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Return Migration and the Meaning of Home and Belonging in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract: In this article, I look back over a decade of my own contributions to the field of Hebrew Bible and migration, to assess where these have been helpful, and where revisions are needed. I argue that boundaries are still an extremely important topic of dialogue, but that a focus on identity has not always been so helpful. Instead, I gravitate towards a more conceptually flexible framework concerning belonging, in terms of theoretical dialogue, to help sensitise us to the complexity of boundary negotiation. I also highlight the importance of meta-critical questions concerning how we talk about the Bible and about textual interpretation itself creates and sustains power structures of its own as well as negotiations around belonging. In addition, I suggest that interpreters must be conscious of the invitation that texts extend when representing identity and difference. Through awareness of the constructed nature of identities within Biblical texts, we are able simultaneously to understand these constructions, while also having space to recognise how complexity is flattened through construction.

Keywords: boundaries; belonging; return migration; identity; imagination; Ezra; Nehemiah; Bible

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1. Introduction

In 2012 my first monograph, entitled *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10*, was published (Southwood 2012). In this article, twelve years after the original publication, I return to where I started in order to assess the contribution I think I might have made, strengths and weaknesses associated with using ethnicity and migration in research concerning Biblical texts, how the field has changed since the original publication, and where there is room for growth and development right now.

2. Reflections on Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10

I hope that the monograph's focus on landlessness and what this achieved for religion and identity was a helpful focal point. It emerged through engagement with Daniel Smith-Christopher's monograph The Religion of the Landless, which provided a helpful springboard for my thinking (Smith 1989). Though, with the dubious benefit of hindsight, I do wonder if it might have actually been very badly named. Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10 did focus on the issue of intermarriage, with a chapter specifically devoted to the language around marriage and divorce in the Hebrew Bible and in the contracts from Elephantine and elsewhere. However, a key issue that I explored through the material, which never made it to the title, was the question of return migration, the significance of homeland, and how exile shaped personal and community relationships (including but not limited to marriage).

My argument, briefly summarised, was that on the surface of Ezra 9–10 the concerns about foreign women and intermarriage dominate and are communicated through powerful linguistic and conceptual vehicles such as the nexus of interconnected ideas about purity and holiness, covenant and law. However, I argued that fuelling these powerful ideas were powerful currents of identity politics shaped by the traumatic process of exile, preservation of identity outside the land, and the complex emotional landscape created through

return migration, or reverse culture shock. I argued that the process of return migration ignited a type of reaction to what had been thought of as the homeland, whereby the group calling themselves the "children of the exile" experienced re-diasporisation in their own homeland. Therefore, rather than perceiving those who remained on the land as similar to those who left, I suggested that they were now viewed as "foreign" (thus understanding ethnicity as constructed, or instrumentalised). In essence, I suggested that the homeland, rather paradoxically, became a foreign homeland because of the distance between the imagined homeland—a concept used as a survival mechanism to preserve identity during the exile—and the reality of the homeland as an actual place. Using pattern recognition when surveying the modern anthropological material on ethnicity and migration, I noticed a common reaction within exiled communities who return migrate to their homeland and are confronted by the identity destabilisation of what appears to be a foreign homeland, which was the reaction of generating a type of exilic identity or diasporic consciousness. I then traced this within Ezra–Nehemiah through the repeated and anachronistic use of the title "children of the exile" while within the homeland. I emphasised the power that textualisation of these identities had for consolidating and crystallising them through raising them to a level of social consciousness within the repeated action of reading.

On reflection, I think one of the very useful things that the book achieved was to show just how haphazard the construction of identity is. Trauma and exile can trigger a vital need for ethnic re-identification, as the loss of homeland and lost sense of self, at a community level, starts to consolidate around the grief of feeling untethered. Boundaries during periods of upheaval are helpful, since they allow uprooted groups a sense of an ongoing and somewhat stable identity during times when many other aspects of life appear to be in flux (Smith 1989). However, I argued that the survival mechanisms which had emerged during exile to preserve the group calling themselves the "children of the exile" and the "holy seed" were also being used in the homeland when exiled populations returned to Yehud, so that resistance to assimilation emerged (Ezra 9:2). The problem with return migration and reverse culture shock is that those very mechanisms which were used to survive the trauma of exile, when re-applied to the homeland, become deeply divisive. How easy it is to see another human being as "different" and somehow "other". The so-called "other" is in fact a construction here, an invention, a fabricated "enemy", projected on to the seemingly blank canvas of groups of people perceived to be somehow very different from those people perceived to be similar to the in-group (Eco and Dixon 2012). I noticed in retrospect not only how unpredictable social forces can be, but also how volatile the boundaries that are constructed can be. In the book itself, the focus was on ethnic and religious identity, but I think all identity markers—while they perhaps usefully help people and groups think about their own values and perceptions around self-knowledge—also potentially set up a dichotomy of self/other, a foil of constructed social distance for self-definition, which can be extremely problematic. In retrospect I still find it rather ironic that the boundary being discussed in the monograph was not one between vastly different groups but between what I labelled proximate others. That is, rather than being profoundly different, it is often people and groups who are similar (or proximate) who are considered to be the biggest threat to identity. The so-called children of the exile in Ezra and the people of the land actually emerge from the same group, with an exile of only fifty years or so. Yet, the way the text represents things, the children of the exile do not consider the people of the land worthy of marriage. Instead, the way the text depicts perceived differences between the children of the exile and the people of the land are highly visceral. The people of the land are presented as if they were polluted human beings whose very presence on the land adds to its impurity, with the loaded word *niddah* being used specifically to suggest that the foreign women have made the land menstrually impure.

