

APPROPRIATING THE DECALOGUE ACCORDING TO AFRICAN PROVERBS

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“A proverb is to speech what salt is to food” (a Lugandan proverb).

Abstract

This article argues the following: (i) there is a close but neglected relationship between “torah” and “hokmah” in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and this should be reflected in the interpretation of the Decalogue. (ii) African proverbs/ wisdom can be utilized as a hermeneutical sounding board for the appropriation of the Decalogue in African contexts.

1. Introduction

When considering how the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments in Ex 20 and Deut 5) can be interpreted in Africa, a variety of different questions spring to mind:

- What *Africa* are we referring to?
- How do we define *interpretation*? Etc. ... etc. ...

Therefore, this session must be considered as being part of an investigation, which is suggesting one amongst many ways of interpreting the Decalogue in Africa. The focus will be on Africa south of the Sahara, although the hermeneutical presuppositions might apply to other parts of the globe too.

The underlying hypotheses of this article are:

- There is a close but neglected relationship between *torah* and *hokmah* in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and this should be reflected in the interpretation of the Decalogue.
- African proverbs/ wisdom can be utilized as a hermeneutical sounding board for the appropriation of the Decalogue in African contexts.

In a nutshell, how can the Decalogue be interpreted in a way relevant to the different interpretive communities in Africa?

2. *Torah* and *hokmah* in the interpretation of the Decalogue

2.1 Origin of the Decalogue

When surveying the research history of the Decalogue one is struck by the lack of consensus about where the roots of this short, but very influential passage in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21, can be traced to:

Documentary theory

During most of the previous two centuries, historical-critical scholarship dominated the interpretation of the Decalogue. At least some agreement developed that the present form of the Decalogue stands at the end of a long historical development. What this historical

development entailed, however, still remains a bone of contention. One of the more recent suggestions by Andre Lemaire (1981:159-195) distinguishes four redactions of the Decalogue – echoes of the 19th Century Documentary Hypothesis:

- an Elohist redaction (Amos and Hosea),
- a Yahwistic redaction (Hezekiah),
- a Deuteronomistic redaction (Deuteronomy 5),
- a Priestly redaction (Ex 20:8-11 and Deut 5:12-15).

Cultic origin

Without denying that the present form of the Decalogue is post-exilic, several scholars in the first few decades of the 20th Century suggested that its origin is to be found in the cultic worship of Israel. Psalms 15 and 24 are cited as examples of “entrance liturgies” dating back to the time of the Salomonic temple. Mowinckel (1927) presumed the existence of an annual covenant renewal ceremony during which the Decalogue was proclaimed as the focal point of the Torah.

Apodictic law

A very significant distinction amongst biblical laws was introduced by Albrecht Alt (1934/1966) who differentiated between the conditional style of the casuistic law (“if..., then...”) and the unqualified prescriptive style of the apodictic law (“you shall not ...”). Alt went further to characterize the casuistic style as being Canaanite and the apodictic law, as represented by the Decalogue, to be unique to Israel. During the past 30 years scholars have found apodictic legal formulas in cultures outside of Israel and this has toned down the supposed uniqueness of the Decalogue (Albrektson 1967).

Suzerainty treaty

Significant similarities have been found between the Decalogue, as part of covenant texts, and suzerainty treaties. While studying Hittite suzerainty treaties Mendenhall (1954) identified common features such as the historical prologue, the covenant stipulations and the blessings and curses related to the observance of the treaty. These common features not only apply to Hittite suzerainty treaties but to other treaties in the ANE.

Criminal law

According to Anthony Phillips (1970) the Decalogue functioned as a summary of criminal law in ancient Israel. The Decalogue as criminal law regulated conduct that was considered to be detrimental or offensive to the community.

Deductions from narratives

Calum Carmichael (1985) has argued that laws such as the Decalogue was deduced from biblical narratives. (This research on the Ten Commandments should not be seen as an extension of the historical-critical approach, but of a more literary approach to biblical interpretation.)

2.2 Wisdom as background to the decalogue

In this article it will be argued that wisdom was an important, but neglected context, to which the Decalogue can be traced.

A new phase in the discussion of the Decalogue developed with Erhard Gerstenberger’s (1965) criticism of Alt’s distinction between casuistic and apodictic legal formulation.

Gerstenberger rejected the options that the Decalogue had its origin in the Israelite cult or Near Eastern suzerain treaties. He postulated an older and more basic form of Israelite law to be the “prohibitive form” whose roots lie in a clan ethic (*Sippenethos*). Although no consensus has been reached with regards to the extent and nature of this clan ethic, Gerstenberger indicated the last six commandments are not unique to Israel and that the commandments have a lot in common with family ethics in biblical times – not only in Israel but also amongst her neighbours.

