



Identity, power, and responsibility: Reflections on prophetic preaching in South Africa

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Abstract

Within South African homiletic thought, prophetic preaching has predominately been understood as preaching steeped in Black Theology of Liberation (BTL). Historically homiletics in South Africa showcased both a rejection of BTL as a merely political ideology and promoted BTL as paramount for prophetic preaching in the democratic context. The former relented, whilst the latter is still dominant. However, there has been no research on the implications of prophetic preaching regarding the proposed outcomes of such preaching, which has a relatively broad scope, including poverty relief, development, admonishment of corruption, and the Lordship of Christ in the public sphere. In this article, I will reflect on prophetic preaching as preaching BTL from a postcolonial, psychological, and ethical perspective, locating four potential consequences of prophetic preaching: a colonial identity paradigm, resentment, misrepresentation of the vital flaws of society, and the relenting of personal responsibility.

Keywords

Prophetic preaching; Black Theology of Liberation; postcolonial thought; identity; resentment; power; responsibility

1. Introduction

Black Theology of Liberation (BTL)¹ has been and is valued as the most viable route towards prophetic preaching,² both historically and currently. Martin Laubscher and I have traced the important association between prophetic preaching and BTL from the democratic transition in South Africa.³ Furthermore, a recent article by Ishaya Anthony and Dion Forster⁴ underscores the recurrent association between BTL and prophetic preaching.

It is important, however, to note that prophetic preaching (as a subdiscipline of homiletics) and BTL have not historically been mutual conversation partners. Prophetic preaching has indeed taken BTL as its primary

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- 1 Black Theology of Liberation has been influenced by a myriad of directions of thought, including Critical Race Theory, South American Liberation Theology, and the Black Consciousness Movement. Unfortunately, it is impossible to go into depths on the complete definition of BTL in this article. However, two points need mentioning. Firstly, Steve Biko's understanding during the apartheid context is that BTL should "redefine the message in the bible and [...] make it relevant to the struggling masses" conceptualise the goal of BTL as socio-political theology which liberates the oppressed through depicting "Jesus as a fighting God" (Stephen Bantu Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987), 31-32). Secondly, in similar trend, Itumeleng Mosala opines that BTL appeals to "[Black] history and culture for tools of self-defence and struggle" against the prevalence of domination by western thought and societal structure within the apartheid context; Itumeleng J. Mosala, "Black Theology in South Africa and North America : Prospects for the Future ; Building of Alliances," *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*, 1, no. 2 (1987): 36. Thus, BTL uses both the biblical text and the cultural capital of the oppressed black person as impetuses for socio-political liberation
 - 2 Prophetic preaching's definition is contested. However, in this article I accept the definition proposed by Laubscher and Wessels (onwards in the article) through their genealogical tracing of prophetic preaching in South Africa as the *de facto* definition in the current South African discourse on prophetic preaching. That being said, Walter Brueggemann has rejected the tendency to equate prophetic preaching with social activism, which the prior definition implies. In pondering on the Old Testament prophets, Brueggemann proposes rather that "prophetic proclamation is an attempt to imagine the world as though YHWH ... were a real character and an effective agent in the world". See Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 2.
 - 3 Martin Laubscher and Wessel Wessels, "A Prophetic Word on Studies in Prophetic Preaching? Re-Visioning Prophetic Preaching's (Post)Apartheid Condition," in Rian Venter (ed.), *Theology and the (Post)Apartheid Condition: Genealogies and Future Directions* (Bloemfontein: Sun Media, 2016), 171–187.
 - 4 Ishaya Anthony and Dion A. Forster, "I Must Honestly Confess That I Am Afraid of You' Prophetic Preaching as Public Theological Engagement in a Context of Socio-Political Fear," *International Journal of Public Theology*, 15, no. 3 (2021):369–384.

(and exclusive) source, with the pioneering work by Hennie Pieterse’s conceptualisation of prophetic preaching in reading and interpreting Desmond Tutu’s preaching of BTL.⁵ However, I am not aware of a single scholar of BTL who has mentioned or engaged the homiletic academy’s reception and interpretation of BTL as prophetic preaching. Furthermore, the reception of BTL as prophetic preaching has been overwhelmingly positive, except for two critical remarks which have gone largely unnoticed in the academic consciousness towards prophetic preaching.

