

WHITE MEN, BIBLES, AND LAND: INGREDIENTS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN BLACK THEOLOGY¹

Gerald West
University of Natal

Abstract

When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we (Blacks) had the land. The white man said to us 'let us pray'. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible. This familiar anecdote, told all around Africa, has been told with particular hermeneutical force in South Africa. Although the anecdote remains essentially the same, the biblical hermeneutics implicit in its tellings shifts. My purpose in this paper is to explore three interpretations of this story as a guide to the Bible and biblical interpretation in South African Black Theology. The interpretations I have chosen to represent each come from a particular phase of South African Black Theology, though they are not confined to that phase. In other words, the distinctive features of a particular biblical hermeneutics are not confined to a particular socio-historical period, though they will of necessity have found their formative impulses in a particular socio-historical period.

1. Introduction

In a recent concept paper, Tinyiko Maluleke categorizes three phases of South African Black Theology. Though Maluleke's phases follow a chronological periodization, he stresses the continuity between the phases (Maluleke 1998b:61).

The first phase starts with the formation of the Black Theology Project by the University Christian Movement in 1970, while the second starts in 1981 with the establishment of the Institute for Contextual Theology. In phase one, Black Theology, though acknowledging Blackness to be a state of mind, nevertheless took objective Blackness as its starting point in such a way that all Black people were the focus of liberation and the whole Bible (Christianity) could be used for liberation. In phase two, objective Blackness, in and of itself, is no longer sufficient. Not all Black people are the focus of Black Theology. Not all theology done by Black people is Black Theology and not all the Bible (Christianity) is liberating. Furthermore, while phase one Black Theology was closely linked to the Black Consciousness philosophy, phase two Black Theology recognized a wider ideological ferment within the Black Theology movement. Most distinctive of the second phase has been the increasing introduction of Marxist historical materialism in the hermeneutic of Black Theology (Maluleke 1998:61).

The contours of the third phase are more difficult to discern, says Maluleke, because 'we are living in and through it' (61). Nevertheless, he does offer a tentative sketch of the third phase. Repudiating allegations of Black Theology's death, Maluleke argues that the third phase of Black Theology draws deeply on resources within earlier phases of Black Theology, and follows earlier impulses into the future.

First, while the plurality of ideological positions and political strategies in the

1. This article is based on a paper presented at the EFSA and University of Stellenbosch Department of Old and New Testament International Workshop on 'Old and New Testament Studies in Africa: Learning from the Past and Planning for the Future'.

construction of Black Theology has been acknowledged since the early 1980s, the ideological and political plurality within Black Theology in the 1990s is more marked and brings with it a new 90s temptation that must be refused. Ideological and political plurality in post-apartheid (and to some extent, I would add, post-modern) South Africa must avoid both the temptation of an uncommitted play with pluralism and the temptation of a despairing paralysis (perhaps even an abandonment) of commitment. Despite the pressures of ideological and political plurality, commitment remains the first act in Black Theology, whatever the particular brand (61).²

Second, if race was the central category in the first phase of Black Theology, and if the category of class was placed alongside it in the second phase of Black Theology, then gender as a significant category has joined them in the third phase of Black Theology. But, once again, the tendency to minimize the foundational feature of Black Theology, namely, race, must be resisted. Gender, like class, in South Africa always has a racial component. Furthermore, in a context 'where race is no longer supposed to matter' (61), racism often takes on different guises and becomes 'more sophisticated' (62).

The third and final feature of phase three Black Theology has three related prongs, each of which might be considered as a separate element. Here, however, I want to stress their connectedness, and so will treat them as sub-elements of a formative feature of the third phase of South African Black Theology. The formative feature of phase three Black Theology is the identification of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) and African Independent Churches (AICs) as 'significant' (perhaps even primary?) dialogue partners (62).³

Subsumed under this general feature, the first of the three prongs has to do with culture. Whereas phase one Black theology 'ventured somewhat into cultural ... issues', phase two 'became more and more concerned with the struggle of black people against racist, political and economic oppression' (Maluleke 1998a:133). However, 'At crucial moments connections with African culture would be made - provided that culture was understood as a site of struggle rather than a fixed set of rules and behaviours' (133). Culture remains problematized in phase three, but the envisaged rapprochement with ATRs and AICs that characterizes phase three foregrounds culture in a form not found in phase two.

