

A Decolonial (Re)turn to Class in South African Biblical Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

South African Black Theology of the 1960–1980s characterised its primary site of struggle as the racial capitalism of apartheid. Intersecting race and/as class has been a distinctively South African contribution to African biblical scholarship. Less common, but equally significant, is the intersection of culture and/as class. This article analyses this trajectory, reflecting on how three South African biblical scholars (Gunther Wittenberg, Makhosazana Nzimande and Hulisani Ramantswana) have discerned the need for the African decolonial project to recognise and recover the class divisions within a culture. A recurring cultural trope across the three scholars is their use of proverbs to discern class distinctions within culture. The works of each of these three scholars and their dialogue partners in South African Contextual Theology and South African Black Theology are interrogated for how they intersect notions of class and culture.

KEYWORDS: Decolonial, African Biblical Scholarship, white culture, black African culture

A INTRODUCTION

One of the contributions of South African biblical scholarship to African biblical scholarship has been its emphasis on class. Economic class as a formative factor in the production of biblical texts and in the reception of biblical texts is central to South African socially-engaged biblical scholarship. This has not meant, however, the neglect of culture or race, though there has been an extended debate about how to intersect class and culture. Buti Tlhagale's 1985 analysis of "Culture in an Apartheid Society" is an excellent example, with him identifying "the peculiarity of South Africa" among other African contexts.¹ Tlhagale echoes here the analysis of the South African Community Party's early 1960s

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¹ Buti Tlhagale, "Culture in an Apartheid Society," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 51 (1985): 27. However, we find a similar debate within Tanzanian Liberation Theology; see for example Per Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1988), 29–81.

characterisation of South Africa as “colonialism of a special type” constituted by “a relatively extensive European settler occupation of the territory; the survival of indigenous African people and their societies as an oppressed but overwhelming majority; and the decisive factor – the imperialist implantation of a highly developed ‘mature’ capitalist system into this colonial setting.”² It is this “decisive factor” that is the focus of my article, what Lebamang Sebidi refers to as “racial capitalism” in his remarkable analysis of the “dialectical relationship” between class and race within the “four historical phases of the black struggle in South Africa.”³

Racial capitalism did not come to an end in 1994, notwithstanding the gains in political and juridical transformation. The long “history of inequality in South Africa,”⁴ dating back as far as 1652,⁵ at least (and I will go on to explain), has resulted in what might be considered a hybrid form of racial neo-colonial global democratic capitalism. Sampie Terreblanche, writing in 2002, uses the term “democratic capitalism” to characterise “a transition” since 1990 “from the politico-economic system of white political domination and racial capitalism to a new system of democratic capitalism.”⁶ While Terreblanche is correct in stating that South Africa’s “democratic political system” is “controlled by an African elite,”⁷ Gillian Hart, writing a decade later, is also correct in recognising “the historical depth and extent of racialised dispossession as the defining feature of South African political economy.”⁸ The Covid-19 pandemic has confirmed the analysis of both Terreblanche and Hart. Race and/as class continue to be the distinctive feature of South African reality.

But what about culture? In honouring the work of our colleague David Tuesday Adamo, who has done pioneering work in contributing to and providing conceptual analysis of ‘African biblical scholarship,’⁹ foregrounding “African

² SACP, “The South African Road to Socialism: 13th Congress Political Programme of the SACP 2012–2017: SACP’s 5 Year Plan,” SACP, 2012, <http://www.sacp.org.za/docs/docs/2012/draftpol2012.pdf>.

³ Lebamang Sebidi, “The Dynamics of the Black Struggle and Its Implications for Black Theology,” in *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology* (ed. Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale; Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), 31, 1.

⁴ Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002).

⁵ Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality*, 14–16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Gillian Hart, *Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2013), 234.

⁹ See for example David Tuesday Adamo, “The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutic(s),” *Old Testament Essays* 28/1 (2015); David Tuesday Adamo, “What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?,” *Black Theology* 13/1 (2015).

cultural hermeneutics" in various ways,¹⁰ this article sets out to analyse a neglected dimension of South African biblical scholarship, namely, the class distinctions within a culture. Tinyiko Maluleke has helpfully offered us a three-phase understanding of South African Black Theology, documenting shifting hermeneutical engagements with 'culture' in Black Theology.¹¹ Whereas phase one of Black Theology, argues Maluleke, "ventured somewhat into cultural... issues," phase two "became more and more concerned with the struggle of black people against racist, political and economic oppression."¹² However, even within phase two, he continues, "At crucial moments connections with African culture would be made – provided that culture was understood as a site of struggle rather than a fixed set of rules and behaviours."¹³ Culture remains problematised in phase three but there is now an envisaged rapprochement with African (Traditional) Religions (ATR) and African Independent Churches (AIC), locating within both ATRs and AICs an alignment between culture and class, so that phase three is characterised by a foregrounding of culture not found in phase two. Given the class dimension of Black Theology's analysis of race – for "Black Theology is first and foremost not about the powerful but about the powerless and the silenced"¹⁴ – both ATRs and AICs offer Black Theology in its third phase "another chance of demonstrating solidarity with the poor," for ATRs are the religion of the poor and AICs are the churches of the Christian poor.¹⁵ My own analysis has followed Maluleke's heuristic (overlapping and intersecting) three-phase analysis and I have gone on to discern a fourth phase, a phase in which class analysis is undertaken within a particular culture, both African and biblical.¹⁶ This article takes that work a step further, enlarging the discourse domain to include not only work within Black Theology, but also work within South African Contextual Theology and South African decolonial biblical hermeneutics.

The (re)turn to indigenous culture is central to both postcolonial and decolonial biblical studies. For example, Adamo is explicit about the cultural dimension of the decolonial African biblical scholarship project. In his 2004 inaugural lecture, Adamo reflects overtly on "decolonizing African biblical

¹⁰ David T. Adamo, "African Cultural Hermeneutics," in *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

¹¹ I have discussed these three phases more fully in Gerald O. West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2016), 326–348.