Firstly, in analysing a sermon of Allan Boesak, Johan Cilliers clearly shows how Boesak’s rhetoric sketches a variety of tensions. Two are worth mentioning: “the absence of God’s presence” and “the future is made dependent on the actions of Christians in the present”.⁶ His critique comes to the fore in the concluding sentence:

In conclusion, at least this critical question must linger: is the “coming of Jesus” indeed dependent on the “real seriousness” of Christians and their “capacity” to take up the cross? If that is the case, South Africa is in trouble again today (2012). “Really seriously” in trouble.⁷

Secondly, Laubscher and I critically reflect on the relationship between studying and practising prophetic preaching. We reckon there is an inconsistency regarding timeliness – preaching prophetically in apartheid without homiletic study and studying prophetic preaching in democracy without the same impactful practice of prophetic preaching.⁸ We go as far as to wonder whether the coinage of prophetic preaching, in a (post) apartheid context, is not merely a continuation of the apartheid trajectory, with the goal of “protect[ing] vested interests and particular histories”.⁹

5 Hennie J.C. Pieterse, (ed.), *Desmond Tutu’s Message: A Qualitative Analysis* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1995).

6 Johan Cilliers, “Prophetic Preaching in South Africa: Exploring Some Spaces of Tension,” *NGTT*, 54, no. 1–2 (2013):10-11.

7 Cilliers, “Prophetic Preaching in South Africa,” 11.

8 Laubscher and Wessels, “A Prophetic Word on Studies in Prophetic Preaching,” 182-183.

9 *Ibid.*, 182.

However, are these two divergent comments fully portraying the dangers of elevating BTL to the revered position of prophetic preaching? Two remarks suffice. Firstly, BTL is not without problematic aspects as theological ideology,¹⁰ and there should be a more honest reflection on these shortcomings. Secondly, BTL's consecration (and absolutisation) as prophetic preaching should be concerning. My point is much broader than BTL; no theological vision should be considered absolute through high value theological labels. Instead, homiletic contemplation should be wary of one-dimensional thought patterns which become centred thoughts. Johan Cilliers has often made the point that such absolutes are problematic to the core of the gospel:

This space [for Grace] cannot and should not be fixated and monumentalized. [...] [T]he empty tomb of Christ is the greatest statue of history! The movement of Christ from death to life transforms all statues into stones that are rolled away from their fixed places. The resurrected Christ now moves through life.¹¹

My endeavour in this article is to pinpoint what I believe the consequences of a “fixated” prophetic preaching are and propose alternative images that rectify this fixedness. I must concede that my proposals stand under the same temptation to become fixed and monumentalised, as do all thought. This is not my intention. However, there is something important in the dialogue on the subject, dislodging thought and proposing alternatives, which underscores what I am most interested in, a movement towards the unattainable truth rather than merely proposing alternatives to become new absolutes.

The contemplation of prophetic preaching's possible consequences will be incomplete without some contemplation on the reception of BTL as

10 I use the word *ideology* in a similar manner as Vuyani Vellem regarding understanding BTL. Vellem claims that spirituality is a combination of ideology and faith. He goes on to say this about the necessity of an ideological framework: “Ideology offers a vision of what is possible; it is aspirational, and on its basis we are guided ethically, we are able to choose between right and wrong, good and bad, and ultimately, we are guided by ideology to legitimize power and the ethos of our lived experiences.” See Vuyani S. Vellem, “The Spiritual Dimension of Embracing the Cross,” *International Review of Mission* 107, no. 2 (2012):521.

11 Johan Cilliers, *A Space for Grace: Towards an Aesthetics of Preaching* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2016), 21.

prophetic preaching. I concede that my sketch on the reception of BTL as prophetic preaching is not complete but restricted to what is possible within the confines of this article. Thus, three prominent themes of prophetic preaching will be contemplated: the black poor as the locus of interpretation, naming evil, and the kingdom of God. After each theme, I will consider the unintended consequences of its reception.

