IZAAK J. DE HULSTER

Ethnicity and 'the Myth of the Reborn Nation'

Investigations in collective identity, monotheism and the use of figurines in Yehud during the Achaemenid period

'The myth of the reborn nation' was one of the results of my recent research on figurines, the history of the religion of Yehud, and the rise of monotheism (cf. de Hulster 2012 and forthcoming a and b). The invitation to participate in the FIME conference in Turku (June 2014) provided me with the challenge of presenting a discussion about 'the myth of the reborn nation' from the perspective of ethnicity.[1]

'The myth of the reborn nation' and its archaeological basis

'The myth of the reborn nation'[2] came about as a response to Ephraim Stern's widely-read and well-received idea that the absence of figurines in Yehud (and Samaria) during the Achaemenid period (also known as the 'Persian period') is evidence of the establishment of 'monotheism' in the area.[3] Whereas Stern's views may be more nuanced than represented here, the present discussion is based on his publications, where he often expresses himself in a somewhat undifferentiated way. Moreover, the reception of his thesis concerning the absence of figurines and the consolidation of monotheism reflects a rather uncritical acceptance of the ideas published by Stern.

Stern's thesis, its reception, and its further application can be presented in three illustrative quotations; first from the work of Stern himself, second a few lines from a review of a book on figurines, and third an excerpt from an article entering into the theological consequences of Stern's research findings.

> How can we explain *the complete absence of sanctuaries and, even more significantly, the complete absence of these common cultic figurines in areas of Judaeans* (and Samaritans who in this period, considered themselves as Jewish too). Apparently, *pagan cults ceased to exist among the Judaeans who purified their worship and Jewish monotheism was at last consolidated.* … [I]t seems that this development occurred among the Babylonian exiles and was transferred to the land of Israel by the returning exiles … who rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, of Ezra and Nehemiah. (Stern 1999: 255, italics added)

> One of the dominant messages that emerges from the lectures *is how uncertain everything is*: there are several possibilities about the function

2   The term was coined in de Hulster 2012. The coining of this myth can be seen to be in the tradition of 'the myth of the empty land' (Barstad 1996) and 'the myth of the mass return' (Becking 2006).
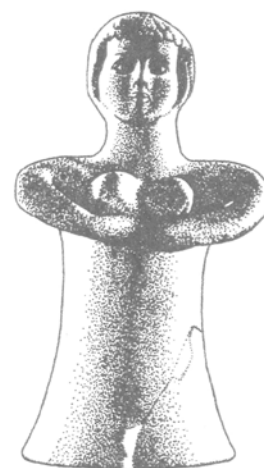
3   The word 'monotheism' is employed because of Stern's terminology; see also the next section of this article.

of the figurines in society (including simply as children's toys), even though a religious purpose is at the top of the list. *The one fact that seems the most certain is that the figurines cease in the areas of Israel and Judah after the exile*. (Grabbe 2005: 28, italics added)

(5) If they [Judean Pillar Figurines = JPFs] indicate such apostasy [the Asherah cult], the widespread ownership of JPFs supports prophetic and deuteronomistic indictment of the nation. In particular, it lends credence to the bleak conclusion of Jeremiah (3:11) and Ezekiel (23:11) that Judah has become worse than Israel. Theologically, they show Yahweh's punishment of his people was fully justified. (6) The virtual absence of post-exilic Judean figurines [*sic*] shows the positive effect of the exile. For all the traumatic upheaval and theological reappraisal it occasioned, the exile clearly has the effect of removing images and figurines from Judean religion. In this respect at least, Yahweh's people had received a new heart. (Johnston 2003: 104)