¹² Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "Black Theology as Public Discourse," in *Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life: Multi-Event 1999 Academic Workshop Papers* (ed. James R. Cochrane; Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1998), 96.

¹³ Maluleke, "Black Theology as Public Discourse," 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁶ West, *The Stolen Bible*, 345.

studies."¹⁷ Drawing on R.S. Sugirtharajah's notion of "vernacular hermeneutics,"¹⁸ Adamo celebrates "the local," mobilising "indigenous cultural materials," "indigenous resources," "indigenous languages," "indigenous texture," "indigenous religion," "indigenous churches," "indigenous tradition," "indigenous society," "indigenous Christians," "indigenous therapeutic traditions," "indigenous people," in short "indigenous culture," in order to decolonise African biblical studies.¹⁹ My analysis adds 'indigenous class' to Adamo's catalogue of (indigenous) cultural attributes.

My starting point is my own 'culture,' White South African culture, in both its apartheid and post-apartheid manifestations. Alongside this first example, I analyse two examples of how Black African South African culture is interrogated for its class dimensions. The first example comes from the work of Gunther Wittenberg, the second from the work of Makhosazana Nzimande and the third from the work of Hulisani Ramantswana. My own contribution lies not only in the analysis of each example but in my weaving of notions of the decolonial across the three examples.

B DECOLONISING WHITE CULTURE—WITTENBERG

Gunther Wittenberg located his biblical scholarship within what came to be known as South African 'Contextual Theology,'²⁰ with Black Theology as a significant dialogue partner in his work. Though he understood his work serving the anti-apartheid struggle in general, he had a particular commitment to a prophetic ministry to White South Africans.²¹ His book *Prophecy and Protest: A Contextual Introduction to Israelite Prophecy* is based on a series of lectures he gave as part of the extension programme of the Centre for Adult Education within the then University of Natal in 1980. These lectures, he says, were "aimed

¹⁷ David Tuesday Adamo, *Decolonizing African Biblical Studies* (Abraka: Delta State University, 2004).

¹⁸ R.S. Sugirtharajah, "Vernacular Resurrections: An Introduction," in *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Adamo, *Decolonizing African Biblical Studies*, 4, 5, 7, 10, 21, 22, 24, 27, 28.

²⁰ McGlory T. Speckman and Larry T. Kaufmann, eds., *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001).

²¹ The Institute for Contextual Theology would later formalise this kind of work within its "A Liberating Ministry to the White Community" project. See Gerald O. West, "White Theology in a Black Frame: Betraying the Logic of Social Location," in *Living on the Edge: Essays in Honour of Steve de Gruchy, Activist and Theologian* (ed. James R. Cochrane et al.; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2012), 69–70; George J. van Wyngaard, "Responding to the Challenge of Black Theology: Liberating Ministry to the White Community – 1988–1990," *HTS Theological Studies* 72 (2016).

at a white middle-class audience for whom I felt the message of Israel's prophets to be particularly relevant at that time."²²

Wittenberg had no need then to elaborate on his understanding of 'White.' 'White' was a settler-colonial-apartheid construction of social identity, regularly reinforced (though not always consistently with reference to a particular distinctive feature of 'whiteness') through what Gerhard Maré, drawing on Göran Therborn's work on ideology as "social processes,"²³ refers to as "hailing (or 'interpellating'),"²⁴ which "relate us to and get us to recognise the social world in specific ways."²⁵ Such hailings or summonings or interpellations 'construct,' 'maintain' and 'confirm' our social identity.²⁶

As a White of German settler origin South African, Wittenberg knew his place within the South African race and/as class landscape. However, he refused to be hailed by White voices, opting instead to be summoned by Black voices, serving their struggle directly with his biblical scholarship and/as activism and indirectly by using his biblical scholarship to address the White ruling classes and summoning them in turn to repentance and conversion (to use the language of Contextual Theology's *Kairos Document* and *Road to Damascus Document*).²⁷ Significantly, given his understanding of and commitment to the struggle against racial capitalism, Wittenberg recognised the peculiarity of the class struggle in South Africa. The *class* struggle was the *Black* struggle. As Robert Davies, writing in 1973, aptly puts it, "At present, there is no liberation movement in South Africa which seriously regards the white working class as a

²² Gunther H. Wittenberg, *Prophecy and Protest: A Contextual Introduction to Israelite Prophecy* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), 5.

²³ Göran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1999), vii.

²⁴ For related discussion on 'interpellation' and 'whiteness' within a specifically South African context see Gerrie F. Snyman, "African Hermeneutics' 'Outing' of Whiteness," *Neotestamentica* 42/1 (2008).

²⁵ Gerhard Maré, "Race Counts in Contemporary South Africa: 'An Illusion of Ordinarity,'" *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 47 (2001): 78; referring to Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, 18.

²⁶ Maré, "Race Counts in Contemporary South Africa," 78.

²⁷ Theologians Kairos, *Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa: The Kairos Document* (Braamfontein: The Kairos Theologians, 1985); ICT, *The Road to Damascus: Kairos and Conversion* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1989).

potential ally, because of the benefits that this section of the settler community derives from Apartheid."²⁸ The White working-class had been coopted.²⁹

While Wittenberg was engaged in various anti-apartheid struggle projects, it is his biblical scholarship that has an enduring impact on European, White South African, and African biblical scholarships. The bulk of Wittenberg's Old Testament biblical studies work was done during a time when the Old Testament Society of South Africa (OTSSA) was almost entirely controlled by White Afrikaner scholarship³⁰ yet he continued to attend OTSSA annual conferences and publish in their journal, *Old Testament Essays* (OTE). What Wittenberg shared in common with these Old Testament biblical scholars was a shared interest in European (mainly German) biblical scholarship. What they did respectively with this scholarship, however, was different. Wittenberg used the historical-critical and sociological work of European biblical scholarship in much the same way as the Black South African biblical scholar Itumeleng Mosala used Euro-American historical-critical and sociological work. For each, the biblical text itself was a site of struggle, incorporating contending ideological and theological agendas, rooted in political and economic contestation.³¹

Summoned by the Black struggle, Wittenberg also published in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (JTSA), a site in which both South African Black Theology and Contextual Theology published,³² among whose liberation discourse Wittenberg situated his work. As I have indicated,

²⁸ Robert Davies, "The White Working Class in South Africa," *New Left Review* 82 (1973): 40.

