

The Ancestors in the Religion of Ancient Israel and in Christian Theology. A Contribution to the Intercultural Reading of the Bible

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Introduction: The Contextual Approach to the Bible

One of the first things you learn when you start reading the Bible is to read a certain text within its context: start reading earlier and continue reading longer. Another important, perhaps the second important rule is to be aware of your own context: your attitude shaped by your personal situation and history makes a difference in how you read the text. To this should be added a third important condition for the right approach of the text: the study of the historical context of the text, its writer and readers. This is the basis of the historical-critical approach. Finally, it should be noted that it is important to relate and integrate these different approaches. Especially when it comes to this final point one may note a tension between the different readers/exegetes of the Bible. Many of them stick to only one or two of the approaches.

In this lecture I will make an attempt to give an integrated contextual approach. For this I do not want to limit myself to making general remarks about methodology, because I think the best way to make my case clear is to apply the proposed method to a specific, challenging theme. For this I have chosen the theme of the veneration of the ancestors. This choice is based on two considerations which have to do with my own context. The first one is that I came across this subject in my study of the ancient Near Eastern culture, especially the literature of ancient Ugarit. The second is that it also touches upon modern discussions about the role of the dead in our religion. This is something relatively new in Western societies. In the Indonesian setting it takes, as far as I can see, a far more important place as it is firmly related to the traditional culture. So here we have a fascinating mix of different contexts, in different places and times. My question now is: can the Bible be of help to get a better view of the value of the veneration of the ancestors? And is the contextual reading of the Bible a good way to reach this goal?

My study will show that the veneration of the ancestors is clearly attested in the ancient Near Eastern religions of Syria and Palestine, especially in the Iron Age and later. Although it was hidden in the OT it also played a prominent part in the religion of ancient Israel and in this way it has influenced Christianity. This may be a reason to take another look at the place of the role of the ancestors in modern Christian religion, especially in societies in which traditionally the ancestors take an important place.

In February 2008 Mery Kolimon (now teaching in Kupang, Timor) defended at the Protestant Theological University, Kampen, Netherlands, her dissertation *A Theology of Empowerment. Reflections from a West Timorese Feminist Perspective*. In her study she explores the possibilities to relate the *Metu* culture of West Timor with Christian traditions. She pays special attention to the role of the traditional healers, relating them to the healing work of Jesus Christ. Kolimon writes about these healers that 'they identify the ancestors as the source of their healing knowledge. This knowledge is generated from a grandfather or grandmother to his/her grandchildren directly or through dreams. When the *Metu* became

Christian they identified the figure in their dreams as Jesus Christ. Thus, Jesus becomes a part of the *Meto* ancestor world. How can we deal with this? May we introduce Jesus as one of the ancestors?' (pp. 224-225).

The traditional Christian answer to this question has always been: no! Mery Kolimon is very clear about that: 'Protestantism does not have any space for communication between human beings and their ancestors' (p. 225). This is also what the missionaries told the *Meto* people. Kolimon suggests to rethink this issue. She states that this denunciation of ancestor worship has been put from above onto the *Meto* and is related to the idea of Christianity as superior to the local religious world. Why not do it the other way around and start with the way Jesus Christ was received by the *Meto*? Kolimon turns 'to look to the emerging images of Jesus Christ among the *Meto*: the one who speaks the *Meto* language, the ultimate healer, true offering, and the original ancestor. In this point of view, the *Meto* still perceive Jesus as one who came from outside (he is a white man) but at the same time he belongs to them; he shares their suffering and pain, also their struggle and effort for healing and empowerment.' (p. 240)

Kolimon's attempt to further the dialogue between the *Meto* culture and Christians traditions was well received by her opponents in the discussion during the promotion ceremony, but she was criticized on the point of the role of the ancestors. One of the opponents said that she should have been more critical here, because Christian belief cannot go together with ancestor worship.

