BOTSA

Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa

16 • 2004

Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa
Paper edition: ISSN: 1502-0819
Online edition: ISSN: 1502-0827
Website: http://www.mhs.no/publikasjoner/ot_afr/botsa.htm

Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa (BOTSA) aims at being a forum for exchange of ideas and information about Old Testament studies in Africa. In brief articles *BOTSA* comments on pedagogical, methodological and research political questions related to Old Testament studies in Africa, and it also brings notices on research projects, teaching programs, books and conferences. The readers are encouraged to use it as a means of communication.

BOTSA is published biannually; in May and November. The paper edition is sent free of charge to African Old Testament scholars and African theological libraries (i.e. libraries in university departments of theology and religion, and degree granting seminaries and colleges). The annual rate for other subscribers is US $ 14.00.

BOTSA is indexed in:

- ATLA Religion Database, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Flr., Chicago, IL 60606, USA;
  Website: http://www.atla.com/

- Old Testament Abstracts, published by The Catholic Biblical Association, 294 Leahy Hall, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC 20064, USA;
  Website: http://cba.cua.edu/OTA.cfm

From 1996 to 1999 (issues 1–7) *BOTSA* was published under the name *Newsletter on African Old Testament Scholarship* (paper edition ISSN: 0808-2413, online edition ISSN 1500-7383).

Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa

Issue 16, May 2004

Editorial: Job 1

André Kabasele Mukenge: Une lecture populaire de la figure Job au Congo 2

Peet van Dyk: The Tale of Two Tragedies: The Book of Job and HIV/AIDS in Africa 7

Knut Holter: The Maasai and the Old Testament: Marking the Centennial of M. Merker's Monograph on the Maasai 13

Upcoming conferences 17

Book reviews 18

Reading Job in Africa

The Book of Job is central in this issue of *BOTSA*. The Book of Job – as it can be interpreted in Africa. André Kabasele Mukenge invites us into popular readings of Job in Congo, and Peet van Dyk helps us relating Job to the HIV/AIDS disaster presently being experienced throughout the continent. In addition to these Job readings, I offer a brief analysis of one of the classics as far as comparative approaches in African Old Testament studies is concerned, and there are also the usual surveys of conferences and recent books. Hopefully this will encourage you in your research and teaching of the Old Testament – in Africa.

Knut Holter

Une lecture populaire de la figure de Job au Congo

André Kabasele Mukenge

L'une des particularités des lectures contextuelles de la Bible, c'est qu'elles prennent aussi en compte le lecteur ordinaire. Par lecteur ordinaire, nous entendons, dans un sens large, tous ceux qui lisent la Bible sans recourir aux méthodes critiques d'analyse, et même ceux qui, sans savoir lire, écoutent et méditent la Parole de Dieu. Dans un sens plus spécifique, ce sont les gens de la marge, exclus des lieux de pouvoir et de parole, les pauvres et les opprimés. Cette prise en compte se situe à plusieurs niveaux. D'abord dans l'écoute des interprétations populaires, ainsi que des questions que la majorité silencieuse se pose sur le texte biblique. Ensuite, dans la destination finale de la recherche biblique dont les lecteurs populaires deviennent les interlocuteurs privilégiés. G.O. West a examiné de près les implications de la prise en compte des lecteurs populaires. Pour lui, la corrélation entre le lecteur cultivé (*trained reader*) et le lecteur populaire (*ordinary reader*) exige de dépasser aussi bien l'attitude qui consiste à "parler pour" les opprimés que celle qui tient à "prêter oreille aux opprimés". "Prêter oreille", sans plus, risque d'idéaliser tout ce qui vient du lecteur populaire ; tandis que "parler pour" renferme le danger de minimiser et rationaliser la contribution de l'opprimé. A la place, West propose un paradigme participatif qui consiste à "parler avec" ou "parler à".[1]

M'inscrivant dans la même ligne, j'aimerais voir comment la figure de Job a pénétré les esprits populaires au Congo, quel usage on en fait, quelles sont les richesses et les limites de cet usage. Il faut reconnaître d'emblée que le livre de Job compte parmi les textes les plus denses, mais aussi les plus difficiles du Premier Testament. Le récit qui en constitue le cadre narratif, par contre, est facile à retenir, car il est construit sur le modèle des contes populaires tels qu'on les connaît dans toutes les traditions orales, avec un *happy end*: un héros au sommet de sa gloire connaît subitement des pires revers; il doit surmonter beaucoup d'épreuves pour s'en sortir. Finalement, il vainc toutes les difficultés et retrouve une situation prospère qui dépasse même sa situation initiale. Cette structure, connue aussi dans les contes africains, ne pose pas de

problème. Mais, il ne s'agit là que du prologue et de l'épilogue du livre (Jb 1–2; 42,7–17), alors que l'ensemble de l'oeuvre compte 42 chapitres. L'essentiel (Jb 3–42, 6), constitué par de longues discussions en vers entre Job et ses amis (Jb 3–31), l'intervention d'Elihu (Jb 32–37) et celle de Dieu (Jb 38–41) est souvent ignoré dans l'approche et l'imagination populaires.