²⁹ Keith Breckenbridge, "Fighting for a White South Africa: White Working-class Racism and the 1922 Rand Revolt," Article, *SAfH Journal* 57 (2007).

³⁰ Jurie H. le Roux, *A Story of Two Ways: Thirty Years of Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa* (Pretoria: Verba Vitae, 1993); Madipoane (ngwan'a Mphahlele) Masenya, "Is White South African Old Testament Scholarship African?," *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* 12 (2002); Madipoane (ngwan'a Mphahlele) Masenya and Hulisani Ramantswana, "Anything New under the Sun of South African Old Testament Scholarship? African Qoheleth's Review of OTE 1994–2010," *Old Testament Essays* 25 (2012).

³¹ See the common approach to the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4; Gunther H. Wittenberg, "King Solomon and the Theologians," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 63 (1988): 27–28; Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 33–37. See also my analysis in Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context* (Second Revised ed.; Maryknoll and Pietermaritzburg: Orbis Books and Cluster Publications, 1995), 60–82.

³² Philippe Denis, "The *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* and the Emergence of Contextual Theology in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 146 (2013).

Wittenberg challenged White culture while serving the Black struggle. A good example of such work is his 1991 article, published in *OTE*,³³ forged in the final days of apartheid's formal rule, "Job the Farmer: the Judean עַם־הָאָרֶץ and the Wisdom Movement."

I have chosen this article for a number of reasons, as will become clear. First, the article is vintage 'Old Testament' scholarship, debating with Euro-American (mainly European) biblical scholars about the "origin" of "the wisdom movement in Israel."³⁴ Second, Wittenberg's orientation to the question of 'origin,' a common focus of this generation of biblical scholarship, is however rather different from the consensus position. Shaped by South Africa's liberation struggle and the summons to learn 'from below,' to be partially constituted by the epistemology of the poor and oppressed, Wittenberg is attentive, like Mosala, to class contestation within the biblical text. His class-based analysis leads him to recognise contestation within ancient Israel's wisdom tradition. "Many scholars believe," argues Wittenberg, "that pre-exilic wisdom is basically 'school wisdom'... reflecting the interests of government officials and the ruling class." However, he goes on to argue, "I want to challenge this view and want to maintain that the setting of Old Testament wisdom is not primarily the court but that it reflects the ethos of the עַם־הָאָרֶץ 'the people of the land'."³⁵ What follows is a careful and detailed analysis using archaeological, historical-critical and sociological method.

A third reason why this article is significant is how it reconstructs a redacted but identifiable struggle situated among the Judean עַם־הָאָרֶץ against the royal court. This is a recurring area of analysis for Wittenberg, shaped as is by the South African struggle, therefore, in what follows, I will connect articles and essays in which Wittenberg has established his argument. Like Mosala, Wittenberg locates resistance in real communities of struggle, both ancient and contemporary. The persuasiveness of Wittenberg's argument for a pervasive "resistance theology" within the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible resides partially in his location of resistance theology within a particular sector of ancient 'Israel,' the עַם־הָאָרֶץ, the Judean, 'people of the land.'

Though the resistance theology of the עַם־הָאָרֶץ takes form with the rise of the monarchy, Wittenberg is careful to demonstrate the political and economic significance of this sector prior to the changes wrought by monarchy. The "men

³³ Gunther H. Wittenberg, "Job the Farmer: The Judean עַם־הָאָרֶץ and the Wisdom Movement," *Old Testament Essays* 4 (1991); this and other of Wittenberg's articles and essays referred to here have been republished in Gunther H. Wittenberg, *Resistance Theology in the Old Testament: Collected Essays* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2007).

³⁴ Wittenberg, "Job the Farmer," 151.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

of Judah," in Wittenberg's analysis, are Judah's relatively stable, relatively prosperous and relatively educated traditional Judahite leadership,³⁶ representing the rural agricultural community of the עַם־הָאָרֶץ. Wittenberg sees this sector as the repository of an early Judean agriculture-based wisdom tradition, which drew on the Egyptian wisdom traditions that characterised "Judean towns which had long been under direct Egyptian control."³⁷ Importantly, the עַם־הָאָרֶץ retained a substantial independence, rooted in their ownership of rural land, their memory of "a period in their history when they were not ruled by kings,"³⁸ their "segmentary" and "acephalous" social structure (similar to African societies, Wittenberg notes)³⁹ and the leadership of clan-based "elders."⁴⁰ Taken together, such characteristics represented early Israel as a form of "democratic society."⁴¹

The resistance theology of this sector takes shape, Wittenberg argues, "within the context of historical struggles and conflicts";⁴² it is a theology of struggle, both ancient and contemporary. Significantly, in the article in which Wittenberg uses this phrase, "Old Testament Theology, for Whom?," he situates his contribution to the field of Old Testament theology clearly within the Black struggle, noting with regret that participation in annual congresses of the Old Testament Society of South Africa "is an almost totally white affair with little black participation."⁴³ Against this reality, Wittenberg is summoned by race and/as class formations other than his own, arguing that in his opinion the,

one central issue which proved of decisive significance for the development of Israel's theology... is the establishment of royal-imperial power and the resistance to that power, the establishment of a hegemonic theology, on the one hand, which is challenged by a new type of theology, on the other.

This theology, he continues, connecting ancient contexts of struggle to the contemporary South African struggle is not ready to hand but is only formulated and developed in the process of resistance and opposition. In order

³⁶ Ibid., 157–161.

³⁷ Gunther H. Wittenberg, "Wisdom Influences on Genesis 2–11: A Contribution to the Debate about the 'Yahwistic' Primeval History," *Old Testament Essays* 8/3 (1995): 452.

