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'Site of struggle': The paradox of Black liberation theology

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The paradoxical nature of liberation theologies for African Christians has, for some time, been an intense subject of contestation. It has produced some polarised communities and made them acceptable on the basis of biblical interpretation. Liberation theological jargons such as 'God sides with the poor' and 'God is for the oppressed' seem to exemplify this attitude. As an acceptable standard of practice, this form of polarisation has been sustained through theological dogmas and ecclesiological dispositions. As a result, the South African biblical scholar, Itumeleng Mosala, has noted how the Bible is a 'site of struggle', which permits ideological contestations through biblical interpretation. His ideological formulations were later explored and expanded upon by Gerald O. West on 'serving the sighs of the working class in South Africa with Marxist analysis of the Bible as a site of struggle'. This important work critically reflects on Itumeleng Mosala's contribution to Black theology and its significance within the South African context. It considers Mosala's use of Marxist concepts such as 'mode of production', his understanding of the relationship between biblical text and interpretive context and his 'prophetic' warnings about working with an ideologically uncontested Bible. It is to the latter – working with an ideologically uncontested Bible, that this paper is sorely focused.

Contribution: It explores the paradoxical nature of liberation theologies, specifically Black theology, in African Christianity, and how it has failed to critically engage with the Bible as a 'site of struggle' within the South African context.

Keywords: site of struggle; Black theology; theology of opposites; liberation theology; Bible; biblical interpretation.

Introduction

The emergence of Black[1] liberation theology, particularly in South Africa, was a deliberate critical response to the problem of white domination and oppression. Motlhabi (2008) noted that it was an invention, which helped to search:

> [*A*]ggressively for theological answers to the problem of white domination and oppression. […] it rejected white theology and its interpretation of the Gospel, life, and reality. It challenged the church's complacency with the status quo and its justification of its complacency. (p. 2)

Even though it served as a critical tool to respond to the problem of white domination and oppression, it still did not address the more pertinent questions, which related to identity, inclusion and equality. Takatso Mofokeng, one of the South African liberation scholars of that time, argued that African Christians are struggling to position their realities in concrete dialectical terms in relation to their professed Christian faith. This is because they are aware of the central position that the Bible occupied in the process of colonisation, national oppression and exploitation (Mofokeng 1988:34). Moreover, they are also perplexed by the paradox of having been colonised by a Christian people, who had no remorse for their actions but wanted them to convert to their religion. Unable to address these issues, African theologians chose the much easier option; that is, to utterly reject white theology and its interpretation of the Gospel, life and reality in favour of their own (Black theology). They did this without understanding and critically engaging with the ideological contestations that are inherent in the Bible as a source that permitted white theology to exist. These ideological contestations, therefore, are ever present and have not changed. They

1.The term 'Black' has been used in its broadest sense, not only referring to black people as a stable or standard definition of race. It also considers the diverse interpretations and applications of the term as used in the classification of those marginalised groups whether in Africa, America, the Caribbean, Latin America and/or Asia. Moreover, as it pertains to the South African context, the term acknowledges all the racial categories that are considered and registered as 'Blacks' within the *Population Registration Act 114/1991*, such as Indians, Coloureds and Asians.

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continue to inform biblical interpretation, the formulation of church theology and church praxis. They are what Itumeleng Mosala referred to as a 'site of struggle' and are the primary subject of enquiry for this paper.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, which is grounded in Document Analysis. As such, it consists of the review of literary or documentary sources. It is a document review study, which uses data that are already available in the public domain. It has sufficiently adhered to academic standards and the non-infringement of copyright issues. All the sources cited in the study were appropriately used and sufficiently acknowledged. Thus, the study is based on good academic practices, which evade plagiarism as an academic offence and do not, in any way, include human participants.

'Site of struggle' – contextualised

According to West (2020:41), the term 'site of struggle' was first used by the South African biblical scholar, Itumeleng Mosala, as early as 1987. The term refers to the inherently conflicted or contested meanings of the text, as found in the Bible or biblical discourses and their inference to contemporary readings of the scriptures (West 2016:328–339). It is a term that acknowledges the paradoxical nature of the Bible and its contribution to both oppressive and liberating theologies. Mofokeng (1988:37) calls this the 'problem of the Bible'. He argues that the Bible was complacent with missionary colonialism and the Apartheid as much as it is complacent with liberation theologies. He therefore challenged the commonly held belief that the Bible is the word of God and should not be questioned (Mofokeng 1988:37). This is the same approach that Mosala (1989) highly criticised:

> An approach to the study or appropriation of the Bible that begins with the theological notion of the Bible as the word of God, therefore, presupposes a hermeneutical epistemology for which truth is not historical, cultural, or economic. For such an epistemology, the word of God is pre-established. The political, cultural, economic, or historical relevance of this word of God comes out of its capacity to be applied to the various facets of human life, and in this case of black human life. Its relevance does not issue out of its very character as a historical, cultural, political, or economic product. (pp. 19–20)

