

## A NAMA 'EXODUS'?

### A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF THE DIARIES OF HENDRIK WITBOOI

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#### **Abstract**

*This contribution attempts to interpret the personal diaries and papers of Hendrik Witbooi, an icon of the struggle for liberation in Namibia, in view of postcolonial criticism. It is argued that Witbooi's diaries and papers indicate how he responded to colonial discursive practices by means of assimilation and resistance. Special attention is given to the possibility that an 'exodus theme' was employed as a rhetorical strategy to mobilize the Witboois to relocate to new territory and eventually used to resist colonialism by inciting an uprising against the German authorities. The question will also be posed what type of Bible interpretation Captain Witbooi employed to come to such an understanding of the exodus theme in his diaries within the nineteenth century theological context of providentialism. The article forms part of a research project on "The negotiation of identity and narratives concerning origin and migration in Africa."*

**Key Words:** Exodus, Hendrik Witbooi, Identity, Postcolonial Reading

#### **Introduction**

This article forms part of a larger research project on how African narratives concerning origin and migration influenced the interpretation of the Bible, the Book of Exodus in particular, and vice versa. Although it is not denied that Exodus remains the classic text for liberation at different levels, an argument will be developed that the ongoing process of the negotiation of identity is closely related to aspects related to liberation and that several African narratives focused on origin and migration provide a meaningful sounding board for the theological appropriation of the Book of Exodus in many African contexts. It will also be considered whether the theological presupposition of divine providence played a significant part in Hendrik Witbooi's interpretation of the Bible and his synthesis of religion and politics.

The main research questions of this article are whether it is appropriate to refer to Hendrik Witbooi's ongoing urge to trek to the north as a type of Nama 'exodus' and whether it was related to his interpretation of the Exodus; as well as his adamant maintenance of an own identity defying the onslaught of German colonialism? To answer these questions the following aspects will first have to be addressed:

- Since Hendrik Witbooi is not all that well known outside of Namibia a short biography will be provided as the backdrop for the subsequent discussion.
- This study of the religious convictions and references to the Exodus by Hendrik Witbooi must acknowledge the valuable existing research on this enigmatic figure in the history of Southern Africa.

- Due to the pervasive influence of German colonial presence and policy during the last two decades of Hendrik Witbooi's life some suggestions are made towards a post-colonial reading of the Witbooi diaries and papers. The quotations from the Witbooi diaries are made in English with the Afrikaans/Cape Dutch original mentioned in footnotes.<sup>1</sup>

### A Short Biography of Hendrik Witbooi

The following brief biography provides some background against which this postcolonial reading takes place:

Hendrik Witbooi was born *circa* 1830, south of the Gariep (Orange) river, at Pella in what is today known as the Northern Cape Province of the Republic of South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Although 1830 is the date of birth indicated by his gravestone several other dates between 1825 and 1840 have been suggested by authors over decades of research and reflection on Witbooi (Zondagh 1991:67; Dederling 2009:3539).

The Witbooi group settled in what later became known as South West Africa or Namibia in 1863 and had contact with several missionaries from different missionary societies (Dederling 1993:57).<sup>3</sup> During their migration from Pella across the Gariep (Orange) River the Witboois seemed to have associated themselves closely with Israel's exodus in the Old Testament. It is against this background that one can interpret their choice of the biblical place name Gibeon as an indication that they were still on their way to a more final destination, somewhere towards the north (Joshua 10:7-13).<sup>4</sup>

It is possible that Hendrik Witbooi was first exposed to Christianity by Paul Visser, a Griqua who married one of the Witboois and who called the faithful to church service by blowing on a kudu horn – similar to the ram's horn or *shofar* of biblical times (Zondagh 1991:67). Witbooi, however, was never impressed by Visser and received a more formal 'Christian education' from Rhenish missionary Johannes Olpp from 1868-'78. This formal Christian education initially formed part of his baptism classes and later also of his training as an elder of the church at Gibeon.

The northern migration of the Nama (literally 'Red Nation') brought them into contact with the cattle raising Herero and for more than a decade a 'grim sort of pastoral war' ensued between the Herero and the Nama (Pakenham 1991:605). This 'pastoral war' comprised several skirmishes and pitched battles and coincided with the Nama ideal of settling in a land of plenty to the north of the area occupied by the Herero.

