NATION AND IDENTITY: PROLEGOMENA TO A DISCUSSION OF THE COMMUNITY IDENTITY IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND THE HEBREW BIBLE *

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Zusammenfassung: Der Beitrag stellt den Stand der Forschung vor in Bezug auf die Debatte über die Frage "Wie alt ist eine Nation?" in den Werken von Soziologen und Historiker wie Gellner, Anderson, Giddens, Hobsbawm, A. D. Smith. Soziologische Ansätze der Bibel gaben den Bibelwissenschaftlern neue Möglichkeiten für das Verständnis der sozialen Struktur der nahöstlichen Staaten. Die Konzepte der „Nation" und „Nationalität" sind nicht mehr für die Beschreibung der antiken Gesellschaften geeignet, wegen des modernen Milieus, dass sie voraussetzen. Ethnizität scheint ein akzeptabler Konzept zu sein, aber die Archäologen und Historiker können nicht sichere ethnische Marker identifizieren vor allem für die Frühzeit. Aufgrund der lokalen und fragmentierten Struktur der antiken Gesellschaften, ist es angebracht, die Gemeinschaftsidentität und ihre Verhandlung zu analysieren.
Stichwörter: Gemeinschaftsidentität, Nation, Ethnizität, Perrenialismus, Modernismus, antikes Israel

The present paper intends to highlight the sociological approach to the Bible, a fresh insight into the problem of the biblical studies beginning in the 80's. I shall focus on the community identity and the community boundaries, but the emphasis is also on the appropriate categories that might be used in describing the ethnic, religious and political identity of Ancient Israel.

1. The new modernist pattern

In the 80's new sociological studies on nation and nationalism allowed new perspectives on the problem of group identity in Ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible. The authors who contributed especially to the theme are Ernest Gellner (1983; 1997), Benedict Anderson (2006), Anthony Giddens (1989) and Eric Hobsbawm (2000). They considered nationalism as a modern phenomenon, influenced by the Reformation, Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the philosophy of Kant, but especially by industrialism. According to Gellner, there were not the nations which produced nationalism, but the other way round: the nationalism, a doctrine that the

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political boundaries should correspond to ethnic border (Gellner 1983: 1), emerged in an educational system that existed only in industrial era. In order to amplify the production, the community needed a common language that could facilitate the tide of information, so the sacral language understood and manipulated only by clergy elite was abandoned or secularized. The communities revolve no more around small centers that represented their own culture and customs. In contrast with the segmented society, divided by its fragmentation, industrialism and capitalism brought up a homogenous culture, a sine qua non condition for the rising of nationalism. In Benedict Anderson's opinion, the ethnic nationalism arose later, in Europe, after the civic nationalism in America. He coined the term *imagined communities*, arguing that nations are such "cultural artefacts" (Anderson 2006: 4), because the members don't have face to face contact to each other. In the same manner Hobsbawm describes the factitious elements that make up the national sentiment as "invented traditions" and assumes that even the past, so important for ensuring the continuity with the present, could be invented (Hobsbawm 2000: 7).

For these researchers the antic societies, the agrarian societies in Gellner's words or the class-divided societies according to Giddens, could not offer the propitious background for nationalism, and therefore for the concept of nations. Instead the pre-modern community was largely structured by local authorities, chieftains or officials. The allegiance of people was directed toward cities or villages, not to a broader category such as nation. For Giddens the antic state didn't dispose of borders (Giddens 1989: 49-51). Instead the gradual influence of the central authority decreased in strength as one reaches the territory controlled by another leadership. Therefore the traditional state had frontiers, where the authority of the leader was diffuse and the local population used to switch sides at the political level.

This mainstream in the sociological approach, what Anthony Smith called the "orthodoxy" of modernism (Smith 1998: 24), replaced the classical dogma of perennialism that deemed the nations perennial and fundamental to human society. Anyway, recent scholars observed the oversimplification regarding the ancient society incumbent in those path-breaking works. For example Routledge calls into question the insurmountable fragmentation in local communities and the very concept of class divided society. Instead he states that the antic society, such as the Pharaonic Egypt, developed "dendric links" that bridged the gap between the local communities and the royal authority, citing cases where an Egyptian official boasted in his tomb inscription that he followed his brother in the administrative career. So the local communities were not independent, but hierarchically and horizontally related to one another.

