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THE MAASAI AND THE ANCIENT ISRAELITES: AN EARLY 20TH CENTURY INTERPRETATION OF THE MAASAI IN GERMAN EAST AFRICA[1]

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Abstract

The idea that a certain ethnic or social group is historically related to the ancient Israelites is a widespread phenomenon in Africa. In some cases the identification is made from a 'we'-perspective about 'our' group, such as the Lembas in Zimbabwe and South Africa. In other cases it is made from a 'they'-perspective about 'their' group, such as Moritz Merker's claim about the Maasai of East Africa. Merker served as a colonial officer in German East Africa, and his Die Masai: Ethnographische Monographie eines ostafrikanischen Semitenvolkes *(1904, 1910[2]) is generally seen as the first ethnographic study of the Maasai, and as such it continues to receive attention. However, the ethnographic focus of the book is framed by a discussion about the past of the Maasai, arguing – with reference to contemporary German Assyriology and Biblical Studies – that they are a Semitic people originating in Arabia and sharing roots with the ancient Israelites. The article discusses Merker's claim and argues that its central idea of a non-African background of the Maasai reflects Merker's colonial, interpretive context.*

Key Words: Bible; Colonial Interpretation; Maasai; Moritz Merker; Postcolonial Interpretation

All over the world there are groups of people who claim that their particular ethnic or social group – or some other group they are able to identify – are descendants of or are in other ways related to the ancient Israelites. The various examples of identification may be based on quite different ethnic, sociological, or cultural parameters, but underneath is often a supposedly historical claim: 'we' (our group) or 'they' (the other group) are able to trace a historical or even genetic connection back to the ancient Israelites in general, or more specifically to one or more of the so-called tribes – even 'lost tribes' – of Israel.

A European example of this phenomenon is the so-called British-Israel movement, which used to argue that the British people descends from the 'tribe of Judah', whereas other 'Israelite tribes' are found in other parts of Protestant, Western Europe, such as for example Dan in Denmark and Benjamin in Norway. The movement experienced its heyday in the last decades of the 19th century and first decades of the 20th, a time when the adherents were able to read the royal promise to Judah in Genesis 49:10 – saying that "the scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet" – directly into the colonial apex of the British empire.[3] But the British were certainly not the only ones. Asian examples include the assumed 'identification' of the Japanese as descendants of the ancient Israelites, but also the Bene Israel of India, the Pashtuns of Afghanistan, the Chiang-Min of Tibet, and many others.[4] In Africa, the same is the case with a large number of ethnically and/or culturally defined groups, from the Beta Israel or Falashas (Ethiopia) in

the north to the Lembas (Zimbabwe and South Africa) in the south, and from the Igbos (Nigeria) in the west to the Merina (Madagascar) in the east.[5] From a popular perspective, an illustrative example can be (the self-proclaimed) King Ayi of Togo, who last year (2016) visited Israel, meeting with a Government minister and requesting "the Jewish state to officially recognise his people as a lost tribe of Israel."[6] And, from a scholarly perspective the focus on supposedly "lost tribes of Israel" in Africa is currently so massive that it has actually become a distinct research field, with its own discourses, literature, and conferences.[7]

The Maasai – mainly located in Kenya and Tanzania – is one of the groups where claims are being made about an historical relation to the ancient Israelites. This occurs partly in church contexts, such as when some pastors and lay people make an assumed Israelite connection an element of their construction of Maasai identity; but partly in secular contexts as well, such as when popular tourism discourses make use of the "lost tribe of Israel" motif in coffee table books or in websites aimed at the market of Western safari tourists hoping to experience something really exotic.

Behind these contemporary voices in Maasai church and secular contexts, there are also some voices of the past – that is, voices of early colonial or missionary discourses – expressing similar ideas. The undoubtedly most important one is Moritz Merker's monograph *Die Masai: Ethnographische Monographie eines ostafrikanischen Semitenvolkes* from 1904, with a second edition in 1910.[8] Merker was a German colonial officer serving at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro from 1895 to 1908, and his book is to some extent still referred to in scholarly discourses. On the one hand, Merker's book is characterised by a systematic approach to societal data about the Maasai around 1900, and as such it is still a most valuable source and early interpretation, frequently being referred to by anthropologists and sociologists working with Maasai societies today. On the other hand, however, the book is also characterised by a peculiar interpretative grid through which some of Merker's data on the Maasai is read, a grid seeing the Maasai as a Semitic people originating in Arabia and sharing roots with the ancient Israelites and Babylonians, and this is a grid and an interpretation that is hardly appreciated by modern social scientists.