A second thing that I think the book very helpfully achieved was to highlight the ways in which the behaviour represented through the text was not one where we as readers and audiences could easily jump in and assign blame. In the light of the anthropological research around exile (or as Casey Strine and I called it in a later co-edited special edition,

"involuntary migration"), return migration, and ethnic identity, it seemed to me that tolerance and the relaxing of perceptions around boundary and identity maintenance for the children of the exile represented in Ezra might not have been consciously recognised as a legitimate choice (Southwood and Strine 2019; cf. Strine 2018). Or, if such a choice existed, the author of Ezra seemed to be unaware of it and therefore no traces of tolerance emerge in the text. This is not a pattern of behaviour restricted to the text. Rather, as the research demonstrated, it is a rather common pattern of behaviour and belief. With the emotional debris of disaster comes the pure sheer focus on what needs to happen to survive. And yet, this can lead to re-diasporisation upon the realisation that a cherished homeland exists only in the realm of memory and imagination, as captured in the quotation that sparked the entire Ezra monograph: "when Mr. Johnson went home in Tobago in 1982, he was a different man in a "foreign" land" (James 1993, p. 248). How quickly something that is positive can turn into something quite destructive once the context changes. While I think it is important to point out now that I do not condone the lack of tolerance the text exhibits, I also think I was able, through the research, to begin to understand why it might have been written this way. However, one role that engaging with anthropology on return migration had which I notice more clearly now—having engaged with Ida Hartmann's contribution to this special issue in terms of historical imagination—is the role that imagination had in the interdisciplinary project. Although I was engaging with a social science, I think it might be most helpful to refer to the work as "thinking with" ideas from anthropology, rather than applying models to the Biblical texts. Imagination allowed me to ask new questions of the evidence through applying pattern recognition to texts that helped to connect ideas I would not otherwise have put together. It increased my intellectual agility by providing me with a conceptual apparatus characterised by critically informed creativity, helped with perspective-taking, and helped to encourage me to think in unfamiliar ways when relating to Ezra–Nehemiah. In addition, engaging with anthropology provided me with a refined analytical language and categories which added precision, and helped to avoid more intuitive ways of thinking.

A third thing that I think the book usefully achieved was to illustrate the way that broad social movements impact individuals and families. The text focused in on what it presented to audiences as illegitimate marriages and illegitimate children. Yet, as the research demonstrated, these views emerged through rather complex social forces and were mainly the outcomes of constructing boundaries in extreme circumstances. In Ezra 9–10, we are presented with a very one-sided view of "what the problem is" and "what we need to do to solve it". The former ("what the problem is") being guilt and shame around the holy seed being "intermingled" with the people of the land, as demonstrated through Ezra's prayer and its powerful polemic that rests on the use of purity language. The latter ("what we need to do to solve the problem"), being sending away (or, divorcing) so-called "foreign women" and their children. I suppose in retrospect that one frustration I felt with the text in Ezra at this point is that it gives us no insight in the humanity of these so-called "foreign" women and their children. The intersectional language of othering (through the intersection between gendered-othering and ethnicity-based othering) is marshalled in a way that makes it easy to forget the lived experience being represented through it. Even if such a set of circumstances never happened but simply amount to a narrative in a post-exilic text, the fact it is represented textually is highly suggestive in and of itself because it implies the ability to talk about "women" and "foreigners" as others in an unchecked way—a tendency found in many Persian period texts such as Proverbs 1–9, Ruth, and others, as is well documented.