In 1880, after an almost lethal skirmish with the Herero, Witbooi escaped and on his way back to Gibeon heard a voice calling out to him – a seminal event that convinced Hendrik Witbooi that he had a divine calling to lead his people further north.<sup>5</sup> During 1884

<sup>1</sup> The language used by Hendrik Witbooi in his diaries and papers was an interesting combination of Dutch and early Afrikaans, sometimes referred to as Cape Dutch.

<sup>2</sup> Hendrik Witbooi was also known by his Nama names Khaob !Nanseb/Gabemag which means "The captain who disappears in the grass" – probably due to his ability to operate as a guerrilla fighter against the Herero and the Germans.

<sup>3</sup> The Nama Witboois (literally 'white boys') were called as such due to the white cloth or scarves they wore draped around their hats – especially when they went on a military excursion – to distinguish them from the other ten Nama speaking groups.

<sup>4</sup> According to Joshua 10:7:12 the Lord commanded: 'Sun, stand still in Gibeon...' Since the lack of movement by the sun was only temporary, the name Gibeon was used to indicate that the Witboois came to a temporary standstill and would continue their migration to a land of plenty at a later stage.

<sup>5</sup> "1. Het is volbring. 2. De weg is opgedaan. 3. Ik geef u een zware opdraag." Letter 20 of *Dagboek van Hendrik Witbooi*, 58.

Witbooi and 200 of his compatriots embarked on the first of three attempts to journey to a fertile land with few but friendly people, to the north of the territory occupied by the Herero. On 24 June 1884 a battle took place with the Hereros at Onguheva and a peace treaty was negotiated allowing Witbooi to return to Gibeon (even with his rifle and horse!). Towards the middle of 1885 Witbooi again attempted to reach his promised land – but in October of 1885 he was ambushed at Osana by the Herero Captain Maherero and two of his sons were killed. After another (third) futile attack on the Hereros, Captain Witbooi decided to embark on a 'small war' by resorting to guerilla tactics. This gave rise to a saying amongst the Hereros: 'Where is the *'short one'*?'<sup>6</sup>

A dispute about the leadership of the Witboois in 1888 caused Hendrik Witbooi to leave Gibeon and resettle in a mountain stronghold at Hoornkrantz, to the west of Reheboth. This was a well-organized community with its own church and central administration.

The German military commander, Captain Curt von Francois, tried for several years to convince Witbooi to accept an offer of protection from Kaiser Wilhelm – a so-called '*Schutzvertrag*' ('protection treaty'). Hendrik Witbooi did not agree to forfeit his freedom by signing the proposed treaty and showed a clear and remarkable understanding of international politics and colonial rhetoric. Von Francois eventually lost his patience and unexpectedly attacked Hoornkrantz on 12 April 1893-88 Witboois were killed, 78 of them women and children.<sup>7</sup>

The new German commander, Major Theodor Leutwein, convinced Witbooi to sign a '*Schutzvertrag*' ('protection treaty') on 15 September 1894, and a cordial friendship developed between Leutwein and Witbooi. Witbooi returned to Gibeon and erected a house at nearby Rietmond – for about ten years peace was maintained with the German authorities. Not only was peace maintained, but Witbooi collaborated with the German military by supplying troops for numerous campaigns against local warlords.

In 1904 Witbooi unexpectedly started an uprising – not only against the Germans, but also against local white farmers. In a letter dated 14 November 1904 to the former governor of South West Africa, Theodor Leutwein, Witbooi denied that he broke the 'protection treaty' by claiming that it was the will of God (Witbooi Papers 1995:193): "For I was attending on Him, and calling to Him to dry our tears in His own time. God from Heaven has now broken the Treaty."<sup>8</sup>

He was joined by several Nama/Oorlam chiefs and fought for more than a year, till he was wounded at Vaalgras/Tses and died on 29 October 1905, and buried in an unmarked grave. According to the son of Captain Witbooi, Isaak Witbooi, his dying words were: "It is over. I am done for. Now my children have peace"<sup>9</sup> (Witbooi Papers 1995:221).

### **Trends in Existing Research on Hendrik Witbooi**

Hendrik Witbooi has been interpreted in remarkably divergent ways due to the different perspectives of the historiographers and the complexity of the person involved who was obliged to face up to the challenges generated by German colonialism and the aspirations of

<sup>6</sup> The Herero name for Hendrik Witbooi was 'Korota' which was derived from the Cape Dutch 'kort ene' or 'short one' (Witbooi Papers 1995:vi).

