

The Lemba, the ‘People of the Book’ in Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

The remembered past is the material with which biblical Israel constructed its identity as a people, a religion, and a culture. It is a mixture of history, collective memory, folklore, and literary brilliance. In Israel’s formative years, these memories circulated orally in the context of family and tribe. Over time they came to be crystallized in various written texts. This is also true of the Lemba, the so-called ‘People of the Book’ of Southern Africa. The religion and culture of ancient Israel and that of the Lemba (and other African cultures) are expressed orally and by texts, and in no small part also created by them, as they formulate new or altered conceptions of the sacred past. For most of their history unwritten laws and practices played a major role in the life of both these oral cultures. The fact that there are numerous points of convergence between most cultures in Africa and the Old Testament suggests that the reading or reception of the Old Testament there would differ from that on other continents or in other countries. African cultures have a contribution to make as far as the interpretation of the Old Testament is concerned.

A INTRODUCTION

According to an old tradition preserved in the Palestinian Targums, the Hebrew Bible is ‘the Book of Memories’. The sacred past recalled in the Bible serves as a model and wellspring for the present. The remembered past, writes Ronald Hendel (2004), is the material with which biblical Israel constructed its identity as a people, a religion, and a culture. It is a mixture of history, collective memory, folklore, and literary brilliance, and is often coloured by political and religious interests. In Israel’s formative years, these memories circulated orally in the context of family and tribe. Over time they came to be crystallized in various written texts. This is also true of the Lemba, the so-called, ‘Black Jews’ of Southern Africa. The religion and culture of ancient Israel and that of the Lemba are expressed orally and by texts, and in no small part are also created by them, as they formulate new or altered conceptions of the sacred past.

The Lemba are concentrated mainly in the southern parts of Zimbabwe, the former Venda (Limpopo Province, RSA) and Sekhukhuneland (RSA). I compare the Lemba with early Israel (1250-1000 BC) because the former regard themselves as ‘children of Abraham’ (Israelites), who at one stage or another left Israel and came to Africa as traders and their communities function according to a segmented clan system, and because this period is interesting for the study of oral cultures. Most Lemba also belong to Christian churches in Southern Africa.

The ‘People of the Book’ is a term in Islam for peoples who, according to the Qur’an, have received divine scriptures, referring to the Torah (*Tawrat*) and the New Testament (*Injeel*). Therefore, in more than one sense the Lemba became the ‘People of the Book’ (Old and New Testaments). They perceive historical events as moments in which they had seen the hand of God, and seem to have perceived their history in such a radical fashion that they have transformed their whole manner of life in accordance with it. For a major part of their history unwritten laws and practices played a major role in the life of both these oral cultures (the Lemba and early Israel).

A comparative study between these two communities (the Lemba and what is known of early Israel) illuminates one’s understanding of some of the practices and rituals of both groups, and it stimulates the asking of new questions about early Israel and Judaism. The aim is to investigate the functioning of practices and perspectives in a pre-industrial society (in the relation of ‘facts’ and ‘history’) – something highly fashionable in ‘New Archaeology’, ‘History of Religion’ and Old and New Testament Studies – and in doing so to find a contemporary counterpart to an understanding of the Old Testament and early Israel (cf. Le Roux 2003). It is comparison in aid of cross-cultural interpretation, for as is now forcefully stated in more recent studies in religion, it is through comparison that the strange and exotic become intelligible and describable, whether the comparison entails juxtaposition of diverse phenomena or the juxtaposition of theoretical models on to phenomena (cf. the circle of religious scholars surrounding Smith 1982 and Mack 2001; Van den Heever 2002). The value of this kind of procedure – to show if not to prove the ‘biblicalness’ of African culture – lies exactly in its undermining of the conventional pictures of biblical history and biblical religion. Once comparative models are introduced we start to discover the complexity and rhetoricity of the mythmaking processes. Apart from the work of the circle of scholars I referred to above, in the field of Old Testament Studies or studies of religion of ancient Israel, one can also point to the groundbreaking works of Albertz (1994), Gottwald (1980), Eilberg-

Schwartz (1990), and Niditch (1993, 1996 and 1997).¹

It is argued that African cultures have a contribution to make as far as the interpretation of the Old Testament (and the New Testament) is concerned. The numerous points of convergence between most cultures in Africa and the Old Testament suggest that the reading or reception of the Old Testament here might differ from that on other continents or in other countries.

