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Title: Race in the Prophets and Writings

Race and Difference

There are many ways in which texts in the Prophets and Writings negotiate similarities and differences between people groups in order to articulate a sense of communal identities. Examples include the broader worldview expressed in the Hebrew language itself as exhibited in the application of ethnonyms (such as “the children of Israel” *bānê yiśrā’ēl* or “the Moabite” *hammô ’ăbîyā*) and key terms for groups of people (such as “kindred” *môledet*, “house of” *bêt*, “tribe” *maṭṭeh* or *šēbet*, “descendants of” *bānê*, etc.). Other examples can be drawn from the specific ways in which passages construct group identities through expressions of origins and migration (Neh 9:7-37), genealogical provenance (1 Chon 1-9), vernacular language (2 Kgs 18:26-28 || Isa 36:11-13), collective violence (Josh 11:21-23; Judg 21), cultural practices (Josh 5:2-3; 2 Sam 1:20), cultic practices (1 Kgs 13:33-34), a common destiny (Esth 4:13), and more. Although scholars can sometimes take biblical texts that relate collective identity and try to map this data onto some concept of race, this task is complicated by various factors including scholarly assertions that race is a biologically fictional trait, scholarship suggesting that race has only developed as a meaningful taxonomy in modern times, and contested definitions of the concept of race.

In modern scholarship, one frequently comes across the assertion that race is a modern social construct, by which the speaker/writer intends to point out (among other things) that theories of racial classification involve treating arbitrarily selected traits of phenotypic human diversity as if they cohere with some fundamental divisions in society even though biological evidence does not support these conclusions. Since biological sciences do not corroborate racial theories, these researchers assert that a person’s racial classification is contingent upon their location in a specific social setting in terms of time and space and the politics therein. Thus, although our understandings of race tend to treat identity as fundamentally divisible into categories of essential (or fixed) biological inheritance, the fact is that this classification is not stable or even a “real” science (even though it has real social consequences for people’s lived experiences) (Kidd 2006, 3-18). With this idea of race as a social construct, one might be inclined to believe that since race has been socially constructed differently in various contexts, one could find the social construction of “race” in the biblical world and/or the biblical texts. However, one obstacle to such an endeavor is a trove of scholarship that traces race as an idea that developed gradually (from earlier taxonomies of difference) to be identified as its own distinct category only in modern times (Baum 2006; Carter 2008; Fredrickson 2002; Goldenberg 2003; Goldenberg 2018; Hannaford 1996; Kidd 2006; Nash 2003; Orkin and Joubin 2019).

Even while acknowledging the novelty of racial classification (and concomitant racism) in the modern era, there are scholars like Benjamin Isaac who argue that Greco-Roman writings seem to exhibit racist or proto-racist ideas on account of how modern racism is similar to Classical concepts of environmental determinism that develops permanently unbridgeable differences, the natural inferiority of “others,” and their resultant status as natural slaves (Isaac 2004). Of course, any such argument about the presence or

absence of ideas of race or racism in any cultural production is completely contingent on a contested definition of race and racism such that a scholar with a different definition could summarily discount another's analysis. However, David Goldenberg follows Isaac's definition in order to show that ideas of difference and prejudice in the Hebrew Bible do not resemble modern race and racism like Classical sources do (Goldenberg 2009). Other works have made a similar point about race and racism being absent from the Hebrew Bible even if there are rare examples of instances that resonate with later ideas of race and racism (Goldenberg 2003; Sadler 2005).

The following survey of biblical texts demonstrates how specific concepts related to modern ideas of race might be explored in relation to texts in the Prophets and Writings. In each section one can see how ideas in biblical texts intersect with some aspect of "othering" that has been important in scholarship concerning modern theories of race even if the ideas in biblical passages do not come together to form a biblical racial ideology.