<sup>7</sup> According to a statement made by Klein Hendrik Witbooi (son of Captian Hendrik Witbooi) and Keister Keister, the Deputy Captain of the Witboois (Witbooi Papers 1995:208).

<sup>8</sup> I did not have access to the Cape Dutch original text.

<sup>9</sup> No access to Cape Dutch original text. According to Zondagh (1991:147) Witbooi's last words were: "Dit is nou genoeg. Met my is dit verby. Nou sal die kinders kan rus."

the Nama ('Red Nation') people. Dederling (1993:74) is sensitive to this complexity when he comments: "Hendrik's personality was too multifaceted, the patterns of his leadership too intricate and the history of the Witbooi Oorlams too complex to be reduced to mono-clausal explanations."

For some colonial historiographers he was a calculating, if not cunning, negotiator (Vedder 1938/1966). Brigitte Lau (1995b:1-16) wrote a devastating critique on 'Vedder and Namibian Historiography', with the title 'Thank God the Germans came'. She argued that a highly partisan reconstruction was made of Namibian history prior to the arrival of the German missionaries and colonial administrators. The social unrest and ongoing fighting between different groups and factions – which Vedder (1938/1966:289) summarized as '...evil, murder and horror...' – created a situation that had to be rectified by German missionaries and colonial administrators.

Postcolonial historiographers have considered Witbooi to be a pioneering Africanist and a champion of independence from colonial hegemony due to his often quoted statement about common resistance to colonialism: "This part of Africa is the realm of us Red chiefs... Come, brothers, let us together oppose this danger which threatens to invade our Africa, for we are one in colour and custom, and this Africa is ours" (Witbooi Papers 1995:86). Witbooi thus became an icon of the struggle against colonialism and a symbol of the resistance against imperial hegemony (Hillebrecht 2004). Hendrik Witbooi is discussed by Dederling in the *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest* (2009:3539-3540) due to the recognition he received in Namibia as one of "the most important figures in the anti-colonial struggle".

Several researchers have focused on the role that religion played in the decision making of Hendrik Witbooi. Tilman Dederling (1984; 1993:54;) argued that Hendrik Witbooi was the leader of a religiously inspired political movement and that he considered himself "as a Christian prophet who believed that his political actions were guided by God." Dederling (1997:169-179) also positions his understanding of Witbooi within the broader context of the ambiguous relationship between English and German missionaries and the Khoekhoe and Nama groups in South West Africa/Namibia during the nineteenth century. It is interesting that a correlation can be found between the religious and political hierarchy of the Nama groups – Hendrik Witbooi was both an elder within the church and a captain of his people.<sup>10</sup> Witbooi is described as a person who "experienced religious visions as a boy herding livestock" and who received a divine calling on 23 August 1880 and thus Witbooi established a religious foundation for his future political and military actions (Dederling 1993:57-58). This historical rendition of Hendrik Witbooi has a sociological foundation and depicts him "as the leader of a prophetic movement" that "emphasizes the importance of religion as an ideological arena in the struggle for power" (Dederling 1993:73). Although the religious enthusiasm of Witbooi was denigrated as "the lunacy of an old, 'semi-civilized' African", more recent historiographers have appreciated his uncompromising commitment "as a staunch anticolonial resistance fighter" (Dederling 1993:74).

In 2000 two biographies of Hendrik Witbooi were published that focused on the role of religion in his life. Gustav Menzel (2000) and Günther Reeh (2000) described the link between resistance and piety ('Widerstand und Gottesfurcht'), as well as the tension

<sup>10</sup> It will be a gross oversimplification to characterize the interaction between missionaries and the Nama as one of assimilation and imitation. There seems to be a creative tension between imitation and resistance in Witbooi's reaction to missionaries that can be described in terms of hybridity and mimicry. The stability of Witbooi as captain was enhanced and not eroded by his prominent position in the Christian community.

