The 'cloud of witnesses' as part of the public court of reputation in Hebrews

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By drawing parallels with the function of ancestors in African traditional religions, this article looks at the possibility that the Israelite ancestors mentioned in Hebrews played a far more dynamic role for the author and community he wrote for than most commentators appreciate. In addition to being examples of loyalty, it is argued that they also constitute an active presence, and similar to God, form part of the public court of reputation distributing honour to the Jesus followers. This also grounded and affirmed their Israelite identity.

Introduction

The author of Hebrews was a well-educated person, who carefully articulated and structured his writing by making frequent reference to the Tanak through direct quotations (most of all the New Testament [NT] books), paraphrases, compiling history lists and using several motifs, of which most relate to 'promise texts' (Steyn 2008). In chapter 11 in particular, he refers to various examples from Israelite tradition as examples of faith, or should we rather say examples of loyalty (*pistis*) (Crook 2004), interspersed with his own commentary, which Steyn characterises as a history list closely associated with the motif of 'promise texts' (2008:348).

The author enumerates various figures from the Israelite tradition in order to encourage the first listeners or readers to remain loyal themselves, and actually writes:

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. (Heb 12:1)

Since the ancestors played such a central role in Israelite tradition, this article has a particular interest to investigate their role in Hebrews, specifically Hebrews 12:1. Most commentators see these ancestors as figures who properly belong in the past. They must be remembered, emulated, but they do not really feature as a vibrant and active part of the community of Jesus followers. By drawing parallels with the function of ancestors in African traditional religions, this article looks at the possibility that the Israelite ancestors mentioned in Hebrews played a far more dynamic role for the author and community he wrote for. Specifically, while being great examples of loyalty, it will be argued here that they also constitute an active presence and similar to God, form a part of the public court of reputation, distributing honour to the Jesus followers. This at the same time also grounded and affirmed their Israelite identity.

The role of the forefathers (ancestors) in African and Israelite tradition

Fostering relationships with the ancestors was a characteristic feature of ancient Mediterranean peoples and was not something unique to Israel.[1] In fact, this relationship still characterises many peoples of the world today and is, for example, an inherent characteristic of African traditional religions. The value and importance of these relationships can be garnered from the traditional roles of ancestors in African tradition that affect all areas of life (see Beyers 2010:4 for a concise summary). The extent of this involvement and influence is so strong, even today, that it is demonstrated by the level of attention it gets from African theologians grappling with the question: what role do the ancestors play in Christian communities? Some argue none. Others argue that Christianity among Africans will not succeed unless the role and involvement of the ancestors are fully validated and accepted. How the ancestors function in Africa today can serve as a useful comparison with ancient Israelite culture, as will be demonstrated below, and is something that demands our initial attention.

1.This can refer to necromancy, annual commemorations, prayers and sacrifices offered to the dead, 'feeding' of the dead, veneration and even worship. For example, Aristotle writes: 'First among the claims of righteousness (justice) are our duties to the gods, then our duties to the spirits, then those to country and parents, then those to the departed; and among these claims is piety, which is either a part of righteousness or a concomitant of it' (*Virtues and Vices* 1250b). Israelite examples are further discussed later.

First we can ask: who are the ancestors in African traditional religion?

> Ancestors are mostly acknowledged up to four or five generations whereupon the memory of these ancestors dies out and they are considered to be truly dead … The spirit of the deceased then becomes an impersonal spirit residing in the spirit world. (Beyers & Mphahlele 2009:2)

Otherwise it is described that ancestors have a natural relationship to their descendents, where children consider their parents and grandparents as direct ancestors (Beyers 2010:4).

A strong feature in African culture is the belief in interconnectedness. What this means is that there is no ontological separation between God, the spirits or ancestors, human beings and nature. Everything is interconnected and stands in relationship to one another. If one of these relationships is disturbed, so are all the others, thus maintaining the order and harmony of relationships between all the various persons and beings involved is one of the primary aims of African traditional religion. The unbreakable bond between the living and the ancestors forms an extension of the relationships between the living, which emphasises group participation and conformance in order to maintain group harmony. Africans therefore, are group-orientated persons (collectivism) and are strongly orientated to the past, where ancestral traditions and the ancestors themselves continue to form a powerful and influential part of the community (Botha 2007:162–64; Meiring 2007:735–36, 741).