Many studies on biblical wisdom literature assume that Ecclesiastes, Job and Proverbs were written by “wise men” at the royal court, where they taught young men in schools to become acquainted with the ethos and ethics of the Israelite elite. During the past two decades more attention has been given to the possibility that the biblical proverbs originated amongst the ordinary people and that this tribal context is remarkably similar to many rural societies in Africa (Golka 1999:6).

Claus Westermann (1990/1994), son of the respected German expert on Ewe proverbs, Diedrich Westermann, came to the conclusion that the “earlier” proverbs in Proverbs 10-21 and 25-29 developed from the oral traditions of the Israelite villages and not in schools at the royal court.

Westermann’s student Friedemann Golka (1993) also refuted the traditional claim that biblical proverbs can be traced back to the royal court and the Israelite elite and argued for its origin in tribal society.

Ronald Whybray (1990) investigated the attitude towards poverty and wealth in the book of Proverbs. He reached the conclusion that Proverbs 10-22:16 and 25-29 seem to reflect the ethical and social values of Israelite peasant farmers who lived with the daily threat of poverty, while Proverbs 1-9 and 22:17 – 24 articulate the scant concern for the poor by urban society. This analysis of the background of biblical proverbs seems to make eminent sense and strikes a balance between urban and rural, as well as popular and elitist backgrounds.

Where in the past it was often thought that Israelite wisdom was based on law, it has now become an option to suppose that law was dependent on societal wisdom – as reflected in family ethos and instruction (Callaway 1984:352). This close relationship between wisdom and law can be found in Deuteronomy 4:5-6:

*See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded...
Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding...*

This identification of wisdom and law reaches a crescendo in Ben Sira and finds its most clear expression in second century Sirach chapter 15:1 and 24: 23-25:

*Whoever fears the Lord will do this,
And whoever holds to the law will obtain wisdom.*

*All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God,
the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations...
It overflows, like the Pishon, with wisdom...*

3. African proverbs as hermeneutical sounding board for the Decalogue

3.1 The relationship between African ethics and African proverbs

A valuable multidisciplinary paraemiographical research tool was the *African proverbs CD*, or as it is known in the USA *The wisdom of African proverbs*, which incorporates the following resources:

- Two conference proceedings on *The African proverb in the 21st Century* (1995) and *Proverbs and African Christianity* (1996).
- Four volumes of the *African Proverbs Series* with as General Editor John Mbiti which includes proverbs from the Akan, Lugbara, Oromo and Sesotho.
- A collection of Ga and Dangwe proverbs called *Proverbs for preaching and teaching* under the editorship of Joshua Kudadjie
- Reprints of collections of about 27,000 African proverbs (more than 17 African languages from all parts of sub-Saharan Africa are represented).
- Extensive bibliographies on African Proverb scholarship by Wolfgang Mieder, Joseph Healey and Stan Nussbaum.

Although much has been done in terms of the collection of African proverbs (paraemiographical research), far less has been done with regards to the paraemiological interpretation of the collected proverbs. The *lacunae* in existing research become even more obvious when one looks for examples of theological and ethical interpretations of African proverbs.

One of the most promising ways to understand ethical reflection and morality in Africa is to come to grips with African worldviews. With more than a thousand ethnic groups on the African continent, there is an overwhelming cultural diversity that has to be accounted for and no one single worldview can be presupposed for the whole of Africa (Verhoef & Michel 1997:394-395).

In the past the anthropocentric dimension (the human person as part of the community which includes the living and the dead) of African ethics has been much emphasized. But not enough prominence has been given to its theonomous foundation - the position of God as the creator of good things (Bujo 1997: 25-27).

According to John Mbiti (1969:214) the essence of African morality is that it is more "societary" than "spiritual" and it focuses on "conduct" rather than "being". In this dynamic view of ethics "a person is what he/she is because of what he/she does, rather that he/she does what he/she does because of what he/she is".

Ethical reflection in Africa refers to communal experience and "is essentially based on the forefathers' (*sic*) wisdom and that of the clan elders" (Bujo 1997:54). The wisdom of the ancestors and clan sages are preeminently found in the numerous proverbs abounding in most cultures in the African continent.

In what way can non-literary African people lay any claim to have an own African theology and ethic? The oral myths, legends and proverbs act as a window on the theological and ethical reflection prevalent amongst African people (Wanjohi 1997: 76).

Why can one presume a close relationship between African proverbs and African ethics? African proverbs are experiential since they originate in the experience and reflection of ordinary people. These proverbs are, however, not merely descriptive of a particular experience since African proverbs also convey an ethical message in a prescriptive way (Dalfovo 1991: 45-52).

In many African societies proverbs are so deeply rooted in every day behavior that every inhabitant of the village becomes a “living carrier of proverbs” (Mbiti 1997:ix). African proverbs not only deal with ethical and moral issues but are also a rich resource for African religion and philosophy (Mbiti 1997: xii-xiii).

