

## David and Shimei: innocent victim and perpetrator?<sup>1</sup>

GERRIE SNYMAN  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

### **ABSTRACT**

*Feeding on the current social anxiety in the country that is defined by racial lines, the paper suggests the possibility of a theology for the 'retributed', i.e. those who undergo justice in terms of affirmative action or land repossession. Employing Ndebele's thoughts on the folktale The lion and the rabbit and the issue of justice in Lars von Trier's Dogville as its matrices, the paper enquires into the roles of perpetrator or victim Shimei and David play to each other in Samuel-Kings in order to see whether Shimei's death constitutes retributive justice or whether there is some social benefit in turning him into a purificatory sacrifice in a Girardian sense.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

What does one say to someone whose job opportunities have been affected by what can be referred to as 'redress of past injustices'? Similarly, how does one counsel someone whose farm has been attached because of a land claim? These occurrences, affirmative action as well as land restitution, act as lawful mechanisms through which the working force is supposed to become more representative of the general population and through which those who lost land under the previous regime, can repossess land. The process of redress operates on the basis of justice. Nonetheless, those upon whom redress is visited, and depending on their political outlook, do not always experience their situation as one of justice. Far from being regarded as purificatory in a Girardian sense, the justice served is considered impure violence that would simply breed revenge.

The current socio-political discourse constructs a negative white identity belonging to a perpetrator culture that has so far got off scot-free from the effects of imperialism, racism and exploitation. Ndebele (2008) compares it with

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<sup>1</sup> The basis of this essay can be found in a paper with the title 'Decentering whiteness and doing justice: innocent victims, perpetrators and the biblical text' presented at a conference on Bible and Justice at the University of Sheffield in May/June 2008. Appreciation towards Unisa for a grant to attend the latter conference is hereby expressed.

the character of the trickster in the tale 'The lion and the rabbit'.<sup>2</sup> The trickster, relating to the darker side of life, is usually a mischievous creature who is bent on surviving the dangers of the world with deceit as his weapon. Through his deceit, the audience experience their own deception of those who dominate them. The trickster does not rank high on the social ladder and is socially marginal (a social outcast), causing these characters to be morally ambiguous creatures that are constantly in violation of cultural categories (cf. Snyman 1996:100). The trickster is usually powerless and weak, unable to triumph over the stronger creatures. It can only survive through wit and cunning. In these stories they establish a false contract with those in power. Their deception ends in terrible consequences for those who fall for them, who are considered stupid and careless, and those who resist them, who are regarded as intelligent and triumphant (cf. Snyman 1996:100).

In his interpretation of the tale Ndebele (2008:109) argues that identities shift so that the tale's interpretation depends on the classification of the participants involved in any particular situation. In other words, the interpretation of the lion and the rabbit's characters depend on race, ethnicity, class, political affiliation, geographical location, gender, and age, to name a few. According to Ndebele (2008:109), the constant ebb and flow of shifting identities subverts any tendency towards simplification. However, contrary to his idea of complexity, a simplified racial division of black and white appears to underlie his (Ndebele 2008:110) interpretation of the tale, feeding on the current social anxiety in the country that is defined by racial lines<sup>3</sup> for which he later makes a proposal to overcome.

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<sup>2</sup> Lion caught Rabbit red-handed in the cave, helping himself to a meal that Lion set as a trap. As Lion was about to polish off Rabbit, the little trickster screamed that the cave was about to fall in, imploring Lion to save them by propping up the ceiling with his powerful limbs while he rushed to get help. Needless to say, Rabbit never returned. And Lion slowly but surely realised he had been duped. 'Our popular trickster has done it again, reducing the brawny king of the jungle to a piteous fool', says Ndebele (2008:106). I am indebted to the inaugural paper of Professor Madipoane Masenya (2008) that put me on the track of this folktale and Ndebele's interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> Ndebele (2008:108) refers to a few possibilities of associative identifications of the lion and the rabbit: the Xhosas play the role of the rabbit in ruling the country while the other ethnic groups hold up the roof of the cave. The Afrikaners hold up the roof after 1948 with the English walking away 'with their second passports' (2008:109). The workers are holding up the roof with the exploiting, manipulating capitalists prospering. The ANC is holding up the roof while the SACP walked away with the RDP. And black women are holding up the cave with black men exploiting them. However, the identification that sticks appears to be the one that differentiate along racial lines: black citizens holding up the roof of the cave with the whites escaping hardship and going on with their lives.

He (2008:110) relates the lion to the newly acquired political power by African South Africans as follows:

For example, there is the fear that magnanimity has not only been misunderstood as weakness, but that it has, in fact, become weakness. There is the fear that the perception of a loss of face may restore old feelings of inferiority, or rage, in proportion to the increasing levels of confidence among those who lost very little else besides political power. There is the fear that right and constitutionality, which were being fought for, so long and so hard, by the magnanimous are being used to frustrate redress, to insult and denigrate.

And of the rabbit(s) he says the following (2008:110):

On the other hand, all rabbits who have left the cave to the lion realise they have to return to the cave. At what cost? Exactly what do they stand to lose or gain? They are not sure what Lion really thinks, but they know that he is in power. They feel guilty about what they have done to Lion in the past, but pride will not allow them to acknowledge the feeling. They may have to resort to the constitution and the bill of rights to assert themselves, but many among them may feel that doing so does not really enable them to push anxieties away. What to do?

