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Understanding the Complexity of Identity in Yehud and the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the lesson plan for discussing Ezra-Nehemiah and Persian Period Yehud. Class readings provide a helpful framework for looking at the complex identities within the classroom and learning about the diversity of identity and thought in Yehud. Primary and secondary sources illustrate that multiple forces shape identity. A class activity allows students to recognize and address the complexity of identity and the power relations that undergird identity formation. Students then engage the biblical text and discuss not only the complexities of identity in Yehud but also the dynamic processes of imperialization and decolonization. Specifically, students begin to see how the text reflects multiple groups, interests, and perspectives, sometimes in competition. Students also consider the issue of intermarriage in both Ezra and Nehemiah. Students often return to discussions of their own experiences of bilingualism, ethnic differences, race, and their mothers' and grandmothers' influences on their own education.

KEYWORDS

identity, Yehud, Persian Period, intermarriage, imperialization, decolonization

Introduction

Students are not required to take my undergraduate course, Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, but it might serve as an “Ultimate Questions” or “Vital Past” Linfield curriculum requirement. Thus, I have a range of students who have different interests and familiarity with the biblical texts or religious students; students might be religious studies majors or minors, they might be taking this religious studies class to fulfill a liberal arts curriculum requirement, or they might simply be interested in taking this course for an elective credit. Because this might be the only religious studies course students take, I tend to foreground student need, learning, and development over pushing the content of the course. I tend to be mindful of how students learn, what they need in a liberal arts “core curriculum” course, and when material content can serve the larger goals and purposes of a liberal arts higher education (critical reasoning, self-reflection, understanding diversity, effective communication, and so forth).

As I approach the end of the semester at least three realities shape my situation. First, and despite repeated course lessons stressing the contrary, many students might still assume, even in the twilight of this introductory course in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, that the biblical text contains monolithic perspectives and clear, consistent reasoning and practices. It is the Bible, after all! Second, some students, especially those who have no confessional attachment to the text, might still feel distant from the biblical text, having a difficult time seeing how this ancient text connects to their lives. Third, an interest in identity formation.

Both the general context of higher education today and my specific context at Linfield University provide opportunities for closely considering the complexities of identity formation. Linfield is a small university located in the Willamette Valley and wine country of Oregon. The college boasts a strong liberal arts core, but the school primarily attracts students who want to enter into business, nursing, or education professions. Many students also come to Linfield to participate in our successful Division 3 athletics programs. Students are typically full-time and of traditional college age. At the same time, institutions like Linfield are enrolling more and more first-generation college students, persons of color, bilingual and multilingual students, students with significant financial need who are fearful of accumulating debt, students with significant emotional, mental, physical, and academic need or assistance, and so on. As a result, many of the factors that shape students' lives become a focal point of our class discussions.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah might be the perfect texts to utilize as a vehicle for student conversations about the complexity of identity. Through these texts, students address the first two elements of the situation as they consider the multiple perspectives and inconsistent argumentation about the issue of intermarriage in the Bible; they also experience how the texts might be relevant to their lives, regardless of confessional affiliation. Ezra-Nehemiah texts, as well as secondary sources on Persian Period Yehud, provide important fodder for discussing the complexities inherent in determining identity. The question arises, how might students better understand identity formation in light of Ezra-Nehemiah and Persian Yehud?

If we can highlight the issues inherent in discerning identity in Ezra-Nehemiah and Yehud, students will not only better understand these texts and their historical context, they might also begin to understand some of the complexities involved in identity formation, particularly the impact of imperialization and decolonization processes. Students might also better understand their own identities and the hybridity that both modern imperialization and decolonization can create. These primary and secondary sources illustrate that multiple forces shape identity.¹

The Set Up and Lesson

The course begins with general discussion of ancient Southwest Asia (the region and geography, religions and polytheism, cosmology, other ancient texts, and a basic timeline), and then follows the Tanakh canon. This lesson on identity in Ezra-Nehemiah occurs in the last two to three weeks of this one-semester introduction to Old Testament course. Students write two essays (one on a chapter of their choosing from *The Bible Now* [Friedman and Dolansky 2011] and a second on a topic in the Hebrew Bible of their choosing), and take a midterm that tests content, usually through the book of Judges. Students complete reflection essays for their final exam.

This lesson falls within a one-hundred-minute session. In the preceding class session, students will have read Third Isaiah and other prophetic texts from the Persian Period and will have been introduced to the Cyrus Cylinder and Persian policies of settling and rebuilding local regions in the empire. For this particular lesson, students come to class having read excerpts from Ezra-Nehemiah and two articles from *Judah and Judeans in the Persian Period*. These are "Constructions of Identity in Postcolonial Yehud" by Jon L. Berquist (2006) and "The 'am ha'ares in Ezra 4:4 and Persian Imperial Administration" by Lisbeth S. Fried (2006).