This is also the opinion of Klaus Nürnberger who published in 2007 a book called *The Living Dead and the Living God: Christ and the Ancestors in a Changing Africa*. The author, born and raised in Namibia, who worked long in Africa invites his readers to face the problem: 'Ancestor veneration is practiced widely in mainline churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America, usually in secret'. He wants to bring it into the open and 'respond creatively to the spiritual needs of those concerned.' This does not mean, however, that in his view the veneration of the ancestors can be incorporated in one way or another in Christian faith. One of his conclusions is: 'When death comes, the surviving offspring should commend their forebears into the loving care of God and leave them there. Respectful but critical memories of our forebears can help us to discover and stabilise our identities, give direction to our decisions and motivate us to do our best. However, these memories should never suck us back into the past or imprison us in guilt feelings, outdated precepts and inflexible traditions' (p. 257).

One can have doubts about the way Nürnberger describes ancestor veneration. Is it really that negative: sucking the practitioners back into a dark past, imprisoning them into guilt without redemption? According to Kolimon there is also an aspect of healing. Is she totally wrong here? Nürnberger bases his view also on what he finds in the Bible on this subject. He states that there is 'no trace of ancestor veneration in either the Old or the New Testament' (p. 105). I want to start my own evaluation on this point, because I did find these traces in my studies on the Old Testament and the religion of ancient Israel. And I do think that they may give some indications of the way the ancestors could receive their rightful and respected place within Christian faith and practice.

The prominent place of the cult of the dead in Syria and West Mesopotamia

There has been much debate about the role of the cult of the dead in the ancient Near East. (You will note that I have changed here from speaking of 'veneration of the ancestors' to

‘cult of the dead’. The second, cult of the dead, sounds more negative, because it evokes the idea of a cult next to or even opposed to the cult devoted to the God of Israel. In fact there is no real difference, however. Usually these venerated dead were the ancestors. A more important distinction is the one between veneration and mere respect. Respect for the dead means things like taking good care of the dead by giving a decent burial and honoring the memory of the deceased; veneration means that the dead is attributed superhuman power which he can use on behalf of or against the living. Respect for the dead does not automatically lead to veneration of the dead, but sometimes it does. One has to be clear then in defining what precisely is meant.)

When I, following a lead of Johannes de Moor, suggested in my dissertation *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, in 1986, that the cult of the dead took a prominent place within ancient Ugarit and that in different ways comparable beliefs and practices can be found in the religion of ancient Israel, this idea was not generally accepted. The textual and archaeological material is admittedly often open to various explanations. And also in this field there are the minimalists emphasizing how little is certain here and how dangerous it is to build your theories on the sand of scattered or circumstantial evidence. Compared to twenty years ago, however, I note a growing tendency – also based on new findings – to accept the prominent role of the cult of the dead, especially in the area of present day Lebanon and Syria. Let us go through some of the evidence. (See on this now also Herbert Niehr, ‘The royal funeral in ancient Syria’, *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 32/2 [2006], 1-24).

I start with Ugarit, because here we have the combination of evidence from the tombs and from texts. It is typical of Ugarit that many graves are located below the houses, both of the king and other people. Unfortunately they have already been plundered in antiquity. But the architecture gives some clues about the way they were used. The rooms are spacious and vaulted. They were accessible via a stair case. In the walls are niches leaving room for, probably, lamps or perhaps cultic objects. An interesting indication of some kind of cultic activities concerning the dead is a tomb with a libation installation. In one room the excavators found four holes in the floor of the room above the tomb. They are interconnected with a conduit. The biggest hole is in fact a small canal leading through the roof of the tomb, ending above a vessel installed in the floor of the tomb. Apparently this was a way to care for the deceased without having to enter the tomb.

It may be clear that there was in many ways a close relation between the living and the dead in ancient Ugarit. But the indications of caring for the dead does not necessarily mean that the dead were also venerated or even deified. For this we need the evidence from the texts. For instance, the text that can be regarded as a liturgy of the living king and his deceased, but powerful ancestors (KTU 1.161). This text describes a funerary ritual in which all deceased members of the dynasty are invoked. They are named Rephaim, which can be translated as ‘healers’, indicating their function. They are called by their names. They are all invited with the help of the sungod Shapash, who knows the way into and out of the netherworld. In order to prevent that one of them is missed also the unnamed spirits receive an invitation, so that no one can become angry for being forgotten. Then they receive sacrifices and asked to give their blessing to the living king and queen.

...

You are summoned, O Rephaim of the netherworld.

You are invoked, O Council of Didanu.

...

Summoned is king Ammishtamru.
Summoned is king Niqmaddu as well.

...

Above Shapash cries out (to the offerings given to the recently deceased king):
'After your lord, to the netherworld descend.'