2.1. The Importance of Land in Ezra 9–10

A final thing that I think the book importantly achieved was to underline how important land is, not only as a concrete place with wealth and resources, but also as a perceived place of safety and belonging. The politics of land were hard to miss. This is because in many ways, the entirety of the episode described in Ezra 9–10 rests on the premise that the

land belongs to those who returned from the exile (the group who self-ascribe the title the "children of the exile" or "holy seed"), and that the group who through the text are ascribed the title the "people of the land(s)" do not really have any right to the land. Indeed, their very presence on the land is described as an abomination, and the requirement on the holy seed to purify the land is emphasised. The politics of access to land loom large, perhaps not all that surprisingly given the events described at the end of Kings where the "poor of the land" remain but communities who may originally have owned land are purposefully displaced. In many ways, however, the book's focus was more interested in the emotional significance that the land has. There were two main areas where land had particularly meaningful emotional resonance. First, the idea of land, both as a physical space and a place bound up with a sense of ethnic identity, has a particular emotional resonance among many people. Indeed, I noticed that this was common in many of the anthropological definitions of ethnicity; the connections between territory and homeland were expressed in terms of ancestral ties, father/motherland, inherited land, and a sense of connectedness between a particular place and people. However, the more important aspect of the idea of land that I noticed is expressed through the idea of the imagined homeland, which I considered to be as much a symbolic space as a place. There were multi-local perceptions of home: an imagined place, a place one comes from; a lived locality; and "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination … a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin" (Brah 1996, p. 192). I suggested in the monograph, and in a later article on second and third generations of return migrants to Yehud, that the imagined homeland was, for exiles, a source of profound hope and weighty symbolic significance (Southwood 2015). It was a strong focal point in the imagination of exiled communities precisely because it represented everything they had lost; a place of security, belonging, and meaningful rootedness; orientation, the sense of being under your own sky, and being able to rest on familiar soil (Stefansson 2003). I found the observations around return migration, where the actual homeland leads to re-diasporisation, particularly poignant in this regard. It has been exciting to see the new directions in which other scholars have taken return migration. In particular, in this special issue, Frederick Poulsen's focus on burial practices and return migration in the Jacob Narrative opens up lots of traditional questions about land and ancestor veneration in a completely new way, with particularly interesting insights around second inhumation and the way that the human body anchors connections to land. Similarly, also within this special issue, Anna Rebecca Solevåg's and Leonardo Marcondes Alves's argument concerning the so-called "prodigal" son as a return migrant (perhaps even a failed migrant) enables us to think again, in a very new way, about a familiar New Testament story.

2.2. The Presentation of History in Nehemiah 9

There were two areas that I wanted to explore, having published the monograph, where I felt there was an immediate need for further research. The first was an article engaging with the presentation of history in Nehemiah 9 (Southwood 2014a). The reason why I believed it was important to look at the role that the representation of history plays was because I had noticed the importance of history in Ezra within the nexus of migration, return migration, and the politics of exiles in a foreign homeland. I noticed that the terms of self-ascription (the "children of the exile") and the ascription projected on to the group characterised as other (the "people of the land") were characterised by the shared history that each of these separately evolving groups had in common. A sense of a mutually connected past is, of course, part of what makes ethnicity so strong. However, I noticed that in Ezra there was a very definite sense of instrumentalization around these shared histories in the text. For one group (the "children of the exile") the past provided a sense of legitimisation and authority, yet for the other group the text projected onto them a sullied history, wherein their identity through time was ontologically sullied whether one went backwards, stayed present, or moved forwards. This is what made the historical retrospect in Nehemiah 9 so peculiar. Much like Ezra's prayer, the Psalm in Nehemiah 9 focused on

a shared sense of history of guilt and shame. It is another strange paradox in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that the history that adds authority and legitimacy to the group who have experienced exile is a history that is shameful. The shame, however, appeared to me—both in Ezra's prayer as discussed in my monograph and in the later article about Nehemiah 9—to be rather divisive. I understood the shame in both prayers as the tactic that the text used to coerce its audiences into separation. The history of shamefulness and guilt portrayed in both prayers persuasively added to the sense of urgency around resurrecting and strengthening ethnic boundaries against those labelled the "people of the land", who only half a century prior to the return were part of the same group as those now calling themselves the "children of the exile". Any relaxing of boundaries would lead to ethnic and religious defilement, and potentially a return to a pattern in history where actions warranted retribution. I found the theological outlook portrayed in these texts in terms of their politics around land and ethnicity rather poignant. Indeed, having written a separate monograph on Job where I criticise Job's friends for a wooden depiction of simplistic retribution, I still find the theology in Ezra's and Nehemiah's prayers rather severe. However, a characterisation of trauma is that is does lead to anxiety, isolation, and rigidity. In this respect, it is very interesting to note the way the prayer shifts the focus away from and "de-centres" exile, a feature that Cunningham's recently valuable article demonstrated (Cunningham 2023). Perhaps, considering the trauma instigated by the experience of exile it is not particularly surprising to find the sort of coercive use of history that we see in Ezra and Nehemiah's prayers.

