is. Biblical texts tell about peoples, nations, and groups all most often described in their relationship to the Israelites. Even though it is not always clear who these other peoples are, the muddiest point in this general typology of ethnic identities of the Hebrew Bible concerns the identity of the Israelites. The name Israel is in the Hebrew Bible used of Jacob, Jacob's family, the northern kingdom of Israel and also, after the return from the Babylonian exile, of Judeans in the province of Yehud.[1] Studying the Hebrew Bible texts from an ethnic point of view might therefore contribute to clarifying some of the misunderstandings. However, it is not done without major clarifications of the process itself, the mode of procedure before turning to the Hebrew Bible text.[2] I will summarize these issues under two categories and then apply some of them to the paper at hand.

A first set of questions needs to be addressed *before* engaging with the biblical text and deals with "the ethnicity in the interpretation of the Bible."[3] How do we define the concept of ethnicity, how do we apply it to

[1] See, for instance, Philip R. Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel: Introduction to Biblical History – Ancient and Modern* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 47–57.

[2] For a discussion of interpretative questions connected to the study of ethnicity in the Bible, see the introductory article by Mark G. Brett, "Interpreting Ethnicity: Method, Hermeneutics, Ethics," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. M. G. Brett; BIS 19; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 3–22.

[3] Fernando Segovia makes this important distinction between ethnicity "from the point of view of … the text (ethnicity in the Bible) and the readers of the text (ethnicity in the interpretation of the Bible)." See further Fernando F. Segovia, "Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Biblical Studies," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. M. G. Brett; BIS 19; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 469–92.

the ancient cultures represented in the biblical texts, and what impact does the ethnicity of the interpreter/scholar have on the study of the text? Analysis of these questions would consider the problem of emic or ethic approaches to the study of ethnicity in the biblical texts, but also wider issues such as politics of reading and interpreting biblical texts.[4]

A second set of questions is related to the first and concerns the study object at hand—the biblical texts themselves. The important questions here are connected to the nature of texts, specifically biblical texts. The complex history of biblical texts demands close attention to the voices represented in the text. Whose ethnic awareness are we detecting in the text and who is in power to categorize markers of ethnic identity in a given text? Would the ethnic symbols mentioned in a text be held as such by all or most audience of the text? Are these ethnic symbols accepted and declared by the main characters of the text? Or, are the redactors of the text, in its canonical context, responsible for lists of (ethnic) identity markers in the text?[5] The Hebrew Bible texts present a variety of positions representing different times, diverse geographic locations, and different authors. When studying the term ethnicity in the HB texts, one needs to be aware of this diversity.[6]

Turning to Dr Southwood's paper, Neh 9 is not a surprising choice of a text. Among the texts of the HB, Ezra-Nehemiah seems to be particularly suitable for the study of ethnicity in the HB, as Southwood has previously demonstrated in her recently published monograph *Ethnicity and the*

[4] See further Segovia, who discusses the role of ethnic and racial minorities in the field of Biblical Studies so heavily dominated by Westerns standards of criticism and maintains that "[f]rom a disciplinary point of view, ethnic and racial minorities … have resisted and continue to resist … any view of criticism as timeless and value-free, seeing it instead as thoroughly enmeshed in the public arena and thus as irretrievably political in character and ramifications" (Segovia, "Racial and Ethnic Minorities," 480).

[5] Thus John Barton, discussing some of the problems of dealing with Hebrew Bible ethics, maintains initially that "the picture of Old Testament ethics which the reader is likely to carry away from it is a rather artificial construct, which purchases coherence and system at the price of historical objectivity and verifiability" (John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* [London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003], 15). Barton states this in order to raise important methodological questions, not to put an end to the discussion. In my understanding, the study of ethnicity in the Hebrew Bible meets the same challenges, when the ancient text is concerned, as the study of ethics does.

[6] For the impact of the difficulties in dating the texts accurately on the study of ethnicity in these texts, see James C. Miller, "Ethnicity and the Hebrew Bible: Problems and Prospects," *CurBR* 6 (2008): 170–212.

Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10: An Anthropological Approach.[7] The book of Ezra-Nehemiah deals with issues that can be described as concerned with construction of social, ethnic, or other identities and Nehemiah 9 offers a historical retrospective heavy with associations relevant to the construct of (ethnic) identity.