Reading Merker today, more than a century after the publication of his book, I am struck by the tension he is willing to create between the Maasai on the one hand, and the neighbouring Bantu groups on the other. The Maasai are portrayed very positively (beautiful appearance, high culture, skilled warriors), whereas the neighbours are portrayed as their ultimate negative contrasts. Seeing this tension in relation to Merker's idea that the Maasai originate outside Africa, in Arabia, I find it difficult to escape the impression that the colonial officer's embrace of the Maasai actually reflects a colonial agenda. The only positive expressions of African culture and society which Merker is able to identify – that is, those of the Maasai – are actually brought to Africa from the outside, according to his reconstruction of history.

Based on this observation, I would like to re-read Merker's embrace of the Maasai and ask: To what extent does Merker's claim about a relationship between the Maasai and the ancient Israelites and Babylonians reflect his colonial – that is, early 20th century, German East African – context? It is a quite modest question. I am not attempting to verify or reject the content of this claim of Merker and subsequently many others, that the Maasai are culturally and even genetically related to the ancient Israelites and Babylonians. Neither am I questioning Merker's source critical work, although some of his contemporaries did so, arguing that his sources were not representative of mainstream Maasai religion and culture, but rather influenced by early missionaries.[9] What I will do is simply to focus on the

interaction between Merker's version of the idea of a link between the Maasai and the ancient Israelites and Babylonians and his interpretative context, that of German East Africa. I will do this from three perspectives. First, Merker and his book, where the claim about the Maasai and the ancient Israelites and Babylonians is made; then, the interpretative context, that of the role of the Bible in colonial East Africa; and finally, an attempt at describing the interaction between Merker's claims and his interpretative context.

Merker and his Book

Moritz Merker was born in Schlesien in Germany in 1867. The son of an officer in the army, he followed in his father's footsteps. For some years he served as an officer in Germany, but he strongly wished to go to Africa, to German East Africa, the German colony that included what we know today as Rwanda, Burundi and mainland Tanzania. Finally he succeeded and he was appointed to a position in Moshi in 1895. Stationed there for eight years, he became acquainted with the Maasai people, and developed a strong interest in their culture and their religion. The result was his major opus, one of the first ethnographic studies of the Maasai.

Merker's monograph *Die Masai: Ethnograpische Monographie eines ostafrikanischen Semitenvolkes*, was published in 1904, and a posthumous second version – which is the one mostly referred to – was published in 1910. It is an impressive work of 456 pages (the 1910 edition), in addition to a number of appendices with drawings of shields of various Maasai clans as well as drawings of various kinds of owners' marks on cattle. The work is impressive, as I said, but I would like to add that also the author impresses, in the sense that without any formal training in ethnography or biblical studies he goes into these academic fields and wants to make a contribution. His self-esteem is that of late 19th century European men, who took for granted that they as such had a mission to fulfill, serving as explorers, colonisers, and missionaries.

Content-wise, the book can be divided into two parts. The main part, pages 5-300, is an ethnographic analysis of the Maasai, focusing on questions like political organisation, family structures, age groups, weaponry, cattle, illness, death, religion, law, etc. It is a descriptive study, not explicitly interacting with contemporary theory or discourses. As a descriptive study it is very valuable, giving glimpses into Maasai life and thought more than a century ago, although filtered through the eyes of Merker. As such it has no parallels, and as mentioned above this ethnographic main part of the book continues to receive attention amongst contemporary researchers in Maasai anthropology, sociology and history.[10]

However, this ethnographic main part of the book, focusing on the Maasai *per se*, is framed by texts focusing on the Maasai in relation to the ancient Israelites and Babylonians. On the one side, before the main part, there are three prefaces and a brief introduction. The first preface occurs in both editions of the book and is written by Merker himself. Here he emphasises the Maasai relation to the ancient Israelites and Babylonians, countering possible objections by saying that the insights he is sharing are not common knowledge amongst ordinary Maasais. The second edition of the book then has two additional prefaces, one is a hagiography written by a friend, and the other is a praise of the claim about the Maasai relation to the ancient Israelites and Babylonians. The latter is written by Professor Fritz Hommel, linguist and orientalist at the University of Munich, Germany, and is important because it gives the autodidact Merker the academic support he needed.[11] These prefaces are followed by Merker's introduction, a brief five pages historical localisation of the Maasai, and presenting the idea of a Semitic origin of the people.