The second prong has to do with solidarity with the poor. In each of its phases, Black Theology 'has sought to place a high premium on *solidarity with the poor* and not with the state or its organs - however democratic and benevolent such a state might be'. While such a position 'must not be mistaken with a sheer anti-state stance Black Theology is first and foremost not about the powerful but about the powerless and the silenced'. And, and I stress this conjunction, 'serious interest' in ATRs and AICs affords Black Theology in phase three 'another chance of demonstrating solidarity with the poor - for ATRs [and AICs] is [sic] the religion of the poor in this country' (Maluleke 1998b:62).

Closely related to the first and second prong, but particularly to the first, is a third. By making culture a site of struggle, Black Theology 'managed to relativise the Christian religion sufficiently enough to encourage dialogue not only with ATRs but with past and present struggles in which religions helped people to take part, either in acquiescence or in resistance' (133). If, as Itumeleng Mosala has argued (Mosala 1986b), African culture can

2. The paper of Maluleke I am referring to here is a brief concept paper, and so I am sometimes making fairly bold inferences from the available clues.

3. Implicit in this formulation is my tentative analysis which locates ATRs and AICs along a continuum. At one end of the continuum ATR as a distinct 'faith' would be located. I am not sure what would stand at the other end of the continuum, but along the way would be various manifestations of what we call AICs, gradually becoming less and less African.

be a primary site of a hermeneutics of struggle for African Theology, supplemented only with a political class-based hermeneutics, then Christianity is not a necessary component in a Black Theology of liberation (Maluleke 1998a:133). A key question, therefore, for the third phase of South African Black Theology is 'Have black and African theologies made the necessary epistemological break from orthodox or classical Christian theology required to effect a creative reappropriation of traditional African religions?' (135)⁴

Generally, South African Black Theology has tended to use 'classical Christian tools, doctrines and instruments - for example the Bible and Christology' for its purposes. Black Theology has used Christianity (and what follows is an allusion to the anecdote I began the paper with) to 'get the land back and get the land back without losing the Bible' (Mosala 1987:194).

Realising that Christianity and the Bible continue to be a 'haven of the Black masses' (Mofokeng 1988:40), black theologians reckoned that it would not be advisable simply 'to disavow the Christian faith and consequently be rid of the obnoxious Bible'. Instead the Bible and the Christian faith should be shaped 'into a formidable weapon in the hands of the oppressed instead of just leaving it to confuse, frustrate or even destroy our people' (Mofokeng 1988:40). Preoccupation with Christian doctrines and ideas was, for black theology therefore, not primarily on account of faith or orthodoxy considerations, but on account of Christianity's apparent appeal to the black masses (Maluleke 1998a:134).

Given this analysis, Maluleke goes on to argue:

What needs to be re-examined now [in phase three] however, is the extent to which the alleged popularity of Christianity assumed in South African black theology is indeed an accurate assessment of the religious state of black people. If it were to be shown that ATRs are as popular as Christianity among black South Africans then in not having given much concerted attention to them, black theology might have overlooked an important resource. There is now space for this to be corrected by making use of alternative approaches (Maluleke 1998a:134).

These brief comments provide a provisional sketch of Black Theology and probably just enough to situate my analysis of the Bible and biblical hermeneutics in South African Black Theology.

2. A hermeneutic of trust

When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we (Blacks) had the land. The white man said to us 'let us pray'. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible.

To which, having retold the anecdote, Desmond Tutu has on occasions responded, 'And we got the better deal!'.⁵ This response is typical of a hermeneutics of trust that characterizes the first phase of South African Black Theology and persists through into the present in the biblical hermeneutics of black theologians like Tutu and Allan Boesak.⁶

I have discussed the biblical hermeneutics of Tutu and Boesak in detail elsewhere, both from an emic approach - using the categories and concepts internal to the discourse of Black Theology - and from an etic approach - using concepts and categories from discourses outside of Black Theology (West 1995). Here I will briefly delineate some of the

4. Maluleke is here quoting Mosala 1986:100.

5. I have been unable to find a published source for this comment, but I personally have heard him make the comment on two public occasions.

6. I have shifted here from 'Black' to 'black' because I am not sure that either Tutu or Boesak would still refer to themselves as 'Black' theologians, that is, proponents of Black Theology.

key characteristics of this particular orientation to the Bible and biblical interpretation in South African Black Theology, again using both emic and etic concepts and categories.

