



Ethnicity In, With, or Under the Pentateuch

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Introduction

[1] In recent years, ethnicity has caught on as an interpretive concept in studies of the Hebrew Bible. Besides various articles, book-length investigations by Mullen and Sparks, and a volume of essays edited by Brett, have appeared in the last decade, all proposing that the social scientific study of ethnicity is relevant to the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. In this paper, this interest in the Hebrew Bible and ethnicity will be examined from the angle of the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch is a worthy focus for such an investigation because, of all the texts in the Hebrew Bible, the Pentateuch, as the narration of the genesis of Israel, is most deeply concerned about establishing an authoritative identity for biblical Israel vis-à-vis other communities. It thus promises to lend itself especially well to interpretation through the lens of ethnicity. The question is whether this promise can be realized; that is, whether there is such a thing as ethnicity in, with, or under the Pentateuch.

[2] The wording "in, with, or under" is evocative of a variety of ways in which the social scientific concept of ethnicity can be brought into relation with the Pentateuch (or, for that matter, the Hebrew Bible). (1) Ethnicity can be seen as a phenomenon that comes to expression *in* the text of the Pentateuch itself. (2) Ethnicity can be utilized as a concept *with* which a modern reading of the Pentateuch can be juxtaposed for interpretive profit. (3) Ethnicity can be interpreted as a dynamic that lies hidden or implicit *under* or behind the text of the Pentateuch, requiring a hermeneutics of uncovering and reconstitution. These possibilities will be considered again below. But first it is necessary to briefly examine how ethnicity is defined, and how it is used in some of these recent works on the Hebrew Bible.

The Concept of Ethnicity

[3] There are many definitions of ethnicity; here only the core elements of ethnicity, as they recur in various studies are identified.<1> The first core element is that ethnicity is a social process concerned above all with a dichotomy or boundary between "us" and "them." Since the work of Fredrik Barth, it has been recognized that ethnicity is best understood as a cultural practice of differentiation or a form of social organization in which the boundary between "us" and "them" is of constitutive importance, over and above the cultural stuff it encloses.<2>

[4] A second core element of a definition of ethnicity is that the ethnic boundary is most often characterized on the inside by a past-oriented, subjective belief in common descent, and thus a common ancestral history or mythology.<3> It matters not whether such common descent or history is actual or fictive, or a bit of each. In fact, such common ancestral origins are usually presented in what could be called ethnomythographies, in which actual origins are obscured behind centuries of historical development and cultural inventiveness.<4>

[5] A third core element of a definition of ethnicity is that the ethnic boundary is most often characterized on the outside by the role of "others" who act as a contrastive foil against which ethnic identity is articulated. In other words, members of an ethnic group define who they are by who they are not. These "others" are usually not distant groups;<5> rather, much more urgent is the invocation of a sense of

difference from "proximate others" or "near neighbors" who share actual similarities with the group attempting to define itself ethnically.<6>

[6] To summarize thus far: ethnicity fundamentally involves the construction of boundaries between "us" and "them," and two essential features of such boundaries are an ethnomythology of common ancestry and a rhetoric of contrast with "others."<7> To these a fourth core element of a definition of ethnicity must be added: the recognition that, although ethnic sentiments exert a strong, seemingly primordial emotional pull, ethnic identity is an intersubjective social construction<8> produced as a human response to particular circumstances, especially asymmetrical relations closely related to state formation, expansion, and maintenance.<9> Several corollaries follow from this core element.

