

# The Implications of the text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa\*

Dr Itumeleng J Mosala

## Introduction

A word about the definition of terms is appropriate at the outset. There exists a great deal of confusion concerning what exactly is meant by Liberation Theology. In part, the confusion relates to the use of terms. There is also a conceptual misunderstanding in this confusion. Furthermore, it is not being extreme to suspect a fair deal of ideological distortion. That is, a deliberate misunderstanding that seeks to make a mockery of or to obscure things.

As far as terminology goes, the confusion is of two forms. There is the failure to distinguish between Liberation Theology and Theology of Liberation. Liberation Theology refers to the Latin American form of the Theology of Liberation. It is associated with the names of activist scholars such as Segundo, Gutierrez, Assmann, Bonino, etc. By contrast, the term Theology of Liberation is generic and denotes a movement of Third World people involved in a struggle to break the chains of cul-

tural-religious imperialism that help to perpetuate their political and economic exploitation.

The second form of the terminological confusion involves a discourse imperialism of a certain kind. At first sight, there may seem to be no distinction between this form of terminological confusion and the first. There is here a tendency to refer to all Third World theologies of the poor and oppressed peoples as Liberation Theologies, thus subsuming them under the Latin American version of the Theology of Liberation. This mistake is made mostly, though by no means exclusively, by white radical people who identify culturally more with the European descendants of Latin America than with Third World people. Cornel West raises the question of the political implication of this cultural preference of the political left when he writes:

For oppressed coloured (black) people the central problem is not only repressive capitalist regimes, but also oppressive

---

\* *This Paper was originally read at the International Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature, in Sheffield, England, and subsequently given in a modified form as a lecture at Rhodes University, Grahamstown.*



European civilizing attitudes. And even Marxists who reject oppressive capitalist regimes often display oppressive European civilizing attitudes toward coloured peoples. In this sense, such Marxists, though rightly critical of capitalism, remain captives of the worst of European culture.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, I resolved that on this occasion a simple apology for the Theology of Liberation would be grossly inappropriate. This is so not only because this theology has been in existence for so long that it is now an inescapable reality, but also because so many significant strides have already been made in developing it. In the case of South Africa, black theologians have been at work for more than a decade now wrestling with many issues of the nature, the method, the specific form, the epistemology, the sources and the goals of the Black Theology of Liberation. More recently, the question of the Black Feminist Theology of liberation has emerged as a high priority on the agenda of Black Theology.

For the reason, therefore, of wanting to get on with the business of *doing* Black Theology as opposed to simply *apologising* for it, as well as for the reason of giving priority to a Black Feminist theological discourse, I chose to address the following topic:

### **The Implications of the text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa**

#### *1. Reading the Bible in South Africa*

That the Bible is a thoroughly political document is eloquently attested to by its role in the Apartheid system in South Africa. No other political or ideological system in the modern world that I know of derives itself so directly from the Bible as the ideology of Apartheid. The superiority of white

people over black people, for example, is premised on the divine privileging of the Israelites over the Canaanites in the conquest texts of the Old Testament.

For this reason, in South Africa, all manner of theological sophistry has been produced by way of countering this embarrassing use of the Bible. The dominant opposition discourse against this way of using the Bible has been the liberal humanist one. The key characteristic of this oppositional perspective has not been its fundamental disapproval of the conquest texts of the Old Testament. Rather, this model concurs with the conservative model in its approval of the conquest texts, but disagrees with the likes of Apartheid ideologues' interpretation of them.

Thus in effect a biblical hermeneutics of textual or authorial collusion/collaboration rather than one of struggle or revolt dominated the debate concerning the reading of the Bible. Increasingly, therefore, biblical appropriation in South Africa became alienating to Blacks as their reality constantly contradicted their supposed inclusion in the biblically based love of God.

Consequently, the struggles of the 1960s which led to the exile, imprisonment and banishment of many Blacks and their organisations, notwithstanding God's love for them witnessed to in the Bible, produced a crisis in black people's self-insertion in the story of the Bible. The rise of Black Theology, which like its counterpart – Liberation Theology – in Latin America, grounded itself in the liberation stories of the Bible, signified black people's discursive attempt to deal with this crisis. This new reading of the Bible by black people themselves in the light of the struggle for liberation would attempt



to argue that liberation and not conquest or oppression was the key message of the Bible.