...

Once ... seven and an offering

...

Peace to Ammurapi and peace to his house,
Peace to Tharyelli, peace to her house,
Peace to Ugarit, peace to her gates!

New evidence from Qatna

In 2002 very interesting new archaeological evidence was found in the ancient city of Qatna, to be more precise: below the royal palace (National Geographic, February 2005). There they found a 40 m long corridor leading to a deep rock chamber that appeared to be the antechamber of a royal tomb. Fortunately no one had been there since the destruction of the palace, probably by the Hittites in the second half of the 14th century B.C.

At its end the corridor turns to the right and ends up in a deep rock chamber. This is the antechamber of the royal tomb. The vertical interval of 5 m between the corridor and the antechamber had, and still has, to be covered by a ladder. In antiquity the antechamber was roofed by a wooden construction.

The antechamber is 5 m long and 3 m wide. Its southern wall is of special interest. In front of this wall, which gives access to the royal tomb, two basalt ancestor figurines were found in situ. Just in front of them some dishes for the offerings could still be seen. Some animal bones which remained from the offerings presented to the figurines were also discovered.

The two figurines measuring 85 cm are seated on a stool. The figurines are wearing the so-called Syrian mantle with thickly rolled borders - a dress typical of deities and kings in Ancient Syria. In their right hands they hold a cup, which is an invitation to offer a libation.

It is exactly between the figurines that the entrance into the royal tomb opens. In antiquity this entrance was not barred by a wall, so that the tomb could be entered when needed. The plan shows that there are four chambers in this tomb: a central chamber and three minor chambers on its three sides.

The central chamber, which measures 8 x 6,50 m, is interpreted by the excavators as the place for the banquets of the living and the dead. This can be derived from the presence of benches, dishes, jugs and animal bones which are the remnants of the meals held in this place. In the south-eastern corner of this room a stone sarcophagus was found.

In the chamber in the west a second stone sarcophagus was found. Most interesting is a stone table with a skeleton still on it. This table apparently was used to prepare the body for the funeral.

On the opposite side of the central chamber, in the east, we have a room, which has been called the royal ossuary. In this place most of the human bones were deposited. It is remarkable that the archaeologists discovered only one skull. This skull was still in one of the sarcophagi and not in the ossuary chamber. It could be that the other skulls were preserved at a special place in the palace which has not yet been discovered. Between the bones of the

ossuary several dishes used for offerings were found. This means that the bones also received offerings. Many precious funerary belongings were found.

The last chamber shows no remnants of skeletons or single bones. The floor was covered with wood. Near the back wall the remains of a wooden structure (2,30 m x 0,90 m), perhaps those of a bed, can still be seen. According to the excavators the deceased king took part here in the funeral banquet.

Although we cannot be 100% certain about their interpretation, the archaeological facts do point in this direction, illustrating what we find in texts about the veneration of the dead as gods. Similar indications are also found more to the east, in Emar, where there is evidence of a funerary cult as part of the domestic cult. This funerary element appears to be typical of the private religion in this area. (see Van der Toorn, 'Gods and ancestors in Emar and Nuzi', ZA 84 (1994), 38-59). The Emar texts contain frequent allusions to the ancestors as gods. The dead are called gods on account of their privileged state. They are called upon for advise and support, just as the Rephaim in the Ugaritic texts.

The cult of the dead as a "hidden heritage" in ancient Israel

There are many reasons to assume that this cult of the dead was widespread and was also an accepted phenomenon in the religion (or we should probably say: religions) of ancient Israel. In the literary sources we still find its traces, although attempts appear to have been made to conceal them. This can be ascribed to the deuteronomistic movement, seeing a tension between the divine status of the dead and the deuteronomistic emphasis on the belief in one god with his one temple in Jerusalem. The clearest indication of this can be found in the book of Deuteronomy itself. Someone who brings sacrifices to the temple of the God of Israel has to declare:

(Deuteronomy 26:14) I have not eaten any of the sacred portion while I was in mourning, nor have I removed any of it while I was unclean, nor have I offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the LORD my God; I have done everything you commanded me.

This text at least indicates that the people of Israel were familiar with some kind of cult of the dead.