Biblical Texts

Genealogies

In 1684, Francois Bernier was the first scholar to use "race" as a hierarchical classification of humanity into major divisions with a primary focus on biologically heritable physical traits (Baum 2006, 52). Even though his treatment of race is not identical to the subsequent development of scientific racism over the centuries that followed, Bernier's classification of humanity is distinct enough from what comes before it (because his treatment of the physical and biological characteristics as foundational to human classification deviated from earlier focuses on religion, morals, language, etc.) that Bernier's *Nouvelle Division de la Terre* tends to be treated as a major turning point in the subsequent development of modern racial thought (Stuurman 2000; West 1982, 154-162).

Some interpreters see the tracing of all humanity according to the three sons of Noah in 1 Chronicles 1:5-28 (which reduplicates a genealogy from Gen 10 with minor differences) as a sign that at least one tradition among the ancient Israelites conceptualized the many people groups of their world as fitting into a small number of categories somewhat akin to the racial division of the world into five types of people by Francois Bernier and others. Since the biblical writers did not explicitly label the criteria of organization for this genealogy, interpreters have offered a variety of hypotheses for the rationale behind which peoples are affixed to a specific son of Noah. The hypothesis that physical features divide Noah's sons can be found in some commentaries from a bygone era of more explicit white supremacist racial sciences (Priest 1853, 33). Other theories of division have continued to hold some currency in more recent scholarship: language families, geographic distribution, geo-political alliances, socio-cultural differences, socio-economic structures, or a combination of factors. As with the modern history of racist taxonomies, scholars often presume that there is a hierarchical stereotyping of an "othered" people group (the descendants of Ham) as exemplifying the worst characteristics including sexual deviance (Sarna 1989, 64; Steinmetz 1991, 195; Sternberg 1998, 110, 119, 144). However, other scholars counter that close scrutiny of the biblical narratives do not corroborate any construction of difference—let alone a hierarchical differentiation based on sexual deviancy—according to the divisions of Noah's three sons (Reed 2020, 54-69). In fact, the genealogies of Noah's sons may serve the opposite purpose: to show the relatedness of all humanity as a single family (Crüsemann 2002; Mbuvi 2016).

Genocide

Texts of genocide in the Hebrew Bible might evoke comparison with modern accounts of mass violence committed against "others" based upon their presumably immutable difference, which some scholars treat

as racial and racist regardless of whether the differences are framed as biological, religious, or cultural (Fredrickson 2002, 5-9). In the Former Prophets, the book of Joshua is a perpetual account of genocide (esp. 10:29-11:23) that coincides with the divine prescriptions in Deuteronomy (7:1-2; 20:16-18) to completely destroy (*hrm*) all living things in the cities of Canaanites whom God is dispossessing. The fear of cultic disloyalty expressed in Deuteronomy 7:4 makes the anti-Canaanite genocidal violence appear to be religious rather than racial. However, the fact that the threat of Canaanites is not understood as surmountable through a potential change to Israelite religious practices (even though the Israelites constantly change to follow the practices of others) in these texts demonstrates that the Canaanites are understood as having an innate, heritable identity as the distinguishing feature that warrants their extermination. One tradition in the Deuteronomistic History depicts Solomon as directly subjecting these same people (who the Israelites were not successful in exterminating) to forced labor (1 Kgs 9:20-21). In keeping with a command from God, the Israelites commit genocidal violence against the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15. The book of Esther also depicts a genocidal threat, but against the Jews (Esth 4:6; 7:4).

“Holy Seed”

The vehement opposition to exogamy expressed in Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13 seems readily amenable to modern ideas of race. In fact, many English translations of *zera* ‘ (literally “seed” and often meaning “semen”) in Ezra 9:2 use the word “race” (e.g. NIV, NASB, KJ2000). These translations seem to be utilizing “race” in a loose sense as synonymous with a nation or ethnic group (Berghe 2002). In these texts, there is no mention of physical or biological characteristics; instead, language and religion or cultic practices seem to be the primary concern as noted in Nehemiah 13:23-27. This apprehension over maintaining pure identity of the community of returnees from exile (*golah*) through the avoidance of any male intermixing with the “other woman” (*’iššâ zārâ*) intersects with modern racism and the ideas of the purity of races maintained through regulations against miscegenation.

