

CHAPTER 2

Good News for the Poor: A Black African Biblical Hermeneutics

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Editor's Note: In the summer of 1992, when this essay was written, the political situation in South Africa was vastly different than it is today. Because the author's concern was in large measure to demonstrate the importance of reading the Bible from particular social locations, the essay has been left in its original form.

Introduction

Naming ourselves is a matter that cannot be entered into carelessly. I use the terms black African in a very specific way. Being a South African allows one the privilege of being either an African or a black, or as in my case a black African. In the volatile and dangerous political situation of the past twenty years in South Africa these identities have sometimes carried deadly implications.

To understand these identities and the differences between them is to understand key distinctions not only in politics, but even in ecclesiology and spiritual praxis such that a Christian statesperson of the calibre and integrity of the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church, Stanley Mmutlanyane Mogoba, and Frank Chikane of the South African Council of Churches are forced to be on different, if not opposing, sides. Similarly three Methodists at the head of three of the major black political organizations in South Africa do not only differ in perspectives and ideology, but are dangerously poised possibly to lead millions into a potentially catastrophic conflict with one another. I refer here to Nelson Mandela for the African National Congress (ANC); to the highly regarded Methodist preacher and

founder/leader of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the late Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe; and, to myself, for the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO), the political organization started by Steve Biko, himself killed by the South Africans in 1977.

Critically, for my purposes here, these identities frame the way in which the Bible has been read, is being read, and can be read in the South African situation. To be an African, therefore, is to be connected to the land of Africa, the histories of the people of Africa, and the culture and spiritualities of the people of Africa. To be black is to know and consciously and deliberately embody the political implications of being African. The implications for a biblical hermeneutics of liberation are enormous.

As the recent history of South Africa has shown, one can also be other things. For example, one can be non-racial. This is a different identity which has its own implications for reading the Bible. The biblical hermeneutics of the Kairos document emanates from this identity. This explains the difficulties that Kairos theologians had in making the Kairos document an African or a black document. Its impact was more among non-blacks and non-Africans than among blacks and Africans in South Africa.

Context

The starting point of a black biblical hermeneutics of liberation is the historical, social, economic, cultural, and political texts of black people. We exist, therefore we read. Our existence, however, is not monolithic. For this reason, we must expand our hermeneutic to state that we read in order to exist. Reading the Bible is a thoroughly political act in our case, as indeed in any case anywhere, appearances notwithstanding. The difference is that we choose to engage this fact deliberately.

The key hermeneutical question facing those who look to the Bible for the liberation of their humanity is not whether or not they read, but what they are reading and with whose eyes they are reading. The eyes of the poor have yet to read the Bible. For without this new presence of the poor in the business of reading the Bible, there is no recovering the erstwhile presence of the poor in the stories of the Bible.

Thus in seeking to develop a hermeneutic of good news to the poor in South Africa the question is no longer on which side God is.

That was a good question for its time. Now, however, the relevant question is how to interpret the eloquence with which the poor are silent and the absence through which they are present in the pages of the Bible. It is in struggling with these silences and absences that a new and creative reappropriation of the liberation of the gospel takes place. It would be nice to know that God is on our side, but in the context of the South African reality we simply cannot start there.

It is as well to point out already that this biblical hermeneutical perspective raises serious questions concerning the Wesleyan doctrinal emphasis on assurance. What does it really mean for black South African Christians to know that they are saved by faith through grace? Again the issue is not that they would not like to be, but exactly what does it amount to affirm such a faith? But let us first turn to our biblical hermeneutical struggles. I will focus on a reading of Exodus 1–2 in order to highlight the issues at stake for a black hermeneutics of liberation.

Exodus 1–2: Some Hermeneutical Reflections

It is common knowledge that oppressed peoples who share the Christian faith have found great inspiration in the exodus story of the liberation of slaves from bondage. It is also common knowledge that the same story has provided arsenal and justification for the colonization of black people and other oppressed peoples by white people. It is now becoming common knowledge that some white people no longer shy away from defending the “unusability” of the exodus story for liberation purposes. The prime example of this latter position is the review two years ago of Jorge Pixley’s commentary on Exodus by John Levenson.¹

The debate about whether Exodus should or should not be used in this way, and who has the right to determine so, is not part of my concern here. Rather, I seek to ask (like Renita Weems, to whom I am indebted in this essay, and Allen Warrior, with whom I share many sentiments) whether Exodus can really and genuinely be liberating for native peoples—Africans, Americans, Aborigines, Maoris, etc.—and what Methodism has to do with or to say to this? The other issue à la Levenson, whether oppressed peoples have a right to use the exodus for political purposes, does not require the permission of white people or, what amounts to the same thing, the permission of the biblical scholarly guild.