Il faut dire que le personnage même de Job est fascinant, et ses malheurs accumulés rendent sa figure disponible pour tenter un rapprochement par similitude ou par analogie avec la situation de la plupart des Africains aujourd'hui.[2] Comme dit le proverbe, "le malheur ne vient jamais seul": on a parfois l'impression que toutes les souffrances se sont données rendez-vous en Afrique. Il n'est pas rare d'entendre des gens, au pire de leurs épreuves, oser cette comparaison et se désigner comme "Job". Dans une telle auto-désignation, ce qui est mis en avant, ce sont les malheurs de Job. La Bible les décrit en effet de manière à frapper les esprits et l'imagination.

Toutefois, c'est l'attitude de Job au milieu de ces souffrances qui a retenu l'attention des milieux chrétiens populaires. Cette attitude est résumée dans une formule lapidaire: *Le Seigneur avait donné, le Seigneur a repris: que le nom du Seigneur soit béni!* (Jb 1,21b). Une enquête dans les milieux populaires à Kinshasa a révélé que c'est la seule phrase du livre retenue par cœur. Que des fois j'ai entendu cette formule, lors des enterrements, sortir de la bouche des mères éplorées, et prononcée comme un dernier acte de foi, devant une situation incompréhensible, que l'on veut admettre comme quelque chose qui nous dépasse.

Certes, on ne peut pas mettre en doute la profondeur de la foi de ceux qui, dans un moment de grande détresse, prononcent de telles paroles, et trouvent en Job le modèle du croyant qui s'abandonne ainsi dans les mains de Dieu. Cette attitude est même relevée comme un élément de la "nouveauté chrétienne" par rapport aux croyances et attitudes traditionnelles.

En effet, dans la conception africaine traditionnelle, seule la mort d'une personne âgée est acceptée comme "normale", comme allant de soi. Par contre, la mort d'une personne dans la fleur de l'âge, d'un jeune ou d'un enfant, est considérée comme "anormale": même si la cause directe (maladie, accident) est obvie, on cherche à déterminer la cause

réelle, profonde, mystérieuse.[3] La maladie, l'accident, tout ce qui peut être cité comme explication rationnelle est tenu pour cause seconde, pour prétexte. C'est "la main" dont s'est servi "le sorcier" ou "le malveillant" pour sévir qu'il faut absolument déterminer. Aussi assiste-t-on souvent, même dans les grands centres urbains comme Kinshasa, à des conflits interminables dans la recherche du "coupable". Un nombre impressionnant d'enfants de la rue est la conséquence de cette démarche: désigné comme celui qui, par des sortilèges, a "causé" la mort dans la famille, tel enfant est rejeté et va grossir le nombre des enfants abandonnés.

Un proverbe luba illustre bien cette conception sur la cause réelle d'une mort inexpliquée: *Wa Mvidie kafwale, ufwafwa ngwa baloji ne bankina bantu* (Celui qui est à Dieu ne meurt pas, meurt celui qui tombe sous les coups des sorciers et des malveillants). Dans une telle vision des choses, on comprend que les prises de parole avant l'enterrement étaient des appels à la vengeance: le défunt était mis en demeure de ne pas laisser en vie ceux qui ont "trempé" dans sa mort. On peut dès lors mesurer l'apport de l'aphorisme de Job cité plus haut: nous sommes passés de l'esprit de vengeance à un esprit d'abandon confiant dans les mains de Dieu. D'ailleurs, c'est ce que l'assistance relève lorsque les membres d'une famille éprouvée recourent aux paroles de Job avant l'enterrement.

Cependant, il convient, me semble-t-il, de se demander si ce recours à Job ne participe pas de l'esprit général de résignation et de fatalisme qui a élu domicile dans notre société. Cet esprit est entretenu par certaines prédications à succès, issues surtout des Eglises dites de réveil. Ces Eglises tiennent un discours simple, voire simpliste dont l'essentiel peut être ramassé en quelques mots: "Dieu seul est le Tout-Puissant. Quelle que soit ma souffrance actuelle, il me donnera la prospérité (matérielle), du moment que je continue à lui faire confiance et à le prier".[4] Ce qui dérange dans un tel discours, c'est l'absence d'un appel à la responsabilité humaine et à l'engagement concret. Le seul engagement exigé, c'est de prier.

Dans ce contexte, dire *Le Seigneur avait donné, le Seigneur a repris, que son nom soit béni*, peut devenir irresponsable dès lors qu' on n'a pas pris toutes les dispositions pour éviter ou combattre un tel malheur. Si les conditions hygiéniques, le système de santé publique, la

sécurité sociale, la paix étaient garantis, que des morts on aurait épargné dans notre société! Et ce n'est pas de la seule responsabilité du "Seigneur". C'est pourquoi, une lecture plus attentive de Job invite à ne pas tomber dans une religion de résignation. A bien voir, Job n'est pas un croyant résigné, mais bien un croyant révolté. Il y a, dans ce livre, une "indignation prophétique" qu'il faut mettre en exergue auprès de nos populations tentées par une démission facile, "au nom de la foi". En quoi cela se manifeste-t-il ?