Black Theology and Liberation Theology's biblical hermeneutics was a product of a crisis situation and not of a revolt on the part of the readers. In South Africa it was not until the post-1976 period when black people seem to have looked death in the face and come to terms with it in their struggle against the forces of Apartheid that a revolutionary reading practice became possible. This practice is an integral part of the social insurgency of the black masses and a necessity of the organic location of its subjects in the context of that insurgency.

The new and developing biblical hermeneutics of liberation differs from the liberal humanist tradition in that it represents a theoretical and not simply a moral mutation from ruling class hermeneutics. Such new reading of the Bible, particularly in the context of South Africa, would concur with Terry Eagleton when he says in support of what in literary criticism has come to be known as the "Revolt of the Reader" movement:

That readers should be forcibly subjected to textual authority is disturbing enough; that they should be insultingly invited to hug their chains, merge into empathetic harmony with their oppressors to the point where they befuddledly cease to recognize whether they are subject or object, worker, boss, or product is surely the ultimate opium.<sup>2</sup>

A study of Esther's relevance for African women's liberation struggle will need to take into account the tradition of the revolt of the reader that is becoming part of Black Theology's liberation praxis. Not only will this hermeneutics refuse to submit to the chains imposed on it by the biblical exegetes of Apartheid or those of the

liberal humanist tradition including its black and liberation theology versions, but it will contend against the "regimes of truth" (Cornel West: *The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual*, 1985:120) of these traditions as they manifest themselves in the text of the Bible itself.

## 2. *The Biblical Scholarship of Esther*

Most studies of the book of Esther are preoccupied with questions of the religiosity, canonical status, historicity and purpose. The problem with these studies is not that they address themselves to these questions but that they rely heavily on the text itself not only for information but also for the theoretical frameworks with which the texts must be interpreted. Thus most works simply retell the story, assess the obvious irreligiosity of the text and confirm the book's own confession of its purpose.

Traditional scholarship does, however, raise crucial issues which a biblical hermeneutics of liberation cannot ignore. Norman Gottwald, for instance, addresses the question of the plot of the story, "replete with dramatic reversals"<sup>3</sup> which is important to note in order to understand the rhetorical devices employed by the dominant ideology of the text. It is also crucial to observe with scholars concerning the historicity of the book that:

The archaic placement of the story in the Persian court is accomplished with considerable knowledge of its inner workings and customs, but there are so many historical inaccuracies and improbabilities that the work cannot be taken at face value. The story may draw on memories of conflicts over Persian policies toward the Jews in which the Jews serving in the imperial court were involved, but the actual setting of the narrator is in the Maccabean-Hasmonean era. This is indicated by several lines



of evidence: the intensity and bitterness of the Jewish-Gentile conflicts in the book which are pictured as "fights to the finish", the lack of external references to the book until late Hellenistic times, and the very late appearance of Purim as a recognized Jewish festival.<sup>4</sup>

Historical Critical scholarship provides these insights which cannot be ignored by newer exegetical and hermeneutical methods. It must be noted, however, that traditional scholarship consistently fails to draw the ideological implications of its historical and literary studies. This it does because it is often in ideological collusion with the text. A criticism that sets itself the task of serving the cause of human liberation must overcome this limitation. For as Terry Eagleton rightly argues:

The task of criticism... is not to situate itself within the same space as the text, allowing it to speak or completing what it necessarily leaves unsaid. On the contrary, its function is to install itself in the very incompleteness of the work in order to *theorise* it – to explain the ideological necessity of those 'not-saids' which constitute the very principle of its identity. Its object is the unconsciousness of the work – that of which it is not, and cannot be, aware.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. *African Women's Struggle for Liberation*

The hermeneutical weapons of struggle of African women must of necessity issue out of the specificity of their praxis within what Cornel West calls the process of "critical negation, wise preservation, and insurgent transformation of (the) black lineage which protects the earth and projects a better world".<sup>6</sup>

In the South African situation black women's struggle takes at once the form of a gender, national, and class struggle. The oppression and exploitation of black women operates at all

those levels. What is more, these dimensions of African women's struggle span different historical periods and social systems each of which has inflected this struggle in particular ways.

