

Black Theology relevance post-1994: Examining themes of debate during the Vellem era, 2010–2019

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In South Africa, debates on Black Theology of Liberation took various shapes over the years. The debates were impacted by different political contexts since the inception of this theology in this country, dating to the early 1970s. For instance, the temperature of the debates during the early 1970s took a different shape from those that were heard towards the end of that decade. The period that followed also shaped the debates accordingly. These different shapes continued to show themselves until the era of Vuyani Vellem, a black theologian whose voice was heard during 2010–2019. This marks the period when his voice started to be heard in Black Theology circles and closed with his death towards the end of 2019. What trajectory did the debates take during this period differently from previous ones? Who were the main protagonists and interlocutors? How did Vellem influence the tone of these debates? With these questions in mind, the author will examine Vellem's academic and black theological locations and assumptions, the sociopolitical dynamics of his time and the tone of the debates during his era and conclude with the analysis of these debates for the future implications of this theology. Drawing on qualitative review method through the study of synthesised literature from libraries, this study will therefore focus on the direction taken by the debates on Black Theology during the aforementioned period. It will also listen to and unearth Vellem's contribution in those debates. Furthermore, it will indicate how he and his generation of black theologians continued to hoist the Black Theology flag so high in the midst of what was seen by the first generation of black theologians as a lull in the life of this liberation theology.

Contribution: Through the lens of the era and activism of Vuyani Vellem, the study examines the relevance and level of Black Theology praxis in post-apartheid South Africa, in order to determine the future implications of this theology. Although it has a missiological focus, there are also implications for disciplines such as Church History, Sociology, Practical Theology and Political Science.

Keywords: Vuyani Vellem; Vellemic era; Black Theology; trajectory; South Africa; Zumaism.

Introduction

What purpose does the Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) have in the democratic South Africa? Could it still be relevant or only relevant for a specific period in time? Already, in the late 1980s, the dwindling voices of Black Theology were being heard. Motlhabi was one of those concerned by this development. He wondered if there were any black theologians left and consequently made this call: 'Will the true remaining black theologians in this country please stand – and show their fruits!' (2005:18).

The message of Black Theology responds to a particular context that is mostly political and racist. From the United States (US), where it originated, to South Africa, where it was introduced in the late 1960s, the context of racism attracted the attention of this theology. This means that the focus of this theology is on liberation, carrying the message of freeing those who were victims of political situations.

Oppressive contexts change over time, which ultimately also dictate the Black Theology agenda. The political situation of the early 1970s differed from that of the decades that followed. Black Theology was also grappling to be relevant in response to all those changing political contexts. Of course, the dawn of the post-1994 democratic South Africa completely changed the political landscape. Black Theology has a responsibility to respond to the new political game with a

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changed message that addresses the new situation. In addition, after 1994, the political scenario changed, especially linked with the vision of each of the state presidents. Former President Zuma's tenure is very important for this research because the Vuyani Vellemic period under review falls within his presidential period. This study, therefore, looks at the topics that were discussed within the space of Black Theology during this period. This puts one in a position to see if they ever responded to the situation of the time. It zooms into the trajectory of Black Theology debates during the Vellemic era, which I identified as being from 2010 when his voice within the space of Black Theology started to be heard until 2019 when it became silent through his death. I also want to argue that the political context of each phase in this country shapes the Black Theology agenda of the time.

The main questions addressed in this article are: *What trajectory did the debates take during this period compared with the previous ones and those after them? Who were the main protagonists and interlocutors? How did Vellem influence the tone of these debates?* With these questions in mind, the author will examine Vellem's academic and black theological locations and assumptions, the sociopolitical dynamics of his time and the tone of the debates during his era and conclude with the analysis of these debates for the future implications of this theology. Drawing on qualitative methods through the study of synthesised literature, the focus will be on the direction taken by the debates on Black Theology during the aforementioned period. It will also listen to and unearth Vellem's contribution in those debates.

Vuyani Vellem's academic and black theological location and assumptions

The position of Vellem was well captured by Tshaka (2020) as follows:

The untimely death of Vuyani Vellem has left a devastating void in BTL circles, locally and internationally. Known for his profundity and knowledge in theology, Vellem has made a great impact in churches, society and the academic world, not escaping the ire of white supremacy, which controlled and still controls society today. In theological spaces reserved mostly for white people, Vellem's presence was that of a towering giant, carefully analysing the matrices of empire in a supposedly post-apartheid South Africa. (p. 1)

Tshaka (2020) correctly positioned Vellem within academia and Black Theology in particular, locally and internationally. His sphere of influence greatly impacted many areas, namely, churches, society and academia. To further disclose Vellem's 'location and assumptions upfront' (Vellem 2017:1), be informed that he was a black theologian whose black assumption was Black Consciousness (BC). He confessed it himself:

I am a black male and have been a student of BTL since my days at the Federal Theological Seminary (Fedsem) in the late 1980s. One of the most important things that made this school so

attractive to me is its inextricable link with BC, a philosophy that truly inspires my reason of faith as a black person. (2017:1)

He believed in the combination of what he called ideology and faith in this context referring to BC and BTL as profound expressions for good news. He regards this as what shaped him in his academic upbringing (Vellem 2017:1). The Black Theology credentials of Vellem are clear from the way Masuku (2021) introduced him:

Vuyani Vellem was a black Reformed Christian, a minister in the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa. He was also a scholar of BTL. He drank, dreamt and immersed himself deep into it, the evidence of which reflected in his writings. He viewed it as 'a theology of life'. (p. 1)

It could therefore be concluded that Vuyani Vellem was a doyen of black theologians, a seasoned academic and a pastor in a congregation. He was an organic intellectual, who succeeded in striking a balance between theory and practice, emotion and cognition. As a seasoned black theologian, it was important to employ him and his period of Black Theology praxis as a tool by which one can gauge the importance of this theology in the post-1994 democratic South Africa and beyond. It is therefore fitting at this stage, in the following section to look at the political context in South Africa during the period when Vuyani Vellem was in active Black Theology praxis.

South African sociopolitical dynamics during the Vellemic era

Politically, most part of the Vellemic era (2009–2018) was characterised by Zumaism, which is clearly highlighted by Langa and Shai as follows:

'Jacob Zuma's time as the president of South Africa has been described, most notably by his successor Cyril Ramaphosa, as "nine wasted years"' (2020:61).

The Zuma years are well and further characterised by Booysen (2015) as follows:

South Africans, irrespective of political affiliation, live under the command of a government that allows the lawlessness and corrupt in its ranks. This is the new post-liberation ANC [*African National Congress*], comfortable with living a double life of left-speaking while right pleasing big business' interests. Patronage and matrimony feed the middle-class game while the social wage and grants signify caring for the underclass. Millions of South Africans reward the ANC by voting for it. (p. 4)

It seems that the type of people Zuma appointed at key positions as his hand and eyes were responsible for the lawlessness and corruption that marked this period. Pauw (2017) paints a clearer picture of how Zuma made appointments to key positions during his time when he appointed cronies and loyalists he called 'stooges' who:

[H]ave little regards for the law and order and for keeping the Republic safe. Instead, they have mostly been reduced to squads of hooligans that are prepared to harass and hound any Zuma adversary to submission. (p. 44)

Booyesen (2015) further indicates that during this period:

At presidential and top-ANC political class level the series of crises reads like a string of dishonour – Nkandlagate, Guptagate, arms deal, spy tapes, tolerance of corruption in upper government, dysfunctionality of the security institutions, inability to contain malfunction at the lower end of the state, clampdowns at parliament and some added to the great escape of Omar al Bashir to the roll. (p. 6)

There were a number of sociopolitical episodes that played themselves out during the period under review. Neocosmos (2010) indicates that xenophobia became a phenomenon that dominated South Africa post-1994 that went into the period under review, 2010–2019. He further contends:

This xenophobia is directed overwhelmingly at Africans from all over the continent while some nationalities, for example Nigerians and Mozambicans, are singled out, particularly in the press, as being associated with illegal activities (drugs and illegal immigration respectively). (p. 1)

The result of this phenomenon was exclusions and discrimination against foreigners, the main target being undocumented foreigners. The limited economic resources facing South Africa after apartheid, coupled with corrupt government officials, resulted in most of the people being poor, and this, therefore, nurtured anti-foreign sentiments.

This period was also associated with massive demonstrations, some in the form of matches because of the lack of service delivery. Therefore, service delivery protests characterised this period. Tournadre (2018) gives us a picture of these demonstrations:

During July 2009, Diepsloot, a township near Johannesburg where there are officially 25000 households, was the scene of several days of confrontations between residents and police. In just a few hours, municipal buildings were torched, and roads blocked by improvised barricades that were rapidly torn down by police who did not hesitate to use rubber bullets. (p. 34)

The 'Zuma effect' has been identified as among the main causative factors for protests as echoed by 'several leaders of the movement' (Tournadre 2018:34). Tournadre (2018:34) further argues that, 'When he was elected President of ANC after Polokwane conference in December 2007, he raised the hopes of township residents'.