- D'abord, Job refuse les explications faciles et simplistes: notamment celle qui évoque le principe classique selon lequel le méchant est puni et le juste récompensé par Dieu. Un tel principe, invoqué par les amis de Job, entend culpabiliser ceux qui souffrent (Jb 4,7–8; 8,4s). Comme l'a montré G. Gutiérrez, dans sa lecture contextuelle du livre de Job,[5] il s'agit là d'une théologie déductive, qui part des principes abstraits, et ne tient pas compte de la situation réelle des gens qui souffrent. Le livre invite plutôt à tenir compte de l'expérience concrète qu'il faut bien analyser, pour ne pas tenir des « paroles en l'air » et être ainsi des "consolateurs inopportuns" (Jb 16,2–3). La position tenue par les amis de Job et dénoncée dans le livre se rapproche bien de la conception africaine du mal, dans l'établissement d'un rapport de cause à effet, entre le malheur et la culpabilité.
- Bien plus, Job ne s'enferme pas dans son propre cas. Pour mieux comprendre sa propre situation, il "ouvre les yeux" sur celle des autres souffrants, il communie à la souffrance des autres et aux injustices qu'ils subissent (cf. Jb 24, 2–14). Cette ouverture à la souffrance d'autrui invite à la compassion et au service de ceux qui souffrent. C'est le pas de l'engagement qu'il faut mettre en valeur dans le dialogue avec les "lecteurs ordinaires".
- Enfin, Job ne capitule pas dans sa recherche : il ne cède ni à la résignation ni à la culpabilisation. Face à la réalité de la souffrance extrême, une acceptation trop rapide signifierait la résignation au mal, à l'irresponsabilité et à l'injustice. Ce serait contraire à la foi dans le Dieu qui libère. L'itinéraire de Job aboutit certes à la reconnaissance de la gratuité de l'amour de Dieu (Jb 42, 1–6), mais

en ayant montré l'importance de l'analyse des situations et de l'engagement aux côtés de ceux qui souffrent.

En dialoguant avec l'approche populaire qui n'a retenu du livre que l'image d'un Job résigné et dépassé par les événements, il me semble que l'exégète et le pasteur africains doivent souligner que la souffrance n'est pas le dernier mot de Dieu, et que le personnage de Job nous enseigne le chemin de l'espérance, au-delà de la situation apparemment sans issue de l'Afrique contemporaine.

1. Se reporter à G.O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.
2. Ainsi cette étude sur la situation catastrophique des malades du sida en Afrique évoque la figure de Job: O. Derenthal, *AIDS in Afrika und die Rede von Gott: Impulse einer Option für Menschen mit HIV*. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002; voir également un article de M. Masenya dans *Missionalia* 29 (2001) n. 2.
3. Voir pour les détails: O. Bimweny Kweshi, *Discours théologique négro-africai: Problème des fondements*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981, p. 579–580. La conception selon laquelle les malheurs sont causés mystérieusement par des malveillants et des sorciers se lit également dans ce proverbe luba: *Mvidi Mukulu umpa bintu, bena panu bacinga byanza* (Dieu m'accorde des biens, ceux d'ici-bas interposent leurs mains).
4. Cette situation est dénoncée récemment, dans un ouvrage percutant, par J.-M. Ela, *Repenser la théologie africaine: Le Dieu qui libère*. Paris: Karthala, 2003, p. 138–139. Cet ouvrage a paru en même temps en traduction allemande: *Gott befreit: Neue Wege afrikanischer Theologie*. Freiburg im B. – Basel – Wien: Herder, 2003.
5. Le titre original de l'étude de G. Guitierrez, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente: Una reflexion sobre el libro de Job*. Lima, 1986. Le livre a été traduit en français: *Le livre de Job: Parler de Dieu à partir de la souffrance de l'innocent*. Paris: Cerf, 1987; et en allemand: *Von Gott sprechen in Unrecht und Leid. Ijob*. München, 1988.

Prof André Kabasele Mukenge
Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa
P.O. Box 1534, Kinshasa-Limete, Rep. Democr. Du Congo, kamuke@yahoo.fr

The Tale of Two Tragedies
The Book of Job and HIV/AIDS in Africa

Peet van Dyk

From across the water he stepped out, among the broken reeds ...
and he laughed silently with white teeth showing — crouching, waiting ...
and the great beast emerged suddenly and quietly from the warm slime.
And finally Koki's heart recognised that he had come to a boundary —
that he was enclosed by something dark and dull and strong.

In his well-known poem, *Raka*, the Afrikaans poet N.P. Van Wyk Louw personified evil as the great beast Raka with his main opponent as Koki. The poem tells the story of the coming of the beast to an African village and how its presence affected the community; how some of the inhabitants wanted to fight the beast, while others were too afraid to do anything. The poem ends in tragedy when the champion Koki is killed by the beast, and Raka enters the village to stay indefinitely.