Mofokeng therefore postulated that the Bible has two conceptual phases of interpretation: the first phase and the second phase. With regard to the first phase, Mofokeng (1988) noted that:

> It is clear that this critique is based on the assumption that the Bible is essentially a book of liberation. This assumption is held in spite of the obvious presence in the Bible of texts, stories and books which can only serve an oppressive cause. (p. 37)

He questioned the reception of the Bible as 'essentially a book of liberation'. He argued that the second phase is important and is to be considered as well:

> We contend that there are stories and texts which are basically oppressive and whose interpretation (not misinterpretation) only serves the cause of oppression. On the contrary it is (in fact) their interpretation and use for liberation that would constitute misinterpretation and misuse. (Mofokeng 1988:37)

Takatso Mofokeng and Itumeleng Mosala were clearly positioning the Bible as a 'site of struggle' in this case. They questioned the uncritical reading of the Bible and warned African Christians about working with an ideologically uncontested Bible. For them, to critique the Bible did not mean to question its validity, add to what the texts say or did not say or omit from them. Their call was to interrogate its claims, put things as they are and not read away or into the biblical text. With this approach, the ideological contestations found in the Bible would be exposed. For instance, citing Terry Eagleton, Mosala (1989) noted that:

> The task of criticism, then, is not to situate itself within the same space as the text, allowing it to speak or completing what it necessarily leaves unsaid. On the contrary, its function is to install itself in the very incompleteness of the work in order to theorise it – to explain the ideological necessity of those 'not-saids' which constitutes the very principle of its identity. (p. 119)

Mosala, through this citation, emphasises the point that the mere acceptance of the Bible by African Christians as the revealed word of God nullified the need for critical reading, and this positioned the Bible as a non-ideological book. On the contrary, Europeans have always been critical and have seen the Bible as an ideologically contested book, which may be used even in the purpose of conquest. The uncritical acceptance and re-reading of the Bible by African Christians have disadvantaged them severely. Hence, the famous African dirge:

> When the white man came to our country, he had the Bible, and we had the land. The white man said to us 'let us pray'. After the prayer, the white man had the land, and we had the bible. (Mofokeng 1988:34)

The paradox of Black liberation theology

The construct of liberation theology, as it emerged and continues to be interpreted within the South African context, appears to lack a critical element – that is 'the theology of opposites'. In his seminal work, 'On the Universe', Heracleitus (1931:483) argued that 'God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, surfeit and hunger'. According to Heracleitus, 'day and night, two opposites, are really one, or, as we should say, two aspects of the same thing' (Barak-Gorodetsky 2021). In this sense, God is said to be completely whole in the unity of opposites (Baloyannis 2013:3). In fact, Heracleitus postulated that harmony comes from binding opposites. He believed that '[*e*]verything is generated from the opposite, such as the dead from the living, the old from the young and the ill from the healthy' (Baloyannis 2013:3).

For that reason, it would be inappropriate to conceive of God as monolithic and without opposites. These opposites are acknowledged in the Bible. For instance, passages such as 1 Samuel 2:6, Deuteronomy 32:39 and Job 1:21 talk about

God giving life but also about God taking life. Some scriptures, such as 1 Samuel 2:6–9, talk about how God makes rich and how God makes poor. However, the criteria of who deserves to be rich and/or poor are not outlined. Again, there are the acknowledged dispositions of power – where the relationship between slaves and masters is considered (Eph 6:5; 1 Pt 2:18–20; 1 Tm 6:1–2; Col 4:1). These speak to the theology of opposites as a developed construct that permits some ideological contestations in the Bible in terms of interpretation.

That European scholars fully understood and acknowledged these ideological contestations is undoubtful. If God could have 'a chosen nation, a royal priesthood and a holy nation' (Dt 7:6; 1 Pt 2:9; Eph 1:11), such a chosen nation could be traced from them. Even though the directive was strictly for the Jews, Europeans adopted it and used it to further their agendas. Fuller (1908), for instance, noted that:

> The reading of the Sacred Book [*Bible*] was all in all to them. Their forefathers in Holland and France had suffered for freedom to read its life-giving pages, and they with inherent steadfastness sought therein the bread of life. But even this had its darker side. Their life, so near to that of the old patriarchs who like them had gone forth hardly knowing whither they went, begot in them the thought that they, as well as the Israelites of old, were God's chosen and peculiar people, and in consequence that they were superior to other peoples. (p. 164)

This is the ideological stance that was embraced by the Afrikaners in South Africa (Oliver 2005:166). In Mackenzie's (1899:158) words, '[*t*]hey have persuaded themselves by some wonderful mental process that they are God's chosen people […]'. As a result, they spoke of the territories that were occupied by native people, particularly Natal, as 'the land overflowing with milk and honey' (Oliver 2005:166). They saw them as 'promised land', following the biblical parallelism of Israel and the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites (Ex 3:8; Nm 14:8; Dt 31:20; Ezk 20:15).