¹ Berquist argues, "Identity refers to the pattern that *multiple forces* produce" (2006, 63).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah contain descriptions of how groups of Israelites returned from Babylonian exile. The books contain correspondence between Persian officials and the Judean groups, detailed lists of families returning and participating in the building projects, accounts of threats to the building endeavors, and the reinstatement of Temple practices.

Class Activity: “Who Are You?”

I lead the students through a class activity where the students identify “Who they are.” Using PowerPoint slides, I ask a series of questions. First, I ask, “Who are you? Without thinking too much about it, what are the first five ways you would identify yourself? What five identity markers immediately come to mind to identify who you are?” I provide two or three minutes for this. I then use Berquist’s (2006) categories of identity: Ethnicity, Nationality, Religion, Roles, and Language. I supply the following questions:

- What is your ethnicity?
- What is your nationality? Nationalities?
- What is your religion, if any? Branch/Denomination?
- What are your roles/jobs? What are your labels?
- What language(s) do you speak?
- Now answer all of these questions for your parents and your grandparents.

Answering these questions directed at self, parents, and grandparents takes a little longer. I usually give ten minutes for students to reflect on these.

In small peer groups of three, student then discuss their answers. They are also asked to reflect on the following questions:

- How do the five identity markers you listed coincide with the other categories?
- In what ways do you align with or resist these identity markers? Are you antagonistic to any of these markers?
- Are any of these identity markers determined for you?
- To what extent do these categories determine who you are? And do these identity markers fully encapsulate who you would say you are?
- How complicated or clearly defined are these elements of your identity? What roles are overlapping/contradictory?

Students learn about their classmates; articulate elements of themselves that may or may not be obvious to their peers; find commonalities and unique qualities in each other’s experiences, backgrounds, and families; and hear about struggles and challenges inherent in various elements of identity. These discussions take fifteen minutes.

We come back together as a class for about ten minutes, and I ask students to comment on their group conversations. In discussing these questions, students begin to recognize within themselves and for each other that identity is multidimensional and fluid. They see how sometimes these markers are predetermined and that they might embrace or resist such markers at different times in their lives. In this way, students begin to address the labels, roles, and power relations that undergird the formation of their own identities.

One Latinx student remarked that in her top-five list, she failed to identify as Latinx, and more specifically, Mexican. The fact that she did not list herself as Mexican was noteworthy because people often mistake her for being a Pacific Islander or even Asian instead of Latinx, let alone Mexican. In a session of a dozen students, with ten who self-identified as cisgender women and two who identified as cisgender men, *all* of the women had some sort of gendered identity marker (“woman,” or a gendered relationship like “daughter” or “sister”), while *none* of the men had a gendered identity marker, perhaps highlighting how normative maleness is in our society. Many students remark on the backgrounds of their parents and grandparents, and that their families have lost or become distant from their heritage. Many of my Latinx students, however, comment on the value of being bilingual and how they have been able to aid their older family members.

As a segue into discussing the biblical material, I ask the students to consider what they know generally about the importance and formation of identity in Ancient Israel. Students will be familiar with the social organizations of family, clan, and tribe; they will have some familiarity with inheritance and marriage practices; they will have read stories that detail how the Israelites/Hebrews related to the Egyptians and Canaanites. I try to steer students to the recognition that Americans tend to value individualism and focus on the individual. But ancient people might not have thought of themselves in quite the same way as we do. The easiest way to do this is to focus on marriage: Why do people get married today? When do they get married? Who is involved in the decision to create a marriage union? How does marriage inform identity? How might this be different from what we have learned about ancient Israel? The individualized choices about marriage that many people make today do not look much like the reasoning and practices in ancient Israel. In this way, we, twenty-first century readers of the biblical material, need to be mindful and bracket our individualism. This discussion on individualism and the ancient world takes about ten minutes.

Hebrew Bible Group Work and Discussion

We then shift gears to focus specifically on Ezra-Nehemiah and the secondary sources. My hope is that students will be able to complete a close reading of the biblical text and discuss not only the complexities of identity in Yehud but also the dynamic processes of imperialization and decolonization. Specifically, students begin to see how the text reflects multiple groups, interests, and perspectives—sometimes compatible, sometimes in competition. The students study the “identities” of various groups, roles, and characters (e.g. Ezra, Nehemiah, the groups that they lead, the Persian officials, the *‘am ha’ares*, the returning *gôlâ* community, and those who scholars have called remainees and returnees).