[7] First, ethnicity is likely to occur on the spatial and/or sociopolitical margin or periphery of expanding states or empires. Thus, the prime conditions for the construction of Israelite ethnicity would seem to occur at the time of the Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian phases of imperial expansion in the ancient Near East. Second, as a subjective category of self and other ascription, ethnicity will be located most definitively in the written remains and artifacts of a society, and will be difficult to pinpoint from the purely material data of archaeology.<10> Third, as a subjective cognitive construct, ethnicity will project an ideal conceptual identity or norm that will not necessarily coincide with actual empirical behavior in a society.<11> For example, the ethnic ideology of a community may posit rigid boundaries circumscribing contact with those considered "others," whereas, in reality, there may be considerable movement across, or deviation from, these boundaries. And fourth, ethnicity, as a cognitive construct or ideology, is likely to be a creation of the elite literate stratum of a society insofar as our evidence necessarily depends on the written documentation of self and other ascription produced by such elites. While demotic or popular notions of ethnicity surely existed, they are extremely difficult to detect and trace in the ancient record.<12>

[8] Given this outline of the basic conceptual content of the notion of ethnicity, let me turn briefly to consider two recent efforts to use ethnicity as a tool for the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

Two Investigations of Ethnicity and the Hebrew Bible

[9] E. Theodore Mullen, Jr. has produced two book-length studies of ethnicity in the Hebrew Bible. The first book, *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries* (1993), analyzes the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy through Kings) as an ethnogenic myth for Israelite identity.<13> Skeptical of traditional source-critical approaches,<14> Mullen favors an analysis of the final form of the text, which he dates circa 550 B.C.E. in the Babylonian exile. He sees Deuteronomy as a social manifesto setting the boundaries of an ideal ethnic group named Israel; the rest of the Deuteronomistic History he interprets as a refining and reformulation of those boundaries. The writing of the Deuteronomistic History was precipitated, he contends, by the crisis of the exile,<15> which stimulated a literate elite in Babylon to imagine a new community and to give it a history via ancient and invented traditions.

[10] In a second book, *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch* (1997), Mullen extends his investigations into the Pentateuch proper. He argues here for the composition of a Tetrateuch (Genesis through Numbers) in the Persian period as a prologue and supplement to the previously composed Deuteronomistic History. The impetus for the composition of this Tetrateuch, he contends, was the growing recognition of the community in Yehud that the restoration of kingship was not imminent. This led to a reformulation of the deuteronomistic ideal of a community organized around a king into the ideal of a community that understands itself as a genealogically related group (that is, an ethnic group) organized around a specific cultic pattern (1997: 323).<16>

[11] In his readings of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History through the lens of ethnicity, Mullen helpfully characterizes the final text as an ethnomythography (1997: 88, 126) -that is, as the creation of an idealized past for the formation and maintenance of a distinct ethnic identity in the present.<17> He repeatedly demonstrates that the ideals of ethnic identity dominate and shape the rhetoric of the Pentateuch.<18> Mullen thus provides an approach that is most helpful in contextualizing the Pentateuch in the period of its primary production and consumption, which he, along with many scholars today, believes took place in the Persian period. What seems to be missing in Mullen's analysis, however, is an explicit ideological critique of the Pentateuch's construction of ethnicity - a critique that seeks to uncover the suppressions and oppositions on which the text's dominant ideology is constructed.

[12] For example, two core elements of ethnicity are a common origin tradition and the contrast with "others." These are ideal constructions, even imaginative and inventive, and therefore require a critical ideological analysis. Yet, on the issue of a common origin tradition, Mullen generally seems to present,

rather than critique, the Pentateuch's master narrative of Israelite origins; that is, of distant origins in Mesopotamia, a detour through Egypt, and a final settlement in the promised land of the Cisjordan. For instance, by analyzing the whole Egyptian sojourn within the confines of the plot of the master narrative, it becomes "simply a time of growth and prosperity from which a mighty nation 'Israel'" would emerge (Mullen 1997: 160). What of the fractures in the master narrative caused by the qualitative difference of the Joseph narrative from the previous ancestor narratives in Genesis, or the thematic disparity between Genesis and Exodus?<19> While recognized by Mullen (for example, 1997: 163-65), these fractures are explained as the result of what he believes to be the Pentateuch's original function as a collection of didactic, and not necessarily tightly connected installments, rather than as a literary or narrative whole. What is missed with such an approach is that the Pentateuch may be shaping disparate origin traditions, familiar to its intended audience,<20> to fit its own particular ideological master narrative. For example, Mullen's view that the Persian period redactors of the Pentateuch saw Egypt largely as a metaphor for the Babylonian exile (1997: 166, 182) erases the specificity of, and possible tension between, the ideological functions of Babylon and Egypt in the Pentateuch.