The first quotation is a telling example of Stern's formulations about the absence of figurines and the establishment of monotheism. Furthermore, the quotation shows how Stern links the population in Yehud and Samaria in the Achaemenid period through their identification as 'Jews'. The second quotation is from Lester Grabbe's review of P. R. S. Moorey's book *Idols of the People* (2003) and underlines how the presumed archaeological basis of Stern's thesis is picked up as academic consensus or fact.[4] The third quotation exemplifies the possible consequences of such a thesis, not only for the history of religion, but also in its theological reflections. Philip Johnston narrowed his argument down to the Judean Pillar Figurines, a typical Judean female figurine type that is often associated with the 'archaeology of Asherah' (e.g., Kletter 1996) and thus with Yᴏᴡʜ's assumed consort (or his wife, cf. Dever 2005). Ultimately, his conclusion that the archaeology of Yehud shows that 'Yahweh's people had received a new heart' leads to my phrase

Three examples of Judean Pillar Figurines.
Keel and Uehlinger 2002 (7th edn): figures 321a–c.

'reborn nation' (see also the section on ethnicity and return migration below), as Johnston explicitly draws the conclusion, from Stern's view, that monotheism had been consolidated. The aspect of 'myth' is best addressed through Bob Becking's article, where he explains that such a historical myth contributes to identity, even when it is 'incorrect in the eyes of the modern historian' (Becking 2006: 13), and when – as will be addressed next for the present case – it is untenable in the eyes of a modern archaeologist.

Archaeological evidence for figurines in Yehud has been presented by Rüdiger Schmitt (2003) for, for example Gibeon, Tell en-Nasbeh, and En-Gedi, based on typological arguments; his case can be corroborated with stratigraphic arguments (see de Hulster a, forthcoming). But figurine fragments that can be attributed to the Achaemenid period have also been found in Jerusalem, as arguments from both

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4 Lester Grabbe pointed me to a recent contribution of his own (Grabbe 2014: 33–6) in which he draws attention to the serious challenges to Stern's thesis from archaeological data; the collected volume in which this article was published was not available when preparing my conference paper and could not be included in this journal article.

stratigraphy and typology make clear. Even JPFs were likely to have been part of the post-exilic figurine repertoire in Jerusalem, as is evidenced, for example by the figurine fragment D2/13590 (see de Hulster 2012 and de Hulster a, forthcoming, with a line drawing).

Figurines and monotheism

The use (and thus significance) of figurines and their relation to religion and monotheism in particular form part of the presupposition of Stern's thesis. Stern assumes figurines to have been used for religious purposes. Johnston's combination of this with the 'archaeology of Asherah' leads to a more specific presupposition: the female figurines would represent Asherah. Both presuppositions can be questioned, but because of the limited scope of this article and its emphasis on the issue of ethnicity, for now I take the religious interpretation for granted, as per the wide consensus within the scholarly catena.

Another set of questions and possibilities needs to be examined concerning the relationship between the figurines and monotheism, rather than Yahwism. Stern relates figurines to – what he calls – Yahwistic paganism, implying an understanding of monotheism as iconoclastic. This might be the right place to emphasise that monotheism is not only a set of premises or a certain belief, but a praxis as well. What would such a practice have looked like? Would it possibly have included figurines? Was there perhaps a diversity of monotheisms? Or do we need to allow for the possibility of a process of monotheistic tendencies that only after a certain time resulted in a kind of monotheism that had freed itself from figurines? If monotheism and figurines are indeed mutually exclusive, the find of figurine fragments in Yehud might raise the question of differentiations between social groups within Yehud: of whose identity might these figurines have been a feature?

Figurines and identity

One possible way in which figurines are indicative of identity is provided by Ian D. Wilson (2012). Although his study deals with the Iron Age II, as the major archaeological period preceding the epoch that serves as context for the present article, it is a relevant contribution to discuss here. Acknowledging the religious significance of the figurines, Wilson focuses on their social meaning and argues that under Assyrian influence a grassroots movement started the production of Judean Pillar Figurines (and horse-and-

riders) to provide itself with a new cultural, material form for sustaining Judean identity within the Assyrian empire. As challenging as this thesis may be, the following observations offer occasions for a dialogue with his well-written article, taking several interrelated perspectives:

1. Comparative: what about other figurines (furniture models, animals without riders) and other media in Judah? Although Wilson addresses horse-and-rider figurines and seal impressions, the question remains as to whether, for instance, *lmlk* seals or ceramics show similar patterns of identity building, or whether the JPFs (and the horse-and-riders) can be set apart for certain reasons to make them particularly suitable for supporting Wilson's line of thought.