between faith and doubt in Witbooi's quest for freedom. Reeh's biography was initially written as an introduction to Menzel's collection of Witbooi sources written by Rhenish missionaries who had contact with him during the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Both biographies interpret Witbooi from a (Rhenish/German) missionary perspective and this inevitably leads to some bias. To their credit they accept that Witbooi was a complex person with many contradictions without interrogating their own presuppositions that enabled them to identify these 'contradictions'. There is a lack of critical distance in the way in which the relevant archival resources of the Rhenish Missionary Society (currently the United Evangelical Mission) are used and interpreted. It is almost as if Hendrik Witbooi's personality is exclusively interpreted from a missionary perspective and therefore any divergence from the theology and spirituality inculcated by the missionaries is viewed in a negative light. These biographies seem to share a reconstruction of Witbooi's life that incorporate both an initial favourable description of him as a devout convert to Christianity that led an exemplary life of hard work and adherence to the missionary spirituality; as well as a highly critical response to Witbooi's eventual claims about his divine calling that brought about violence against the Herero and German colonial forces. Although it is accepted that Hendrik Witbooi remained a committed Christian up to his death, the complexity of his character cannot be appreciated or explained from primarily a missionary perspective – without denying the importance of the extensive missionary archival resources for future Witbooi research.

### **A Postcolonial Reading of the Witbooi Diaries**

During the past decade Biblical scholars who have been interested in postcolonial theory focused on how colonial empires interpreted the Hebrew Bible; how indigenous populations reacted to these colonial interpretations, as well as the role of colonial empires in the composition of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (Crowell 2009:217). This article is most interested in the second option, although the others must also be kept in mind.

A postcolonial approach to this study requires some attention to German colonialism – not only as a phenomenon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but also as a lingering influence that impacted on events in South West Africa/Namibia long after German colonial rule came to an end in 1915. The reference to the Witbooi 'diaries' does not presuppose reading these documents as a conventional diary because they more resemble a collection of letters and documents than a personal diary.

To answer why Germany became involved with Namibia in 1884, one has to look briefly at the relationship between colonialism and imperialism as the underlying motivation for the 'scramble for Africa' in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This 'scramble for Africa' took place between 1880 and 1910 with the result that about 16 million square kilometers and more than a one hundred million people became part of European colonial empires (Belgium, Britain, France, Germany and Italy) by means of conquest and negotiation (Stanley 1983:71-94; Pakenham 1991).

A postcolonial reading of the events leading up to the German involvement in Namibia indicates a distinct contrast between the official rhetoric and what eventually happened.

On the one hand, the Berlin-Congo Conference pledged in 38 clauses to secure access to the interior of Africa for all nations, as well as 'careful solicitude' for the moral and material advancement of the aboriginal nations of Africa. In the concluding speech of the

<sup>11</sup> It might be that after Menzel's death it was decided to publish the research by Menzel and Reeh separately.

Berlin Conference on 26 February 1985, Bismarck associated himself with the ideals of Livingstone: Christianity, civilization and commerce (Pakenham 1991:254).<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, however, what was not mentioned by Livingstone nor Bismarck was the fourth ‘c’ (‘conquest’) that became synonymous with the ‘scramble for Africa’. Dr Paul Rohrbach (an important official in the German Colonial Office) commented at the end of the nineteenth century (New African May 2002:40): “The decision to colonise in South West Africa could after all mean nothing else but this: namely that the native tribes would have to give up their land on which they have previously grazed their livestock in order that the white man might have the land for the grazing of his stock.”<sup>13</sup> In the case of Namibia initial colonial involvement was not primarily due to economic reasons (South West Africa never produced a profit as a German colony) but was triggered by the imperialistic aspirations of the German *Reichskanzler*, Bismarck, as Baumgart puts it: ‘*als Mittel Bismarckscher Staatskunst und Herrschaftstechnik...*’ (Bühler 1994:12).

Against this background, we can now turn to Hendrik Witbooi in more detail. In an article by Werner Hillebrecht (2004:144-153) Hendrik Witbooi is described as an icon and inspiration for anti-colonial resistance in general and for Namibia as an independent country in particular. Hillebrecht (2004:144) argues that the nineteenth century Oorlam migrations from South Africa to the north of the Orange/Gariep can be interpreted as “*ein Mittel, ihre Unabhängigkeit und ihre Lebensgrundlagen zu wahren beziehungsweise neu zu etablieren.*” One explanation for the precolonial Witbooi migration and the subsequent conflict with the Herero is that it can be explained in terms of the conflicting interests of neighbouring pastoralists (Hereros and Namas) trying to survive in an arid country with limited resources (Pakenham 1991:605). The religious motivation (divine calling) articulated several decades after the initial migration should not be taken at face value because Hendrik Witbooi was a highly intelligent negotiator who seemed to know when religious rhetoric would result in some strategic advantage (Dedering 1996:337-341).

