

Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation

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1. Introduction

No statement in the history of political science as well as that of Christian missions expresses the dilemma that confronts black South Africans in their relationships with the Bible with greater precision and has whipped up more emotions than the following: "When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we 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". 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 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 disinheritance and eradicate exploitation of humans by other humans.

The statement we referred to talks about the connection between *black Christians, the Bible and the struggle for liberation*. This is the issue that will occupy us today.

The historical dilemma – The Bible as an instrument of social control and social struggle.

It is a generally accepted fact which will undoubtedly come up again and again in this conference that the Bible first reached the shores of our part of the African continent through the sometimes uncomfortable but nonetheless successful partnership between colonialism and the Christian missionary enterprise. Many critical African writers, both secular and religious, have written extensively about this partnership and its benefits to each of the partners involved. Some have argued that the missionary enterprise used colonialism as an effective and readily available vehicle to reach the religious heart of the so-called 'dark continent' and win it for Jesus Christ. They add that in the missionary use of this vehicle they succeeded in two things. Firstly, they reached their destination with the Bible, which is the religious heart of Africa, emptied it of all the 'evil' contents that led to vio-

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lent African social structures, corrupt political institutions and a weak economic system. Consequent to their activities the African people have accepted a new religion and the Bible as a guide in their lives. They have been introduced to new European cultural values, norms and attitudes and that their entire society has been changed. For this work, the defenders of the missionaries argue, they deserve eternal gratitude from Africans. Bishop Desmond Tutu agrees with this line of thought but adds a critical note with which we agree, saying: "But it remains true to say that they sought to Europeanize us before they could Christianize us. They have consequently jeopardized the entire Christian enterprise since Christianity has failed to be rooted sufficiently deeply in the African soil, since they have tended to make us feel somewhat uneasy and guilty about what we could not alter even if we had tried until doomsday – our Africanness."

In addition to the change of the African personality and society that have been achieved through the use of the Bible, another achievement is always added. It is contended that these men did a lot to blunt the sharp edges of the sword of the colonizers with their moral influence on the latter. Had it not been for their numerous interventions, it is said, Africans would have been ruthlessly butchered. While this may be true, it should not, however, be forgotten that more often than not, the missionaries invoked the same violence of the colonial powers whenever they wished to mete out punishment on the so-called stubborn and intransigent African kings.

Other African writers have also argued very persuasively that it was colonialism that used the missionary enterprise to soften the hearts and

minds of our African forebears. As Gwinyai Muzorewa aptly puts it: "What is indisputable is the fact that the colonists tended to use the missionaries to make their task easier". He follows up this assertion by addressing the congruence of their goals and says: "... consequently, there is a thin line between the missionary intention and the intent of the colonizer¹ ..."² B.M. Magubane is even more emphatic when addressing this issue. He argues very forcefully that "the initial act of conquest was buttressed and institutionalized by ideological activities" that resulted in the African people themselves loudly admitting the cultural hegemony of their conquerors.³ Magubane further argues that it was necessary for Africans to be incorporated into the mental and cultural universe of their white conquerors through an ideological onslaught. Hence the presence of Christian missionaries who were armed with the Bible on the colonial ox wagon when its wheels rolled violently through the breadth and length of our continent. In the Bible they had the most potent canon in the entire ideological armoury targeted at the fundamental pillars of African social structure, religion and culture.

Magubane's assessment of missions and the use to which the Bible was put has not just been sucked from his own thumb. Many missionaries confirmed the legitimacy of this indictment of the Bible in their reports to the missionary societies as well as in their memoirs. Brownlee, a British missionary for instance, wrote and said: "As the natives came under the influence of the teaching of missionaries, in proportion to the spread of missionary influence the desire for articles of European manufacture grew and spread, and I think (it) will well satisfy

this meeting that to the missionary mainly we owe the great revenue now derived from native trade." The same sentiment was expressed by Dr. John Philip of the London Missionary Society in his *Researches in South Africa*. John de Gruchy in his *Church struggle in South Africa* also points out that the initial opposition to missions among Africans in South Africa was defeated by an assurance given by the missionaries that the Bible would, contrary to the colonists' fears, create obedient and loyal hardworking slaves out of the indigenous people.

Stories that come from areas where the slave trade and slave labour was practised also confirm this indictment. In that case too the initial efforts to introduce the Bible to captured Africans were opposed until the slave owners were assured of the benefits of Christian missions. Slaves were severely punished by their masters if found reading the Bible until the assurance referred to above was given and kept. In other words the missionaries were certain that there was enough material in the Bible which would enable them to keep their word of making better slaves out of a colonized people.