³⁸ Gunther H. Wittenberg, "Authoritarian and Participatory Decision-making in the Old Testament," in *A Democratic Vision for South Africa: Political Realism and Christian Responsibility* (ed. Klaus Nürnberger; Pietermaritzburg: South Africa, 1991), 87.

³⁹ Wittenberg, "Authoritarian and Participatory Decision-making," 87.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Gunther H. Wittenberg, "Old Testament Theology: For Whom?" *Semeia* 73 (1996): 221.

⁴³ Wittenberg, "Old Testament Theology," 221.

to make that theology relevant for our own situation, we would have to retell the story of this theology, concentrating not only on theological ideas or theological traditions but taking into consideration the historical context and the various social groups and their struggles, which gave rise to those traditions. Such a theology could serve as a model for struggles of resistance and theological reflection arising out of struggles in our own South African context.⁴⁴

Critically and crucially, Wittenberg recognises that this kind of theological project cannot be done by biblical scholars and theologians on their own. Such theology requires participation and knowledge "from below."⁴⁵ This is why Wittenberg devoted much of this work towards establishing the Institute for the Study of the Bible (what is now the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research), linked to the then School of Theology at the then University of Natal. The Institute for the Study of the Bible, states Wittenberg in this essay, "seeks to establish an interface between biblical studies and ordinary readers of the Bible in the church and community in order to facilitate social transformation." Though the participation and input of "grassroots communities," he continues, contextual Bible study "not only aims at empowering the poor and oppressed who take part in this process, but also seeks to transform the teaching of Biblical Studies at the School of Theology."⁴⁶

While the contemporary struggle Wittenberg is addressing is the struggle against apartheid and its legacy, the locus of the biblical struggle is the monarchy. The resistance theology of the עַם־הָאָרֶץ is forged in opposition to Egyptian colonial control of the towns of Judea, for though the עַם־הָאָרֶץ "shared in the great tradition of the ancient Near East... they no longer shared the royal-urban imperial values,"⁴⁷ nor the attempts of David and Solomon "to establish an empire according to the Egyptian model."⁴⁸ Wittenberg's analysis is nuanced and he is careful to point out that though the עַם־הָאָרֶץ are clearly apprehensive about monarchy, given their memory of the Egyptian model (and their experience of the Canaanite city-states),⁴⁹ they supported David's kingship. Within the "stable world" of an agricultural community, "where wealth came from the land," "everybody had a place, the rich and the poor, even the king, all of whom the עַם־הָאָרֶץ of Judah had come to accept as part of the just order of creation."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 231.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Wittenberg, "Wisdom Influences on Genesis 2–11," 452.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Wittenberg, "King Solomon and the Theologians," 12; Wittenberg, "Job the Farmer," 159.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 162.

A fourth reason the "Job the Farmer" article is significant is that it is attentive to class divisions within a 'culture.' Incrementally, as the Davidic-Solomonic monarchic system developed ominous systemic features,⁵¹ so Wittenberg discerns a division among the עַם־הָאָרֶץ. The stable world on which so much of the agriculture-based life and wisdom was based became unstable. As Wittenberg shows, wisdom literature captures the emergence of a systemic relationship between wealth and poverty. With the shift in political, economic and religious system towards a city-temple state system,⁵² a division develops within the עַם־הָאָרֶץ, for a certain sector of the עַם־הָאָרֶץ not only benefited from this systemic shift but contributed to the exploitation of "the poorer Judahite fellow citizens who were sinking even deeper into debt and serfdom."⁵³ A sector of the עַם־הָאָרֶץ "in the latter part of the monarchy" "became a rich, land-owning class who participated in the oppression of the poorer sections of the people, together with the merchants and other feudatories in the city of Jerusalem."⁵⁴ However, rediscovering "their own ancient sacred traditions,"⁵⁵ re-membering the Exodus tradition and Samuel's poetic warning about the predatory practices of the monarchic system,⁵⁶ there was a "prophetic counter-reaction" in alliance with "a counter-movement" "within the עַם־הָאָרֶץ."⁵⁷ It is this counter-movement and its resistance theology that is the focus of Wittenberg's scholarship.

Like Mosala, Wittenberg uses historical-critical and sociological methods to identify this redacted resistance theology. Central to Wittenberg's work is the recognition that the resistance theology he discerns is located within a particular social sector, the עַם־הָאָרֶץ in general and within a particular class-sector within the עַם־הָאָרֶץ in particular and that the resistance theology of this social sector was "aimed not at abolishing the Davidic dynasty but at curbing its power and checking its tendency to self-deification."⁵⁸ Even prior to Solomon, there are indications,⁵⁹ according to Wittenberg, of resistance to David's monarchy, when

⁵¹ Ibid., 23–24; Wittenberg, "Authoritarian and Participatory Decision-making," 100–101.

⁵² Roland Boer, "The Sacred Economy of Ancient 'Israel,'" *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: An International Journal of Nordic Theology* 21/1 (2007); Gerald O. West, "Tracking an Ancient Near Eastern Economic System: The Tributary Mode of Production and the Temple-state," *Old Testament Essays* 24/2 (2011).

⁵³ Wittenberg, "Job the Farmer," 159.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 159; see also Gunther H. Wittenberg, "Amos and Hosea: A Contribution to the Problem of the 'Profetenschweigen' in the Deuteronomistic History (Dtr)," *Old Testament Essays* 6/3 (1993): 306.

⁵⁵ Wittenberg, "King Solomon and the Theologians," 25.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 24–25.

⁵⁷ Wittenberg, "Job the Farmer," 159.

⁵⁸ Wittenberg, "King Solomon and the Theologians," 25.