The Job tragedy

The poem of Raka is timeless in the sense that it expresses the emotional turmoil and the bewilderment of humans when tragedy strikes. It deals with the age-old demand of people to know why a tragedy happened and where it came from. Ultimately this is of course a religious question and nowhere is it posed more forcefully than in the Old Testament book of Job.

In Job evil is personified as the devil — something novel, because the image of the devil is strikingly absent from all earlier texts in the Old Testament. But in the prologue to the book the author presents the emerging metaphor: One of the "son's of God" started to act mischievously, challenging God and humanity.

When tragedy strikes one of the most pious men of the Ancient Near East (i.e. Job), he loses all his children and possessions in one calamity

(Job 1:13–19). Devastated, Job commenced immediately, as is expected from a devout man, with the elaborate mourning rituals of his time. He tore his clothes into shreds, sheared off all his hair and sat on a heap of ash (Job 1:20 and 2:8). In the most exemplary fashion he further declared his acceptance of either good or bad from God's hand (Job 2:10). But this situation would not suffice. Aristotle already said that one of the most basic human traits is the will to know. Humans want to know the good and the bad (Gn 3:6–7) as well as the reasons for it. As Job settled on his heap of ash, covered in sores, his wife and friends started the parade of apparent consolation and comforting. And immediately the twin questions arose: "Why did this tragedy happen?" and "Who was to blame?"

But the answers to these two questions are not clear and Job and his friends engage in a bitter theological dispute. According to his friends either Job's children (Job 8:4) or Job himself is to blame (e.g. Job 22:5–11). Some secret sin of his children or by Job must have caused the tragedy. Job vehemently denies these allegations and even takes God to task, questioning him about the reasons for his suffering.

While this debate is raging on, the contemporary reader is struggling with a dilemma on a different level. Having been made the confidant of the author in the prologue of the book (Job 1–2), the reader knows the true reasons behind Job's ordeal. Job's suffering has nothing to do with the reasons forwarded by his friends. It was caused by the 'spitefulness' of the devil and was "allowed" by God as a test for the faith of Job (Job 1:9–12).

Somehow this answer doesn't satisfy the reader. Somewhat against the grain of the text (cf. Clines, 1995) the solution offered by the epilogue poses the same question afresh, and add many more questions: Why did God 'allow' Job to go through such a heart-rendering ordeal? Even if it was a test for his faith, it caused unnecessary pain and death. Why wasn't Job at the end informed about the 'true reason' for his tragedy? That is, that his faith was being tested. Why withhold such crucial information? Why, after meticulously explaining to the reader (in 40 chapters of poetry) that God doesn't necessarily work according to the theory of retribution, conclude with exactly such a neat scheme of retribution in the epilogue? That is, God awards the good deeds of Job (Job 42:10–17). Isn't this counterproductive to the main argument of the

book? One can therefore say that the Book of Job challenges the contemporary reader on various levels to deal with the most human of all questions: "why?" It further constantly frustrates the reader by preventing him or her from drawing any easy or straightforward conclusions. In that sense it makes a huge contribution towards dealing with our second tragedy: The contemporary calamity of HIV/AIDS — especially in Africa.

The HIV/AIDS tragedy in Africa

The magnitude of the HIV/AIDS crisis cannot easily be overemphasised. Like the Job tragedy the HIV/AIDS calamity in Africa has severe economic effects and involves the death of children. It also has devastating personal consequences to those affected by the loss. But in all other respects it transcends the Job tragedy in its magnitude and effects: It does not only cause the loss of children and possessions, but also directly effects women and men. Not only is it a tragedy on a personal level, but it has become a national and continental disaster, effecting the lives of everybody living in Africa and causing a loss to families, peoples and nations.

When looking at the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, it quickly becomes clear that Africa is not doing very well:

- About 75% (28.5 million) of all the people in the world with HIV live in sub-Saharan Africa.
- The 15 million AIDS orphans in Africa represent 80% of the AIDS orphans in the world.
- Southern Africa (south of the Zambezi river) has one of the most explosive HIV epidemics in the world, with about 2000 new infections per day. South Africa alone has more than 5 million HIV-positive people, which constitutes more than 10% of the total population and between 20 and 30% of the adult population of the country. That is while South Africa has only 0.68% of the world population, 10% of the HIV-positive people in the world live in the country.

These statistics pose the question why Africa has been effected so severely? Researchers have explained the *immediate* reasons for the tragedy in the following ways:

Social reasons:
Social structures in Africa are partly responsible for the high incidence of HIV/AIDS. Like all plagues, HIV/AIDS emerged out of very distinct social and economic environments that provide the fertile grounds for the spread of the infection.

It is especially where social disorder and social chaos are prevalent, for example, an unstable migrant labour force, uncontrolled and rapid urbanisation, prostitution, child labour, homelessness, poverty, low education levels and social and cultural transition, that infections such as HIV are the most prevalent. Thus HIV/AIDS is an epidemic effecting mostly society's in transition, which is true of almost all sub-Saharan African states.