[13] On the issue of an ethnic contrast with "others," Mullen similarly seems to present, rather than critique, the Pentateuch's contrast of Israel with the major "other" in the Pentateuch, namely the Egyptians.<21> For example, Mullen tends to accept at face value the distinction between Israel and Egypt, which is argued for throughout the first half of Exodus, rather than analyzing it as one position among other possibilities. In contrast, the rhetoric of Israel's distinction from the Canaanites he deals with in a more nuanced fashion.<22> Yet, from a critical perspective, the Pentateuch's construction of a contrast between Israel and Egypt is just as suspect as is its construction of a contrast between Israel and Canaan.<23>

[14] In summary, Mullen convincingly demonstrates that ethnicity is a major phenomenon expressed in the text of the Pentateuch. However, his analysis seems at points to lack the uncovering of the ideological dynamics of ethnicity that may be hidden *under* or behind the text. Thus, while recognizing the plurality of contending groups that likely constituted the intended audience of the Pentateuch, Mullen does not exploit the ideological clues within the text in order to reconstruct the particular position of the Pentateuch in the midst of this plurality. He argues that the scribes who compiled the Pentateuch were attempting to be as inclusive of the multitude of variant traditions in this plural situation as possible (that is, that they were constructing aggregative rather than contrastive identity).<24> While helpful in balancing the diachronism of traditional source criticism, again such an approach should not obscure the ideological aims of the producers of the text.

[15] The second example is the recent book by Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel* (1998), subtitled a "prolegomena to the study of ethnic sentiments and their expression in the Hebrew Bible."<25> In contrast to Mullen, Sparks reads the biblical record, not in its final text form, but as a series of diachronically developing traditions. The result is a study of ethnic sentiment in the Hebrew Bible beginning with what he identifies as the earliest discernable sources (Deborah's Song in Judges 5, containing traditions he believes tracable to as early as 1100 BCE) and continuing with an examination of the development of such sentiment through successive stages in various texts until the early exile. Thus, while Mullen bases his investigation on the production of the final text form of the Hebrew Bible in the exilic and Persian periods, Sparks begins with a reconstruction of early sources, almost all from the prophets, which he dates to various periods before the exile.<26>

[16] What Sparks discovers, unsurprisingly, is that Israelite ethnicity has developed from the more simple to the more complex. Beginning with a number of separate tribes, each associated with a separate territory,<27> a sense of ethnic identity slowly developed,<28> becoming predominant only in the exile in order both to resist assimilation to Babylon or Persia, and to legitimize the claims of the returnees against those who had stayed in the land.<29> Sparks contextualizes this development within the wider phenomenon of ethnicity in the Ancient Near East, especially among the Assyrians, Greeks, and Egyptians,<30> which constitutes an obvious strength of his analysis. Very suggestive also is his elucidation of ethnic eponymy, especially his distinction between exonyms and endonyms (Sparks: 54, 105-8).<31>

[17] However, in the end, Sparks' analysis of ethnicity in the Hebrew Bible depends on the viability of his particular diachronic approach (in which the final text form is discounted in the interests of discerning the composition of earlier and more original sources), which remains speculative, no matter how confident one is in its methods and the results.<32> Furthermore, Sparks tends to read the sources, as he reconstructs them, as more-or-less accurate depictions. Like Mullen, he thus shows a tendency to read the texts "with the grain," as representational rather than rhetorical or ideological. An important consequence is Sparks' underlying assumption of a monolithic Israelite ethnic identity that, while it develops through time, also displays a strong continuity throughout the centuries *and* in the biblical texts.

While the notion of competing forms of ethnic identity is not foreign to Sparks' work,<33> his reading strategy tends to underplay the possibility of such competing forms in the Hebrew Bible.<34> In contrast, a careful "counter-reading" of the biblical master origin tradition for Israel and the use of "others" in the Hebrew Bible as a contrastive foil over against which Israelite identity is constructed, reveals a plurality of competing ethnic visions *under* or behind the Hebrew Bible.

