

African light on the New Moon ceremony

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ABSTRACT

The endeavour to juxtapose the manners and customs of these two communities (African and early Israel), illuminates the understanding of the practices and rituals of both sides, and it stimulates new questions to be asked about Israel (and Judaism). These kinds of questions cannot be asked of ancient Israel any more and the idea is not to attend to all these questions in this article, but in order to obtain a better understanding of the Old Testament, to suggest that scholars could learn from Africa as a 'living source' about the practices and customs such as sacrifices, festivals, and social structures (especially if they have some connection with ancient Israel). Studying African groups suggests new ways of answering these questions. Some of the Biblical, Mesopotamian and Talmudic textual sources for the Rosh Hodesh (New Moon Festival) and the Sabbath, as well as contemporary Orthodox and African (Lemba) rituals are being reviewed. Some attention is being paid to the changing understanding of the relationship between humans, God and nature. Research into the interpretation of the Sabbath and the possibility that the Sabbath is in some way connected to the custom of the moon cult of the Babylonians and the Canaanites, is strengthened by the same idea which occurs amongst the Lemba (and other groups in Africa) when celebrating the New Moon Festival. A more intensive investigation could yield interesting possibilities and a greater understanding of the Sabbath, early lunar calendars and the system of the sighting of the new moon.

A INTRODUCTION

The creation of the moon is recorded in Genesis 1:16, where it is referred to as 'the lesser light' in contrast to the sun. It was placed in the heavens to rule the night, and with the other luminaries to be 'for signs and for seasons and for days and years' (1:14). Its appearance in regular phases in the night sky afforded a basis for early calendars, and the word most commonly used for it (יָרֵחַ) is

closely related to חַדָּשׁ, 'month'. The same word occurs in Akkadian, Ugaritic, Phoenician, and other Semitic languages (Mitchell 1988:793; Eliade 1987:154ff).

The sun is always the same, but the moon is a body the existence of which is subject to the universal law of becoming, of birth and death (Eliade 1987:154). This ever-recurring cycle makes the moon the heavenly body above all others concerned with the rhythms of life. The moon governs all those spheres of nature that fall under the law of recurring cycles: waters, rain tides, plant life, the menstrual cycle, fertility (Eliade 1987:154-159). Time was quite certainly measured everywhere by the phases of the moon.

The first day of each month was considered holy; hence the association in the Old Testament of the monthly 'new moon' with the weekly Sabbath (e.g. Is 1:13). It was a fresh beginning; special sacrifices were made over which the trumpets were blown (Nm 10:10; Ps 81:3). Regarding the new moon of the seventh month, the law specifically stated that no servile work was to be done on it (Lv 23:24-25; Nm 29:1-6; 1 Sm 10:18ff). 2 Kings 4:23 suggests that both the new moon and the Sabbath were regarded as providing an opportunity for consulting the prophets (Cohn 1999:31), and Ezekiel (46:1) marks out the new moon as a special day of worship (Mitchell 1988:793). The moon is also named as an object of idolatrous worship in Job 31:26, and archaeology has shown that it was deified in ancient west Asia from early Sumerian to Islamic times (cf Keel 1998).

Many things are not mentioned in the text or have perhaps been edited out by later redactors. The classic fallacy in arguments from silence is that absence of evidence does not prove absence of the phenomenon. It is, for example, neither clear how the actual sighting of the new moon took place in early Israel nor how it was related to the Sabbath. Was the idea of a Sabbath and the lunar calendars, as we know it today, influenced by the Babylonian practices and festivals? Before anything was written down by the Israelites (mainly during the Babylonian exile), there were already oral traditions that were transmitted from generation to generation. Nevertheless, we have to investigate other available sources to illuminate what cannot be derived from the text.

These kinds of questions cannot be asked of ancient Israel any more and the idea is not to attend to all these questions in this article, but in order to obtain a better understanding of the Old Testament, to suggest that scholars could learn from Africa as a 'living source' about the practices and customs such as sacrifices, festivals, and social structures (especially if they have some connection with ancient Israel). I will now briefly review some of the Biblical, Mesopotamian and Talmudic textual sources for the *Rosh Hodesh* (New Moon Festival) and the Sabbath, as well as contemporary Orthodox and African rituals. Some attention will be paid to the changing understanding of the relationship between humans, God and nature.