On the other side, after the ethnographic main part of the book, follows a more detailed, fifty pages long discussion of the supposed Semitic origin, where Merker deals in detail with the parallels he claims to find between his own empirical material and its counterparts in biblical and Babylonian texts.

Between these frame texts, Merker first presents (before the main ethnographic part of the book) and then develops (after the ethnographic part) the idea that the Maasai belong to a "Semitic group of peoples," whose origin is to be found in the Arabian Peninsula. His major argument is the striking parallels he claims to find between traditional Maasai culture and religion and their supposed counterparts in Babylonian sources and the Old Testament. The close relationship between Babylon and Israel is taken for granted, as one would expect in the early years of the twentieth century, and plays a major role on a rhetorical level. Nevertheless, in the more detailed comparison with the Maasai traditions most of the examples are taken from the Old Testament. There is no space to go into detail here, so let me just mention that Merker points out parallels with regard to how the two or three traditions conceptualise the creation of the earth, the creation of the first human beings, the idea of a paradise, the introduction of sin through a snake, a great flood, a lawgiver, the rite of circumcision, and even the Ten Commandments.[12] The question, according to Merker, is then how these parallels can be explained, and he sees four possibilities:[13]

- That the Maasai had direct contact with the Babylonians.
- That the Maasai concepts are influenced by Christian missionaries and/or Muslims.
- That the Maasai, Hebrews and Babylonians share the same roots from Arabia.
- That the Maasai concepts are the oldest ones, and have influenced Israelites and Babylonians.

Merker concludes that the third possibility is the most convincing one. Nomadic Arabia was the home of a people with certain religio-cultural concepts and practices. Some 'Semites' migrated out of Arabia, he argues; in two directions: some migrated north-westwards into the Middle East and became the ancestors of the ancient Israelites, whereas others migrated southwards, into Africa and became the ancestors of the Maasai.

Interpretative Context: The Role of the Bible in Colonial Africa

After this narrow reading of Merker, I would like to broaden the perspective, and turn to Merker's immediate, interpretative context, that of the use of the Bible in colonial Africa. Let me concentrate on two discourses. One is the biblical background of the overall conceptual tools used to identify major ethnic groups on a global scale, the other is the Bible as a provider of models used to reinterpret the identity of certain African ethnic groups.

First, the biblical background of the overall conceptual tools used to identify major ethnic groups on a global scale. The Table of nations in Genesis 10 argues that from the three sons of Noah – Shem, Ham, and Japheth – "the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood" (Genesis 10:32). Based on this biblical text, not only theologians but linguists and ethnographers as well talked about 'Semites' (Middle East / Arabia), 'Hamites' (Africa), and 'Japhethites' (Europe). When colonial discourses refer to the term 'Hamites' about Africans, however, we have to distinguish between two related but quite opposite concepts. One is the so-called 'curse of Ham,' which based on (a mis-understanding of) Genesis 9:18-27 argues that black Africans are cursed and therefore, according to Scripture, sentenced to slavery. The idea of a 'curse of Ham' was important in

the 18th and 19th centuries slavery debates in Europe and the United States, but it also served as a more general conceptualisation of oppressive attitudes toward black Africans.[14] One example of its influence is that the First Vatican Council (1870) actually discussed whether black Africans could be released from the Hamitic curse. Another example – this one from the Protestant side – is found in the famous Keil & Delitzsch commentary from the 1860s (a commentary that is still being used in certain theological contexts). Here it is argued that not only history but even the present (the German original of the Genesis commentary was published in 1861, that is before the North American abolishment of slavery) demonstrates the effects of the curse of Ham.[15]

The other and quite opposite concept about 'Hamites' in colonial discourses in relation to Africa is the so-called "newer Hamitic theory."[16] It developed throughout the 19th century in reaction to the European 'discovery' of Pharaonic Egypt, a 'discovery' that raised the problem of how a cursed Ham could build such a great civilization. The solution to this problem was the idea of a pastoralist migration from Europe to Sub-Saharan Africa, with the result that white migrants to some extent mixed with black Africans. When I say "to some extent," it is because it was argued that it was still (in the 19th century) possible to distinguish (with parameters like physiognomy and culture) between 'Negroes' (mainly farmers) and 'Hamites' of non-African background (mainly pastoralists). Examples of the latter are then ethnic groups such as the Tutsi (supposed to be 'superior' to the neighboring Hutu, and we all know what this lead to in the 1990s) and the Maasai (supposed to be 'superior' to the Bantu-speaking neighbours).

