

GEMA TEOLOGI

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THE ANCESTORS IN THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT ISRAEL AND IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY. A CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTERCULTURAL READING OF THE BIBLE

KLAAS SPRONK*

Abstrak:

Pemikiran Klaas Spronk dipicu oleh saran Mery Kolimon dalam disertasinya (Kolimon, 2008) yang menganjurkan pemikiran kembali mengenai hubungan budaya Meto dari Timor dengan tradisi Kristen, khususnya pemahaman positif dari budaya tersebut terhadap nenek moyang (the ancestors). Sejak zaman missionaris, para nenek moyang dianggap negatif, dan penghormatan terhadap mereka dianggap bertentangan dengan iman terhadap Tuhan Yesus Kristus. Namun bagaimana kalau Yesus dianggap sebagai salah satu dari nenek moyang (Kolimon, 2008, p. 224-225). Saran Mery Kolimon tetap ditolak oleh sebagian dari pengujinya pada sidang promosinya, karena "Penghormatan atau ibadah terhadap nenek moyang tidak ada di dalam Alkitab". Menurut Spronk, di dalam budaya religius di sekitar Israel Kuno ada penghormatan terhadap nenek-moyang, seperti dapat dilihat dalam pengalihan kubur-kubur kuno di sekitar Syria dan Libanon, di lingkungan budaya Ugarit. Di Perjanjian Lama terdapat teks-teks yang mengecam ibadah terhadap nenek moyang, namun demikian sebuah perspektif berdasarkan konteks Ugarit dapat menyajikan kepada pembaca makna kisah Elia dan Elisa (dari I Raja 17 ff) sebagai kisah nenek moyang yang tetap menjaga umat Israel, kendatipun sudah meninggal.

Kata-kata kunci:

Ibadat kepada nenek moyang – Penghormatan kepada nenek moyang – Makam-makam Ugarit – Makna Qatna – Nenek moyang sebagai "hidden heritage" dari Israel Kuno.

In this lecture I want to pay attention to the veneration of the ancestors as a common element playing a special role in the older and newer religions of the ancient Near East, including Christianity. The veneration of the ancestors is clearly attested in the ancient Near Eastern religions of Syria and Palestine, especially in the Iron

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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 this year 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 *Meto* 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 *Meto* 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 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.

1. 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 mini-

malists 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, that is: 'healers', indicating their function and next to this 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 underworld.

You are invoked, O Council of Didanu.

...

Summoned is king Ammishtamru.

Summoned is king Niqmaddu as well.

...

*Above Shapash cries out:
'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!*

2. 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.

3. 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:

(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 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 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.

4. 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.

It is also intriguing that Jesus was associated with the cult of the dead: they say He is possessed by Beelzebub, 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.

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.

Daftar Pustaka

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A MATTER OF RE-INTERPRETING CERTAIN BIBLICAL TEXTS: RESPONSE TO KLAAS SPRONK

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Abstrak:

Tanggapan Singgih terhadap Spronk dilatarbelakangi oleh pengalaman ayahnya, yang meskipun mendapat didikan Gereformeerd yang melarang penghormatan kepada orang tua yang sudah meninggal dan berziarah ke kuburan, akhirnya toh melaksanakan hal itu. Pengalaman itu menjadikan jelas bagi Singgih bahwa larangan tsb bersumber pada pemahaman Barat-modern mengenai "nuclear family", padahal pemahaman Timur-tradisional biasanya adalah "extended family". Jadi meskipun diwacanakan sebagai teologi, sebenarnya lebih sosiologis daripada teologis! Paham terakhir ini tersebar luas di Indonesia Timur, dan meskipun secara resmi Gereja-Gereja di wilayah itu menentang penghormatan terhadap nenek moyang, diam-diam warga gereja tetap melaksanakannya dengan membuat pertemuan 3, 7, 40 malam sesudah penguburan, dan setiap Natal dan Paskah orang berbondong-bondong berziarah ke kuburan untuk berkomunikasi dengan yang telah meninggal. Penghormatan terhadap nenek moyang dapat dipertimbangkan kembali seperti usul Mery Kolimon, namun diperlukan juga sikap konfrontatif di samping konfirmatif. Pada akhirnya Singgih memeriksa teks Perjanjian Lama, dan mengusulkan agar Yesaya 41:8, 51:2 dan 63:16 digolongkan ke dalam teks-teks mengenai agama kekerabatan, dan Abraham serta Yakub, nenek moyang Israel, ditafsir sebagai nenek moyang, yang meskipun sudah meninggal, ikut memperhatikan kemaslahatan Israel.

