Reading Judges 12:2 in dialogue with Maimela

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Abstract

The affirmation that human beings are created in the image of God was once regarded as the inspiration for the struggle against racial oppression, social class exploitation and gender domination; but it has since become a most abused theological statement, devoid of any practical significance. Theoretically, it is used to give credence to the notion that South Africa is a Christian country; but in practice the theological spokespersons of the oppressors appropriate the affirmation exclusively to the members of their groups; on the other hand, the theological spokespersons of the oppressed continue to believe in it for as long as they remain at the receiving end of oppression. So we are desperately in need of a common anthropology, in which we celebrate the unity in diversity of the equal human worth of all human beings.

Introduction

In response to the report of the General Synod of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK), approved and accepted in October 1974, Maimela's critical appraisal of the report took the form of nuanced articles published in 1981 in the Southern Africa Missiological Society journal *Missionalia* and the Journal of Theology for Southern Africa. One may be forgiven for suggesting that the two versions of Maimela's fierce critique appear to have been intended to address the audiences targeted in the original report Ras, volk en nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif and its translation Human relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture, published in 1975 and 1976 respectively. Maimela levels his critique with the courage very few would have matched at the time, by giving credit where it is due. Take, for example, his applauding of the report's conformity to Biblical anthropology (Maimela 1981a:64-78; Maimela 1981b:27-42) and the honesty and integrity of his spiritual solidarity with the writers of the report, in his admission that he wonders whether others would have done differently (Maimela 1981a:64-78; Maimela 1981b:27-42).

The issues raised in the Afrikaans version 35 years ago and in the English version 34 years ago, on which Maimela provided his critical appraisal 29 years ago, are still with us – albeit in a different form, and confronting different actors. The issues raised then are pertinent to our situation now because of the view of human beings of contemporary Black Christians themselves. The times when those issues were raised are now important landmarks for our collective consideration, when we reflect on how far we have come and point out the pitfalls we as a Christian community need to avoid as we move forward into the future in the process of constructing a common Christian anthropology. What the context then and our situation now have in common is the contest to claim entitlement to, if not deserved occupation of, the Biblical high ground. Such tendencies find expression in the perennial attempt by the protagonists to give the impression that they are thoroughly Biblical in their view of human beings and the proclivity of these protagonists to use the same Bible as the yardstick to evaluate and reject their claims. It is for this reason that the antagonists would applaud the protagonists' theory of an anthropology that conforms to Biblical anthropology. However, be very scathing against the disconnection between the positive anthropology espoused with a contradictory historical praxis, to which they would blame on the tradition that informs their theology and their own historical praxis. Tentative suggestion: "However, the protagonists are very scathing about the disconnection involved when a positive anthropology espouses a contradictory historical praxis, a disconnection which they would blame on the tradition".

In this essay an attempt will be made to read Judges 12:2 in dialogue with Maimela in terms of his critical appraisal of Ras, volk en nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif (1975) and its translation Human relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture (1976) in the following sequence: a definition of "volk" and "people" in terms of the race relations dispensation at the time and "volk" and "people" as a translation of the Hebrew 'am; the Hebrew 'am in salvation history and its appropriation in secular history; the Hebrew 'am, "volk" and church membership based on the notion of "volk" constituted in language and culture on one hand and on the other disconnection between theory and historical praxis; reading Judges 12:2 in dialogue with Maimela, where the text provides a locus for a race relations construct of choice between "volk" and "people" is deliberately used to translate the salvation history Hebrew 'am. Also, I show how the construct is at once both positive and negative. Among other things, I point out that secular considerations inform, if not primarily determine, the nature of being thoroughly Biblical.

For the purposes of this essay the importance of Judges 12:2 is threefold. In the first place, Judges 12:2 provides textual evidence for the link between Maimela's critical appraisal and the NGK's original report and translation. To my knowledge neither the NGK report nor Maimela refer explicitly to Judges 12:2 but they do refer to "volk", although without specifically linking it to this text. However, the text contains one of the instances of the Hebrew 'am which is translated there as "volk". In the second place, Judges 12:2 appears to feature yet another Biblical instance of the former oppressed and discriminated one who reaches out to the former oppressor and embracing them as his people: "My people and I". Here the Hebrew 'am is used inclusively to reconcile and unite Jephthah and the Gileadites, but exclusively against the Ephraimites with whom they later fought. The result of a preoccupation with being thoroughly Biblical (Maimela 1981a:64-78; Maimela 1981b:27-42) appears to be to fall into the trap of focusing only on the former usage and disregarding the latter (although it is just as Biblical), which raises grave concerns for a common anthropology in general and peaceful coexistence in particular. This appears to be the case in the critique levelled against the use of "volk" in order to insulate (Maimela 1981a:64-78; Maimela 1981b:27-42) the Afrikaners from the rest of the Christian fold in general and from black people in particular, so as to encourage division and Afrophobia (Maimela 1981a:64-78; Maimela 1981b:27-42).