The overall interpretative orientation towards the Bible is one of trust. A hermeneutics of trust is evident in a number of respects. First, as in much of African Theology (and African American Black Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology), the Bible is considered to be a primary source of Black Theology. The Bible belongs to Black Theology in the sense that doing theology without it is unthinkable. Second, the Bible is perceived to be primarily on the side of the black struggle for liberation and life in South Africa. The Bible belongs to Black Theology in the sense that the struggle for liberation and life is central to them both.⁷

While there is definitely an awareness that there are different, sometimes complementing and sometimes contradicting, theologies in the Bible, this is understood as evidence of the thoroughly contextual nature of the Bible and, because the pervasive theological trajectory is one of liberation, the plurality of theologies in the Bible is unproblematic for Black Theology (Tutu 1983:106). Those who use the Bible against black South Africans are therefore misinterpreting the Bible, because the Bible is basically on the side of Black Theology.

In terms of interpretative interests (Fowl 1990), the dominant interests among Black theologians who work within a framework of a hermeneutics of trust can be characterized as a combination of a focus on the text itself and a focus on the central symbolic and thematic semantic axis (or trajectory) of the final canonical form. A careful and close reading of particular texts is used in conjunction with a generally accepted sense of the liberatory shape of the final Christian canonical form, culminating as it does in Jesus, 'the ultimate reference point' (see Tutu 1983:106, West 1995:64-70, 146-173, and Draper 1996).

Although race is not an obvious dimension of biblical texts and trajectories, the first phase of Black Theology found numerous lines of connection between their struggle and the struggle of God's people in the pages of the Bible.

3. A hermeneutics of suspicion

When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we (Blacks) had the land. The white man said to us 'let us pray'. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible.

To which, have recounted the anecdote, Takatso Mofokeng responds by saying that this story expresses more precisely than any statement in the history of political science or Christian missions 'the dilemma that confronts black South Africans in their relationships with the Bible'.

With this statement, which is known by young and old in South Africa, black people of South Africa point to three dialectically related realities. They show the central position which the Bible occupies in the ongoing process of colonization, national oppression and exploitation. They also confess the incomprehensible paradox of being colonized by a Christian people and yet being converted to their religion and accepting the Bible, their ideological instrument of colonization, oppression and exploitation. Thirdly, they express a historic commitment that is accepted solemnly by one generation and passed on to another - a commitment to terminate exploitation of humans by other humans (Mofokeng 1988:34).

That the Bible is both a problem and a solution is a central characteristic of second

7. A good example of both these positions is (Tutu 1983, see in particular 'The divine intention: presentation to the Eloff Commission of Enquiry on 1st September 1982', 124-149).

phase Black Theology. The dominant orientation is one of suspicion towards the Bible. Again, I can here only sketch the contours of the biblical hermeneutics of this phase (for more detail see West 1995), using wherever possible the emic categories and concepts of Black Theology itself.

While the 'external' problem of the misuse of the Bible by oppressive and reactionary white Christians remains, phase two Black Theology identifies a more fundamental problem - the 'internal' problem of the Bible itself. Mofokeng is critical of those who concentrate only on the external problem, those who accuse 'oppressor-preachers of *misusing* the Bible for their oppressive purposes and objectives' and 'preachers and racist whites of not practicing what they preach'. It is clear, Mofokeng maintains, that these responses are 'based on the assumption that the Bible is essentially a book of liberation'. While Mofokeng concedes that these responses, so characteristic of phase one-type biblical hermeneutics, have a certain amount of validity to them, the crucial point he wants to make is that there are numerous 'texts, stories and traditions in the Bible which lend themselves to only oppressive interpretations and oppressive uses because of their inherent oppressive nature'. What is more, he insists, any attempt to 'save' or 'co-opt' these oppressive texts for the oppressed only serve the interests of the oppressors (Mofokeng 1988:37-38). Young blacks in particular, Mofokeng continues, 'have categorically identified the Bible as an oppressive document by its very nature and to its very core' and suggest that the best option 'is to disavow the Christian faith and consequently be rid of the obnoxious Bible'. Indeed, some 'have zealously campaigned for its expulsion from the oppressed Black community', but, he notes, with little success (Mofokeng 1988:40).

The reason for this lack of success, Mofokeng argues, is:

largely due to the fact that no easily accessible ideological silo or storeroom is being offered to the social classes of our people that are desperately in need of liberation. African traditional religions are too far behind most blacks while Marxism, is to my mind, far ahead of many blacks, especially adult people. In the absence of a better storeroom of ideological and spiritual food, the Christian religion and the Bible will continue for an undeterminable period of time to be the haven of the Black masses par excellence.