It therefore appears that the protest actions that were seen during apartheid directed at that government replayed themselves in the democratic space for a different purpose. Kesselring (2016:1; Bevernage 2012) confirms this noting that 'Experiences of violence do not simply go away; they continue to haunt people and to affect the possibilities of sociality'. He further argues that transitional justice mechanisms, taking the examples of truth commissions, recognise that the past cannot be reversed. Having said this, attempt to put it aside in order to start afresh from a new slate but to the most, the past cannot be easily revoked. He further observed that the experiences of violence hang in the lives of people and bodies and continue to their being in the world (Kesselring 2016:1; Bevernage 2012).

Linked to the above-stated scenario is the question of 'development'. Freund and Witt (2010:4) interrogated this phenomenon. The approach they adopted was of asking the following questions: 'What is really meant by "development" in 21st-century post-apartheid South Africa? What are the challenges and complexities of real transformation in this context?' This indicates how South Africans from all sectors are confronting development dilemmas from various fronts such as 'the energy crisis, environmental sustainability and environmental justice to grassroots social movements, problems of policy implementation, land and agricultural reform and gender inequality' (Freund & Witt 2010). They thus conclude that it is not easy to attain development because in their view, it is not a quick fix or event but a process that is infested with failures with some elements of gains.

Black Theology trajectory of debates during the Vellemic era: 2010–2019

During the Vellemic era, 2010–2019, the main interlocutors of Black Theology shifted from most of those who were seen during earlier phases. This period was characterised by what Motlhabi (2005:18) referred to as a younger generation of religious leaders. In this study, they are the main protagonists and interlocutors. However, I agree with Farisani (2010:508) who, when judging the level of Black Theology activism during the Vellemic era, elevated Maluleke as 'one of the faithful champions of Black Theology today'. Already, towards the end of 1980, Motlhabi (2005:18) noted that during this period, talks were dominant that Black Theology is dead. In response to this situation, he made this call: 'Will the true remaining black theologians in this country please stand – and show their fruits!?' I argue that the political temperature determined the Black Theology trajectory. The rainbow nation euphoria might have had a hand in what was seen as the demise of Black Theology. Boesak argued along these lines while also blaming black theologians. He noted that South Africans 'were seduced by rainbow nation mentality' (2020:60).

The Vellemic period was ushered in by a period that questioned the allegations relating to the demise of BTL. The voices pronouncing and prophesying the death of this theology were recorded far earlier than the Vellemic era. Maluleke (1998) supports Motlhabi in his argument that during the second half of the 1980s, talks predicting the death of Black Theology were already rife. From Maimela, in his interview by Molobi (2010:9), it came to light that the silence of Black Theology activities was already observed since 1993. Most of these noises were picked up after the Black Theology International Conference organised by the Black Theology project and the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT), which were sponsored by Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologies (EATWOT). What was the cause for these prophecies that pronounced the death of this type of theology? Motlhabi's (2005:15) observation became helpful

in this regard when he located the problem from the view that many veteran black theologians migrated from academia to assume positions in administration. The retirement of these seasoned black theologians might have played a role in the silence of Black Theology activities as they were not replaced by younger scholars of Black Theology afterwards.

What could be the strategic approach with regard to the starting point in doing theology during this period under review? Maluleke's (2008) view is helpful in this regard when he advised:

... we now need similar but new tools to analyse the role of religion in the post-colony called South Africa ... We find ourselves in a situation in which the colony continues even after the colonial period. (p. 7)

It appears that the younger black theologians adopted the reactionary culture of Black Theology because they understand it as situational (Buffel 2010:473). For instance, an additional voice that offered direction was echoed by Moore (2018:94). He produced credible guidelines on the role of BTL in the South African context, which is marked by dynamic political changes. He further called for the need to focus on the victims of poverty, listening to their needs and partnering with them in their liberation struggle. Motlhabi (2005) seems to summarise the cause of this decline of black theological activities well when he argued:

The false impression given by this trend is that we have now arrived at freedom square; we can now relax and concentrate on other things. Nothing, indeed, can be farther from the truth. (p. 18)

Already, at the start of the Vellemic era, the future of Black Theology was a major concern. This could be gleaned from the gathering of both younger and older black theologians that was hosted by Prof Mosala at his residence on 09 February 2010. The younger black theologians were well represented. Among them was Molobi who listened attentively. Molobi (2010) correctly captured the main agenda of that meeting when he stated:

[S]enior Black theologians indicated that they had already played their role in the struggle and that now is the time for developing scholars to reveal their visions for the revival of Black Theology. (p. 11)

It therefore became apparent that the agenda of this gathering was on the handing over of the Black Theology project to the younger generation of black theologians and to encourage them to carry it forward into the future. The outcome of this gathering was that they all agreed that it is important for the younger generation to accept this responsibility. This meeting was important as it yielded a plan with regard to the vision or way forward in the revival project of Black Theology, which included 'renaming, spirituality, revisiting and redefinition of racism, and the principles and methodologies of feminist theology and feminist hermeneutics' (Molobi 2010:12).