A moderate position between the modernism and perrenialism was held by Anthony D. Smith (Smith 1986; 1991; 2008; 2009). He assumes that nation is a modern category, but there are pre-modern precursors of nations, for which he used the French term *ethnie*. Smith identifies six components for the ethnie: a collective name, a common myth of descent (the overall framework of myths being coined *mythomoteur*), a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, an association with a territory, a sense of solidarity (Smith 1986: 22-31). Without this ethnic group identity

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the emergence of nations would be impossible. In doing so, Smith is closer to the perrenialism.

2. Nations vs. ethnic groups in Ancient Near East

Nevertheless from the dispute between modernists and perrenialists the biblical scholar can learn some important features. The term "nation" is indeed inappropriate to define the ancient states, including the ancient Israel. Already some Orientalists, like W. von Soden, have observed that the word "nation" is totally inadequate for Ancient Near East. He proposed instead "ethnic group" (*Volksgruppe*) (von Soden 1985: 13). Similarly Speiser had underlined that in Akkadian the "men" collectively is *nīšū* or *nīšūtu*, and the group *sābum*. Instead of "nation", the Mesopotamian records speak of *mātum* "contry". The singular term for "man" is *awēlum*, the upper class citizen, distinguished from *muškênum* "tenant" or *wardum* "slave" (Speiser 1960: 161).

On the other hand, Speiser and von Soden believed that ancient Israel was the only one which developed a particular concept of "people". Speiser wrote that in Hebrew there is a pair *'am* and *'iš*, "people" and "man", without parallel in Mesopotamia (Speiser 1960: 160-162). Or, in von Soden's words: "only Israel has formed a unique concept of people (*Volksbegriff*)" (von Soden 1985: 13). It is therefore important to stress that the allegedly uniqueness of Ancient Israel is sociologically and historically inappropriate. The traditional society relied rather on local allegiance, such as city or village, and had no concept of nation. For example, king Mesha of Moab described himself as "the king of Moab, the Dibonite" (KAI 181:1-2; English translation COS 2.23). Moab is the name of the country and Dibon is his birth town and capital. It is worth noting that the king didn't call himself a Moabite. Likewise in the Hebrew Bible the king of Israel is also called "king of Samaria" (1 Kgs. 21:2; 2 Kgs. 1:3). So these states are locally structured, based upon a fragmented concept about territory: anyone might be subject to a particular king not because he is Moabite or Israelite, i.e. not on ethnical or national grounds, but because he lived in an area dominated by that king. The capital is the center of power and a person is primarily presented as born or living in a certain place.

During the Neo-Assyrian Empire the Assyrians are called *nīšī māt Aššur* "people of land Assyria", while newly conquered people were automatically integrated as the people of Assyria. Only starting with the time of Sennacherib the conquered population is presented in the royal inscriptions as "prey". Bustenay Oded thought of "the growth of self-confidence and national pride" (Oded 1979: 89), but the ethnic or national terms are still lacking in the Assyrian texts. In a letter of Esarhaddon to the people of Babylon, the Assyrian king blamed the "non-Babylonians" (*la Babilaya*, written *la LÚ.TIN.TIR.KI-MEŠ*), which are called "criminals", for turning themselves into Babylonians. Esarhaddon replied that he will read only the letters from the true citizens of Babylon (SAA 18.1). Anyway, analyzing this letter, one must conclude that there is no ethnic dispute. The Babylonians should be identified with the citizens of Babylon, who enjoyed some tax exemptions. The "non-Babylonians" were

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undoubtedly people who wanted to gain that privilege status, no matter what their (ethnic) group identity was.

It would be better to speak about a territorial fragmented worldview and not in terms of "nations". I dare to conclude that the term "nation", "national state" or "national god" must be avoided when scholars referred to ancient cultures, even in the Bible translation[1].