In Southern Africa social and family life were severely disrupted by the system of migrant workers during the time of apartheid. Going hand in hand with high mobility and good transportation HIV-infection was able to spread like wild fire. Further, the generally low status of women, who often have little choice in sexual matters, low contraceptive prevalence (due to political or cultural reasons), famine, wars, crime, corruption and the disintegration of traditional social and sexual morality have contributed to the tragedy.

Other social and cultural reasons to explain the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa can be listed as follows; for more detail on anyone of the above issues, please consult the book by Van Dyk (2001).

- The importance of having many children. In traditional African society it is believed that by having many children extends one's life as an ancestor.
- Cleansing rituals, whereby a widow has to have sexual intercourse with a close relative of her deceased husband to cleanse her of her husband's spirit.
- The custom of inheriting the wife of a deceased brother (who might have died of AIDS) or the impregnation of an impotent or sterile brother's wife.

- Female genital mutilation (or female circumcision) and the common practice of 'dry sex' which may cause injuries to the vagina and make women more vulnerable to HIV infection.
- Preparation and cleansing of bodies for burial. In Sudan, for example, undigested food and excreta are removed from corpses by hand, which may facilitate the spreading of Ebola and HIV/AIDS.
- Male circumcision, tribal markings or incisions (made for healing purposes) with non-sterile instruments.
- The myth of virgin cleansing, which sometimes encourage HIV-infected males to rape virgins and children in the desperate hope that they will be cured by the practice.
- The avoidance of personal responsibility by blaming HIV on witchcraft.

Biological reasons:

Biological factors also play some role in the fact that HIV/AIDS has become such a catastrophe in Africa and South Africa. The high incidence of other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and the high prevalence of HIV 1, Subtype C (one of the most virulent of HI viruses) have made the spreading of the HI-virus more effective and much quicker.

The presence of Tuberculosis and Malaria also had a detrimental effect. On the one hand, the high Tuberculosis and Malaria infections amongst the population have made people more vulnerable to HIV infection. On the other hand co-infection with Malaria and TB (which is true of more than 50% of HIV-positive people in Africa) also had a negative effect on the already impaired immune system of HIV-positive people.

Conclusions

From the above summary is a clear that Africa is in serious trouble. The social and biological reasons given for the HIV/AIDS tragedy, offer a secularised and scientific explanation for the pandemic. However, to the religious person these explanations are important but not sufficient in themselves. Finally the question, 'why God allowed it?' must and will be posed. If the church and Christians have learnt anything from the Book of

Job, an answer to this question would seriously try to avoid the following problems:

- Any simple answer, which directly link specific sins (for example promiscuity or a specific lifestyle) with HIV/AIDS.
- The idea that suffering or illness is a punishment for sin.
- The consolation that suffering is always intended as a test for a person's faith and will in the end strengthen the person's faith.
- That all suffering will somehow and someday be to the advantage of the faithful, even if the exact reasons for the suffering are not clear at this time.

All the above answers imply to some extent that humans can fully comprehend God and his reasons for allowing things to happen on earth. Any such idea is strongly resisted by the Book of Job. Does this imply that Christians can offer no answer to suffering or to a tragedy such as HIV/AIDS?

According to my understanding of the Book of Job it does give the following complex answer:

- Suffering has always been part of life.
- The reasons for a specific tragedy are not always clear and humans should resist the temptation to 'play God' in trying to provide definite explanations for each tragedy.
- Each person has to personally search for meaning in their life (i.e. 'meet God face to face', Job 42:5). This search should be conducted in humble faith and within the context of God's love — which is beyond any doubt.
- Humans should accept that God and his works will ultimately remain a mystery to us and therefore a matter of faith.

In conclusion I would like to quote a section from the *The plague* by Albert Camus:

> *This whole thing is not about heroism. It is about decency. It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plaque is with decency.*

Bibliography

Camus, A., *The Plague.* London: Hamilton, 1957.

Clines, D. J. A., *Interested parties: The ideology of writers and readers of the Hebrew Bible.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Van Dyk, A.C., *HIV/AIDS Care and Counselling.* 2nd Ed. Cape Town: Pearson Education: 2001.

Van Wyk Louw, N.P., *Raka.* Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel, 1941.

Prof Peet van Dyk
Dept of Old Testament, University of South Africa
P.O.Box 392, Pretoria 0001, South Africa; vdykpj@unisa.ac.za

The Maasai and the Old Testament
Marking the Centennial of M. Merker's Monograph on the Maasai

Knut Holter

One hundred years have passed since the publication of Moritz Merker's famous monograph on the Maasai, in Berlin, 1904.[1] Merker's book is important because it offers an early interpretation of the Maasai, but it is also important – and that is why it is given some attention here – because the interpretive grid the Maasai are read through is that of (early 20th century German interpretation of) the Old Testament.