⁵⁹ "Absalom was proclaimed king in Hebron, the sacred city of Judah. His commander-in-chief Amasa was from Judah, as was Ahithophel who came from Gilo, one of the country towns (2 Sm 17:23)"; Wittenberg, "Job the Farmer," 158.

an emerging counter-movement who had initially supported David "changed sides and supported the rebellion of Absalom."⁶⁰ The counter-movement among the עַמ־הָאָרֶץ takes textual form alongside the emergence of prophets and as part of the Deuteronomic movement,⁶¹ re-memembering the prophet Nathan as "the spokesperson of this opposition,"⁶² intervening in the name of Yahweh to prevent David from establishing a fully-fledged temple-city state.⁶³

A fifth and final reason for choosing Wittenberg's "Job the Farmer" article as an example is how Wittenberg recognises the cultural resonances of proverbs but probes these ancient biblical proverbs for their class identity. Wittenberg is also attentive, like many African biblical scholars, to the resonance between biblical proverbs and African proverbs. In making his argument for the origins of a wisdom tradition among the homesteads of the עַמ־הָאָרֶץ, Wittenberg draws extensively on Friedemann Golka's work⁶⁴ in which Golka uses a sociological approach to establish similarities and analogies between the "tribal cultures" of ancient, pre-exilic Israel and pre-colonial Africa.⁶⁵ Golka concludes his argument as follows:

If the aspects of life depicted in the Israelite proverbs and those of tribal societies are basically the same, then the derivation of Hebrew wisdom from Egypt and Mesopotamia [and their associated 'wisdom schools'] is in doubt. It would then have to be explained as indigenous wisdom.⁶⁶

We find a similar interpretive interest in the work of Adamo, who offers a useful historical overview of African biblical scholarship's engagement with African proverbs as well as a contribution of his own, identifying and cataloguing forms of proverbial correspondence between biblical and African proverb-types. Adamo identifies the (re)turn to such oral resources as a feature of the decolonising of African biblical studies.⁶⁷ Like Wittenberg, Adamo is of the view "that the Proverbs were formerly oral sayings of elders and wise people in ancient Israel."⁶⁸ It is this recognition that African proverbs reflect African

⁶⁰ Wittenberg, "Wisdom Influences on Genesis 2–11," 451.

⁶¹ Wittenberg, "Job the Farmer," 159–160.

⁶² Wittenberg, "Authoritarian and Participatory Decision-making," 89.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 89–90.

⁶⁴ Wittenberg, "Job the Farmer," 154–155. Wittenberg cites two of Golka's essays in their German original, published in 1983 and 1986 respectively. These two essays form the first two chapters of the book from which I cite below.

⁶⁵ Friedemann W. Golka, *The Leopard's Spots: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 10–15.

⁶⁶ Golka, *The Leopard's Spots*, 15.

⁶⁷ Adamo, *Decolonizing African Biblical Studies*, 4, 9, 19.

⁶⁸ David Tuesday Adamo, "Ancient Israelite and African Proverbs as Advice, Reproach, Warning, Encouragement and Explanation," *HTS Theological Studies* 71 (2015): 4.

indigenous wisdom that has drawn African biblical scholarship to comparative analysis.⁶⁹ Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), as Adamo's account acknowledges, is one of the earliest practitioners of this kind of "cultural hermeneutics,"⁷⁰ building a body of work over more than thirty years. While aware of the kinds of interpretive interest that shape the work of Golka and Wittenberg, Masenya's interpretive emphasis has been less on how African proverb-generating indigenous societies offer an alternative reconstruction of Ancient Near Eastern proverb-generating societies and more on how comparative cultural hermeneutics provides for an analysis of the "apparent resemblances" between "the Israelite worldview as embedded in some Old Testament... with (an) African worldview(s)." ⁷¹

While neither Adamo nor Masenya takes up a class analysis of African proverbs, Masenya makes a similar analytical move toward Wittenberg when she identifies the gender system within which proverbs are situated. Masenya is attentive to the gendered system of African culture, even indigenous culture. In two related articles on "singlehood" among women,⁷² Masenya provides a nuanced analysis of contending wisdoms within Northern Sotho-Pedi culture, demonstrating how normative hetero-patriarchal proverbs are challenged by the stories (and proverbs?) of women marginalised by hetero-patriarchal norms.

What is profound about Wittenberg's analysis is that he identifies two similar sounding but systemically quite different proverbs in the biblical corpus. Wittenberg probes their cultural context with respect to their class identity. Wittenberg does not accept that "early Israelite wisdom presents a single world view, arising from a common setting," arguing instead that the changing economic "social history of the עַם־הָאָרֶץ" generates related but systemically distinct proverbs:⁷³

The rich and the poor meet together,

⁶⁹ See for example John Mbiti, "The African Proverbs Project and after," *Lexikos* 12 (2002).

⁷⁰ Madipoane J. Masenya, "In the School of Wisdom: An Interpretation of Some Old Testament Proverbs in a Northern Sotho Context," *Old Testament Essays* 4/2 (1991): 171, which is based on J. Masenya Madipoane, "In the School of Wisdom: An Interpretation of Some Old Testament Proverbs in a Northern Sotho Context" (Masters Dissertation, Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1989).

⁷¹ Madipoane (ngwan'a Mphahlele) Masenya, "Making Sense of Psalm 127:3–5 in African/South African Contexts," *Old Testament Essays* 32/2 (2019): 412.

⁷² Madipoane (ngwan'a Mphahlele) Masenya, "Engaging with the Book of Ruth as Single, African Christian Women: One African Woman's Reflection," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34/1 (2013): 5; Madipoane (ngwan'a Mphahlele) Masenya, "Is Ruth the 'Eset Hayil for Real? An Exploration of Womanhood from African Proverbs to the Threshing Floor (Ruth 3:1–13)," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXVI/Supplement (2010).

⁷³ Wittenberg, "Job the Farmer," 162.

the Lord is the maker of them all (Prov 22:2).