2. Black Theology of Liberation's reception as prophetic preaching and its unintended consequences

Laubscher and I have made the argument that the reception of Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) as prophetic preaching by homiletic scholars in South Africa finds its conceptualisation in the 1995 book of Hennie Pieterse, *Desmond Tutu's Message*:

We believe that this marks the moment prophetic preaching is conceived in South Africa as preaching which is keenly aware and takes seriously the ethical-political-societal dimensions of preaching.¹²

The particularities are twofold. Firstly, there is a direct movement from the preaching that Tutu practices (with a BTL perspective) towards Pieterse's proposal that such a theological perspective is "critical prophetic preaching".¹³ Secondly, this theological perspective should transcend the divide between the apartheid (and colonial) context in which it had its inception towards the democratic (and postcolonial) context to bring forth a "vision for the South African society, which is [...] based on [Tutu's] Christian interpretation of the reign of God".¹⁴ Inevitably, Pieterse connects these two ideals as follows:

12 Laubscher and Wessels, "A Prophetic Word on Studies in Prophetic Preaching," 178.

13 Hennie J.C. Pieterse, "Prophetic Preaching in Context," in Hennie J.C. Pieterse (ed.), *Desmond Tutu's Message: A Qualitative Analysis*, (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1995), 96

14 Hennie J.C. Pieterse, P Scheepers, and F Wester, "Structure of Thought," in Desmond Tutu's Message, 55.

[L]iberation theology and prophetic preaching should guide the churches' contribution to the struggle for LIBERATION FROM POVERTY [sic] through reconstruction and development.¹⁵

This connotation between BTL and prophetic preaching, although pioneering work by Pieterse, given the fact that South African homiletic thought was up to this point either indifferent (and silent) towards BTL or directly opposed to it,¹⁶ is by no means unexpected. Similar thoughts have emerged in international thought.¹⁷ However, the South African formulation of prophetic preaching has three important themes, which could potentially also bring forth some unintended consequences for the praxis of prophetic preaching.

2.1 The black poor as the locus of interpretation: Underscoring colonial identity

With the reception of BTL as prophetic preaching, Hennie Pieterse's work *Preaching in a context of poverty* stands paramount regarding the poor as the locus of interpretation. He underscores this point for preaching: "[the] preacher must be existentially familiar with the local context of poverty".¹⁸ However, in Pieterse's contemplation on the context of poverty, there is a shift away from BTL. Pieterse does not consider the insistence of BTL that the black experience under the oppressive reality of apartheid is the only locus of interpretation but thinks instead from a perspective of colour blindness.¹⁹ This is by no means a theological faux pas by Pieterse but rather

15 Pieterse, "Prophetic Preaching in Context," 97.

16 The conceptualising prophetic preaching as ethical, societal, and political is quite clearly a prevalent way of thinking in the American context, which Walter Brueggemann critiques. See Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

17 Hennie J.C. Pieterse, *Preaching in a Context of Poverty* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2001), 92

18 Earlier thought on BTL clearly showcases the black experience under apartheid as the hermeneutical locus of interpretation of BTL. See Itumeleng J. Mosala, "Black Theology in South Africa and North America," 35–41; Takatso A Mofokeng, "A Black Christology: A New Beginning," *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*, 1, no. 1 (1987):1–17; Takatso A Mofokeng, "Following the Trail of Suffering: Black Theological Perspectives, Past and Present," *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*, 1, no. 2 (1987):21–34; Mokgethi B. G. Motlhabi, "Black Resistance to Apartheid," *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*, 1, no. 2 (1987):3–12.

19 Vuyani Vellem, "Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century: A Reflection," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 38 (2012):1–9.

a contextual re-interpretation of BTL in the euphoria of South Africa as the colour-blind rainbow nation. However, in post-apartheid contemplation by Vuyani Vellem, there is still the insistence that the poor black person is the only legitimate locus of interpretation of BTL.²⁰

The question of the legitimate locus of interpretation is complex. Vellem critiques post-apartheid BTL precisely on this ground, stating that the move towards critical solidarity with the government has relocated the locus of interpretation for BTL towards the black middle class.²¹ Taking the queue from Vellem and using a racial lens, I determined that the locus of interpretation of prophetic preaching has become the white middle-class person.²² The white middle-class person as the locus of interpretation can already be discerned in Pieterse’s *Preaching in a Context of Poverty* but finds its ultimate form when prophetic preaching becomes preaching against corruption. In the first instance, Pieterse determines that the “church for the poor” should be of diaconal aid to the “church of the poor.”²³ Stated with a racial lens, the white church should be for the black church, with the locus of interpretation and agency located amongst the white middle-class person. Later, when prophetic preaching locates its central reason for existence in calling out the corruption of the government,²⁴ the white middle-class person is once more the locus of interpretation for prophetic preaching. I argue that because corruption has a novum and detrimental influence on the well-being of the white middle-class person, the only explanation for privileging corruption as the paramount evil in society is the well-being of the white middle-class person.²⁵

20 Vellem, “Interlocution and Black Theology,” 4.

21 Wessel Wessels, “On Justice and Beauty in Recent South African Homiletics: A Post-Colonial Reflection,” Henco Van der Westhuizen (ed.), in *Beauty and Justice* (Bloemfontein: Acta Theologica, 2020), 181.