Second, the Bible also played a role in colonial times with regard to providing models that were used to reinterpret the identity of certain African ethnic groups. Several ethnic or social groups identified with the experiences of the ancient Israelites and developed ideas of a historical connection. We can distinguish here between two perspectives. In most cases the identification with the ancient Israelites is made from a 'we'-perspective about 'our' group. An illustrative example is the Lembas in Zimbabwe and South Africa, who have a conscious identity and strong oral tradition about a migration from the north, originally from Judea, two and a half thousand years ago.[17] However, there are also examples where the identification with the ancient Israelites is made from a 'they'-perspective about 'their' group. An illustrative example here is the American ethnographer (and Jesuit missionary) Joseph J. Williams' book *Hebrewisms of West Africa* (1930),[18] where he argues that travelling Jews/Israelites influenced and left traces in the culture and religion of the Ashanti (of today's Ghana). He contrasts the general "polytheism and superstition" of the Ashanti with the reminiscences of a Yahwism brought them from the outside.

In sum, amongst the many roles played by the Bible in colonial Africa, is a clear tendency of letting it prove that most examples of what is supposed to be 'high culture' result from impulses from outside the continent. One does not need much fantasy to see a connection between this tendency and the agendas of late 19th and early 20th centuries colonial enterprises in Africa.

Interaction between Merker's Claims and his Interpretive Context

After this brief presentation of Merker's historical claims and interpretative context, it is time to ask how the two interact; that is, how is his reconstruction of a cultural and even genetic relationship between the Maasai and the ancient Israelites and Babylonians to be understood against the colonial context of which he was part?

Reading Merker, one immediately notices his very positive portrayal of the Maasai. His way of writing – creating the impression of being close to his informants – enables the

reader to imagine the colonial officer travelling through the field and assessing what he observes. Merker acknowledges the Maasai's beautiful appearance (especially the young girls, not so much the old women),[19] he respects their cultural and technical skills, and he admires their national pride and not least their military organisation.[20] There are no reasons to doubt Merker's honesty; having spent several years together with the Maasai, he is really impressed by what he has seen and heard. Merker might be an example of the colonial phenomenon we see documented in several contexts, that the colonisers eventually learn to know the colonised ones quite intimately and gradually start identifying with them. This does not mean that Merker is negative toward the German colonial enterprise. The colonial discourse is taken for granted. Africa is inferior, and civilisation is only possible by help of European colonisers. Still, there is something about the Maasai, and they stand out in comparison to other ethnic groups.

The simultaneity of respect and admiration on the one hand and a full acceptance of the colonial enterprise on the other deserves an explanation. Merker makes an overall construction of the Maasai in past and present, and my impression is that he conceptualises the Maasai as predecessors of the contemporary European colonisers and that they, like the current colonisers, are thought to represent culture and power into the general darkness of Africa. Postcolonial theory has taught us that when the colonial West describes the rest of the world, it easily constructs a foil of itself. The 'others' are constructed in ways that emphasise 'our' positive characteristics. In Merker's conceptualisation of 'Africa,' the Maasai represent such a contrasting foil to the other, neighbouring ethnic groups, and they are to some extent constructed in the image of contemporary German ideals: historically they have migrated into Africa, ethnically they have avoided interracial relations with other Africans, militarily they demonstrate strength and skills, and religiously they are the heirs of the ancient Babylonians and Israelites.

My interpretation of Merker would correspond with several others examples of colonial biblical interpretation in relation to Africa. I have already mentioned the so-called "newer Hamitic theory," which assumes that certain pastoralist groups descend from intermarriage between Africans and migrating Hamites from Europe. Merker's claim that the ancestors of the Maasai are not Hamites, rather explicitly non-African Semites, strengthens the idea of the Maasai as a result of white migration. I have also mentioned Williams' 'Hebrewisms' of West Africa, where migrating Jews/Israelites are said to have influenced Ashanti religion and culture and to some extent raised it from its indigenous barbarism. Again, it corresponds with Merker's basic concept that traits of high culture in Africa reflect white migration into the continent.

However, a geographically, historically, and colonially closer example is the early interpretation of the Great Zimbabwe ruins. It was in 1872 that the German explorer Karl Mauch 'discovered' – that is, as the first European – these enormous stone structures, a kind of Acropolis in the midst of southeastern Africa. He took for granted that such structures could not have been built by Africans, and suggested that they were remnants of the city of Ophir, the legendary source of gold for biblical King Solomon in 1 Kings 9-10.[21] In this way Mauch – and he had many followers the next decades[22] – was able to create a narrative about a three thousand years old colonial enterprise, directed by the wise King Solomon who as part of his service of God – that of building a temple in Jerusalem – extracted wealth out of Africa. Mauch and his colonial contemporaries could hardly have found a better role model.