The poor and the oppressor meet together,

the Lord gives eyes to the light of both (Prov 29:13).⁷⁴

The first proverb, he argues, “reflects the experience of a well-to-do farming community,” whereby common experience taught “that laziness and mismanagement would lead to impoverishment.”⁷⁵ The wealth of the rich and the poverty of the poor are not systemically related; the poor are not poor because the rich are rich. Wisdom’s view on the difference between the rich and the poor within an agricultural context where there is class parity is that those who engage with their agricultural world wisely would prosper, while those who did not would not. This economically “early” saying, argues Wittenberg, is part of the corpus of “early sayings” which “are dominated by the act-consequence sequence, where every good or evil deed is seen to have good or evil consequences.”⁷⁶ However, the shift in analysis in the second proverb “from wealth as a desirable asset and a blessing of God typical of old wisdom, to wealth as a means of oppression... can be interpreted as a reaction of the old rural economy to the dynamics of a growing urban-based monetary economy.”⁷⁷ In particular, continues Wittenberg, the introduction of Canaanite business practices, “especially interest on loans ... could be seen as being primarily responsible for the exploitation of the rural population.”⁷⁸ In sum, “The wise realise that there is a type of wealth gained by unrighteous means.”⁷⁹

Wittenberg’s work, particularly his article “Job the Farmer,” does pioneering work in recognising and analysing the class dimensions within culture, both ancient biblical culture and South African apartheid culture. In the next two examples, I turn my attention to two equally pioneering pieces of work in which Black African culture is interrogated by Black South African biblical scholars.

C DECOLONISING BLACK AFRICAN CULTURE— NZIMANDE

My first example is the work of Makhosazana Nzimande. What makes her work truly pioneering is her insistence on a class analysis while Black African culture is being recovered as part of a post-apartheid postcolonial project. Wittenberg understood his work as being part of a decolonial contextual-liberation theology

⁷⁴ Ibid., 163.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 162.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 162.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 163.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 163.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 164.

trajectory; Nzimande locates her work overtly within a postcolonial and neo-colonial frame.⁸⁰ Her work "seeks to place African women at the forefront of post-apartheid historical examination... changing black African women's historical positioning as objects of history into subjects of history."⁸¹ Post-apartheid Black African women's identities, she argues, are "in dire need of decolonisation."⁸² Central to her understanding of the decolonial project is that, "black cultural consciousness should be placed within the context of a globalised cultural hegemony and utilised as a decolonising strategy of resistance against the colonially imposed amnesia," while avoiding "the creation of false nostalgic cultural memories and post-colonial ethnic identities that conform to colonially inscribed identities."⁸³

Nzimande deploys the "multivocalic symbol" of "Imbokodo" as her central hermeneutical concept, "construed from the freedom song sung at the South African Women's Defiance Campaign against apartheid pass laws at the Union Buildings in Pretoria in 1956: '*Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo, uzokufa!*' translated as 'You strike a woman, you strike a grinding stone, you will be crushed!'"⁸⁴ Following overtly in Mosala's (which are also Wittenberg's) theoretical and methodological footsteps,⁸⁵ Nzimande locates Black African women within three intersecting oppressive systems. These are (1) the "post-apartheid economic condition" in which "black women continue to suffer from the socio-economic legacy of the racial capitalism of apartheid,"⁸⁶ (2) the gender struggles of South African Black women who, quoting Musa Dube, "not only suffer the yoke of colonial oppression but also endure the burden of two patriarchal systems imposed on them,"⁸⁷ both settler-colonial patriarchal systems and indigenous African patriarchal systems and (3) "the pervasive injustice that reigned supreme in African political systems of governance."⁸⁸

It is this (re)turn to class analysis within indigenous cultural systems that marks Nzimande's contribution as distinctive, ushering in what I have argued might be considered a fourth phase of South African Black Theology. Nzimande's careful theoretical and methodological analysis of 1 Kgs 21:1–16

⁸⁰ Makhosazana K. Nzimande, "Reconfiguring Jezebel: A Postcolonial *Imbokodo* Reading of the Story of Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings 21:1–16)," in *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning* (ed. Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 223–224, 27–28.

⁸¹ Nzimande, "Reconfiguring Jezebel," 226.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 227.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 231, quoting Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 20.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.

brings this text into a postcolonial *imbokodo* mediated dialogue with "African Queens and Queen Mothers in Africa." It aligns her scholarship with African and African American scholarship, following in the footsteps of Adamo and Randall Bailey by rejecting the "de-Africanisation" tendency "prevalent in Eurocentric biblical scholarship."⁸⁹ Having located alongside Jezebel "the Zulu Queen Mother Mkabayi kaJama Zulu [c. 1750-1843] of the Zulu nation in South Africa and the legendary Queen/Queen Mother of the Swazi [c. 1859–15 December 1925]," as hermeneutical dialogue partners,⁹⁰ Nzimande's analysis slowly proceeds towards the third and final oppressive frame. It argues that:

The common thread that binds the roles of Queens and Queen Mothers in the Hebrew Bible... and in Africa, is the politics of exploitation whereby the women concerned, alongside the men, selfishly hoarded power for their own benefit at the expense of the poor and the downtrodden.⁹¹

She becomes quite specific, making it clear that, "the beneficiaries from the Queens and Queen Mother's reigns are themselves and their sons, rather than the general grassroots populace they are expected to represent by virtue of their royal privileges."⁹²

Refusing to follow the White feminist focus on Jezebel, Nzimande asks, "Whatever happened to the struggles of Naboth's wife"? Postcolonial readers, she insists, "refuse to identify with Jezebel in the text and choose instead to foreground and underscore the hidden struggles of Naboth's wife from their own experience of similar situations of oppression and forced removal although there is no mention of her in the text."⁹³ She explicitly invokes Naboth's wife and children, bringing them into a critical class dialogue with the indigenous African "marginalised and dispossessed, those at the receiving end of the Queens' and Queen Mothers' policies."⁹⁴ While not denying the gender oppression and marginalisation of women both in the Hebrew Bible and in contemporary postcolonial settings, accentuating gender oppression over and above the pernicious [class] social dynamics and ramifications of the royal abuse of power

⁸⁹ Ibid., 238. See for example Randall Bailey, "Beyond Identification: The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Cain Hope Felder; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 168 and footnote 14; David Tuesday Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament* (San Francisco: Christian University Press, 1998); David Tuesday Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the New Testament* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006).

⁹⁰ Nzimande, "Reconfiguring Jezebel," 239.