Ndebele (2008:111) wants to overcome this line of division by proposing an interactivity whereby a dependency on each other is recognised, 'a common awareness that the survival of South Africa is a common responsibility'. He (2008:117) suggests the following:

Rabbit has walked away. Maybe he wants to come back and talk. But he is too clever to put himself at risk. He fails to appreciate the extent to which his cleverness may create intractable problems for him. That happens when his anxieties get hidden behind his cleverness; when his instincts lead him to create and maintain the illusion of continual control. The best among the rabbits recognise the illusion for what it is. But to face it squarely, they will require Lion *to reassure them constantly that Rabbit will not be grabbed and eaten; that Rabbit has a role in the social ecology*. But rabbit may find it difficult to make the move. Making the move is the primary responsibility of Lion (My italics – GFS).

James Perkinson in his book *White Theology. Outing supremacy in modernity* (2004) suggests a programme according to which a specific kind of cultural perpetration could be confronted and be dealt with. He refers to white privilege and suggests a way of coming to consciousness by looking into black eyes without denying the reflection. It is an attempt to deal with black critique and deal with the embarrassment of being found out. As part of my own endeavours

(cf. Snyman 2008) to give effect to this coming to consciousness of racist perpetration, the question regarding the continued presence of the perpetrator amongst his or her victims has become of considerable interest. Each day the victims of racism have to look the perpetrators of apartheid in the eyes.

Accepting the collective responsibility for apartheid in my own daily practice (cf. Snyman 2007b), and thus ‘playing the role of the perpetrator who has been found out’, I am looking for clues of redemption for the perpetrator in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> But I find myself continuously in a dead end, since perpetrators are not supposed to live within the community in which the perpetration took place. They are either killed or banned. To use the imagery of the folktale, the rabbit cannot remain in the cave. I started to look for models of cohabitation of victim and perpetrator, and the story of Shimei and David presented itself. Shimei seemingly survived his cursing and stoning of David, only to be killed later by Solomon at the behest of David (2 Sam 16:5-12; 1 Kings 2:8, 46)!

Has Shimei become a scapegoat? Was his death justified? Was he killed for his cursing and stoning of David, or for his failure to comply with the house arrest conditions laid down by Solomon, or was he killed in order to secure the Davidic dynasty? In the story, David, at the end of his life, wants to revenge himself on Shimei, but he feels himself bound by an oath he took not to kill Shimei. He obliges Solomon to find a way to deal with Shimei. Solomon does, on the pretence of failure of complying with certain house arrest conditions Shimei is said to have agreed to. However, the reader remains aware of Shimei’s connection to the Saulide dynasty.

In as much as the story of David and Shimei is a play between innocence and perpetration, it constitutes a theme that plays out in a real drama in South Africa when it comes to reconciliation and redress. This play of innocence and perpetration forms the background in my own reflection on the embarrassment of looking into black eyes and seeing the reflection.

Does the killing of Shimei constitute justice? Should one conceive here of retributive justice, in the sense that Shimei is killed after all for his cursing of and irreverence towards David as the anointed of Yahweh? Or should one perhaps regard his death as a kind of purification, safeguarding the throne from any future Saulide intervention? What is constructed with the death of Shimei: a sacrifice or a scapegoat?

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<sup>4</sup> After World War II, German theology revealed an inability to express any consciousness of the significance of the Holocaust for Christianity (cf. Krondorfer *et al.* 2006; cf. Snyman 2007b). South African (Afrikaans) Reformed theology has so far failed to address its complicity with those theological and hermeneutical structures that legitimated apartheid (cf. Snyman 2007a).

In an attempt to understand the issue of justice, sacrifice, and scapegoating, the paper will employ the issue of justice in *Dogville*<sup>5</sup> as its matrix to understand whether Shimei is a perpetrator who received his just dessert.

## **B SACRIFICE OR DIVINE JUSTICE: DOGVILLE**

To René Girard the creation of the victim of the sacrifice, the scapegoat (*la victime / le bouc émissaire*), is ideological. But when the ideological construction is revealed, it loses its cathartic effect (1972:120). The scapegoat is constituted for the effect the group needs (1972:115). The scapegoat is convicted without a trial, and his or her guilt is unquestionable. However, its reality is hidden in order for it to function (1972:122).

What is important to realise, is that the victim's body disappears. The victim is removed from the scene, as if in a removal of a stain (1972:413). Its violent death constitutes a pious act. Death constitutes an expulsion outside the borders, an expulsion of the remains of sacrileges. The expulsion is real and not merely symbolic.

Sacrifice is a social act. Its consequences are not limited to a particular individual marked for a sacrificial destiny (1972:68), but concern the well-being of the entire community. Sacrifice has a real function and the problem of substitution relates to the entire collective. A particular individual who is endangered or threatened is not substituted for the victim of the sacrifice (the animal or person to be sacrificed). The latter is sacrificed for the entire community by all the members of the community. The sacrifice protects the entire community from violence (1972:22).

The crisis of sacrifice is its loss (1972:76), for example the loss of difference<sup>6</sup> between impure violence and purificatory violence. Then no purification is possible any more and impure violence becomes contagious, and expands within the community. Any difference is eliminated when the victim ceases to be a good conductor, and increases the prospect of further violence, for example, a chain reaction of revenge.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Hugh Pyper of the University of Sheffield for the link between justice and *Dogville* in his paper 'Rough justice: Lars von Trier's "Dogville" and the theology of wrath' at a conference on Bible and Justice at Sheffield in 2008.