Where do the ancestors fit in the social hierarchy? In many traditional African societies, God (or the Supreme Being) forms the pinnacle in a hierarchy of interconnected being. Between God and the ordinary people there are various mediums and forms of communication also hierarchically arranged. Here the spirits of the ancestors play a pivotal role where they, as leaders of the people, communicate God's message and act as intermediaries, or even act out of their own will. The ancestors are revered as those who have supernatural, even sacred, status and who have power that can be either benevolent or malevolent. The ancestors are also both the source and guardians of social morality and traditions, and are regarded as models of proper living within the community. They can punish those who do not live by this morality by bringing on various calamities. (Beyers 2006:293; Beyers & Mphahlele 2009:1–2; Meiring 2007:741–742; Van Wyk 2006:708, 717).

'Sin' is therefore seen as anything that destroys the group's solidarity and this extends to where the delivered traditions of the ancestors, or the relationships maintained with them (and God and the community) are neglected or affected negatively. It demonstrates disrespect to the ancestors and undermines God's created order. Correct living requires that the ancestors must be part and parcel of everyday life, indeed, they need to be approached for their approval and blessing, or be consulted for advice and direction throughout a person's lifecycle from birth, puberty, adulthood, old age and to death. In this regard 'salvation' is not some eschatological event, but rather the successful completion of a person's lifecycle, something already experienced in the here and now through the maintenance of relationships, including the performance of ancestral customs and rituals (Beyers 2006:397–98; Meiring 2007:739, 744). In this regard, the ancestors are regarded as companions and guides in the journey of life and are understood as playing an active role, especially at initiation rites (Beyers & Mphahlele 2009:2).

If we look at the role of ancestors in the Israelite tradition discussed below we will notice some similarities and differences with African traditional religion. The point to bear in mind here is that Western ethnocentrism should not blind us to the pivotal role that ancestors play in collectivist societies. Certainly, the earliest followers of Jesus, forming part of a collectivist society themselves (cf. Malina 1993) would not have been immune to the need for making the forefathers a part of their community. This is a matter we will focus on later, but as we proceed, we will first distinguish between Israelites and their relationship with family ancestors and that of Israel as an *ethnos* with their corporate ancestors.

Family ancestors in Israel

Family ancestors here, refers to the relationship of the living with their deceased parents or immediate family. We can proceed by mentioning that literature testifies to Israelites 'feeding' their dead (Dt 26:14; Tob 4:17). Archaeological evidence also supports this. Bowls and platters for food are commonly found in the tombs in every period of Israelite and Judean history. Other items placed in tombs were jewels, mirrors, amulets, knives, jugs for liquids and juglets for oils and perfume. These things were supplied for their journey to, and stay, in the netherworld (Craffert 1999).

The sense of interconnectedness encountered in African traditional religion is also present here. If you look at the burial traditions of the patriarchs (Gn 49:29ff; Ex 13:19), then the ancestral land, the presence of the ancestors in their tombs, the living, as well as the tribal deity, all of these formed an integral whole (Craffert 1999:38). 'By keeping the cult of the ancestors, the family proclaimed its right to the land' (Van der Toorn 1996:235 cited in Craffert 1999:68).

Other interactions with the deceased included necromancy, which must have been popular due to the many incidents and prohibitions found in the Tanak (1 Sm 28–29; Dt 18:10–11; 2 Ki 21:6; Is 8:19–20; cf also Bae & Van der Merwe 2008). The ancestors were also mediators of divine power. They were understood as kind and benevolent, mediating protection, foreknowledge and healing (Craffert 1999:67). For example, the bones of Elisha raised a man back to life (2 Ki 13:20–21) and we cannot exclude the possibility that the bones of deceased relatives were understood as harbouring beneficial powers. After all, the welfare of the living was dependent on the proper burial of the dead (2 Sm 21:12–14). The son especially had to give a proper burial and carry out the necessary funeral rites (Gn 25:9–11; 35:29).