2. Exchange: what about figurines elsewhere (e.g. Jordan or the Levantine Coast), their *raison(s) d'être* and possible influences? As the introduction of pillar figurines could be related to similar figurines in Syria (Moorey 2003), a comparison concerning their meaning, use, and so forth, could shed light on the distinctive nature of the JPFs in Judah. Such comparisons may result in formulations using more generic terminology to show the common nature of such figurines. Dealing with JPFs, one might assume that the 'female' could function as a metaphor for blessing (cf. Lesure 2011), but for the sake of studying JPFs as an identity marker, one also needs to address how these figurines express culture-specific elements in their various societies.

3. Empire: is the development of JPFs to be valued as an innovation (and emulation), or rather as a sign of resistance? And if the former is the case, is it possible to apply the concept of 'fashion' to these ancient societies? An example of 'fashion' could be provided by the revival of cylinder seals in the Achaemenid period. While Christoph Uehlinger (1999), probably correctly, describes their use in Samaria as 'Persianism', the extent to which their use could be ascribed merely to fashion detracts to the same extent from his assumption that the revival was an expression of adherence to Persian ideology and a sign of loyalty. Similarly, cautiousness is called for when attributing explanations to the rise of JPFs that conjecture a self-understanding of the people in Judah as belonging to the Assyrian Empire.

Identity, collective identity, and ethnicity

Having illustrated how figurines could be related to identity and ethnicity (and what complexities are to be taken into account), this section addresses the concept of 'identity' itself, and 'ethnicity' in particular. From the point of view of ethnicity studies, a helpful guide is the sociologist Andreas Wimmer.[5] Before entering into dialogue with Wimmer, I first sketch how ethnicity is a pitfall for biblical studies.

Whereas Kenton L. Sparks (1998), in his pioneering study on ethnicity in the Hebrew Bible, understands himself to be writing a prolegomenon to the ethnic study of Israel by providing a probing chronological overview which is to be filled in, for our purposes Dermot Anthony Nestor's monograph *Cognitive Perspectives on Israelite Identity* (2010) could be considered a more essential prolegomenon, mainly reflecting as it does on the approach to ethnicity in ancient Israel. Nestor describes the aims of his work as follows:

> It is rather to address one highly problematic consequence of biblical scholars' seemingly immutable commitment to this principle of 'singular affiliation' [in reference to A. Sen, *Identity and Violence* (2006: 20)]. It is the problem of 'groupism' – the tendency to treat ethnic *groups* as the fundamental units of social analysis, and the basic constituents of social life. (Nestor 2010: 4)

He warns against the grouping that he describes as 'vernacular categories and commonsense understandings' (Nestor 2010: 7), as 'biblical scholars have all too frequently embraced the essentialising and naturalising categories of their informants as the frame for their own analysis' (*ibid.*). Such categories are the Herderian heritage of the study of ethnicity. Herder shaped ethnicity as an essentialising approach to culture, assuming that humanity can be divided into different peoples with their own cultures. For Nestor, this heritage does not dismiss notions of the ethnic group or Israelite ethnicity, but 'the promise of a "cognitive perspective" is that it encourages us to ask how, when, and perhaps most importantly, *why*, people interpret their social experience in ethnic, racial, or national terms' (*ibid.* 8, italics in original). He illustrates this Herderian heritage by pointing out