However much one may try to plead the innocence of missionaries as the overzealous children of the Victorian age, and many have done this, the presence of the Bible which most of us still accept as the normative document of the Christian faith on the colonial wagon presents us as present victims of colonialism and capitalist exploitation which it ushered in with a contradiction we cannot easily ignore. We have to admit that the Bible which was a great problem as well as a blessing to millions of our ancestors for two or more centuries, still constitutes a problem and a blessing to millions of

our contemporary African people, both Christian and non-Christian, religious and non-religious. And this historic paradox cannot remain unresolved to haunt of our coming generations. We have to respond to it with all the zeal and intelligence at our command. But as things stand we can respond best only if we are prepared to learn from the responses of those Black Christians who went before us in order not to repeat their mistakes.

2. Black responses

Looking at the history of Black responses to incursions which the Bible and its message made in an ideological field that had hitherto been the exclusive territory of African religion and its oral traditions we can distinguish three different kinds of Black response to which we shall refer only briefly and in passing. Firstly, we notice the heroic defence of the legitimacy of African traditional religions and their hegemonic field. In spite of all the energies expended in this effort these religions have lost the struggle for exclusive ideological and spiritual control of the Black community. Secondly, as a consequence of the loss of control to which we referred, the African Independent Churches emerged as churches of compromise, in which elements of the Christian tradition as represented by the Bible and those of traditional religion as conveyed by African oral tradition are synthesized. Thirdly, the historic churches or colonial churches or even white churches which represent a total surrender of the African ideological field and a consequent total assimilation into European Christendom mushroomed as Blacks were converted into them. These three responses constitute the inexhaustible source from which present Black Christians and theologians

in South Africa draw their own different responses to the paradox presented by the Bible in a situation of unabating oppression and disinheritance of the indigenous people of South Africa. I wish now to move on to a discussion of the present state of the paradox we referred to above under the heading:

Contemporary paradox: the Bible as a problem as well as a solution

The paradoxical nature of the Bible is not only inherent. It is also external. It derives from another concrete paradox, i.e. the paradox of racist oppression and the exploitation of black people by white people. It also derives from a religious paradox – that the overwhelming number of people from both races are Christians who swear on the Bible and pledge allegiance to Jesus the Messiah and his teachings. It is internationally recognized that the forebears of the present white Christians used the Bible to justify white superiority and the right of whites to be masters over Blacks. Hence the well-known partnership between the gun and the Bible. Even the present generation of white Christians continue to use the Bible in many of their efforts to resist change. What is worse, they even launch endless Christian revival campaigns to passify Black resistance to oppression. When Black Christians see all these conservative and reactionary efforts and hear the Bible being quoted in support of reactionary causes they realize more and more that the Bible itself is indeed a serious problem to people who want to be free.

Many Black Christians through the ages have tried to locate and solve this problem of the Bible in many different ways. The most commonly held approach has been to accuse oppressor-

preachers of *misusing* the Bible for their oppressive purposes and objectives. This misuse is based, it is argued, on misinterpretations of biblical texts to support or promote oppressive intentions.

It is clear that this critique is based on the assumption that the Bible is essentially a book of liberation. This assumption is held in spite of the obvious presence in the Bible of texts, stories and books which can only serve an oppressive cause. This argument, which is generally held by trained theologians who have been brought into the ideological universe of the dominant and oppressive Christian world and accepted it, is not completely based on fact. We will concede that this misinterpretation has indeed been done. But this is the case with some texts and certainly not all. It could easily be done only with texts that already appeared to be written to promote a different cause namely, the cause of liberation. We contend that there are stories and texts which are basically oppressive and whose interpretation (not misinterpretation) only serves the cause of oppression. On the contrary it is (in fact) their interpretation and use for liberation that would constitute misinterpretation and misuse. There are numerous texts which have long disqualified themselves in the eyes of oppressed people. We can refer to the well-known Pauline position on slavery and on the social position and behaviour of women. We think that in the light of this textual reality formally-trained hermeneutists and exegetes of the downtrodden should abandon the ideologically-motivated concept of the unity of the Bible as well as the assumption that it is a book of liberation per se. They should join those grassroot Christians who made the necessary distinctions

long ago and identified their texts and used them to the exclusion of others.