Southwood starts her paper with some preliminary observations regarding the definitions of the concept of ethnicity as well as of the manner in which this concept can be applied to the biblical texts. Since the paper does not aim at reproducing the debates on the definitions of the concept of ethnicity, Southwood adopts a general understanding of the concept as a binary division separating "us" from the "others," a division which is a crucial feature of self-definition.[8] Considering the literary nature of the study object, Neh 9, Southwood fruitfully utilizes the method of comparative studies, attempting to relate Neh 9 to other literary accounts of ethnic history. Southwood's overview of ethnic histories results in a list of specific functions of such histories that can be summarized in the following list:

1. Transmitting traditions: beliefs, values, memories
2. Justifying possession of the Land
3. Imputing legitimacy through continuity with the past
4. Maintaining ethnic nostalgia
5. Maintaining social solidity
6. Inculcating codes of behavior
7. Enhancing the sense of uniqueness

I would like to address a few aspects in Southwood's discussion of Neh 9 as being an ethnic history whose function in its context can be compared to the ones summarized above. For the sake of argument I will pose some questions to this paper and propose a few of my own thoughts on ethnicity in Neh 9. Although a stimulating paper like this could be discussed in many different ways, I will here concentrate on the following three aspects: the question of Neh 9 as a "myth-symbol complex," the question of the main function of ethnicity in Neh 9, and the question of the legitimization of power in this text.

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[7] K. E. Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10: An Anthropological Approach* (Oxford Theological Monograph Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[8] Thus Brett, "Interpreting Ethnicity," 10.

The Myth-Symbol Complex in Nehemiah 9

In her comparative analysis Southwood stresses the fact that the accounts of ethnic history are highly selective, although not arbitrary. They are carefully created in order to serve the needs of the community that constructed them in the first place. This is an important observation, one that is particularly helpful for the understanding of Neh 9. I would like to address a few issues that might take the discussion further. Southwood describes the "myth-symbol complex" of Neh 9 as comprising "the most significant founding events in the eyes of the community" (p. 14), and as "the most important episodes in Israel's history" (p. 22). This is probably correct—yet quite dependent on whom one asks. Can we really be sure that these events are *already presupposed* by the community as the most important? For sure, scholars have observed the fact that some traditions seem to have been particularly important for the community of Yehud in the decades after the Babylonian exile.[9] However, we know this from the biblical text, which has been composed at a later time in history. The question is whether these texts are in fact introducing, rather than confirming, these traditions as foundational. Just as all the individuals among the intended audience of textbooks in Bosnia and Herzegovina or British fantasy literature would not necessarily presuppose and recognize the events and characteristics in these texts as ethnically important, so is probably the case in Neh 9. It seems to me that the events of the historical retrospective in Neh 9 could equally be defined as exclusively foundational at the very creation of the account. There must have been a number of other events and individuals in the history of the Israelites that could be listed instead, events that Nehemiah's audience in chapter 9 could perceive of as founding moments of *their* past. Such lists tell more about the authors than about the actual historical importance of the events listed.[10] A closer investigation in the question of the identity and historical location of those responsible for the creation of the myth-symbol complex in Neh 9 would

[9] These traditions are, among others, traditions about Abraham and Sarah and the exodus from Egypt, which are sometimes described as "ethnic myths." See, for example, the study by Theodore Mullen, who discusses the importance of Tetrateuch/Pentateuch as a created narrative directly related to the formation of Judahite ethnic identity in the Second Temple period (E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997]).

[10] One might say that every recounting of ethnic history is imposed by its authors on the community. There is no neutral response to such histories, only acceptance or skepticism. In the end, the list that survives is the one that will be normative.

be required. Who, in Neh 9, is "the community behind the prayer" (p. 14), and how is this group related to groups of "others" and groups of "those like us but not us" in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah? Is "the community behind the prayer" the historical community addressed by the figure of Nehemiah, is it Nehemiah and his group,[11] or is it the community of final redactors of Ezra-Nehemiah?

The Function of Ethnicity in Nehemiah 9

In the analysis of Neh 9, Southwood finds that this text functions in pretty much the same way as other ethnic histories considered in the comparative part of this paper. However, Southwood points to one major difference important for the overall understanding of Neh 9: ethnic nostalgia and even continuity with the past, prominent in other ethnic histories, is in Neh 9 not maintained but largely renounced. I would like to point out two major consequences that this fact conveys for the function of ethnicity/ethnic awareness in Neh 9.

First, the partial discontinuity with the past, stressed in Neh 9, further boosts another function of the ethnic awareness, namely the function of inculcating codes of behavior. This didactic aspect seems in fact to be a kind of rhetorical highpoint in Neh 9, just as Southwood implies referring to Neh 9:32 where a shift from historical retrospect to a plea occurs. The different "sub-functions" of ethnicity in this chapter seem therefore to reach their climax in the admonition not to reproduce the mistakes of the ancestors but act in a different way—a way that will grant them a kind of true ethnic identity as the people of Yhwh, an identity that will not only clearly define the boundaries of the in-group versus out-group, but also guarantee their physical survival and future existence as an ethnic or religious group with rightful claims to the land that Yhwh gave to *their* ancestors (9:36). The primary function of ethnicity in Neh 9 could thus be described as didactic in essence.

Second in turn, connected to the prominence of the didactic function of ethnicity in this text, is the question of claims to and legitimatization of power.

[11] Southwood implies that this group is the postexilic community, "possibly those who returned from exile" (p. 15).