⁹¹ Ibid., 242.

⁹² Ibid., 243.

⁹³ Ibid., 246.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 243.

and the exploitation of the poor in the hands of women, as Jezebel's dealings with Naboth so clearly demonstrate, is a dangerous exercise. It is therefore regrettable that the immense social standing of Queens and Queen Mothers, both in Africa and in the Hebrew Bible, confers upon them the opportunity to exploit and dehumanise those over whom they reign. Such is the disposition of women of higher *classes* who are divorced from the everyday realities of women at grassroots.⁹⁵

Nzimande's metaphor of the *imbokodo*—grinding stone is indeed appropriate. The proverb 'Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo, uzokufa!' rather aptly recognises class divisions among women within Black African culture; not all women use a grinding stone equally.

D DECOLONISING BLACK AFRICAN CULTURE— RAMANTSWANA

My second example of Black South African decolonial analysis of class divisions within culture makes overt use of local African proverbs in order to make an argument about class within culture. Hulisani Ramantswana is among a generation of African biblical scholars who explicitly do their decolonial biblical scholarship drawing on African (indigenous) proverbs.

Much like Adamo, Ramantswana is deliberate about his use of the concept of the necessity for 'decolonial' readings and of 'decolonising' biblical studies.⁹⁶ As I have done with Wittenberg and Nzimande, I will focus on a particular article in which there is an explicit recognition of class contestation within a cultural corpus of proverbs. Like Wittenberg, Mosala and Nzimande, Ramantswana is clear that "a decolonial reading also seeks to uncover the voices of those who have been marginalized and the suppressed voices of resistance within the same Bible."⁹⁷ In order to discern, identify, and analyse contending biblical voices, Ramantswana makes use of proverbs from his own Black African Tshivenda culture.

The article which is my focus is "Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics in the (South) African Context," in which Ramantswana offers not only a detailed account of his understanding of the 'decolonial' task, including interrogation of the notion of 'social location' and the issue of 'epistemology' but also an example of what a decolonial interpretation looks like within African biblical

⁹⁵ Ibid., 243, my emphasis.

⁹⁶ Hulisani Ramantswana, "Not Free While Nature Remains Colonised: A Decolonial Reading of Isaiah 11:6–9," *Old Testament Essays* 28/3 (2015); Hulisani Ramantswana, "Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics in the (South) African Context," *Acta Theologica Supplement* 24 (2016); Hulisani Ramantswana, "Decolonial Reflection on the Landlessness of the Levites," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 158 (2017).

⁹⁷ Ramantswana, "Decolonial Reflection on the Landlessness of the Levites," 74–75.

hermeneutics.⁹⁸ There is a clear decolonial logic in this movement from social location, to epistemology, to practice.

Social location in the South African context is contested terrain, deeply inscribed even now by race. "The White social location of privilege is," insists Ramantswana, "not a thing of the past; it remains a current reality,"⁹⁹ which is why a decolonial perspective requires that "the concept of social location is not simply concerned with place, be it Africa or South Africa." "Reading from this place," continues Ramantswana, invoking the (grudging) recognition within biblical studies that all biblical interpreters read from a particular place,¹⁰⁰ "without engaging the social location of the reader in the racialised world in which we live, does not necessarily address the problem."¹⁰¹ Therefore, "In the South African context, the issue of 'race' can be neither evaded nor avoided, as it has to do with the question of who is producing knowledge."¹⁰² This is in fact the case within South African biblical scholarship, argues Ramantswana, where "[t]he demise of the colonial-apartheid regime in South Africa did not result in a radical shift in the production of knowledge," particularly in the post-apartheid history of South African biblical scholarship—both Old Testament and New Testament—¹⁰³ where "[t]he continuance of the status quo basically implies the continuity of White dominance in the production of knowledge in the field of biblical studies."¹⁰⁴

In moving towards his practice of decolonial biblical interpretation Ramantswana engages with the concept of 'Whiteness' and the "epistemological location of White Africans"¹⁰⁵ but his primary emphasis is on the "epistemological location of Black Africans."¹⁰⁶ This leads him directly into his decolonial interpretive practice, which requires the "production of alternative

⁹⁸ Ibid., 180.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 182.

¹⁰⁰ Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (vol. 1; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (vol. 2; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

¹⁰¹ Ramantswana, "Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics," 184.

¹⁰² Ibid. 182.

¹⁰³ See Masenya, "Is White South African Old Testament Scholarship African?"; Masenya and Ramantswana, "Anything New under the Sun of South African Old Testament Scholarship?"; Maarman S. Tshehla, "Africa, Where Art Thou? Pondering Post-apartheid South African New Testament Scholarship," *Neotestamentica* 48/2 (2014).

¹⁰⁴ Ramantswana, "Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics," 183.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 185–187.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 187–189.

knowledge from an African social location."¹⁰⁷ Given the history of colonisation and the continuity of the structures of coloniality in Africa as a social location, African biblical scholars should have a two-fold commitment. They need to be committed to understanding the workings of the current global system in order to avoid perpetuating the structures of coloniality, and from our social location, and they need to be committed to producing alternative knowledge on the basis of our own African knowledge systems and experiences.¹⁰⁸

As indicated, a significant feature of Ramantswana's understanding of the South African decolonial project is the inclusion of 'White Africans.' However, Ramantswana recognises that White South African biblical scholars are "faced with two options." The one option is to continue to maintain White privilege through the subterfuge of a claim to being a minority through which they "tend to cling to their position of privilege in the postcolonial and post-apartheid period and to perpetuate the structures of coloniality from within the subaltern location." "The other option is for subaltern Whites to accept that the colonial system has thrown them onto the underside of the colonial matrix of power and to understand that their liberation has to become intertwined with that of the Blacks." "This position," Ramantswana continues, and Wittenberg and I would concur,¹⁰⁹ requires White (South) Africans,

[to] give up their continuing attempts to maintain their privileged position and to let their struggle become one with the Black struggle. For as long as the White (South) Africans do not embrace the Black struggle and let it envelop them, they remain linked to the colonial system of power, which will continue to work through them to maintain dominance.¹¹⁰

For both Black Africans and White Africans, Ramantswana's twofold commitment, turning away from neo-colonial global systems and (re)turning to African knowledge systems, "requires a dual process of epistemic delinking and epistemic relinking."¹¹¹ Building on the work of Walter Mignolo, who argues

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 189.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 189.