B AFRICA INTERPRETS THE OLD TESTAMENT

1 Legal and ethical codes

A Lemba saying proclaims: 'Once we had a drum, because we are a holy people ...', but they also remark: 'Once we had a priest [...] and a book'. According to this tradition the book concerned was made of skin, but it was destroyed by the Arabs. The Lemba state that the book of the Arabs was known as the 'book of Allah', but that the book of the Lemba was the 'book of the Mwenye' (Parfitt 1992:231). Daneel (1996) explains that 'mwenye' is perhaps derived from a Shona word which means 'light', thus 'book of the light', therefore also 'people of the light' (cf. Le Roux 2003:191-200; De Vaal 1958:54; Mathivha 1992).

Although the Lemba possess no written laws or regulations available in a 'holy' book, an oral tradition holds that they have had a special book at some stage in their history. There is a strong memory that it was a kind of legal book and that the coming of the missionaries perhaps refreshed their memories of this book.² They particularly experienced a sense of *déjà vu* when they came into contact with the so-called 'Priestly Code', or perhaps the missionaries made them aware of how their own customs and laws resembled those of the Old Testament. It appears that some of the Lemba's legal and ethical codes closely resemble those in Exodus, Deuteronomy and especially those in Leviticus, with many traces from the life-world of the Old Testament. Comparative laws which do concur with some of those of the Lemba occur in later sections of Deuteronomy. Observers from previous centuries similarly referred to these resemblances; there are at least traces of a possible connection in the past. The Lemba obviously also abide by codes which are not in accord with those in early Israel (cf. Le Roux 2003:200-207).

¹ By referring to Ancient Israel I am aware of the fact that it is utterly impossible to claim that we have sufficient evidence of early Israel. The same is of course true of anything that happened in the past.

² Near 'Rangoon', 'Burma' and the surrounding area, missionaries have come across many tribes with a similar kind of tradition regarding a so-called 'lost book'. They believe that 'a white brother' will some day bring them their lost book and thereby set them free from all who oppress them (Richardson 1984:74).

Some respondents (informants) contended that they strictly adhered to the laws in Leviticus 11. Hence their tremendous emphasis on the laws of cleanness; in virtually every instance of self-identification these categories are mentioned. However, their day-to-day existence shows that not all of them live according to Leviticus 11. The same could probably have been said of ancient Israel. Written laws and codes represented the ideal as it was presented to the nation, but this does not imply full-scale adherence to the law. It appears that laws or traditions, once written down, become exposed to the world-view of, and editing by, a redactor or writer, and they fossilized into set codes. These codes do not necessarily represent the real life-world of a community, but are often those of the editor or the writer.

2 Segmented societies

Within the segmented Israelite communities one finds mentions of free associations between various clans, and it appears that the idea of the Israelites acting together as twelve tribes (as mentioned in the Bible; first ten and later twelve), represents a retrojection from a later situation onto an earlier one (cf. Le Roux 1995; 2003:110-114).

A living source of such a segmented society can be found in the Lemba (and other African tribes). The notion that they consisted of, and functioned, as twelve clans, even now plays a great role in their oral traditions and in the stories which are transmitted during important ceremonies and rituals. If one investigates their present situation and distribution, it is clear that there is no mention of a central government and that one clan's stories and experiences are assimilated into those of other clans. When a specific event or skill is communicated, reference is still made to the specific clan which was originally involved with that which is being transmitted. Such a story then becomes a common possession, because in the end the clans are all known as 'Lemba'. It is clear from this division that the Lemba comprised twelve different clans (first ten and later twelve) and that every clan possessed its own historical and genealogical background. The traditions of each clan play a role in their identity formation yet they are all known as the Lemba.

The segmented societies of Africa could be used as a model in an endeavour to understand pre-monarchic Israel. These societies are mainly leaderless, with leaders only arising during critical situations. The Lemba model of segmentation explains, for example, Judges 5 and 12, where the tribes are both united and yet in opposition to each other.

3 Conceptions of God and the ancestors

Noteworthy are the commonalities between the Lemba clans' and the Israelite clans' conception of God and to a certain extent of the role the ancestors play

(cf. Le Roux 2003:129-133, 138-140). The possibility exists that the ancestors in ancient Israel were seen by some as gods, who were then worshipped, and not only as mediums as some scholars have thought to be the case.

The connection which Mathivha (1994) discerns between the Lembas' and the Israelite clans' conception of God and the role which the ancestors play is noteworthy. For Mathivha there is no difference. He argues that the ancestors (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) only acted as mediators between God and the Israelites and were not worshipped themselves (exactly as in the Lemba communities). However, when one takes note of Van der Toorn's (1996:225 and others') research, then it appears as if Mathivha possibly underestimated the role of the cult of the ancestors in early Israel. The ancestors were most probably seen (unofficially) as gods; they were worshipped and were not only mediators, as Mathivha surmises. The particulars of this cult, against which the prophets polemicized vehemently, were probably elided by later editors. Among the Lemba communities themselves, reference is often made to the ancestors as 'gods' and they are worshipped as such (Le Roux 2003:129-133). In the field one sometimes gains the impression that some of the Lemba respondents want to ameliorate this matter, as it seems some of the editors of the Old Testament books also tried to do.