Postcolonial criticism is more interested in the relationship between Hendrik Witbooi and the German colonial authorities and in this regard it is of particular importance to explain Witbooi’s staunch resistance to become party to any ‘*Schutzvertrag*’ with the colonial authorities. His well-reasoned decline of these unsolicited offers of German protection is a good example of his remarkable insight in international politics, almost unique amongst his fellow Oorlam/Nama leaders (Hillebrecht 2004:146).

The sudden attack by Von Francois on the Witbooi stronghold at Horingkrantz on 12 April 1893 left Witbooi with some 88 dead and no option but to sign a ‘*Schutzvertrag*’ with the German authorities, now under the persuasive leadership of *Landeshauptmann* Theodor Leutwein. These traumatic events lead to 10 years of relative peace and collaboration between Witbooi and the German colonial authorities (Hillebrecht 2004:147-148).

One can speculate as to what factors triggered the eventual uprising in 1904. In an evocative letter to Leutwein dated 3 November 1904, Witbooi tried to argue that God was responsible for the breaking of the ten year truce that existed with the colonial authorities – a possible example of his rhetorical use of religion.<sup>14</sup> Other contributing factors for breaking the treaty with the Germans after ten years, were the possibility that the ruthless

<sup>12</sup> The slogan of ‘commerce and Christianity’ has often been associated with David Livingstone, but was in fact representative of much of colonial rhetoric in the second half of the nineteenth century (Stanley 1983:72).

<sup>13</sup> Kössler (2010:31) argues that after the Herero-German wars between 1904 and 1908 in “socio-economic terms, the centre and south experienced the imposition of a settler economy and agriculture, on the basis of wholesale dispossession of most Africans” due to their military defeat.

<sup>14</sup> Subsequently discussed as part of the section on a possible Nama ‘Exodus’.

military campaign (genocide?) by General Von Trotha against the Hereros in 1904 could be repeated against the Namas, as well as the influence of the prophet Hendrik Bekeer/Shepherd Stuurman that stoked the embers of resistance and an anti-white sentiment amongst the Witboois (Dederling 1999:1-19; Kössler 2011:235-250).<sup>15</sup>

Can postcolonial theory help the latter day reader to make some sense of the complex and even contradictory figure Hendrik Witbooi obviously was? Let us consider a few basic concepts used in postcolonial theory:

'Postcolonial theory' is often a generic term that entails many and even diverging concerns and practices. According to Musa Dube (1999:299) one of its "defining characteristics is that it emphasizes the pervasiveness of imperialism and relates imperial expansion, impact and response..." It is the contention of this contribution that Hendrik Witbooi's often confusing behaviour can be interpreted in terms of postcolonial concepts such as hybridity and mimicry against the background of assimilation and resistance.

- *'Hybridity'*: Homi Bhabha (1994) analyzed the relations between colonizer and the colonized. From this analysis emerged different trends in interpretation: on the one hand, it emphasizes the unconscious process of hybrid identities or creolization (of which Afrikaners and the Cape Dutch speaking Namas are good examples), but on the other hand, it also refers to the conscious and politically motivated concern with resistance and disruption of homogeneity as defined by those in authority (Post-Colonial Studies 2000:118-121). In this regard one can think of the eventual pronouncement of the Witboois – 'in the beginning we needed the Bible, but now we only listen to Hendrik.'
- *'Mimicry'*: As Bhabha (1994) has shown the copying of the colonizing culture by the colonized contains both mockery and menace. There seems to be a pervasive, inherent threat in mimicry due to its covert resistance by developing an identity both similar and dissimilar to the colonizer.<sup>16</sup>

Steinmetz (2007) made ample use of the concepts of 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' in his study of the German colonial state. He explained the paradox that Europeans experienced when confronted by what seemed to them as the Khoikhoi's (of which the Nama was part) oscillation between 'nature' and 'culture' as a form of 'aggravating hybridity' (Steinmetz 2007:110). The combination of Witbooi's Christian conversion, initial resistance against German colonialism, followed by a temporary acceptance and eventual violent rejection of German colonial presence in South West Africa has been explained by means of mimicry. For Steinmetz (2007:121) Europeans perceived "this slippery combination of Europeanized modernity and African archaism" as "more disturbing than any simple 'paganism' or 'savagery'". This experience of hybridity and mimicry reached a climax when Hendrik Witbooi started his war against the Germans in 1904 after 10 years of peace and collaboration with the Germans, as well as claiming divine inspiration for this change of mind.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Whether Stuurman was influenced by the theology of the Ethiopian Churches in South Africa requires further research.