In the third place, Judges 12:2 as one of the locus for the Hebrew *ami* provides an important opportunity for engaging Maimela about his appropriation of Biblical grounds as a yardstick to evaluate and ultimately on these alleged Biblical grounds to reject "volk" as an anthropological and theological construct. The envisaged exercise will take the form of reading Judges 12:2 in dialogue with Maimela.

Definition of "volk" and "people"

Maimela took issue with the racial classification of people generally and particularly in terms of the languages they speak. He responded to the NGK report's definition of "volk" and "people" as follows: "'n Volk is 'n groep mense wat op grond van 'n gemeenskaplike kultuur as behorende tot 'n bepaalde groep geklassifiseer word, d.w.s. 'n groep mense wat o.m. dieselfde taal, gewoontes, algemene lewenswyse, ens. het" (*Ras, volk en nasie* 1975:6). In translation: "A people is a group of individuals who are classified as belonging to a particular group on the basis of common culture, i.e. a group of individuals who share a common language, habits, general lifestyle, etc" (*Human relations and the South African scene* 1976:8). Here, Maimela delivered the following critique: "Indeed, the glorification of isolationism has such an appeal that Christains have been tempted to believe that differences in languages and cultures are insurmountable absolutes that must be allowed to override any unity in Christ that believers claim they have" (Maimela 1981a:66,69; Maimela 1981b:29,32).

So Maimela underscores the need to address culture in general as a medium of revelation and, in particular, to address language as one of the alleged identifiers of culture. It will be observed later that the issue of language is very important, especially concerning the translation of the Hebrew ami and the view of human beings in terms of the South African official languages. Language is regarded as not just a medium for communication but also as a major, if not the only, constituent component of who people are. The shortcoming of such a notion of the composition of people is that "people" who speak the same language were at the time regarded as belonging to different racial groups and of course - within the same racial group – belonging to different homelands. The definition of the composition of "volk" or "people" in terms of language and culture only raises the question whether language and culture are there to speak against the context and medium within which to hear and accept diversity. The inability to respond to this question has not only complicated the use of Afrikaans in translation but also the use of the African languages.

"Volk" as a translation of the Hebrew 'am

The problematic nature of "volk" is not just about its linguistic and cultural constituents but also as an interpretation and translation of the Hebrew 'am:

Met die terme 'volk' en "nasie" is dit in die Ou Testament enigsins anders gestel. Volgens Speiser word die woord 'am in hoofsaak gebruik om 'n geneties-verbonde groep aan te dui, en gôi veral as tipering van 'n politieke entiteit wat in 'n bepaalde woongebied gesentreer is (Ras, volk en nasie 1975:11).

In translation:

In the Old Testament the situation is somewhat different with respect to the terms "people" and "nation". According to Speiser the word 'am is chiefly used to designate a genetically related group while gôi chiefly typifies a political entity centered in a particular residential area (Human relations and the South African scene 1976:12-13).

The above definition of the Hebrew 'am would probably suit its use in Judges 12:2 because Jephthah was genetically related to the Gileadites, albeit "illegitimately". Maimela criticises the viewing of "volk" as an anthropological and theological construct to seek refuge in it at the expense of striving for the realisation of unity of all people created in the image of God. Maimela further critiques the belief that the "volk" is divinely chosen as well as the

tendency to turn its cultural and language constituent element into a **theological principle** (Maimela 1981a:69; Maimela 1981b:32).

The Hebrew 'am in salvation history

In honour of Maimela and following his good example, we need at least to give credit where it is due, namely that the NGK reports admit to the fact that the Hebrew 'am and gôi are used in the Hebrew Bible in the context of salvation history and are therefore not automatically transferable to the issue of contemporary race relations:

Dit is egter duidelik dat die gebruik van hierdie twee terme in die Ou Testament nie op 'n wetenskaplike definisie berus nie, maar hulle betekenis aan die heilsgeskiedenis ontleen. Ons slotsom is dat die terme soos dit in die Bybel gebruik word, nie sonder meer op die rasse en volkeresituasie van ons tyd oorgedra kan word nie, ten eerste, omdat die Skrif geen rassevraagstuk ken nie, en ten tweede, omdat die terme "volk" en "nasies" primêr 'n heilshistoriese vulling het (*Ras, volk en nasie* 1975:11).