that archaeology, especially after 1920 with the first Jewish excavation (by Nahum Schloucz, supervisor at Hamat-Tiberias), served the identity of immigrants to Israel-Palestine, as 'archaeological findings not only nurtured a sense of a continuous Jewish habitation of the land, they also served to verify the historicity of the biblical accounts, thereby validating the ancient history of the Jews' (*ibid.* 70). According to Nestor, the essentialist approach is partly the result of a conflation of folk and analytical understandings (cf. p. 239). '[Avoiding such conflation] allows one to analyse the *workings* of ethnicity and identity in ancient Israel *without* positing the existence of the ethnic group "Israel"' (*ibid.* 239, italics in original).[6] In order to do so, Nestor suggests a cognitive approach which employs 'identity' (and ethnicity) as an epistemological and not as an ontological category. In other words, people use categories of ethnicity to think, either in etic imagology (making images of others) or in emic identity-making (to confirm their own 'ethnicity').

Wimmer (2008, cf. 2007) addresses the Herderian legacy in his work and shows helpful ways to overcome its pitfalls. An approach to ethnicity needs to take account of parameters of identity, community, and culture. Wimmer speaks about '*ethnic* boundary markers', but points out that within so-called 'ethnic groups' (e.g., those classified as such by their migrants' origins) one finds different worldviews, subcultures and group loyalties (related to cities, regions, villages), etc. What is generally called 'ethnicity' should not be studied as a presupposition. Wimmer calls for: 1) attention to individual and collective *agents*; 2) study with a *geographical* starting point; 3) an emphasis on *history* to account for the changes over time.

With these directions I return to biblical studies and delve a little further into 'identity'. Jon L. Berquist (2006), reflecting on his earlier writings on identity-related issues, wants to take the *individual's roles* as a starting point for identity ('bottom-up'), dismissing

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5   With thanks to Dorottya Nagy for pointing me to the work of Andreas Wimmer.

6   For instance, Nestor takes the reference to 'Israel' in the Merneptah stele not as an objective proof of 'the actual existence of a discrete, bounded group' [essentialism], but as an indication of the possibility of the existence of Israel as 'religious unity centred around devotion of the El deity' (Nestor 2010: 190, italics in original). If one were to say that this Israel is an ethnic group, one could do so only void of essentialism, that is to say, one should not assume the group is a clearly delimited, homogeneous ethnic unity.

collective models for identity based on any of the following:

- *Ethnicity*; firstly because of its association with modern genetics – as an aside, however, one could argue that the notion of *seed* in the Hebrew Bible shows an interest in genealogy which is not entirely unrelated to today's concept of genetics. Secondly, Berquist states that a 'discernible difference between ethnic groups' (Berquist 2006: 55; note that he still speaks about 'ethnic groups') is lacking because the boundaries between groups in Yehud under Achaemenid rule are debated.
- *Nationality* because transnationality would blur national belonging; moreover the imperial context also contributes political and geographical elements to identity formation.
- *Religion* because of its diversity, moreover the inhabitants of Yehud would not have 'understood themselves as sharing a single religion' (*ibid.* 57).

Berquist's emphasis on the individual conflicts with Wimmer's twofold emphasis on agents, both individual and collective. Although identity can be studied from the perspective of the individual, people also share identities (collective identities), for example as agents of return migration (as will be discussed below).

The second point by Wimmer takes geography as a starting point. For Wimmer this implies the possibility that one can find ethnic diversity. Even Stern seems to come to such a conclusion; in En-Gedi, part of Yehud, he had excavated two figurine fragments. He comments on these as follows:

> Fragments of two clay figurines uncovered at En-Gedi can be attributed to Stratum IV. These two figurines presumably belonged to a non-Jew since pagan figurines were not ordinarily found at Persian period sites in the territories of Judah and Samaria. (Wimmer 2007: 262)

In comparison with Wimmer, one might conclude that Stern, instead of accounting for the 'ethnic' (or identity) diversity of the inhabitants of En-Gedi, takes a certain overlap of ethnicity and religious identity as a starting point and thus *dismisses* his own finds as the actions of a single migrant. As an aside, in reference to Wimmer's first point, it is also striking that right here, Stern acknowledges human agency. The overlap between ethnicity and religion was clear from the 1999 quotation above, where Stern referred to Judaeans and adds in parenthesis 'and Samaritans who in this period, considered themselves as Jewish too' (1999: 255). He underlines this point in 2006, stating: 'In the areas of the country inhabited by the Jews [*sic*] during the Persian Period … not a single cultic figurine or sanctuary has been found' (Stern 2006: 201).