<sup>16</sup> In another research project one could ask why African Initiated Churches flourish whilst the mainline churches seem to struggle for survival?

<sup>17</sup> A German officer, Lt Franz von Bülow (1896:152-156), explained this hybridity and mimicry in a much more crude manner when he depicted Hendrik Witbooi as a master of the "art, widespread amongst natives, of hiding his feelings and controlling his facial muscles" while describing Witbooi's eyes as being "hard, expressionless, and restlessly slanty..."

### A Nama ‘Exodus’?

The yearning to journey to a land of plenty somewhere to the north did not find its origin with Hendrik Witbooi, since it is clear that the idea was already aspired to by his grandfather Kido (David) and father Moses Witbooi. Hendrik was no Moses, but rather the son of Moses – and David – who continued what his ancestors began!<sup>18</sup>

According to Helbig and Hillebrecht (1992:12) the eventual calling experienced by Hendrik had the effect “to resume the plans of his grandfather Kido Witbooi and to move further north – into the desired Land of Promise. In Gibeon, Kido Witbooi had only ‘made the sun to stand still’, which meant that one day the journey would continue.”

In a letter dated 3 January 1890 to Reverend Olpp, Captain Hendrik Witbooi answered the question why he was anxious to leave Gibeon by means of a description of how they arrived in Gibeon (Witbooi Papers 1995:43):

*I think you know our history already. How our/Khowese nation trekked from Pella northwards until we came to Gibeon, where we stopped, and where our old Captain, old David Witbooi, rests forever. And then you had the idea to build a church there... Our great men and old father Moses Witbooi were against it, feeling the church would stand in our way when we wanted to move on. But I was in favour, saying: This church will not hold us back. Rather, it will provide us with blessings; and when we move on, when the time is ripe, we shall travel with this power of blessing.*<sup>19</sup>

During his return to Gibeon, after being captured and released by the Hereros, Witbooi heard a voice while riding through the //Khanigukha mountain pass on 23 August 1880 (Vedder 1938/1966:456; Witbooi Papers 1995:38-39):

- The time is fulfilled [Het is volbrag].
- The way is opened [De weg is opengegaan].
- *I lay* a heavy task on you [Ik geef u een zware *opdraag*].

The first written reference to this event was found more than ten years later in a letter to Johannes Olpp, the Rhenish missionary who baptized and trained Witbooi as a church elder more than a decade ago. This event can be related to earlier childhood experiences mentioned in the ‘*Gemeinde-Chronik Gibeon*’ of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church [ELC] according to which he experienced religious visions as a young boy while herding livestock.<sup>20</sup>

This letter written to Reverend Olpp on 3 January 1890 makes it clear that he remained quiet for almost a decade about his divine calling:

<sup>18</sup> Van Rooyen (2011:58) describes this pervasive urge amongst the ancestors of Hendrik Witbooi as follows: “In die vaste geloof dat daar na die Noorde een of ander paradys lê en wag vir die moedige reisiger (‘n eie El Dorado, Atlantis, Utopië, Eden) pak die ou kaptein, Kido Witbooi, die swerftog aan, sy eie Eksodus.... Waarop Kido sy afwagting en sy hoop bou, is onbekend.”

<sup>19</sup> “Ik denk dat U Eld zal weten, van de trek van ons/Khowese volk, dat wy van Pella getrokken zyn, en dat wy Noordwaarts getrokken zyn, en wy zyn op Gibeon gekomen, en daar hebben wy eers gerust. En daar zal onze oude kapitein ou David Witbooi rusten, zoo als hy ook daar gerust heeft. En toen hebt U een gedachte gekregen, om een nieuwe kerk huis te bouwen....toen hebben onze groot mannen, en ou Vader Mozes Witbooi afgestaan, en gezeg, neen, het kan niet gebouwd worden, want deze huis zal ons verhinderen, wanneer ons willen trekken, maar ik heb gezeg, neen, wy zullen het bouwen, maar deze huis zal ons niet verhinderen, maar het zal veel meer tot zegen, en versterking dienen, wij zullen groote zegeningen als padkos ontvangen van deze huis, en wy zullen met dezen zegen trekken, wanneer de tyd vervuld zal zyn...” (Dagboek van Hendrik Witbooi 1929:65).