Kata-kata kunci: *Nuclear family-extended family-ancestor's veneration-pilgrimage to cemeteries-kinship or familial religion*

1. Introduction: Childhood Memories

I am part of a big family. I have two brothers and three sisters, and when I was 17, my parents decided to adopt a baby-girl, so all in all, there were nine people at home in Makassar, in Eastern Indonesia. Almost everyday I met my relatives. Uncles, aunts, and cousins from either side of the family (my father had seven brothers and sisters; my mother had twenty: ten brothers and sisters added with ten step-brothers

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and step-sisters live in the same town. Half of the relatives from either side are Christians, the other half are Muslims. So we are part of an extended family, which relationship transcends religious affiliation. I think ancestor veneration is part of the extended-family system. Members of an extended-family include the living and the dead, and as the dead who precedes the living is giving protection to the living, the dead become more important than the living. At this moment I am unable to give you a social theory which may support my inkling, but from my experience living within an extended family system, I hope you can have an idea of what I am talking about.

My parents belong to the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (Indonesian abbr: GPIB). This is the former *Indische Kerk*, which was a state church in the colonial times. In 1948 it became a self-supporting church, but the characteristics of a state church are still there to this day, with emphasis on the bureaucracy rather than church tenets. However, my father worked as an administrator for a *zendings* hospital after the second world war, and there he met subsequently with *zendings* medical doctors, who were mostly *Gereformeerden*. They had a great influence on my father and mother, and so one of their outlooks was evident, i.e. my parents never visited any cemetery. You make a distinction between respect for the dead and veneration of the dead. My parents did not care, even for mere respect for the dead. But this piece of *Gereformeerde* faith did not last long.

In the end of September 1965, at one of the days that were filled with frightening news of the death of six generals and rumour of an attempted coup, my grandmother from my father's side died after a short illness. When she was brought to a Muslim cemetery, my father and mother went with the throng. This was unexpected, and it was there that for the first time I saw my father weeping. Then we went home. In the people's culture, there is a custom to gather every 3, 7, 40, 100 and 1000 days to commemorate the dead. My parents never go to these meetings, even if it is disguised as a commemoration service, if the deceased belongs to the Christian faith. But after a month, my father began to show signs of uneasiness. He was restless, could not sleep well, became easily irritated etc. Clearly he was in a strong emotional stress. He was advised by his youngest sister to visit the grave of their mother. He went with his sister (not with my mother), and after that he was again his older self. After this event, as a family we regularly go to cemeteries at Easter and Christmas, and pay respect to the dead members of our big family.

Because there was still a remnant of the *Gereformeerde* faith in my parents, we were not allowed to communicate with the dead. But I always watched with interest when my step-grandmother from my mother's side started *to talk* to my dead grandfather, introducing us as his grandchildren who are paying their respect to him and bringing him some cookies and drinks (mostly iced-water!), beside the traditional flowers, and asking his blessing for her, her children and her grandchild-

dren. This practice was done by all other visitors to the cemetery (and, in fact, by the whole country regardless of their religions. Every presidential candidate goes to their parents' grave to ask favour before election time). When it was time that we, the children had to take our parents to the grave (my father in 1988, my mother in 2006) we were doing it without any qualms.

