

Review of Willa M. Johnson, *The Holy Seed has been Defiled: The Interethnic Marriage Dilemma in Ezra 9-10*. Hebrew Bible Monographs, 33. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011.

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Willa Johnson's book is an edited version of her doctoral thesis submitted in 1999, and is one of a recent mini rush of books on Ezra 9-10. These final chapters of Ezra have had a chequered reception history. As Johnson notes, this narrative, about the identification, and subsequent dissolution, of certain marriages in Persian Yehud as covenant breaking, has frequently been misused to support various segregationist agendas. As an African-American, Johnson offers an alternative reading aimed at undermining the way the narrative continues to be used by elements of contemporary American society in racial statements. She also puts a feminist perspective into her reading, although she does not seek to provide a voice for the silenced "foreign women" so much as the neglected local women, who Johnson claims the outsider wives displaced. The thrust of the book is summed up in the final two sentences of her introduction.

Modern historical biblical scholarship has always been enmeshed with theories of race, religion, gender, class, and sexuality that promote certain androcentric conceptions of the world. It is as essential to evaluate these, as it is to analyze thoroughly the intermarriage dilemma in Ezra–Nehemiah (14).

Johnson wants to offer an alternative reading to the traditional western male models in Biblical Studies. She is conscious, however, of working within the academy and caution prevents her moving far from its centre of gravity (9). This is one of the areas where the gap between the original dissertation and publication is noticeable. What may have been a more daring move in the late 1990s is hardly radical in the 2010s. Nevertheless there are aspects of her critique that are still pertinent. She chooses an eclectic anthropological approach to the text and argues that the controversy over the marriages was produced through struggles over community identity in Persian Yehud.

The first chapter establishes her approach, arguing the need to recognise the biases in traditional historio-critical methods of interpretation. She contends for a reading based on her context and argues that issues of community identity form the social context of the marriage controversy. Chapter two discusses the historical experience of exile and return that forms the background to the story. Johnson also argues that marriage in the ancient world needs to be seen in terms of contract and exchange. Here she presents one of the key assumptions of her reading; that the marriages in question are between Persian women and Yehudite men. She reasons that the marriages were economically motivated and were a means by which Yehudite men gained access to land. The Persian motive was security; the administration got military service in return. Quite what Johnson means by "access" is never spelled out which makes later statements difficult to interpret. Chapter three discusses the economic and political environment. Johnson adds to her argument about the marriages using World Systems Theory and land "ownership" in the Persian Empire to argue that the returning Yehudian men did not have any right to land and needed the marriages to secure their access.

Chapter four discusses marriage law in Mesopotamia, the Hebrew Bible, and the Elephantine Papyri. As in the previous chapter, Johnson argues that the evidence from these documents supports her theory by showing that marriage was "was related to concerns about economics, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality" (78). In chapter five, Johnson offers two readings of Ezra 9:1-10:18. One is

an anthropological reading and the other is an ideological reading. The anthropological section identifies a number of social elements that need to be applied to the text. The primary focus is on how the controversy uncovers the community identity discourse. There are some good insights, such as recognising Ezra's mourning as a ritual act, which are not followed up. The ideological reading seeks to identify the cultural codes at work and the power relations expressed. In her final chapter Johnson briefly addresses her contemporary American context. Her primary conclusion is that the marriage separations in Ezra were the result of a typical sociological response of a minority community that had experienced exile and was struggling to secure its identity. Therefore the narrative does not provide grounds for a majority community whose culture is dominant, such as white American culture, to appropriate Ezra's methods.

The claim that identity formation is at the heart of the marriage controversy is one with which many would concur now. Similarly, many would find her conclusion about the application of the text both predictable and reasonable, if narrowly applied. There are two aspects of the book, one of which is fundamental to the study, which cause me concern. First the lesser issue. The gap between the completion of the dissertation and the publication gives an outdated and incomplete feel to some sections. While Johnson has updated the references in a number of places she has not completely filled the gaps. An example is the section entitled "Experiences of the Exile" in chapter three. While she has incorporated some post-2000 references, the structure of the section is based on the works of Morton Smith and Peter Ackroyd. Given the debate over the exile and the extensive work on the social and political issues in Yehud over the past decade the section is dated. The basic argument is outmoded and too many current references are missing. I don't see how a discussion of most aspects of Persian Yehud currently could fail to list the works of Lester Grabbe or Joseph Blenkinsopp, to name just two of the more substantial contributors. Similarly it would be difficult to comment on the Persian Empire today without reference to Pierre Briant's *From Cyrus to Alexander*: the French original was published in 1996 but only one article by Briant appears in Johnson's references.