<sup>6</sup> 'Si la violence d'abord cachée de la crise sacrificielle détruit les différences, cette destruction en retour fait progresser la violence. On ne peut pas toucher au sacrifice, en somme, sans menacer les principes fondamentaux dont dépendent l'équilibre et l'harmonie de la communauté' (Girard 1972:77).

<sup>7</sup> René Girard (1972:66) says: 'La violence, une fois de plus, se déchaîne contre les êtres que le sacrifice aurait dû préserver'. Girard (1972:65) acknowledges that the difference between pure and impure violence is arbitrary, but the distinctive moment is

The film *Dogville* by Lars von Trier (2003) conspicuously and unapologetically confronts one with this kind of violent justice that can be labelled in religious terms as hell and damnation.<sup>8</sup> The setting is a fictional mining town in the Rocky Mountains during the nineteen-thirties. The viewer is told that the town is on a dead end road at an abandoned silver mine. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, the day the citizens of the USA celebrates their nationhood and independence to the sound of gunfire, the main character whose name bears an obvious religious connotation, Grace, appears in town, disturbing its quiet equilibrium.

Grace encounters Tom, who hides her in a nearby mine when approached by the mobsters who are looking for her. One of them hands Tom his card with his phone number in case Tom finds her. Tom, whose surname is Edison, thus alluding to one of the icons in American culture, is the town's would-be writer and philosopher. He decides to use Grace to educate the townspeople on the subject of acceptance and openness. Though sceptical about Grace, Tom succeeds in persuading the townspeople to give Grace a chance to prove her worth. In the two weeks she is allowed to prove her worth, Grace offers to do chores for the citizens on Tom's suggestion. After some reluctance they accept her doing things they would like to do but do not think necessary. Grace succeeds in earning the trust of the townspeople, who indulge in a bit of friendship and comradeship with the beautiful fugitive.

After a few months, though, the mood in the town darkens when the police put up a poster about a missing person with Grace's name and picture on it. It was the first time in living memory that the police visited the town, and they would eventually come thrice: first to put up the missing poster, then to put up a poster declaring Grace dangerous and a third time with the FBI. It suddenly became dangerous and against the law to harbour Grace. But instead of sending her away, Grace is forced into a *quid pro quo* to do more chores. The inhabitants exploit her by scheduling her day, cutting her wages, increasing her tasks and making them more strenuous. Eventually the town reveals its true nature as Grace becomes oppressed and abused, to the point of becoming the object of sexual assault by most of the men of the town.

Deciding she had had enough and renouncing the privilege of being hidden, she attempts to leave town with the help of the truck driver, Ben, who tricks her, rapes her and delivers her back in town. The money Grace spent on her liberation was taken by Tom from his father. Grace is accused of theft and Tom does not come to her rescue. Her enslavement is intensified with her being collared and chained to a large iron wheel she has to carry around all day. A

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the question whether the violence is purificatory (*purificatrice*) as in the case of a sacrifice.

<sup>8</sup> Morton (2004), reading *Dogville* as a religious film instead of a political one, claims it to be unapologetically moralistic, displaying and justifying 'the most unpopular Christian doctrine' of all, namely Hell.

bell is attached to the collar so as to announce her presence. Tom is the only man in town who has not raped her (yet).

In a meeting where Grace narrates what she has endured from the town, the townspeople who become embarrassed decide to get rid of her. At this point, Tom consoles Grace and wants sex with her. Angered by her refusal, Tom calls the gangsters. The town expects the execution of Grace, but learns instead that she is the boss of the mobsters' daughter who ran away because she could no longer face her father's dirty work.

In a complex discussion with her father on morality and power, Grace asks why she should not be merciful. Her father replies:

'You should be merciful when there is time to be merciful, but you must maintain your standards, you owe them that. The penalty you deserve for your transgression they deserve for their transgressions.'

Grace protests that they are human beings, upon which her father claims:

'And does every human being need to be accountable for their own actions? Of course they do. You don't even get them that chance, and that is extremely arrogant.'

The film ends with the townspeople being killed by the mobsters and with Grace killing Tom. The only survivor is Moses, the dog of Dogville, who never wronged her.

It is the scene with the father and Grace's decision to have the town eliminated that calls forth the issue of justice. Within particular Christian circles the scene of Grace's transformation from being shackled to being unshackled alludes to the eschatological move from Christ as the sacrificed son to a vengeful Christ on Judgment Day (cf. Elbeshlawy 2008). In *Christianity Today* Overstreet (2004) reads Grace as a Christ figure who bewilders Tom because of her resilience to intense evil and generosity. From a religious point of view, Overstreet sees the film as Von Trier's wrestling with the difference between a God of fire and brimstone and a God of grace, asking whether human beings who have been given so much can be forgiven for their gross abuses of each other.

The theological significance of the fugitive's name, Grace, is noted within these Christian circles, alluding to the suffering servant and Christ (Morton 2004). Rejecting Grace would imply the rejection of the saving grace of Christ. The townspeople rejected Grace, and the result is damnation with them being shot dead by the gangsters. The film appears to encode theology. For example, Morton (2004) remarks that the discussion between Grace and her Father resulting in them acting in concert illustrates that if the Father and Son is one, justice and mercy have to come from the same side, or else one has

gangsterism with the Father alone or victimology with the Son alone. To Morton, Grace's transformation from an all-forgiving Christ to an avenging angel, suggests that forgiveness without judgment is indulging and infantilizing (Morton 2004).<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the first 160 minutes of the film seems to reveal to Morton 'the deeply problematic of a doctrine of unlimited ever-patient grace, a Son with no Father, a salvation with no damnation'. Fibiger (2003) says of Grace that '[s]he constitutes the notion of absolute, boundless love, ... [with] obvious allusions to Jesus, who also – as a result of his unconditional, boundless devotion – ends up being sacrificed on a cross'. Representing the very meaning of grace, Grace surrenders to the unreasonable demands of the town. For the most part of the film, Grace is seen as turning the other cheek, but when her gangster father appears on the scene, Grace chooses the Old Testament maxim of an eye for an eye. And with the dog called Moses the only survivor, it is clear that it is the Law of Moses that prevails in *Dogville* (Fibiger 2003).