Other texts like the prohibition to go to special places for certain ceremonies to mourn for the dead in Jeremiah 16:6-8:

Both high and low will die in this land. They will not be buried or mourned, and no one will cut himself or shave his head for them. 7 No one will offer food to comfort those who mourn for the dead - not even for a father or a mother - nor will anyone give them a drink to console them. 8 And do not enter a house where there is feasting and sit down to eat and drink.

Also the references to 'saints in the land' in Psalm 16 can be interpreted as reference to some kind of cult of the dead:

2 I said to the LORD, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing." 3 As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight. 4

The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods. I will not pour out their libations of blood or take up their names on my lips.

One can also find indications in the stories of Saul and David with references to periodical sacrificial meals. It also seems plausible to regard the enigmatic *Teraphim* as 'ancestors figurines' used both in the Israelite houses and in their local sanctuaries. The reference to the garden in 2 Kings 21:18

Manasseh rested with his fathers and was buried in his palace garden, the garden of Uzza. And Amon his son succeeded him as king

and in 2 Kings 21:26

He was buried in his grave in the garden of Uzza. And Josiah his son succeeded him as king.

can be combined with God complaint according to Isaiah 65:3f. about

a people who continually provoke me to my very face, offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick; 4 who sit among the graves and spend their nights keeping secret vigil; who eat the flesh of pigs, and whose pots hold broth of unclean meat

and Isaiah 66:17:

Those who consecrate and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following the one in the midst of those who eat the flesh of pigs and rats and other abominable things - they will meet their end together.

In a cultic Ugaritic text the garden is the place where offerings were made to the death god Reshep and to the spirits of the dead in his company.

The different attitudes of Moses and Elijah concerning the cult of dead

In the OT we find a number of texts criticizing any contact of the living with the dead, venerating them as if they were gods, seeking their help, for instance:

Isaiah 8:19-20 – do not ask the dead, go to the Torah!

Deuteronomy 18:9ff – do not consult the dead, wait for a prophet like Moses!

The choice is clear: it is them or the Law given by Moses. And after Moses has died one should consult what he has written down, not his spirit. Not a dead prophet, but his living successor. We find this beautifully illustrated in the story in 1 Samuel 28 of king Saul consulting the spirit of the deceased Samuel. With the help of a medium, a woman in Endor, Saul does succeed in making contact with the dead prophet. But it does not help him. Samuel merely repeats what he had already told him when Samuel was still among the

living. At the end things have only got worse for king Saul. He should have listened to the living prophet and obeyed the words of God at the right moment.

The cult of the dead also plays a role in the history of Elijah and Elishah (1 Kings 17ff). These prophets were constantly fighting Baalism. From the Ugaritic texts we know that there was a close relation between the god Baal and the deified spirits of the dead, the so called Rephaim, which can be translated as 'healers'. In Ugaritic texts Baal is called the first of the Rephaim. He is the one who returns from the netherworld. The belief that the spirits of the dead would follow the way Baal is a basic element of the cult of the dead.

In his fight against Baal and his cult the prophets Elijah and Elisha time and again enter the domain of Baal, as if to show that the God of Israel can defeat Baal on his own terrain and with his own weapons. This already started with the announcement that God would stop the rains for years to come (1 Kings 17:1). The rainfall was believed to be the work of Baal, the god of fertility and held responsible for the rains in due time. In this way it becomes clear that it is not Baal but the God of Israel who regulates the rains.

Also when Elijah and Elisha are acting on the brink of life and death, bringing back children from the other side (the son of the widow from Sarephat in 1 Kings 17:17-24, and the son of the Sunamite woman in 2 Kings 4:18-37), they enter the domain attributed to Baal and the deified spirits. Because in Canaan people prayed to Baal and sought contact with the dead to get help and healing in times of sickness and the threat of death. They believed that the god who was able to leave the world of the dead and the venerated ancestors with him had the power to rescue from sickness and death.