22 Pieterse, *Preaching in a Context of Poverty*, 112. Original italics.

23 Ferdi P. Kruger and Hennie J.C. Pieterse, “Reasons Why Government Leaders, Officials and Church Leaders Have to Act against Corruption,” in Ferdi Kruger and Ben De Klerk (eds.), *Corruption in South Africa’s Liberal Democratic Context: Equipping Christian Leaders and Communities for Their Role in Countering Corruption* (Durbanville: AOSIS, 2016), 90.

24 Wessels, “On Justice and Beauty in Recent South African Homiletics: A Post-Colonial Reflection,” 182.

25 Wessel Wessels, “Postcolonial Homiletics? A Practical Theological Engagement with Postcolonial Thought” (University of Pretoria, 2020), 86.

Thus, the conversation around the legitimate locus of interpretation underscores a representation of identity as “a fixed identity,”²⁶ which can neither be dissolved through racial lenses nor colour blindness. Instead, the legitimate locus of interpretation for prophetic preaching has to do, at its core, with locating the most victimised group in society from the perspective of colonial identity traits, especially race and class. Still, other traits like gender or sexuality are also possible.

Therefore, if prophetic preaching needs a locus of interpretation based on group identity markers, then the colonial identity paradigm is not dismantled but underscored. This is the first consequence of prophetic preaching. Let us delve deeper into the problem.

Homi Bhabha has suggested that the possibilities for a future that does not merely repeat the past lies precisely in the dismantling and interrogation of colonial identity and the possible imagination and creation of future(s) through an identity that is contingent, fragmented, and decentred:

What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, ‘opening out’, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender, or race. Such assignments of social differences – where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides, in-between* – find their agency in a form of the ‘future’ where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. It is, if I may stretch a point, an interstitial future, that emerges *in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present*.²⁷

Thus, as long as prophetic preaching insists that its locus of interpretation is dependent on class or racial grounds, the colonial enterprise lives on and

26 Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 313. Original italics.

27 Vuyani Vellem and Martin Laubscher, “Interview with Vuyani S. Vellem,” *Acta Theologica* 38, no. 1 (2018):1–14; Stephen Bantu Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987).

the unintended consequences of which both Biko and Vellem have located as racism, that is, group superiority,²⁸ will continue as paramount.²⁹

2.2 Naming evil: Resentment and misrepresenting the vital flaws of society

Closely related to the representation of the locus of interpretation, prophetic preaching's reception of BTL strongly emphasises the importance of naming evil within the present socio-political and cultural context. One possibility is that naming evil is left as an open-ended endeavour for the prophetic preacher to discern. De Wet and Kruger poignantly showcase the naming of evil in the first part of what they deem the essence of prophetic preaching:

In our view, the essence of prophetic preaching is that *it proclaims the biblical message critically in a society that tends to deviate from its God-given form and destiny*, in the process equipping Christians to radiate the light of the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness revealingly and energizingly with a view to refocusing the world on its destiny in a restored relationship with God.³⁰

However, as an alternative possibility, the naming of evil finds its practical implications in the perspective of a chosen theory for understanding the world. Prophetic preaching and BTL find their understanding of evil within the framing of power relations as the ultimate reality, taking the perspective of the black poor as the locus of interpretation. Allan Boesak, in a sermon, adequately showcases the praxis hereof:

In South Africa, apartheid is over, but apartheid is everywhere. The oppressors of yesterday live as well as ever; the murderers of our

28 I must concede that the problem of liberation through social justice falters at this point. After all, the locus of interpretation amongst the poor black person, or the oppressed, underscored the necessity for liberative justice in the world, rectifying the malicious evil done through systems of the past. Unfortunately, thorough contemplation on Bhabha's thought and the necessity of social justice is beyond the scope of this article.

29 Fritz W. DeWet and Ferdi P. Kruger, "Blessed Are Those That Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness: Sharpening the Ethical Dimension of Prophetic Preaching in a Context of Corruption." *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 34(1):7. My italics.