Using Girard's ideas on violence and scapegoats, Brighenti (2006:105-108) reads into the film retributive punishment as well as sacrificial purification. The violent elimination of the town at the end of the film constitutes retribution: the townspeople pay for what they did to Grace.<sup>10</sup> Grace, representing God's grace, encounters exploitation, domination and violence. She responds by firstly accommodating the needs of the town, then by trying to escape from the town and finally by exercising retributive violence that destroys the town and its inhabitants, alluding to the Mosaic law of retributive justice, an eye for an eye (cf. Sinnerbrink 2007). In this retribution her father's gangsters help her, causing the source of judgement to turn into a source of crime.

Sinnerbrink (2007) calls this violent retribution 'an aesthetic expression of the perverted morality of "infinite justice" that is characteristic of contemporary neoliberalism'.<sup>11</sup> However, according to Sinnerbrink, Grace's violence is not pure or divine violence, but retributive:

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<sup>9</sup> Morton's review of the film stands in the light of Matthew 11:20-24 which he quotes at the very beginning of the discussion. In these verses, Jesus expresses God's wrath and judgement over the cities in which he performed miracles and that rejected him.

<sup>10</sup> Schwartz (2004) regards *Dogville* as a bitter allegory of failed Christian hospitality and Old Testament revenge clothed in 'what goes for American justice'.

<sup>11</sup> He says that the questions *Dogville* leave us with are disturbing and unsettling: 'We are left hovering between the deadening nihilism of forced liberal democratic consensus, with its moral hypocrisy and social exploitation, and a violent destruction or *passage à l'acte* that would annihilate the corrupted democratic community while also cancelling itself'.



‘once Grace abandons her compact with the community, and takes up her “proper” place in the symbolic and social order – an order predicated on the kind of symbolic violence and naked exercise of power that her grace and forgiveness had attempted, in vain, to overcome’.

Whereas in the retributive justice model a personal identification is required, this is not the case with the purification model. A categorical identification suffices. The victim does not have to properly belong to the group, but is merely ‘categorically identified’ as a plausible subject (2006:108). The person does not really matter and the violence is not divided or attributed *singulatim* (Brighenti 2006:105). All that matters is that the victim belongs to a class of sacrificeable beings. The question of who is bearing the brunt of the violence is not a matter of personal identification, but a matter of strategy. The issue of punishment is irrelevant.

The aim of the sacrifice is to contain the violence and tensions within a group. If the collective violence is out of control, the group will destroy itself through a chain of infinite vengeance. The sacrifice fails when its cathartic or purifying effect becomes contagious, spreading like a virus (2006:108). From Grace’s side, there is an element of retributive justice in the elimination of the town, but in the end there is a sacrificial element too when she proclaims it is for the sake of other towns too. Says Brighenti (2006:108):

But, while at the biblical level the slaughter is aimed at establishing an exemplarity of the punishment, at the mythic level the same slaughter is aimed at ritual purification through the concentration of violence against a single subject. The only difference is that here the sacrificeable being is not individual but collective.

## **C DAVID AND SHIMEI**

When Absalom usurped the throne, David fled from Jerusalem, realising that the hearts and minds of Israel found a new leader (2 Sam 15). As he entered Bahurim, a Benjaminite town on the main road just north of Jerusalem connecting Judah with Israel, he encountered Shimei, a man from the family of Saul. Shimei threw stones at David, labelling him a murderer and a scoundrel (2 Sam 16:7-8):

‘Out! Out! Murderer! Scoundrel! The LORD has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, disaster has overtaken you, for you are a man of blood’.

And as David made his way towards the Jordan, Shimei remained on the opposite side of the hill, cursing him and throwing stones. David did not kill him.

Instead, he accepted Shimei's curse as Yahweh's way of dealing with his (David's) distress.

Absalom has driven out David, unsettling him, turning him into a *migrant*, metaphorically speaking. Shimei, a resident in Bahurim, is settled. He is what one can call a *settler*. The mobile David is vulnerable. He finds himself in a situation that favours the settled, a situation that has been exploited by Western powers in history in the persecution of mobile people and the construction of narratives depicting them as inferior. Early South African history is a case in point with the destruction of the San in the early days of Dutch settlement and the construction of narratives of inferiority of those who became unsettled by their settlement. Brighenti (2006:102) considers the opposition between settled and migrant subjects of fundamental importance to settled society, because the question of settled or mobile constitutes the basis of inclusion or exclusion from the group. David's mobility makes him an easy target for Shimei's attempt at banning him from the kingdom.

When David returns after the death of Absalom, he is no longer the migrant runaway, but a king returning to his settlement. Shimei came down from Bahurim as David crossed the Jordan, bowing before him and begging for forgiveness (2 Sam 19:19-20):

May my lord not hold me guilty or remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem; may the king not bear it in mind. For your servant knows that I have sinned; therefore, see, I have come this day, the first of all the house of Joseph to come down to meet my lord the king.