In many cases the problem of the Bible has been transferred to the area of ethics or the practical concretization of biblical teaching. In this attempt to solve the dilemma many downtrodden Christians have accused many preachers and racist whites of not practising what they preach. Again that may well be the case as far as certain texts, that are ambiguous or broad enough to allow for many options at a practical level, are concerned. We want to argue that there are texts, stories and traditions in the Bible which lend themselves to only oppressive interpretations and oppressive uses because of their inherent oppressive nature. And that no amount of textual surgery or hermeneutic juggling and semantic gymnastics can change that. In fact all surgical attempts to transplant the blame or stretch the interpretation to "save" or "co-opt" these oppressive texts for the oppressed only serve the interests of the oppressors who desire to have the oppressed under the same cultural, spiritual and ideological as themselves because they are in control of it. Instead of pursuing these diversionary paths oppressed Christians and theologians have to acknowledge the reality of this problem, assess its gravity, commit themselves to search for its solution and chart a new and independent approach to the biblical text, as well as a more relevant epistemological cause.

On the other hand, when many Black Christians read their history of struggle carefully, they come upon many Black heroes and heroines who were inspired and sustained by some passages and stories of the Bible in their struggle, when they read and interpreted them in the light of their Black

experience, history and culture. They could consequently resist dehumanization and the destruction of their faith in God the liberator. It is this noble Black Christian history that helps to bring out the other side of the Bible, namely, the nature of the Bible as a book of hope for the downtrodden.

A careful reading of the experiences and witness of the early church confirms the correctness of the experiences of our people concerning the usefulness of the Bible as a book with a message of survival, resistance and hope. As we all know, the weakest, neglected, poor and marginalized people in Palestine at the time of Jesus felt attracted to Jesus' practices and message about his God and human life. What Jesus taught and did benefitted them materially and spiritually and gave them a reason for hoping for a different future and believing in their right to a decent human existence. It is no accident that after Jesus' departure this first Christian community structured and organised their communal and material life in the manner in which Acts 4 relates. This was a thoroughly practised structure of material survival and basis for hope for the weak and poor in that threatened community at that historical period and those imperial economic circumstances. At a spiritual and ideological level Jesus had given them a new way of reading the Old Testament and understanding their God. With this new way they could counteract the official reading of the Old Testament as well as the dominant view of God as the God of the law who demands total and blind obedience or else Against this view they witnessed to a God who delights in the salvation of people, the removal of their burdens and not in their destruction. They could hold onto a gracious God who is merciful to

the weak and the blind who fall continuously or lose their way in the socio-economic and political jungle. Jesus also brought them to a God who champions the cause of the victims of people's inhumanity to the point of suffering and the cross.

It is abundantly evident that this basic social and theological position was modified during the period of missions into Europe and other areas of the Mediterranean basin or of the Roman Empire. In this expansion of the church the interpretation of the basic text – the praxis of Jesus and its translation into concrete social structures, relations and attitudes also changed. For example, the original communism of the first community gave way to tolerance of economic disparities, with the proviso that the poor should not suffer from their lack of material possessions. In spite of these modifications which continued to be made up to the point of Constantinian compromise, the position of the earliest Christian community remained as the reference point in understanding the praxis of Jesus. Every Christian generation could go back to it in search of a liberative approach to the biblical text.

This new insight becomes a source of encouragement to contemporary Blacks to assert their claim on the Bible as a weapon of ideological and spiritual struggle for liberation. As they assert this claim a new kind of struggle ensues, namely, the struggle for the Bible or, to be more precise, the struggle for control of the Bible.

This new struggle is accepted not as a substitute or alternative to the physical one but in addition to it. It is realized that the physical struggle for control of the material means of subsistence has to be complemented by a struggle for control of the Bible that

contains the means for ideological and spiritual subsistence. But since the Bible is an ecumenical document part of which is even shared with adherents of the Jewish religion, it will be futile to expend a lot of energy and time in an effort to control it. This has been realized by Black theologians. What is within reach as a viable option is to insist on finding and controlling the tools of opening and interpreting the Bible as well as participating in the process of interpretation itself. The dawning of this consciousness thrust Black theologians into the centre of what Harvey Cox calls the "age-old hermeneutical class struggle" which is a struggle to resist and contest the interpretation of scripture by theologians who represent Christians of the dominant race and political order. This is how our version of Black Theology emerged as a broad theological framework within which the new hermeneutic operates. But here again the epistemological break with dominant European theological language and methods was very difficult to effect due to the many centuries of enslavement to the hermeneutical yoke of our oppressors. Many Black theologians continue to slip back to the use of the dominant liberal hermeneutics, thus confirming the assertion made by Anthony Mansueto that "existential or religious commitment to social revolution will not substitute for scientific analysis of the valence of a tradition in the class struggle."³ This process of one step forward and two steps backwards in the hermeneutical area is a clarion call for hermeneutical vigilance on the part of the entire community of black theologians lest the gains which have been made in this area be lost because as Archie Mafeje says "clear identification of issues (including theological issues) is as impor-