This ideological stance fuelled the territorial conquest of the Great Trek[2] and the Apartheid[3] (Giliomee 2003:178). A few things can be seen from this account: that the Afrikaners used an ideological framing of God who had established a favourite people, a chosen nation and a royal priesthood; that God, out of love for his people, promised them a territorial possession, which belonged to other ethnic groups, whose lot was not under his protection; and that such ethnic groups could be conquered through perpetual wars and utter domination. As Mofokeng (1988) argued, these are explicit principles that are derived from the Bible and are not just a mere incidence of *eisegesis*. They are an obvious example 'of Biblical texts, stories and books which can only serve an oppressive cause' (Mofokeng 1988:37). To simply dismiss these with a liberation theological approach that primarily sees God as siding with the poor is not enough. Hence, Mofokeng (1988) strongly avowed that:

> We [*him and those of like-mindedness*] contend that there are stories and texts which are basically oppressive and whose interpretation (not misinterpretation) only serves the cause of oppression. (p. 37)

The framing and acceptance of the Bible as 'essentially a book of liberation' therefore did not attend to this ideological contestation. How do we justify the preferential treatment and adoption of one nation (Israel, whether in material terms or spiritual) over other nations by God who is accountable for all of creation? Why are we not questioning God's love for his people if he promises them the territorial positions of others – that is, the Israeli versus the Palestinian saga? What should be thought of God who encourages territorial wars in his name and empowers the oppressors? These and many more questions arise when one sees the Bible as an ideologically contested book. What liberation theologians have done is to read-away these ideological contestations for the sake of comfort (Farisani 2010; Motlhabi 2008). They mostly speak of the God who sides with the oppressed and is much closer to the weak and never about the God who empowers the oppressors.

This is not to say that God does not side with the oppressed, he does. He also stands up for the poor. But this should be read against the theology of opposites, where God is involved on both sides. The very God of peace is the same 'God of war' (Ex 15:3), the God who gives life is the same God who takes life (1 Sm 2:6; Dt 32:39; Job 1:21) and the God who makes rich is the same God who makes poor (1 Sm 2:6–9). These contending abstracts in the theology of opposites permit the ideological contestations in the Bible, in terms of interpretation. However, they are largely ignored because they imply that there is a darker side to the nature of God, which we are not prepared to accept – as an unpopular opinion. The paradox of Black liberation theologies therefore is that it takes the Bible at face value, 'as essentially a book of liberation' and reads-away the inherent ideological contestations, which should also be considered. This uncritical method, as used in Black liberation theologies, appears to be one of the limitations that positioned the Bible as the word of God, which needed not to be questioned (Farisani 2010:510). As Mosala (1989:6) argued, this led to the false notion that the Bible is a non-ideological book. Hence, he proposed a new hermeneutical framework based on the notion of 'struggle' (Mosala 1986:8). He posited that:

> The category of struggle becomes an important hermeneutical factor not only in one's reading of his or her history and culture but also in one's understanding of the history, nature, ideology, and agenda of the biblical texts. (Mosala 1986:9)

This is the critical reading of the biblical text that is missing in Black liberation theologies.

2.Peter Walshe (1987:299) noted that the Trekkers believed that their mandate was from God: 'As Dr. Malan put it in 1938 when speaking at the centenary of the Battle of Blood River: 'The Trekkers received their task from God's hand. They gave their answer. They made their sacrifices. There is still a white race. There is a new volk'.

3.Brink (1983:18) noted that '[*f*]or [*A*]partheid to be sanctioned as the definitive characteristic of the Afrikaner Establishment, it had to reach far beyond the domain of politics: It was not simply a political policy "adopted" as a response to the racial situation in the country but had to be accepted as an extension of an entire value system, embracing all the territories of social experience, economics, philosophy, morality and above all religion. The Church itself had to provide the ultimate justification for the ideology'.

Conclusion

Black liberation theologies seem to have produced polarised communities that are deemed acceptable on the basis of biblical interpretation. These biblical interpretations have developed the dichotomy between the theology of the whites – often perceived as oppressive and the theology of the blacks – which is seen as more liberating. Even though hewn from the same bible, they stand as polar opposites and serve different needs. The Black liberation rhetoric says that 'God sides with the poor' and 'God is for the oppressed', whereas white theology speaks of 'a chosen nation, a royal priesthood', which God empowers to rule and take over promised lands, where necessary, by brutal force. The irony is that these are two sides of the same coin – 'a theology of opposites' where God is intrinsically involved on both sides. That is why biblical scholars, such as Mosala and Mofokeng, argued that the Bible is a 'site of struggle'. It permits ideological contestations through biblical interpretation, and these must be considered by Black liberation theologies. Thus, working with an ideologically uncontested Bible is a disservice to Black liberation theologies.

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