David did not kill Shimei. In fact, he gave him an oath to this effect. However, as David lay on his deathbed, he instructed Solomon 'to bring his [Shimei's] grey head down with blood to Sheol' (1 Kings 2:9), which Solomon did with what looks like trumped up charges (1 Kings 2:36-46).

Shimei is permanently removed, excluded to the extreme, annihilated. The lion killed the rabbit. And the question is whether his violent expulsion serves retributive justice or whether his removal serves purificatory purposes. The story, so it appears, provides a juridical reason for Shimei's death: his original curse is visited upon him when he fails to comply with the conditions of his house arrest. His death is attributed to his own devices. His death is simply retribution for what he did wrong. His death is divine justice. But his removal relates also to the disappearance of the Saulide claims to the throne, in which case his death might be considered purificatory.

Kirsch (2000:126) argues that in the portrayal of his story, David is never represented as blatantly yearning for Saul's kingship. Nor is he depicted as ac-

tively conspiring against him. But whenever David acts, Saul's shadow appears somewhere, with the Davidic dynasty benefiting directly or indirectly.

- He killed the Amalekite (2 Sam 1:9 ff.) who claimed to have killed Saul himself in the battle with the Philistines (whom David once begged to fight with against Saul). However, the Amalekite brought Saul's battle outfit with him, and David would soon wear it. The story presents to the reader a David distancing himself from a political murder that worked to his advantage, with the people seeing a face of unrelieved grief and despair (2 Sam 1:17 ff.).
- Saul's death did not mean David became king automatically. He was only crowned king over Hebron in a tribe of Israel, making him more a tribal chieftain than royalty. Ishbaal, the eldest son of Saul became king (2 Sam 2:8), but the power behind the throne appeared to be Abner, Saul's army chief. When a rift<sup>12</sup> appeared between him and Ishbaal, he turned to David, bringing the rest of Israel with him (2 Sam 3). Not everyone trusted Abner. Joab, David's army chief, still had a grudge against Abner who killed his brother Asael in battle (2 Sam 2:18 ff.). With Abner gone, Ishbaal had no real power. He became the victim of two other captains in his army who followed Abner's route in coveting David's favour by bringing his head to David. Despite David being not pleased (he ordered them to be executed), it meant that the way was open for David to become king of the entire tribal structure. So Abner's death enabled him to complete what Saul failed to achieve, namely extending the borders of the kingdom in subjugating the Philistines, Moabites, and the Aramaeans.

But David was not finished with Saul's legacy. Shortly afterwards he would take into his house Saul's grandson, Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, yet he would sacrifice seven other sons and grandsons of Saul.<sup>13</sup>

- After bringing the ark back to Jerusalem David is apparently looking for more survivors within Saul's dynasty. Mephibosheth fell upon his knees before David. Did he feel anxiety? The reader does not know, but David says he should not fear, most likely acknowledging the expression of anxiety on Mephibosheth's face. Who would not be filled with fear when one takes the Gibeon incident into consideration? The reader has the impression that David acted out of his love for Jonathan who made David promise that he would remain loyal to his family. But Mephibosheth was lame and such people were the object of David's hatred when he took possession of Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:8).

<sup>12</sup> Abner overplayed his hand by taking a concubine of Saul, Rispa, as his wife. It was an act of treason as it amounts to usurpation of the throne.

<sup>13</sup> The latter episode is thought to have happened before David took in Mephibosheth, but it appears much later in the royal account. In fact, the Mephibosheth episode does not make any sense if the sacrifice of the rest of Saul's sons and grandsons happened later.

- At some stage in David's kingship there was a famine that lasted for several years. David sought a divine oracle to explain the occurrence of the famine (2 Sam 21). The story then reports that God revealed that there is indeed blood-guilt on Saul and his family for killing the Gibeonites who lived under Israel's protection ever since the conquest of Canaan (Joshua 9). The Gibeonites requested blood-vengeance: seven men of Saul's sons had to be hanged. David found two sons and five grandsons, whom he promptly executed publicly. One cannot deny that each of the victims here, son or grandson of Saul, posed a threat to David's assumption of the throne. They were potential rivals. The story, however, clothed their slaying as human sacrifice, or the offering of royal blood, to appease an angry god who is punishing his people with famine. Human sacrifice violates the official theology of the Bible (Kirsch 2000:175). In the royal history, David keeps his distance: it was the Gibeonites who spilled the blood, not David. Whenever David sinned, it would be other people who suffered: the child out of wedlock would die and the inhabitants of Jerusalem would suffer the consequences of God's wrath at the census.

As David's reign became embroiled in the succession soap opera, Absalom's usurpation of the throne with the murder of Amnon caused David to flee. But in this chaos, it seems that Mephibosheth also had plans to get his father's throne back. However, David's survival skills neutralised him by drawing his servant and only ally, Siba, into his (David's) sphere.

Kirsch (2000:235-6) evaluates David's predicament as follows:

Here we are reminded that God's favor and public acclaim are two very different things: Saul may have forfeited the affection and confidence of Yahweh, but he never faced a general rebellion against his kingship. Here and now, all the old grudges were boiling up against David, and the notion that he was God's anointed king seemed to matter not at all to the general populace. The fact that the people of Israel rallied so readily to Absalom confirms that David may have been the beloved of God, but he was despised of men.

