

Theology of Land: Reflections and Dialogue from a South African Socio-Political Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines the current situation of land possession in the South African socio-political space. Land possession in South Africa is an emotive issue that receives different political responses based on historical constitutional land laws and declarations, such as the Freedom Charter of 1954. African views on land are elaborated, together with South African current political debates regarding land. Negative politics of the land leave the dispossessed humiliated, experiencing feelings of indignity and insentience. Being robbed of the land is humiliating, but the dialogue about regaining it should occur in the spirit of eschatological hope with one goal in mind: inheriting the land. The paper further elaborates a theology of the land and extensively explains its historical and biblical evolvement from the Abrahamic era to the period of exile. In the midst of tensions between colonial views of land and cultural clashes, eschatological hope is the route to take. Citizens are to be granted the rights and promises that lead to eschatological peace, which creates coexistence where life is fully experienced. Eschatological hope should not be read as opium with a calming effect or a soothing balm for people to endure injustice. It should be a message of hope for the restoration of quality of untrammelled joy on the fruitfulness of the land. All this is achievable through dialogue by and with all stakeholders regarding land issues. The contribution made by this article is the acknowledgement of the imbalances regarding the land issue, and it attempts to bring forth a theological understanding of land and how to apply it in the current South Africa.

Keywords: Theology; Land; Possession; Dispossession; Laws; Eschatological

Introduction

One of the emotive issues in South African socio-political dialogues is land. Colonialism and apartheid severely curtailed indigenous populations' land rights. "Instead of full land ownership rights, they were granted only occupancy rights" (Mpofu-Walsh 2021:50). This has become such an emotive issue that conversations always end in ructions and rumbles. Since 1994, land debates have become a continuous agenda item in both national parliament and all tiers of government and society formations. The bone of contention revolves around historical occupation, ownership, or possession of the land. Land occupation and ownership is the concrete situation of life (*Sitz in Leben*). It cannot be avoided or ignored. This article tries to bring some theological understanding and aspects in the current South Africa. It acknowledges the imbalances regarding the land issue and attempts to bring forth a theological understanding of land and how to apply it

in the current situation in South Africa. The article proposes eschatological hope and dialogue as a means of clarity and understanding on the matter of inheritance of the land.

Land in the South African socio-political landscape

Although land is the most precious natural resource, it can also be the most precarious and pernicious resource, which in some cases leads to major conflict (Beinart, Delius & Hay 2017: xi). All historiographies synchronise to one conclusion about land in Africa: it is a source of life and livelihood for Africans. This is factually captured by Muzenda (2020:4):

Land has always been the source of life in Africa. African history shows that the African life is based on land. It is the land that produces which is needed for human consumption. The value and importance of land in Africa are demonstrated by the fact that from ancient to modern history, land always caused wars and political and social disturbances whenever it was not equally distributed amongst people.

Land has become one of the biggest post-colonial dilemmas in many African territories. It is a topic analogous to concepts such as ownership, occupation, restitution, restoration, tenure, allocation, and compensation, etc. Colonialists arrived in the African continent with their western mindset of individualism, especially in areas of ownership, self-satisfaction, and the amassment of land for self-enrichment. Through their actions, according to Adebajo (2020:17), they notoriously “declared *res nullius* – a no man’s land” – a continent populated by “uncivilised savages” whose land could be seized and exploited for imperial expansion and promotion. Hence, land dispossession is synonymous with imperialism, colonialism, oppression, racism and white supremacism. It is true that, for the dispossessed, “racism inevitably degenerates morals and deteriorates the quality of living” (Ellisen 1991:141). The historical genesis of land issue perpetrated by segregation and discriminatory laws

formulates the very basis of our racist political economy which is at the heart of the inequality that perpetuates the status quo of racism and exploitation of the black masses even under democratic Constitutionalism (Malefane 2020:219).

For these westerners, land is a commodity, a property opened to commercialisation for personal economic gains. This attitude is in contrast to the African view of land. Ilgunas (2018:53) brings attention to the fact that “in indigenous communities around the globe, personal ownership of large pieces of land was unheard of.” The same attitude is highlighted by Kabongo (2021:2), that they (colonialists) “introduced a new concept of access to land which had to be owned and proof of ownership had to be issued in the form of a title deed.” In Africa, land has always been the property of the community under the administration of traditional leadership. The same notion is attested by Resane (2019:4) that “in the African worldview land was never deemed as a personal possession but as communal property.” These two world views clash, i.e., relational ownership and property that leads to a communitarian sense of identity towards harmonious co-existence within the eco-system versus the western object-focused separation of self

from other and self from land, leading to ownership and control (Pirbhai-Illich & Martin in Kumalo 2021:66).