30 Allan Aubrey Boesak, "The Tears of the Sower: Psalm 126," in *The Fire within: Sermons from the Edge of Exile* (Steenberg: New World Foundation, 2004), 69.

children and the artists of the torture chambers walk the streets as cocky as ever. The power relationships have hardly shifted, and the grip of the old, white, moneyed establishment on almost every facet of life is fearsome. Racism, even though vehemently denied, continues to plague us, and fathers bitter injustice in our courts.³¹

Thus, prophetic preaching's system of thought necessitates that evil finds its expression and existence in the location and identity of the oppressor, be it individual, group, or systemic.

For a moment, let us consider the implication of naming evil in this sense. Indeed, the outcry and lamentation of prophetic preaching are justified, for the world is not as it should be, and we are plagued by various realities which undermine human well-being. There are many reasons to justify the outrage that prophetic preaching embodies so adequately. As Cas Wepener and Hennie Pieterse have acutely showcased in their reading of the South African situation, the context necessitates angry preaching:

We believe God's anger being an expression of God's love; for the sake of a common good and a faith that bears witness to public failure, we believe in angry preaching and angry liturgies in South Africa at this particular point in time.³²

However, what Wepener and Pieterse propose as angry preaching is not equal to BTL's proposal of anger for they do not suppose power relations as ultimate reality. Allan Boesak's contemplation on righteous anger more correctly corresponds to the BTL position:

It is a righteous anger because of injustice done to others, the refusal to meekly accept what is wrong, because it is a wrong done to someone created in the image of God. It is anger against the arrogance of power, against the sinful cowardice of feigned neutrality while benefiting from the fruits of injustice and exploitation. It is anger that refuses to give in to hopelessness

31 Cas Wepener and Hennie J.C. Pieterse, "Angry Preaching: A Grounded Theory Analysis from South Africa." *International Journal of Public Theology*, 12, no. 1 (2018):415.

32 Allan A Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), Kindle Edition.

and resists what drives us to despair. It is the anger of injured but unbowed dignity.³³

To my mind, the difference between these two visions of angry preaching lies in the naming of evil. Wepener and Pieterse are open-ended in the specifics as to whom or what is culpable of the evil in the world, merely stating “public failure”. Boesak is clear that whatever and whoever could be conceived as “the powerful” are culpable. That being said, the implication would be that the prophetic preacher would somehow, without a doubt, be able to pinpoint these powerful ones. The difference can be deduced from group identity, with Wepener and Pieterse being more cautious about grouping people against one another. At the same time, Boesak unapologetically imagines a world where groups are in constant competition with each other.

But this chauvinistic tendency in prophetic preaching results in more than mere anger. Instead, such anger results in resentment toward the very being of the other (especially as the other is framed as the powerful oppressor). Or at least, that is what Pankaj Mishra argues in his book, *Age of Anger*.

Their evidently natural rights to life, liberty, and security, already challenged by deep-rooted inequality, are [today] threatened by political dysfunction and economic stagnation, and, in places affected by climate change, a scarcity and suffering characteristic of pre-modern economic life. The result is, as Arendt feared, a ‘tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else’, or resentment. An existential resentment of other people’s being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness, resentment, as it lingers and deepens, poisons civil society and undermines political liberty, and is presently making for a global turn to authoritarianism and toxic forms of chauvinism.³⁴

33 Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), 14.

34 The model other refers to the person or persons one desires to become and will therefore imitate.

To clarify, resentment is present in various ideological paradigms, especially on the radical sides of the polar spectrum. But this reality cannot justify resentment's possible presence in prophetic preaching. Furthermore, there may be a deeper and more concerning impetus to the presence of resentment beyond chauvinism, that is, imitation. According to René Girard, resentment is the ultimate conclusion of the triangulation between the self, the model other, and desire. The argument is as follows: as human beings, we are mimetic creatures, relating to each other through imitation. Thus, in relating to the model other³⁵ through imitation, we also mimic what is desired, for humans do not know what they want.³⁶ Thus, in relating to the other, we inevitably become the competitor of the other for our shared desires.³⁷ With time, the initial positives of relating change into resentment. Or, as Girard puts it: "The positive feelings resulting from the first identification – imitation, admiration, veneration – are fated to change into negative sentiments: despair, guilt, resentment."³⁸