Merker and his context

Moritz Merker was born in 1867 as the son of an army officer, and he chose the same career for himself, joining the army at the age of 18, subsequently attendig various army academies. In 1895, at the age of 28,

he was sent to German East Africa, given a command in the Kilimanjaro area, located to Moshi, and he stayed in East Africa most of time until his early death in 1908. The German colonization of East Africa was at its heights these years, symbolically expressed by Merker's compatriot Hans Meyer's conquest of the summit of Kilimanjaro in 1889.

In East Africa Merker met the Maasai. And behind the expected characterizing of the Maasai as "wild" and "uncivilized", one easily sees that the colonial officer was fascinated by this ancient and proud people, and he used much of his time and energy to study Maasai culture, religion and social structures, in relation to the Old Testament. Merker's comparative approach, using the Old Testament to interpret the Maasai, comes as no surprise. The science of comparative religion was still very young, and non-scholars of religion, often with a profound Christian background, saw ancient Israelite religion as the obvious comparative material to the religious phenomena they encountered in Africa. Accordingly, throughout the 19th century a number of European adventurers, colonizers and missionaries interpreted various examples of African religion through the lenses of (their understanding of) the Old Testament.[2]

Merker's presentation of the material

Merker's main message is that the social structures, culture and religion amongst the Maasai are very parallel to the counterparts in Old Testament Israel, and that the parallels reflect the common origin of the Maasai and the ancient Israelites.

After an introductory first part (pp. 5–15), the second (pp. 16–228) and third (pp. 229–269) parts survey various social structures and institutions, such as tribe, family, war, smith-guilds, but also diseases, death, religion, marriage, etc. Coming from Old Testament studies, one is reminded of Roland de Vaux' classic about the social and religious institutions of ancient Israel.[3] And the parallels between the Maasai tradition and ancient Israel are indeed legio, according to Merker.

The fourth part (pp. 270–339), discussing the primeval narratives of the Maasai and Israel, is then the crucial point for Merker in his claim of a close relationship between the two. Here, the parallels are so close, it is

argued, that any other explanation than an historical interaction between the two is out of the question. And Merker eagerly argues that the Maasai and the ancient Israelites once constituted one single people. The creation narratives are very close, there are parallel paradise narratives, the two first human beings are portrayed in similar ways, and then follow traditions about the serpent, the first smith, the flood, etc.

Some critical remarks

From a methodological point of view, Merker's book is far ahead many of its contemporaries. Whereas most writers prior to Merker – and indeed many scholars after Merker, even up till today – tend to focus on a limited number of examples of supposed parallels between ancient Israel and some African tradition, Merker has a wide approach, trying to establish not only certain accidental parallels but indeed a common worldview. Merker's conclusions thereby get an accumulative strength; he can acknowledge variations or lack of parallels, and still make his point. Nevertheless, today we will have to consider Merker's many parallels as reflecting a very superficial understanding of culture and religion; he is obviously closer to James G. Frazer's notorious *Golden Bough* than to what we today would consider proper phenomenological research.[4]

The most obvious difficulty with Merker's book is the historical explanation he gives to the supposed parallels between the Maasai and ancient Israel. The idea that the Maasai – or any other ethnic group in Africa – originally came from Israel or somehow is related to the ancient Israelites, may fit well into historiographical concepts of the colonial period, but they have little to do with historical facts.

Seen from a centennial perspective, Merker's study of the relationship between the Maasai and the Old Testament is an important research historical contribution as far as African Old Testament studies is concerned. It never got the same attention as for example J.J. Williams' parallel study of the Ashanti and the Old Testament (1930),[5] but that is hardly because Williams' book is better; rather, it probably reflects the facts that Merker's book is written in German, and that comparative approaches to Old Testament studies never got the same position in East

Africa as they have traditionally had in West Africa.[6] So, perhaps the time has now come to make a new study of the Maasai and the Old Testament; a study where Merker would be an interesting discussion partner, and where the interpreter probably ought to be a Maasai!

Much more could obviously have been said about Moritz Merker and his monograph on the Maasai. He was part of the German colonization of Eastern Africa, and the book certainly reflects that context. In spite of this, Merker has left us a valuable legacy, also as far as African Old Testament studies is concerned, as his book provides us with some interesting material and raises certain important methodological questions.

Notes

1. Moritz Merker, *Die Masai: Ethnographische Monographie eines ostafrikanischen Semitenvolkes*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1904. The following references follow the second, revised version, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1910.
2. For a survey, cf. Magdel LeRoux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?* Pretoria: University of South Africa (2003) 18–24.
3. Cf. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961.
4. Cf. James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. First published 1890, mostly quoted from the abbreviated version from 1922, reprinted: London: Macmillan, 1967.
5. Cf. J.J. Williams, *Hebrewisms of West Africa: From Nile to Niger with the Jews*. London 1930; reprinted New York 1967. For examples of the role of this book in later African Old Testament studies, cf. K.A. Dickson, "'Hebrewisms of West Africa'", *Legon Journal of Humanities* 1 (1974) 23–34, and D.N. Wambutda, "Hebrewisms of West Africa", *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 2 (1987) 33–41.
6. For a survey of comparative studies, cf. Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967–2000*. New York: Peter Lang (2002) 88–100.