B ROSH HODESH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The creation of the sun, moon, and stars as calendrical markers is described in Genesis 1:14-16: 'to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times – the days and the years'. No specific mention is made of the month as a unit of time, while the moon is mentioned in terms of its role to 'dominate the night'. On that day, according to the Bible, God not only set the sun, moon and the stars in the sky, but He also established the order of the daily cycle and the calendar. This provided humans with a temporal framework in which to live and work (cf Eliade 1987:155). The God-human connection took place with nature as an intermediary.

The first mention of *Rosh Hodesh* (or the New Moon ceremony) is made in Numbers 10:10, which discusses the sounding of trumpets over the sacrifices of the *Rosh Hodesh* and festivals. In all times of gladness, such as the celebration of the New Moon (the beginning of the new month), the sounding of the trumpets was meant for rejoicing over the burnt offerings and the peace offerings and to remind God of his covenant with his people. Numbers 28:11-15 specifies the offerings to be included in the sacrifice each *Rosh Hodesh*: Apart from the daily burnt offering there shall be an extra burnt offering to the Lord consisting of two young bulls, one ram, and seven male yearling lambs – all without defect and accompanied by all the relevant spice- and drink-offerings (as described in Nm 15:1-12). In this way the new month is dedicated to the Lord. Also on this first day of each month one male goat shall be offered for a sin offering to the Lord.

The new moon of the seventh month (mid-September of the Hebrew calendar; much later the Jewish community celebrate this day as New Year's Day) possessed special significance. Numbers 29:1-6 and Leviticus 23:24-25 mention specifically the loud blowing of trumpets and the fact that no servile work was to be done; it was a day of rest. The usual sacrifices are mentioned except that one bull instead of two should be offered.

In 1 Samuel 20:18-42, during which King Saul observes a two-day *Rosh Hodesh* feast, we find more remnants of this ancient ritual. The two-day event would require David's presence at court since he was now a high official in the administration and a member of the family (Vos 1983:72). While David was absenting himself from the court, Jonathan was playing out his part in the testing of Saul's attentions. The first day of the feast of the New Moon arrived. The members of the court filed in to eat. According to Vos (1983:73; Gordon 1986:167,168) the most distinguished sat at a table for four in the corner. Saul sat with his back to the wall, perhaps for security reasons and to have a full view of the assembly. It seems as if Jonathan was sitting next to Saul, but when Abner, the commander of the forces, entered, Jonathan got up and gave his place to him. Jonathan then sat opposite Saul and there was an empty space for David across from Abner. The New Moon Feast was a religious celebration which included

certain rules concerning ceremonial cleanness. Saul's first reaction to David's non-appearance was, therefore, to assume that he had been guilty of some infringement which had rendered him temporarily unfit for cultic participation. The appropriate means of purification are described in Leviticus 11-15. A person might be rendered unfit by, for example, contact with a dead body.

'New moon' (חֲדָשׁ) and 'Sabbath' (שַׁבָּת) are similarly associated in 2 Kings 4:23; Amos 8:5; Hos 2:11 and Is1:13. 2 Kings 4:23 suggests that both days were regarded as providing opportunity for consulting the prophets. Psalm 81:4,5 refers to the need to blow the *shofar* - ram's horn on the new moon and the full moon and Ezekiel 46:1 mentions the new moon and Sabbath as a special day of worship (Mitchell 1988:793). Job 31:26 refers to the moon as an object of idolatrous worship.

In brief, like the Sabbath, *Rosh Hodesh* required proper sacrifices and other specific prescriptions. The most important elements of this ritual that can be derived from the text seem to be the following:

- The actual sighting of the new moon was a necessary element in early Israelite ritual practice, but the system is not described
- Sacred time was determined by nature; God-nature relationship played a major role
- Horn or trumpet blowing was a sign of rejoicing and announcement (similar to the Sabbath)
- Rules and rites concerning ceremonial cleanness were included
- Specific sacrifices were brought (similar to the Sabbath)
- A festive meal was prepared
- It was a day of rest (the 'Sabbath' was a day of cessation)
- It was regarded as providing an opportunity of consulting the prophets or the prophets-sons
- It was a two-day long event
- New Moon and the Sabbath were closely associated

The New Moon Festival played a major role in the everyday life of ancient Israel, but whether the Sabbath had the same content and meaning as it had later in history is improbable. Deuteronomistic History (the P-source) was compiled mainly during the Babylonian exile, and the question is, for example, how much influence from the Babylonian world was absorbed by both the New Moon Festival and the Sabbath.