Through the ages, both the colonial and apartheid regimes formulated and implemented numerous laws regarding the land. Many, if not all, of these laws were enacted to enrich the colonialists and disadvantage the indigenous populations. As can be expected, the possessor prospered while the dispossessed were disadvantaged. The dispossessed descended into poverty while the possessors escalated into prosperity. Land is associated with prosperity; hence Ngcukaitobi (2018:235) highlights the fact that “without the land, the natives are absolutely compelled to starve.” Consequently, conflicts ensued. Wars surfaced and dignity was lost. The land and the dignity of the dispossessed are inseparable. Landlessness means indignity, what Biko (1987) calls an empty shell. This affirms Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s (2009:57) assertion that ‘a person who has lost his land feels the pangs of hunger.’ Being dispossessed of the land leaves men in society without a sense of dignity. Kobo (2018:63) is of the opinion that this leads to black women’s exploitation by white people and makes black children vulnerable due to a dysfunctional upbringing. Kobo here refers to domestic workers who own no land and sometimes are forced to reside with their children in the backyards of white people’s homes. A sense of belonging and ownership cannot be felt in this situation; it leads to a sense of disempowerment. For Africans, being dispossessed of land is the highest robbing of one’s dignity, integrity, and respect. To be driven from one’s ancestral land is the highest degree of humiliation.

This humiliation was heightened by the apartheid government in the 1970s and the 1980s through forced removals, wherein the so-called black spots were destroyed by relocating communities to the poor non-arable lands of the then *bantustans*, especially in the Western Transvaal and elsewhere. Soil cultivationists and livestock herders of the highveld were subjected to the arid bushveld, where rains are erratic, and soils are infertile. In reference to former President Thabo Mbeki’s family as victims of these removals, Gevisser (2007:29) points to the status quo that ‘the state service was so dismally dysfunctional that more and more arable land in the Bantustans fell into disrepair and ultimate infertility.’ These uprooted communities left the graves of their forebears and ancestors behind – a real anathema or curse on the African world view of the land and the living dead. This was all designed to strengthen African dispossession of the land for the benefit of the white farmers to gain and own most of the land. The “scheduled areas were created to serve as native reserves on about 7 percent of the country’s land” (Hall 2014:1). Land grab and forceful removals from the land are evil; it is “the use of political power to destroy others for the purpose of defending or preserving the integrity of one’s sick self” (Peck 1990:277).

The humiliation by dispossession continued even in the democratic era. One is constantly confronted with the news of people being evicted from their houses. That is why Hall (2014:8) continues to highlight that “rather than always talking about ‘apartheid-era dispossession’, we need now to add to our lexicon ‘post-apartheid dispossession’.” People are evicted from the farms where they were born and bred; informal settlements are mushrooming all over the country as evicted people seek any open land and occupy it. This exerts pressure on local municipalities to provide basic services, such as water, sewage, electricity, and roads.

Land ownership continues to be a contentious issue in the South African socio-political landscape. Africans have always struggled for the land. Prior to the 1910 creation of the Union of South Africa and thereafter, Africans have been constantly at war for the land with colonialists. It is true that ‘land always caused wars and political and social disturbances whenever it was not equally distributed amongst people’ (Muzenda 2020:4). The first President of the African National Congress, John Dube, ‘led a delegation to Britain to protest against the Land Act of 1913, which was aimed at taking away fertile land from the African people and giving it to Whites. It also barred Africans from purchasing land’ (Kumalo 2012:148). Land and freedom are inseparable. The fight for political freedom is synonymous with the fight for the land. Hence, Ngcukaitobi (2021:3) asserts that “the struggle for freedom was therefore the struggle for the land.” This is what makes the struggle for the land such an emotive issue, because “human societies have a strong attachment to territory, seeking to exercise absolute control over tracts of country regarded as vital living space” (Mellor 1989:53). The democratic South African land reform revolves around restitution, tenure and redistribution (Denninger 1999, Moseley & Mccusker 2008). Restitution, which involves financial compensation for the victims of forced removals, has been unsuccessful, and the policy has shifted to redistribution, which is expropriation without compensation. Land tenure reform recognises people’s legitimate rights to land ownership and control. Lahiff (2008:42) highlights the importance of redistribution, where land is bought from the current owners (willing seller) by the state (willing buyer) to redistribute to the once-dispossessed. This ‘willing buyer – willing seller’ approach was adopted and recommended by the World Bank in its publication known as *Options for Land Reform and Rural Structuring* in 1992 (Williams 1996:139). It has become a non-satisfying methodology for rightist politics in South Africa.