If Girard is correct in his exposition of imitation, desire, and resentment, it would not be a great leap to propose that prophetic preaching inherently desires the same power it critiques in the hands of its greatest enemy and most prominent model: the powerful. This possibility brings forth another consequence within the thought of prophetic preaching, the misrepresentation of the vital flaws in society. Indeed, one could argue that prophetic preaching is correct in proposing that poverty, corruption, and injustice are essential flaws in our society. I also agree with this argument. But when power is located as the impetus of these vital flaws, a power prophetic preaching desires for itself, an inconsistency enters the fray. The inevitable outcome of such thinking is that power, when located in the hands of the prophet and those who claim to be prophetic preachers, will eradicate the vital flaws of society. I highly doubt this argument. Returning to Girard, it is precisely this type of moral superiority which re-enacts the mistakes of the past:

35 The model other refers to the person or persons one desires to become and will therefore imitate.

36 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred, Translated* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 146.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 182.

The children repeat the crimes of their fathers precisely because they believe they are morally superior to them. This false difference is already the mimetic illusion of modern individualism, which represents the greatest resistance to the mimetic truth that is re-enacted again and again in human relations. The paradox is that the resistance itself brings about the re-enactment.³⁹

Inherently, I greatly appreciate prophetic preaching's insistence on considering and interpreting contextual realities seriously. However, I am convinced that the insistence that power relations are the prominent theme by which the world should be interpreted is inadequate to the multiplicity of factors that bring forth vital flaws in society.

Postcolonial theory, as one example amongst many possibilities, could aid in rearticulating the genesis of the vital flaws in society. Aimé Césaire points out that the dynamics of the colonial endeavour of constructing society have been detrimental to the well-being of both the colonised and the coloniser, the former becoming enslaved, and the latter brutalised.⁴⁰ I might be criticised for denying that power played a prominent role in the colonial endeavour, but this is not what I am trying to say. Corrupted power did play a role and has had immensely destructive implications for many people in history. However, I am claiming that locating power as the primary impetus to the vital flaws within our society brings forth at least three unintended consequences. First is the problem of victimhood. Secondly, a denial of the good that the past has bestowed upon us. And thirdly, the inability to locate tyranny.

The insistence on power brings forth victimhood which equates to the rejection of agency within the world. I must mention that there are voices within BTL who have explicitly written on the need for a better understanding of agency towards transformation.⁴¹ But, as far as I can

39 René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Translated (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 20.

40 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

41 Godwin I Akper, "We the Poor Must Abandon Our Wheelchairs and Begin To Walk Unaided: On African Agency Discourse." *Scriptura*, 100 (2009):108–20; Tinyiko Sam Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar, "Alien Fraudsters in the White Academy: Agency in Gendered Colour." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 120 (2004):5–17.

discern, the conversation about agency and the relationship with power is only in its infancy, hopefully not to die an early death. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has been immensely helpful, to my mind, in articulating a fundamental human agency:

[This book] is a call for the rediscovery of the real language of humankind: the language of struggle. It is the universal language underlying all speech and words of our history. Struggle. Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language, and our being.⁴²

Wa Thiong'o's imagination of struggle is not the reduction of struggle as a struggle for power. It is the struggle for life. Furthermore, when dialoguing with Wa Thiong'o and Césaire, this struggle is not the property only of some, but the responsibility of each of us to locate, name, and discern the destructive forces in our personal and communal lives and to struggle towards something which better represents an ideal beyond ourselves. In the words of Homi Bhabha, becoming "the other of our selves [sic]"⁴³ and recurrently becoming this other of ourselves as corruption re-enters the world.

Secondly, power as the vital flaw of our society denies the good that society has bestowed upon us. Notwithstanding the injustices purveying in our society, much is bestowed upon us that has made our current existence fundamentally and empirically better than people of the past. And this reality has been bestowed upon us through great struggle against nature and myriad forms of tyranny, including ideologies that have pronounced themselves utopian.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Covid-19 has showcased the potential of nature to destroy human existence to a scale unknown to modern humans. Irrespectively, we have been able to organise something akin to modern society, especially concerning western democracy's ability to work within the confines of human fallibility, nature's relentlessness in

42 Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1986), 108.

43 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. 39.

