

# LAND RIGHTS, LANDLESSNESS AND POLITICAL UNREST IN THE UNITED MONARCHY OF ISRAEL: READING 1 SAMUEL 22:1-8 FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STRUGGLE FOR LAND OWNERSHIP IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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## Abstract

*The present article proposes a reading of 1 Samuel 22:1-8 from the perspective of struggle for land ownership in Southern Africa. This approach allows the article to argue that the same question of access to or exclusion from land, which is currently claiming an important share in the South African political space, was a great contributor to the conflict that opposed King Saul to his army commander David. The conflict occurred at a time when budding political centralization in the nascent monarchical regime was bringing a shift in land tenure. The two antagonists may have clashed over their high political ambitions; their respective supporters were driven, at least partly, either by the hope of acquiring land or by the bitterness over being deprived of it.*

**Key Words:** Land; Marginalization; Conflict; Comparative Approach; Power

## Introduction

The question of access to, or exclusion from, land has proven to be central to socio-political stability in a number of societies. Recently in South Africa crowds of people were seen rallying around the slogan “expropriation without compensation” championed by the Youth League arm of the ANC. This slogan resonates well among many landless South Africans who associate their current situation of poverty with the land dispossession imposed on them. Support and opposition to the ZANU PF regime in Zimbabwe have much to do with the regime’s land policy. The conflict that has been claiming lives in the Nigerian Niger Delta since 1992 started when the Ogoni people decided to rise and resist the Nigerian government that took their land and distributed it to oil companies. Such examples show that contentions over land rights have serious implications for social harmony and political stability in Africa and in many other societies.

The present essay examines the problems related to land ownership in South Africa in dialogue with similar problems reported in 1 Samuel 22:1-8, a text that describes events allegedly happening during the period of early monarchy in Israel. The article follows a comparative approach that seeks to establish a dialogue between the text in its context and the context of the reader. Before embarking on the question of the land and the conflicts it generated in Ancient Israel and in South Africa, a brief description of the comparative approach guiding the discussion is helpful.

## Comparative Approach

The comparative approach followed in the present article is an approach that makes the African context the subject of biblical interpretation and seeks to establish a dialogue between the socio-historical dimensions of the biblical text and social realities of African life.<sup>1</sup> The approach goes beyond studying the similarities and differences between African and biblical situations to interpreting the biblical text on the basis of these similarities or dissimilarities. It includes evaluation of the theological underpinnings resulting from the encounter between the text and the context of the reader. The aim is the actualisation of the theological meaning of the text in today's context, so as to forge integration between faith and life and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation.<sup>2</sup>

In the present essay, the discussion uses the South African context as the subject of interpretation, so that the biblical text is interpreted against the background of the African experience with the aim of arriving at a new understanding of the text.<sup>3</sup> The essay illustrates a mutual and dynamic interaction between a biblical text reporting a social conflict in Israel and a contemporary context of social conflict in South Africa. The dialogue here is a back-and-forth movement between text and context, as Draper has described such a kind of interaction.<sup>4</sup> In the present article, the discussion uses the South African context as the subject of interpretation, yet the biblical insights are also used to reach a better understanding of issues raised in the South African context. The movement is dialogical since text and context 'talk' to each other.

The present article illustrates one of many ways whereby the biblical text is interpreted against the background of African life experience. The aim is to arrive at a new understanding of the biblical text informed by the African situation.<sup>5</sup> The basis for this approach is the realisation that any interpretation of a biblical text or theme is done from the socio-cultural perspective of the interpreter. Approaching a theme or text from an African perspective is therefore expected to offer some fresh insights into its meaning.<sup>6</sup>

The analytical categories selected from both contexts for interaction reveal the reader's deliberate choice to read the text and its context from the perspective of the victims of marginalisation resulting from exclusion from land ownership. Thus, the reader's ideo-theological orientation is influenced by his/her social location.<sup>7</sup> The issue of land rights and landlessness is first described in relation to the South African context before it is examined in relation to early Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Ukpong, JS. "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Modern Africa," *Missionalia* 27/3, November 1999: 315.

<sup>2</sup> Ukpong, JS. "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Modern Africa," 315.

<sup>3</sup> Ukpong, JS. "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Modern Africa," 320.

<sup>4</sup> Draper, JA. "For the Kingdom Is Inside You and It Is Outside You: Contextual Exegesis in South Africa" in *Texts and Interpretation: New Approaches in the Criticism of the New Testament*, (ed.) Patrick J Hartin and Jacobus H Petzer; Leiden: Brill, 1991:257.

<sup>5</sup> Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 319.

<sup>6</sup> Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 319.

<sup>7</sup> West, Gerald. "Interpreting 'the Exile' in African Biblical Scholarship: An Ideo-theological Dilemma in Post-colonial South Africa" in Becking, B and Human, D. *Exile and suffering*. Leiden: Brill. 2009:256.

## **The Question of Land in South Africa**

Last year in June, South Africa marked the centenary of the Native Land Act that, in 1913, deprived the native black population of the ownership of their land. Under the ignominious Act No. 27 of 1913, and more than 17 000 subsequent pieces of legislation, millions of black South Africans were dispossessed of their ancestral land and forcibly relocated to townships and ‘Bantustan’ homelands – an estimated 3,5m people in 1960-80 alone.<sup>8</sup> The land thus confiscated from black autochthonous became the exclusive property of white settlers who turned it into commercial farms.