In an attempt to lift their profile, the African National Congress (ANC) at its 54th Conference in 2017 resolved to seek the amendment of Section 25 of the South African Constitution in order to implement land expropriation without compensation. The Section states: “No one may be deprived of property except in terms of law of general application, and no law may permit arbitrary deprivation of property.” In trying to interpret this clause, the ANC went further to state that their resolution grants ownership of traditional land to respective communities, which make up 13% of the country (Merten 2017). This assertion is debatable within political spectrums. The 2017 government audit claims that 72% of the nation’s private farmland is owned by white people, who comprise 9% of the population (Morton 2018). On the other hand, AfriForum, which has Afrikaner interests at heart, claims that 24% of South African land is owned by the state and only 34.5% is owned by Black people.¹ The motion was tabled before parliament, and on February 2018, the South African parliament passed a motion to review the property ownership clause of the Constitution to allow for the expropriation of land without compensation (Pather 2017). This escalated the emotiveness of the issue, as it underlined the historical review that the land was originally seized by whites without just compensation (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2018).

Expropriation is dispossessing the land from its owner for public benefit. This act of dispossession or expropriation is legally justified as long as it is for a public purpose or

¹ <https://afriforum.co.za/wp-content/uploads/AfriForum-Land-and-land-reform.pdf> (Retrieved 1 March 2022).

public interest. It entails the state's seizure of land to change it from private property rights for public benefit. Expropriation without compensation means the owner should let go of their perceived property without any monetary reimbursement. This is a commencement point of conflict in land matters. The owners who have been occupying and working the land for decades find it difficult to embrace the approach. Right-wing politicians, such as those of Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), are of the conviction that land occupants who happen to be majority white are not the legitimate owners, as they are deemed to have confiscated land from Africans. Pan Africanists are also strong on this point, that white settlers are greedy thieves who robbed Africans of their land. This is the continuation of the 1967 ANC's National Consultative Conference held at Morogoro in Tanzania. There it stated that "the land and property stolen should be confiscated from these agents of racist state and redistributed to small farmers, peasants and landless people of all races" (Smith in Ndaba, Owen, Panyane, Serumula & Smith 2017:297). On the other hand, some white occupants use an unverified historical dictum that the land belonged to the Khoisan, who are now extinct from the current landscape, something that some political analysts view as an unjustified escape mechanism. The tussle continues and the gulf between the possessors and the dispossessed grows wider and deeper, with a connecting bridge surfacing as an impossibility. This echoes Lephoto's (2020:3) cry: "We are very conscious that the struggle for land justice will only be won if all people of goodwill can develop an effective collaboration to realize it." In all social sciences addressing the issue of justice in the land, a consensus is reached that, in the South African socio-political landscape, justice is "about restoring what was stolen by unjust means and repairing that which was broken by unjust acts. It is about land and wealth" (Mpofu-Walsh 2021:60). This is something that sounds farfetched, but it remains a wish to be realised, as the conflict is a real *Sitz in Leben* for the dispossessed South African black majority population. The scenario painted is viewed as populism, constitutional misinterpretation or misunderstanding.

Inheriting the land speaks of owning, occupying, or dwelling securely in the land. Both the Freedom Charter and the Preamble of 1996 Constitution unequivocally state that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it." This statement assures people of cultural diversity that the land is theirs to occupy or own. For many, this is a dream in a pipeline as many South Africans are still not owning the land. The constitutionalists hold on to Section 25 and 26 to continue occupying the land regardless of the masses in need of the land. Their attitude in this matter is echoed by Changuion and Steenkamp:

Land reform in South Africa can only succeed if it is implemented fairly and honestly, if the provisions of the constitution are complied with and if there is no deviation from the regulations for the enforcement of the law. Everybody should realise that land reform has to take place, but also that all the citizens of the country, irrespective of race, are entitled to own land (2012:308).