The relevancy of the BTL after the South African democratic context was another topic that was interrogated early during

this era. Buffel (2010), one of the younger black theologians, argued that this type of theology is still important because its role is still huge in South Africa. In his own words, he argued it out as follows: 'Although apartheid is believed to have died and black people have political power, the socio-economic and cultural realities and conditions that necessitated Black Theology are still prevalent' (Buffel 2010:470). Similar sentiments are seen to have also been echoed by Biko in the 1970s when he argued 'of a post-apartheid situation if black people's political liberation did not include economic liberation as an essential and indispensable reality' (Boesak 2020:35). Additional voices on this continued to be heard from other scholars. For instance, Tshaka and Makofane (2010:532) observed that the challenge with regard to the relevance of Black Theology could be located from the point that there was no adequate definition that was given to the notion of freedom. From their argument, they identified economic freedom and recommended it as what could have been a new focus for Black Theology. In addition to this debate, the title of one of Boesak's (2020:2) work offered another helpful description of this situation: 'When tomorrow is yesterday'. This title means that what was viewed as oppression of yesterday infiltrated both the economic and political freedom that was hoped for regarding tomorrow.

The topic regarding the redefinition of Black Theology could be heard. When taking it from the tune of the definition that was offered by the previous Black Theology generation such as Pityana, Cone, Goba, Boesak and others, this enabled Buffel (2010:472) to be in a better position to define this theology as: 'the theology of black liberation'. Moore and Maimela's contributions were accommodated by Buffel when he indicated that they redefined Black Theology as a situational theology, meaning that black people attempting to come to terms with their situation of blackness (Buffel 2010:473). In addition, another aspect of this debate could be located from Farisani who argued that Black Theology rejected white theology and the manner in which the gospel, life and reality were interpreted. From this understanding, it therefore comes to light that the complacency of the church with the status quo and the justification of it were challenged (Farisani 2010:509). It therefore becomes apparent that Maluleke (2008:115) was influenced by this situation that he selected this title, 'May the Black God stand up please!', in his analysis of the challenge to religion posed by Biko. It could therefore be concluded that the theology that was irrelevant to the plight of the oppressed in order to set them free was discarded as worthless.

During this period, voices echoing the issue of reconstruction theology could be heard. Jesse Mugambi, who was hailed as the father of this concept, suffered critiques from some black theologians. Accordingly, Maluleke (Farisani 2010:513) stood out as one of his formidable critics. Two areas of criticism could be gleaned from Maluleke. In the first place, he pointed out that Mugambi failed to fully develop the justification of his reconstruction theology along both biblical and sociopolitical grounds. In the second place, he further noticed that Mugambi did not succeed in appreciating the biblical

hermeneutic of the liberation paradigm. In addition to Maluleke, another critique could be located from Dube (Farisani 2010:513). Dube criticised Mugambi on his call for focussing on reconstruction at the expense of liberation. Dube further argued that these two could not be divorced. In her view, there is no way in which liberation could be transcended. Dube also observed that Mugambi's reconstruction theology is sexist and that there is an element of ethnic cleansing in it (Farisani 2010:514). Farisani (2010:515) was another critique who joined the circle. His critique centred on his argument that Mugambi's use of Ezra-Nehemiah 'undermines the basic call for a theology which aims at addressing the needs and plight of the poor in Africa'. He reasons that Mugambi failed to engage the text in depth and thus missed the point of identifying the prevailing ideology in the Ezra-Nehemiah text, which favours the returned exiles over against the *am Haaretz* (people of the land). Farisani called for a critical reading of the biblical text over against the uncritical approach. In his mind, he held that the critical textual reading approach will result in 'de-ideologising' of the text.

The widening economic gap that existed between black and white South Africans formed another topic for engagement within the circles of Black Theology during the period under review. This point was discussed by Vellem (2015a:181) when he addressed the topic of Black Theology and the economy of life. He analysed the opacity of the empire that was seen as life denying. For him, he saw what he called a theology of life in Black Theology which he believed was aiming at unmasking the Empire's universe. He stated:

If there is anything that continues to bedevil South African public life post-1994, it is the embarrassing truth that we find vestiges of colonial and apartheid South Africa expressed along racial lines. The 'uneven levels of improvement' in South Africa after political liberation reflect a history of racial exclusion and privilege written on the bodies of men and women who are poor and worse off even after twenty years of democracy. (p. 181)

Vellem went on to blame neoliberal economic policies that were adopted since the dawn of democracy in 1994. He further argued that this process displayed 'the metaphysics of economic management based on racial exclusion, extraction and violence' (Vellem 2015a:182). He believed that, 'The pact between white capital and black political power remains glaringly indisputable'.

