



# **THE BIBLE AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE IN SOUTH AFRICAN BLACK THEOLOGY**

**Gerald O. West**  
**School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics**  
**& Ujamaa Centre**  
**University of KwaZulu-Natal**

# SITES OF STRUGGLE

- The concept 'site of struggle' has been an important socio-theological concept in South African theology
  - The concept refers to the inherently conflicted/contested identity of a particular institution or discourse, focusing on the systemic dimensions
- Each of South Africa's liberation theologies has recognised that *biblical interpretation* is a site of struggle, but have gone on to make other distinctive identifications of 'sites of struggle'
- South African 'Contextual Theology'
  - Theology as a site of struggle (*The Kairos Document*)
- South African 'Feminist/Women's Theology'
  - African culture as a site of struggle
- South African 'Black Theology'
  - The Bible as a site of struggle (Phase II) (1987)

# THE STORY OF THE JUDGES

## The Book of Judges

“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (21:25)

## The Book of Ruth

“In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land” (1:1a)

“... the father of David (4:17)

## The Books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel

Samuel as ‘judge’  
vs  
Samuel as precursor and anointer of kings

‘Extended Book of Judges’  
Judges 2:11 to 1 Samuel 12 [David Jobling, 1998]

## PHASE II BLACK THEOLOGY: ITUMELENG MOSALA

- “the appropriation of works and events is always a contradictory process that embodies in some form a ‘struggle’” [1989]
- “I will argue that this struggle [– specifically the socio-economic struggle –] is a key category in developing a biblical hermeneutics of liberation”
- “the texts of the Bible are sites of struggle”
- The enduring problem, according to Mosala, is that the final form of the Bible we have and use is a form shaped by the dominant classes of particular historical periods in the Bible’s formation.

- The biblical text is only of use to Mosala because, first, in the words of his colleague and fellow Black theologian, Takatso Mofokeng [1988], “the Christian religion and the Bible will continue for an undeterminable period of time to be the haven of the Black masses par excellence”, and because,
- second, Mosala’s historical-materialist analysis of the biblical text’s contending ideological voices offers potential kindred sites of struggle for Black working-class Christians, “drawing from their history of struggle”, including their struggles against both African precapitalist and later white settler capitalist modes of production, to “make hermeneutical connections with similar agendas in the contemporary setting”.
- “[t]he category of the ‘black struggle’ as a hermeneutical factor draws its poetry from a future that, in this struggle’s collision with ... [much of the biblical text as we have it], is experienced as an ‘absence’”

# LAYERS OF IDEOLOGY IN THE FINAL FORM

Dominant ideology layer, with hegemonic aspirations, representing the ruling classes: the Israelite and Judahite royal houses, temple-city aligned priests, and temple-city-based land-owners and merchants; incorporates other voices



Scribal, economically 'middle layer', accommodating its representation to the ruling classes it serves and subsists on



Prophet as organic intellectual re-presents the voices of the poor and marginalised, those excluded from the discourses of the city-temple state and the surrounding empires



Exploited classes, whose 'text' is oral rather than written, and whose voices, therefore, are always re-presented in the various layers above them

# AN EXAMPLE FROM ISAIAH

- David Pleins [2001] identifies contending notions of ‘the poor’ (*‘anî* / *‘ănāwîm*) in the Book of Isaiah. “The early chapters of Isaiah [deriving from the prophet] depict the members of the urban establishment as exhausting the produce of the vineyard, God’s people, and taking the property of the *‘anî* (3:13-14). The driving concern of the decadent upper classes is depicted as enhancing pleasure and increasing material prosperity ... (5:22-23; cf. 5:18-21)”.
- Furthermore, continues Pleins, “the prophet specifies the mode of exploitation adopted by the rich: ‘Ah [‘Woe to’] those who add house to house and join field to field, till there is room for none but you to dwell in the land’ (5:8)”.
- In sum, argues Pleins, “[t]he prophetic critique is clear: The prosperity of the wealthy is directly linked to injustices against other members of Israelite society”. Poverty and wealth are directly and systemically related; the poor are poor *because* the wealthy have exploited them.