[18] To summarize, the works here considered demonstrate that many parts of the Hebrew Bible, including the Pentateuch, can be interpreted as functioning to construct, consolidate and maintain a particular Israelite ethnic identity, based on an ethno-mythography of common origins and kinship, and on boundaries between "them" and "us." Obviously, the concept of ethnicity can be juxtaposed *with* the texts of the Hebrew Bible, including the Pentateuch, for interpretive profit. Based on the readings of these scholars and others, one could further argue that the phenomenon of ethnic identity is present *in* the Hebrew Bible, including especially the Pentateuch, in some fundamental way. However, if ethnicity is articulated in written documents in the form of ideological rhetoric that seeks to persuade the audience of one form of identity above others, and thus necessarily obscures, suppresses, and otherwise distorts or erases alternate possibilities, then ethnicity is also a deeper phenomenon that lies submerged *under* the surface of the Pentateuch, and the Hebrew Bible.

[19] This submerged level can be accessed by a reading strategy that goes "against the grain" and attempts to reconstruct that which the text seeks to silence. It means asking what other ethnic origin traditions were possibly in play, and whether the "others" were really other in the way that the texts wish their audience to believe. It is this sort of reading strategy which seems to be lacking somewhat in the works described above. The following section will look more closely at Egypt as an "other" in the Pentateuch's ethnic discourse in order to uncover some of the dynamics which could further supplement and fill the gaps in the approaches of Mullen and Sparks.

Egypt as Ethnic "Other" in the Pentateuch

[20] Mullen has most directly engaged the Pentateuch through the lens of ethnicity, asserting that the Pentateuch originated in the context of, and was directed to an audience of, a plurality of contending groups, in order to construct a unifying sense of Israelite ethnic identity. How the creators of the Pentateuch wished to construct such an identity in this plural situation could be indicated, according to the dynamics of ethnogenesis, by an analysis of the specific portrayal of ethnic "others" in the text. Interestingly, Mullen seems to single out only the Canaanites as ethnic "others" in the Pentateuch worthy of such an analysis, while Egypt is largely ignored. And yet Egypt is arguably the most important ethnic "other" in the Pentateuch, being mentioned some 376 times in the Pentateuch over against 96 references to Canaanites.<35> However, instead of being interrogated as to the specificity of its historically contextualized function in the Pentateuch's ideological rhetoric, Egypt, in Mullen's analysis, tends to be generalized and universalized. The polemical distinction made between Egypt and Israel in the text is accepted as natural or self-evident and is not problematized.

[21] For instance, Mullen's analysis of Exodus 2 (1997: 173-76) presents the text's argument for a distinct Israelite identity as embodied in the origins of Moses as ethnic hero. But his analysis does not question or situate the text's ethno-mythic claim of difference between Egypt and Israel or recognize the ambiguities in the narrative that embodies that claim. Similarly, his truncated treatment of the plague narrative (1997: 185-86) only makes a fleeting reference to that narrative's insistence on separation between Israel and Egypt and does not interrogate this separation. The fact that an Egyptian is involved in the story of the blasphemer in Leviticus 24:10-16 is not subject to analysis (1997: 243). Furthermore, Egypt is ultimately interpreted as a general metaphor or symbol:

If one removes the action from the specific historical context in which it is presented and understands these narratives in the context of an exiled people looking for hope of some form of restoration and return to their land, then Egypt and the Pharaoh may be understood in metaphoric terms as *any* land and ruler that would try to enslave the people of Yahweh and hinder them from their service to him (1997: 182, my emphasis).<36>

[22] Egypt does not figure prominently in Sparks' analysis of ethnicity in ancient Israel mainly because he does not directly engage the Pentateuch; his traditio-historical approach ends with the exilic period.<37> Thus, he does deal with Deuteronomy but quite apart from the preceding four books of the Pentateuch. However, in his impressive analysis of ethnicity in Hosea (126-68), he highlights the presence of two conflicting origin traditions in the prophet: one connected with the ethnic ancestor Israel/Jacob, and the other concerning the migration from Egypt. This would seem to provide fertile ground for the exploration of ethnicity as an ideological construct, and promises intriguing connections with the Pentateuch's focus

on Egypt as ethnic "other." But for Sparks this conflict of origin traditions is relegated (and confined) to a particular past phase of the historical development of Israelite ethnicity, and is furthermore read as a representational description rather than an ideological construction. Even Egyptian ethnic conceptions are discounted in favor of Greek ethnic models, which Sparks argues have the greatest affinity with the Hebrew Bible (92-93).