The topic of biblical interpretation was also brought to the table for discussion. In this instance, the aspect of Black biblical hermeneutics was foregrounded. Vellem argued that 'the hermeneutical heritage of BTL is not and has not been Western-oriented' (2017:2). Farisani (2010:507) added his voice by highlighting and examining the importance of the biblical hermeneutics in developing and propagating BTL. He argued that for Black Theology in order to effectively reveal the ideologies imbedded in the biblical text, a suitable methodological approach is a sociological analysis of the biblical text. Furthermore, Farisani (2017:2) identified three pillars for an interpretation of the biblical text in Africa,

namely, the biblical text, African context and appropriation. This is the area where Black Theology and African Feminist Theology, as two current trends in African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH), will be employed, indicating the way in which appropriation occurs. Vellem (2015b:2) argued that what he calls the context of the cry for life by the poor marks the scope within which the biblical hermeneutics of a BTL moves. He further contends that the interpretation of the gospel that ignores the content of liberation is meaningless in the context of the oppression and dispossession of black people (Vellem 2016:2).

During this period, special terminologies, expressions and metaphors were popularised, which occupied important space in the debate. For instance, 'un-thinking' and 'empire' were the terminologies that were popularised. When one looks at the first term, un-thinking, especially with reference to the West, Vellem argues that BTL un-thinks the West. By this, he meant that it could stand independently from the West, thus rejecting Western epistemologies as final norms for life. Vellem wrote an article entitled 'Un-thinking the West: The spirit of doing Black Theology of Liberation in decolonial times' in 2017 that reflected this term. Another identified term is 'empire'. Vellem titled one of his articles in 2015b as 'Black Theology of liberation: A theology of life in the context of empire'. Five years later, Mashau in 2020 employed the same terminology in his article entitled 'Pushing the naked envelop further: A missiological deconstruction of the empire and Christianity in Africa'. A year after Mashau's article, that is in 2021, Masuku added his voice by also writing an article entitled 'African Initiated Churches as interlocutors of African spirituality of liberation against colonial spirituality of the empire'.

The church in economic justice and its role during the post-1994 context in South Africa also received attention. In approaching this matter, Vellem employed the *Kairos Southern Africa* document as he believes that it touches on economic justice though scantily. Vellem (2013:6) in this document is attracted to phrases such as '350 years of imperialism, colonialism and apartheid' and the reference to 'disparities between Blacks and Whites within churches'. For him, these were meaningful for the church on her prophetic mission during the 1980s. In the understanding of many Christians, the meaning of this was prophetic ministry during the anti-apartheid project and activating the church theology to take over the prophetic project in the democratic South Africa. Thereafter, Christians did not reverse the social and economic injustices. He advises that the *Kairos Southern Africa* within the tradition of the *Kairos* document challenge 'the entitlement of the rich, the powerful and those who serve their interests' (p. 6). Masuku (2014:164) also identified this position when he stated, 'While during apartheid the church was vocal against apartheid, she is silent today'.

During this period, there was the foregrounding of the culture of highlighting the profiles and Black Theology credentials of the older generation of black theologians and

their views. This was seen among others, from Molobi (2010) who wrote about Maimela where he interrogated his views with regard to the past and future of Black Theology in South Africa. On the contrary, Maluleke (2017:61) wrote about Boesak, wherein he highlighted his role as a theologian and political activist. Maluleke (2015:572) also wrote about Emeritus Archbishop Tutu. In this writing, he appraised his earliest notions and visions of the church, humanity and society. In another instance, Maluleke (2019:177) also wrote about Tutu. At this point, he profiled the strategies and (theological) tactics he (Tutu) employed in the management of painful memory in his own personal life, in his various leadership roles in church and society, and in his role as chairperson of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Another topic that featured during the Vellemic era was the Black Theology of land. The importance of land within the African cultural context was centralised. Among younger black theologians who added their voices on the importance of land was Vellem. He emphasised the importance of land from the point that it is life in Africa; it is like a mother; and it has sacred, spiritual, cultural and religious features in black Africa. He stresses it as follows:

... land is an integral part of the whole constellation of life, which cannot be separated into dichotomised compartments or spheres in the African ethical view of life. Sadly, since the encounter between white and black in South Africa, the epistemological view of land by Africans was violently dismantled and perhaps even so in the current democratic dispensation. Black African people bury their umbilical cords, foreskins and their dead in the land. (2016:1)

Vellem lamented the fact that the church failed to construct a theology of land after 1994. He argued that the interpretation of the gospel should be based on the content of liberation. He further states, 'The lessons of the past twenty years of democracy in South Africa should alert us to epistemological dialogue as a prophetic moment of our time' (2016:2).

