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Response to Denise Kimber Buell: A Plea for Clarity in Regard to Examining Ethnicity *in, Based on, or in Scholarship on* the New Testament¹

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Professor Buell calls attention to central problems, or “hesitations,” that the interpreter encounters, or ought to encounter, when attempting to speak about ethnicity in the NT. Although the problems Buell identifies are important, I wonder to what extent her recourse to “hesitations” and “hauntings” adds anything substantial to her arguments. Following a summary of her paper, this response highlights three points: ethical implications of Buell’s third “hesitation”; a reflection on two remarks of Rudolf Bultmann that may not be as ethnocentric as Buell seems to allege; and, finally, a plea for clarity in regard to whether one examines ethnicity in the NT, in NT reception history, or in NT scholarship.

1. Summation

In the first two-thirds of her paper, Buell reflects on three “hesitations” (a neologism that, in this paper, seems to be synonymous with “problems” or “prolegomena”) for examining ethnicity in the NT. Her first “hesitation,” on “ethnicity and canonicity,” comprises several parts: the eventual canonical status of the NT writings; a primordialist view versus a constructivist view of ethnicity; the problem of ethnocentrism (my term) in defin-

¹ At the annual “Exegetical Day” of the Swedish Exegetical Society (September 30, 2013), I responded to Denise K. Buell, “In Our Minds and/or in the Texts? What Does It Mean to Speak about Ethnicity in the New Testament?” My thanks to Samuel Byrskog, Göran Eidevall, Hans Leander and Clare K. Rothschild for feedback on earlier drafts of this response. Citations of Buell are from her published article, “Challenges and Strategies for Speaking about Ethnicity in the New Testament and New Testament Studies,” *SEÅ* 79 (2014): 33–51.

ing ethnicity; and, in particular, the use of the Bible in the service of colonialism (pp. 34–37). Each of those parts is pertinent to contemporary biblical scholarship, although how they, together, contribute to her first “hesitation” could have been clearer.

In voicing a second “hesitation,” Buell points to rather recent NT scholarship that views the NT writings as *Jewish* literature—which, for Buell, invites the question of a possible shift in meaning from those writings’ original *Sitz im Leben* of “an intra-Jewish” discourse to a *Sitz im Leben* of considering those writings as Christian Scripture without reference to their Jewish roots (pp. 37–39). This “hesitation,” too, builds on recent NT scholarship and, in my view, would seem to be of primary interest to studies of NT reception history.

In voicing a third “hesitation,” Buell aptly criticizes a well-intended (if also naïve) trend in NT scholarship construing “early Christianity as ‘not ethnic’” (pp. 39–44, quotation at p. 39)—a construal that sharply contrasts with the overtly ethnic pronouncements in both Jewish and Greco-Roman antiquity. Buell’s salient critique, to which I return below, has both ethical and historiographical implications.

Building on her three “hesitations,” Buell discusses in the remainder of her paper “hauntings” (pp. 45–48), building on the work of Avery Gordon and Jacques Derrida. For Buell, recourse to “hauntings” is helpful for pointing out “the necessity of wrestling with not simply the historical contexts and afterlives of our source materials but also the historical contexts and afterlives of our methods and interpretive frameworks ...” (p. 46). Buell holds that “hauntings” are to invite us to consider the context(s) of the NT writings, the context(s) of NT reception history, and the context(s) of recent and contemporary biblical scholars(hip). Indeed, biblical scholars ought to be critically aware of all three contexts.²

² See also J. A. Kelhoffer, “New Testament Exegesis as an Academic Discipline with Relevance for Other Disciplines,” *CurBR* 11 (2013): 218–33 (220) (= J. A. Kelhoffer, “Nya testamentets exegetik som akademiskt ämne med relevans för andra ämnen,” *SEÅ* 77 [2012]: 55–70 [57]): “Exploration of the theologies of the NT authors, of the history of interpretation and reception, and of how biblical interpretation has affected ideas and values in later contexts also come within the exegete’s purview. Exegetes thus also give attention, for example, to feminist, postcolonial and queer hermeneutics in a critical analysis of early Christian literature.”

2. Ethical Implications of Buell's Third "Hesitation"

Buell calls attention to ethical problems that can arise from a construal of early Christianity as non-ethnic. She critiques Chan-Hie Kim's contextual analysis of Acts 10–11 for the implicit assumption of a non-ethnic neutrality of Acts as a basis for Kim's post-imperialist critique of white non-immigrant-welcoming North American churches (pp. 48–50).³ As a way forward from Kim's problematic assumption, Buell calls us "to re-examine the assumption that what characterizes the shift from members of a Jewish sectarian Jesus movement to a Christian group is a break with ethnic reasoning" (p. 49). Buell's critique strikes me as more than fair and could, I think, be sharpened.