2.3. Women and Children in Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13

Another area that I felt warranted my attention after the publication of the monograph was the nagging question around the women and children in Ezra 9–10. As noted, the text does not provide us with any useful information concerning these women and children. Interestingly, however, the depiction of the intermarriage crisis in Nehemiah 13 represents the problem and the rationale for separation as being largely concerned with the language that the children speak. In Nehemiah 13, unlike Ezra 9–10, a strange phrase occurs which I translated as "and they could not understand Jewish speech" (the sentence suffers from a number of translational difficulties) (Southwood 2011). I argued that the episode should be understood in terms of language, ethnicity, and religion, suggesting that the surface-level concern (i.e., to preserve language through resisting assimilation and intermarriage) was actually a symptom of a deeper crisis; the perceived need to preserve ethnic identity. I argued that here, language and women both acted as symbolic border guards for imagined communities. I argued that language formed a key symbolic barrier around which claims to legitimate ethnic and religious identity made socially constructed differences between groups into realities and enduring rifts. Since linguistic assimilation symbolizes a willingness to leave past loyalties behind, I suggested that the women and children being represented in Nehemiah threatened to undermine years of attempting to preserve the homeland culture during exile.

I also felt that Ruth was important for giving us insight into thoughts about so-called "foreign" women and marriage during the Persian period. I published an article critiquing the language found in much of the secondary literature from social anthropology at the time about assimilation, suggesting that a better way of thinking about the complex imagined landscape in Ruth was through the metaphor of ethnic translation. One problem that I found with the language of assimilation is the idea that one group must assimilate to another (with an implied melting away of one identity), rather than both adapting to each other. The key point I wanted to convey in the article was that while Naomi was a return migrant and a woman, Ruth was a new migrant. However, a play on the root "נכר" (recognise/foreign) in the form of Ruth's question to Boaz, where her repeated epithet "the Moabite" was dropped, gave us insight into Ruth's situation (Southwood 2014b). In Ruth 2:10, Ruth finds recognition in Boaz's eyes as a person. Ruth asks Boaz, "why have I found grace in your eyes, that you should recognize me להכירני, a foreign woman נכריה?"

(Ruth 2:10). This recognition, I argued, was the polar opposite to seeing and perceiving a foreigner, an "other". It was the acknowledgement of Ruth's humanity, personhood, and true identity by Boaz. However, I was also interested in the complexity of the situation in Ruth, given that by the end of the short book her son is identified as having been born "to Naomi" (Ruth 4:17).

3. Continuing Research on Ethnicity and Gender

3.1. Reflections on Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible

Despite making some helpful inroads into ethnicity and gender, I still felt that I had not quite captured the complexity of this important intersection in research. Therefore, Martien Halvorson-Taylor and I produced a co-edited volume entitled *Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible* (Southwood and Halvorson-Taylor 2019). The essays in this volume focused on Jeremiah, Ruth, Susanna and the Elders, and family identity in Isaiah, Ruth, Esther, Judith, and Ezekiel. I think the fact that the essays were together in a volume representing women's exilic experiences in the Hebrew Bible was as important as the topic itself. The cumulative nature of the essays standing together in one place made an important point, I felt, about the importance of noticing how women are represented textually. There were plenty of examples of women being treated more as symbols and tropes than as people, with similarities to Ezra–Nehemiah and Proverbs 1–9. For example, one of the essays I am really fond of is Holly Morse's, which compares Ezekiel's tactics in negatively representing women who intermarry to modern day slut-shaming and revenge porn (Morse 2018). In contrast to this, I also really enjoyed Jennie Grillo's essay which showed how metaphoric tropes that attempted to control women's sexuality, such as the women-as-city image, are overturned in Susanna and the Elders so that the experience of exile and the notion of shame do not have to go hand in hand (Grillo 2018).

3.2. Rethinking Boundaries of Identity and Belonging

In more recent work, I have returned to the questions of identity and belonging. I would like to highlight several recent articles in this area and show how we might develop future avenues of thought and reflection in our analytical journey. A key theme that I noticed running throughout the research on ethnicity and within the primary materials from the Persian period where ethnicity featured was the way that boundaries were constructed. Although it has caused some debate, many anthropologists view ethnicity as constructed or something that can be used instrumentally. I agree with this approach. Furthermore, one pattern that I have recognised through the research is the way that ethnic boundaries themselves are fundamentally unstable. Rather than being ontological, unchanging, and primordial, I noticed an elasticity in boundaries that are perhaps even more responsive and dynamic than much of the secondary research that I originally read in preparation for the Ezra monograph suggested. This is not a surprising pattern at all; in fact it goes back to Barth. In his influential work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Barth has emphasised that ethnic identity is a social construction and that it is mainly defined by its boundaries, not its content (Barth 1969). Twenty-five years later he revisited this work, and argued that:

> The cultural differences of primary significance for ethnicity are those that people use to mark the distinction, the boundary, and not the analyst's ideas of what is most aboriginal or characteristic in their culture … [therefore, ethnic boundaries] do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories. (Barth 1994, p. 12)

I have noticed in my own research just how important it is to keep coming back to Barth's point about boundaries. The reason for doing so is the tendency in many emic perspectives, and also in the primary evidence from the Hebrew Bible, to do the opposite by emphasising the content and defining features of groups, often in addition to marking out boundaries. Although focusing on boundaries is perhaps more subjective than thinking

about more obvious and more easily measurable factors such as cultural identity, I think it needs to be taken really seriously. I published an article in 2020 revising the matter of ethnic language, such as the term "foreigner" in primary evidence from Isaiah (Southwood 2020). I focused on the following verse, which I translated as: "do not let the "foreigner", the one who has joined himself closely to Yahweh, say: "Yahweh has utterly separated me from his people", and do not let the eunuch say: "behold, I am a dried-up tree" (Isa. 56:3). However, rather than thinking about what makes the foreigner, or the eunuch, different from the main groups—an investigation with a premise that the difference represented within the text must be genuine—I started with an entirely different question. I focused instead on boundaries.

Rather than using the analytical framework provided by ethnicity, I actually found it more helpful to go beyond ethnicity and focus only on boundaries by exploring the politics of belonging. One reason for doing so was that even the very word "ethnicity" is suggestive of a type of identity. Even on a linguistic level, the Greek term *ethnos* is suggestive of a certain "people" or "nation", much like the Latin noun *natio* "nation", which is connected with the verb *nasci* "to be born" and therefore is highly suggestive of primordial notions of identity such as common descent. Benedict Anderson's early work on nationalism demonstrated some awareness of this in terms of framing communities as things that are imagined (Anderson 1983). In using the language of "belonging" and "politics", I wished to highlight the complexity of boundaries and the ways in which boundaries are constantly under negotiation. I also wanted to highlight some of the limitations of the ways in which the word ethnicity and its associated infrastructures of evaluation are used. I traced a decisive shift away from the term "identity" itself. For example, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue that rather than "stirring all self-understandings based on race, religion, ethnicity, and so on into the great conceptual melting pot of "identity", we would do better to use a more differentiated analytical language" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 20). Similarly, I noted that Paul Jones and Michal Krzyzanowski argue strongly against using the concept of identity in scholarship, because:

> "identity" has become something of a catch-all concept, which is used uncritically to support an untenably disparate range of claims; in actual fact the explanatory potential of "identity" has been much diminished by such loose and overgeneralized application. We believe that a point has now been reached where the concept of identity, without serious de- (and re-) construction, provides little … theoretical or methodological precision. (Jones and Krzyzanowski 2008, p. 39)

I thought that these points of criticism when it comes to the concept of identity were really helpful. The need for theoretical sophistication is now more widely recognised within Biblical scholarship, as Eric Trinka's excellent paper in this special issue regarding the theorizing of cultures of mobility helpfully demonstrates. In particular, I found Jones and Krzyzanowski's emphasis of subjectivity, liminality, and incoherence attractive. Brubaker and Cooper's case for going beyond identity was particularly persuasive because the concept of identity within scholarship is so often discussed in a way which leaves no room for ambiguity or mixed forms, as if identity can be reduced to some sort of hermetically sealed, neat, and static state. Instead of this, I argued that it was really important to pay attention to the political implications and power dynamics involved in categorising people by dividing them into mutually exclusive groups. Therefore, following Brubaker and Cooper, I agreed that "conceptualizing all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understanding and self-identification in the idiom of "identity" saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 2). I suggested that reducing the complexity of various group participations to the notion of "identity" is dangerous because it allows scholars to make swift and abrupt decisions about people or texts using one label or other and then fail to question the ongoing validity of that analytical pronouncement. Therefore, instead of focusing on ethnic identity as the main point of analytical attention, I argued that we need to take the politics of belonging seriously and give empathic emphasis in our

evaluations to how boundaries are continually negotiated. In light of Terje Stordalen's contribution to this special issue—which makes a very compelling case for recognising, rather than flattening out, complexity within Jeremiah 44 and in present-day interpretation of the text—I think belonging helps us to appreciate and notice the nuance within our evidence. Using the analytical framework of belonging to think with achieves this through sensitising us to the power dynamics associated with identity, which texts represent and reproduce.