Wimmer's third observation addresses history. For the present case this implies a need to study the relation between the pre-exilic, exilic (Babylonian
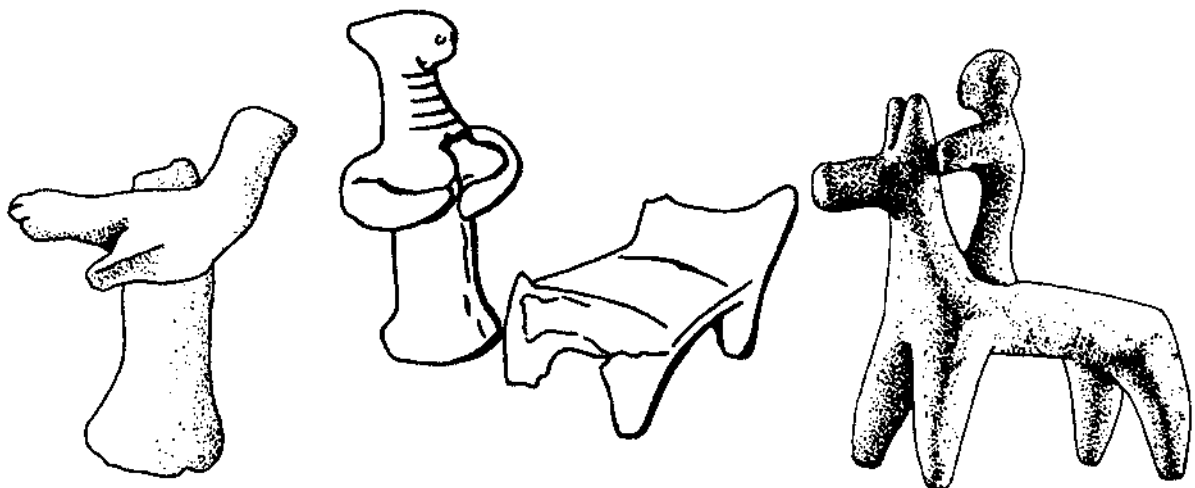
Iron Age figurine compilation from Judea: bird pillar figurine; Judean Pillar Figurine, bed model; horse-and-rider.
Combination of three figures from Keel and Uehlinger 2012 (7th edn), respectively figures 320, 329 (adjusted), and 333b.

period), and post-exilic (Achaemenid period) situation in Judah/Yehud; which for those building their theories on the myth of the empty land is characterised by a sharp discontinuity. Against this background, it should not surprise us that Stern assumes the Babylonian period to be 'a definite vacuum' in Yehud (Stern 2006: 201); figurines were, of course, not 're-introduced' to fill the vacuum.

Based on the observations above, one can conclude that a variety of factors contribute to identity, both on an individual level and on a collective level. The latter, in the sense of group identity, underlines the importance of 'belonging'. Belonging, however, is a dynamic process between the individual and the group, affected by such factors as phenotypes ('natural' outlook),[7] language, religion, outlook (dress, hairstyle, jewellery), structure (family, lifestyle, architecture, etc.), profession (such as the range of professions possible, limited by, for example, a nomadic lifestyle or political impediments), food, musical preference, hobbies (sports, hunting, knitting, collecting). Focusing on the first of these factors, one could introduce ethnicity as a focal point, but not without the disclaimers mentioned above (cf. Donaldson 2009: 234).

Despite these observations one can find numerous examples of a less careful use of ethnicity in biblical studies. This can be illustrated with two quotations from encyclopaedias related to Yehud.