3. Perrenialism vs. modernism in biblical studies

An instructive example could be offered by comparing two monographic books issued at the same printing house (Eisenbrauns). In 1998 Kenton Sparks published his dissertation entitled *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible*. It is interesting to observe that he avoided the term *nation* and spoke instead of ethnicity just as the balanced opinion of Anthony Smith (see especially the discussion in the introduction: Sparks 1998: 16-22). On the other hand, in 2002 Steven Grosby published a collected volume of papers ranging from 1991 and 2001, in which he used the term *nationality*, under the suggestive title *Biblical Ideas of Nationality: Ancient and Modern*.

I want to discuss further some of the main assumptions of Grosby, taking into consideration also a short introduction written by him at Oxford about nationalism in 2005. As a matter of fact Grosby recognized that "there is much to recommend" the conclusion that nation is a "relatively recent" concept, but he gives examples of pre-modern societies which developed some characteristics that justify considering them as nations: "(1) a self-designating name; (2) a written history; (3) a degree of cultural uniformity, often as a result of and sustained by religion; (4) legal codes; (5) an authoritative center, and (6) a conception of a bounded territory". He resembled Anthony Smith with his six components for ethnie, with the difference that Smith specially left aside the economic and legal aspects (Grosby 2005: 71-72). That is why for Grosby the nation "is a collectivity of *temporal depth*" (Grosby 2002: 46), a definition that places him in among the perrenialists.

He is proud to follow Herder who back into 1782 considered ancient Israel as a nation. Grosby argues that analyzing the Hebrew Bible, one can discern sufficient evidence "which would indicate that the ancient Israel was a nation" (Grosby 2002: 14). These elements are the expression people of Israel (*'am*, *goy*), "all Israel", stretching "from Dan to Beersheba", the worship of Yahweh, the national god. "We can with confidence conclude that at a certain point in the history of ancient Israel: (1) there was a belief in the existence of a trans-clan/tribal people, namely, Israel; and (2) there was a belief in the existence of a trans-local territory, Israel. Note that the term 'Israel' applies both to the 'people' and to the 'land'. This terminological 'conflation' represents a 'conjoining' of a people to a land. This conjoining is a characteristic referent in the shared beliefs constitutive of nationality" (Grosby 2002: 24). But there are also other "ingredients of nationality" (Grosby 2002: 46), as Grosby called them:

[1] Hebrew *goyim* (Greek *ethnē*) could be rendered for example as "tribes", "clans", "peoples", while Hebrew *'ammim* as "peoples".

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the monolatrous worship of Yahweh, a legal code epitomized by the Deuteronomic law and the Jerusalem as a political and religious center. Grosby states that the concept of nation, "the Israelite consciousness", emerged in ancient Israel in the time of king Josiah in the second half of the 7th century BC (Grosby 2002: 59), but also in the exile period in the 6th century (Grosby 2002: 68).

4. Pan-Israelite ideology in Ancient Israel

In order to evaluate Grosby's contribution, one has to study the evolution of the name *Israel*. Following the epigraphist André Lemaire, Israel seems to have been initially a Manassite clan, called Asriel (Josh. 17:2.14) (Lemaire 1973). It first appeared epigraphically in the famous Israel stele of pharaoh Merneptah in 1208 BC. However it remains hard to tell anything about this population in respect of the exact location or social and political organization. Then Israel disappeared for 350 years from the literary sources. In the 9th century we encounter Israel in Assyrian, Moabite and Aramean inscriptions as the name of the northern kingdom, also called House of Omri. A bit later the southern kingdom is mentioned under the name Judah or House of David. From the historical evidence we can conclude that Israel encompassed only the northern part, the kingdom of Omride and Jehuite dynasties until the Assyrian conquest in 720. There is no trace of the biblical pan-Israelite tradition of twelve tribes descending form patriarch Jacob, so this kind of traditions must have been written much later.