Crucial for the struggles for human liberation is the ability of the story and text of Exodus, especially when taken in its entirety, to deliver the goods to the dispossessed majority of the world's population. Renita Weems concludes her illuminating study of the way in which the ideology of difference in the text of Exodus 1 structures race, gender, and sexual relations by asking and replying: "Can those involved in race, gender, and/or class struggles in modern society use this story as a positive example in their struggle for liberation? Not without due caution."² I have been of the same view for some while on the basis of the nature and history of the text, not to say anything about the ideological practices inscribed in it, as Weems points out so clearly. The most recent confirmation from traditional biblical scholarship which points in this direction, albeit unintentionally, is the conclusion of John van Seters that Exodus 1-2 represents Yahwistic historiographical imaginativeness and inventiveness. According to van Seters, the Yahwist who produced Exodus 1-2 is not reliant upon an ancient stratum of tradition. On the contrary, the Yahwist uses elements from the account of Solomon's reign, but is not for that reason contemporaneous with the period from which those elements come. He emphasizes that

... it is Dtr's understanding of the time of Solomon that is reflected in J's use of this material. This historiographic presentation of the sojourn in Egypt must therefore be post-Dtr. It goes without saying that it can hardly yield any useful information about the date or circumstances of an Egyptian sojourn and efforts to correlate it with elements from Egyptian historical sources are a waste of time.³

There are far-reaching hermeneutical implications in the fact, if indeed it is a fact, that certain parts of the exodus story are Solomonic or at least monarchic. The key hermeneutical question, therefore, is not, as the likes of Levenson have implied, simply whether Exodus should be used for liberation purposes. More fundamentally the question is what results are possible when Exodus is used, whether by protagonists of liberation or by beneficiaries of the status quo. From the South African perspective the question has gone beyond the liberal preoccupation with who has the right to use the Exodus, the white apartheid state or black oppressed masses. The real question is what is in Exodus that seems to make it more effective as a tool of colonization and oppression than as an instrument of liberation. Black biblical hermeneutics has gone beyond moralistic con-

demnation of the apartheid state for “misusing” the Exodus story. The task of a black biblical hermeneutics of liberation is to find out whether the text of the bible itself is open to use in the way in which colonizers have used it, and if so, why.

This takes us back to the Solomonic or monarchic character of Exodus 1–2. I should add that the text need not have been monarchic simply by virtue of its monarchic provenance. However, the question of the class character of the story of the midwives and Moses is a relevant one. It places the liberation of the slaves from bondage in Egypt under a different light. The issue is no longer how a population of slaves struggles to find freedom from a slave holding nation, but how a story about the liberation of slaves fares in the hands of those who write for a state that itself is engaged in slave labor, land dispossession of peasants, and a program of imperialist annexation of other people’s lands.

Seen from this perspective, the political contradiction at the heart of the exodus story takes on a different complexion. I refer here to the inherent contradiction of a story of liberation from slavery for the purpose of taking over the land of the Palestinians, all in the name of God, and in the name of the chosenness of the colonizing nation. This contradiction is less God’s contradiction, which in the nature of theology is anyway non-contradictory, than the contradiction born of the workings of hegemonic ideology. The exodus story is a coopted story. Both Moses and the midwives must be reevaluated in the light of this observation.

The disjunction between liberation and colonization in Exodus happens in the text before it happens in situations where Exodus is used, like South Africa. The contextualization of the exodus story by different political and ideological generations of Israelite people itself means that the concerns and commitments of these generations became the concerns and commitments of the canonical text of Exodus.

Beyond the Midwives and the Princess

It is often very tempting for oppressed communities to seek to find themselves in every text of the Bible. Hence certain forms of black theology and feminist theology have attempted to reclaim certain characters and stories for themselves. The actions of the midwives in Exodus provide precisely this temptation. The story

makes them out to be heroines who use their professional role to support the resistance and survival of an enslaved community. I have already pointed out that Renita Weems sees a basic inadequacy in the failure of this story to question the ideology of difference that is used to explain one of the contradictions of the situation.

In addition to this key issue of difference between the Hebrew women and the Egyptian women we also need to ask who these women are anyway. Is it enough that they are Shiprah and Puah? How are they related to Pharaoh, or shall we say Solomon? Are they liberating figures in the way in which they are presented? If the exodus had not been influenced by the Solomonic context in the way in which it was, would the descendants of the exodus slaves have produced this account of the resistance against Pharaoh? What is the logic that keeps the mothers of those who were born under the circumstances described silent? The privileging of the Princess over against the slave mothers in the story certainly points to class interests and class commitments on the part of this Solomonic, yet post-Deuteronomist, text that cannot be speaking of the liberation of slaves? Is it possible that instead we are dealing here with the liberation of the Israelite state from domination by other imperial powers? How else is one to read the political significance of 1:9 ("Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we are") and 1:20-21 ("So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own") which scholars have already pointed out are of a kind with promises to the patriarchs in Genesis? And do we not know that those promises refer to realities that happened under the Davidic imperial expansion? This should surely explain the ideology of difference which Renita Weems has identified as hermeneutically problematic in a story about liberation.