I argued that in Isaiah 56, there is a danger of taking the label "foreigner" at face value and in doing so, simplistically repeating the divisions formed within and by the text. I suggested that instead of thinking about ethnic identity, we should be focusing our attention on the matter of boundaries, asking who constructs difference? Do the people identified by the text as "foreigner" also identify with that category? Is the category just a pejorative way of excluding and othering? Focusing attention away from questions around constructed ethnic identity and on to the questions of boundaries allowed me to think about boundaries as markers of belonging or non-belonging. Effectively, therefore, it did not particularly matter what the content of the identity might be and how it is reconstructed. Instead, this shifted the question about what counts as important over to the ways in which belonging and power were being deployed. I found a lot of helpful information in terms of apparatus to think with when it came to the matter of belonging in the field of geography, where Elspeth Probyn's writing on *Outside Belongings* really made me think about the connections between belonging and the feeling of safety (Probyn 1996; Wood and Waite 2011). The work of bell hooks was also a major contribution that made me re-think my ideas about ethnicity in favour of the idea of belonging (hooks 2009). Just as exile and return migration had helped me to think about the significance of the homeland in Ezra, the various theories about belonging featured discussions around the quality of attachment to place and space in terms of the matter of home and of safety. I found belonging a more flexible analytical tool to work with than ethnicity (Lähdesmäki et al. 2016). This is because it is fluid and complex; psychological belonging, political belonging, and literal and social belonging can all be differentiated in order to attune to the specifics of the group dynamics one is faced with. I found Nira Yuval-Davis's work particularly enlightening here, in her suggestions that "the politics of belonging involves not only constructions of boundaries but also the inclusion or exclusion of particular people, social categories, and groupings within these boundaries by those who have the power to do this" (Yuval-Davis 2011, p. 18). The key point in this observation is the fact that some people "have the power" to decide who is included or excluded, and to either firm up or loosen boundaries. I found the flexibility of the concept very attractive because it was able to acknowledge that at different times and in different contexts, people may strategically deploy one identity over another. Furthermore, it highlighted the politics of belonging in terms of behaviour. Therefore, I suggested that unlike ethnicity, belonging is not just about identity labels, given that identity is adaptable; it is about acting according to a set of given identity principles or "doing belonging" according to collective practices. Therefore, when people feel a sense of association with a group they may perform acts of belonging, attachment, and alignment. It is then up to the dominant group whether to loosen the boundaries through inclusion or apathy, of whether to actively engage in the rhetoric of difference and exclusion, thus maintaining boundaries that even performative acts of belonging cannot transgress.

In Isaiah 56, I suggested that the person called the "foreigner" and the person called the "eunuch" were performing acts of belonging, but being met with apathy and boundary maintenance by the dominant group (perhaps a group also represented in Ezekiel 44) who the text sought to rebuke because of the politics and power dynamics around admission to the temple and service within the sanctuary. The acts of performative belonging are clearly listed in Isaiah 56. The so-called eunuch in the chapter already behaves in alignment with several features that characterise the monotheistic Yahwism that ought to be practised by the main group. These include Sabbath observance, and adherence to the covenant, as well as the more generalised behaviour of doing "things that please" Yah-

weh (Isa. 56:4). Likewise, the "foreigner" keeps the Sabbath and the covenant, loves Yahweh's name, joins closely to Yahweh, is Yahweh's servant, and even ministers to Yahweh (Isa. 56:6). Effectively, the eunuch's three-fold description of performative belonging and yearning to belong, expressed both by concrete actions and by emotions, is matched by the "foreigner's" five-fold description of performative belonging, which is likewise expressed through actions and emotions. Although these verses are short, they are exceptionally rich in terms of communicating about "doing belonging". One thing that Yuval-Davis's work really helped with in this respect was to show the way that identities and stories people tell themselves go hand in hand. Personal and collective narratives about what identity is and the ways in which people and groups narrativise are important in terms of recognising the politics of belonging and the way the boundaries bend and flex, or remain rigid, in relation to new circumstances.

I made a related point in a recently accepted article on human connections and belonging in Esther (Southwood forthcoming). Esther navigates the convoluted power dynamics connected with identity by actively, but selectively, *performing* belonging through adhering, *seemingly* wholeheartedly, to the conventions and values of the majority. This aligns very well with Alexiana Fry's article in this special issue regarding the myth of multiculturalism in Esther, critiquing perceptions around Persian "tolerance". Belonging and having authentic connection is quite different from being tolerated (especially when the words tolerance and benevolence are the self-ascriptions, often repeated unthinkingly in scholarship, of a genocidal and dangerous Persian Empire; cf. Kuhrt (1983)). Sometimes the only recourse that oppressed minorities have in the face of domination is to "perform." By this I mean that sometimes, as in the case of the story and proverbs of Ahiqar found as part of the Yahwistic community at Elephantine's papyri, subtler methods of relating to Persian power must be used. These include the use of irony in obedience, the display of deference (without sincerity), and ultimately the resistance to power without ever seeming to resist (Southwood 2021). Rather than considering ethnicity through the lens of reductive binaries related to relationships between intersecting groups, I considered an example of belonging from an interesting study into identity in Alltown by Jeanette Edwards in the 1990s. Edwards argued that although the residents of Alltown could theoretically be described as an ethnic group in relation to their alignment with various criteria for ethnicity, they did not consider themselves as such. Instead, the people of Alltown perceived their own interconnectedness as a process "of bring particular kinds of identity and belonging in and out of focus" depending on context (Edwards 1998, p. 156). Therefore, among the same set of people, boundaries and identities kept changing in different times and according to different circumstances. Interestingly, for the residents of Alltown their own criteria involved "knowing" the place in terms of temporality. This meant that the role of history was important for belonging in Alltown. ""Knowing" in Alltown entails knowing its past" and projecting a future on to this. As such, Edwards argues, "it is much more than an effort of nostalgia which prompts Alltown people to dwell on the past"; instead, Alltown's past is an "active fabrication of the links and connections which endure over time" and which "override the present" (Edwards 1998, p. 163).