[23] Thus, both Mullen and Sparks tend to accept the Hebrew Bible's representation of the separation of Israel from Egypt, it's ethnic "other," instead of subjecting this representation to critique. In contrast, from a more ideological critical perspective, it can be argued that the distinction between Israel and Egypt is not presumed by the Pentateuchal text to be a natural, generally accepted fact. Rather, by insisting that Egypt and Israel are distinct, the Pentateuch indicates that this was a point of which at least some members of its audience needed to be convinced.<38> Furthermore, even where the Pentateuch most vociferously insists on such a distinction, such as in the narrative of the plagues in Exodus 7-11, the text contains clues that allow for the reconstruction of other voices that do not necessarily accept such a distinction.<39> Reading "against the grain" uncovers the ideological work for which the text was launched.<40> In the following, I will briefly summarize some results of my investigations of Egypt in the Pentateuch from this perspective.<41>

[24] First is the issue of origin traditions, so central to an ethnic ideology. The Pentateuch provides an ethnomythography for Israel by promoting a master narrative that places Israel's origins in Mesopotamia. The sojourn in Egypt is portrayed as only a temporary detour on the way to claiming a rightful patrimony in the Cisjordan.<42> However, it seems to me that this ethnomyth has overwritten an alternative Egyptian origin tradition for Israel. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, there are texts which seem to know only an origin tradition beginning in Egypt for biblical Israel (for example, Amos, Ezekiel 20, and Psalms 78, 106, and 136),<43> as is also the case for some of the oldest accounts of Judean or Jewish origins in Greek literature.<44> The narratives of Joseph and Moses on their own could stand as testimonies to Egyptian Israelite heroes, but are linked in the Pentateuch to the programmatic ancestral accounts of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, making Israel's time in Egypt a temporary detour rather than a point of origin. The overall shape of the final text form of the Pentateuch suggests that this linkage is a deliberate redactional means of incorporating at least two different narratives of biblical Israel's origin, the story of Joseph functioning as a hinge between the two.<45>

[25] The final text of the Pentateuch thus integrates two concurrent and conflicting origin traditions by subordinating one to the other. The covenantal prophetic model of Exodus through Deuteronomy (and also the Deuteronomistic History), with its Mosaic ethnomyth of Israelite origins beginning in Egypt, is made to fit within the genealogical model of Genesis, with its patriarchal ethnomyth of Israelite origins in Mesopotamia.<46> This combination is a product, I would argue, of the Persian period, the most likely era in which the texts of the Pentateuch were redacted into a form similar to those that exist today.<47> The Persian period was one in which imperial loyalty was required of Persian dependencies such as Yehud in the face of the challenges to Persian hegemony on the western front, epitomized by a rebellious Egypt. Thus, origin traditions rooted in Egypt would not have provided beneficial sociopolitical capital for the leaders of the restoration community in Yehud and would need to be neutralized. Furthermore, by negating Egypt in favor of Mesopotamia, the Mesopotamian origins of the literate intelligensia of the restoration community of Yehud would be vindicated.