The extent of the hatred towards him can be seen in Shimei's bitter cursing<sup>14</sup> and stoning of David (2 Sam 16:5 ff.). Shimei was a blood relative of Saul and he held David accountable for all the slayings of the sons and grandsons of Saul. To him David could not distance himself from these killings since it benefited him directly.

In the Books of Samuel, nothing happens to Shimei. Abishai wanted to kill him on two occasions, the first when David fled Jerusalem as a fugitive and

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<sup>14</sup> Fokkelman (1981:198) declares the main emotion permeating Shimei's speech as poisonous and savage rage. Shimei lived through Saul's kingship and the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, as well as the murders of Abner and Ishbosheth. He held David responsible for these deaths, and David's current fate is simply retribution for these crimes.

was confronted by Shimei who cursed him (2 Sam 16:9) and the second when David returned with the kingship firmly established yet again, when Shimei met him begging for forgiveness (2 Sam 19:21).

David, in his status as a refugee, refused to kill Shimei but instead spared his life (for the moment), interpreting his curse as a curse of Yahweh.<sup>15</sup> After Absalom's death, whereby the security of David's tenure on the throne has been firmly re-established,<sup>16</sup> David pardoned three members of the Saulide dynasty in a general amnesty. Shimei received an oath from David that he will not die (2 Sam 19:23) whereas Siba and Mephibosheth both received reprieves.

In receiving reprieve, Shimei masked his Saulide relations in marking his tribal affiliation as that of Benjamin. Fokkelman (1981:299) interprets the sudden tribal link in terms of a shift in Shimei's interests. With David again secure on the throne, he cannot raise any Saulide pretensions to the throne. Instead he becomes part of the collective and not the individual crusader imprisoned in his own world.<sup>17</sup>

It is only at David's deathbed and after his death that his dynasty benefited when he advised Solomon to deal with Shimei in 'wisdom': '[Y]ou are a wise man; you will know what you ought to do to him, and you must bring his grey head down with blood to Sheol' (1 Kings 2:9). David quotes himself by saying that he swore to him by the LORD not to kill Shimei (2 Sam 19:23-24), but then implores Solomon not to reckon Shimei innocent (1 Kings 2:8). The

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<sup>15</sup> David does not seem to address Shimei. Fokkelman (1981:200) argues that David refused to relate to him, rather talking over him. In fact, it is as if Shimei did not make any contact with anyone around him, Fokkelman thinks (1981:201): '[H]e has no intention of a real encounter, but he is occupied wholly in an ego trip, acting out his own frustrations which are not pertinent to David's case or past'. The absolute use of the word for curse (לָקַח) makes Fokkelman (1981:201) think that Shimei is cursing in every direction, yet he remains captive in his own frustrated world, unable to make contact with any one anymore.

<sup>16</sup> As David's fortune turns for the better, his relationship with Shimei also changes: he can now afford to settle his score with him. Shimei knows this and he tries to preempt David in meeting him at the Jordan.

<sup>17</sup> Fokkelman (1981:330) is sceptical about Shimei. Shimei's grim cursing is thought to be ineffaceable, so that David cannot forgive Shimei, despite engaging directly with him when the latter met him at the Jordan, albeit it was much shorter than the first time. In the first confrontation David's speech takes up 6 lines and in the second meeting, he speaks only two words in Hebrew: "You will not be killed". Moreover, when compared to Mephibosheth's change of heart, Shimei's adaptation is thought to be external and comparing poorly with Mephibosheth's inner self and true presence (Fokkelman 1981:304).

implication is clear: David made an oath to spare Shimei's life, but Solomon is not bound by that oath.<sup>18</sup>

David appears to be deceptive. Czovek (2002a:196) argues that deception is the tool of the powerless. Who is now the rabbit? In his initial confrontation with Shimei David was on the run from Absalom, and hence powerless. On his return to reclaim the kingship, he was not yet restored to full power. Moreover, the fact that Absalom could have made inroads in the traditional support of David, suggests that everybody was not satisfied with David as king any more.

There seems to be a lack of enthusiasm for his return to Jerusalem, which was far from triumphant (cf. Czovek 2002a:192). His return is not a success, because he long since made a transition from a charismatic leader to that of an oriental king (cf. Czovek 2002a:192), simply resuming his position as an old king sitting in the palace without venturing into any military operations of his own.

Abishai is rebuked by David for wanting to kill Shimei when he says that *today* is not a day for killing: 'What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruah, that you should *today* become an adversary to me? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel *this day*?' Perhaps David is simply pragmatic and exhibits a bit of *Realpolitik*: one does not kill a chieftain when there are a thousand people of Benjamin present (2 Sam 19:17). Later it is *Realpolitik* that resembles very closely a clan-based vengeance whereby David can avenge himself against his foes, Joab and Shimei. But his earlier tolerance of Joab's crimes now counts against his clan interests when Joab killed Absalom. In order to keep Solomon's throne 'safe', Joab with all the make-up of a potential king-maker needs to be removed. *Realpolitik* would also require from Solomon to execute Shimei, who as a Saulide would pose a continuous threat to Davidic rule.

Czovek (2002a:197) observes that David's charisma later in his kingship only functioned in crises. The Absalom revolt shook David up and for the first time after a long absence Yahweh is recognised in the situation when David refers to Shimei's curse as coming from Yahweh (2 Sam 16:10). And in his last words to Solomon, with the crisis of succession at hand (Czovek 2002b:248), David's deception (a typical feature of charismatic leadership) comes to the fore: he circumvents the oath not to kill Shimei by appealing to Solomon's wisdom.