Given this situation of very limited ideological options, Mofokeng continues, 'Black theologians who are committed to the struggle for liberation and are organically connected to the struggling Christian people, have chosen to honestly do their best to shape the Bible into a formidable weapon in the hands of the oppressed instead of leaving it to confuse, frustrate or even destroy our people' (Mofokeng 1988:40).

But on just how the Bible is to become 'a formidable weapon in the hands of the oppressed' Mofokeng is not too clear. For this we will have to turn to the work of Itumeleng Mosala. Mosala is the clearest of phase two Black Theology on the problem of 'the obnoxious Bible'. In his early essay on 'The Use of the Bible in Black Theology' he is the first Black theologian to publically question the status of the Bible in Black Theology (Mosala, 1986 #2968, and chapter one of Mosala 1989a). Mosala's basic critique is directed at Black Theology's exegetical starting point which expresses itself in the notion that the Bible is the revealed 'Word of God' (Mosala 1986:177; Mosala 1989:15). He traces this view of the Bible as 'an absolute, non-ideological *Word of God*' back to the work of James Cone.⁸ He finds it even in the work of the 'most theoretically astute of [African American]

8. For a discussion of the role of James Cone in South African Black Theology see the important book by Per Frostin (Frostin 1988:89-90).

black theologians', Cornel West. Whatever the origin, what matters to Mosala is that 'South African black theologians are not free from enslavement to this neo-orthodox theological problematic that regards the notion of the *Word of God* as a hermeneutical starting point' (Mosala 1986:179; Mosala 1989:17). Mosala underlines the pervasiveness of this view of the Bible by subjecting Sigqibo Dwane, Simon Gqubule, Khoza Mgojo, Manas Buthelezi, Desmond Tutu, and Allan Boesak to a similar critique. More recently, Tinyiko Maluleke has extended this critique to African theologians north of the Limpopo, including Lamin Sanneh, Kwame Bediako, John Mbiti, Byang Kato, and Jesse Mugambi (Maluleke 1996:10-14).

Mosala's contention is that most of the Bible 'offers no certain starting point for a theology of liberation within itself'. For example, he argues that the book of Micah 'is eloquent in its silence about the ideological struggle waged by the oppressed and exploited class of monarchic Israel'. In other words, 'it is a ruling class document and represents the ideological and political interests of the ruling class'. As such there 'is simply too much de-ideologization to be made before it can be hermeneutically straightforward in terms of the struggle for liberation' (Mosala 1986:196). The Bible, therefore, cannot be the hermeneutical starting point of Black theology. Rather, those committed to the struggles of the black oppressed and exploited people 'cannot ignore the history, culture, and ideologies of the dominated black people as their primary hermeneutical starting point' (Mosala 1986:197).

However, this does not mean that Mosala totally rejects the Bible. While the Bible cannot be the primary starting point for Black theology 'there are enough contradictions within the book [of Micah, for example] to enable eyes that are hermeneutically trained in the struggle for liberation today to observe the kin struggles of the oppressed and exploited of the biblical communities in the very absences of those struggles in the text'. Because the Bible is 'a product and a record of class struggles' (Mosala 1986:196), Black theologians are able to detect 'glimpses of liberation and of a determinate social movement galvanized by a powerful religious ideology in the biblical text'. But, he continues, it 'is not the existence of this which is in question. Rather, the problem being addressed here is one of developing an adequate hermeneutical framework which can rescue those liberative themes from the biblical text' (Mosala 1987:27-28).

In a later essay Mosala offers further reflections on the dialectic between an appropriation of black culture and experience and an appropriation of the Bible (Mosala 1986a:119). 'Black Theology has roots in the Bible insofar as it is capable of linking the struggles of oppressed people in South Africa today with the struggles of oppressed people in the communities of the Bible', but because the oppressed people in the Bible 'did not write the Bible', and because their struggles 'come to us *via* the struggles of their oppressors', 'Black Theology needs to be firmly and critically rooted in black history and black culture in order for it to possess apposite weapons of struggle that can enable black people to get underneath the biblical text to the struggles of oppressed classes'. However, Black Theology must also be 'firmly and critically rooted in the Bible in order to elicit from it cultural-hermeneutical tools of combat' with which black people can penetrate beneath both the underside of black history and culture and contemporary capitalist settler colonial domination to the experiences of oppressed and exploited working class black people (Mosala 1986:120).