Also the remarkable ending of Elijah's life on earth can be seen in this light. It appears to be some kind of Israelite alternative for the Canaanite belief in powerful spirits of the ancestors. According to Ugaritic texts these Rephaim travel in heavenly horse drawn chariots. When they are invoked they appear in this way as a heavenly army. It is certainly no coincidence that similar chariots play an important role in the stories of Elijah and Elisha. First in the story of the heavenly ascent of Elijah (2 Kings 2). Elijah is taken away by chariots and horses of fire (verse 11). The only other place in the old testament in which we hear of this supernatural phenomenon of heavenly horses and chariots is in 2 Kings 6:17, where they appear to save Elisha from the army of the enemy pursuing him. When we take a closer look at these two texts we note that they have much in common. Not only do they both belong to the stories about the prophet, in both also the servant plays a prominent part. The chariots and horses of fire surround the prophet, whereas it is a prerogative of the servant to see them. The appearance of the chariots and horses of fire is a sign from heaven (cf. Exodus 3:2; Isaiah 66:15-16; Habakuk 3:13-15) and can be regarded as an indication of the prophet's close relation to God. The servant allowed to see this is initiated in the mystery of God working through his prophet. It is also interesting to note in this connection the reaction of Elisha when he sees his master being taken away in this manner. He shouts: 'My father, my father, chariots of Israel and its horses!' (2 Kings 2:12). Some scholars assume that this title has nothing to do with the chariots and horses of fire mentioned in the previous verse, because a different word is used to denote the horses in verse 12. This difference, however, can be explained if we assume that in verse 12 Elisha gives an interpretation of what he saw: the appearance of these chariots made him realize that Elijah was no less than Israel's mightiest weapon. It is remarkable that the same title is given to Elisha at the same moment of his life, namely when he is on the brink of death (2 Kings 13:14). This leads to the assumption that this title is an indication of their expected state after death: both Elijah and Elisha shall become members of the heavenly host of God. We can see this heavenly host in action in

the story of 2 Kings 6, when they surround the army of the Aramaeans. Such an action can be compared to the way the Rephaim are pictured in Ugaritic literature: as warriors of Baal who travel on chariots.

All this leads me to the conclusion that in the stories of Elijah and Elisha we find some kind of Israelite alternative to the Canaanite cult of the dead. Apparently this cult of the dead was more than just something in the background, that left traces in the literature of Yahwism, pointing to a phase gone by and that can be better forgotten. I see two different approaches to these matters in the Old Testament: the one connected with the name of Moses, strictly forbidding any kind of veneration of the dead; the other connected with the name of Elijah offering an alternative in which there is a place for some kind of veneration of the dead next to the cult of the God of Israel. I suggest not to see them as one coming after and correcting and replacing the other. Why not accepting these two as two different but equivalent parts of the religion of ancient Israel, standing next to each other? And – to go one step further – why should we not also take this important element of the cult of the dead more seriously in our biblical theology? Is it not time for some kind of rehabilitation, going beyond the one-sidedness of the deuteronomistic movement in which Moses (or better: their picture of Moses) has taken all the place. Elijah should take his chair and not wait till the end of time.

Some questions regarding a possible place of the cult of the dead within Christianity

In the literary tradition furthered by the written record of Torah, Prophets and writings, clearly the way of Moses became prevalent. But also Elijah and his line persisted. The belief in his intervention from heaven in the life of the believer persisted, be it that it was also transformed into the eschatological conception of Elijah's return as indication of the end of time.

It is interesting to look within this framework to the story of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain when he met both Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:1-13 par.). Here Jesus receives support from the ancestors of Israel. This story is more in line with the stories in the Old Testament of Elijah giving help from heaven than with the prohibition in the name of Moses of any contact with the deceased. Precisely the appearance of Moses can be regarded as a kind of justification of the old line of Elijah.

It is also intriguing that Jesus was associated with the cult of the dead: they say He is possessed by Beelzebub ('Baal of the multitudes') driving out demons by the prince of demons (Mark 3:22 par.). It was not for nothing that his work was associated with the things people expected from powerful spirits of the dead.

The veneration of saints can be regarded as a Christian form of the cult of the dead. As a protestant I always had problems with the roman catholic practices concerning the deceased being declared holy and saint. And I do think that it is not up to the pope to decide about these matters. But I am getting more and more convinced that within biblical theology the cult of the dead ancestors deserves more positive attention or even a rehabilitation, taking it away from Rome and giving it back to the families.

As a conclusion it may have become clear that Nürnberger was wrong when he states that there is no trace of ancestor veneration in the Bible. The suggestion by Mery Kolimon to rethink the position of the ancestors within the Christian context in Indonesia and elsewhere deserves serious consideration.