According to Gale Yee, the ideological construction of the *golah* community needing to remain pure in the course of their new “exodus” into the promised land (by avoiding exogamy with both Jewish women outside of the *golah* group and the “other” non-Jewish women) emerges from a historical subtext of socioeconomic desires to keep land (ironically acquired through exogamy) within the boundaries of the *golah* community (Yee, 2003). This same subtext from the circumstances of Persian period Yehud forms the background of other texts in the Writings (cf. Prov 1 – 9) where the “other woman” is associated with death (see Yee, 1989; Marbury, 2007). As Yee points out, looking at the historical background to these texts shows that the othering inscribed in the *’iššâ zārâ* emerges, as in the modern dynamics of racial discourse, to address (by annexing and/or protecting) social, historical, and material interests. In other words, like the development of modern politics of racial identification, this discourse on inclusion and exclusion of others is not a disinterested taxonomy of human diversity (cf. Harris 1993). The tension in this text between a male attraction to foreign women and categorical aversion to mixing is a peculiar element that might be worth exploring in its similarities and differences to some examples of modern intersections of race and gender (Orkin and Joubin 2019, 201-204). Finally, the history of power dynamics in the interaction of male colonizers with female people of the land is another way in which race might be explored as it relates to this text and more modern history (Kim 2006).

Physical Traits

Modern discussions of race and racism quite often involve physically distinguishable traits, especially skin color. Although there are a few unambiguous references to skin color in the Prophets and Writings, these verses do not treat skin color as a marker of communal identity.

The color *ʿedôm* (“red”) and related words from the same root are applied to David (1 Sam 16:12; 17:42), the male in Song of Songs (5:10), and Nazirites of an earlier time (Lam 4:7). In each case, the skin color reference signifies health and beauty as it is coupled with describing the individual(s) as “beautiful” (*yāpeh*), “good looking” (*tôb rōʾî*), and “radiant” (*ṣaḥ* and *ṣḥḥ*). Although several English translations render the last term, *ṣaḥ/ṣḥḥ*, as “white,” the word has to do with luminosity, clarity, and glow, which other translations and commentaries properly reflect (see Goldenberg 2003, 93). Any attempt to match the “redness” of skin mentioned in these passages to our own understanding of a shade of skin is somewhat subjective since the development of color terms in biblical Hebrew is such that they used fewer color terms than in English. Consequently, the single term *ʿedôm* (“red”) indicates what English speakers would mark with a range of different terms (Brenner 1982; cf. Berlin and Kay 1969). What we might call “red”—wine (Isa 63:2), blood (2 Kgs 3:22), and rubies (Lam 4:7)—are noted with the same term to describe what we might label “red” while meaning light brown, yellow, orange, or dark brown—cooked lentils (Gen 25:30), a cow (Num 19:2), and a horse (Zech 1:8; 6:2). Thus, scholars arrive at contested human complexions potentially denoted by *ʿedôm* ranging from pinkish (Brenner 1982, 72-74) to brown or brownish red (Keel 1994, 198; Longman 2001, 170).

In some verses, darkening of skin is a sign of ill-health and suffering (*ṣḥr*, “to be black,” in Job 30:30; *ḥṣk*, “to darken” in Lam 4:8; and *kmr*, “to scorch,” in Lam 5:10). In Song of Songs 1:5, scholars debate whether the phrase *šḥôrâ ʾănî wēnāʾwâ* (translated “dark/black am I and beautiful” or “dark/black am I but beautiful”) connotes that darkened skin is assumed to be a negative trait (associated with manual labor, unattractiveness, or low socioeconomic status) or a positive trait (enviable of onlookers) in the ancient Israelite context—particularly, according to standards of beauty set for women. Yet, a third option is to see both: darkened skin considered undesirable by the urban elite audience but embraced as beautiful by other populations including the speaker of this text (Goldenberg 2003, 79-83). Regardless of how one interprets this verse, the immediate context makes it clear that the darkness of the speaker’s skin relative to her audience is a mutable trait of this individual and not an indicator of any group identity. Thus, any cultural preference or dislike for changeably dark-skin of an individual within the community of ancient Israelite authors should not automatically be equated with their potential sentiments concerning the skin color inherent to a population. The same is true for the complexion *ʿedôm* denoting attractiveness and health as well as the darkening of skin as a sign of ill-health.