2. Ancestor Veneration as Source for Contextual Theology

In Eastern Indonesia the dead ones are not really dead. They were brought to their graves, but then they start another life, a different way of being. Sometimes they are regarded as identical with the divine, sometimes they are the ones who mediate between human mortals and God, the immortal one. In the Mollucans, God or Jesus is called *tete manis*, which means "sweet grandpa". It is a practice which is taken from the primal kinship religion of the tribes. But I suspect there is also Dutch influence. *Tete manis* is derived from the phrase "onze lieve Heer", which was taken over during colonial times. In the Torajaland, God is called *Puang Matua*, "de oude Heer". When the tribes in Eastern Indonesia became Christians, they of course started to relate their ancestors with Christ. So what Mery Kolimon referred to in her dissertation (you referred to hers in your paper) is the common struggle of Christians in Eastern Indonesia.

The problem is that the ethnic churches (GPM, GMIM, GMIT, The Toraja Church) are officially against ancestor venerations. They regard themselves as guardians of the faith, which is handed down to them by the Protestant missionaries. These missionaries are regarded almost in a par with the biblical apostles. These churches usually have an anniversary day to remember when the first missionaries put their foot on the land. They are the bearer of truth and light to Eastern Indonesia, which formerly lived in the dark. The churches that grew out of the work of these missionaries regarded themselves as the core of a new breed of people, the new Israel, in contrast to their former lives in the kinship religions. In principle there is no continuity between the new and the old. As a logical consequence, the link between people and their ancestors have to be cut off. This attitude, in my opinion, is silently resisted by the majority. Formally they follow what the church officials stated, but informally they go their own way.

But because they form the majority, the post-missionary church officials never try to impose this attitude on the people by force. One form of compromise is to hold commemoration services following the old ritual of the dead, to meet every 3, 7, 40, 100 and 1000 days after the death of the beloved one. In this service the emphasis is on comforting those who are bereaved, but sometimes an empty chair is set aside so that the spirit of the dead can also follow the service. Every Easter and Christmas cemeteries are packed with people. Officially they are paying respect for the dead; unofficially they are continuing the tradition of communicating with the dead. So

if you ask for a change in policy in your paper, the question is *who* has to change? The people have been doing ancestor veneration all the time...

Speaking in sociological terms, the missionary policy tries to break the system of extended family and changed it with a new system, the nuclear family. It shows the bias of the western educated missionaries, which tend to look down on the extended family, and behind it, is of course individualism against collectivism. I think what Mery Kolimon and others are doing is remedial; they try to defend collectivism against the onslaught of individualism, which is continued in the present days by modernism. But when we are talking in academic terms, there are always pluses and minuses. The extended family and the ancestor veneration also have their dark side. First, it fosters ethnicism, and the result is superiority feeling which could be expressed in violence against others who do not belong to the clan/tribe/ethnic group. Second, it concentrates on the dead. This concentration could become so obsessive, that burial feasts are often regarded more important than wedding feasts, and the result is pauperization: people are left with huge debts, which have to be paid by the coming generations. Struggle to uphold the quality of present life is neglected as people try to make the second stage of their ancestors' life happier than before.

Third, it preserves patriarchy. I wonder how Mery Kolimon tackles this problem as a feminist. The ancestor is always a male, the father. When I face hardship and difficulty, sometimes I have a dream that my father comes down to comfort me with his presence. It is my father, not Jesus (as God). So in my understanding the ancestors are not God, but mediators between mortal humans and God. But I wonder why it is never my mother who comes down... Fourth, it stifles individual initiative. One of the factors that caused urbanization in Indonesia (people moving from the Eastern part to the Western part of the country) is that an extended family system does not appreciate individual merits. So I think the work of the missionaries is not all negative, and a real contextual theology should strive to hold a balance between the *extra nos* and the *intra nos*, between the Christ of Asia who are with us through our ancestors, and the Christ of Israel who comes to us from outside (brought by the missionaries).