C BABYLONIAN AND CANAANITE INFLUENCE ON THE NEW MOON CEREMONY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF THE SABBATH

The only ritual texts available for comparison have come from Ugarit, properly outside the immediate circle of Canaan and the Transjordan. No such extensive archives have been available from Canaan proper. These rituals and festivals share features with the biblical cult and they assist greatly in any reconstruction of Canaanite religion before the appearance of Israel and Judah, the states dominated by the national deity Yahweh.¹

In Mesopotamia the Sumerian moon god Nanna, named Sin by the Akkadians, was worshipped in particular at Ur, where he was the chief god of the city, and also in the city of Harran in Syria, which had close religious links with Ur (Mitchell 1988:793). The Ugaritic texts have shown that a moon deity was worshipped under the name *yrh*. On the monuments the god is represented by the symbol of a crescent moon (amulets; Mitchell 1988:793). At Hazor in Palestine a small Canaanite shrine of the late Bronze Age was discovered which contained an absalt stela depicting two hands lifted, as if in prayer to a crescent moon, perhaps indicating that the shrine was dedicated to the moon god (Mitchell 1988:793). In Babylonia *shabbatu*, was the day on which the moon 'rested' from waxing, i.e. the full moon day, on which the gods might be propitiated.

How did the system of the sighting of the new moon work? Wacholder (1976:59-74) refers to a Neo-Assyrian text from the Harper Collection, *ABL* 894, from which he reaches the following conclusions:

- The lunar month was determined by the sighting of the new moon and not by a predetermined calculation
- A messenger arrived from an important city bringing word about the sighting
- The date was fixed by the king after hearing from this messenger; then it was officially proclaimed
- Royal instructions were set to the various temples for the official announcement of a month as intercalary (month)
- The recipients of the letters were to see that the proper rites were performed and that this was done correctly
- The Sabbath and the New Moon were closely associated
- The Sabbath was a day of cessation

¹ Emar has yielded a larger body of ritual texts that considerably extends our knowledge of regional practice. The Akkadian ritual texts from Emar are roughly contemporary with the Late Bronze Ugaritic texts, but come from 125 miles inland, on the great bend of the Euphrates (Arnaud 1986, numbers 369-535).

Finegan (1998:26,27) comments that it is not known whether the months (in the Babylonian calendar) eventually were determined by calculation instead of visual observation.

It is not clear how much the New Moon ceremony (and the idea of a Sabbath) in early Israel was influenced by the worshipping of the moon gods in the ancient Near East, but the Deuteronomistic tradition informs us of a significant increase of astral cults in Judah during the seventh and the beginning of the sixth century (2 Kn 21:3-5; 23:5,12; Dt 4:19; 17:3). The increase in the veneration of the 'host of heaven' is generally ascribed to the pressure exerted by the Assyrian conquerors on the subdued peoples to adopt the cult of the victors (Keel 1998:102). Eilberg-Schwartz (1990:242, footnote 3) stresses 'the fundamental religious changes [between "Israelite religion" and "ancient Judaism"] that occurred as a result of and in the wake of the Babylonian exile' (cf Finegan 1998:33-39).

Grant (1984:59; cf Meinhold 1909:81-112) points to the custom amongst the Babylonians and the Canaanites of setting a day aside concerning their cult of the moon. Interestingly, the observance of the full moon is called 'Sabbath', derived from *shabbatu*, the Akkadian word for full moon (cf Wolfe 1982:144). In the Bible the word Sabbath is often connected to the new moon (e.g. Am 8:5; 2 Ki 4:23; Ezk 46:1; Is 66:23), and in Babylonia the fifteenth day of the month, or the day of the full moon, is called *shabbatu*. Schmidt (1983:89; cf Finegan 1998:26) states:

If however the sabbath is derived from the well-known unlucky days of the moon, it remains unexplained why (probably very early) it became independent of the course of the moon. Since the lunar cycle differs substantially from 28 days (it is 29½ days), the week would need constantly to be corrected, so that the sequence of six working days and one day of rest would be destroyed. The similarity with the Babylonian name does point to an early connection, but the derivation of the sabbath from the phases of the moon is not really convincing; at least in the later period the sabbath of Israel was not a day of the full moon.