Black community vis-à-vis Black Theology also featured as part of the themes reflected upon during the time of Vellem. The black community has been seen as a common denominator in the definition of Black Theology. Buffel (2010:475) reasons this as being from the fact that Black Theology was conceived from the experiences or situation of the black community. He identified the characteristics of this situation as 'dehumanisation, pain and suffering, oppression, sexism and exploitation' (Buffel 2010:475). Vellem (2015b:2) regarded this community as 'nonpersons in the logic of the empire who is life denying'. These nonpersons face the struggle that Jesus faced. It was further lamented that theological reflection became a prerogative of academia limited to universities.

The role of the black church came to the fore too as an extended terrain of the struggle for liberation. This included the role played by church leaders in the struggle for liberation. Buffel observed 'that church buildings were used as venues

of meetings and rallies during the struggle for liberation' (Buffel 2010:475). The colonial church was singled out as having been irrelevant in their message which failed to touch on the physico-spiritual needs of the black community (Buffel 2010:476). This is seen from the three models of the church in South African history as defined by Vellem (2016:3ff), viz. settler, missionary and African Initiated. The first two represent their 'original' purpose of trade, which becomes the 'Gospel of Work' justifying cheap labour and denigration of black dignity.

The African Initiated Churches (AICs) also attracted focus. Although the AICs were initially seen to be mute on matters of sociopolitical justice, black theologians detected some value during this period. The importance of the AICs in social change began to be appreciated. This could be seen among others, from Vellem's positive view towards them when he considered them:

[A]s those who can play an important role in reconstructing, promoting and securing the 'free dispensation of moral and ethical thought that shaped the lives of the black African people' from the terror and destruction of the Western empire. (Masuku 2021:1)

Farisani (2010:509) acknowledges that the emergence of the AICs in the second half of the 1800s represented early protest from the church against white oppression. Vellem (2014:3) confirmed this when he echoed, 'the AICs had been linked to praxis and thus the tradition of liberation and resistance'. Mosala (Farisani 2010:509) elevated AICs as one of his four sources of Black Theology. Makofane (2019:126) acknowledged that the AICs had some positive lessons for the Evangelical Lutheran Church on the moratorium debate in the 1970s.

The question of gender was foregrounded as well. Molobi (2010), in his discussion with Maimela, brought the topic of gender to the table in order to listen to his take on it. He defined Maimela as a gender sensitive scholar who was seen as an inspiration to other feminist theologians. The way Boesak (Maluleke 2017) describes his mother, Sarah, presents a glimpse of his theology of gender. He presents her as:

'[A] heroine of the faith, a marvellous woman whose footprints in the lives of her children will remain large and her memory for all of us unsullied' ... 'an extraordinary woman who did a great job in raising her children'. (p. 66)

Farisani (2010:508) commended Maluleke as a modern black theologian who engages both African and black theologians, including those who practise what he calls women theologies. Benoni-Wang and Vellem (2020:1) wrote an article entitled 'A womanist theological engagement of triple patriarchy and its implications on (Ejagham) women's liberation'. In that, they look at the practice of Nkim e Nkim, a cultural rite that has been globally described as 'female genital mutilation', which remains a concern for the Ejagham area in Cameroon and the world at large. Vellem's promotion of gender issues in favour of women could be gleaned from his statement:

The resistance of the young people and their anger, women and their struggles against patriarchy, including all these currents that inspire a new vision of living, express hope that denies death and affirms life. The development of distinctive theologies by women in addition to class and race constructs that deny black peoples their dignity and life, is an expression of the power of the oppressed to say 'no' to death. (2015b:2)

Unearthing Vuyani Vellem's voice in post-1994 Black Theology praxis

The voice of Vellem has been noticeable in this debate. Therefore, it is apparent that he was part of the younger black theologians who gathered at the residence of Prof Mosala on 09 February 2010 during which the older generation of black theologians handed over the Black Theology project to them. He was therefore part of the generation who agreed to take the project forward. As already outlined by Molobi (2010:12), the task ahead of them, as guided and emanated from that gathering, included that they should work, among others, on the spirituality, renaming, revisiting and redefining racism, as well as principles and methodologies of feminist theology and hermeneutics.