Although the verses above concern individual physiognomy, there are a couple of references to (presumably) heritable physical features that are associated with a particular people group. The Amorites (Amos 9:2) (like the Anakim, cf. Num 13:33) are described with exaggerated height as a distinguishing feature, but these verses seem to describe a people from a mythic past rather than any people with whom the ancient authors and their contemporaries interact. The height of Sabeans might be referenced by the phrase *ʾanšê middâ*, “men of stature” or this might indicate their lofty status (Isa 45:14). In addition, the Kushites might be distinguished for their height when described as *měmuššak* (literally, “drawn out”), but this also might denote their geographical distance from Israel rather than their appearance (Isa 18:2, 7). These same verses also describe Kushites as *môrāt*, which denotes polished metal (1 Kgs 7:45; Ezek 21:14-16, 33 [21:8-11, 28]) or baldness (Lev 13:40; Ezra 9:3; Neh 13:25) elsewhere, thus yielding the common translation “smooth-skinned.” Alongside the spots of leopards, Jeremiah 13:23 implies that the skin of Kushites is a distinguishing feature without an explicit indication what quality of their skin is notable. Is it their dark skin color or are modern readers projecting our assumptions? Is the smoothness of Kushite skin notable here like how it is mentioned above? Or is there another quality that the author of Jeremiah presumed the audience would have in mind?

Language

Differences in native language as well as the distinctive pronunciation of a shared language have often been treated as a marker of racial and ethnic difference in the dynamics of navigating race in modern societies. A notorious biblical analogue to the latter can be found when the men of Gilead slaughter Ephraimites whom they distinguish from themselves through a test of their pronunciation of *šibbolet* as *sibbolet* (Judg 12:4-6).

Akin to Animals

Racialization of an “othered” people often comes hand-in-hand with rhetoric that justifies prejudiced thinking by reducing their humanity through comparing or equating them with animals (Isaac 2004, 194-195). In the books of Samuel, a comparison with the lowly state of a dog is used in a self-deprecating expression (2 Sam 9:8), while a contrast with a dog allows one to exalt himself (1 Sam 17:43). Neither of these examples from the Former Prophets denigrate a collective group. However, Exodus 1:19 describes Hebrew women as *ḥāyôt*, which is often translated as “vigorous” or “lively” and is related to *ḥayyôt*, “animals.” The point of this stereotype seems to be to treat the ease with which Hebrew women give birth before a midwife arrives as an animal-like quality different from a typical Egyptian (as in fully human) woman.

Conclusion

Any assertion of the presence of a concept of race in the Hebrew Bible involves the mapping of a concept that developed in a radically different socio-historical context onto a collection of literary productions from a much earlier and very different context. For the researcher that finds this work fruitful, there are a handful of aspects of racial thought that might be investigated in terms of how they appear or do not appear in the Prophets and Writings. Physical appearance, one of the most noticeable aspects of modern racial categorization, is largely overlooked in terms of depictions of group identity in the Hebrew Bible even though there are a few references to skin color. Other elements of racial othering (such as its function in securing privileges, the use of language to mark racial differences, the idea that some humans are closer to animals than others, and the threat of genocidal violence) might be more auxiliary features of modern categorizations of race that have biblical analogues. Finally, the biblical organization of humanity into a genealogical system with three major branches might appear to match modern ideas of racial distinctiveness, but it might also be understood as illustrating human connections in a large-scale family.

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