In an important essay on "Ethical Issues in Reconstructing Intrareligious Violence in Antiquity," Shelly Matthews problematizes depictions of "the Jew as Violent Other in ancient and modern historiography."⁴ Matthews observes that, although much sophisticated scholarship has addressed NT accusations against Jews for killing Jesus, there has not been an effort to assess "the numerous New Testament depictions of Jews as agents of violence" against members of the early Jesus movement(s) "subsequent to the crucifixion."⁵ Further, Matthews critiques two deficiencies in much previous scholarship: (1) for reading the NT allegations "positivistically" as unbiased historical evidence and (2) for characterizing the persecutors as "Jews" while designating those persecuted as "Christians"—that is, seeing the persecutors and those persecuted as two distinct groups.⁶ It is a positivistic approach to the biblical authors' sometimes arbitrary categorizations, asserts Matthews, that the modern historian must weigh critically before taking over those categorizations.

³ See C.-H. Kim, "Reading the Cornelius Story from an Asian Immigrant Perspective," in *Reading from this Place: Volume One: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (ed. F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 165–74.

⁴ S. Matthews, "Ethical Issues in Reconstructing Intrareligious Violence in Antiquity," in *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom* (ed. S. Matthews et al.; Harrisburg: TPI, 2003), 334–50 (336).

⁵ Matthews, "Ethical Issues," 336. See further J. A. Kelhoffer, *Persecution, Persuasion and Power: Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration of Legitimacy in the New Testament* (WUNT 270; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 306–307.

⁶ Matthews, "Reconstructing Intrareligious Violence," 338–40; quotation at 338. Concerning the former shortcoming, Matthews argues, "This positivistic framework leads to an interpretive process akin to fundamentalist prooftexting" (346–47 at 346, criticizing studies by J. T. Sanders, G. Stanton and U. Luz).

Kim's study of Acts 10–11, which Buell justifiably criticizes, could be described as a post-colonialist attempt to colonize the (purported) colonists by using a thoroughly colonialist reading strategy for the Bible as a source of power and legitimacy. I would hope that, in today's critical scholarship, any such binary reading of Scripture identifying "good guys" in counterpoint to "bad guys" and placing the "good guys" (of course!) on "our" side and conscripting the "bad guys" into serve as an archetype for "our" opponents should, almost by definition, be suspect. We in biblical scholarship can, and must, do better. Otherwise, our guild risks serving merely as an arbiter—and, at that, an arbiter of tenuous legitimacy—in contemporary struggles for power. What qualifies the exegete—or anyone—to make pronouncements about modern groups' legitimacy to wield power over others?

3. Reconsidering Rudolf Bultmann on Ethnicity in Early Christianity

Buell astutely criticizes the common presumption in scholarship that early Christianity was universal and non-ethnic. In a long, and informative, footnote, Buell cites some rather embarrassing examples from Adolf von Harnack and Rudolf Bultmann, who construed the early church as a non-ethnic eschatological community (pp. 40–41 n. 16). Citing scholarship subsequent to the 1970s, Buell adds numerous equally startling examples—by Frank M. Snowden, Jr., Anthony D. Smith, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Guy G. Stroumsa, Mary Beard and others, and Wolfgang Stegemann. Those examples from more recent scholarship show that Harnack and Bultmann typify a bias that has hardly been questioned in even more recent and more theoretically-informed studies.

Two passages of Bultmann that Buell cites could, however, be taken as anticipatory of a more nuanced understanding of Christian origins. First, Bultmann's notion that "[t]he eschatological community did not split off from Judaism, as though it were conscious of itself as a new religious society"⁷ sounds much more at home in a "radical new perspective" on Paul than in the positing of an arbitrary border between church and

⁷ Buell, "Challenges," 40 n. 16, citing R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* (trans. R. H. Fuller; London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 175.

synagogue. Perhaps we need not be as critical of Bultmann as of more recent scholars who, arguably, *ought* to have known better than to make such ethnically naïve statements about earliest Christianity.