Gray (1985:497) is also convinced that the fact that the new moon and Sabbath are associated in the life of Israel does not mean that the Sabbath in Israel was a lunar occasion. He stressed the fact that, falling with mathematical regularity every seventh day, it was not. Gray agrees with Mowinckel (1927:75-98) that the fact that the seventh day Sabbath observance was a distinctive rite of the sacral community of Israel, as in the Decalogue (Ex 20:8; Dt 5:12), the Ritual Code (Ex 34:12) and the Book of the Covenant (Ex 23:12), indicates a deliberate attempt to counteract the influence of Canaan in the observance of rites of suspense at lunar

phases – such lunar phases are actually noted in ritual texts from Ras Shamra (Gray 1986:497; cf Grant 1988:60). Gottwald (1985:209) is also of the opinion that the Decalogue was most probably already part of ancient Israel's life from the pre-monarchic period.

However, the Sabbath was regarded by the Babylonians as a day of danger. The Israelites could possibly have associated their labour and toil in Egypt with this day and thus considered it as a day of safety and testing to be celebrated in their 'Promised Land' (Ex 20:1-17; Dt 5:15; Grant 1984:59; cf Zeitlin 1986:98). Sabbath observance might have occurred a good deal earlier, but the custom seems to derive from a day set apart by the Babylonians and Canaanites, in connection with their cult of the moon (Grant 1984:59).

Wolfe (1982:87) and others are further convinced that the fourth commandment (Ex 20:8), namely to keep the Sabbath, is not correctly translated. Wolfe is of the opinion that it should read: 'remember the day of cessation, to keep it holy'. According to him, the notion of 'cessation' was replaced by post-exilic redactors six centuries later, when their notion of 'Sabbath' had developed. He maintains that it was Moses who gave this command in order to distinguish Israelite religious practices from other religious practices. He proposes a free translation: 'Remember the holy day to keep it sacred!' Thus it does not refer to 'Sabbath', as it was known later, but to a day of cessation equivalent to the New Moon celebration.

Although difficult to prove, it seems as if there could possibly have been mention of a holy day, a day of cessation, in early Israel. The possibility that it could have had the same content and significance as acquired by the Sabbath later in history, is improbable. The first day of each month was considered holy, hence the association in the Old Testament of the monthly 'new moon' with the weekly Sabbath (e.g. Is 1:13). This new beginning was inaugurated by special sacrifices (Nm 28:11-16) which were made when the horns were blown (Nm 10:10; Ps 81:3). '... [T]he origin of the sabbath remains obscure, in spite of numerous theories' (Schmidt 1983:89).

D ROSH HODESH DURING THE TALMUDIC PERIOD

It is worthwhile to look briefly into the 'development' of the New Moon feast and the Sabbath in Jewish history. During the Talmudic period some Jewish groups seem to have followed a calendar that included schematic months, not lunar months, and by implication interpreted the biblical *Rosh Hodesh* as the beginning of the schematic 'new month' rather than 'new moon'. This situation was reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls, collected during the 200-300 years prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (70 CE). However, at least since the period of the Mishnah (around 100 CE), Jewish practice has assumed that *Rosh*

Hodesh is synonymous with the appearance of the new moon, which marks the beginning of the lunar month (Feldman 2003:28). The Mishnah and Talmud offer extensive discussion of the procedures the rabbis used for marking, affirming and declaring the *Rosh Hodesh*. Feldman summarizes the situation as follows:

... [the discussion] was important because the observance of the holidays in their proper time was critical, and depended upon the declaration of the new month. The text claims that the new month was determined by observation, and that the rabbinical court would declare the beginning of a new month based on the acceptance of testimony by witnesses who claimed to have seen the new crescent. Nevertheless, the testimony was checked against calculations done by the court according to a confidential method. Upon the declaration of the new moon, beacons were lit and runners were sent to the diaspora to notify the whole Jewish world about the advent of the new month. An important aim of the Talmud is to assert that what is important for proper calendrical observance is *not* the sighting of the new moon, but the human court's *affirmation* of such an observation. The argument is that the only times that are holy are the ones declared by the court (*b. Rosh HaShana 22b*, in Feldman 2003:28).

It is still not clear how the new moon was sighted during this period or earlier, but as Feldman (2003:28) has observed, this was an important step in the development of a Jewish calendar based exclusively on calculation, with no observational component any longer. In Jewish tradition the publication of the calculations for the calendar is attributed to the Patriarch Hillel ben Judah in 359 CE, while some scholars believe this may have taken place as late as the seventh century CE. Reinstein states:

With the calculated calendar, the new month begins not with the sighting of the new crescent moon, but at the calculated moment of astronomical alignment of the sun, moon, and earth, called in Hebrew *hitkabtzut*, the moment of 'gathering'. This moment, when the moon is invisible because it is directly between earth and sun, results in the *molad*, literally the 'birth' of the new moon (1996:130-143).