While the forms of Black Theology inherited by Mosala and others from phase one are 'firmly ... rooted in the Bible' they are not 'critically rooted in the Bible'. This is the fundamental problem of Black Theology for Mosala, and because his understanding of what it means to be 'critically rooted in the Bible' is so important in its contribution to South African Black Theology (and because it ought to be clearly heard by all forms of

African Theology) I will discuss his contribution in some detail.

Mosala contends that the impotence of Black Theology as a weapon of struggle comes from the enslavement of Black Theology 'to the biblical hermeneutics of dominant ideologies' (Mosala 1989:4). More specifically, Black Theology's impotence comes from embracing 'the ideological form of the text' - 'the oppressors most dangerous form' (Mosala, 1989:28). Existential commitment to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa was no substitute 'for scientific analysis of the valence of a tradition in the class struggle' (Mosala 1989:34). While Mosala accepts that 'texts that are against oppressed people may be coopted by the interlocutors of the liberation struggle', he insists that 'the fact that these texts have their ideological roots in oppressive practices means that the texts are capable of undergirding the interests of the oppressors even when used by the oppressed. In other words, oppressive texts cannot be totally tamed or subverted into liberative texts' (Mosala 1989:30).

Mosala rejects what he calls a 'fundamentalism of the Left', that 'attempts to transplant biblical paradigms and situations into our world without understanding their historical circumstances'. Like Gottwald, Mosala criticises liberation theologians who invoke biblical symbols of liberation but who 'seldom push those biblical symbols all the way back to their socio-historic foundations' and consequently are not able to 'grasp concretely the inner-biblical strands of oppression and liberation in all their stark multiplicity and contradictory interactions'. Not only does this 'picking and choosing' of biblical resources by some liberation theologians 'not carry sufficient structural analysis of biblical societies to make a proper comparison with the present possible', a lack of interest in and knowledge of social forms and ideas from biblical times to the present may mean that 'unstructural understanding of the Bible' simply reinforces and confirms 'unstructural understanding of the present' (Mosala 1989:31-32). It is 'a risky business', says Gottwald, to 'summon up' powerful symbolism out of a distant past unless the symbol users are very selfconscious of their choices and applications, and fully aware of how their social struggle is both like and unlike the social struggle of the architects of the symbols' (Gottwald 1979:703).⁹ Efforts to draw 'religious inspiration' or 'biblical values' from, for example, early Israel 'will be romantic and utopian unless resolutely correlated to both the ancient and the contemporary cultural-material and social-organizational foundations' (Gottwald 1979:706).

Mosala agrees; his fundamental objections against the biblical hermeneutics of Black Theology are that not only does it suffer from an 'unstructural understanding of the Bible', but, both as a consequence and as a reason, it also suffers from an 'unstructural understanding' of black experience and struggle. Central to Mosala's hermeneutics of liberation is the search for a theoretical perspective that can locate both the Bible and the black experience within appropriate socio-historical contexts. Historical-critical tools (to delimit and historically locate texts), supplemented by sociological resources (including a historical-materialist understanding of struggle) provide the theoretical perspective for Mosala's treatment of texts; historical-materialism, particularly its appropriation of 'struggle' as a key concept, provides the categories and concepts necessary to read and critically appropriate both black history and culture and the Bible. 'The category of struggle becomes an important hermeneutical factor not only in one's reading of his or her history and culture but also in one's understanding of the history, nature, ideology, and agenda of the biblical texts' (Mosala 1989:9).

In order to undertake this kind of analysis, Mosala argues, black interpreters must be engaged in the threefold task of Terry Eagleton's 'revolutionary cultural worker': a task that

9. Gottwald gives considerable space to developing this point (703-706).

is projective, polemical, and appropriative. While Mosala does not doubt that Black Theology is 'projective' and 'appropriative' in its use of the Bible, it is 'certainly *not* polemical - in the sense of being critical - in its biblical hermeneutics' (Mosala 1989:32). Black Theology has not interrogated the text ideologically in class, cultural, gender, and age terms. Black Theology has not gauged the grain or asked in what code the biblical text is cast and so has read the biblical text as an innocent and transparent container of a message or messages (Mosala 1989:41). By not using socio-historical modes of interpretation, Black Theology continues to spar 'with the ghost of the oppressor' in its most powerful form - the ideological form of the text (Mosala 1989:28).

