CHAPTER 2

Identity Formation as an Anthropological Phenomenon

1 Introduction

The preceding chapter has laid out archaeological evidence suggesting that the major political, social and economic changes in the southern Levant during the long seventh century led to a recognisable increase in the mobility of people around the region and an associated increase in the diffusion of cultural paraphernalia. The material record illustrates this period as an era of Judah's increased exposure to the diversity of material cultures from other parts of the southern Levant and other parts of the ancient Near East and, by implication, its increased exposure to the people with whom these cultures originated, either directly or indirectly.

The question which now arises concerns the effect of the increased level of cultural interactions which these materials suggest. How might the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem have reacted to their interactions with increasing numbers of outsiders, especially in connection with a flourishing regional economic system and occasionally as representatives of other states and powers? In an attempt to formulate a response to this question, this chapter draws on the work of a variety of social anthropologists on the nature and formation of group identity and, in particular, on the nature and formation of ethnic identity.

2 Race, Ethnic Identity and Nationalist Identity

Ethnic identity is, as encountered already in the discussion of Edom, a phenomenon which is both difficult to define and difficult to identify with precision. It is closely related to ideas about race and biological descent, on the one hand, and to ideas about the nation or nation-state, on the other. All three of these are attempts to articulate major phenomena of group identity.1

1 This is not the place for an exhaustive review of the theories pertaining to the origins and functions of group identity formation and the social phenomena they attempt to describe and the appearance of such reviews in recent monographs would render one redundant here.
2.1 Ethnic Identity

The prominence of language of ethnic identity in the latter part of the twentieth century has been, in some respects, a result of attempts to focus on cultural and ideological aspects of group identity without invoking the negative connotations of ‘race’, a term which has tended to be used to emphasise genetic components of group identity, sometimes to the near exclusion of group markers such as language, religion and territorial affiliations. Though references to race are still used in forensic anthropology and related contexts, the heavily pejorative overtones of this language and its use especially in German National Socialism have led to the near-abandonment of this terminology in current discussions about group identity as a social phenomenon.\(^2\)

The status of genetics and biology with regard to the definition of ethnic phenomena has been and remains varied; one traditional division among ethnographers has been between those who emphasise a strong genetic component to ethnic phenomena and their cultural expressions (the so-called primordialists) and those who decentralise genetics in favour of understandings of ethnic identity which prioritise current social context (the so-called instrumentalists).\(^3\) Although the definition of ethnic groups in terms of strict

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\(^2\) For further discussion see Southwood, *Ethnicity*, 36–41; Nestor, *Cognitive Perspectives on Israelite Identity* (LHBOTS 519, London, T&T Clark, 2010), 12–125 and K.E. Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10: An Anthropological Approach* (OTM, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), 19–72. With regard to the philosophy according to which this material is employed, Banks is worth quoting at some length. ‘I do not think’, he writes, ‘that ethnicity is simply a quality of groups, and for the most part I tend to treat it as an analytical tool, devised and used by academics’ . . . ‘This is not to say that the ethnographic subjects are not responsible for their “ethnic” actions: they are fully responsible for their actions but it is for the analyst to decide whether—if at all—ethnicity is a useful tool to make sense of those actions’ (Banks, *Ethnicity*, 6, 186). The use of ethnic identity here is not as an attempt to force either the archaeological material or the biblical material into anthropological box, but rather the use of anthropology as a useful tool for making sense of this material.