With the formation of the centralised temple cult in Jerusalem, it attempted – probably quite unsuccessfully – to replace the local family cults. The official tradition declared that the dead were not part of Israel's cultic life (Ps 88:3–12; 115:17; 6:5; Is 38:18) and the dead and their tombs were ritually impure

(Nm 19:11–116). Divine mediation was only found through the priests at the temple, not through the family ancestors.

During the first century CE the more acceptable forms of relationship with the dead included proper burial and commemorations. At death, the father became a family ancestor and in the burial rite the son was recognised as the new paterfamilias:

> and from then on one of his principal functions would be to venerate the remains of the ancestors to whom the living still felt themselves bound as members of the same family. This obligation was one of the most sacred that a son had towards his father, and it did not finish on the day of burial but was prolonged in a series of funeral ceremonies after the burial and in the annual commemorations whose celebration was also entrusted to the son. (Guijarro 2004:229)[2]

Archaeological evidence also illuminates our understanding here. Around the turn of the era the practice of *ossilegium* (secondary burial) emerged, where the bones of the dead were collected in ossuaries (bone boxes). This practice occurred mainly in and around Jerusalem from just before the turn of the era until 70 CE. The usual practice was different. When more space was needed in burial caves, the bodies were exhumed with the bones being placed in charnel piles where bones of a similar type of various persons were stacked together (Fine 2001:39–40). Otherwise burial sometimes took place in decorated wooden coffins as demonstrated by the tomb-caves near Jericho. These wooden coffins date from the late-Hasmonean period to 6 CE (Hachlili 1979). Tomb-caves near Jericho also delivered two inscribed ossuaries (one in Hebrew and one in Greek) with an inscribed bowl (in Hebrew). The funerary bowl referred to the persons in the ossuaries and indicated that an Ishmael, a third generation son, commemorated his father and grandfather (Hachlili 1979).

Corporate ancestors of Israel

Ancient Israel, when compared with African traditional religions, had another dimension to it that related to the ancestors. Frequent mention is made in Israelite literature of the 'God of my/our/their fathers',[3] or Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.[4] Abraham is referred to as 'our/your father' or Israelites are identified as 'children of Abraham' (TLevi 8:15; Jub 36:6; 4 Mac 9:21; 18:23).

When relating to the corporate ancestors of Israel, such as Abraham for example, various dimensions of Israelite identity were invoked such as divine election, the gift of the land, a shared ancestry, a common culture and sense of community and solidarity. In particular the emphasis fell on the inherent advantages of Israel as an *ethnos*. For example, Abrahamic descent gave Israelites a privileged and superior status when compared with other groups (cf. Mt 3:8–9; Lk 3:8; Jn 8:33). 'Abrahamic descent is thus a way of describing the glorious status of being a Judean ... By remembering Abraham, the Judeans told themselves who they were' (Esler 2006:27, 29). Their ancestry and membership of the Israelite *ethnos* made them an honourable people (ascribed honour) (Duling 2008:808–809; cf. Malina & Neyrey 1996), affording a privileged status as recipients of the law, the covenant and God's election. All these advantages were enjoyed by Israelites or Judeans because of how God related to and conferred benefits on their ancestors (3 Mac 1:23; Ps-Philo 9:4; 19:2; 23:11; 30:7; 1 Mac 2:20, 50; 4:10; 4 Bar 6:21).