3.2 The relationship between biblical and African proverbs

As far back as 1953 Berend Gemser of Pretoria suggested a correspondence between biblical *torah* and *hokmah* and Africa in his study of the motive clause in Israelite law. He concluded: “Here we find a striking example of the intrinsic coherence of legal practice and wisdom or proverbs, so characteristic for a certain stage of development in the administration of justice and so well known among the native people of e.g. East, Southern and West Africa” (Gemser 1953:64).

In far more detail Claus Westermann (1990/1995:146-148) detects several similarities between sayings in the Book of Proverbs and African proverbs. Amongst others, he describes considerable formal parallels such as the indicative and imperative sayings, proverbial statements, exhortations and warnings. “Integral to proverbial form and content are graphic language, comparisons and an abundance of metaphors... as well as ...direct speech, exaggeration, contrasts and contradictions... and the emphasis on human observation and experience” (Westermann 1995:147).

Although the similarity between African and biblical proverbs has been suggested on numerous occasions, few studies have been done by African scholars in this regard:

Okofor Ugwueze (1976) from Nigeria wrote his dissertation on a comparison of Igbo and biblical proverbs. His analysis of Igbo proverbs emphasizes the role of the ancestors and the proverbs and the theological and rhetorical characteristics of the proverbs are rooted in it being part of the heritage of the ancestors. In the last section, the comparison between the two proverbial traditions is utilized to suggest how Christian faith can be adapted in the Igbo culture (Holter 2002: 57).

Kasamba Michel Uzele (1982) of the Democratic Republic of the Congo focused on the *meshalim* of Proverbs 10-22 as the first collection proverbs by Solomon. Most of his attention is taken up by a comparison between the proverbs in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East. Only in the last chapter does he point out a few examples of parallel proverbs in the Bible and traditional Africa (Holter 2002: 58).

Laurent Nare (1986) interpreted Proverbs 25-29 from the perspective of the Mossi (a combination of Berber and Arabic) culture in Burkina Faso. Amongst several thematic and formal correspondences between the biblical and Mossi proverbs, a parallel conceptualization of God was identified: God as Creator and as guarantor of the moral order and source of justice. Parallels between the proverbial traditions also include practical wisdom such as references to laziness and mendacity (Holter 2002: 42).

In another comparative study of Proverbs 25-29, Philippe D Nzambi (1992) of the Democratic Republic of the Congo comes to the conclusion in his dissertation under the supervision of Walter Gross at Tübingen that the biblical proverbs as sayings (not as collections) can be traced back to the people and not the royal court. Nzambi concentrates on the formal description of the biblical and Congolese proverbs and Wolfgang Richter’s influence can be clearly discerned in the discussion of the syntax, genres and stylistic features of Proverbs 25-29.

4. Conclusion

One of the major challenges facing biblical ethics and hermeneutics is to suggest hermeneutical models which can account for the cultural circumstances of different societies and religious communities and still maintain a type of “family resemblance” that will enable recognition as a specific religious tradition. In this day and age it is simply not tenable to maintain that ethics and moral behaviour are based some form of universal rationality (Verhoef & Michel 1997:389).

A Ghanaian proverb reminds us: “*Wisdom is like a baobab tree; a single man’s hand cannot embrace it*”. No single individual researcher from a particular culture and religion can do justice to the immense treasure of African proverbs. Paremiological scholars from different cultures will have to cooperate to come to grips with the potential of African proverbs to act as sounding board for the interpretation of biblical proverbs. Very little has been done about the theological appropriation of African proverbs and this provides an opportunity to theologians in Africa that should be grasped with both hands!

African proverbs are encapsulations of the accumulated wisdom and experiences of countless generations and they constitute an authentic door that allows access to the religious and ethical orientation of African peoples. The dominant European and American hermeneutical and theological reflection can be enriched and invigorated by interacting with long neglected African resources of religious and ethical insight (Dresen 2000: 42).

In this regard it should be noted that the interaction between African and European interpretations of the Bible should not only entail enrichment by means of a supplementation of the semantic field of any biblical passage by African proverbs and folklore. Above all, this dialectic between African and European biblical interpretation should be vigorous and involve rigorous mutual critique. This interaction must amount to a stimulating hermeneutical symbioses and not merely be yet another example of superficial and opportunistic cross-cultural comparison.

One of the crucial challenges facing Biblical scholarship in Africa is to explore the possibilities that proverbs and local wisdom offer to develop a more paraemiological informed interpretation of theological-ethical texts such as the Decalogue. This research on the theological-ethical potential of societal wisdom and folklore can make a significant contribution to the development of a more inclusive hermeneutical framework that will include the ignored and the marginalised biblical readers who have previously been excluded to contribute to theological-ethical discourse.

Since it takes wisdom to understand and use proverbs and proverbs are only explained to fools, those intending to question this contribution must be cautioned in advance...!

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