Throughout the dark period of Apartheid black South Africans were landless since almost the totality of the fertile land belonged to white farmers. The black indigenous people found themselves confined into reserves which made up just 7% of the country (later increased to 13%).<sup>9</sup> By the early 1990s, a few years before the end of Apartheid, some 60 000 white commercial farmers owned about 102 million hectares of arable land, this being more than 85% of land classified as agricultural<sup>10</sup> while about 1,2 million black subsistence farmers shared 17 million hectares. This dispossession of land produced a pool of migrant workers for the mining industry and other labour-hungry industries.

Since the advent of the unpopular Land Act, the question of land has been a crucial political issue in South Africa. It was at least partly in reaction to the threat of the 1913 Land Act that the African National Congress (ANC) was founded in 1912. Land reform featured prominently in the negotiations that brought an end to apartheid.

Subsequently to the victory of the ANC and the recovery of the country’s freedom, the ANC-led government initiated a programme of reform that intended to redress historical injustices and envisaged a more equitable distribution of agricultural land. To this effect, a new legislation, the Restitution of Land Rights, was adopted in 1994 with the intention of compensating those people who had lost their land as a result of the 1913 Act. The ANC pledged to redistribute 30% of white-owned agricultural land to black farmers by 1999, and to effect the restitution of property lost as a result of racist legislation. This was to be achieved mainly following the principle known as ‘willing seller, willing buyer’ (WSWB).

Despite its pledged determination to restore historical injustices especially with respect to land rights, the government has been criticized for the slow progress in land redistribution. By May 2012 ownership of 7,95m hectares of land had been transferred under the programme – about one third of the original target of 24,6m hectares.<sup>11</sup> Among the factors responsible for slow progress in land reform in South Africa, the Africa Research Institute lists the following:

- In the absence of compulsion, most landowners have been reluctant to sell their land on the basis of ‘willing seller willing buyer’ principle;
- Collusion between sellers, land valuers and government officials – and instances of corruption – have inflated market prices making purchases prohibitively expensive;

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<sup>8</sup> Africa Research Institute. *Waiting for the green revolution: Land reform in South Africa*. [www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30](http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30).

<sup>9</sup> Clarke, V. *Land reform in South Africa: Controversial comments by ANC members spark debate on land redistribution*. [Thinkafricapress.com/SouthAfrica/land-reform-South-Africa](http://Thinkafricapress.com/SouthAfrica/land-reform-South-Africa). August 28:3013.

<sup>10</sup> Africa Research Institute. *Waiting for the green revolution: Land reform in South Africa*. [www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30](http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30).

<sup>11</sup> Africa Research Institute. *Waiting for the green revolution: Land reform in South Africa*. [www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30](http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30).

- Purchased land has been scattered and often unsuitable for beneficiaries;
- Complex legal issues hampering the progress of reform;
- Political considerations in a situation where the ruling party has to tread carefully maintaining its appeal with core voters and investors alike.<sup>12</sup>

The current government recognises that the land redistribution programme has been too slow and that the 'willing seller, willing buyer' policy is not working. This policy has now been replaced by expropriation with 'just and equitable' compensation, as sanctioned by the South African Constitution. Alterations to land reform were proposed in a Green Paper which is yet to be approved by cabinet. With the new expropriation bill, the government hopes that the introduction of land ceilings and the creation of a Valuer General will speed up land transfers and prevent inflation of prices. However, sceptics predict more red tape, lengthy legal challenges from landowners – and alienation of commercial farmers.<sup>13</sup>

### Politics, Populism and Opportunism

As much as the government admits that land reform has been too slow, this does not mean that it admits to doing nothing or to failing in its responsibility. In the passionate rhetoric about land reform, the government likes to emphasize its achievement such as the adoption of a number of legislations designed to improve rights of tenure for rural South Africans or to strengthen the rights of farm workers and other residing on farm lands. More importantly, the government claims credit for the redistribution of thousands of hectares from white ownership to black farmers and entrepreneurs. By 2013, 4,12m hectares had been redistributed from white ownership to 230886 black farmers and entrepreneurs at a cost of R12,9 billion.<sup>14</sup>

However, the number of hectares redistributed seems not to be the main criteria judging the success and the failure of land reform. The crucial purpose of land reform was expected to be the redress of historical injustices, redistribution of wealth and transformation of rural livelihood. All these need more ingredients to succeed than shuffled hectares.<sup>15</sup> As the Africa Research Institute observes:

Against the backdrop of subdued economic growth and widespread industrial unrest in 2012, a wholesale restructuring of the agricultural economy is required. This could be reasonably expected to take more than a generation to achieve. The transfer of 7,95m hectares is itself, arguably, not an insignificant feat. But more money, greater political will and greater skilful implementation is required to counter allegations that land and agrarian reform are merely agenda items.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Africa Research Institute. *Waiting for the green revolution: Land reform in South Africa*. [www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30](http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30).

<sup>13</sup> Africa Research Institute. *Waiting for the green revolution: Land reform in South Africa*. [www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30](http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30).

<sup>14</sup> Africa Research Institute. *Waiting for the green revolution: Land reform in South Africa*. [www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30](http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30). (The 4,12 m hectares distributed to black farmers in 2013 are, apparently, part of the 7,95m hectares transferred from white farmers to the custody of the state in 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Africa Research Institute. *Waiting for the green revolution: Land reform in South Africa*. [www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30](http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30).