Prof Knut Holter
School of Mission and Theology
Misjonsveien 34, N-4024 Stavanger, Norway; knut.holter@mhs.no

Upcoming conferences

Ibadan (Nigeria): The 17th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS) convenes at Lagos State University, Lagos, from July 13 to 16, 2004. The theme of the conference is "Decolonizing African Biblical Studies", and there will be papers from historical and methodological perspectives, exemplified through a number of topics and texts. For further information, please contact NABIS at nabis_ng@yahoo, or visit the NABIS website, http://www.nabis.8m.com.

Leiden (The Netherlands): The 18th Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament (IOSOT) will take place at Leiden University, Leiden, August 1–6, 2004, under the presidency of Prof Arie van der Kooij; cf. the website of the congress: http://www.leidenuniv.nl/gg/iosot2004/. For further contact: Dr K.D. Jenner, Faculty of Theology, Leiden University, P.O. Box 9515, 2300 RA, Leiden, The Netherlands; e-mail: iosot2004@let.leidenuniv.nl. Amongst a large number of main papers and short papers, one should especially notice a seminar on World Christianity and the Study of the Old Testament, with contributions from Yuet Shun Ho (Hong Kong), André Kabasele Mukenge (Kinshasa), J. Severino Croatto (Buenos Aires), and John Barton (Oxford). In conjunction with the IOSOT congress, the following congresses will be held: International Organization for Targumic Studies (IOTS): July 29–30, International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies (IOSCS): July 30–31, International Organization for Masoretic Studies (IOMS): August 2.

Groningen (The Netherlands): The 2004 International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) will take place in Groningen, The Netherlands, July 25–28, 2004, cf. the website of the meeting: http://www.sbl-site.org/Congresses/. For further information: Society of Biblical Literature, 825 Houston Mill Road, Ste. 350, Atlanta, GA 30329, USA; e-mail: sblexec@sbl-site.org.

San Antonio (Texas, USA): The 2004 Annual Meeting of the Society of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) will take place in San Antonio, November 20–23. For further information: Society of Biblical Literature, 825 Houston Mill Road, Ste. 350, Atlanta, GA 30329, USA; e-mail: sblexec@sbl-site.org or you can visit the SBL website: http://www.sbl-site.org.

Book reviews

Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academics. 297 pp. ISBN: 0-8010-2686-5. US$ 26.99.

Edwin Yamauchi, professor of history at Miami University of Ohio in the United States, is well known for his numerous books and articles in the field of biblical archaeology, especially in the area of Old Testament studies. In his latest book, *Africa and the Bible,* Yamauchi applies his expertise to the history and archeology of both Testaments as they relate to the presence of Africa and Africans in the biblical texts. The eight chapters and an Appendix are basically self-contained units, distinct essays on particular topics. The first four chapters are new; the others have appeared in journals and have been revised slightly for this book. This does not mean that the book does not have a sense of unity about it. Clearly there are some themes that run throughout this book which enable the separate chapters to work together in a coherent way.

The main purpose of the book appears to be to examine biblical texts about Africa in such a way as to provide the Bible reader with a full description of the cultural, geographical, and historical background of the 'Africa' of each particular text. So, for example, in order to understand Simon of Cyrene and others in the New Testament who are said to be from Cyrene, Yamauchi provides a thorough description of ancient Libya, its peoples, its history, an account of archeological work carried out there and so on. In this case, his conclusion is that it is probable that Simon of Cyrene, although an 'African' in the sense that his home was a particular part of northern Africa, was probably not black: "in the case of Cyrene, the city was a Greek colony; Simon was no doubt a member of the Jewish community there." (186). This conclusion may bother some African interpreters because it appears to lessen the African presence in the Bible. And in fact it is true that Yamauchi is quite critical of a kind of 'Afrocentric' exegesis which would assume that all of the Africans in the Bible were necessarily black.

On the other hand, Yamauchi is also aware of the terrible legacy of racist and Eurocentric interpretation that would read Africans out of the text. In a lengthy chapter on "Moses' Cushite wife", Yamauchi provides a fascinating and detailed history of Cush and its relations with Egypt during the OT period. All of this evidence points to his conclusion that "In light of the ample Egyptian evidence of the presence of many Nubians in Egypt from as early as the Old Kingdom and of intermarriage between Egyptians and Nubians, we should not doubt the possibility of Moses' marriage to a Cushite or Nubian woman." (75). The evidence of archaeology, in other words, contradicts those scholars who would de-Africanize the Cushite wife of Moses. The author's examination of a number of other Africans: Tirhakah, the Nubian Pharaoh of Egypt (mentioned in 2 Kings 19:9 and Is 37:9), Cushi, the father of Zephaniah

(Zeph 1:1), Jehudi (Jer 36:13–14), Ebed-Melech (Jer 38), and 'Ethiopian' (or actually 'Sudanese') eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) are also helpful.