[26] This contest of origin traditions leads directly to the second, and final, point: a reconsideration of the Pentateuch's dominant negative evaluation of Egypt as Israel's "other." The Pentateuch constructs a strong sense of discontinuity between Israel and Egypt by insisting that Israel, to be truly Israel, must be purged of all things Egyptian. Thus, the "endangered-ancestor" series in Genesis (12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-11) shows a progressive distancing from Egypt, the Egyptian Hagar and her son are rejected from the lineage of Israel (Genesis 16, 21), the Israelites are persuaded to physically exit from Egypt (Exodus 1-14), the blaspheming half-Egyptian son in Leviticus (24:10-23) is stoned, and finally the entire Egyptian-born generation, including Moses, must expire in the wilderness and only an entirely new generation, untouched by Egypt, can inherit the promised land (Numbers 14). The negative depiction of Egypt in the Pentateuch is thus overwhelming.

[27] Yet the Pentateuch also gives voice to an alternative perspective in which Egypt is viewed positively as a place of refuge, of plenty, and of enrichment - an alluring and attractive place. Such a depiction is especially part of the Joseph story, which represents a sort of exodus-in-reverse in that Israel leaves the famine-ridden territory of the Cisjordan in order to enter an Egypt that promises survival, satiation, and even prosperity.<48> These clues of a more positive assessment of Egypt indicate the presence of such a perspective in the traditions that the Pentateuch draws on and among the audience to which it is directed. This perspective, in such opposition to the dominant negative view of Egypt that the Pentateuch seeks to inculcate, could, however, not simply be rejected or delegitimized without alienating parts of the audience

which it seeks to persuade. Instead, while at times acknowledging the positive character or associations of Egypt, the Pentateuch fits this positive perspective within its larger master narrative, thus effectively neutralizing a positive view of Egypt by framing it within a more negative view.<49> For example, the plundering motif (Exodus 3:21-22; 11:2-3; 12:35-36) could represent an attempt to fit the positive image of Egypt as a place of enrichment into the more negative frame of the need to separate from Egypt. Or the motif of rebellion in the wilderness (Exodus 16, 17; Numbers 11, 14, 16, 20) arguably represents an attempt to articulate a positive image of Egypt as a place of satiation while simultaneously framing such a voice as one of rebellion against the divine. In the context of the Persian period, one can see in these dynamics the attempt to dissociate Israel from any positive leanings towards Egypt so as to encourage loyalty to the Persian-sanctioned regime in Jerusalem.<50>

[28] That Egypt is negatively portrayed in the dominant perspective of the Pentateuch, and yet that Israel is described as receiving its shape as a distinct people in the same place, is a paradox that leads to a number of ambiguities and contradictions. Legislation that speaks of Israel as native to the land conflicts with the tradition of Israel's origins outside of the promised land,<51> and legislation that speaks of Israel as a sojourner in Egypt conflicts with Israel's experience of slavery in Egypt.<52> Furthermore, the image of Egypt as an "iron furnace" consists of overlapping negative and positive connotations.<53> It is here that the Pentateuch reveals one of its stress points or fault lines: a total repudiation of Egypt can not be made to fit totally with the tradition of an origin that is at least somehow connected with Egypt. In the Pentateuch, Egypt thus functions not only as embodiment of that which is adverse and must be repulsed, but also as a mark of the anxiety, ambiguity, and contingency of identity itself.

[29] In conclusion, I would argue that the equivocal anti-Egyptian perspective of the Pentateuch's ethnomythography is most effectively contextualized within the period of the production of the Pentateuch's final text form in the Persian period. The history of the Persian empire's troubles in Egypt during this period, the geopolitical location of Yehud on the front between the empire and Egypt, and the presence of Judean colonists in Egypt, all provide a compelling sociopolitical setting for the Pentateuch's anti-Egyptian rhetoric. In the Pentateuch's target audience were those for whom Egypt occupied a positive position, potentially subversive of the interests of the Persian patrons of the elite of Yehud. The Pentateuch seeks to subdue this perspective by inscribing it, through the strategies described above, within a symbolic geography in which Egypt occupies a predominantly negative position. Especially at stake is the origin of Israel; Egypt's essential role in that origin is configured such that it is both necessary and a subsidiary stage which has been superseded and must be rejected. By reading the Pentateuch's ethnomythography "against the grain," one is enabled to discern *under* the Egypt that is portrayed as the rejected "other" in Israel's formative identity, an Egypt that functioned also as a positive point of origin for Israel.

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