The Bible, according to Mosala's analysis, is a complex text best understood as a 'signified practice'. 'It cannot be reduced to a simple socially and ideologically unmediated *Word of God*'. Nor can it be seen merely as a straight forward mirror of events in Ancient Israel. On the contrary it is a *production*, a remaking of those events and processes' (Mosala 1989b:3). Using the language of redaction criticism, Mosala argues that the different 'layers' historical-critical work detects each have a particular ideological code. Some layers of the Bible are cast in 'hegemonic codes', which represent social and historical realities in ancient Israel in terms of the interests of the ruling classes. Other parts of the Bible are encoded in 'professional codes', which have a relative autonomy, but which still operate within the hegemony of the dominant code. Then there are layers that are signified through 'negotiated codes', which contain a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements, but which still take the dominant codes as their starting point. Finally, there are a few textual sites that represent 'oppositional codes' which are grounded in the interests and religious perspectives of the underclasses of the communities of the Bible (Mosala 1989:41-42).

A critical and structural analysis of the biblical text requires that Black Theology identify the ideological reference-code in which a particular text is encoded. For it is only by recognizing the particular ideological encoding of a text that an interpreter can prevent herself or himself from colluding with the dominant and hegemonic. Moreover, it is only by recognizing the particular encoding of a text that the interpreter can then interpret the text 'against the grain'. In other words, the polemical task of the interpreter is vital because it enables the appropriative task. A critical analysis of the biblical text ensures that Black Theology is able to appropriate the text against the grain. Such an approach would not be selective, nor would it engage in 'proof-texting'. Rather, a critical and structural ideological mode of reading 'advocates an analytic approach to the text of the Bible that exposes the underlying literary and ideological plurality in the text without denying the hegemonic totality or shall we say unity of the final product' (Mosala 1989:4).¹⁰

This phrase of Eagleton's, 'against the grain', seeks to remind us, Mosala argues, 'that the appropriation of works and events is always a contradictory process embodying in some form a *struggle*'. The interpretive struggle consists of, depending on the class forces involved, 'either to harmonize the contradictions inherent in the works and events or to highlight them with a view to allowing social class choices in their appropriation' (Mosala 1989:32).¹¹ The concern of Mosala is not that black theologians *cannot* read any text, no

10. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza makes a similar point when she argues that 'The failure to bring a critical evaluation to bear upon the biblical texts and upon the process of interpretation within Scripture and tradition is one of the reasons why the use of the Bible by liberation theologians often comes close to 'proof-texting'. Later she adds, 'a critical hermeneutic must be applied to all biblical texts and their historical contexts' (Fiorenza 1981:101-102, 108).

11. David Tracy notes that 'the particular form of 'correlation' [between the tradition and contemporary situation] that liberation and political theologies take will ordinarily prove to be a form not of liberal identity nor one of

matter what its encoding, against the grain, but that they *ought not* to do this without *recognizing* what they are doing.

As I indicated earlier, Mosala acknowledges that the black interpreters he criticizes are clearly correct 'in detecting glimpses of liberation and of a determinate social movement galvanized by a powerful religious ideology in the biblical text'. His point, however, is that while the 'existence of this phenomenon is not in question', the problem 'is one of developing an adequate hermeneutical framework that can rescue those liberative themes from the biblical text'. 'One cannot', Mosala maintains, 'successfully perform this task by denying the oppressive structures that frame what liberating themes the texts encode' (Mosala 1989:41).

Only a *critical* appropriation of the Bible along socio-historical and ideological lines will enable the Bible to be a resource with which Black Theology will be to 'get the land back and get the land back without losing the Bible' (Mosala 1987:194).

4. A hermeneutics from below

When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we (Blacks) had the land. The white man said to us 'let us pray'. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible.

To which, having retold the anecdote,¹² Tinyiko Maluleke poses the question of what precisely it means to say that black people 'have the Bible'. Although Maluleke does not formulate the question in this way, his frequent and insightful reflections on the Bible and biblical interpretation in South African Black Theology (and African Theology) push in this direction.

As I argued earlier, drawing on Maluleke's analysis, one of the important features of phase three Black Theology is the recognition, recovery, and revival of its links with ATRs and AICs; and in so doing renewing its dialogue with African Theology in its many and various forms.¹³ This rapprochement raises the question, as we have already noted, of the place of Christianity in Black Theology (and African Theology). Starkly articulated, in the words of the African theologian Gabriel Setiloane, 'why do we continue to seek to convert to Christianity the devotees of African traditional religion?' (Setiloane 1977:64, cited in Maluleke 1997:13). 'This', says Maluleke, 'is a crucial question for all African theologies [including South African Black Theology] as we move into the twenty-first century' (13).

