

Researching the Identity of
the Chosen People – A Hermeneutical Proposal,
Marcel V. Măcelaru,
*Discursul etno-național în Biblia Ebraică.
Repere metodologice în analiza narațiunilor
istoriografice veterotestamentare*



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The search for ancient Israel's identity has long been an issue of debate in scholarly circles. Most frequently the questions asked have had the historical emergence of Israel in Canaan in view and although several scenarios have been put forward over the years, the discussion seems to be far from over. Proposals range greatly – on the one hand we have the so-called maximalists, who tend to treat the narrative account given in the book of Joshua as objective history, and thus describe Israelite emergence in terms of total military conquest. On the other hand, there are the so-called minimalists, who do not trust the historical accuracy of the Biblical account and seek to explain Israel's appearance in Canaan as an emergence from within, in which the peasant population arose and took over the control of the territory from the inhabitants of the city-states.

The book authored by Marcel Măcelaru, entitled *Discursul etno-național în Biblia Ebraică: Repere metodologice în analiza narațiunilor istoriografice veterotestamentare* [*Ethno-national discourse in the Hebrew Bible: Methodological landmarks in the analysis of Old Testament historiographic narratives*], proposes a fresh approach to the issue, one which accounts for the way ethno-national identity is expressed in direct discourse within the narrative material of the Hebrew Bible. Methodologically this represents an innovative move, one which has the potential to refocus the debate on Israel's identity. As argued by the author, when so undertaken, such a description of Israel will be a discursive accomplishment rather than a historical one.

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The book consists of 4 chapters, bracketed by a short Introduction and a Conclusion. It begins in the Introduction with the observation that descriptions of identity can refer to features external observers see when dealing with a particular entity, or can be discursive articulations of internal feelings, thoughts and attitudes given by the entity itself. This categorization is complemented with the Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga's particular insight that national/ethnic identity is best expressed in the literary/cultural creations of a people.

The conceptualization of identity given in the Introduction provides the theoretical framework used in Chapter 1 to assess the contribution of several representative scholars to the debate on Israel's identity. It is shown that, when talking of Israelite identity, most times scholars have in mind the historical entity 'Israel', distinct from and existing outside of the text of the Hebrew Bible. As such, definitions of Israelite identity tend to be limited – they make exclusive reference to what external observers (scholars) can say about Israel's characteristics at any given time and place. Even in works in which a careful examination of the Biblical text is undertaken, the expression of Israelite identity is envisioned as a description of such features within a given textual tradition. Such an understanding can lead to a hermeneutical fallacy, for an approach that looks for socio-historical information tends to treat Biblical narratives as a source of historical information, a pool of resources to talk about 'Israel', and consequently neglects their literary value. The author argues, however, that these traditions, envisioned as Israel's cultural/literary accomplishment, provide an internal identity articulation, that is, Israel's very self-expression. As such, the study undertaken here explores modalities of identity expressions within these narrative traditions for the purpose of establishing how Israel understood and defined itself.

The methodological framework proposed, which is the main point of the publication, is provided in Chapter 2. It is argued that Hebrew Bible narrative texts relating Israel's life come together to form a consistent narration, a 'sacred story', which provides a symbolic universe or a 'story world' within which the identity depiction takes place. It is also suggested that an examination of identity within such literature should be confined to the limits of this 'story world', for it is the only world to which the present researcher has unmediated access. Moreover, it is concluded that any examination of identity needs to take into account the structure of the plot and the rhetorical strategies used in this 'sacred story'. In terms of structure, the plot reveals pivotal narratives that describe changes in Israel's status and identity, two of which are selected for analysis in order to provide examples of how the theory

might work in practice. In terms of rhetorical strategies, the description of identity as external cultural features and internal attitudes expressed discursively is considered an appropriate conceptualization as long as the examination is restricted to the 'story world'. Finally, insights from ritual, cultural and discourse analysis are employed as specific methodological tools to be used in the analysis.

Following this methodological discussion, the book offers an interpretation of identity based on two biblical texts: Exodus 19: 1-24: 11 (Chapter 3) and Nehemiah 7: 72b-10: 40 (Chapter 4). Based on the first passage it is argued that the birth of Israel takes place (within the story-world) as a divine initiative, for in this passage God provides an identity definition expressed in direct discourse (in Exodus 20) that transforms a bunch of slaves running away from their Egyptian taskmasters into a 'holy nation'. The distinct external identity marker of this newly formed people is 'Torah', the Law given to them by their God, while the internalised definition of identity takes the form of 'Torah obedience' and verbally expressed allegiance to God, which make Israel a distinct community.

Regarding the second passage, it is argued that the culmination of Israel's re-birth as a 'nation' out of a group of former exiles is hereby depicted. As such, this pericope revisits the earlier Exodus paradigm of slaves being transformed into a nation. However, there is also a negative side to the situation in Nehemiah's account, for the former exiles remain subject to the Babylonian imperial power even after returning to Jerusalem. The emphasis in the pericope is again on Torah obedience, which again makes 'Torah' the most prominent external identity marker these people have. The internalised definition of identity, given as direct discourse, takes form here in the communal prayer of confession given in Nehemiah 9. Thus, differently than the Exodus account, where YHWH's voice is the only voice that describes who Israel is, here Israel herself has the speech production role, while the divinity does not appear to be explicitly involved. As such, while in the Exodus account the identity depicted appears to be solely YHWH's invention, here this is solely an Israelite enterprise. The author draws parallels between these two accounts and shows that the dynamic involved in the expression of identity via direct discourse seems to be the specific mode in which Biblical narratives portray Israel.

The conclusion of the book revisits the earlier observation that the search for Israel's identity within Biblical narratives ought to identify both external markers and internalised expressions of what makes Israel a distinct nation and suggests that based on the two texts examined this can be safely treated as a typical mode of

representation, commonly the way in which Biblical narratives speak about Israel. As such, the methodological point advanced in the book regarding how one ought to ‘search’ for Israel adds to the debate rehearsed in the first chapter, for it introduces the idea that a shift from purely historical concerns to a more literary sensitive approach would actually bear results in terms of describing who ancient Israel was.