3. The Texts of the Old Testament (OT)

At last I come to the texts of the OT. I am grateful for your information about the prominent place of the cult of the dead based on archaeological findings in Syria and West Mesopotamia, and also on your interpretation of certain Ugaritic texts. In general I agree that the context of Ancient Israel was also similar to these findings, and thus indirectly we can postulate that people in Ancient Israel also follow the same custom. On the other hand, the texts of the OT give contrary evidence: many of them are against the cult of the dead, as you have showed in your paper. Follow-

ing certain trends in the study of the OT, we can say that the texts function as polemic against the context, produced by “Yahweh-only” group/s, which eventually become dominant in the society. Later on this/these group/s controlled the canon, and thus it can be said that anti ancestor veneration is one of the characteristics of the OT.

But you are right in stating that the cult of the dead is “a hidden heritage” in Ancient Israel. What is a polemic if it is not against a certain phenomenon which is *practiced* by members of the society. Even if the battle is won, it may be asked whether people cease practicing the cult of the dead. If they are pushed out of society, the practice could go on outside the society. If something keeps going on, later on there will be people inside the society who sympathize to some extent with this practice. Maybe I am influenced by contemporary events in Eastern Indonesia. When theological institutions in Eastern Indonesia were asked by ATESEA (Association of Theological Education in South-East Asia) to give some new ideas on how the curriculum of their doctoral program could become contextual, the heads of these theological institutions (the elite!) responded with a statement which among others, emphasize ancestors’ veneration as one of the contents of the context, and sympathetic interaction between this context and Christian faith (Singgih, 2006, p. 150).

This sympathetic attitude may also be the case why in the OT there could exist two strands (or more) which are antithetical to one another. You have interpreted the story of Elijah and Elisha (in 2 Kings) in a different way than others. After their death, Elijah and Elisha become members of the heavenly host of God (p. 7). I can accept this interpretation, but then I add an explanation *why* could this kind of text (which is incompatible with the outlook of the OT) survive to this day. My explanation is not without its weakness, I admit. Others can say that it survives because it is not interpreted in the direction which is followed by Spronk, or that he is not interpreting the text, but *re-interpreting* the text!

4. Conclusion: But Why Not re-Interpreting?

Your paper has aroused my curiosity to look at certain texts in a different way. I think intercultural reading of the Bible is very promising in the context of Indonesia. If a certain perspective can be build through which we read the texts of the OT (I tried to build this perspective above), then we are on the track of what Jeffrey Kuan termed as “cultural interpretation of the Bible” (Kuan, 1999, pp. 70-77). This perspective makes me not satisfied with the interpretation of certain texts in the Isaianic corpus, namely references to the patriarch Abraham in Is 41:8 (actually an oracle to Jacob as a descendant of Abraham); 51:2 (twice, and also with Sara), and 63:16 (with Israel). The common interpretation is to see these references to Abraham as a way of strengthening the conviction of Israel that Yahweh is helping them just as he has helped their patriarch in the past. Yahweh is loyal to his promise to

Abraham. The emphasis is on Yahweh and not on Abraham. I do not want to deny Yahweh's ultimate role in saving Israel, but he is saving them through their ancestor Abraham. Israel is going to be saved *because* they are descendants of Abraham.

Is 63:16 is problematic, because there Yahweh as Father is contrasted with Abraham. RSV: "For thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us..." It is interesting that both Indonesian versions of the Bible, TB-LAI and BIMK, put it in the interrogative form: "Art thou not our Father? Abraham is ignorant about us and Israel does not recognize us" (Indonesian: "Bukankah Engkau Bapa kami? Abraham tidak tahu apa-apa tentang kami, dan Israel tidak mengenal kami"). Who is speaking here? Certainly not Israel. Probably they are a certain group of people, who regarded themselves as servants of God (Beuken, 1986). Perhaps we can say that these servants of God are no longer satisfied with their identity with Abraham and Israel, and place their identity with God as their father. But to call God as a father, imply kinship, and such indicates the characteristics of an ancestors' based religion. They have moved from looking at Abraham as their ancestor, and look at God as their ancestor. But this move is still done within the borders of an ancestor religion, and not necessarily out of it. To see the patriarchs of Israel as *dead* ancestors, but still powerful to save or to help (by the grace of God) in their afterlife is what I call re-interpretation.

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