In translation:

It is clear, however, that the use of these two terms in the Old Testament is not based on a scientific definition; their meaning is derived from salvation history. Our conclusion is that the terms, as used in the Bible, cannot simply be transferred to our present situation as far as race and peoples are concerned, firstly, because the Scriptures evidence no racial problems and secondly, because the terms "people" and "nation" have a primarily historico-redemptive meaning (*Human relations and the South African scene* 1976:13).

However, Maimela takes issue with the fact that despite the above admission the report goes on to contradict itself by choosing to use the exclusively politically laden "volk" to translate the Hebrew 'am in terms of salvation history in Judges 12:2. The other point to consider is that on considering the foregoing we cannot make a too rigid distinction between salvation history and secular history or conveniently establish a dichotomy, as if the two are separable. A case in point is the Hebrew 'am used in Judges 12:2 and translated "volk" in the contemporary situation. The point is that we need to use those terms in our contemporary languages that enhance our common being and destiny, not those terms that divide and scorn our Christian unity, albeit

in our diversity. The basis of Maimela's critical appraisal is the disconnection between the appropriation of salvation history for our unfolding dispensation of contemporary political histories (Maimela1981a:69; Maimela 1981b:32). Furthermore, we need to make the point that salvation history is not more pure than secular history, at least when it comes to Jephthah himself.

The Hebrew 'am, "volk" and church membership

The admission that the Hebrew 'am and gôi are used in the Hebrew Bible in the context of salvation history and are therefore not automatically transferable to contemporary race relations is at once a credit and at the same time raises the bar of accountability for the NGK concerning church membership. The practical implication of the definition of "volk" and "people", the admission that the Hebrew 'am is used in terms of salvation history and the contradiction occasioned by rendering the Hebrew 'ami as "volk", finds no better expression than in the issue of church membership. The report determines as follows:

Sou 'n dergelike oordraging van lidmaatskap egter die orde en vrede in die kerk en in die volk (volke of volkslede) tot so 'n mate versteur dat die koninkryk van God daardeur nie bevorder sal word nie, die gemeenskap van die gelowiges én hul diensbaarheid daaronder ly en die volle uitlewing van die eiendomlike karakter van die betrokke volk(e) daardeur benadeel word, sou ter wille van die welwese van die betrokke kerk(e) 'n tydelike ordereëling teen oordraging nie afgekeur kan word nie (Ras, volk en nasie 1975:47).

In translation:

If, however, such a transfer of membership should disturb the order and peace of both church and people (peoples or sections of the people) to such an extent that the kingdom of God is no longer served, that the fellowship of believers and their ability to serve should suffer and the nation or nations concerned should find it difficult or impossible to give full expression to their national identity – in these circumstances a temporary arrangement against the transfer of membership cannot be condemned since it would enhance the well-being of the churches concerned (*Human relations and the South African scene* 1976:47).

Maimela criticised not just the restriction of church membership but also its implications for common anthropology in general and race relations in particular. "By teaching us to avoid each other and to avoid Christian fellowship so as to eliminate points of friction even between those who are supposedly united in the body of Christ, our churches have become proclaimers of negative, restrictive anthropology, an anthropology that limits the meaning of the ..." (Maimela 1981b:34-35). Maimela is underscoring the claim he makes that life experience may not conveniently yield to a blackand-white dichotomy between theoretical theological pronouncements, however thoroughly Biblical they may first look on paper and then in practical encounters with fellow human beings on life's journey. He laments their theological commitment to succumbing to the temptation to go against their own admission that the Hebrew 'am is used in the sense of salvation history, when they appropriate it exclusively to the members of their group and church. They have once more allowed themselves to miss an opportunity to participate positively in the realisation of salvation history in their time. Their action constitutes a serious disconnection between theory and historical praxis:

To sum up: the history of South Africa, both past and present, strongly suggests that Whites have not always lived according to theories and principles about human selves, theories which they believe are grounded in biblical truth. Because their theory is discontinuous with their practical principles about "man" White Christians' affirmations have always foundered in the face of actual and concrete racial situation[s] in this country. History shows that Whites have never put to practice their theories about our common human origin. Nor have they accepted Blacks as brothers and sisters in Christ to whom they are united and related by person of their common God and Father. They have never put to practice their theories about human equality in sin (Maimela 1981a:66).