First, we briefly discuss elements in the articles. I use Lisbeth Fried’s (2006) article to identify who the players are in Yehud. This helps provide content for the imperial context. I ask, “Who does Fried argue are the *‘am ha’ares*”? For Fried, “The meaning does not change. . . it refers to the landed aristocracy of an area. . . in Persian empire, they were the satrapal officials who administered the government” (2006, 125). They are the landed aristocracy, the real political power. And this is an indicator that the land is in control of strangers. I emphasize that clearly there were conflicts between various people: those who were already in Jerusalem, those returning, Persian officials, and others.

Then I move to elements of Berquist’s article. I point to the first pages of the Berquist article and ask students to identify and explain the terms that Berquist says are problematic. For example, what does “Judah” represent? Does it reference a geographic region, a political entity? And what is meant by “Judeans”? Is it an adjective? A noun to indicate persons who have something to do with “Judah” during the Achaemenid Period? Who counts as Judean? (Berquist 2006, 53). I also ask, “What other categories does Berquist identify as problematic for describing identity?” This should be relatively easy for the students, given the exercise they have just completed on ethnicity, nationality, religion, language, and roles. I like to give at least fifteen minutes to this discussion that pinpoints elements of the two articles.

With this clarified context, I have the students reread passages in Ezra and Nehemiah in small groups. Students consider the problems with intermarriage in these texts for approximately twenty minutes. Students focus on Ezra 9, especially verses 1-4 and 10-15 and Nehemiah 13:23-27. If there is extra time, I ask students to look at Nehemiah 5:1-12. Before they break into their groups, I first ask students to glance at where these passages fall in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In both texts, the issue of intermarriage falls at the end of the books, directly following a number of reforms, dedications, and reestablishment of practices. Then I provide the following questions and instructions:

- What is the specific problem with intermarriage in each passage?
- What historical figure does Nehemiah use as evidence for his argument? Now read 1 Kings 11:1-4. In his interpretation of this particular story, does Nehemiah mention either his rationale for opposing intermarriage or the rationale within the particular story he cites?
- How do these arguments against intermarriage relate to each other?

When they are finished with their small group work, we come back together as a large group for fifteen minutes to debrief. Students note that in Ezra, the problem with intermarriage is that the “holy seed” has mixed itself (4:2). In 1 Kings 11, the problem is that foreign gods are introduced when foreign wives are taken, resulting in Solomon’s heart being turned after foreign gods and not whole for the Lord (11:2-4). Solomon experiences and allows the introduction of foreign worship and practices. For Nehemiah, the problem is that the children (of non-Judean wives) are no longer speaking the language in Judah; they now speak a foreign tongue (13:24). Nehemiah cites Solomon as evidence for the problem with marrying foreign women. But he does not note that there is a difference in the rationale in 1 Kings 11 and his own argument for *why* intermarriage is so bad. In summary, while the issue for all three texts has to do with the problem of intermarriage, the rationale is slightly different in all of them.

In this discussion, the class returns to the Berquist article. Berquist focuses on the fact that Nehemiah is concerned that children do not speak the language of the people but instead speak various languages, and this is considered a key loss to identity (2006, 64). Berquist also points out the irony that Nehemiah finds bilingualism or multilingualism problematic in a text that is itself bilingual and “in which issues of translation are vital” (64). While his focus on language is helpful, because as Berquist rightly points out, “postcolonial studies highlight the role of language as a basic element of identity formation, maintenance, and transformation” (64), these three texts show a merging of multiple factors that contribute to identity formation, moving beyond primarily linguistic concerns. The examination of these three texts more adequately complicates the processes of identity formation as religious, ethnic, national, and linguistic concerns all intermix and ebb and flow in terms of their relative importance to the problems with intermarriage.

Conclusion

In the remaining minutes of class, students often return to discussions of their own experiences of bilingualism and their mothers’ and grandmothers’ influences on their own education. I ask students to consider which decisions they have made for themselves, and which decisions their mothers and their grandmothers made, regarding how their personal or family identity was formed. I then ask students to rethink: “What decisions were made for you? What is forced upon you? How are you autonomous; how are you not? How has this changed over time?” This helps students reflect on how the processes of imperialization and decolonization determine identity, try to categorize people, and how people are sometimes complicit, sometimes unaware, and sometimes antagonistic to these processes.

In closing, I take a quote from Berquist and ask the students to see themselves through Judean eyes, as they might imagine similar processes in their own identity formation. I insert the parenthetical phrases. Berquist writes, “Understanding Judean identity formation (and our own identify formation) involves complex analysis of multiple social levels (e.g. ethnicity, politics/nationality, religion, and myriad other complex social patterns/roles) with attention to numerous processes in which people internalize the forces of imperialization and decolonization” (2006, 64). In these ways, a fantastic interaction between the texts of Ezra-Nehemiah and the students’ own lives fosters deeper understanding of the biblical text, deeper understanding of one another, and a deeper understanding of the processes that shape who we are.

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