Alongside this question, of course, comes the related question of whether Black Theology can be done without the Bible. If it is true, as is claimed by both Mofokeng and Mosala that the Bible is primarily of strategic, not substantive (see Cady 1986, and West 1995:1-3-130), importance to Black Theology, a claim that is vigorously rejected by Tutu, Boesak, Simon Maimela (Maimela 1991), and many other Black theologians, then there are good grounds for a Black Theology without 'the Book'. Before we too quickly dismiss the claim made by Mofokeng and Mosala we would do well to hear their claim clearly. Remember Mofokeng's argument: the Bible is important to Black Theology because besides the Bible there is no easily accessible ideological silo or storeroom is being offered to the social classes of our people that are desperately in need of liberation. African

the several forms of analogy or similarity but rather one of sheer confrontation'. 'The confrontations will be demanded by both the retrieval of the prophetic tradition's stand for the oppressed and by the suspicions released by the prophetic ideology-critique embedded in that retrieval' (Tracy 1981:2-3).

12. In his retelling of the anecdote Maluleke uses inclusive language, referring to 'White people', thereby implicitly capturing the role white women played in missionary and colonial enterprises. Perhaps the title of my article should read: 'White Men and Madams, Bibles and Land: Ingredients in Biblical Interpretation in South African Black Theology'.
13. Each of the publications cited demonstrates this threefold dialogue with Black Theology.

traditional religions are too far behind most blacks while Marxism, is to my mind, far ahead of many blacks, especially adult people. In the absence of a better storeroom of ideological and spiritual food, the Christian religion and the Bible will continue for an undeterminable period of time to be the haven of the Black masses par excellence (Mofokeng 1988:40).

In other words, there are good strategic and pragmatic reasons for continuing to use the Bible, so long as it remains the most readily available resource for liberation. 'Preoccupation with Christian doctrines and ideas [and the Bible] was, for black theology therefore, not primarily on account of faith or orthodoxy considerations, but on account of Christianity's apparent appeal to the black masses' (Maluleke 1998a:134). But, Maluleke continues:

What needs to be re-examined now [in phase three] however, is the extent to which the alleged popularity of Christianity [and the Bible] assumed in South African black theology is indeed an accurate assessment of the religious state of black people. If it were to be shown that ATRs are as popular as Christianity among black South Africans then in not having given much concerted attention to them, black theology might have overlooked an important resource (Maluleke 1998a:134).

However, Maluleke doubts whether 'pragmatic and moral arguments can be constructed in a manner that will speak to masses without having to deal with the Bible in the process of such constructions' (Maluleke 1996:14). The Bible remains in the 1990s, and probably into the millennium, a 'haven of the Black masses' (14). And as long as it is a resource, it must be confronted, 'precisely at a hermeneutical level' (14). Quite what Maluleke means by this is not clear, but he does offer some clues, which emerge in his dialogue with the biblical hermeneutics of African Theology (Maluleke 1997:14-16).

He agrees with Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who speaks with many African women,¹⁴ when she says that the problem with the Bible in Africa is that 'throughout Africa, the Bible has been and continues to be absolutized: it is one of the oracles that we consult for instant solutions and responses' (Oduyoye 1995:174, cited in Maluleke 1997:15). 'However', continues Maluleke, 'while many African biblical scholars and theologians are locked into a biblical hermeneutics that *makes exaggerated connections between the Bible and African heritage*, on the whole, and in practice, [ordinary] African Christians are far more innovative and subversive in their appropriation of the Bible than they appear' (Maluleke 1997:14-15). While they 'may mouth the Bible-is-equal-to-the-Word-of-God formula, they are actually creatively pragmatic and selective in their use of the Bible so that the Bible may enhance rather than frustrate their life struggles' (Maluleke 1996:13).

The task before Black Theology, then, is 'not only to develop creative Biblical hermeneutic methods [such as those forged in former phases of Black Theology], but also to observe and analyse the manner in which African Christians *read* and view the Bible' (15).

5. Conclusion

This, it seems to me, is an appropriate point to end my analysis, with Maluleke's reminder that any discussion of the Bible and biblical hermeneutics in Black Theology in South Africa is incomplete that does not include ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible. Further scholarly words about the Bible and biblical hermeneutics in South African Black Theology (and I would hope, African Theology more generally) await an articulation by ordinary African Bible 'readers' (West 1999a; West 1999b).