Legitimatization of Power in Nehemiah 9

Southwood demonstrates clearly that one of the functions of ethnicity in ethnic histories is to justify claims to land and impute legitimacy through establishing historical continuity with the past generations. Southwood maintains that Neh 9 stresses continuity with those historical memories which corroborate their right to the Land, i.e., Abraham, Exodus, as well as the divine promises and commands to take possession of the land. This fact leads Southwood to conclude that Neh 9 imputes "notions of being native to, and rightful possessors of, the land" (p. 15) and "offers a source of social legitimacy" (p. 17). This is further corroborated by the fact that Neh 9 stresses discontinuity with those moments in history which jeopardized the fulfillment of these promises (possession of the land), i.e., the recurring rebellion of the ancestors. Southwood concludes therefore that Neh 9 attempts to promote distinction between the Israelites and other nations (pp. 14–15): the land does not belong to the nations but to the Israelites who already in ancient times received it as a gift from Yhwh. It is at this point that I would like to offer and explore another possibility.

Southwood notices that Neh 9 does not identify specifically these nations who implicitly claim the land as rightfully theirs. In contrast, the nations in this text are homogenized and portrayed as "faceless" (p. 15). While a certain attempt to claim power and right to the land vis-à-vis other peoples certainly exists in this text, there is a possibility that Neh 9 articulates claims to power vis-à-vis other Israelites. This understanding is particularly supported by the argument presented above: if the conclusion about the precedence of a didactic function of ethnicity in Neh 9 is correct, then the true "others" as opposed to "us" in Neh 9 are not the nations, but those among the Israelites who do not subscribe to the ethnic/identity boundaries presented by the authors of Neh 9. After all, loyalty to Yhwh is certainly not required from the nations, but from the people of Yhwh, the Israelites alone. In other words, from the point of view of "us-group" in Neh 9, the "other-group" are not the nations, but "those like us," who for some reason refuse to be "us".[12] The effect of the didactic function of

[12] In a related study, Daniel Smith-Christopher argues that mixed marriages, particularly in Ezra 9–10 but also in Nehemiah 13, represent an internal struggle within the Israelite community of the time, rather than a self-definition against other peoples. See D. L. Smith-Christopher, "The Mixed Marriage Crisis of Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13: A Study of the Sociology of Post-Exilic Judean Community," in *Temple and Community in the Persian*

ethical awareness in the historical retrospect of Neh 9 would then be a clarification of the boundaries of identity of the true people of Yhwh, as opposed to the diverse population of Israelite descendants living in Yehud after the Babylonian exile. Only those among "us" who adhere to the admonition are the true heirs of the land and the title.

Conclusion

Introducing this paper Southwood calls for caution when using ethnicity as an interpretative tool. The reason is ethical in nature: biblical texts have been (mis)used in order to dominate the "other" represented by the difference in color, culture, or political opinion. Indeed, there are many risks to be avoided, out of which Southwood emphasizes one in particular: the risk of not considering the importance of contextual understanding of ethnicity in biblical texts. In my response above, I have made an attempt to focus on questions of both historical and literary context of Neh 9. Concluding my response, I would like to briefly return to the context of the scholar/interpreter. How do we as biblical scholars evaluate the struggle for ethnic identity documented in Neh 9 and what do we do with it? The ethnocentrism of Neh 9, is it good or bad? Do we in Neh 9 see a powerless, insignificant group of people fighting nonviolently for their survival, or do we see a group in power attempting to force specific views of reality on "those like us"?[13]

Mark G. Brett summarizes Boyarin's ethical evaluation of different kinds of ethnocentrism in a following way: "ethnocentrism is only malign when it is combined with homogenizing political power."[14] Reading this text in its historical context, there is no homogenizing political power in Neh 9 on the part of the speakers in this prayer. Even in its literary con-

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Period (ed. T. Eskenazi and K. Richards; vol. 2 of *Second Temple Studies*; JSOTS 175; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 243–65.

[13] In this I wish to refer to what Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza says in her SBL Presidential Address, given in Boston 1987: "The rhetorical character of biblical interpretations and historical reconstructions, moreover, requires an *ethics of accountability* that stands responsible not only for the choice of theoretical interpretative models but also for the ethical consequences of the biblical text and its meanings" (Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 197 [1988]: 3–17 [15]).

[14] Brett, "Interpreting Ethnicity," 17. See further Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

text, it can be fairly certain that the authors of Ezra-Nehemiah did not enjoy any political power to speak of. Yet, this fact does not leave us on safe ground. The ethnocentrism of Neh 9 is oppressive against those who do not adhere to the implicit admonition in Neh 9. Those people are indirectly denied their right to the land and even if the oppression is not austere at the time of Ezra-Nehemiah, its kernel risks growing with the transmission of the texts into new political realities. The text might be static, but the reality in which it is read and interpreted is not. This is why a final conclusion that Dr Southwood so well presents in her paper must always be recognized: the ethnic history of Neh 9 does not "reproduce the glorious golden age of the ethnic past" (p. 22), but turns attention to the people's own inadequacy, failures, and limitations. This could be one of the keys to studying ethnicity in the Bible in an ethically conscious manner.