Close observation of the moon was no longer a necessary element in Jewish ritual practice. It might be possible that they were no longer familiar with how the system of the sighting of the new moon worked. Sacred time was not determined by nature any more, but by humans. The human-God connection could now take place without nature as an intermediary. Feldman (2003:29) asserts that 'being attuned to nature (sighting the new moon) was replaced by synchronisation to an abstraction of nature (the average lunation) calculated by

human mathematics.’ The human dependency on the rhythms of the moon was reduced. This was a major transformation of Jewish religion after the destruction of the Temple.

Another major shift that was made after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans was from sacrifice to prayer, with one implication being again that nature itself was less important in rabbinical Judaism than in the priestly Judaism of the Temple. A demotion of nature in comparison to humanity took place. In place of the Temple sacrifices, the Talmud reports a new practice of reciting a blessing upon sighting the new moon:

Rabbi Aha ben Hanina also said in the name of Rabbi Assi in Rabbi Yohanan’s name: Whoever blesses the new moon in its due time welcomes, as it were the face of the Shechinah [Divine Presence]... In the school of Rabbi Ishmael it was taught: Had Israel inherited no other privilege than to greet the face of their Heavenly Father every month, it would be sufficient (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 42a: modified by Feldman 2003:29,30).

It is worth noting that the gender of the moon is still not clearly settled, depicted both as the face of the Shechinah (usually understood as feminine) and of the Heavenly Father. This text also reflects the beginnings of the *Kiddush Levanah*, the monthly ritual of observing and sanctifying the new moon. It takes place during the waxing phase and is preceded by the formal announcement in the synagogue, on the Sabbath prior to the new moon, of its impending arrival.

The main elements of this ceremony during the Talmudic period seem to be the following:

- Observation of the new moon was no longer a necessary element in Jewish ritual practice
- Testimony was checked against calculations
- Sacred time was determined by humans
- Beacons were lit and runners sent to the diaspora to announce the new month
- Sacrifices were replaced by prayers
- The beginnings of the *Kiddush Levanah* were reflected - rituals of observing and sanctifying of new moon
- Sabbath prior to the new moon became important

E ROSH HODESH IN CONTEMPORARY ORTHODOXY

‘While most Jewish denominations still include some aspect of *Rosh Hodesh* observance, contemporary Orthodoxy asserts a privileged position in Judaism as

the legitimate successor and preserver of the Jewish tradition' (Feldman 2003:31). There is a strong continuation of the Talmudic perspective. In the contemporary Orthodox *Artschroll siddur* we find the Talmudic assertion of human authority to determine the holidays reaffirmed (Scherman, in Feldman 2003:31):

... the authority to regulate the calendar [is] a function that the Torah confers upon the Beit Din [rabbinical court]. In effect, by proclaiming when the months will begin, the Jewish people control the very existence of the Festivals. The Sabbath, on the other hand, comes every seventh day, independent of the Jewish people and the calendar.

We are told that humans have the ability to recognize or withhold recognition of the natural cycle of the moon – a cycle which takes place whether or not we mark its passage – and further, that the Sabbath is naturalized by the assertion that it comes every seven days 'independently of the Jewish people'. This independence is exegetically derived from the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:3, which describes the Sabbath as the final act of God's creation of the world.

According to Feldman (2003:32) 'this dual move – to make cultural what is natural, and naturalize what is cultural – conspires to decrease the importance of the natural world.' It seems that nature and natural cycles are not eliminated from Jewish practice; they are preserved in a re-negotiated relationship (cf *Rosh Hodesh* in Jewish feminist thought and practice, in Feldman 2003:34-45).