Yamauchi also deals with two important sets of texts often associated with Africa, but which are probably not about Africa at all. The first is the so-called 'curse of Ham.' In this case Yamauchi is clear: the curse on Canaan in Genesis 9:25 has nothing to do with Africa and been used against Africans as a way of justifying slavery and oppression. Most important here is Yamauchi's investigation of the history of the (mis)interpretation of this text. The story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba has also been seen by some (especially in Ethiopia) as a story related to Africa. Yamauchi's conclusion is that Sheba is probably southern Arabia, rather than Ethiopia, but once again, he has included a worthwhile study of the ways in which the story of the Queen of Sheba has been read and interpreted in Ethiopian tradition.

Yamauchi main purpose in writing this book, it appears to this reader at any rate, is to illustrate the importance of history and archaeology in reading the biblical text. In this quest, he has attempted to walk a middle road. He rejects Eurocentric interpretation which either reads Africans out of the text entirely or reads the text with a racist intent. He also rejects Afrocentric readings which assume that all Africans were black Africans or that everything of value has its origin in Africa. Yamauchi's contribution will not put an end to the discussion. It is, however, a valuable and, for the most part, balanced contribution which cannot be ignored by anyone who wants to take the history of the biblical text seriously.

It should be noted that the full bibliography, plentiful illustrations and three indices are especially helpful additions to this significant work.

Grant LeMarquand
Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry
311 Eleventh Street, Ambridge, PA, 15003, USA; grantlemarquand@tesm.edu

Gareth Jones (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing (Blackwell Companions to Religion). xx + 586 pp. ISBN: 0-631-20685-X. US$ 143.95.

Due to the rapidly increasing specialization of theology, most of us find it more and more difficult to be generally informed and updated. In response to this, we currently experience a flood of new handbooks trying to keep us informed and updated. The present specimen of the genre, edited by Gareth Jones of Christ Church University College in Canterbury (UK), is a good one, partly because it has chosen a number of well established researchers to write about their particular areas, but partly also because it has limited the number of entries to 32, which, in a book of nearly six hundred pages, means that each entry gets some real attention.

The book is divided in five major parts. (i) Entries offering a general survey of theology and the practice of faith, theology and biblical studies, etc. (ii) Entries to periods of the history of the church. (iii) Entries to some particular themes, such as trinity, incarnation, redemption, and church and sacraments. (iv) Entries to certain key figures, such as Schleiermacher, Barth and Bonhoeffer. And (v) entries to certain contemporary issues, such as Christianity and other religions, economics and social justice, feminism, etc.

The major problem with this book is not what it includes, but what it excludes. Even in a typical British volume, where each entry tries to relate its topic to the British context, it is surprising to find that non-Western church life, theology and biblical studies are more or less totally absent. Obviously, a few references to Latin-American liberation theology pop up here and there, but the fact that sub-Saharan Africa is now *the* Christian continent seems to be unknown to the editor and authors, in spite of their wish to present a survey of *modern* theology. Can the book, on this background, be recommended for African institutions? Well, in the same way as Western theological students eventually will have to familiarize themselves with African theology and church life, African students, too, need to familiarize themselves with Western theology and church life. And, as such, the present book is a good introduction. But the price will probably prevent most of us from buying it.

Knut Holter

Gabriel Oyedele Abe, *Yahwism Tradition vis-a-vis African Culture: The Nigerian Milieu*. Akungba-Akoko: Adekunle Ajasin University, 2004 (Inaugural Lecture Series; 1). iv + 54 pp.

Dr Gabriel O. Abe, Professor of Religious Studies and Head, Department of Religion and African Culture, Adekunle Ajasin University, Ondo State, Nigeria, is one of the doyens of Nigerian Old Testament studies, and the present booklet gives the text of his inaugural lecture at Adekunle Ajasin University, delivered on Dec 10, 2003. The main point of the booklet is that religious studies – and not least Old Testament studies – is of vital importance in the university and for the society. Dr Abe makes comparisons between religion, culture and society in Old Testament Israel and traditional Africa, arguing that the people of Nigeria ought to learn from the experiences of the people of ancient Israel. He surveys structures for education as well as social institutions, but he especially challenges the problem of poverty and corruption.

Knut Holter

BOTSA is edited and published by Prof Knut Holter.
All editorial and business correspondence should be addressed to:

- Prof Knut Holter, School of Mission and Theology, Misjonsvegen 34, N-4024 Stavanger, NORWAY, tel.: (+47) 5151 6227, fax: (+47) 5151 6225, e-mail: knut.holter@mhs.no

As the very idea of *BOTSA* is to be a forum for exchange of ideas and information, the editor constantly needs response from the readers. Other scholars working with the Old Testament within the context of Africa are interested in your ideas and meanings, your research and book projects, your meetings and conferences.

BOTSA is part of the
«Africa and Old Testament Program»
School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, Norway
Website: http://www.mhs.no/w/forskning/ot_africa/index.htm

Photo: Ivar Barane

MHS

1843

MISJONSHØGSKOLEN

School of Mission and Theology