Some right-wing politicians see this clause as a "serious setback for the restoration of dignity for Africans and detrimental to achievement of true freedom for the former colonised black masses" (Malefane 2020:220). The dispossessed feel continuous humiliation, while the elite possessors want to continue enjoying the occupation. The peasants are crying for the return of the land, while the elite regard these cries as

illegitimate, as they are also the sons and daughters of the soil and therefore deserve to own the land. The two worldviews are at loggerheads. Access and ownership of the land is historically marked for its white-supremacy advancement. The advancement includes all socio-cultural promotions. This is highlighted by Butler, Rotberg and Adams (1977:158–159):

Cultural supremacy is organic to European thought, especially as it has developed in South Africa, and it is difficult to separate and weigh its racial, cultural, militaristic, technical, and religious contents.

As happened in the Old Testament, where laws were in place to regulate land occupation and utilisation, South Africa needs to ensure systematic institutional changes from a judicial system to an administrative system based on the pressing need for land. Clear procedures and remedial actions should be in place to protect the vulnerable occupants of the land in question. These administrative laws will ensure that there are no illegal activities of land grab by either political or economic elites. It is important for these laws to keep unfolding like a scroll through history. All administrative systems “need revision to keep reasonably in balance with changes in the economic, social, and population geography of the country” (Mellor 1989:130).

Theology of the Land

It is in the public domain that “theology is never timeless, and it cannot be studied in a historical vacuum” (Selderhuis 2007:23). Theology continues to speak in all circumstances of life, including the burning issues in public spaces, such as land debacles. The nexus of the debate here is between dwelling (occupation) and inheriting (ownership versus possession, legal and legitimate deed holder). This inheritance is the blessing and the legal right for humanity to dwell on the land. “To possess the land was to share in the inheritance and responsibility of all God’s people” (Wright 2004:190). The central theme of this paper is engaging theology regarding the inheritance of the land. This inheritance is the promise of life (the concrete life experience) regarding land in the South African socio-political landscape. From the biblical narratives, it looks like land inheritance or ownership was necessary for the people’s wellbeing, and if that is the case, they should have it. The land belongs to humans as their inheritance, and it gives them some honourable dignity and a sense of safety. It is “God’s gift as a place of life with God, the place of a specific moral and spiritual lifestyle before God” (Wright 2004:190). People dwell in the land as their permanent possession forever, and it is on the land that they are protected forever. This is further expressed by Wright (2004:190), who states that the land “meant security, inclusion, blessing, sharing and practical responsibility.” The land is a platform on which humanity sees God as the Creator, the space where humanity derives its meaning and existence. Resane (2021:2) captures this: ‘the land is the platform on which humanity experiences God’s blessings, and where God delights communing with his people. The land is where humanity experiences God and life and all its accompanying prosperity.’ Biblically, humanity is entrusted with the land because, through principles of faith, they are expected to manage it in a God-honouring manner.

There is strong theo-historical evidence that the land was never a commercial commodity in Israel. Nobody owned the land as an individual, but a clan did. As owned by a family or clan, land was “looked upon as a heritage bestowed upon the group by God” (Deist & Le Roux 1987:68). However, as per Deuteronomic directives (Chapter 4), the possession of the land was never permanent, but was dependent upon Israel’s obedience to the Lord and longevity on it was also dependent on the obedience to the laws administering the land (Le Roux in Deist & Vorster 1986:139). As in ancient Israel, “there had to be carefully defined regulations relative to their use” (Merrill 1994:132). The laws governing the administration of the land ensured that land ownership was the mark of full citizenship. These laws further ensured that the system of primogeniture would be consistently upheld (Deist & Le Roux 1987:96). God as its Creator and owner reserves the right of moral control over its administration by humans (stewardship) who are tasked with ensuring that land is “to be shared in such a way that all people have access to the use of its resources” (Atkinson, Field, O’Donovan & Holmes 1995:536). It represents an opportunity to exercise stewardship. In Israel, the land was the nation’s patrimony or inheritance. Therefore, to inherit the land was synonymous with God’s bestowal of blessings.