With most Lemba (and other groups in Africa) the cult of the ancestors forms part of everyday life, with faith in a 'common ancestry' being expressed. In fact, the ancestor cult plays an extraordinary part in almost every aspect of the social, as well as the religious, life of the Lemba. For example, when presenting food as a sacrifice, the Lemba dedicate the food to their immediate ancestors, who in the past had been asked to give it to their own immediate ancestors, and so on up the line, until the gift reached the first ancestor (in some cases this person is seen as Jesus Christ), who was closest to God. The possibility exists that a similar cult existed in practice in early Israel, although it was not part of the official religion (cf. Van der Toorn 1996:206-266; Schmidt 1994:267-275).

Furthermore, the repetition of the names of the ancestors at important ceremonies of the Lemba reminds one rather strongly of the creed of Israelite clans (cf. Deut 26:5b-9), which was cited at important events and in which there was specific reference to the mighty deeds of Yahweh, but also to the role of the ancestors in history. In fact, the Israelites utilized genealogies to identify their deity and to uncover relationships between people with different names and from different 'tribes' (clans). These long lists of genealogies served an important unifying function in the religious culture of early Israel and later, because they lay bare kinship ties hidden under layers of many generations. In more than one respect it emerges that in both communities, the basic needs to belong to a group and to enjoy protection, and the importance of an heir, underlie all their social laws.

Currently, many theologians in Africa (and elsewhere) are convinced that the Africans had already worshipped the 'living God' long before they came into contact with the gospel (cf. Adamo 1998; Mafico 1979). The beliefs of the Lemba are even more remarkable, since they consider themselves as 'children of Abraham' and they worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob long before they heard (again) about that same God from the Christians' Bible.

Some would say it is unacceptable to speak of Modimo or Mwari and the God of the Bible as if they are one and the same God. We find, however, a similar kind of situation in the names given to God in the Old Testament. Some of those were the names of the Canaanite gods El and Baal, and there are even references, to a possible consort for Yahweh, in much later artefacts (cf. Kuntillet Ajrud, in the eighth century). The mingling of names for God thus occurs within both the communities: El with Yahweh and, for example, Modimo or Mwari with Jehovah. As with Baal and Yahweh in early Israel, the characteristics of Mwari were eventually transposed onto the God of the Bible and vice versa. That most Lemba belong to Christian churches may have had the effect that the concept of Jesus Christ could eventually have forced out other ideas about God or godhead.

When one reads the Old Testament, one comes across clear and specific commandments as to how God wants human beings to know him and worship him. The prophets and judges strongly polemicized against any mixing of the cults and abandoned any form of idolatry. Archaeological illumination of the pervasiveness of the Canaanite fertility cults in Israel is not revolutionary, it merely confirms what the Bible suggests – but downplays. Over against this, the tolerance of both groups (the Lemba and early Israel) to 'other gods' in the land is very striking. Intolerance and exclusivity toward other *persons* or 'heathen' is, however, noteworthy amongst both groups.

4 Oral cultures

It is especially the historiography of early Israel that constitutes a problematic field in Old Testament Studies. Only a few written sources are known, even over a long stretch of time, and therefore researchers are dependent on hidden oral traditions. Research into this era usually needs to be supplemented by studies from other disciplines, such as archaeology, anthropology, sociology and even comparative studies, involving peoples with a similar social structure, for example those groups from Africa who exhibit a tribal organization, oral traditions and a village culture.

Because of the lack of accurate historical written resources, it is essential to consider the relationship and role of oral traditions vis-à-vis written sources. It is for this reason that the functions of oral traditions have been investigated (Le Roux 2003). Virtually everything appears to have been preceded by oral

traditions, which were eventually written down (regarding both the Lemba and early Israel). This has decisive implications for the study of written material. Oral traditions were originally performed for a specific audience. Therefore, exegetes of the Old Testament need to read the books of the Old Testament differently from simply regarding them as mere literature, since these were probably never meant to be 'fixed', but rather intended to be 'fluid' (cf. Deist 1994:160; Van Dyk 1994:95).

That the Israelite clans' stories were written down so many years after the events portrayed does have further implications for historiography. This could mean that much of the experience concerning certain events was lost. It should also be taken into account that the author could have imprinted his or her own perspective and interpretation onto certain stories. This is also true of the Lemba's ancient stories and of the experiences attached to these stories.