Wozniuk (1997) assesses the situation as follows:

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<sup>18</sup> Wozniuk (1997) suggests that the oath can be circumvented to suggest that Solomon or someone else can perform the task in David's stead.

And yet, the vengeful violence that David required of Solomon would also inevitably have the practical effect of contributing to a fulfilment of Nathan's curse upon the house of David, staining as it would from the very start Solomon's reign with injustice, through pursuing clan-based blood vengeance without any sanction from Yahweh, and killing a man whose curses David had not only earlier recognized as just, but whom David had also taken a public oath against harming. So while all this could hardly be interpreted as a positive, pro-monarchic representation of a legacy of political wisdom, it could be understood as an anti-monarchic depiction of Yahweh's sovereignty being rejected in favor of purely realpolitik concerns about any threats to David's "eternal throne". Significantly, it is just after David's charge to Solomon to engage in this vengeance that the narrative unambiguously affirms that his "rule was firmly established" (2:12).

Solomon obeys David and thereby strengthens his kingship, affirming himself as the legitimate heir of the throne and silencing any opposition to his assumption of the throne. The narrative provides Solomon with ample reason to act as David requested without really attributing the killing of those David suggested to David himself. Solomon found personal reasons to act against Joab and Shimei whom David wanted removed and against Adonijah and Abiathar whom Solomon regarded as a threat. Joab and the latter two opposed him in his usurpation of the throne, whereas Shimei simply trespassed geographical boundaries and thereby the conditions of his house arrest. The problem is that their deaths do not conceal political expediency (Walsh 1995).

Adonijah's request for Abishag is regarded by Solomon as a direct threat to his assumption of the throne. Abiathar and Joab supported Adonijah against Solomon. It is understandable that they should be removed from the power scene. Joab and Adonijah are killed and Abiathar is banned to Anathoth.

Shimei is summoned to Jerusalem where he was placed in house arrest and forbidden to cross the Kidron Valley. His house arrest in Jerusalem separated him from his power base in Bahurim in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin, who still harboured sentiments for the Saulide throne. Shimei is depicted as in agreement with his fate.

Three years later two slaves ran away to Gath and Shimei went and brought them back from Gath (the opposite direction of the Wadi Kidron). The narrative puts his subsequent death on himself: he did not keep to the house arrest conditions and was thus killed. At the end of 1 Kings 2:46, the author remarks: 'So the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon'.

Bodner (2005:153) has found that the opening chapters of Kings (1 Kings 1 and 2) abound with oaths. Solomon assumes his royal duties with the 'creative use of oaths' and consolidates his power 'through an equally creative

and dubious use of oaths'. Of concern are the oaths regarding Shimei. In 2 Kings 2:8, David claims to Solomon that he swore to Shimei by Yahweh that he will not put him to death by the sword. In verse 42, when Shimei is confronted with the break of the conditions for his house arrest, Solomon says: 'Did I not make you swear by the LORD, and solemnly adjure you, saying: "Know for certain that on the day you go out and go to any place whatever, you shall die"? And you said to me, "The sentence is fair; I accept". Why then have you not kept your oath to the LORD and the commandment with which I charged you?'

In both instances, the dealings with Shimei appear to be selective. David does not refer to his initial remark that Shimei cursed him at the behest of Yahweh. Nor is Shimei's apology mentioned as well as the men with whom Shimei arrived to meet David on his return to Jerusalem. David depicts his 'forgiveness' as an act of leniency and Shimei's cursing a crime of considerable proportions. In his own construction of the event, David changes his initial general promise of clemency to a specific limited scope. He substituted 'I will not put you to death by the sword' for 'you will not die'.

Bodner (2005:165) says this scene adds

to the rather malodorous fog that has clouded the use of oaths to this point in 1 Kings. [...] Solomon mounts the throne of Israel due to David's recollection of an earlier oath; now he is instructed to circumvent a bothersome oath "through wisdom".

It is as if David's licentiousness with oaths sets for Solomon an example.<sup>19</sup> In Solomon's confrontation with Shimei (1 Kings 2:36-37) Bodner (2005:170) does not see any oath language. In fact, one gets the feeling of deception all the way. Shimei's leaving of Jerusalem does not sound hostile or conspiratorial against Solomon, but rather the result of economic risk (cf. Brueggemann 2000:36). Moreover, the conditions of house arrest stated that Shimei is not to cross the Wadi Kidron, that is, go east. Shimei went to Gath, in a western direction. Yet Solomon felt justified to act. Moreover, in Solomon's retort, he substitutes a general prohibition against any travelling for the specific geo-

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<sup>19</sup> In Barnard's (2004:131) reshaping of the narratives, he has Nathan reminisce on David's conversation with Solomon: 'Again, is he speaking here as he would think that the Lord would have him speak? Or is it one final attempt on his part to remove the last remaining threat from the house of Saul so that his own dynasty will be unchallenged?' Later on he (2004:157) has David himself deliberating on his talk with Solomon: 'I have had to pass on to Solomon the responsibility for a few loose ends in the kingdom. There are some who have not demonstrated the support he will need as king, and I have had to leave these for him to deal with. I am too old to face these issues myself'.



graphical prohibition of crossing the Kidron valley (cf. Bodner 2005:170).<sup>20</sup> Solomon refers twice to an oath that has not been recorded in 1 Kings 2:36-37.