> In sum, [fourth century] Judah was surrounded by different ethnic groups: Samaritans to the north, Ammonites to the east, Arabs to the south, and Sidonian and Tyrian merchants [*sic*] to the northwest. Such ethnic and cultural diversity may help to explain the conservative reforms and transformations to the Jewish community under Ezra and Nehemiah. (Graf 1997: 223)

And:

> Formerly a nation with fixed borders, postexilic Israel became a multicentric people identified not geographically or politically but by ethnicity – an amorphous cluster of religious, social,

historical, and cultural markers perceived differently depending on whether the eye of the beholder looks from inside or from without. (Leith 1998: 369)

For Mary Joan Winn Leith, the danger for the identity of this new Israel was therefore 'ethnic pollution' (Leith 1998: 369). This suggests an overlap between ethnicity and religion, but Leith (though mentioning religion first!) is explicit about other factors and not explicitly exclusive about religion. Nevertheless, she implies that those returning to Jerusalem shared their 'ethnicity', including their religion, with those who stayed behind in exile; although possibly biologically correct, this observation underlines the character of 'ethnicity' as a construct of identity. And where the (still) exiled are seen in relation to the returnees (Leith speaks about a 'multicentric people'), transnationality takes the place of the nation.

To strengthen the link with the final section, I add two quotations about the relationship between ethnicity and nationality.[8] Mario Liverani (1992: 1036) states: 'The "national" origin of the Jewish religious community kept important features, however, in the ethnic and racial limitations of its membership – to be eventually overcome by the "universalistic" character of Christianity.' Like Stern, Liverani seems to lump (early) Jewish religion and 'Judean' ethnicity together. And David Smith-Christopher (2009: 230) states: 'Yehud [was] a polity that is closer to an ethnos rather than a bordered territory'. Some scholars (e.g., Baer 2001) speak about a change from *Volk* (people) to *Gemeinde* (religious community), assuming that religion became the most important factor in identity formation. Even though this *Gemeinde* might have been smaller than the 'nation', this group laid claim to the land (cf. also Cataldo 2009 and 2014). Moreover, the people presents itself as a unity, but reduces this identity to Yehud, in which sense the term 'nation' – even when anachronistic – is apt. In other words: the focus on the group of returning migrants and the definition of their identity, based on their common history of going into exile and returning back, in combination with their religious beliefs and practices (also in relation to 'the land'), allows for the wording 'nation' (when using today's phraseology).[9]

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7   Cf. Rodney S. Sadler (2009) who instead of race wants to speak about ethnicity, and pointing to common biological origins as one of the parameters for studying ethnicity.

8   The latter is even more problematic; cf. the brief remarks by Kletter on this in the present issue.

9   Given the shared history, one may speak about 'people'; given the importance of the land I speak of a 'nation'; given the fact that there is no king,

To recapitulate the above briefly: cultic figurines mismatch with monotheism. Such figurines, in particular JPFs, could serve as an identity marker. Is this ethnic or religious identity? Or do they coincide (as they seem to do for Stern and Liverani)? Based on Wimmer, Nestor, and the other considerations above that have provided 'new insights into ethnicity' (or more appropriately: identity, overlapping with ethnicity but without pigeon-holing people through a one-sided, essentialist emphasis or approach), the myth of the reborn nation can be studied through the perspective of ethnicity by 1) taking Yehud as a geographical starting point; 2) considering the possibility of various groups living (active) in Yehud, some of which are (strict, aniconic) monotheist, while others are using figurines, and raising the question of whether this is an 'ethnic' division; 3) taking account of history.