Second, we may consider Bultmann's contention that "baptism and the Lord's supper do not cement the Christians into a nation, but into an eschatological community, which, since it is eschatological, transcends the limits of nationality."⁸ In regard to the earliest Jesus movement(s), I would suggest testing the hypothesis that there was an inverse correlation between imminent eschatology and an emphasis on an exclusive ethnicity: if the world as early Christ-believers knew it would soon end, who would have had time, or need, to reflect on ethnicity? The mistake of Harnack and Bultmann (and innumerable others) may well be to suppose a continuity between the imminent eschatology of the earliest Jesus movement(s), on the one hand, and the conception(s) ethnicity reflected in the (somewhat later) writings of the NT.

In his classic study of Lukan eschatology, Bultmann's *Doktorkind* Hans Conzelmann powerfully pointed out prominent Lukan redactional tendencies favoring a non-imminent eschatology.⁹ Within Lukan *Heilsgeschichte*, those tendencies create both time and space for construing the church as an enduring movement and, perhaps eventually, as a distinct *ethnos*. An implication of Conzelmann's study is that, in Acts, the church's mission and constituency must be defined in relation to the church's Jewish roots and eventual Jewish persecutors. I would thus find inviting the question of how the non-imminent eschatology of Luke-Acts (and, for example, of the Pastoral Epistles) might have fostered a need for ethnographic reflection in subsequent Christian literature.

4. A Plea for Clarity

In the final part of her paper, Buell outlines how "hauntings" can help the interpreter understand meanings in a text's afterlife. A central thesis is that

⁸ Buell, "Challenges," p. 41 n. 16, citing Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting*, 187. See further Samuel Byrskog, "The Message of Jesus," in *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology* (ed. B. W. Longenecker and M. C. Parsons; Waco: Baylor University Press, forthcoming), 1–22, esp. 8–9 (on Bultmann's view of Jesus as an "eschatological phenomenon").

⁹ H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (trans. G. Buswell; New York: Harper, 1961 [2nd German ed. 1957]).

[a]ny adequate study of ethnicity/ethnic reasoning in the New Testament ought to situate itself in relation to the histories of the Bible's influence as a collection or in specific ways upon modern notions of collective difference and belonging, including ethnicity and race. (p. 37)

The persuasiveness of this point hinges on what Buell means by “in” when she refers to “reasoning *in* the New Testament.” If I understand Buell correctly, what the NT *meant* should be informed by what the NT would later *become*. To me, that sounds like a kind of “canonical criticism” à la Brevard Childs, whereby the *Sitz im Leben* of later reception history is to provide a framework for interpreting the original documents. I fail to see how this proposal is helpful or how it would aid Buell in negotiating around her three “hesitations.”

One could have readily appreciated from Buell an analysis of ethnicity in NT scholarship, an analysis of ethnicity in NT reception history, or an analysis of ethnicity in the NT itself. But I would ask that she be clear about what her *Fragestellung* is. It would be worthwhile to consider the history of the NT's effects on later conceptions of ethnicity—as both the postcolonial biblical scholar Benny Liew (see p. 50) and the xenophobic Norwegian ultranationalist (and self-identified secular Christian) Anders Breivik (see p. 51) illustrate. But if Buell aims to focus on the history of the NT's effects, we would not expect a paper title on “... Speaking about Ethnicity in the Bible.”¹⁰ Rather, we would expect to have a paper on conceptions of ethnicity *derived from* the NT when the NT came to be construed *as (non-Jewish) Christian Scripture*. What Buell seems to want to do—a critical examination of “ethnicity in biblical scholarship”—is interesting and worthwhile. But we still have not broached “ethnicity in the Bible.”¹¹

In general, I find Buell's haunted invitation pertinent and enticing. I am not convinced, however, that her explorations of “hesitations” or “hauntings” are necessary or particularly helpful. Indeed, the aims of her paper remain unclear. If Buell merely wishes to place NT scholarship in conversation with the likes Avery Gordon and Jacques Derrida, then she arguably succeeds. But if she wishes to show how NT scholarship is en-

¹⁰ See immediately below and n. 11 on Buell's original and revised paper titles.

¹¹ Buell's conference paper title concluded with “... Ethnicity in the Bible” (see p. 33 n. 1). Apparently in response to my request for clarity at the Exegetical Day in Lund, the published paper title ends with “... Ethnicity in the New Testament and New Testament Studies,” a change that, regrettably, further obfuscates the purpose of her study.

riched by an engagement with “hesitations” and “hauntings” the paper largely fails.¹² In fairness, Buell’s project remains a work in progress. That she cites her own forthcoming publications in this article (p. 36 n. 10; p. 46 n. 30) gives hope for eventual theoretical and terminological clarity.

¹² See further Kelhoffer, “New Testament Exegesis,” 226 (= Kelhoffer, “Nya testamentets exegetik,” 57).