Land serves as a platform on which humanity exercises faith in God. It is where they can expect God’s provision. In reality, land is a token of God’s favour on the righteous, where his provision becomes plentiful. This is affirmed by Jesus Christ, that *the meek shall inherit the earth* (Matthew 5:5), confirming blessings bestowed on the meek. Land is used to symbolise the presence and blessing of God. It has come “to embody the very substance and being of life itself” (Beinart, Delius & Hay 2017: xi). The land and soil are crucial to the economy. Wright (1997:3) alludes to this fact, that in earlier societies, including in Old Testament Israel, “wealth was even more directly linked to land and to land ownership”. Siphon Malefane, a Black Consciousness writer, also endorses the life meaning regarding land:

Land is central to man’s quest for subsistence. Men need to interact and exploit land to create their work and to earn a living. Men need land to fully realise their *specie essence*. All economic activity from agriculture, mining, commerce and industry takes place on land i.e., capital bearing land. Without access and ownership of land one cannot build capital (2020:216).

Humanity derives the meaning of life on the land. Taking the land away from humanity is an act of disgrace at its highest pinnacle, an act of disrespect at its deepest core. Dispossessing people of their land is the severest pain that cuts across and dispels their sense of *botho/ubuntu*. This was also pointed out by the South African Cities Network in 2018:

The tragedy of the apartheid project is not simply the dispossession of people’s land but the dispossession of the texture of their lives – their community and their sense of belonging ... Belonging means inclusion, having access to economic

opportunities, exercising power and voice, and living with dignity – of which housing is but one component²

It is for this reason that one observes the emotional trauma of refugees and asylum seekers, and people forcefully removed from their land. They are stripped of their sense of humanness and dignity, as they cannot participate in national expressions such as voting and participating in the labour force. The pain of dislodgement and dislocation from the land is indescribable. Reading through some texts such as Deuteronomy and Psalms, one realises that there is some eschatological hope of sharing the land, and that “God’s people will no longer depend on charity or good fortune but will be permanently guaranteed” (Wright 2004:191).

Inheriting the Land: Eschatological Hope

The eschatological hope of land inheritance started in Abrahamic promises (Genesis 12), though ‘the land promise and possession are never quite reached within the Pentateuch itself’ (Ankrah 2017:125). This hope is continuously reiterated through the patriarchal era and renewed during and through the Mosaic era when laws of administration and management of the land were articulated. Hope for the inheritance of the land was prodigiously experienced and heightened during the Joshua era, though it was not fully conquered and/or occupied. The land promise was incorporated into the covenantal structure, though the patriarchs were far removed from it as they had to go through some detours, such as sufferings and slavery in Egypt before the concrete realisation of the promise (VanGemeren 1988:106). Of great significance is that the inheritance of the land forever was conditional upon covenant loyalty; obedience to the giver of land was a condition for the inheritance. The theology of the land was inseparable from the nation’s consciousness of its unique covenant relationship with God, the giver of land (Wright 1997:23). Hope could be dashed due to disobedience. This is demonstrated by Israel when it ‘desecrated the land, oppressed the poor; injustices and unrighteousness were the order of the day’ (Ankrah 2017:138). Indeed, historically it happened when the nation was exiled for 70 years. Even in exile, eschatological hope perpetuated that the return to the inheritance is possible as promised in the covenants and prophetic narratives.

Theologically, there is a calling or appealing to humanity to reflect concretely on the reality of landless South Africans. As opposed to the possessor’s temporary prosperity, the landless and the poor’s occupation of the land should be assured. Land inheritance or ownership is a “sign of hope, and an object of promise ... the central object of hope and eschatological expectation” (Clemens 1978:94). The assurance is both current and eschatological. One bears in mind that the biblical future (eschatology) is not psychological escapism from the problems of the present. The prophets’ reference to the future was designed to affect a response and change in the present (Wright 2004:186). When it is said that the promise is eschatological, it does not mean a utopian dream of what might be but a vision of what will be because of theo-determinism, which is when God himself will be involved in doing it. Citizens are to be granted the rights and promises that lead to eschatological peace, which “involves an anticipation of the