¹⁰⁹ Gerald O. West, "The Vocation of an African Biblical Scholar on the Margins of Biblical Scholarship," *Old Testament Essays* 19/1 (2006); West, "White Theology in a Black Frame: Betraying the Logic of Social Location."

¹¹⁰ Ramantswana, "Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics," 186. I do not think however that the use of the concept 'subaltern' is appropriate for White South Africans. The notion of 'subaltern' is a foundational 'postcolonial' concept that should be reserved, I would argue, for those colonialism has marginalised, not those who were previously part of the colonial power who now find themselves a 'minority' within the South African post-colony; see for example Chaturvedi Vinayak, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000).

¹¹¹ Ramantswana, "Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics," 189.

“that both ‘liberation’ and ‘decolonization’ points toward conceptual (and therefore epistemic) projects of de-linking from the colonial [racial and/as capitalist]¹¹² matrix of power,”¹¹³ Ramantswana calls for “an epistemic shift [delinking] from the imposed colonial mindset and the continuing dependence on Euro-Western categories”¹¹⁴ and an “epistemic relinking” to “African cultures, heritage, and knowledge systems.”¹¹⁵ Crucially, he adds,

The idea of a ‘relinking’ is not some obsession with time-travel to the long-gone, outmoded, precolonial past; rather, it is an epistemological reorientation in the present that refuses to abandon the rich heritage of the African ancestors and draws knowledge from the experiences of suffering from colonialism and coloniality.¹¹⁶

Having outlined his understanding of the logic of the decolonial project, Ramantswana provides “an example of how a relinking with our African knowledge system can be applied in the reading of biblical texts, by reading Gen 47, informed by knowledge systems derived from our African ancestors.”¹¹⁷ From the outset, Ramantswana uses a Tshivenda proverb in order to “relink with African knowledge systems,” appropriating “afresh the heritage our ancestors left us” and making “a deliberate move to anchor the Bible in indigenous discourse”: “*U nala tshau ndi u lata*” (“to abandon what is yours is a loss”).¹¹⁸ From this starting point, Ramantswana then uses a particular Tshivenda proverb to “inform our understanding of reality and of biblical texts,” in general, and specifically in the case of Gen 47 to critique “those in positions of power”: “*Dza musanda dzi kumba thole*” (“The chief’s livestock draws a heifer”).¹¹⁹ Ramantswana elaborates on his translation, arguing that the proverb uses the image of how the chief’s livestock “attracts a poor family’s heifer to mingle with and thus become legally part of the herd”; “that is,” he continues, explicating the proverb further, “those in power tend to thrive at the expense of the poor.”¹²⁰ Ramantswana draws his decolonial ideological orientation from such indigenous knowledge.

“Decoloniality,” Ramantswana argues in another article, “is a perspective through which structures of domination are questioned and challenged,”¹²¹

¹¹² See Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21/2–3 (2007): 478.

¹¹³ Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity,” 455.

¹¹⁴ Ramantswana, “Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics,” 189.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190–191.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 190, 191.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

while also seeking "to uncover the voices of those who have been marginalized and the suppressed voices of resistance within the same Bible."¹²² Ramantswana's Tshivenda proverb does both:

This proverb reflects a critical stance towards those in power, especially when they deprive the poor of their basic necessities. To read Genesis 47 through our proverb of interrogation is to enter into a dialogic process of questioning, challenging, and understanding of the biblical text.¹²³

My emphasis in this article is on Ramantswana's recognition of a class dimension to Tshivenda proverbs (and so to indigenous African knowledge). Ramantswana goes on to deploy this proverb to critique the class contestation within the Joseph narrative, identifying an Egyptian elite economic agenda driven by Joseph and a resisting economic and/as cultural ideology of the masses of ordinary Egyptians who are systematically deprived of their cattle and land and then enslaved.¹²⁴ Turning from biblical text to South African context, Ramantswana uses the same proverb to interrogate a similar kind of economic contestation. He identifies President Jacob Zuma's economic and/as cultural exploitation not only of South African citizens in general but of "the four neighbouring households of Jacob Zuma's Nkandla homestead," who "were forced to give up their ancestral lands in order to create security in comfort for President Zuma and his family."¹²⁵

What is particularly significant in terms of my focus on class-within-culture is how Ramantswana's Tshivenda proverb offers indigenous African resources for interrogating any form of 'political elite,'¹²⁶ whether an African chief or an African president or an imperial Egypt co-opted Hebrew. Ethnicity in each case is interrogated for its class commitments.

E CONCLUSION

Both African postcolonial and decolonial projects emphasise the recognition and recovery of indigenous African 'culture.' Both are overt in bringing to the fore what missionary-colonial 'culture' sought to eradicate or at least regulate by relegating to the margins. African biblical scholarship, led by scholars like David Tuesday Adamo, has brought local African cultural resources alongside biblical texts, using such resources to interrogate both the missionary-colonial brought Bible and the pre-missionary-colonial Bible. What is less usual within African biblical scholarship is the interrogation of class, both class within biblical cultural contexts and class within African cultural contexts. South African

¹²² *Ibid.*, 74–75.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 192–195.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 195–196.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

biblical scholarship has led the way in demonstrating class divisions within culture, whether African culture or biblical culture.

In this article, I have analysed three different yet related decolonial examples of South African biblical scholars at work, spanning a time period of more than thirty years. In each case, the 'cultural' indigenous knowledge of proverbs has been used to discern the class dimensions within culture. What these scholars offer us, I would argue by way of conclusion, is that the 'decolonial' project requires not only a recognition and recovery of culture but also the recognition and recovery of class within culture. African decolonial biblical scholarship requires attentiveness to class (while affirming African culture).

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