God will have mercy on Israel because of the merit (*zekhut*) of the fathers (Ezk 33:24; Jr 9:24–25). We may also draw attention to the following texts:

> Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many. (Is 51:1–2)
>
> And unless you had received mercy through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, our fathers, not a single one of your descendants would be left on the earth. (TLevi 15:4)
>
> But he [*God*] will have mercy, as no one else has mercy, on the race of Israel, though not on account of you but on account of those who have fallen asleep. (Ps-Philo 35:3)
>
> [*The Judeans plea for deliverance*] – And if not for their own sakes, yet for the covenants he had made with their fathers … (2 Mac 8:15)

The living must continue this sense of community and relationship with the deceased, and loyalty to the Torah is at the same time demonstrating loyalty to ancestral beliefs (3 Mac 1:3; 4 Mac 16:16) or the customs of the fathers (2 Mac 11:25; 4 Mac 18:5). Needless to say this loyalty to Israelite tradition was the very means by which the covenant privileges were maintained and it is emphasised in various texts, as the following examples demonstrate:

> I [*Eleazar*] will not violate the solemn oaths of my ancestors to keep the Law, not even if you gouge out my eyes and burn my entrails. (4 Mac 5:29; cf. 9:1–2, 29)
>
> Far be it from me [*Daniel*] to leave the heritage of my fathers and cleave to the inheritances of the uncircumcised. (LivPro 4:16)
>
> Woe to you who reject the foundations and the eternal inheritance of your forefathers! (1 En 99:14)
>
> Happy – who preserves the foundations of his most ancient fathers, made firm from the beginning. Cursed – he who breaks down the institutions of his ancestors and fathers. (2 En 52:9–10 [J])

Several observations are in order here. Israelite ancestors – something supported by the great tradition – were people to be honoured, emulated and remembered. By being one of their descendents it conferred many privileges, including honour, an elevated social status and a privileged identity. It just needs to be emphasised that the corporate ancestors played a pivotal role in the identity and memory of the living. Those who can lay claim to the ancestors as belonging 'to us' can lay claim to all the privileges, status, identity and honour that went along with it. But at the same time, at least according to the priestly tradition, they were at best passive

2.(Cf. Gn 49:29–32; 50:25; Jos 24:32; Tob 4:3–4; 6:15; 14:9, 11–12; Jub 23:7; 36:1–2, 18; 2 Mac 5:10; War 5:545; TReu 7:1; TLevi 19:5.)

3.(2 En 71:30; TMos 9:6; Jub 36:6; Tob 8:5; Jdt 7:28; 10:8; WisSol 9:1; PrAzar 1:3, 29; 2 Ezra 1:50; 4:62; 8:25; 9:8; PrMan 1:1; Ps-Philo 27:7; 4 Mac 12:17; AddEsth 14:18; PssSol 15:1.)

4.(Tob 4:12; Jdt 8:26; Sir 44:22; 1 Bar 2:34; 2 Mac 1:2; PrMan 1:1, 7; 4 Ezra 1:39; 6:8–9; ApZeph 9:4; TLevi 15:4; 18:6, 14; TJud 25:1; TDan 7:2; TAsh 7:7; TBenj 10:4, 6; TMos 3:9; Jub 1:7; 4 Bar 4:10; 6:21; 4 Mac 7:19; 13:17; 16:25; EzekTrag 104–105; and the object of special attention in jubilees.)

and somewhat aloof participants within the community since they properly belonged to the realm of the dead. They did form a part of the community but were spatially somewhere 'down below' or 'up above' (in Sheol or one of the heavens) or their bones were separated by the demands of purity. In a word, the living could involve themselves with the dead through a visit to the grave, or perhaps a heavenly journey, but the dead could not really involve themselves with the living. Perhaps they could watch, but participate? Not really, unless of course, they came back to life from the dead.

The background to Hebrews

I understand the letter of Hebrews to address an Israelite audience and arguments that it addresses a Gentile audience are not persuasive (cf. Bruce 1990). Particularly relevant is Koester's (2005) interpretation of the historical background and occasion for the writing of Hebrews. Koester explains that Hebrews is a 'word of exhortation' (Heb 13:22) to a group of early Christians to renew their faith and commitment to the community since they are dangerously drifting away from its confession (Heb 5:11; 6:12; 10:25). Koester specifically recognises three stages of development within the community that can be gathered from the text:

> The group was formed when Christian evangelists proclaimed a message of salvation and performed miracles to validate their preaching (2:3–4). Later, non-Christians accosted members of the community and denounced them to the local authorities, who imprisoned them and allowed Christian property to be plundered. During the conflict, Christians remained loyal to each other and attended to those in prison (10:32–34). Eventually, overt persecution gave way to a lower level of conflict in which non-Christians continued verbally to harass Christians. Some from the community were in prison and others felt the effects of being marginalized in society. Although some continued to show faith and compassion, others experienced a malaise that was evident in tendencies to neglect the faith and community gatherings (5:11; 6:12; 10:25; 13:3, 13–14). (Koester 2005:232)

Hebrews was probably written for a community somewhere outside of Palestine, their imprisonment therefore demonstrating that non-Israelite local officials were involved. Hebrews reflects a situation where these followers of Jesus were estranged from both their fellow Israelites and the broader city and society (Koester 2005:241). According to Koester (2005:243–44) the action against these 'Christians' was probably for two main reasons, to give up their beliefs and to isolate those who persisted from the wider society, while dissuading others to join them.

Koester (2005:246), rather surprisingly, does not identify a major conflict with other Israelites (Koester speaks of 'Jews'), or that the author of Hebrews discouraged association with the local Israelite community; neither that the believers were under pressure to return to 'Judaism' so as to enjoy legal protection, nor that they were attracted to the Israelite community for a clear sense of identity and well-defined 'religious' practices. The problem he generalises as to discourage 'shrinking back' (10:39) from the 'Christian' community in order to obtain a more favourable judgment from a 'non-Christian society', in itself left somewhat undefined. According to Koester, whatever their legal status as citizens, the recipients of the letter would have felt like aliens and foreigners where they resided, but their experiences parallel that of Abraham (Heb 11:9; 11:13), and they, like the patriarch, are promised a future city and inheritance (Heb 6:13–14; 11:9–10, 16; 11:8–9). In this social context, resident aliens, transients and foreigners were socially and legally inferior to citizens of a particular city, and were often regarded with suspicion and contempt (Koester 2005:247).

For DeSilva (2008:194), the community of Hebrews 'reveals a sub-cultural relationship with the Jewish ethnic culture', and in terms of loyalty to and trust in God, 'proceeds to show how Christians may fulfil that virtue more fully than those Jews outside the Christian subculture.' Otherwise he describes it generally as a 'minority culture' set in a counter-cultural relationship to the broader Greco-Roman society (2008:341–47).

Disagreeing with Koester it is understood here that the community of Hebrews were in some conflict with fellow Israelites. Also, Koester's view is to be questioned that they were not a discouraged association or the like. The author of Hebrews certainly wants to create a distance between his community and fellow Israelites by constructing and legitimating an alternative symbolic universe for his followers of Jesus (cf. Salevao 2002). He wants to legitimate their Israelite identity and convince them that their social status as Israelites is more honourable. What is relevant therefore, is the evaluative dimension of group membership and belonging. As social identity theory informs us, groups tend to form a positive valuation of themselves, as 'better' than other groups, especially in collective and agonistic contexts (Tajfel 1978, 1981; Tajfel & Turner 1979; Brown 1995, 2000, 2001). The author of Hebrews explains that, compared with their fellow Israelites or Judeans, followers of Jesus have a better mediator (Heb 8:6) who offers 'better sacrifices' (Heb 9:23). They live within the orbit of a 'better covenant' (Heb 7:22), have a 'better hope' (Heb 7:19), and have 'better promises' (Heb 8:6) (DeSilva 2008:346).[5]

We can agree with Koester concerning the sense of alienation or isolation that this community must have felt as 'resident aliens, transients and foreigners.' Being so isolated, who can vouch for their honour, their status and Israelite identity? Since it is negated or questioned by fellow Israelites (the living), the role of the ancestors would have been particularly important. It is no accident that in the Synoptic Gospels we are told that Moses and Elijah appeared at Jesus' transfiguration (Mt 17:1–9; Mk 9:2–8; Lk 9:28–36). As representatives of the ancestors, the latter are incorporated into the Jesus movement. It would have been critical for the honour, status and identity of an Israelite follower of Jesus that the ancestors were on board. It is suggested here that we encounter a similar dynamic in Hebrews, but in a very special way, since the living are seen as sharing the same 'space' as the ancestors, and they are actively involved in the public court of reputation by distributing honour to the living.