² <https://www.sacities.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Urban-Land-Dialogues-Series-Report-WEB-Released-2018-1.pdf>

peaceful coexistence of all creatures” (Wells, Quash & Eklund 2017:371). Eschatological promise calls for a moral response in the present, so “eschatological interpretation of the Old Testament theme, such as the land in this case, rebounds back into the present world with an ethical thrust” (Wright 2004:186). A theology of land should not be read as an opium with a calming effect or a soothing balm for people to endure injustice with the eschatological hope that their turn to realise justice is futuristic – in the world to come. It should be a message of hope for the restoration “of a new quality of untrammelled joy on the fruitfulness of the land” (Wells, Quash & Eklund 2017:371). This is not just about the future bliss such as a better habitation or flourishing crop production. One realises that, in the context of this discussion, eschatology is ‘the foundation of a social, civil, and political programme of transformation of society’ (Segalerba 2020:248) from misery to joy. Resane (2022:75) refers to this transformation as not ‘just futuristic, but present. God is able to transform human miseries into hopeful expectation of restoration.’ It is the eschatology that injects into Christian hearts a sense of hope for everyday living, making a Christian to be a person of hope irrespective of circumstances (Amevenku & Boaheng 2017:35). This is what Conradie (2014:16) proposes, that ‘the focus cannot be only on future prospects for housing; it should also be on making present living conditions more bearable.’ It is the vision of promise for the restoration of the fruits of labour to the workers as foreseen by the prophet Isaiah that *they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit* (Isaiah 65:21). It is a calling to watch with dismay how prosperity gained through injustice holds no future. The possessors of today may be the dispossessed of tomorrow. Constitutional policies, procedures, and mechanisms may take long, but the goal of equality or justice for all is explicit and definite.

Some biblical texts, especially from Psalms (e.g. chapters 37, 73) and Job (e.g. Chapter 21), call for the oppressed not to worry about the prosperity of the possessors. Texts such as these seem to encourage what Van Eck (2021:17) refers to as an authentic life of sharing what one has and taking responsibility for the well-being of those excluded from what others take for granted. Commentators to these texts delve into the hermeneutical analysis of *Do not fret of those who do wrong*. Does this mean the victims of injustice should remain silent amid their misery? Should the oppressed remain silent, watching others prospering at the expense of what rightfully belongs to them, in this case, the land? This injunction calls for an almost impossible human psychological reaction. Deductively, it appears that one should not be angry at the prosperity of the privileged – in this case perpetrators of injustice. Together with their ill-gotten wealth, they shall soon perish. Fretting and envy for the wealthy bourgeois is tantamount to doubting God’s justice. These elitists are the opposite of those who trust in God and those who practice goodness. The dispossessed should remain focused on the divine intervention, as this will lead them to better outcomes, such as *dwelling in the land*. Patience and faith in the hopeless situation keep the victims of injustice floating until their misery is turned into positive outcomes. Struggles through eruptive circumstances can be approached by hope that goodness can succeed. Scott (1999:306) says, “That hope is our answer: goodness can succeed. Evil can be defeated by goodness ... Evil can be conquered only by love.” The inhabitants of the land should join forces to fight for the prevalence of justice to humanity that is continually disadvantaged by the elites. Natural and social justice leads to equitable sharing of resources, such as the land and all natural

resources intertwined with land (agriculture, mining, industry, and human settlement, etc).

The victims of dispossession in the face of despair should look ahead with confidence and courage. As negotiations at all levels of society (political and ecclesiastical) continue, the disadvantaged should develop some sense of expectancy and optimism that the divine intervention is eminent. There should be that inextinguishable flicker ignited by faith in the prevailing sovereignty of God. That hope is not wishful thinking but a biblical hope, which is the ‘confident expectation that God is willing and able to fulfil the promises he has made to those who trust in him’ (Strobel 2022:11).

In this atmosphere of hopelessness, Mofokeng (1983:18-19) gives some affirming exhortation that theologians ‘have to develop sensitivity that enables them to capture the cry of the fellow oppressed blacks as it emerges from the situation of oppression and from a new praxis.’ All South African citizens should eschatologically wait for the time when they will be peacefully settled in the land and reflectively proclaim: *Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other* (Psalm 85:10 ESV). Hope in the midst of despair is a universal desire. People universally in dire need, feeling dispossessed and stripped of their dignity, yearn for hope. It locates people’s rightful ownership. This is asserted by Msabah (2018:6), that, ‘The universality of hope makes it a quality of life for which no social group can claim its rightful ownership.’ Hope keeps victims of social injustice floating and holding on (*hupomeno*).