14. See for example (Dube 1997; Masenya 1997; Mbuwayesango 1997; Sibeko and Haddad 1997).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cady, LE 1986. Hermeneutics and tradition: the role of the past in jurisprudence and theology. *Harvard Theological Journal* 79: 439-463.
- Draper, Jonathan A 1996. 'Was there no-one left to give glory to God except this foreigner?': breaking the boundaries in Luke 17:11-19. In *Archbishop Tutu: prophetic witness in South Africa*, ed. Leonard Hulley, Louise Kretzschmar, and Luke Lungile Pato:222-229. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau.
- Dube, Musa W 1997. Toward a postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible. *Semeia* 78: 11-26.
- Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schussler. 1981. Towards a feminist biblical hermeneutics: biblical interpretation and liberation theology. In *The challenge of liberation theology: a First World response*, ed. B Mahan and LD Richesin:91-112. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Fowl, Stephen E 1990. The ethics of interpretation; or, what's left over after the elimination of meaning. In *The Bible in three dimensions: essays in celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the Department of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield*, ed. David JA Clines, Stephen E Fowl, and Stanley E Porter:379-398. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Frostin, Per 1988. *Liberation theology in Tanzania and South Africa: a First World interpretation*. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Gottwald, Norman K 1979. *The tribes of Yahweh: a sociology of the religion of liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.
- Maimela, Simon 1991. Black Theology and the quest for a God of liberation. In *Theology at the end of modernity: essays in honor of Gordon D Kaufman*, ed. Sheila Greeve Devaney:141-159. Philadelphia: Trinity Press.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko S 1996. Black and African theologies in the New World Order: a time to drink from our own wells. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 96: 3-19.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko S 1997. Half a century of African Christian theologies: elements of the emerging agenda for the twenty-first century. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99: 4-23.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko S 1998a. African Traditional Religions in Christian mission and Christian scholarship: re-opening a debate that never started. *Religion and Theology* 5: 121-137.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko S 1998b. Black theology as public discourse. In *Constructing a language of religion in public life: Multi-Event 1999 Academic Workshop papers*, ed. James R Cochrane:60-62. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Masenya, Madipoane 1997. Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African context: a reading for the liberation of African (Northern Sotho) women. *Semeia* 78: 55-68.
- Mbuwayesango, Dora Rudo 1997. Childlessness and women-to-women relationships in Genesis and in African patriarchal society: Sarah and Hagar from a Zimbabwean woman's perspective (Gen 16:1-16; 21:8-21). *Semeia* 78: 27-36.
- Mofokeng, T 1988. Black Christians, the Bible and liberation. *Journal of Black Theology* 2: 34-42.
- Mosala, Itumeleng J 1986a. Ethics of the economic principles: church and secular investments. In *Hammering swords into ploughshares: essays in honour of Archbishop Mpilo Desmond Tutu*, ed. B; Mosala Tlhagale, Itumeleng J. <eds>:119-129. Johannesburg: Skotaville.

- Mosala, Itumeleng J 1986b. The relevance of African Traditional Religions and their challenge to Black Theology. In *The unquestionable right to be free: essays in Black Theology*, ed. Itumeleng J Mosala and Buti Tlhagale:91-100. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Mosala, Itumeleng J 1987. Biblical hermeneutics and black theology in South Africa. PhD, University of Cape Town.
- Mosala, Itumeleng J 1989a. *Biblical hermeneutics and black theology in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Mosala, Itumeleng J 1989b. Black theology: Unpublished paper.
- Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. 1995. *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Setiloane, Gabriel 1977. Where are we in African Theology? In *African Theology en route: papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, Accra, December 17-23, 1977*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Sibeko, Malika and Beverley G Haddad 1997. Reading the Bible 'with' women in poor and marginalized communities in South Africa (Mark 5:21-6:1). *Semeia* 78: 83-92.
- Tracy, David 1981. Introduction. In *The challenge of liberation theology: a First World response*, ed. B Mahan and LD Richesin:1-3. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Tutu, Desmond Mpilo 1983. *Hope and suffering: sermons and speeches*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- West, Gerald O 1995. *Biblical hermeneutics of liberation: modes of reading the Bible in the South African context*. Maryknoll, NY and Pietermaritzburg: Orbis Books and Cluster Publications.
- West, Gerald O 1999a. *The academy of the poor: towards a dialogical reading of the Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- West, Gerald O 1999b. Reading other-wise: re-envisaging the reading practices and place of the socially engaged biblical scholar. *Scriptura* 68: 49-66.