<sup>16</sup> Africa Research Institute. *Waiting for the green revolution: Land reform in South Africa*. [www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30](http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30)

If the South African government can be faulted for failing to deliver a timely response to the need of the people, it is not necessarily that it does not understand what restructuring agricultural economy will require. The problem is that the realization of this reform remains a project so that the people are to live with promises. The yet to be approved Green Paper promises to achieve the deracialisation of rural economy, to create growth, equitable and democratic land redistribution and production discipline for sustainable food security.<sup>17</sup> The original 1999 deadline for the redistribution of 30% of agriculture land to black South Africans initially postponed to 2014 is again postponed to 2025. The ruling party speaks about the target of redistributing 25 million hectares of farmland by 2014.<sup>18</sup> The 2011 National Development Plan targets the creation of almost one million agriculture-related jobs by 2030.<sup>19</sup>

The ruling party may persist in emphasizing what it has achieved and what it is promising to achieve, but there are analysts who see failure and lack of political will as the only explanation for the delayed implementation of land reform. It is observed that the ruling party enjoys the support of a substantive parliamentary majority giving them a mandate for bolder action. The timidity with which successive ANC administrations have addressed rural development is understood to result from politico-economic considerations. It is alleged, for example, that the contribution of agriculture to the GDP is small. Concerns about rural voters in a country with urbanisation level 62% are of secondary political importance. Moreover, in the opinion of the Africa Research Institute:

Competing policies priorities have taken precedence over land reform – and agriculture – since 1994. The achievements of the ANC government are many and significant. The economy remains the largest in Africa. Social grants are received by more than 15m people and will rise to R120 billion (US\$13 billion) annually by 2015. Four million new houses have been constructed. A massive infrastructure programme is underway. By contrast, the allocation of 2% of the national budget to agriculture, rural development and land reform for 2013-14 is a paltry sum.<sup>20</sup>

The perceived delay in implementing the much desired land reforms exposes the ruling party and its government to criticism from the challengers. During a budget debate in the South African Parliament a few months ago, a Member of Parliament from an opposition party warned the government that ‘whipping up emotions’ about land reform threatens to create a ‘Zimbabwe situation’.<sup>21</sup> This is a situation where neither the slow, expensive and poorly planned process of ‘willing seller willing buyer’ nor the compulsory acquisition with compensation, was able to redress imbalances in landholding in Zimbabwe. This failure triggered the incursion into white-owned farms amidst a series of protests by war veterans

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<sup>17</sup> Clarke, V Land reform in South Africa: Controversial comments by ANC members spark debate on land redistribution. [Thinkafricapress.com/SouthAfrica/land-reform-South-Africa](http://Thinkafricapress.com/SouthAfrica/land-reform-South-Africa). August 28, 3013.

<sup>18</sup> Clarke, V Land reform in South Africa: Controversial comments by ANC members spark debate on land redistribution. [Thinkafricapress.com/SouthAfrica/land-reform-South-Africa](http://Thinkafricapress.com/SouthAfrica/land-reform-South-Africa). August 28, 3013.

<sup>19</sup> Africa Research Institute. *Waiting for the green revolution: Land reform in South Africa*. [www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30](http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30).

<sup>20</sup> Africa Research Institute. *Waiting for the green revolution: Land reform in South Africa*. [www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30](http://www.africaresearchinstitute.org.2013/08/30). This article was written towards the end of 2013, since then, apparently, Nigeria has overtaken South Africa to become the largest economy in Africa.

<sup>21</sup> Cieplak, P *South Africa: Land Reform Debates Heat up again, 100 Years after the Natives Land Act*. [Thinkafricapress.com/SouthAfrica/land-reform-South-Africa](http://Thinkafricapress.com/SouthAfrica/land-reform-South-Africa). August 28, 3013.

that resulted in the legalization of land invasion through the Fast Track Land Reform Programme launched by the ZANU-PF government in 2000.<sup>22</sup>

The lingering problem of land, unemployment and poverty in South Africa is increasingly becoming susceptible to political opportunism. Under the leadership of Julius Malema, the ANC's Youth League made expropriation of white-owned farms without compensation one of its rallying calls. The mass of people who responded to his slogan and joined his protesting rally in Johannesburg indicates that there are many people who are ready to listen to anybody promising to do what the government is not doing. After Malema was expelled from the ANC, he formed the Economic Freedom Fighters party and he maintains his slogan with respect to the land: 'expropriation without compensation.' Malema considers President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe as his hero, and advocates resolving the land question in South Africa the 'Zimbabwe way'.

One journalist pondering Malema's unfading popularity even after he parted company with the ANC had this to say:

The most obvious answer is that Mr Malema seems to be one of the few public figures now articulating the frustration felt by so many poor and marginalised communities in South Africa. He may be an opportunist, and a brazen populist. But he is filling an extraordinarily large vacuum of silence left by the country's more mainstream leaders.<sup>23</sup>

Mr Malema described the launch of his party as "the beginning of a real radical, militant and decisive political programme which will lead to real emancipation of the people of South Africa, Africa and the world." the South African Press Association (SAPA) quotes him as saying. "The oppressed and exploited people of the world should now expect real anti-imperialist actions and political programmes which will practically and programmatically undermine neo-liberalism and global capitalism." As well as redistributing land and nationalising the mines, he has pledged to provide free, quality education, healthcare and sanitation.<sup>24</sup>

Malaika Wa Azania is another analyst who is not surprised by the willingness of many people, especially the youth, to join Malema's movement. In Malaika Wa Azania's view:

By prioritising the struggle for land and economic freedom in a country where white monopoly capital has cemented its inhuman face, the EFF is able to touch the hearts of the black majority that is landless, disenfranchised and at the receiving end of structural inequalities. The ANC, once a voice for these people, has over the years assumed a posture that is dangerously excluding of its own constituency.<sup>25</sup>

The people rallying around Malema seem to be motivated by conditions that have striking similarities with those that encouraged the people to support the young David at the beginning of his rebellion against King Saul. It is reported that the people gathering around David were those who were in distress or in debt or discontented (1 Samuel 22:2). It is

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<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch/Africa. *Fast Track Land Reform in Zimbabwe*. www.hrw.org./reports/2002/03/08.fast-track-land-reform-zimbabwe. September 10, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Harding, A *South Africa: Julius rides public anger in style*. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/World-Africa19585351. 06/09/2013

<sup>24</sup> BBC News Africa. *Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters to fight poll*. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/World-Africa23978099. 06/09/2013

<sup>25</sup> Malaika wa Azania. *Why are young people buying into Malema's party?* Mail & Guardian. http://www.thoughtleader.co.za/malaikawaazania/2013/07/23. Why-is-the-youth-buying-into-malemas-party/2013/09/07.

these similarities that provide space for dialogue between the two situations, the context of early monarchy in Israel and the present context of Post-Apartheid South Africa. The present article focuses on land issues, paying attention to the effect of land management on the political stability in both contexts. The assumptions are that the same problem of land rights and landlessness that is fuelling opposition to the present South African Government was a factor that encouraged opposition and rebellion against Saul's regime in Israel.

### **Landlessness fuels Rebellion against Saul: 1Samuel 22:1-9**

The passage of 1 Samuel 22:1-8 is part of David's story reported in three narrative cycles. The first narrative, known as the story of David's rise, runs through 1 Samuel 16 to 2 Samuel 5. It relates the beginning of his career, his relation with the house of Saul and his early success that placed him at loggerheads with Saul and propelled him to the throne. This is followed by a narrative that reports the apex of David's reign (2 Samuel 6-8) which includes the arch narrative and Nathan's oracle promising to David a dynasty that will be established forever. The last part of the David's story is the succession narrative, a story of David's decline (2 Samuel 9-1 Kings 2).<sup>26</sup> The passage under discussion is located in the first cycle narrating the rise of David. This narrative introduces David and provides a background for the two other narratives that follow.

### **David's Rise**

David was still young when he became a servant of Saul. The biblical traditions about his rise to power are presented in varying versions all of which contrast David's rise with Saul's downfall. In one story, David is designated by Yahweh through Samuel to take over from the discarded Saul. Samuel goes to anoint David at his home in Bethlehem, where the young man was keeping the sheep of his father, Jesse (1 Samuel 16:1-13). David was preferred, not only to Saul, whom he was called to replace, but also to his elder brothers. This version that makes David the preferred elect of Yahweh is a continuation of the account of a prophetic rejection of Saul in 1 Samuel 15:26. In this account, David's election is contrasted with Saul's rejection.

In another story, David begins his career as a famous warrior by defeating Goliath, the Philistine giant (1Samuel 17). It is this victory and subsequent acclaim by the people (1Samuel 18:7) that make him a feared rival of King Saul. The jealous king attempts to get rid of the increasingly famous warrior who subsequently leaves the palace and runs for his life. But the mention, in 2 Samuel 21:19, of a Goliath killed not by David but by Elhanan has led some to suggest that David was attributed this mighty deed of the unknown Elhanan.<sup>27</sup> In this version of the story of David's rise, Saul has failed in his leadership responsibilities. He cannot discharge the very functions for which he was appointed in the first place, namely, fighting Israel's battles (1Samuel 8:20). The empowered David steps into the leadership vacuum left by the disheartened Saul.

In a third version, David is invited to Saul's palace, where he becomes an armour-bearer, while his music helps to bring relief to his depressed master (1 Samuel 16:14-23). In this version, the Spirit-filled David is contrasted with the dispirited Saul.

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<sup>26</sup> Römer, T. *The So-called Deuteronomistic History: a sociological, historical and literary introduction*. London: T&T Clark, 2005:9.

<sup>27</sup> Soggin, JA. "The Davidic-Solomonic Kingdom" in Hayes, HJ and Maxwell Miller. *Israel and Judean History*, p. 334.

In Soggin's view, there are some materials relevant for the historian to be gathered from the different narratives about David's rise to power. These include the suggestions:

- that David was a Judahite who entered the service of the king while still quite young;
- that he became, through gallantry and valour, but also through great cunning, a military leader under Saul;
- that he soon fell from grace, either because of the pathological jealousy of the king or else because Saul realized David's budding ambitions for the throne;
- that he was compelled to flee from the royal court; that he enlisted a small but efficient personal army.<sup>28</sup>

In the passage under examination, the reader is introduced to David who is on the run. The same young man who once impressed the king and his entourage, is now alone out in the cold. David who once was popular when he was known as the brave servant of the king, always ready to 'kill for Saul' is now hiding in a cave (1 Samuel 22:1). But David has been too popular to be simply forgotten and abandoned as his former master would have wished. David can count not only on members of his family who have no other choice but to support him and share his fate (1 Samuel 22:1), but also he can still count on his past exploits which the people who knew about him are not quick to forget.