5.The comparative adjective (*kreitton*) also appears in 10:34 and 11:35, 40, et cetera. The approach of positive or negative group identity and comparison, or intergroup dynamics, was also applied to Hebrews by Johnson (2002). Johnson interprets Hebrews as advocating an ideal society that is open to outsiders as opposed to the more restricted society offered by the Levitical system.

The ancestors and the distribution of honour in Hebrews

Traditionally the ancestors as 'witnesses' in Hebrews are interpreted as figures who properly belong to the past, that is, as figures of Israel's past who are worthy of emulation in view of the present challenges. In other words, although they are part of the community, they have that position as passive and aloof participants.

For example, Bruce (1990) interprets the 'cloud of witnesses' as those:

> not, probably, in the sense of spectators, watching their successors as they in their turn run the race for which they have entered; but rather in the sense that by their loyalty and endurance they have borne witness to the possibilities of the life of faith. It is not so much they who look at us as we look at them – for encouragement. (p. 333)

Though Bruce also admits that *martus* is capable of having the sense of being spectators (e.g. 1 Tm 6:12) while in Hebrews 10:28 both senses of 'witness' are implied (1990:333, n. 8). It is suggested here that 'witnesses' in Hebrews 12:1 performs the same function.

For Marohl the key to Hebrews is 'faithfulness' in service of creating a positive social identity for the community. 'The author compared the faithfulness of the addressees with the unfaithfulness of a symbolic outgroup in order to encourage a positive social identity' (Marohl 2008:182). According to Marohl, the community's antecedents, Jesus and the 'great cloud of witnesses', are faithful, and they are encouraged to 'look back' to 'run their race' (Marohl 2008:180).

DeSilva (2008) approaches Hebrews from the Mediterranean institutions of honour and shame, patronage and clientage. His analysis pinpoints how the author's rhetoric attempted to persuade the audience to 'despise the shame' of the broader society. What is important is God's court of reputation, as well as that of the believing community, that is, their worth and status in God's eyes and that of fellow believers. In Hebrews 11 specifically, the author wants the community to identify themselves with 'faith', especially as it was exhibited by exemplars from Israelite tradition and apply it to their own situation (DeSilva 2008:193–218). These exemplars 'despised shame' within the popular honour discourse of the surrounding cultures, and proved their loyalty and commitment to God. In a similar fashion believers must remain loyal to the values and behaviours of the alternative social group they embody.

The above interpretations in various ways appreciate the role of the Israelite ancestors in Hebrews but essentially understand Jesus' living followers to be the only active and present members of the community. It is argued here, however, that the Israelite ancestors are active and present in a very special way.

Firstly, we can see how the author of Hebrews incorporates the ancestors into the movement of Jesus followers. In Hebrews 11:40, it refers to the faithful ancestors, but, importantly, they did not receive the promise, so that 'together with us would they be made perfect (brought to completion, or fulfilment).' What we have here is an example of contested social memory (Esler 2005). The audacity of the author to somehow suggest that the ancestors, although faithful, were not 'perfect'![6] They also needed the redemptive work of Jesus. And if these ancestors were not perfect, how much more does the living not require the redemptive death of Jesus! And as a consequence, how much more do they not need to remain part of the professing community!

This incorporation of the ancestors into the community and the perfection of the 'great cloud of witnesses' are found again in Hebrews 12:22–23:

> But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, *to the* spirits *of righteous men made perfect…*[7] [*Author's own emphasis*]

The author of Hebrews envisages a symbolic universe where the living are incorporated into a reality of which the ancestors form a vital component. They share the same 'space' that has both a future and a present dimension to it. As far as the author is concerned, these perfected 'cloud of witnesses' belong 'with us', or 'we belong with them', so too all the privileges, status, identity, and honour that comes by associating with them.