- However, ‘the poor’ are reframed in subsequent redactions as the voices of the poor and their prophet are redacted by elite-aligned scribal voices. Though this recomposition of ‘the poor’ is evident in chapters 1-39 and 40-66, it is particularly prevalent in 55-66, argues Pleins, where the terms ‘*anî* / ‘*ānāwîm* are used to “reconceptualize the experience of Israel’s dislocated elite”.
- As becomes clear in chapters 40-66, where the message of the prophet has been ‘redacted’ for later contexts, “the exile has brought about an adaptation of the ancient prophetic call for justice for the poor. Where once this language may indeed have been spoken in relation to the concrete needs of Israel’s oppressed, this language has, with the exile, been amalgamated, via prophetic recasting, into the political program of the displaced *elite* in ancient Israel”.



- Dominant classes have through the redactional processes of the Bible's composition co-opted the ideological perspectives of other social sectors.
- If contemporary working-class Africans do, through their struggle trained eyes, “discover kin struggles in biblical communities”, then there is the potential, argues Mosala, that “[t]hese biblical struggles ... serve as a source of inspiration for [their] contemporary struggles, and as a warning against their co-optation”.
- For Mosala, both the discovered resonances between contemporary and biblical sites of struggle and the method used in the discovery process are significant resources.

# NOT MERELY INSTRUMENTALIST

- When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we [Blacks] had the land. The white man said to us, “let us pray”. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we [Blacks] had the Bible.
- Mosala: “The task now facing a black theology of liberation is to enable black people to use the Bible to get the land back and to get the land back without losing the Bible”.

# CONTEMPORARY CO-OPTATION

- By not recognising that the Bible was itself a site of struggle, the bulk of practitioners of South African Black Theology and South African Contextual Theology of the 1980s and 1990s failed to equip contemporary forms of 'prophetic' theology with the capacity to resist the co-optation of the Bible by either post-liberation 'State Theology' or 'Church Theology'.
- Indeed, I would argue, 'Church Theology' understandings of the Bible now characterise how the state and the churches use the Bible in the public realm of post-liberation South Africa.

# A (SOUTH) AFRICAN EXAMPLE

- Thabo Mbeki uses the Bible to deflect the critical engagement of prophetic theology with the post-1996 macro-economic policies of the South African state. Having abandoned the pro-poor and socialist inclined Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) with which it came to power in 1994, the South African state sought to disrupt and deflect the critique of South Africa's liberation theologies as it replaced the RDP with a pro-capitalist macro-economic policy, GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution).
- Mbeki used the Bible in 'Church Theology' ways in order to assert that liberation theologies ought to focus on the personal and moral dimensions of South African life and leave the structural and economic dimensions to the state.
- The churches should focus, argues Mbeki, on "an RDP of the Soul".

- 'Bewitched' by the final form of the biblical text our South African churches are unable to delve beneath the implicit ruling-class ideologies that characterise this final (canonical) layer.
- For example, the voices of economically marginalised sectors and an analysis of the economic systems that exploit them remain unexamined. The failure of king David is moral (2 Samuel 11) not economic (1 Samuel 8); what is remembered about Solomon is his wisdom (1 Kings 3) not his economic exploitation (1 Kings 12); the problem with the Jerusalem temple in the time of Jesus is religious (Mark 11:17) not economic (Mark 12:40); the version of the 'Lord's Prayer' used liturgically is about personal moral sin (Luke 11:2-4), not economic structural sin (Matthew 6:9-13).
- The theological capture by 'Church Theology' of the remnants of 'Prophetic Theology' is almost complete.

# AFTER CO-OPTATION: THE NEXT LECTURE

- The focus of the next lecture is: “Recovering a co-opted Bible in post-apartheid South Africa”
- Here I will reflect on how we have worked, within the work of the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research, with an increasingly more overt understanding of the Bible as a site of struggle, drawing on both literary-narrative and socio-historical re-readings of biblical texts.
- In the fourth and final lecture, “Working with the Bible as a site of struggle in local communities”, I will focus on actual examples, across a range of contextual issues, including unemployment, gender-based violence, HIV, and sexuality.