tant as fighting in the streets or in the mountains".⁴

Some people will undoubtedly argue that this hermeneutical option is not the only one, nor even the best one. They'll suggest that the best among the available options is to disavow the Christian faith and consequently be rid of the obnoxious Bible. And indeed many Black people especially the youth have gone further than Steve Biko who asked rhetorically whether the decolonization process should not be accompanied by a process of the dechristianization of Africa – a process which if successfully accomplished, would remove the Bible from Africa. Young blacks have categorically identified the Bible as an oppressive document by its very nature and to its very core. Hence the refusal of all oppressors in South Africa and elsewhere to part with it. They have zealously campaigned for its expulsion from the oppressed Black community but with little success. And this 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,⁵ 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.

In this situation of very limited ideological options, 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 just leaving it to confuse, frustrate or even destroy our people.

A hermeneutic for the liberation of the Bible

It is an open secret that Black people have, ever since the Bible was brought to them, asserted their right to appropriate and interpret it according to their socio-economic, cultural and religious needs. And this they have done in spite of concerted opposition from those who brought it. Guided by these interests they have appropriated the Bible selectively and critically. Only portions, texts and stories of the bible which were regarded, in the light of these interests, to be supportive of the immediate and long term goals of the majority of that religious community were appropriated. Those portions, texts and stories of the Bible which were seen to be clearly opposed to their communal concern for individual and communal survival were ignored or rejected outrightly. These Black Christians did this informal hermeneutical work without any feelings of guilt for allegedly dismembering the canon of scripture. Neither did they feel that their faith would be weakened by this exercise. Instead they felt that that was the most responsible way of being authentically African and truly Christian at the same time – without dishonouring their creator and saviour.

In this hermeneutical work the social context is brought into a dynamic and fruitful interaction with the Bible by these untrained Black hermeneutists. The progressive elements of the Black life experience, history and culture interact with the progressive life experience, histories and cultures of some biblical communities. Other life experiences, histories and cultures of

other biblical personalities, and communities are frowned upon and rejected on the grounds of either being unproductive or counter-productive. Intuitively most pious Black Christians at the present stage of the struggle for freedom will, for example, identify with Moses and the Hebrew slaves as they engage in the long and bitter struggle to undermine the ancient Egyptian economy and weaken the Pharaonic political grip on them. In the light of the internal and external difficulties encountered by Black Christians on our national "exodus" Black exegetes are attracted to the stories about the difficulties of the desert journey to the biblical promised land. The prophetic interventions when things went wrong also captivate the minds of the Black Christian community. These and many other areas of the Bible constitute the canon for Christians at this stage of our "exodus" The history of theology has indisputable evidence which proves that the de facto canon of a particular Christian community is determined, among other factors, by the context and challenges of the historical trajectory of that community. The same applies to the South African theatre of Christian life and political struggle. Black theologians who are organically connected to the above Christian hermeneutical communities but who also stand with both feet in the liberation struggle do not frown on this hermeneutical approach of lay Christians. On the contrary they lift the above hermeneutical exercise to a higher formal level. In a positive response to Anthony Mansueto, they search for analytical tools that can be helpful in the search of Black Christians for the right hermeneutical links in the Bible. Using these analytical tools as mem-

bers of a silenced, marginalized and sometimes ignored race, they discover the silenced, ignored and marginalized people in the Bible and develop an affinity with them. They also discover the text behind the text of the Bible – a text that has been silenced but one that speaks through this silence about the struggles of the silenced and marginalized people of the Bible. As members of a people whose story of pain, fears and hopes has been suppressed, they are enabled, by their physical and psychological scars, together with the analytical tools they have chosen, to discover the suppressed and forgotten stories of the weak and the poor of the Bible. These seem, according to them, to be the stories wherein God is identifying with the forgotten and the weak and is actively retrieving them from the margins of the social world. It is through these stories that God the creator of humans is manifested as the God of the oppressed and accepted as such. This creator God acts incarnately in Jesus to end the rampant enmity in creation and restore real humanity to people. Only the reading of these stories of the downtrodden God among the downtrodden of this world strengthens the tormented faith of the oppressed of our time, as well as enhancing the quality of their commitment to the physical struggle for liberation. This discovery constitutes the liberation of the Bible from the clutches of the dominant in the Christian fold who impose the stories that justify their victories onto the oppressed.

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