44 See Ralph Raico, *Great Wars and Great Leaders: A Libertarian Rebuttal* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2010), 143-156. Herein Raico showcases the distortions between Marxism as an ideological utopia and the tyrannical nature of its reality.

endeavouring to exterminate human life, and the individual as a sovereign entity are things to appreciate.⁴⁵

Finally, the conceptualisation of power as the vital flaw of society relents the possibility of actually locating tyranny within the confines of our society. If power is always tyrannical, as prophetic preaching assumes, we miss the opportunity to pinpoint truly destructive forces in the culture of our society. The danger surfaces when the prophetic voice and agentic potential are divided against so much preconceived evil. The truly tyrannical realities cannot be adequately brought to the light and struggled against. Thus, in relenting the obsession with power as the fundamental impetus of societal flaws, the prophetic voice might become more acute in determining where tyranny is to be found.

2.3 The Kingdom of God: Relenting personal responsibility

This brings me to the third significant theme of prophetic preaching, which stands as an antidote to what is evil in society; the imagination of the kingdom of God. To my mind, this is a logical consequence of the nature of BTL and the reception thereof in prophetic preaching. If the world, as it is, is merely an oppressive reality, God and all aspects of God's kingdom must be absent, and the faithful Christian will have to be located in the struggle which brings about both God's kingdom and God's presence. As I have mentioned earlier, this is indeed discernible in Boesak's preaching and partly what Johan Cilliers critiques in Boesak's preaching.⁴⁶

That being said, let us explore the imagination of the kingdom of God as paramount to prophetic preaching a bit more in-depth. Three aspects are of importance. Firstly, what the kingdom of God is. Secondly, the prophet as the discernor of the presence or absence of God's kingdom. And thirdly, the relationship between the ideology of prophetic preaching and praxis.

45 See Jordan B. Peterson, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2021), 333–338. Peterson makes quite the compelling case that an awareness of our human propensity towards destruction built into our cultural and political systems, counterintuitively, brings forth the possibilities of organising a less oppressive system vis-à-vis the utopian ideal.

46 See Cilliers, "Prophetic Preaching in South Africa: Exploring Some Spaces of Tension."

Regarding the first, the kingdom of God is constituted as a political reality where ideals that could be grouped under the theme of *liberation* become realities. In Pieterse's early conception of BTL, the central idea was that the poor could be liberated through "reconstruction and development".⁴⁷ In later deliberation, prophetic preaching became the exposition of corruption within the confines of political leadership in South Africa.⁴⁸ Implicitly in both, the kingdom of God is directly linked to a political praxis which could, to a substantial degree, be articulated as a governmental agency which brings about liberation for the oppressed.

But this *liberation* and the proclamation of its ultimate presence (or relentless absence) within society seemingly depends on the prophets. Prophetic preaching has not contemplated this problem, and I must concede that one could question the merit of such enquiry. However, I think it is essential to determine whether the prophets perceive change within society as development toward the ideals of liberation or not. However, the prophets seem dismissive of real progress in a society underscored by a global free market and a colonial past. In Vuyani Vellem's contemplation on our current context, he has the following to say:

I wonder if there is anything moral or ethical about capitalism or neoliberal capitalism ... The restoration of the authority of the people means the restoration of identity-sustaining narratives and their compatible logically coherent ethical arguments with the feasibility of the planning of courses of action. It means that the victims of colonization and apartheid become in charge of the *terms* of economics, not just the critique of the *content* of economic justice.⁴⁹

As far as I can discern, liberation, according to the prophets, is impossible because of a global economy and a past which still haunts. Stated differently, the understanding seems to be that God's kingdom will be absent until

47 Pieterse, "Prophetic Preaching in Context." 97.

48 Vellem and Laubscher, "Interview with Vuyani S. Vellem," 10, 12. Original italics.

49 Hennie J.C. Pieterse, "Prophetic Preaching in the Contemporary Context of South Africa," *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi*, 47, no. 1 (1995):5; Kruger and Pieterse, "Reasons Why Government Leaders, Officials and Church Leaders Have to Act against Corruption," 90.

there is a profound (and radical) change in human activity, interaction, and politics. However, even if and when such profound change occurs, it will still be upon the prophets to decide its adequate praxis towards liberation.