The parallels between Mauch and Merker are quite clear. Both take for granted that what they find to be key values in current (that is late 19th and early 20th centuries) African

culture reflect non-African influence, brought into the continent by migrants related to biblical Israel. In this sense, Mauch's 'Zimbabweans' as well as Merker's Maasai can be seen as predecessors to the current European colonisers, and the colonisers can see themselves as part of a new version of an ancient colonisation paradigm.

Conclusion

Merker's main claim – at least in the texts framing the ethnographic major bulk of his book – is that of a Babylonian origin both of the Maasai and the ancient Israelites. I have not gone into questions related to the historicity of this claim. Rather, I have concentrated on the relationship between Merker and his colonial, interpretive context, and I hope to have demonstrated that the two fit like hand in glove. This is in a sense an utterly negative conclusion, but I think that it is the duty of academia to question traditional and even already rejected interpretative paradigms, as the reception history of the Bible illustrates again and again how we as interpreters are not able to escape our contextual bias.

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Endnotes

[1] It is a privilege to dedicate this essay to Professor Hendrik Bosman, a colleague and friend. The essay's focus on the Maasai is a way of acknowledging our interaction. Back in 1999 – during a pre-conference safari to Maasai Mara in Kenya – the two of us (and a few others) had our first encounter with the tourist industry interpretation of the Maasai, and it taught me – and us, I assume – something about clarifying and criticizing interpretive perspectives.

[2] The research for this essay is part of the project 'Potentials and problems of popular inculturation hermeneutics in Maasai biblical interpretation', funded by the Norwegian Research Council, whose contribution is hereby acknowledged.

[3] Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002), 46-57.

[4] Parfitt, *Lost Tribes*, 102-72.

[5] Tudor Parfitt, *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 13-65.

[6] Cf. http://www.israeltoday.co.il/NewsItem/tabid/178/nid/29202/Default.aspx, downloaded 2017-07-30.

[7] Cf. the webpages of the International Society for the Study of African Jewry, http://issaj.com/, downloaded 2017-07-30. An illustrative research contribution is Edith Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[8] Moritz Merker, *Die Masai: Ethnographische Monographie eines ostafrikanischen Semitenvolkes* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1904, revised edition 1910).

[9] See for example Carl Meinhof, "Über M. Merkers 'Masai,'" *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 36 (1904), 735-44.

[10] Illustrative examples are Paul Spencer, *Time, Space, and the Unknown: Maasai Configurations of Power and Providence* (London: Routledge, 2003), and Dorothy L. Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters between Maasai and Missionaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

[11] Fritz Hommel, 'Vorwort,' in Moritz Merker, *Die Masai: Ethnographische Monographie eines ostafrikanischen Semitenvolkes* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1910), xiii-xxii.

[12] Merker, *Die Masai*, 271-88.

[13] Merker, *Die Masai*, 300-06.

[14] David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[15] Carl Friedrich Keil, *Biblical Commentary of the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*. Vol I (Clark's Foreign Theological Library. Fourth Series. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1866) 158. For a closer study, see Knut Holter, "Relocating Keil & Delitzsch: Reading a mid-19th century commentary from Germany with early 21st century theology students from Tanzania and Norway", forthcoming (2017) in a Festschrift for Werner Kahl.

[16] Charles B. Copher, "The Black Presence in the Old Testament," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 146-64.

[17] Magdel le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2003).

[18] Joseph J. Williams, *Hebrewisms of West Africa: From Nile to Niger with the Jews* (London & New York: Biblo & Tannen, 1930).

[19] Merker, *Die Masai*, 13.

[20] Merker, *Die Masai*, 116-121, 76-104.

[21] Carl Mauch, *Carl Mauch's Reisen im Inneren von Süd-Afrika, 1865-1872. Mit einer Originalkarte* (Ergänzungsheft No. 37 zu Petermann's 'Geographischen Mitteilungen'; Gotha: Justus Perthes, 1874).

[22] See for example Carl Peters, *Das goldene Ophirs Salomo's: Eine Studie zur Geschichte der Phönisischen Weltpolitik* (München & Leipzig: Verlag von R. Oldenbourg, 1895), 32. For a critical study, see Joost Fontein, *The Silence of Great Zimbabwe: Contested Landscapes and the Power of Heritage* (London: UCL Press, 2006).