Beyond Moses and Pharaoh

Apart from its anti-African ethos, the story of Moses and the dynamics surrounding him and Pharaoh presents a difficulty for a hermeneutics of liberation. A key element of the problem is the silence of the slaves. This, however, is unavoidable, given the entirely ruling-class context of Moses' rebellion. The story is undoubtedly moving as an account of survival and rebellion on the part of some-

one who could have remained comfortable. But is it the kind of story of one who underpinned by an ideology as a comfortable, unoppressed person becomes the hero of the uncomfortable and oppressed people?

Again, it is the silence of the slaves which is hermeneutically disturbing. It is also the sociological distance. Moses *goes out to visit* his people. The next day he *went back*. He kills the Egyptian *on behalf* of the slave workers! And then he expects them to trust and believe him when he utters that familiar blacker-than-thou political self-righteousness: "Why are you beating up a fellow-Hebrew?"

Indeed the slaves do speak! But they speak in tongues they are not expected to. There is no mistaking the text's disapproval of what the slaves say: "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (Exod 2:14). I can hear Moses and those who share his class and ideological commitments murmur in their hearts angrily: "You fool, don't you know I am on your side, not on my side?" So Moses does have a side other than that of the slaves, only he does not choose it.

In order not to choose his side, therefore, Moses must talk with Pharaoh to *negotiate* the freedom of the slaves. By this time of course the slaves are not only silenced, they are absent. What needs to be kept in mind, though, is that this is not really surprising. This post-deuteronomistic story of the Solomonic state is not about the liberation of slaves. On the contrary, it seeks to harness the full ideological potential of the state to explain why the land of the Canaanites has justifiably been annexed and why the genocidal slaughter of the people of the land was only part of the divine plan. The story of exodus makes absolute ruling-class sense. It is only when an attempt is made to appropriate it as an oppressed people's story that the contradictions emerge. As it stands, the contradictions are an inherent part of it.

Liberating the Text

The text of Exodus no longer belongs to the slaves. In this regard, though, it joins to form a part of an imposing majority in the Bible. The history of other stories is the same. The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe notwithstanding, Marx's words continue to ring true even for the exodus: "In every epoch the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class" (German Ideology). It is the liberation not just of the

slaves but also of the texts and stories of the slaves that are a condition of the freedom of the slaves. Reading the Bible in the context of the black struggle and in particular of the black-consciousness philosophy in South Africa inexorably points to the importance of the praxis of the slaves and oppressed peoples. Through their praxis against their present enslavement will come the liberation of the stories and texts of slaves. And in a dialectical fashion, only then will the stories themselves be liberating.

Exodus stands in a similar political hermeneutical tradition with Daniel, Esther, Ruth, to name a few in the Hebrew Bible, and with the parables of the gold coins/talents, the vineyard tenants, and the woman who anointed Jesus on the eve of Calvary. It is the silencing of slaves, oppressed peoples, and women that characterizes these texts and the privileging of ruling class perspectives in them which raises hermeneutical problems for us. Whose stories are they?

Needless to say, the cry for the reopening of the canon of scripture in order to liberate its full potential has long been heard among scholars of the oppressed. In the meantime the oppressed people of our time who still rely upon and utilize the resources of scripture for their spirituality have gone ahead and done so through their everyday praxis. But what about the Methodist canon? How have ordinary Methodists fared on issues related to Wesleyan spirituality and its groundedness in the stories of the Bible?

Methodism, the Bible, and Black People

Despite John Wesley, Methodism is of necessity a people's movement. The sociology of its structures and the political economy of its doctrines betray as much. Its weapons of struggle are discursive and cultural in stark contrast to the institutional power of its competitors both at the time of its origin and since. It is a genuinely post-Reformation movement which presupposes the political and economic developments that took place in post feudal Europe. Take away the proletarian masses and it reduces to no more than an attenuated form of its predecessors. Assurance, sanctification, and perfection are the stuff of which people's spiritualities are made. And it is good. But having said this, I must retreat from the "enthusiastic" and "triumphalist" exposition of Wesleyan doctrine against which José Míguez Bonino warns.⁴ Its doctrines and social history have, despite itself, been for those of us in the Third World, "part of the history of our

domination and exploitation.”⁵ It shares in the indictment which Sergio Rostagno makes against the church when he declares:

Historically speaking, the church has always been a church of the bourgeoisie, even when it claimed to transcend class barriers or labored under the illusion that it pervaded all classes in the same way. Indeed, it has been a truly bourgeois church, if the notion of interclassism is taken as part of bourgeois ideology. . . . The church has been the church of the class which has identified itself with the history of the West, in which Christianity may be considered to have been a major force. Only those members of the working class who accepted this view of history attended church. But most of the working people never accepted this view and only gave the church the kind of formal allegiance subjects give to the claims of their rulers. They could not really belong to the church of another class.⁶

And so we move from asking of the texts of liberation in the Bible, Whose texts these are? to asking about the church, Whose church this really is? to asking about Methodism, Whose spirituality are we really dealing with here? Is it any wonder that Methodism prevented a revolution in Britain—a fact of no mean displeasure for those of us attempting to overthrow oppressive regimes?