Thus, the third point: what is the relationship between the ideology of prophetic preaching and the practicality of the complexity of life? After all, as much as a particular theological vision underscores preaching, how we worship will influence how we live in the world. Stated differently, homiletic thought must consider the question Sally Brown proposes: “What particular preaching strategies best support the imaginative, improvisational testimony of Christian lives to the reign of God in the culturally hybrid spaces of everyday life?”⁵⁰

As far as Vuyani Vellem is concerned, societal pragmatism undermines the strength of BTL and, thus, by implication, that of prophetic preaching. Accordingly, he opines, “[the] theoretical and intellectual discourse of the school [of Black Theology of Liberation] may become sterile in a context of structural pragmatism and contradictions in public life”.⁵¹ Similarly, Tinyiko Maluleke recently claimed that theologies that seriously consider the Realpolitik of our day (i.e. Public Theology) are “imperial”, and he opts instead to “rely on [his] various strategies of ‘refusing to read’”.⁵²

We find a paradox between the ideological hopes within the homiletic reception of BTL as prophetic preaching and the proponents of BTL’s insistence that praxis within our realities would weaken the ideological nature of the prophetic. The hope for realising God’s kingdom as a political, economic, and societal reality depends on the agency of systemic change through political impetus. However, such agency’s practicality would undermine the strength of the prophetic. Therefore, I would argue that this paradox exists in the final consequence: the relenting of personal responsibility.

50 Sally Brown, *Sunday’s Sermon for Monday’s World: Preaching to Shape Daring Witness* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), xix.

51 Vuyani Vellem, “Black Theology of Liberation and Radical Democracy: A Dialogue,” *Scriptura*, 114, no. 2 (2015):8.

52 Tinyiko Maluleke, “Why I Am Not a Public Theologian.” *Ecumenical Review*, 73, no. 2 (2021):297–315.

This is an ethical conundrum. Nico Koopman has argued that a lack of a human rights culture in South Africa is at fault for the underdevelopment of an ethics of responsibility.⁵³ One could argue that the current understanding of human rights as the sole responsibility of the government, an idea underscored by prophetic preaching, is fundamental to the absence of ethics of personal responsibility. Koopman argues for the moral formation of “right humans” to fulfil human rights.⁵⁴ Although I can’t entirely agree with Koopman’s overly optimistic disposition regarding the possibility of a “democratic South Africa where peace and justice reign supreme,”⁵⁵ his argument is worth considering for the formation of personal responsibility. In conversation with Johannes van der Ven, Koopman proposes two essential aspects of an ethic of personal responsibility. Firstly, Van der Ven focuses on the personal character formation of citizens, which forms the locus and impetus from where public and communal citizenry sprouts.⁵⁶ And secondly, from this personal locus of virtue ethics and character formation, Van der Ven develops what I conceive to be a personal responsibility of relating to the world as “open and true selves, self-determined thinkers who develop their own judgements and cause their own actions for which they think responsibility.”⁵⁷

I find postcolonial thinkers extremely helpful at this intersection between personal responsibility and its impact on the broader societal realities. In this intersection where personal ethics of responsibility aligns with Wa Thiong’o’s call for the language of struggle towards the imagination of a better future,⁵⁸ as well as Bhabha’s call for an ideal self as “the other of our selves [sic],”⁵⁹ we may find the possibility of emphasising personal responsibility towards the struggle for life, identity formation beyond colonial traits, and relating through cooperation rather than power.

53 Nico Koopman, “Towards a Human Rights Culture in South Africa. The Role of Moral Formation,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 48, no. 1&2 (2007):107–18.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*, 110.

56 *Ibid.*, 107.

57 *Ibid.*, 115.

58 Wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 108.

59 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. 39.

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that prophetic preaching as preaching steeped in Black Theology of Liberation cannot be uncritically accepted within the homiletic academia as a static mode of preaching, nor consecrated as absolute. No theological vision should be consecrated as absolute nor left in eternal stasis. My attempt at dislodging prophetic preaching in the mode of Black Theology of Liberation from its elevated position does not discredit its importance. Instead, I attempt to locate it as a possible mode of preaching amongst many modes, each with its strengths and weaknesses. Thus, I have showcased four weaknesses of prophetic preaching as potential consequences and the direct linkage of these consequences with significant themes in Black Theology of Liberation. Hopefully, in homiletic academia and the reception of prophetic preaching by young theologians, this article could aid in tempering the more troublesome extremes in prophetic preaching.

At the same time, this article opens new avenues for considering a mode of preaching that honestly considers the empirical reality in which we find ourselves and the practical wisdom necessary to traverse such a world: where theory should not be at odds with praxis but work towards the wisdom to live well in the world, even as the world is fraught with danger and regression. One possible future direction could be *wise preaching*, where the emphasis is not on upholding the ideology of a theological vision but rather seeking the wisest direction for life in praxis.

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