### David attracts the Landless 'Have-nots'

David's banishment by the master he once served well does not totally tarnish his credentials. There are people who believe that he can still be useful. It is reported that all those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him (1 Samuel 22:2). The outlaw David becomes a rallying point, a magnet attracting all kinds of marginal people.

The people who rallied around David have been described as "all kinds of discontented and reckless elements who had some reasons for escaping from the situation in their homeland".<sup>29</sup> In line with this understanding, the members of this group may have identified themselves with David who was himself a marginal person. Birch observes that David, as an eighth son of a rather undistinguished family, may be seen as the hero and champion of socially and economically marginal groups over against wealthy landholders. He notes that Saul continues to avoid David's name and call him a 'son of Jesse' as if these were derogatory, which may indicate a contempt for David's humble birth and lack of social position.<sup>30</sup> He could therefore be characterized as a 'Hebrew' as one who has no social standing or social power.<sup>31</sup> The marginalised people could then easily identify with him.

It appears, however, that what these people had in common was their being economically disadvantaged. They are described as belonging to three categories. There were *qwcm vya-ik* 'everyone who was in distress'; then *כל-איש אשר-לו נשא* 'everyone who was in debt', and *כל-איש מר-נפש* 'everyone who was discontented.' This description is different for

<sup>28</sup> Soggin, JA. "The Davidic-Solomonic Kingdom", 335.

<sup>29</sup> Hertzberg, HW. *I&II Samuel*. London: SCM Press, 1980:184.

<sup>30</sup> Birch, CB. *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 237.

<sup>31</sup> Brueggemann, W. *First and Second Samuel: Interpretation*. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990:157.

example from the group of men that had once rallied around Jephthah, the Gileadite warrior, when he was rejected by his brothers (Judges 11:1-3) and the group hired by Abimelech son of Jerub-Baal in his bid rule over Shechem (Judges 9:1-4). In both cases the mercenaries are described as אנשי־מַרְקָיִם translated as worthless men (New King James) or reckless adventurers (NIV). The men who join David are not described as reckless adventurers. Their description is in terms, not of what they are and do to the society, but of what the society has been and done to them. They are not criminals but victims of social injustices. They have one thing in common, namely being economically disadvantaged. If this group was sometimes involved in looting activities, this seems not to have been their final objective. Sometime they used the spoil to give gifts to key people (1 Samuel 30:26-31) as part of their higher plan to move away from the margin.

It can be argued that these people approached David, not necessarily because he had become one of them – all they had in common was the hardship inflicted on them by King Saul and his regime. Among the ‘discontented’ who joined David would have been, we may suppose, persons whom Saul had dispossessed of their land. Apparently the land grants that he had made to his inner circle of Benjamite supporters, and perhaps to others as well, had to be made at someone’s expense.<sup>32</sup> It seems that, as this is discussed below, with the advent of the monarchical regime as early as the time of Saul, the issue of land had begun to be associated with power and politics.

David was a key person because he had what it took to challenge the regime. David’s case may have more similarities with the case of Jeroboam who, being estranged and antagonised by his master, Solomon, was recuperated by the northern tribes in their plan to challenge the regime of David’s house that exploited and oppressed them (1 Kings 12:1-24).

The attitude of the group rallying around David can be understood in the light of the situation in South Africa where all kinds of unhappy people join the expelled ANC Youth League leaders to form the Economic Freedom Fighters Party without being so much preoccupied neither by details about the character and reputation of their leaders nor by the motives that led their leaders to break away from their masters. Their resolve to form a rebellious group indicates that they held Saul and his regime responsible for their misery. Saul may have loved to call them ‘terrorists;’ they would insist that they were ‘Economic Freedom Fighters.’

David, who so far had been a lonely fugitive sees his situation changing slightly. He now has a group of men around him who are prepared to stand by him. He needed them as they needed him. Their presence emboldens him, he is restored to his commanding position this time as a general in his own army. In order to face Saul and his men more comfortably, David ensures that his parents are safely out of Saul’s reach. He seeks and obtains asylum for them from the king of Moab (1 Samuel 22:3-4). According to the Genealogy of Ruth 4:18-22, David had family ties with Moab, the country of his great grandmother. But the fact that David goes straight to the king with his request may be more a consequence of his previous high status.<sup>33</sup> Achish, the king of Gath had recognised him as the renowned warrior (1 Sam 21:11); surely the king of Moab also knew about David’s *curriculum vitae*.

David finds favour not only from the king of Moab, but also from Gad, the prophet of God (1 Samuel 22:3-4). The sympathy that this man of God has for David is consistent with the attitude of other men of God who met David so far. Samuel anointed David preferring

<sup>32</sup> Miller, JM and Hayes JH. *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*. London: SCM Press, 1986:144.

<sup>33</sup> Hertzberg, HW. *I & II Samuel*. London: SCM Press, 1980:184.

him to his elder brothers and to Saul (1Samuel 16:1-13), Ahimelech provided him with the assistance needed (1Samuel 21:1-6) and now Gad advises him about the strategy to remain safe from Saul's ill plans against him (1Samuel 22:5). All the three behave like secret supporters of the outlawed David. David can therefore count on a network of connections available to him and they are more than his opponent is aware of. Michal (1Samuel 19:11-17) and Jonathan (1Samuel 20:12-42) from Saul's own house, Achish the king of Gath (1Samuel 27) and the unnamed king of Moab just across the border; all these people have different motives for supporting David against Saul but the spearhead of the opposition is made of those people who, having nothing to lose and are ready to openly support David and challenge Saul's regime. This group referred to as the 'malcontent and disinherited'<sup>34</sup> can be seen as the 'have-nots' as contrasted from the group of the 'haves' surrounding King Saul.