Two main rituals associated with the new moon in contemporary Orthodoxy are of significance. The first observance is the *Birkat haHodesh* – blessing of the new month – which usually takes place in the synagogue on the Sabbath prior to the arrival of the new month, announcing the day during the coming week when *Rosh Hodesh* will arrive. The prayer includes requests for a life of peace, blessings, sustenance, health, wealth, honour, expresses a fear of heaven, fear of sin, love of Torah, and prays for a 'gathe[ring]' in [of the] dispersed from the four corners of the earth; all Israel becoming comrades. The gathering also refers to the astronomical 'gathering' of the sun, moon, and earth, which becomes a symbol for messianic anticipation. Scherman (in Feldman 2003:32) contends that the lunar cycle is expanded into a metaphor for the ethical life of Israel:

Just as the moon is reborn after a period of decline and total disappearance, so too, Israel's decline will end and its light will once again blaze to fullness. As an example, the Midrash (*Shemosh Rabbah 15*) states, 'when Israel is worthy of God's favor it is like the waxing moon, but when it is not worthy, it is like the declining moon.'

Hirsch is of the opinion that this should be the model for 'your own conduct. As the new moon renews itself by the law of the nature, so you, too, should renew yourselves, but of your own free will' (1986:250).

The second observance is the service that incorporates an actual sighting of the new moon, known as the *Kiddush Levanah*, the sanctification of the New Moon. This could take place any evening during the waxing phase of the new moon, and the prayers include psalms for and praises of God as creator of the heavens (Feldman 2003:32). Thus as 'we greet the moon, we greet its Maker and Guide' (Scherman, in Feldman 2003:33). While the moon's pattern is observed, the moon is seen only as a metaphor, either for Israel's fate or as a pointer to God.

The following elements are of importance:

- There is a strong continuation of the Talmudic perspective
- The Sabbath prior to the arrival of the new moon is significant; the blessing of the new moon and the sanctification of the new moon takes place
- An announcement takes place; sacred time is determined by human calculations
- Special prayers and praises are said
- The coming of the new moon becomes a metaphor for the coming of the Messiah and for Jewish ethical life.

F THE NEW MOON CEREMONY IN AFRICAN TRADITION

The research by Wolfe (1982:87 and others) into the interpretation of the Sabbath (Ex 20:8) and the possibility that the Sabbath is originally connected to the custom of the moon cult of the Babylonians and the Canaanites (to put sacred days aside), is strengthened by the same idea which occurs amongst the Lemba and other groups in Africa when celebrating the New Moon Festival.

According to their tradition of origin the Lemba, also known as 'Israelites' or 'children of Abraham', left Israel at a very early stage (before the Babylonian invasion), built a city called Sena in Yemen and eventually migrated into Africa.. This means that they were not exposed to inner-Jewish migration and that their religion could still contain some remnants of an ancient type of religion that is worthwhile investigating (cf Le Roux 2003:1-9).

Closer investigation showed that very few Lemba remembered that they ever had a Sabbath or such a day of rest as we know it today. It is noteworthy, however, that they rather place much emphasis on the observance of the new moon and all the rituals that should accompany it. Interestingly, the traditional

Lemba consider the day of the observance of the new moon as the day of rest, as the Jews would consider the Sabbath. This custom concurs with that of ancient Israel.

This could be a remnant of a very ancient custom (embedded in an African culture), transmitted from generation to generation. Chaplain Mhani of the Lemba Cultural Association explains the activities surrounding the New Moon Festival in the Lemba communities (V:1:LCA): Just before the time of the new moon, a bowl is placed under a tree or in the shade of a hut. Then a day before the moon is visible, it reflects in the water in the bowl, usually around noon. The person who sees the moon before the others, shouts: ‘Ha lea e bonala lapeng’ (‘you are not there when I came home’; [the moon] is not visible at the lapa) and runs to the chief to inform him. Then the chief sends his servants to the river to see if they can really see the moon in the dish. Marole says that if they confirm this, the chief will blow the horn and the ‘indunas’ (a Zulu word used by Marole) will follow suit, blowing the horns (1964:4). When the people hear the horns, they will leave everything behind and run to the river (Marole 1964:4). All the old men and women shave their heads and everybody fasts for the rest of the day. Most of the respondents during my field study remember that, according to their culture, they must remove all their hair every month when the new moon starts, so that their heads are shiny (D:M:7; cf Le Roux 2003; cf De Vaal 1958:56). Mathivha (D:1:B:5) explains that if a person’s head is not clean-shaven he or she becomes foolish. The Lemba women specifically shave off their hair to become wiser. The following day no work is done. It is kept as a day of cessation and everybody brings food to the chief. That evening the Lemba would look at the moon and say, ‘This is the batsetse’s [heathen’s] moon, our moon has been seen in the pot.’