Reading Judges 12:2 in dialogue with Maimela

The vices in the translation of Judges 12:2 into the South African official languages including the African languages may be blamed on the colonial and apartheid missionaries; but nothing dictates that the status quo should continue as if nothing has happened over the last 34 years. A cursory look at the translation of Judges 12:2 confirms that it is just as important to look at what is contained in the Biblical text as it is to look at what interpreters and translators do with the text – thinking of support for the divide-and-rule

approach, in translations into their respective languages that perpetuate this approach as a theological principle.

First we look at the translations of Judges 12:2 into the South African languages, summarised as follows: *Nna le setshaba sa geso* (Sepedi 2006 Baahlodi); *Nna le setjhaba sa ka* (Sesotho 1989 Baahlodi); *Nna le morafe wa me* (Setswana 2007 Baatlhodi); *Mne nabantfu bami* (siSwati 2006 Tikhulu); *Nne na vhathu vhahashu* (Tshivenda 2007 Vhahatuli); *Mina na vanhu va mina* (Xitsonga 2001 Vaavaanyisi); *Ek en my volk* (Afrikaans 1953 Rigters); *My people and I* (English 1989 Judges); *Mna nabanta bam* (isiXhosa 2007 Abagwebi); *Mina nabantu bami* (isiZulu 2007 AbAhluleli).

The jury is still out whether what we observe above are expressions of a common anthropology or just expressions of different languages that represent contradictory, exclusive notions of being human, even among Black people themselves on the one hand and on the other as a response to the Afrikaans "volk". One can only wonder what African-language translators had in mind, just as one can only wonder the same about the NGK translators. The constructs these African languages employ to translate the Hebrew *ami* may appear to be vague, as in "people", but that does not mean they are more inclusive of all "people" than the Afrikaans construct "volk". The critique of "volk" in terms of language and cultural community needs to be levelled against the African language translations of Judges 12:2 as well.

The African language translators are also guilty of translating the Hebrew *ami* in terms of their narrow language and cultural community understanding of "people" or anthropology with their narrow, exclusive language classification. It would not be far-fetched to suggest that they have understood "people" in terms of narrow cultural and linguistic communities in conformity to the homeland system that arose from the apartheid ideology. If so, we cannot overemphasise the need for contemporary theologies to engage the translation enterprise. For our contemporary situation, we need to construct an anthropology that transcends ethnic language and cultural barriers, and of course an anthropology that transcends country boundaries: to strengthen our resolve to fight back against anthropology constructs that fuel xenophobia and Afrophobia.

The impression should not be created that the problem is only with "volk" as a translation of the Hebrew *ami*. Something similar is happening in translations of the Hebrew *ami* into African languages. The primary contemporary concern with race, and peripherally with social class and gender, may fall short in the face of the pertinent issues if we do not contest the proponents of the status quo when it comes to interpretation and translation. It is only when the cultural discourse is being engaged and with it claims of moral superiority (Maimela 1981a:45; Maimela 1981b:39). Currently, culture in general and language in particular are proving effective means of separation, division and domination.

"Having been taught to presuppose the worst in human relations and dealings with one another, it should not surprise us that even so-called White Christians will easily and without reflection work to discourage contacts between Black ethnic groups, who for their good must be separated into safe and self-enclosed entities" (Maimela 1981a:69). "Indeed, we have people who have concluded that Whites do not only have the 'swaart gevaar' and 'race problem' in their hands but also South Africans collectively have innumerable dangers that each ethnic group poses for all the others. It becomes a risky business to marry and live among Zulus if one is a Sotho, etc." (Maimela 1981b:33).

However, the situation may since have improved in other respects. But a lot of work still needs to be done as far as language is concerned: the above evidence of the internalised distortion of the reference to the Amazulu and Mosotho is an example. It is for the above and other reasons that we enter into dialogue with Maimela on, among other things, the interpretation and translation of Judges 12:2 – not just in the Afrikaans version – but also, especially, in the African languages.