In response to the above-given task, Vellem's voice was heard on different sides of the Black Theology debate during the period under review. Regarding the debate on the matter of wide economic divide between black people and white people in South Africa, his input was when he looked at what he called 'Black Theology and the economy of life' and 'the opacity of the empire' (2015a:181). He condemned neoliberal economic policies, racial exclusion and privileges, among others, that were directed at black people. On biblical hermeneutics, Vellem argued that if the gospel fails to interrogate the content of liberation, it becomes meaningless in the historical context of black experience (Vellem 2016:2). He was also part of those who popularised certain terminologies and gave them unique meaning. For instance, some of the terminologies that were associated with him included 'empire' and 'un-thinking', the latter being in relation to the West. These terminologies are apparent in his articles that were published in 2015b and 2017, respectively. His voice could also be picked up on the debate on the topic: 'The church in economic justice and its role in democratic South Africa'. He foregrounded the *Kairos Southern Africa* document and saw it responding so well on this matter. Vellem also had a say on the matter regarding the Black Theology of land. He noticed that the church failed to construct the theology of land after 1994 (2016:2). His voice was also heard on the debate around the topic of 'Black community vis-à-vis Black Theology'. He was among those who highlighted the role of black community in the life of Black Theology. He deemed this community as 'nonpersons in the logic of the empire who is life denying' (Vellem 2015b:2). Therefore, the black community should also be part of theological reflection, not to limit that task to academia. His voice was also heard when discussing the role of the black church. This was seen when he coined three models of the church, viz. settler, missionary and African Initiated.

The first two represent the empire as they justify cheap labour and undignifies black people (Vellem 2016:3). Vellem's voice was also heard on the debate regarding the AICs. He indicated that they are associated with the tradition of liberation and resistance (2014:3). His voice was also clear on the debate regarding gender. His positive voice towards women is seen among others in his article titled 'A womanist theological engagement of triple patriarchy and its implications on (Ejagham) women's liberation' (Benoni-Wang & Vellem 2020). He supported women's struggle against patriarchy as well as the development of different theologies by women (Vellem 2015b:2).

It could therefore be concluded that Vellem was one of the vocal voices of Black Theology during the period under review. He left a legacy that will stand out for years to come as a principle for Black Theology praxis in post-1994 South Africa. Vellem through his Black Theology activism appeared to have embraced the responsibility given to them by the older generation of black theologians at the residence of Prof Mosala in 2010.

Relevance of the debates vis-à-vis the future of Black Theology of Liberation in South Africa

Were these topics debated during this period under review relevant enough in response to the political dynamics of the democratic South Africa? In addition, one could also want to know the meaning of those topics with regard to the future of BTL in this country during the period under review. During this period, topics that featured included positioning of the interlocutors of Black Theology; reflection on allegations of the demise of Black Theology; analysis of possible strategic approaches of Black Theology; the agenda of gathering of older and younger black theologians; relevance of Black Theology in post-1994 context; redefinition of Black Theology; critique to reconstruction theology, widening economic gap between black and white people; biblical hermeneutics; new terminologies; expressions and metaphors; the church's role in economic justice; highlighting profiles of older generation of black theologians; the theology of land, black community versus BTL; the role expected from the black church; AICs; and the question of gender.

The political context was dominated by Zumaism. This context was characterised by what was defined by President Cyril Ramaphosa as 'nine wasted years' during which corruption ran supreme. Booysen (2015) characterised this period by listing evils such as lawlessness, corruption, and bias towards pleasing the interests of the business community, patronage and the middle class. The appointments in senior positions were a selection of Zuma cronies and loyalists. Pauw (2017:44) called them 'stooges' and stated that they had little regard for the law and order. According to Booysen (2015:6), the string of crises included Nkandlagate, GuptaGate, arms deal, spy tapes, dysfunctionality of security institutions, the great escape of

Omar al Bashir, etc. Massive demonstrations, including those in the form of service delivery protests, dominated this period. Tournadre (2018) confirmed that when Zuma was elected at Polokwane, he raised the hopes of the poor, especially township residents.

The positioning of Black Theology interlocutors, which featured during the period under review, was important. It was to locate the strength and the capabilities of BTL during the Vellemic era. This period was characterised by a generation of what Motlhabi (2005:18) referred to as 'a younger generation of religious leaders'. Among this generation of black theologians, Farisani (2010:508) is correct in elevating Maluleke as a doyen of black theologians during this period. The younger black theologians should have noted the talk of the time as echoed by Motlhabi (2005) that Black Theology is dead. It was for this reason that the relevance of BTL was interrogated. Talks related to the death of Black Theology were getting dominant. From Molobi's (2010) interview with Maimela, it came to light that concerns about the silence of black theological voices were noticed as early as 1993. However, Motlhabi's (2005:15) observation should not be ignored when he warned that the older generation of black theologians have left academia and assumed positions in administration. In addition to this, some could have retired.

What was understood to be the focus of Black Theology during this period? Maluleke (2008:7) warned of the need to analyse the role of religion in what he termed a 'postcolony'. Moore (2018:94) was on point when he advised that Black Theology should focus on the needs of the victims of poverty, listening to their needs and partnering with them in their liberation struggle. These guidelines are an excellent response to Motlhabi (2005:18) who warned against relaxation and concentration to other things in the detriment of the Black Theology agenda. These arguments arose as this younger generation of black theologians struggled with the positioning of Black Theology during this period and looking into the future. That is why the meeting of 09 February 2010 at the residence of Prof Mosala was important to chart a way forward with regard to the future of BTL (Molobi 2010:11).