<sup>20</sup> No speculative psychological interpretation is warranted by the focus of this particular article.



*You are my old Pastor, and I have known you for many years in Gibeon; but this matter I concealed from you, even though I had known it even before you came to Gibeon... Even then, in that war, I knew that I would be given a mighty task... I knew that I would continue the trek which the old Captain could not complete. I would do it when the time was fulfilled, and the time has now come... I have been quiet because I was saying to myself that I must not reveal this matter of my leadership of this trek...<sup>21</sup>*

Subsequent attempts by Witbooi to trek to a place to the north of the land of the Herero, seemed to be rooted in this seminal calling experience. The way in which Witbooi articulated what he perceived to be his divine mission was deeply influenced by the rhetoric of the Old Testament prophets with whom he came into contact by means of missionary Olpp's baptismal classes (Hillebrecht 2004:145). The profound influence of the Old Testament on Witbooi's life can also be detected in the fact that several of his sons had names gleaned from the Old Testament (Solomon, Isaiah and Jeremiah).

In a letter to Captain Maharero written on 27 June 1884 the ideal to travel to the north and to settle in peace was emphasized again:

*Grant us free passage to pass through your land in order to search for a new land to settle. Some of our people have come a long way, and I want the kind of peace where even a solitary person can move and sleep where he wishes.<sup>22</sup>*

Two important implications emanated from Witbooi's experience of a divine calling (Hillebrecht 2004:146):

- The renewed resolve to lead the Witboois to a new dwelling place to the north, despite the fact that this would require a hazardous journey through the land of the Herero.
- To curtail the theft of livestock – an activity the Witboois were frequently accused of.

One way of explaining the combination of the urge to continue on an exodus to the north and the presupposition of a divine calling is the influence of the theological presupposition of divine providence. Research on the missionary movement in the nineteenth century suggests that 'providentialism' seemed to dominate evangelical thought (Stanley 1983:93). There are numerous examples of how Hendrik Witbooi related his calling to lead his people, as well as his revolt against the Germans with divine providence.

Witbooi assumed that his leadership would be determined by the will and wisdom of God. In a letter to Pastor Olpp on 3 January 1890 Witbooi wrote (Witbooi Papers 1995:38): "...I must wait in patience until God decreed that the time was ripe; and that God would, according to his wisdom, reveal the beginning and the progress of his work through a wonderful and visible sign, that he would bring to light."<sup>23</sup> Witbooi pleaded with his spiritual mentor Olpp not to argue about the faction fighting amongst the Witboois and the

<sup>21</sup> "Gij zyt myn oude Leeraar! en ik heb velle jaren met U op Gibeon gekomen is als Leeraar, in den tyd van onze bekendgemaak, maar ik heb het van U weggestoken, en ik heb het toch al lang geweten, voor dat U op Gibeon gekomen is als Leeraar, ... daar reeds in den oorlog heb ik het geweten, dat ik zulke groote opdraag zal krygen ... en dat ik deze oude trek, waarvan onze oude kapitein gerus heeft zal voortzetten, wanneer de tyd zal vervult zyn en de tyd is vervult geworden, en al dien tyd, wat ik stil gewees was, dat was ik hierom stil gewees ik heb gezeg en gedach in myn binnenste, dat ik deze zaak van myn voorgangerschap van deze trek niet zal openbaren..." (Dagboek van Hendrik Witbooi 1929:52).

<sup>22</sup> "Laat toch den poort voor ons open weezen op wij zullen voorbij trekken om een aander land te zoeken. Opdat onze menschen komen ook van ver af, zulke vrede wensch ik laat ook een enkele mensch loopen en slapen waar hij wil" (Dagboek van Hendrik Witbooi 1929:10).