### Saul supported by the 'Haves'

While David is on the run and hiding in caves, other strongholds and bushes, Saul is at Gibeah, his hometown and capital. He is seated under a Tamarisk tree (1Samuel 22:6), a tree which, being like a palm tree, rarely found in hill country, is probably a holy tree.<sup>35</sup> It reminds of Deborah holding court under a palm tree (Judges 4:4). As it is frequently the case, Saul has a spear, the same spear that he has already hurled at David. He sits while his servants stand around him. The description is that of a chief, seated in his position of power. Although Saul is sited at his headquarters surrounded by his servants, he is not comfortable and he cannot contain his insecurity.

Saul has been informed that David is no longer a lonely and weakened fugitive hiding in the bush.<sup>36</sup> He has heard that David has supporters even from the King's own house. He is so troubled that he doesn't know whom to trust anymore. The servants around him are Benjamites, men from his own tribes who have supported him the longest and most faithfully. Yet, even with them he does not feel secure. His speech to them (1Samuel 22:7-8) shows how disquieted and uneasy he is. He accuses his people of siding with the one he wanted isolated. He laments that nobody has reported to him about what he calls conspiracy. Surely somebody has reported the news to him, but he assumes that everybody new and all those who have not come to him with this intelligence report are culpable of conspiracy.

Saul is reported reminding his Benjamite tribesmen that he counted on their natural loyalty to him in his fight against the 'son of Jesse', who was becoming a serious threat to his dynasty (1 Samuel 22:6-8). He expresses this in a rhetorical question: Will the son of Jesse give all of you fields and vineyards? Will he make all of you commanders of hundreds? Is that why you have all conspired against me? (1Samuel 22:17). Saul's scold seems to imply that he has himself bestowed the land and ranks mentioned upon members of his home tribe as special favours. His statement may be understood to mean: It appears that you expect to gain as much from David, who is from Judah, as you have already received from me who is of your clan. The absurdity of such expectation is manifest. Yet it

<sup>34</sup> Buttrick, GA *et al* (eds.). *The Interpreter's Bible Vol II*. Nashville, Tennessee : Abingdon, 1989:1000.

<sup>35</sup> Hertzberg, HW. *I&II Samuel*, 187.

<sup>36</sup> It was noted that after David's establishment of his new support group, the narrator uses less urgent verbs of motion to describe David's actions, *hlc* and *bw'* rather than *ml and br*, subtly indicating that David's position is now more secure. Edelman, Diana Vikander. *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah: Journal for the Study of Old Testament Supplement Series*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991:171.

is only on this ground that their behaviour can be explained.<sup>37</sup> Saul's speech insinuated that his followers had fared well, having secured through Saul fields and vineyards. They are prosperous because Saul has been effective. Saul casts himself in the role of a chief who has distributed the land to his loyal followers.<sup>38</sup>

Saul intends to imply that the rebel David, contemptuously called the son of Jesse (1Samuel 22:7,8), cannot possibly offer similar benefits to his ragtag corps, who are debtors and misfits.<sup>39</sup> In Tsumura's understanding, by the rhetorical questions that Saul asked his fellow Benjamites in this episode, he tries to convey that "since the Benjamites will not have any hope of enriching themselves by feudal grants and appointments if the Judahite David should become king, they have no reason to support him."<sup>40</sup>

Saul's remarks hint at the practices cited as negative aspects of kingship described by Samuel in the so-called 'rights of the king' (1Samuel 8:11-17) before all the tribes. This text is believed, though with no certainty, to originate from early monarchy,<sup>41</sup> and contains a list of exploitative measures associated with dynastic monarchy in Israel. Indications pointing to practices similar to those described in this passage are found further in the accounts of the kings that reigned over the United Kingdom. It was such practices that set the stage for the appearance of Israel's prophets who exposed and condemned the resulting injustices. Saul is citing them as positive advantages of kingship to impress upon those loyal to him how they have benefited from their loyalty to the crown.<sup>42</sup> Saul's reported scolding of his fellow Benjamites (1 Samuel 22:7-8) may indicate that the king's servants, most of whom were his close relatives, were rewarded for their loyalty and services with land and with prominent positions.

Birch is of the opinion that it had become customary to reward service with land and promotion to military command. This practice, if attested was a by-product of the monarchy. With the advent of the monarchy, Israel may have begun a process of slowly moving away from being an egalitarian society into a more stratified one with social classes which had not existed before. This development is associated with the institution of the monarchy and described as a process of becoming 'like other nations' (1Samuel 8:20). The Israelites expressed the wish to move from a tribal society to a monarchy such as the surrounding nations. The dispossession and redistribution of land are mentioned in the so-called 'rights of the king' in 1 Samuel 8:11-17, and may be understood in this context. Saul's servants, most of whom were his close relatives, were apparently rewarded for their loyalty and services with land and with prominent positions.

Saul's remarks that echo Samuel's speech reflect the socio-economic situation surrounding Israel's transition from its tribal existence to a state. The regulations of kingship in 1 Samuel 8 are understood as economic theory of state formation,<sup>43</sup> or the birth narrative

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<sup>37</sup> Smith, HP. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*. Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1992:205.