This was interesting and important for me, because at the heart of belonging is not identity—though that is part of it and must be acknowledged—rather, it is about the strength and depth of human connections. I used this body of theoretical knowledge to look again at human connections and belonging in Esther, arguing that at the beginning of the book Esther's active concealment of ethnic and religious identity strongly suggest she is not at home or experiencing place-belongingness. However, Esther is able to carve out belonging for herself through exogamous intermarriage with a Persian monarch, an act of significant personal and social belonging. Esther becomes an archetype of intersectional existence. Rather than performing her Jewish identity, she uses her gender identity (as a beautiful woman) to perform a role as queen. Here there is an intersectional blurring of which identity is most important relative to the occasion. Just as the people of Alltown engaged in a process of bringing particular kinds of identity and belonging in and out of focus depend-

ing on context, so too must Esther navigate her interconnectedness with the Persians and with her own people carefully. In this way, Esther acts as a kind of broker between communities. Although my focus was on Esther here, the research has resonance beyond the Biblical text. Many individuals and communities find themselves managing the disclosure of information about identity very carefully, especially those who like Esther might seem to "pass" for another identity, in light of restrictions on belonging and in light of the notion of toleration, as Georgie Wemyss also highlights (Wemyss 2009).

Moving forward, I hope that more Biblical scholarship takes the question of boundaries, their transgression, and the politics of belonging more seriously in the future. In particular, I would like to see research concerned with the convergence of boundaries and belonging in relation to emotion and embodiment emerging in our field, in a similar way to Anastasia Christou's study of diasporic spaces of home and return when it comes to narrating lives (Christou 2011). A recent doctoral student of mine and Nilli Fox's, Steven Donnally, has just submitted and passed his PhD paying attention to the way analytical structures around ethnicity and belonging might helpfully converge when thinking about primary Biblical evidence (Donnally 2024). I think his work makes a compelling case for considering belonging, alongside ethnicity, as having a lot of heuristic analytical potential. I think belonging is perhaps equally as important as a conceptual tool for engaging with primary evidence, which is temporally and culturally distant from us, because it is more flexible and more human than some of the discussions around ethnicity in scholarship. One important point here is the meta-critical one. Representations of ethnicity in texts tend to invite interpreters to subscribe to a basic premise of difference as construed by and through texts. There is a risk that theories about ethnicity when applied to texts, no matter how heuristically, might still result in the reproduction of the sorts of differences that the texts seek to concretise. I think it is really important, when gazing into the past, to think carefully about the power dynamics involved in self-ascription and ascription of others. Rather than allowing ourselves the privilege of a sort of emotional detachment that might slip into caring less about why the text is representing some groups as external to boundaries and others as belonging, it is important to notice what the text invites us to think about those whom it represents. By putting space between the invitation that texts present us with when thinking about the people they represent and our own responses to said invitation, we gain greater mental and emotional agility around issues of representation. Therefore, instead of being tethered to the texts' own representations of belonging and constructions of difference, we are able to think more carefully about how we respond. We must attend to (rather than flatten out) complexity, as Terje Stordalen argues in his contribution to this special issue. This critical and analytical space is crucial for analysis. It sharpens up our attunement to the humanity represented in texts but also, paradoxically, it sharpens up our detachment to think critically about representation and to take multiple perspectives when engaging with constructed differences in texts.