Dialogue towards coexistence

South Africa is known for separatism. This is separation of people based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or economic class. In this paper, separatism is the one based on the possessor and the dispossessed, landowner and the landless, leading to the separation of the rich and the poor, the marginalised and the elite. The gulf is historical, and though it was politically ended in 1994 and constitutionally in 1996, it has remained subliminally embedded in people’s hearts and minds. The Acts of Parliament and constitutional dictates seem to be failing to address the land issue. The previously advantaged and the disadvantaged are at loggerheads, as both sides feel that the law is not favouring their economic positions. The advantaged landowners (previously and mostly Whites) feel insecure, as they sense some vulnerability regarding their livelihoods. The disadvantaged (previously Blacks) sense the inadequacy of the laws to address their plight of landlessness, which leads to economic disadvantages. Debates are hot in political circles and on economic platforms. The solution is eschatological hope that can be enhanced through dialogue. As theology is never a silent science, it should be taking the lead in negotiating for a peaceful situation.

The leading experts in all spheres of scientific disciplines, such as theologians, agriculturalists, urban planners, and indigenous leaders, should convene regularly to confer on land rights. Inclusivity of dialogists should share creative spaces to share knowledge with all the stakeholders to promote the importance of land ownership by individuals and communities. This dialogue should aim to support multi-stakeholder decision-making around environmental and ecological concerns in the public space. In particular, South African theologians from all disciplines or persuasions should engage robustly in the discourse initiatives regarding the land. This is further necessitated by the fact that ‘Land is communal, spiritual, sacramental, healing and eschatological’

(Chimhanda 2014:37). This spiritual connection with the land is a rallying call to theologians to take after the example of the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27:1–11), who ‘challenged the ancient traditional biblical laws with their patriarchal endorsements that restricted them to land ownership’ (Resane 2021:1). Comprehensively, according to a well-noted South African Black theologian, Vellem (2016:2), land is the rendezvous of black people’s ‘liturgical rhythms of dance and song in their celebration of life. Land is life. Land has a body. Land has a womb! Land can be scarred!’ This view is the precedence for epistemological dialogue regarding the land.

A theology of dialogue operates on public platforms since it is itself a method of public theology. Through ecclesiastical formations, theology should immerse itself into land issues without any reservations or any form of bias. This is the time for the secular governments to learn about a theological stance on land ownership justice. There should be an understanding that theology stands synergistically with culture, that humanity deserves justice when it comes to land occupation. It is an open secret that currently land is commodified and politicised. This is the cry of Hlumelo Biko (2019:140), that land has been balkanised into some ethnic enclaves, where much-needed land redistribution is associated with political association, affiliation, or connection – a ticking time bomb that may explode if dialogue is not expedited. The dialogue must be comprehensive regarding the land – even if it means opening the wounds of the past or reviving the memory of the injustices of the past. Historical anomalies should serve as the base for understanding the current dialogical deliberations. Vorster (2020:16) alludes to the fact that original sin talk can be employed in public moral discourse and used as a diagnostic tool in policies to redress the injustices of the past. This aligns well with Vellem (2016:2), that, ‘There is no possible solution for the land question without the symbolic significance of black African values in the construction of land imaginaries post-1994.’

Conclusion

Land is the livelihood of humanity. The indigenous populations of Africa were dispossessed by the imperialists of this livelihood. Out of greedy aspirations for commercial gains, land confiscations impoverished Africans and left many devastated emotionally, physically, and even spiritually. Dispossession is humiliation and infringement of people’s dignity and sentience. While the colonialists regarded land as a ladder to supremacy, a luxury or self-exertion, they disregarded theological dogma that land is “the theatre of God’s glory, the playground of God’s delight, the garden of God’s encounter with us” (Wells 2016:49).

Theology invites the reader to enter into dialogue with both the possessor and the dispossessed in order to bring equitable justice and reconciliation. In dialogue, theology refrains from fretting, envy, bias, and anger. The expected outcomes should lead to trusting in the Lord, doing good, dwelling in the land peacefully, delighting in the Lord, commitment to the Lord, remaining calm and peaceful before the Lord, and waiting upon the Lord. All these directives are not dictatorial or imposing. They remind a believer that, although the constitutional processes and legal approaches are in progress, one should remain posted in faith, knowing that all things work together for good for those who are in Christ Jesus. Activism against evil is justified; raising one’s voice for justice is legitimate, but one should not use the methods that will end on the side of the perpetrators

of evil. A dialogist cannot enter dialogue with anger. Inevitably, there is an emotional and psychological malaise. Being robbed of the land is humiliating, but dialogue about regaining it should be in the spirit of peaceful dialogue with one goal in mind: peaceful human coexistence in the land.

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