The doctrines of assurance and perfection are not objectionable. They can hardly be for those groaning under the yoke of economic debt, social alienation, and political dispossession. But are they liberating? Are they more than Exodus and Luke and all those parables that speak for and on behalf of the poor but never really represent the voice of the poor itself, let alone the action of the poor?

Es'kia Mphahlele, a black South African novelist educated at one of Methodism's best institutions, Kilnerton in the Transvaal, returned to South Africa after twenty years of exile to find a political mood and a style such as the one at which Jeremiah's invectives were directed when he said "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer 8:11). In reacting to the optimism and triumphalism which the powers-that-be were creating he focused on a song that the Ministry of Information of the South African government was sponsoring. The title of his article in the black magazine *Tribute* was: "Whose Song, Whose Peace?" It is this question that frames, relentlessly, the biblical hermeneutic of struggle in South Africa.

When we turn to the fundamental beliefs of Methodism the question stays with us: Whose assurance, whose perfection? A few

excerpts from Es'kia Mphahlele's article might give flavor and context to the dilemma of a black Methodist reading the Bible in the 1990s in South Africa. He writes at the beginning of the article: "I wonder why so many people often believe that they can say and do things that hurt millions of other people and then simply make amends with a song that will say soothing words." And then again later: "We all know that the South African Statute Book is the best and most eloquent textbook on racism." Referring to an incident that had just happened between a young white man and a black young woman, Mphahlele continues: "We have witnessed a young man plead guilty to raping and murdering an 18-year-old woman and then cry out, 'God has forgiven me, so man must also forgive me.'" And finally, in a tone that exemplifies the pain of black Christian spirituality and its relation with the Bible on the one hand and Methodist faith on the other hand, Mphahlele writes:

Amidst all this pain and alienation among the unfree, and the tough and menacing talk among the rulers, the legalized violence that is generated by this class, amidst this whole process that alienates family and community members from one another and from the law and its minions, a song is born that speaks of peace and co-operation in the building of some resplendent future for everyone. The mud house . . . the choir set up by those who have power . . . the oppressed called upon to sing while chafing under the yoke and the cruelty of the times. How cynical, how exasperating!⁷

Yet some black people did take part in the singing of the song, albeit at great expense physically for themselves and their families. The reason is that it was done in the name of peace. Who can say after three hundred years of suffering that they do not want peace? But whose peace was it? Indeed, even today whose peace is it? More to today's point: Whose Bible is it? and Whose Methodism is it?

For black people in the Christian fold and in the Methodist tradition the question has been simplified. What does it mean to read the Bible in the aftermath of the Rodney King case in Los Angeles and the murder of black people in Boipatong, South Africa? Is it still possible to be Christian and Methodist after Los Angeles and Boipatong?

32. *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Part II, *Works* (J) 8:187.
33. "The Signs of the Times," *Works* (J) 6:308.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. John D. Levenson, "Liberation Theology and the Exodus," *Midstream* (October, 1989), 30–36.
2. Renita Weems, "The Hebrew Women are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1," unpublished paper, 11.
3. John van Seters, "Reconstructing the Past: The Yahwist's Historiographic Method in Exodus," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* (1992).
4. In Theodore Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 60.
5. *Ibid.*
6. "The Bible: Is Interclass Reading Legitimate?" in Norman K. Gottwald, ed., *The Bible and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 62.
7. *Tribute* (February/March, 1986), 176.

Notes to Chapter 3

1. For Wesley's own account of the Methodists' assistance in "temporal things," see "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists" in *Works* 9:272–80. Several modern commentaries will be mentioned below.
2. Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992). This is a translation by John E. Steely and W. Stephen Gunter of the original German edition, entitled *Praxis und Prinzipien der Sozialethik John Wesleys* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977).
3. *Works* 2:162–63.
4. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).
5. *Ibid.*, 57, quoting a letter of June 9, 1775, in *Letters* 6:153.
6. Jennings artificially supports this wrong assumption by occasionally putting words in Wesley's mouth; e.g., "the poor of the society [of London]," implying the broader society rather than the Methodist society. See *ibid.*, 59.
7. Henry Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
8. See the chapter on "Daily Conduct" in Abelove, 96–109.