A second reason why such a critical and analytical space is important is because considering the politics of belonging applies as much to the politics of reading as it does to the power dynamics that we trace within the text, given that scholarly interpretation is not devoid of constructions of power and boundaries. Since the Biblical texts have a long reception history, they do not merely reflect ethnicity. Indeed, the Biblical texts also have a role in generating power dynamics around ethnicity and belonging and they cast a very long shadow. For example, the way that the post-flood episode in Genesis 9 and the "curse of Ham" has been used been used to justify despicable dehumanisation through the slave trade is a clear demonstration of the Biblical material being used to incite, and justify, oppressive and degrading power structures. Another example of the contemporary ethnic dynamics generated by the Biblical texts is highlighted in Brian Rainey's recent monograph where he draws attention to their roles in producing anti-Muslim bigotry and anti-Black polemics in the US (Rainey 2018, pp. 261–75). Therefore, we must acknowledge that Biblical texts are vulnerable to being used to *create* ethnic identity and, in doing so, to marginalise and dehumanize. The Transgressing Boundaries conference held in Copen-

hagen in September 2024 was particularly helpful in curating genuinely interdisciplinary dialogue among scholars from a range of disciplines concerning the way the Biblical texts create and sometimes sustain boundaries. Indeed, many of the contributions to this special issue demonstrate the Bible's role in migration and identity negotiation. Astrid Trolle's engagement with Jeepney hermeneutics highlighted the way migration transforms religious expressions and practices, for example. Similarly, Edmond Agyeman's fascinating contribution to this special issue on the ways in which Biblical imagery around the Exodus from Egypt frames transcontinental migration from Ghana demonstrates the importance of Biblical texts in terms of generating migration and transgressing boundaries. Furthermore, Karin Neutel's very compelling argument about the Bible's role as a vehicle for nationalism in terms of Nordic identity shows the intersections between boundaries and the ways in which the translation of Bible itself takes on a symbolic role. Finally, Jacqueline Hidalgo's fascinating contribution in this special issue, as with the previous contributions, demonstrates the real-world consequences and legacy of the Biblical material in terms of the notions of home that ethnic Cuban and Mexican communities in California construct.

One way we might start is through paying closer attention to the language that is used within our primary texts and to the more meta-critical question of the language that is used by us and by other scholars when talking about constructions of ethnic difference, boundaries, and their transgression within texts. I have made a start here by devoting some thought to this matter in an article I recently published on the intermarriage between Moses and the Cushite woman in Numbers 12 (Southwood 2022). In the text, Moses is criticised by Miriam and Aaron for his intermarriage. I argued that the story was made to represent people (perhaps a bit like the Ezra group) who during the post-exilic period opposed marriage with foreign women, and that it depicts foreign women as impure. I argued that the text reverses this idea rather ironically by making Miriam (the one who criticizes Moses's intermarriage) the very source of the impurity, as someone with the cultic pollution of *tsarat*. Furthermore, ironically, rather than foreign women being unceremoniously cast out, Miriam is the one who must leave. I thought it was important to note the positive way that the text represents the exogamous marriage. The unnamed woman is depicted as a Cushite, which I found was a high-status descriptor for foreignness, rather than a marker of inferiority. However, what was particularly important for me (in terms of the representation of difference in the text) was the way the metaphors of purity and defilement, illness and disease, and ethnic other and in-group were being reversed.

I suggested that the metaphors about illness and impurity, when combined with the idea of ethnic difference, were particularly divisive. This metaphoric cluster becomes a particularly powerful (and incredibly dangerous) tool that can dehumanize people by making them seem gravely unsafe, physically dirty, or a source of contamination. This can sometimes exacerbate ethnic othering through disgust and creates a hermeneutical loop that is difficult to intercept and break. I suggested that in many Persian period texts, the intersectional indicators of difference, "impure", "foreigner", and "woman", were used in a way that constructs people as a figment or a mythical creature, an image frozen in space and time that can be projected on to any living person. However, I suggested, the narrative in Numbers turned this metaphor on its head, making Miriam—the one criticising an intermarriage—the real source of danger and cultic impurity. Returning to the meta-critical point about how we discuss constructions of ethnic difference in texts, it is important to think very carefully about metaphoric expressions and the emotional responses they can incite. Connecting concepts together through metaphor such as ethnic difference, dirt, and illness evokes a sense of danger. The rhetoric of impurity and disease in political and moral discourse about ethnicity when combined with Biblical texts, which can so easily imply structures of authority, is especially worth monitoring carefully. I hope this is a helpful inroad into the topic, but I feel there is a lot more work to be undertaken.

4. Conclusions

In this article I have return-migrated to my own earlier work on Ezra–Nehemiah and ethnicity. I tried to show where the strengths of my own previous approach were, and where there was potential to further develop the ideas. I have emphasised the importance of language and metaphors and the need to take meta-critical discussion and considerations seriously. I have also emphasised the importance of gravitating towards intellectually flexible tools for analysis, such as focusing on boundaries and belonging rather than on the defining features of ethnic identity. Furthermore, I have noted that sometimes seemingly subjective and emotive aspects of scholarship can been extremely important and worthy of our analytical attention. Finally, I have suggested that the invitation that texts extend to interpreters in terms of presenting constructions of ethnicity should be treated with caution, so that interpreters have hermeneutical space for perspective-taking.

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