The importance of fellowship and communion with the ancestors for these Israelites can perhaps be explained by contemporary examples. For some African Christians the 'cloud of witnesses' (Heb 12:1) referring back to chapter 11 is seen as a parallel for 'acknowledging the role of ancestors in the lives of the living' even today (Kalengyo 2009:49–50). Kalengyo understands that what the author does here is to reinforce the truthfulness of his message – even the Israelite ancestors testify to the supreme significance and status of Jesus. Thus, when the letter to the Hebrews was written, the ancestors could influence the lives of the living. Kalengyo, who argues that ancestors can fit comfortably within the parameters of Christian theology, and who certainly appreciates the role of ancestors in African (especially Ganda[8]) tradition better than any 'Westerner', appreciates the role of the ancestors in Hebrews 12:1 in the following way: 'The departed faithful ancestors as it were are still in a way in fellowship with the living providing inspiration and encouragement' (Kalengyo 2009:66).

Let us draw attention again to what the author writes in Hebrews 12:1: '… we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.' If the living share the same 'space' as the

6.Cf. Esler (2005:163): 'The notion that the perfection of the great figures from Israel's past … could not take place apart from the perfection of those who believed in Christ would have struck Judeans who were not members of the Christ movement as blasphemous effrontery.'

7.Here one cannot agree with Gray (2003:343), who argues that Hebrews 11:39–12:1 refers to the 'perfection' of the cloud of witnesses that is now in the hands of the audience. Gray contends that the 'author ties the fate of the patriarchs and matriarchs to that of his audience. If the audience does not get to the finish line, according to the logic of 11:40, then no one gets there.' In view of Hebrews 12:23 this argument is not convincing.

8.The Ganda are a people situated in central Uganda.

deceased, is it not reasonable to assume that the ancestors constitute an *active presence* within the community, as Kalengyo (2009:66) suggests, 'providing inspiration and encouragement?' Placing it within the ancient Mediterranean context, this would mean distributing honour as 'witnesses' of the community's loyalty. As we saw above, DaSilva speaks about the believers giving due credence to God and the community's court of reputation. It is suggested here that the ancestors form part of the public court of reputation. Existing as an isolated community, and having to endure the shame of wider society, having the ancestors as belonging to their social group and being honoured by them would have contributed much to affirm or ground their Israelite status and identity.

The primacy of the public court of reputation (PCR) has recently persuasively been argued by Crook (2009). Challenging Malina's model on the dynamics of challenge and riposte, Crook demonstrates that in the real world social challenges to honour or shame did occur across lines of social status as well as gender, and it was 'the absolute power of the PCR to define honour and shame as it pleases' (Crook 2009:610). This approach takes into account the role of collectivism, and removes the emphasis away from individual claims to honour (cf. Crook 2009:598–599).[9] This scenario explains the situation of Hebrews, as suggested here, quite well.

Concluding observations

Functioning as more than mere exemplars of loyalty, the ancestors are incorporated into the community of Jesus followers, are present and active in the same 'space' and as a consequence, form part of the public court of reputation with God and fellow believers. This is the strategy of the author of Hebrews whereby his isolated and pressurised community is honoured not only by God and fellow believers, but also by the ancestors, those glorious figures of the past 'belong with us' and who, like us, have been perfected by Jesus. Who better than the 'perfected' ancestors to validate your profession of Jesus, your Israelite identity, and your honour, while having to endure the 'shame' of fellow Israelites and the broader society? It is because the ancestors are watching and play an active role in the public court of reputation by which the followers of Jesus are encouraged to 'throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us (Heb 12:1).

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9.Crook (2009:610) also suggests that we change 'ascribed honour' to 'attributed honour' and 'acquired honour' to 'distributed honour'. DeSilva (2008:345) also argues that honour was not merely about the agonistic (competitive) game to obtain honour at the expense of others, but the importance of patron-client bonds in antiquity should also alert us that the need to show honour to patrons was equally, if not more powerful.

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