Stayt (1931:232) refers to a new moon ceremony among the Basia, recorded by Ellenberger and MacGregor in their history of the ‘Basuto’:

Tradition tells of an indigenous method in use among the Basia, whereby the crescent could be detected in the sunlit firmament with the minimum of trouble to the observer. An earthen pot, made of glazed pottery, was filled with very clear limpid water, and as soon as the crescent appeared, it was reflected in the water even in the most glaring sunlight, and the first observer to discover the reflection in his pot ran to report to the chief, who announced the fact and summoned the feast by messengers. The successful astronomer was, according to custom, declared to be ruler of the feast, and was entrusted with the distribution of the refreshments.

Junod (1908:283) states that the shaving of the head for the ‘Suto’ and the ‘Thonga’ is principally a sign of mourning. For the Lemba this is a sign of festivity and wisdom. Thompson (1942:77) recorded that the Lemba’s New Year

begins when the new moon is first seen at the end of the month of November. In more than one way they follow their own calendar.

During a visit to the eastern Hadramaut, in Yemen, Parfitt (1992:340) was informed about the customs and traditions of the tribes of the *wadi* Sena (the people in the vicinity of the old city of Sena) and was surprised to find that they have exactly the same new moon celebration as practised by the Lemba in Southern Africa. The same kind of bowl which the Lemba use for the observance of the new moon is found there. Nowhere else during his many travels, investigating Judaising movements all over the world, could he find a similar practice.

Different elements regarding the celebration of the new moon in African tradition are the following:

- The system of how the sighting of the new moon takes place is clearly described (also found in the eastern Hadramaut)
- The first observer runs to the chief to report
- Confirmation is needed
- A day of cessation is announced
- Horn-blowing to announce the appearance of the new moon
- The God-nature relationship plays a major role in their ritual practices
- A specific meal is prepared
- No mention is made of sacrifices as such
- Old men and women shave their hair as a sign of cleanness, festivity and wisdom (African influence)
- It is a two-day long event.

In the world-view of the Lemba the new moon accompanies the transition from one cycle in nature to another and is therefore a *rite de passage*. The similarities between this African custom and that of early Israel and even Babylonia are noteworthy.

G CONCLUSION

The invasions by Assyria and Babylonia as well as the Israelites' exile to these countries, suggest major influences on the latter's religious rituals, festivals and calendars. One such example is possibly the interpretation of the Sabbath. The possibility that the Sabbath could have had the same content and significance as acquired by the Sabbath later in history is improbable. The 'sacred day' as described in Exodus 20:8 was most probably a day of cessation equivalent to the New Moon celebration. The similarity to the Babylonian name does point to an

early connection, but the derivation of the Sabbath from the phases of the moon is not really convincing.

The possibility that the Sabbath is connected to the custom of the moon cult of the Babylonians and the Canaanites is strengthened by the same idea which occurs amongst the Lemba and other groups in Africa when celebrating the New Moon Festival as a day of cessation. Many concurrences between the ritual in African communities and that of ancient Israel come to the fore and bring possible answers to some of the questions.

It appears that most of the elements of the celebration of the new moon of early Israel are still present in the religion of the Lemba. The God-nature relationship still plays a major role in both communities (which is no longer the case during the Babylonian Talmudic period and in contemporary Orthodoxy). The elements present in Lemba culture that we do not find in early Israel are mainly the rituals concerning the announcement and confirmation of the observance (much of the detail have probably not been recorded, or edited out by later authors), but the latter are clearly described in the Babylonian and Canaanite documents and a continuation of this announcement and confirmation ritual is found during the Talmudic period and in contemporary Orthodoxy. The similarities (and differences) between this African custom and that of early Israel and even Babylonia are therefore noteworthy - we find a combination of both in the Lemba custom. The specific description of how the actual sighting of the new moon takes place in Lemba culture is unique and is a great contribution to the understanding of this Old Testament custom. This Lemba custom has become intertwined with other religious ideas, or they have become diffuse and were then assimilated into other rituals or customs than what was originally intended.

The changing rituals and understandings of *Rosh Hodesh* are examples of how Jewish cultural resources are reused, reshuffled, and remade in response to changing natural and cultural conditions. As Eilberg-Schwartz (1990) put it, there are fundamental religious changes between the early 'Israelite religion' and 'ancient Judaism' as a result of the Babylonian exile. A juxtaposition of the ceremonies accompanying the sighting of the new moon by the Lemba (and other African groups) and that of ancient Israel has shed further light on the new moon ceremony, as well as highlighting certain differences.

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