In Nadav Na'aman's words, "it appears that the use of the name 'Israel' in reference to the people of both kingdoms began no earlier than the late 8th century BCE, after the downfall of the kingdom of Israel and its annexation by Assyria" (Na'aman 2009: 213). Scholars made up two scenarios for this transfer of identity. First, following Broshi (Broshi 1974), the archaeologists Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman suppose a massive wave of northern immigrants in Judah after the fall of Samaria (Finkelstein/Silberman 2002: 243-246; 2006; Finkelstein 2013: 153-155). According to them, this is the most plausible explanation for the demographic growth in Judah and Jerusalem that could not be achieved through natural biological increase. The allegedly mixed population inherited from the northern kingdom, more economically developed, the religious tradition about Exodus and patriarch Jacob, but, more important, the name Israel. Na'aman confirmed the transfer of identity (Na'aman 2010), but refuted the immigration theory, that lacks in his opinion any textual or archaeological support (Na'aman 2014). The second scenario, imagined by Philip Davies, sees in Benjamin the channel for the identity changing (Davies 2006; 2007). After the fall of Samaria, Benjamin, an Israelite/northern territory, passed under Judah. Similarly, Knauf considers particularly the sanctuary of Bethel as the keeper of the Israelite traditions that were adopted by Judah and then the role of Bethel was replaced by Jerusalem and its temple after the exile (Knauf 2006).

If one of the two scenarios is correct, then the Israelite identity was applied to Judah already from the pre-exilic, monarchic period. Possible candidates are king Hezekiah and king Josiah, to whom the Bible ascribed pious behavior and religious

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reforms contrasting with the other bad and idolatrous kings. But indeed there is no conclusive evidence that Josiah had an Israelite consciousness. The biblical texts invoked as supportive might not date from the preexilic period, so this kind of argument risks being circular. Grosby's enthusiastic theory about the Israelite nation during the 7th century bases on shaky ground.

5. Is "ethnicity" a safer concept?

Unlike "nationality", "ethnicity" seems to be more appropriate for ancient societies. The boundaries set by a social group towards its enemies represent an important category for group identity, an objective perspective in comparison with the subjective one (their own identification). On the other hand, the social groups are fluid and there are many elements that make up such a social bond. One could be seen as part of a group according to some criteria, but as belonging to another group according to others. Liminal circles are overlapping and dynamic so that foreigners/enemies could be integrated into a genealogical scheme, but still ascertained as foreigners. Others could maintain kinship relations within a large ethnic group, articulating subgroup ideologies. Fredrik Barth spoke in this regard about "ethnic groups" (Barth 1969) and therefore the "ethnicity" emerged in the anthropology literature at the beginning of the '70s, as an acceptance of Barth's argumentation, taking the place of other terms such as "culture", "tribe" that have been previously used. Barth gave the following definition for an "ethnic group": "(1) is largely biologically self-perpetuating; (2) shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms; (3) makes up a field of communication and interaction; (4) has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order" (Barth 1969: 10-11).

Among the biblical scholars until the middle of the 90's no critical study appeared to take into account the rich anthropological and social literature on ethnicity. In 1995 W. Dever complained that no biblical scholar has ever tested a comprehensive ethnicity model upon the Early Israel and the Iron I cultures (Dever 1995: 200-201), one of the most scholarly discussed topic. Nevertheless since then the bibliography on ethnicity and the Hebrew Bible grew considerably (cf. Miller 2008).

Depending on the traditional primordialist and perrenialist ways of thinking, some biblical scholars and archaeologists advocated the possibility to discern ethnic markers starting with the Iron I highland settlers. The archaeologist W. Dever spoke of "proto-Israelites", being confident that in time with further archaeological finds one can call them "early Israelites" (Dever 1995: 210; Dever 2003: 194-200). Other archaeologists and biblical scholars used in their studies the concept of "ethnicity" (ethnic groups, ethnic identity), avoiding generally "nations" and "nationalities" (Brett 2002; Sparks 1998; Miller II 2004; Killebrew 2005). Nevertheless they hold to the possibility to articulate ethnicity based on discernable ethnic markers such as social structure, language, ceramics, architecture, garment style, food, worship etc.

But other scholars tend to evaluate circumspectly the archaeological finds (Edelman 2002; Hesse/Wapnish 1997; Small 1997). E. Bloch-Smith tried to reshape the search for

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the previous Israelite-Canaanite ethnic dichotomy into an Israelite-Philistine ethnic distinction (Bloch-Smith 2003), but with questionable results. Although initially he placed more weight on the ethnic markers, the archaeologist Israel Finkelstein became more cautious (Finkelstein 1996; 1997), even if Brett imputes that Finkelstein conflated ethnicity and nationalism (Brett 2003: 405).