In other words, when a study examining the religion or social life of early Israel is attempted, one is largely dependent on the ancient, edited and 'set writings' of the Hebrew text rather than the orally based culture, as well as on archaeological discoveries that may cast light on the specific aspects that can be studied. Unfortunately, one can no longer go back to the ancient Israelite communities in order to eliminate certain ambiguities, or to verify certain aspects. However, we can possibly learn something from the living community of the Lemba.

An advantage of the situation, therefore, is that one is not only dependent on the fixed text of the Lemba, but can also verify the data (from the written sources as well as the possible archaeological sources) with the Lemba themselves. My field research provided me with the opportunity to hear the Lemba's stories and customs, and to observe these, as they experience them. This process could also contribute to the understanding of the role or functions of oral traditions in the process of historiography. The fact is, oral traditions continued to exist in spite of the written form. Although these processes did exercise an influence on each other, ultimately historiography cannot be separated from oral traditions or folklore.

It can further be inferred that in the case of the writing of Lemba oral traditions, not everything was written down; similarly many of the oral traditions of the Israelites could also have been lost over a period of 500 years or more. Strong voices in the Old Testament may sometimes be those of a minority in the midst of a much wider culture. In this way what we read in the Old Testament may only constitute trickles of the wider stream of the oral cultures there.

Another very important implication of this research is the possibility that an oral tradition can survive over many generations in a group (consisting of

many clans). An holistic approach to the history of the Lemba, for instance, shows that the oral traditions reflect important points of congruence with information from other sources, information which may be as old as 3 000 years (Thomas et al 2000). This has serious implications for the late dating of the Old Testament by some scholars who hold the notion that an oral tradition cannot survive much more than a hundred years. Scheffler (1998:523) specifically refers to 'the recent trend among certain Old Testament scholars to assign a post-exilic dating to all the literature or oral traditions that would still be contained in literature'. The consequences are, therefore, that there is no 'pre-exilic ancient Israel because it is only a product of the imagination, it is worthless for historiography and not even containing a historical kernel'. Being an Old Testament scholar in Africa, Scheffler contends that the tendency to assign a late date to the Old Testament 'late' is 'a typical modern, western phenomenon.' He also draws attention to the existence of folklore among Africans and 'the basic vocality of culture' (1998:525) and supposes that it is perhaps owing to the 'absence of vocality in western culture that ancient oral traditions mentioned in the Old Testament are denied or not reckoned with' (1998:526). Oral cultures and the transmission of oral traditions from one generation to another (over many generations) are not strange in Africa.

C CONCLUSION

Africa possesses customs and traditions that need to be respected. Some of these, which are closely linked to those in the Old Testament, should not be ignored in the teaching of this subject.

The question of the relationship between gospel and culture has become topical again during recent decades in theological and above all in missiological discussion, not least as a result of the contributions of Asian, African and Latin American theologians. In 1994 Wessels contended that in the last 'twenty' years Christian theologians from these continents had made important contributions to the practice of theology, above all by investigating and beginning from their own political and cultural/religious contexts (1994:14). It is now possible to speak of African, Asian and Latin American 'contextual theology'.

European theologians have sometimes reacted negatively to this contextualization, because they have thought that this approach sacrifices the distinctive character of the Christian message to what, for example, is distinctive in Asian or African culture. This theology might be contextualized African or Asian theology, but can it still be called Christian (or then Biblical)? Wessels (1994:14) argues that European theologians usually almost take for granted that they represent and defend a universal Christian theology which puts them in a position to judge others and measure the latter by their own criteria. He says that African, Asian and Latin American theologians often do

not pass the test of what is thought to be ‘universal’ theology, the theology practiced by Westerners, and are often dismissed by European theologians as ‘syncretistic’. They are felt to make too many concessions to their own cultural context. Wessels (1994:15) is convinced that one of the reasons why European theologians find it so difficult to assess African, Asian and Latin American contributions to theology is that the former are unaware of the question of their own contextualization, above all in the sense of their inculturation into European culture.

The inference that there are numerous points of convergence between most cultures in Africa and the Old Testament suggests that the reading or reception of the Old Testament in Africa would differ from that on other continents or in other countries. This implies, among other consequences, that the teaching of a subject such as Old Testament in Denmark or France would be totally different from that in Africa. Many other comparative studies between the Old Testament and Africa have already been carried out, but in the quest for a better understanding of the Old Testament in Africa, the research on the Lemba, the People of the Book, has again indicated that there is yet another group whose customs and rituals concur to a great extent with those of ancient Israel (cf. Le Roux 1999:254ff).

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