<sup>38</sup> Cheney, LM. "Ancient Palestinian Peasant Movement and the formation of Pre-monarchic Israel." In Freedman, DN and Graf, DF (eds.). *Palestine in Transition*. Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983:39-90.

<sup>39</sup> Edelman, DV. *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah*, 173.

<sup>40</sup> Tsumura, DT. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The First Book of Samuel*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans, 2007:542.

<sup>41</sup> Dietrich, W. *The Early Monarchy in Israel: The Tenth Century BCE*, 196.

<sup>42</sup> Edelman, DV. *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah*, 173.

<sup>43</sup> Wagner-Tsukamoto, S 2013. State Formation in the Hebrew Bible: An Institutional Economic Perspective. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37:391-422,408.

of the tributary mode of production.<sup>44</sup> It appears that Israel's monarchy favoured a return to a tributary system against which Israel's tribe had revolted and that had been at the origin of the emergence of Israel's state. This tributary system is described in the following words:

The tributary form of production was pre-capitalist: it did not involve capital formation in anything like the modern sense. But it did include relationships of domination, and the structure of that power system was bipolar: a powerful central state (such as Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon) or a smaller city-state (such as Canaan or Syria) dominated a considerable stretch of land made up largely of villages engaged in agriculture and animal breeding. These villages contained up to 98 per cent of the state's population. Peasants had 'use ownership' of the land, but the state claimed entitlement to tax the village first in the form of payment in kind and secondly in the form of conscription of labour for public works or army service. So the state intruded regularly into village communities and took a good part of their labour products. Many peasants, already living on the margin, were further impoverished and driven into debt by these measures. Many were compelled to take loans at staggering interest rates offered by money-lending merchant and absentee-landlord class that grew up with state blessing and support.<sup>45</sup>

According to the 'Peasant Revolt Model', one of the theories that attempts to explain the emergence of Israel in Canaan assumes that the first Israelites were residents in small villages in the highlands of Canaan. They banded together in large families and tribes to protect themselves from the Canaanite city-states and invading empires. Earliest Israel was in rebellion against the tributary system and the political and religious system that legitimated and enforced it.<sup>46</sup> They refused allegiance to the states that taxed and conscripted their subjects, and they themselves strove not to extract tribute from one another.<sup>47</sup> Taking advantage of weaknesses in the political system and joining together in the common cause of becoming free agrarians, these assertive peasants developed their own distinctive measures of self-help, co-operative labour and mutual aid, extending assistance from one family or clan to another, making grants-in-aid that passed among the people without interest charges.<sup>48</sup> It is suggested that the exodus from Egypt served as a metaphor to describe all kinds of experiences of oppression and resistance shared by Canaan Israelites, who had to contend not only with the Canaanite city-states, but also with surrounding powers exerting imperial claim over Canaan. Every Israelite group had its own experience of a Pharaoh and an exodus. A pattern of community formation runs through diverse traditions: Israel, under tributary oppression, resists and is delivered into a new communitarian society that it strives to sustain through covenant and law.<sup>49</sup>

With the rise of the monarchy, the dominance of the tribes of Israel by state power gradually displaced the communitarian mode of production. Even though the economy continued to consist of fundamentally small-scale agriculture organized by village networks, key political decision making was vested in the Israelite monarchy, and this meant

<sup>44</sup> West, G 2011. Tracking an Ancient Near Eastern Economic System: The Tributary Mode of Production and the Temple-State. *OTE* 24/2 511-532:514.

<sup>45</sup> Gottwald, NK. From Tribal Existence to Empire: The Socio-Historical Content for the Rise of the Hebrew Prophets. In: Thomas, JMAV, (ed.). *God and Capitalism: A Prophetic Critique of Market Economy*. Madison, Wisconsin: A-R Editions, Inc. 1991:13.

<sup>46</sup> Gottwald, NK From Tribal Existence to Empire: 14.

<sup>47</sup> Gottwald, NK From Tribal Existence to Empire, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Gottwald, NK From Tribal Existence to Empire, 14

<sup>49</sup> Gottwald, NK From Tribal Existence to Empire, 15

taxing and conscripting policies, without which the state could not have thrived and taken its place among other Near Eastern States.<sup>50</sup>

The fully-fledged tributary system seems to have been reached in Israel during the time of Solomon. Solomon's large-scale building projects, the opulence of his court, the maintenance of the security of the state and the service of his external debt, necessitated extraction of tribute from the people. It was the feeling that Solomon's demands on the people had become a 'yoke' too heavy to bear that fuelled the internal revolution that resulted in the division of the Kingdom shortly after Solomon's death (1Kings 12:1-24).

Before Solomon, his father David may not have developed a full-grown tributary system, largely because he could rely extensively on the 'booty of war' and the tribute extracted from conquered people (2 Samuel 8:1-14; 10:19; 12:26-31).<sup>51</sup> It is observed, however, that David had an administrator of forced labour (2 Samuel 20:24). Moreover, the census taken by David (2 Samuel 24:1-9; 1 Chronicles 21:1-6) must certainly have had the objective of extracting tribute from the population. Most significantly, David played a direct role in establishing a city-based elite, distributing the fertile alluvial plains of Canaan, secured when he defeated the Philistines, to his military retainers. This led to the establishment of a new class of Israelite 'aristocrats and bureaucrats',<sup>52</sup> which was some form of tributary mode of production. It can therefore be concluded that, even in the time of King David, there was an emerging tributary system.