After the above brief look at the issues involved in the translation enterprise, we need to ask the question what Jephthah meant by the pronouncement "I and my people", to which we now turn. At face value the pronouncement appears yet another laudable and generous reaching out for conciliation and reconciliation, by oppressed to oppressor. What exactly is the message Jephthah is conveying? Is he publicly declaring that the former dichotomy of "I and them" are no longer going to treat him as "us and him" but now as "I and my people"? Is it a confirmation that he has now made peace with the Gileadites and that he now identifies with them, at least as their reward for electing him as their leader? Is it a declaration of confidence on his part that he is no longer being Othered in terms of his genealogy?

However, on deeper reflection, the Hebrew *ami* as used by Jephthah is also narrow and exclusive with regard to the Gileadites – and we cannot appropriate it to our situation simply because it is in the Bible. The construct excludes the Ephraimites. We need an inclusive construct: even with reference to the tribes we read about in the Bible. We need to admit that, even if we agree that the Hebrew *ami* is being used here in terms of salvation history, this agreement does not put it beyond reflection and critique – for the simple reason that salvation history itself is neither neutral nor pure nor fully inclusive: it is partisan, full of social stigma and excusive to the core; and for this reason we may not just appropriate it lock, stock and barrel for our contemporary situation. The stigma of Jephthah on account of genealogy persists even beyond his grave.

The Hebrew construct of 'am and the former translation of Judges 12:2 as one of its locus in the South African official languages cannot provide a common anthropology, either at the theoretical level and in the tradi-

tions from which it has been appropriated or as the historical praxis of contemporary readers.

It appears that the goal of constructing a theoretical anthropology should not just be to be thoroughly Biblical. The Hebrew ami has been exposed as problematic because, while at face value it shows the potential to resolve the conflict between Jephthah and the Gileadites, that potential falls short of dealing with the conflict between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites. The Hebrew ami, "people", is interpreted and translated in the 11 official languages in an insulated and exclusively tribal and ethnic way, devoid of any theological intention to enhance their unity and reconcile their speakers around a common anthropology. What is worse is that not just the languages but also the people who speak these languages are being divided rather than united. The author suspects that the reason for this is that by and large these interpretation and translation enterprises are being supervised by theologians and language practitioners who do not themselves believe in unity, or who have been schooled in the teaching and traditions that Maimela decried; and on the other hand their Black counterparts providing the service of language consultants are themselves working not just with the orthography endorsed by colonialism and apartheid but also with a questionable notion about the function of interpretation and translation.

The process of translation needs to be complemented, if not preceded, by a deliberate act of deconstruction of Ek en my volk in Judges 12:2 for what it is, so that it becomes clear to everyone that historically it has been understood and translated in terms of oppressor and oppressed, gender domination, and White people and Black people – and among Black people in terms of the isolated official languages, which served the ideology of divide and rule and isolationism among Black people. We need to reconstruct Ek en my volk in Judges 12:2 to express the common anthropology we long for in South Africa. Texts like Judge 12:2 should always remind us that, contrary to the denials, the source of theology is our historical praxis which claims to be Christian (Maimela 1981b:30). An acceptance of that reality will enhance our efforts to move away from a fragmented and pessimistic anthropology and construct an optimistic anthropology (Maimela 198ba:30) to build one nation, by living ubuntu to overcome racial and gender subjugation, xenophobia and Afrophobia rather than just paying lip service. We observe with appreciation and pleasure that the Afrikaans language translators have done away with the notion of volk in the rendering of Judges 12:2, but wonder why they replaced it with military constructs and so on. It would be most welcome if the African languages translators were to do more to overcome a linguistic isolationism that is contrary to African anthropology and the affirmation of our common humanity.

Conclusion

I have attempted to read Judges 12:2 in dialogue with Maimela in terms of his critical appraisal of Ras, volk en nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif (1975) and its translation Human relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture (1976). I have attempted to do so in the following sequence: a definition of "volk" and "people" in terms of the race relations dispensation at the time and "volk" and "people" as a translation of the Hebrew 'am; the Hebrew 'am in salvation history and its appropriation in secular history; the Hebrew 'am, "volk" and church membership based on the notion of "volk" as constituted first and foremost in racial classification on the one hand and on the other in language and culture. I have also highlighted the disconnection between theory and historical praxis. I have reflected on Judges 12:2 as a locus where a race relations construct of choice – "volk" and "people" – is deliberately used to translate the salvation history Hebrew 'am. Also, I have shown how the construct is at once positive and inclusive and at the same time equally negative and exclusive. Among other things, I have pointed out that secular considerations inform, if not primarily determine, the nature of being thoroughly Biblical.

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