Ethnicity and return migration

In a study on Ezra 9–10, Katherine Southwood (2012) discusses ethnicity in Yehud and intermarriage from an anthropological perspective of return migration. She does not conclude a shift from *Volk* to *Gemeinde*, but rather the creation of coinciding religious-ethnic boundaries. In particular, in a situation of return migration, ethnicity and religion are envisioned to reinforce each other. Speaking about 'the holy seed' contributed to the returnees' 'ritualized ethnicity' (*ibid.* 125 f., 215), its coping mechanism for post-exilic ethnic survival. The returnees shared one form of Yahwism and understood their exile in the light of 'a shared collective history of sinfulness' (*ibid.* 216). Their exile and return made these 'children of the exile' different from the people of the land and thus there was no restoration (to the pre-exilic unity of land and people), but a return, resulting in a conflict that Ezra's group countered with its diasporic identity and endogamy. Endogamy and the emphasis on the holy seed make intermarriage a form of 'mixing of kinds' prohibited in the religious law, trespass against which had caused them to be exiled. Moreover, preservation of the holy seed not only secures legitimate offspring, but also stresses the ancestral connection, but not to the extent that the people of the land can

one cannot speak about a 'kingdom'. 'Nation' better includes the 'people' as agents than a word like 'state'; moreover the meaning of 'nation' includes all three elements: people, land (country), and state. See further the next section.

be accepted; the diaspora experience of the exiles warns against assimilation, even in the homeland. I would like to emphasise the connection between the group's identity as returned migrants, and the theological interpretation of the exile as punishment and, in a way, purification. The related understanding of 'ethnicity' makes this group of returnees an '(ethnic) minority' in their homeland.

The group returning may have been small but what they envisioned went far beyond them, with a focus on the land (Cataldo 2014). This group of returnees did not see their dream come true, but their ideas are echoed in the scriptures (e.g., Deut. 30:5–6) and they are still repeated, for instance from a theological perspective such as Johnston, quoted above.

With an important theological component, the ethnic identity of the 'returnees' was constructed to serve the in-group coping mechanism. Biblical authors, such as the writer(s) of Ezra, employed the history of exile to express (construct) an ethnic identity that served the identity formation of their readers, in relation to their ancestry, their exilic past, their claim on the land and their perception of Yнwн, his laws, and his loyal loving kindness. Thus, the coinciding religious-ethnic boundaries of this return community can be understood with the identity-making (and identity-marking) myth of the reborn people. Instead of 'people' it seems better to speak about a 'nation', as the latter (in today's language) relates to 'the land' and not to the diaspora.[10] From a historical perspective, Smith-Christopher (quoted above) might be right in saying that Yehud could be regarded as an ethnos. However, from an ideological point of view a construction such as 'the myth of the reborn nation' seems a justified means to describe the process of imagined identity formation, in which the land plays a central role.

In conclusion, what can be said about ethnicity in Yehud in relation to the myth of the reborn nation? First, more research is needed concerning the identity (and possible ethnic identity) of groups present in Achaemenid Yehud (a further elaboration will follow in de Hulster b, forthcoming). Second, despite this first observation, we can already conclude that

10 It is hard to address the self-perception of the people who 'remained' 'exiled', who chose to stay behind in Babylonia; at least for the returnees their theological perception of their arrival in and rebuilding of the land can be understood as processing the exilic past and coping with the new situation in the 'old' land.

ethnicity (at least as a cognitive construct) fosters the identity-making (and identity-marking) 'myth of the reborn nation' of returning migrants. ■

Dr **Izaak. J. de Hulster** is a post-doc researcher at the University of Helsinki, Finland (and Habilitand at the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Germany). His current research focuses on the history of religion in Yehud during the Achaemenid period and in particular on issues concerning figurines. One of his other projects addresses Aram and Israel in the Iron Age. His long-standing interest is in iconographic exegesis, on which he has published the monograph *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* (Mohr Siebeck, 2009, an abbreviated version of his PhD thesis, Utrecht 2008). He has also co-edited *Iconography and Biblical Studies* (2009, together with Rüdiger Schmitt), as well as *Image – Text – Exegesis* (The Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies 288, 2014, together with Joel M. LeMon) and the textbook *Iconographic Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: An Introduction to Its Theory, Method, and Practice* (forthcoming 2014/15, together with Brent A. Strawn and Ryan P. Bonfiglio). Email: izaak.dehulster(at)helsinki.fi

Veikko Somerpuro

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