If the signs pointing to the existence of a tributary mode of production are apparent in the time of David, it is not clear how extensively such a tendency was manifest in the time of his predecessor Saul, Israel's first monarch. Apparently, although the tribes designated Saul as commander-in-chief of their armed forces, there would have been no grant of further powers and no office of 'king' to occupy once the military crisis had passed.<sup>53</sup> If the constant external threat may have necessitated the prolongation of Saul's military services, it seems that he did not achieve the stature of a king from the beginning. Questioning Saul's kingly position, Gottwald formulated the following arguments:

There was no indication of taxation or conscription beyond the outlay of men and supplies for tribal levies, which, given the seriousness of the Philistine threat, were probably readily volunteered for the most part. There is no account of Saul's keeping records, nor is there evidence of his role as head of the judicial system or as a pontiff of the religious cult. In keeping with his limited exercise of power, there was no discernible bureaucracy. In his function, Saul seems no more than a military chief.<sup>54</sup>

In Gottwald's estimation, Saul could not be called a king, since he had no detectable non-military powers beyond the capacity to reward followers with honours and possibly with modest land grants.<sup>55</sup>

The time of Saul's reign in Israel may be too early for the tributary mode of production to have taken place in tribal Israel but Saul took office when apparently tributes were exacted on people in the surrounding states. In Samuel's objection to the people's demand for a king so that they may be like any other nations (1Samuel 8:5), he made it clear that

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<sup>50</sup> Gottwald, NK. *From Tribal Existence to Empire*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> West, G. *Tracking an Ancient Near Eastern Economic System*, 516.

<sup>52</sup> West, G. *Tracking an Ancient Near Eastern Economic System*, 516.

<sup>53</sup> Gottwald, NK. *The Politics of Ancient Israel*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001:173.

<sup>54</sup> Gottwald, NK. *The Politics of Ancient Israel*, 177.

<sup>55</sup> Gottwald, NK. *The Politics of Ancient Israel*, 176.

their king would be like the kings of all other nations and would treat them like the people of other states were treated by their kings. Part of his warning was that the king “will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and give them to his servants” (1 Samuel 8:14). This was the practice of the kings of ‘all other nations’ and Samuel knew that Israel’s king would not resist the temptation to take all kinds of tributes from the people as was the practice in the neighbouring states. It seems that it did not take long before Saul began to behave like the neighbouring kings. In his remark to his servants he refers to allocation of land, vineyards and positions of privileges as normal rewards that the king grants to those who serve him faithfully. Commenting on the land alluded to in Saul’s speech in 1 Samuel 22:7, Dietrich observed:

The text does not say from where he took these lands. It stands to reason that they were not his own or that of his family; these lands would not have been large enough, and the Benjamites – according to the words used – were no stewards of royal lands but rather owners of their own lands and vineyards. It seems that Saul provided them with land – or allowed them to provide themselves with land that either was without owner or that was taken from previous owners.<sup>56</sup>

The consequence of this practice of dispossession and redistribution of land was the creation of a group, the ‘haves’, those close to the king who received positions and land at the expenses of those pushed to the margin, those from whom the land had been taken or who could not acquire enough because they were not closely enough connected to the palace. The group of those people who joined David belonged to the last category. This can explain their bitterness and their resolve to oppose and fight Saul’s regime.

Similar to the Economic Freedom Fighters of South Africa, this group was the by-product of land management. The misery of these ‘have-nots’ was the direct by-product of the process of acquisition of wealth by the ‘haves’, a process facilitated by their connection to the king. Like the situation in South Africa, where all kinds of unhappy people joined the expelled ANC Youth League leaders to form the Economic Freedom Fighters’ Party, these marginalised Israelites joined David in order to fight for economic freedom. They were drawn to David neither by sympathy for him, nor because they could identify with him. They were not so much preoccupied, neither by details about the character and reputation of their leader, nor by the motives that led him to break away from his master. Their resolve to form a rebellious group indicated that they held Saul and his regime responsible for their misery. They could no longer trust the regime for a better future. What David brought to them was HOPE, the hope of one day moving away from the margin!

## Conclusion

The present article undertook to illustrate a comparative approach to biblical text that allows for a dialogue between the text and its context and the reader and his/her context. Reading the passage of 1 Samuel 22:1-8 from the perspective of the struggle for land ownership in South Africa, has allowed for identification of socio-economic aspects of the conflict narrated in the biblical text. The article argued that behind the scramble for power between king Saul and his servant David, highlighted by the narrator of this text, issues of access to land fuelled the conflict and influenced its course. Such socio-economic aspects of the conflicts glossed over by the narrator who may not see them as key to the story

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<sup>56</sup> Dietrich, W. *The Early Monarchy in Israel: The Tenth Century BCE*, 190.

he/she wished to tell, are brought to the fore by this approach that makes the reader's context the subject of interpretation of the biblical text.

The dialogue between the biblical text and the contemporary South African context has reiterated the relation between social injustice and conflicts, precisely around the issue of land. In Ancient Israel, as in contemporary South Africa, inequitable handling of the land created marginalized people who then blamed the political regimes in their respective contexts for their misery. These marginalized social groups, having lost their trust in their respective political leaders and their regimes, became vulnerable and available to whoever they perceived as promising to offer an alternative. In the two contexts, the background and agenda of the ringleader did not matter as much as his ability to challenge the status quo. The power that destabilizes the society often derives not from the leader of the opposition to the regime in power but from the reasons that the people have to hear and thus follow him or her.

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