<sup>23</sup> "Maar dat ik zal wachten, totdat de tyd, wat God besloten heef zal vervult zyn, en dat God naar zyne wysheid met een wonderbare, en door een zichtbare teeken de begin en het voorgaan van het heele werk zal openbaren..." (Dagboek van Hendrik Witbooi 1929:52).

skirmishes with the Hereros: "...leave the whole matter in God's hands. Let Him have His way, as is said in one of our hymns" (Church Hymnal, No. 91):

*Let Him take all decisions*

*Let him have His good way*

*He'll handle all so wisely*

*That you will stand amazed.*<sup>24</sup>

During October 1904 at the start of the Nama uprising Theodor Leutwein wrote to Hendrik Witbooi (Witbooi Papers 1995:192): "I ask you therefore to tell me even now your reasons for breaking your holy promise and turning rebel against the German Government." On 14 November 1904 Hendrik Witbooi responded to the question by Leutwein by arguing that it was God who decided to break the treaty between the Witboois and the Germans. It is striking how Witbooi used phrases from the description of the plight of the Israelites in Egypt according to the Book of Exodus to express the predicament experienced by the Witboois under German rule (Witbooi Papers 1995:193): "I will have to answer a great reckoning to God our Father in Heaven. He has heard our tears and sighs, and has delivered us. For I was attending on Him, and calling to Him to dry our tears in His own time. God from Heaven has now broken the Treaty."

According to Vedder (1938/1966:474) contact with the traveller Stephenson could have triggered Witbooi's yearning to travel to the north. The scholarly Stephenson invited Witbooi to accompany him on his journey from Cape to Cairo – Vedder speculated that this exposure rekindled his father's and grandfather's longstanding hopes to travel to the north and that Gibeon was merely 'a halting place on their journey'.

Another surprising manifestation of the 'exodus motif' amongst the Nama was the use of Christian symbolism when involved in extreme violence. Missionary reports of the events which took place during the Witbooi uprising (1904-05) stated how prayers were conducted before victims were shot and "on one occasion they ostentatiously left an open bible on the threshold of a ransacked house – the place where it lay open was Psalm 106 that described the exodus in cultic poetry" (Dederling 1999:9). This use of Psalm 106 can be considered as an example of how the context of a struggle for liberation from colonial oppression influenced the interpretation of the Bible by the Witboois.

## Conclusion

The memory of Hendrik Witbooi has come a long way: from an unmarked grave in the colonial period to the face on post-independent banknotes as an icon of the liberation struggle in Namibia! Postcolonial criticism and an investigation of Biblical interpretation combined in this study to establish well deserved credit for a previously neglected historical figure without resorting to a hagiographic rewriting of colonial wrongs and imperialist power plays. Uncompromising research must in a critical and constructive way challenge the myths of both the colonizers and the colonized.

For some missionaries the ideal of an exodus to the north that was motivated by a presumed divine calling amounted to a form of '*Schwarmgeisterei*' (letter by Hegner dated May 12, 1884). For others, Hendrik Witbooi assumed the role of a messianic prophet to enhance his influence amongst his people as a type of 'saviour' (letter by Rust dated May

<sup>24</sup> Witbooi Papers 1995:40-41. No access was possible to enable the reading of the Cape Dutch original correspondence written after October 1894.

17, 1884). A poignant tribute was formulated by Theodor Leutwein, former German governor of South West Africa/Namibia (Witbooi Papers 1995:224):

*The name of the little Captain will, however, remain engraved upon the history of South West Africa forever. His stubborn resistance against the mighty German empire at the head of a small warlike band, ragged and poor... I still see him before me... Modest yet self-possessed, loyal yet not without political cunning, never deviating from what he considered his duty or his right...*

This engagement with research related to Hendrik Witbooi has emphasized the responsibility Biblical scholars have to face up to and reckon with a common colonial past in Southern Africa. Biblical scholars also have to pay special attention to the literature produced by marginalized people – of which the Witbooi diaries and correspondence are a uniquely important example.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of a 'Nama exodus' did exist and although Hendrik Witbooi never presented himself as a 'second Moses', Gibeon was but a temporary stop on their journey to a promised land, somewhere to the north of the land of the Herero. The extent to which the 'exodus terminology' was used to legitimate aggression towards the Herero and to eventually resist the colonial presence of German imperialism is there for all to see.

The Witbooi diaries and papers are a resource that Biblical scholars can utilize to describe the hermeneutics and biblical interpretation of marginalized people who struggled to maintain their cultural identity which was challenged by imperialistic colonialism by means of strategies of hybridity and mimicry. Although the Book of Exodus remains a classic 'liberation text', its resonance with narratives concerning origin and migration in Africa opens up new ways of appreciating the relevance of these narratives for the ongoing negotiation of identity that could enrich our challenging quest to make sense of a complex present in terms of our diversified past! Theological foresight is well served by informed historical hindsight...

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<sup>25</sup> These diaries have been submitted for inclusion in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.

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