The depiction of Shimei's demise has a foul fragrance (Bodner 2005:171). Solomon gets round the oath David is purported to have sworn to Shimei by using another oath. Not only undermine both depictions each characters' relationship with Yahweh and claim to divine election, but also their respective integrities to act as charismatic leaders. The ingenious use of oaths leaves the impression of something sinister when it concerns power. As Bodner (2005:174) argues, there is a negative subtext underneath Solomon's presentation that signals his fall.

The use of oaths in 1 Kings 1 and 2 renders the killing of Shimei a politically expedient act, turning the victim into a real victim and not a perpetrator on whom retribution has been visited. In fact, the perpetrators seem to be those in power: David and Solomon. In any case, the story is not very sympathetic towards Shimei and his death is attributed to (divine?) justice. In the process, he is 'othered' in such a way that the reader should feel he receives his just dessert. However, a reader struggling with the concept of perpetrator because of being in the some boat (and I can only speak for myself) finds this kind of justice difficult to digest. And given the lack of integrity of David as well as of Solomon, Shimei's death as a sacrifice in terms of a purificatory violence, does not sit well. In fact, it seems the difference between impure violence and purificatory violence has disappeared. And perhaps one should acknowledge that purificatory violence is only purificatory in the eye of the beholder.

## **D CONCLUSION**

Reading the story of David and Shimei with a view to the issue of being a perpetrator is unsettling. Whether the story is interpreted in terms of the sacrifice of a scapegoat (purificatory violence) or in terms of divine justice, the hard part is that it would be a human being who would undergo that purification or justice. Whether it is purificatory or divine justice, is merely a question for those who observe. For the one undergoing it, it is much more existential. The story is othering Shimei to the point of having Solomon eliminate him. The scary part is that any process that labels an individual or a group as perpetrators, initiate the possibility of violence against them. Shimei's Saulide kinship makes him a plausible subject: posing a threat to the throne, he belongs to a class of sacrificeable beings. However, with the story identifying him personally and not categorically the impression of retributive justice served on Shimei hovers over the story. Lars von Trier's *Dogville* pushes justice to the extreme. For the

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<sup>20</sup> Bodner (2005:171) observes that in the midst of Solomon's modification of the initial meeting with Shimei, Solomon plays with Shimei's name. The words he put in Shimei's mouth (I will obey) is a play on Shimei's name.

inhabitants of *Dogville* there is apparently no redemption. Did Shimei receive his redemption when David did not kill him and then squandered it under Solomon's regime? The Samuel part of the story treats Shimei leniently, but the author of Kings appears to be bent on removing Shimei.

The death of the perpetrator in the story of David and Shimei, amplified by the example of the meaning of divine wrath and judgement in *Dogville*, makes it rather difficult to give effect to one's own acknowledgement of perpetration without a proper theological framework that would have an element of redemption not only in the eyes of God, but also in the eyes of the community in which the perpetration was done. Identification with Shimei is then cathartic in that one understands the dark side of justice and experiences shock or relief with regard to the position of the one undergoing justice.

In terms of the redress of the apartheid past, a category of sacrificeable beings or entities has been created, that is, whiteness, maleness and Western culture. Justice requires that the perpetrator do something or undergo something as an indication of not getting off scot-free. Affirmative action and land redistribution create necessary scapegoats as markers of justice. However, those who undergo justice are in need of a theology for the retribution visited upon them. And I am not sure how to proceed in this regard except to state the inevitability of the process. If those who undergo this justice do not accept its terms, the table is laid for revenge, and then their sacrifice is not purificatory.

Who is the victim and who is the perpetrator? Here is my dilemma and the link to whiteness, privilege and racism. Whiteness is suggestive of a perpetrator culture. After apartheid, whiteness continued unabatedly to exert its influence without anyone within whiteness itself enquiring about its structure of power and the privileges it created and apparently still is creating. The perpetrator culture is neither eradicated nor reformed. On the one hand, those measures instituted after apartheid as a way of redress, are interpreted in terms of a new victim-perpetrator scheme. On the other hand, despite whiteness having lost political power, it is still projected as a major force that necessitates counter measures.<sup>21</sup> In terms of one set of perspectives, redress may serve justice. With another set of perspectives, it may not be experienced as such. And perhaps that is what the story of David and Shimei illustrates: the issue of justice is never a cut and dry case.

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<sup>21</sup> Recently, the Forum of Black Journalists refused a few white journalists entrance to a meeting where the newly elected president of the ANC would speak. One journalist lodged a complaint at the South African Human Rights Commission and the latter ruled that the exclusion of particular people on the basis of race is unconstitutional. The FBJ inverted the matter in arguing that the problem is not that of being black, but, yet again, whiteness: white journalists lamenting their exclusion because they are white. In other words, whiteness succeeded to take centre stage again, claiming its dominance in society (cf. Harvey 2008).

In terms of the story, Shimei is the perpetrator apparently forgiven by David, yet eliminated by Solomon. Shimei as perpetrator lived a restricted life, never really at ease. In the end it turned out David never forgave him and he is removed. David's offspring need not be confronted by anyone in Saul's house. The story attributes credibility to David in suggesting Shimei brought his death all over himself since he failed to comply with the conditions set out by Solomon. And if he did not insult David in the first instance, he would not have been in this predicament. David is the innocent victim and Shimei the defiled taker. Yet one cannot escape the feeling that Shimei's cursing of David that created his own death sentence, is directly linked to David's benefiting of the deaths of so many of the possible successors to the Saulide crown.

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Gerrie Snyman, Department of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 362, Pretoria, 0003. E-mail: [snymagf@unisa.ac.za](mailto:snymagf@unisa.ac.za)