Ethnic markers are also debatable in respect of Iron II states. Some scholars spoke about national, ethnic or ethnicizing states (Joffe 2002), taking into account the formation of Moab, Edom, Ammon, Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah in the aftermath of the Egyptian withdrawal from Canaan around 1100 BCE. For a prolific author such as S. Grosby one can find in the 8-7 centuries BCE national conscience in Aram (cf. *'-r-m k-l-h* "all Aram" in the Sefire treaty I:A.5 – Fitzmyer 1995: 42-43) and Judah (during the religion reform of king Josiah). But, as already said, such positions are too optimistic.

According to some scholars, only the post-exilic realities generated a religious and ethnic conscience that produced also a set of boundaries between the "people of Israel" and the "Canaanites" (Lemche 1999). The returnees identified themselves with the true Israel, while those remained in the land during the exile were excluded from the community, being assimilated with the early Canaanite population.

6. Community identity and identity negotiation

Let us discuss now three collective volumes issued also at Eisenbrauns publishing house and Mohr Siebeck. The first one is *Community Identity in Judean Historiography: Biblical and Comparative Perspectives*, edited in 2009 by Garry Knoppers and Kenneth Ristau. The volume represents the outcome of a 2007 meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies. The editors wrote in the introduction: "Group identity is not regarded as an abiding or absolute norm. The social behaviors of group members at a certain moment in time should not be assumed to be incontrovertible indicators of permanent identity. Ethnic boundaries are culturally permeable and historically relational. […] Corporate classification may be multiple and overlapping. One might be a resident of a particular city, a member of a special guild, a practitioner of a certain profession, a participant in a given religion, and a citizen of a larger people. Seen from this perspective, both the definition of the group and the definition of the other are inextricably related, changing, and ongoing processes that are always subject to revision. In this respect, one may speak of identity formation and reformation rather than presuppose any kind of ongoing static identity" (Knoppers/Ristau 2009: 2). One might observe that the term *nation* is no more used and instead a person is deemed belonging simultaneously to multiple communities. This set of features is called "community identity".

The second book from 2011 is entitled *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, edited by Oded Lipschits, Garry Knoppers and Manfred Oeming. It groups also presentations at an international meeting, this time in 2008 at the University of Heidelberg. Focusing on the post-exilic period, much more complex and interesting regarding the community identity, the editors conclude:

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"During Persian and Hellenistic times, more than one community claimed to carry on the legacy of ancient 'Israel'" (Lipschits/Knoppers/Oeming 2011: ix). The proteic nature of the name Israel shows that after the exile particular groups strove to legitimate themselves by earlier political and religious traditions. They had temporal depths, but this didn't make anyone a nation. Rather the term *community identity*, coined by the title of Garry Knoppers and Kenneth Ristau, offers a better view on the historical reality, if on the other hand one assumes that several communities coexisted in the post-exilic Persian province of Judah (Yehud). In the Hebrew Bible we meet more contemporary voices, joined together in what scholars often called a compromise work between major redactors such as the Deuteronomists and Priestly scribes.

The third book, a collective volume too, entitled *Texts, Contexts and Reading in the Postexilic Literature: Exploration into Historiography and Identity Negotiation in Hebrew Bible and Related Texts*, edited in 2011, a little bit later than the previous book, by Louis Jonker, focused on the post-exilic period. The volume originated in a project conducted by the editor and a workshop in 2010 that discussed the problems of identity from different perspectives. Jonker observed that "the notion of 'identity negotiation' has become an important category in the interpretation of biblical writings in recent years" (Jonker 2011: 3). Indeed, speaking of identity negotiation as the previous book, the editor attests to the versatile character of the community identity.

7. Conclusions

Sociological approaches to the Bible gave to biblical scholar new opportunities for understanding the social structure of the Near Eastern states. The concepts of "nation" and "nationality" are no more suitable for describing the ancient societies, because of the modern milieu that they presuppose. "Ethnicity" seems to be a more acceptable concept, but the archaeologists and historians cannot identify secure ethnic markers especially for the early period. Due to the local and fragmented structure of the ancient societies, it is more appropriate to analyze the community identity and the changing vectors of its negotiation.

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