Contemporary African women are products of pre-capitalist semi-feudal, colonial, and settler-colonial monopoly capitalist racist social systems, on the one hand, as well as of heroic anti-sexist, anti-colonial anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles in South Africa, on the other hand. At different times and in different ways aspects of these processes and struggles enjoyed dominance or subservience in determining who African women are and how they would wage their struggle.

Thus given this complex nature of African women's struggle a biblical hermeneutics arising out of such a struggle can hardly be simplistic. It is rather akin to the programme that Cornel West suggests for revolutionary black intellectuals. He writes:

The new 'regime of truth' to be pioneered by black thinkers is neither a hermetic discourse (or set of discourses), which safeguards mediocre black intellectual production, nor the latest fashion of black writing, which is often motivated by the desire to parade for the white bourgeois intellectual establishment. Rather it is inseparable from the emergence of new cultural forms which prefigure (and point toward) a post-Western civilization.<sup>7</sup>

A hermeneutics of liberation which is envisaged for an African women's struggle will be at once a human, African and feminist hermeneutics of liberation; it will be polemical in the sense of being critical of the history, the devices, the culture, the ideologies and agendas of both the text and itself; it will be appropriative of the resources and victories inscribed in the



biblical text as well as its own contemporary text; it will be projective in that its task is performed in the service of a transformed and liberated social order.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. *Reading the Text of Esther*

##### 4.1 *A Feudal-Tributary Text*

The social formation implied by the text of Esther is clearly a kind of feudal or tributary system. Chapter 1 describes the social and political topography in the Persian Empire which patently presupposes the tributary mode of production; a hierarchical political structure with the monarch – *melek* – at the head of the royal ruling class, followed by the chiefs and governors (*sarim*) still within the ruling nobility (vss.1-3); then follows the non-royal ruling class fractions, some of whom may be properly designated middle class, the influential sector – probably by virtue of its property ownership – advisers and people of high office (*gedolim*, *hakamim* and *yoshibim*, vss.5,13-14). The Queen (*malkah*) is of course a member of the royal nobility, but even in a fairly straightforward descriptive text like chapter 1 her insertion into the ruling class is gender-structured (vss.10-11) where mention of her necessitates the royal summoning of seven eunuchs, the latter symbolising the private property character of the sexuality of the king's wife. In fact, the fundamental problematic of this chapter as indeed of the whole text of Esther is the *gender structuring of politics*.

The feudal social relations of the Persian Empire as articulated in this text reflect two forms of oppression and exploitation. The one form is present by its absence; it is represented by the "not-said" of the text. This form of oppression is signified in the verses of chapter 1 that describe the use to

which the surplus production of the economy was put. In typical feudal and tributary fashion, surplus was squandered on non-productive luxury goods and a luxurious life-style among the ruling classes. None of it was invested in productive activities or technologies in order to enable development to take place. More importantly, verses 5-9 which describe this wasteful expenditure of the economic products simultaneously functions to obscure the social relations of production on which this consumptionist practice is premised. It mystifies the fact that behind these luxurious goods and this extravaganza lie exploited, oppressed and dispossessed peasants, serfs, and sub-classes. This text, which is otherwise excellent in its provision of socio-economic data, is eloquent by its silence on the conditions and struggles of the non-kings, non-office holders, non-chiefs, non-governors and non-queens in the Persian empire.

The second form of oppression is patriarchy. This specific kind of oppression is an inherent part of the structure of feudal society. The central thrust of the book begins, in chapter 1, around the question of the anti-patriarchal revolt of Queen Vashti. The text's agenda is spun around the view, generated by the text itself and representing its dominant ideology, that the audacity of one woman unleashed the political possibilities reflected approvingly in the rest of the book. All this, however, is located in and refracted through a feudal social structural arrangement, producing a thoroughly feudal text.

African women who are themselves products and victims of past feudal legacies and are presently historical subjects in the context of transformed



but pervasive tributary/feudal practices surviving under capitalism, understand the specificity of this form of oppression. Further, they recognise that this oppression cannot simply be subsumed under other kinds of oppression such as capitalist or colonial oppression. For this reason the revolt of Queen Vashti represent a form of struggle with which an African biblical feminist hermeneutic of liberation must identify. It does not accept the implicit condemnation of Vashti by the text, and eschews the technique whereby her revolt is used as reason for the rise of an apparently more acceptable queen. This identification is possible only on the basis of a biblical hermeneutics of struggle.