The more substantive concern is Johnson's methodology. She uses an eclectic approach drawing on a number of theorists and applying their models with a broad brush. I would characterise her application as loose and generalised. Theories are used without evaluation or modification, and those used side by side are not assessed for compatibility. To be fair to Johnson, she uses a wide range of sociological, literary, philosophical, and ideological writers and it would not be possible to discuss them all. The danger latent in her method, however, is realised in her application. For example, Johnson chooses to use World Systems Theory to discuss the Achaemenid economy. Leaving aside questions about the model's application to ancient economies, even those who advocate its use in this way acknowledge that details and characteristics change in different environments. Johnson does not show specifically how the system links with the Persian economy, but using her broad brush technique she couples it with the notion that the Great King owned all property, in order to claim that the Persian royalty directly controlled the land in Yehud. She does not provide any specific evidence of this. Her claim is thus speculative and flawed. There is no evidence that the whole empire was divided up among the royal families in the way she claims. Ancient administrations did not have the wide ranging and effective control of the economy all over the empire she presumes. Their control was highly variable and much weaker at the periphery than the centre. Johnson's loose approach means she misapplies notions of the operation of modern nation states to the Persian Empire.

The generalised nature of her evidence gathering and application adds to the difficulties. Some examples will illustrate. Johnson surveys Mesopotamian, biblical, and Elephantine documents on marriage and claims that they reflect a common view of marriage regulations, even though there are fundamental differences between Elephantine marriage contracts and the other legal sources on which she draws. She suggests the right of women to inherit property in the Elephantine contracts was operative in Yehud, in spite of the evidence of the Hebrew Bible, and claims this would have

caused social and economic difficulties. She does not, however, explore the specific application to the Ezra narrative. If the Elephantine contracts were operative in Yehud a number of questions would be raised, given her claim that the outsider women were Persian and the property was actually under the control of Persian families. Johnson's application is too superficial and the difficulties of specific application are not addressed. Other examples of this generalised application include treating the pre-exilic **בית אב** and the post-exilic **בית אבות** as the same institution, which is clearly not the case. Similarly, she conflates notions of the strange woman of Proverbs 1-9 and the prophetic harlot-wife metaphor with the foreign women in Ezra. Such generalised accumulation of concepts under one phrase is tantamount to what James Barr referred to as illegitimate totality transfer. Failure to be specific and accurate creates significant flaws in Johnson's argument.

The value of Johnson's work lies in her self-conscious approach as an African-American woman to the study of the Hebrew Bible. Despite my concerns about her methodology there are some good insights and helpful questions raised about Ezra 9-10. She has produced a study that validly questions the androcentric focus of some scholarship, even if her challenge is somewhat muted. She identifies a number of social factors at work in the marriage controversy and notes that power factors mitigate against a racist agenda. This pinpoints the main flaw in many separatist applications of Ezra 9-10. That is, the dominant culture uncritically appropriates what were the reactions of a subservient minority to a specific social crisis, in order to support its oppression of the marginalised.

Johnson's book, as I hinted at the beginning, is one of a number of recent works on Ezra 9-10 and there are interesting links between them. Two other books emanate from the South Pacific and, like Johnson's, are publications of doctoral dissertations (Auckland and Otago Universities). The first is Nasili Vaka'uta's *Reading Ezra 9-10 Tu'a-Wise: Rethinking Biblical Interpretation in Oceania* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011). Like Johnson's book, Vaka'uta offers an alternative reading of Ezra 9-10 to the dominant western academic mode. He constructs a Tongan-orientated Oceanic hermeneutic which he applies to the Ezra narrative. The second book is my own volume, which like Johnson's, chooses an anthropological approach to understanding the narrative: Donald P. Moffat, *Ezra's Social Drama: Identity Formation, Marriage and Social Conflict in Ezra 9 and 10* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies; London: T&T Clark International, forthcoming 2013). Unlike Johnson, I use one anthropological model and examine the biblical text more closely. There are interesting areas of consensus as well as informative divergences in the three books which, one can hope will encourage continued research into a demanding text.



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