Furthermore, the relevance with regard to Black Theology was highlighted, which confirms that the younger generation of black theologians saw its importance in their analysis of the context of the period. Buffel (2010) emphasised the necessity and relevance of BTL in the democratic South Africa. He continued to advise that black people have political power, but socioeconomic conditions necessitated the relevance of Black Theology. Boesak (2020:35) indicated Biko's concern already during the 1970s when he warned of the uselessness of a political liberation which excluded economic liberation. A similar view was picked up by Tshaka and Makofane (2010:532) who identified the problem from the point that the notion of freedom was not defined. They observed that the relevance of Black Theology is when it foregrounds economic freedom. Buffel (2010) called for the

redefinition of this theology which he defined as situational theology that enables black people to understand their situation of blackness.

These arguments seem to be rejecting Mugambi's reconstruction theology. This could be picked up from Dube (Farisani 2010:513) who lamented the call for a movement from liberation to reconstruction. She argued that these two concepts could not be divorced. This was seen from the concern of the widening economic gap that was becoming evident between black and white South Africans. It was addressed by Vellem (2015a:181) when he linked Black Theology with the economy of life. He was concerned with what he called the metaphysics of management based on racial exclusion (2015a). He blamed the neoliberal economic policies that were adopted since 1994. That is why topics focusing on the church in economic justice were discussed, where Vellem (2013:6) brought to attention the *Kairos Southern Africa* document as he believed it touched on the matters of economic justice in a way. The importance of the economic element of liberation could be seen in the focus on the theology of land. Vellem (2016:2) lamented the fact that the church failed to construct a theology of land after 1994.

In the light of the above, it could therefore be concluded that the younger black theologians located the importance of BTL in addressing the matter of economic justice. Because Black Theology has further been identified as a situational theology, this means that other challenging issues will be addressed alongside the economic justice going into the future. However, during this period under review, it was acknowledged that freedom has been attained with the exclusion of the economic element. That is why topics such as widening economic gap between black and white people; the positive impact of the church in economic justice; and the theology of land were foregrounded during the period under review. These were topics that received much attention during this period to which Vellem contributed considerably, especially in his emphasis on Black Theology as economy of life and church in economic justice, wherein he foregrounded the importance of the *Kairos* document on matters of economy and the land. As Motlhabi (2005:13) acknowledged that while the focus of Black Theology was initially on racism, during his period, and called for the issue of gender to be included and be fought against in equal proportion with racism, the same could be applied to the fight against economic injustice.

Conclusion

The influence of the context of the democratic dispensation in South Africa determined the agenda for Black Theology epistemologies and praxis during the period under review. It was an era where the voices of those who were referred to as the younger generation of black theologians were heard and those of older or first generation seem to have disappeared or are in the process of vanishing. Their voices disappeared leaving their contributions behind which will remain as guidelines for the younger generations going forward into

the future. The following topics were discussed during the period under review: relevancy of Black Theology; future of Black Theology; redefinition of Black Theology; critique to reconstruction theology; widening gap between black and white people; biblical hermeneutics; special terminologies and metaphors; church in economic justice; profiling of older generation Black Theology credentials; Black Theology of land; organic relation between BTL and the masses; the role played by the black church; AICs; and gender issues.

It became apparent from the tone of the debates that the necessity for Black Theology during that era and beyond was supported. This was justified by the continued existence of racism, economic injustice, gender issues, class, etc. These topics and others that may emerge in future underline the continued relevance of BTL. The relay baton was officially handed over to the younger generation by the older generation of black theologians at the place of Prof Mosala on 09 February 2010, right at the beginning of the Vellemic era. Going forward, it became apparent that the voices of Black Theology were diminishing relative to those of the older and previous generation who were more vocal. The importance of the younger generation of black theologians was underlined as they carried on the baton handed over to them by the older generation going forward.

Listening to the debates during the period under review, it became apparent that the relevance and importance of Black Theology were underlined. Although the 'Zuma effect' with regard to corruption may not seem to have been directly addressed in the debates, there was a great focus on the wrongs of that period that emanated from corruption. For instance, the economic injustice that was identified and discussed responds to the effects of corruption of that period which contributed to poverty. The growth in the number of service delivery protests, which became a daily occurrence during this period, was a testimony to the economic injustices that were highlighted during that period and beyond. The fact that the younger generation of black theologians made a call to redirect the focus of Black Theology towards economic justice is appreciated. It became apparent that the voices of Black Theology are diminishing, therefore calling upon current theologians to stand up.

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Author's contribution

M.T.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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