#### 4.2 *A Survival Text*

The book of Esther builds its story around the memory of very difficult, times under colonial exile. The specific lesson it seeks to draw attention to revolves around the struggle for survival. In particular, two forms of survival are accented in this story: cultural and national survival. Needless to say that these two types of survival are inseparable, though not identical.

The material conditions of the practice of survival presupposed by the text are political powerlessness, economic exploitation, cultural and national alienation. The text proposes its own solution. It suggests a pure survival strategy, which is not underpinned by any liberative political ideology. According to this solution Esther gets incorporated into the feudal haven of the King, Mordecai is appointed an administrator in the colonial political machinery and later an even higher honour is given him. Through the cooperation of these two figures the rest of the oppressed Jewish

community manage to survive the odds against them, and in fact find themselves in a position where they outpace the Persians at their own game.

The price that the oppressed pay for this favourable turn of events for them is at least two-fold. Firstly, the oppressed must be seen to have bought heavily into the dominant ideology in order that their survival struggle should find approval. In chapter 9 this ideological capitulation is expressed in three terse but powerful repetitious statements: vs.10 "However, there was no looting"; vs.15 "But again, they did no looting"; vs.16 "But they did no looting". This principle of upholding the sanctity of property over the life of people is well known as part of ruling-class ideology. The final chapter of the book of Esther exposes the politics of this ideology when it summarises the thrust of its discourse:

King Xerxes imposed forced labour on the people of the coastal regions of his empire as well as on those of the interior. ... Mordecai the Jew was second in rank only to King Xerxes himself. He was honoured and well-liked by his fellow-Jews. He worked for the good of his people and for the security of all their descendants. (1,3)

Secondly, in this book the survival of the group is achieved first and foremost by the alienation of Esther's gender-power and its integration into the patriarchal structures of feudalism.

#### 4.3 *A Patriarchal Text*

More than being a feudal and survival discourse, the book of Esther is a patriarchal text. There are at least three objections that a biblical hermeneutics of liberation must raise against it. These three are related to each other and to the questions raised in relation



to the text's feudal and survival character.

Firstly, the text's choice of a female character to achieve what are basically patriarchal ends is objectionable. The fact that the story is woven around Esther does not make her the heroine. The hero of the story is Mordecai who needless to say gives nothing of himself for what he gets. Esther struggles, but Mordecai reaps the fruit of the struggle. African women who work within liberation movements and other groups will be very familiar with these kinds of dynamics. A truly liberative biblical hermeneutics will struggle against this tendency.

Secondly, the book of Esther sacrifices gender struggles to national struggles. In the name of the struggle for the national survival of the Jewish people it disprivileges the question of gender oppression and exploitation. The matter of the subsumption of some struggles under others is a serious issue of discourse imperialism. In the book of Esther this problem is especially unacceptable given the purely nationalist character of the national struggle. The Maccabean-Hasmonean revolution which probably underlies the nationalist struggle of the text of Esther is known to have replaced Greek Hellenism with Jewish Hellenism.

Thirdly, the discourse of Esther sup-

presses class issues, including the class character of cultural practices. The feast of Purim, for example, which represents the principal cultural benefit of the Esther revolution, is not located in class terms in such a way that proper ideological choices can be made about it. In this it is very much like many cultural practices that seem inherently autocratic in the demands they place on their people.

### 5. Conclusion

This essay has tried to take seriously Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's critique of what she calls the biblical hermeneutics of consent.<sup>9</sup> In taking this critique seriously it has argued for the need for cultural-materialist biblical hermeneutics of struggle. Such a hermeneutics will raise questions of the material, ideological and cultural conditions of production of the text. It is argued here that it is only when such questions are raised that the political issues affecting nations, women, races, age groups, and classes will receive proper treatment in the interpretation of the Bible.

The conviction that has been articulated elsewhere must be reiterated here, namely, that oppressed communities must liberate the Bible so that the Bible can liberate them. An oppressed Bible oppresses and a liberated Bible liberates.

### Bibliography

1. Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," *Cultural Critique*, Vol.7, (Fall 1985) p 256.
2. Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain* (London: Verso, 1986) p 102.
3. Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) p 561.
4. *Ibid*, p 562.
5. Terry Eagleton.
6. Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," p 124.
7. *Ibid*, p 122.
8. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*.
9. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p 43ff.