

LAND, CLASS AND THE BIBLE IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY.

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The Bible is inseparable from the modern history of South Africa. It was there at the founding of modern South Africa when white colonisers dispossessed the Africans of their land and created out of them a wage class with nothing but their labour power to sell. When Apartheid, as a specific ideology of racial oppression and exploitation was established, the Bible was there. The Bible is there in the present Constitution of the South African government. The Bible is there in every aspect of South African life in curious and often violently contradictory ways.

Not only was the Bible present at the moment of the enslavement of black South Africans, but it became the mechanism through which and the reason why a settler colonial group of white people took the land of black people.

Lest any political confusion is created, let me explain my use of the word "clans" in the title of this paper. While the term may be perfectly clear to those who are familiar with its use in the Hebrew Bible, its application to the South African situation, without further explanation, can be dangerous. It is my intention to avoid as hard as I can any connection with the idea of tribes which for us in South Africa has caused us much pain through the policy of Bantustans or Homelands which the government imposed on us.

Clans in this paper translates the Hebrew term *mishpahoth*. The social phenomenon represented by the latter term has been chosen in order to posit, using the Bible, a project for the reconstruction of a liberated nation, economy and culture of Azania, committed to a permanent struggle against racism, sexism and imperialism. I translate *mishpahoth* with Norman Gottwald sociologically to mean a "protective association of families". The functions of the biblical *mishpahoths* as identified by Gottwald resonate with the functions of a number of African traditional institutions, notably the two known as *Letsema* and *Mophato*. These functions have played a major role in influencing socialist thinking among many South African political activists. Gottwald summarises his reflections on the Israelite clans/*mishpahoth* in the following way:

From passages we have examined, the *mishpahoth* stands out as a protective association of families which operated to preserve the minimal conditions for the integrity of each of its member families by extending mutual help as needed to supply male heirs, to keep or recover land, to rescue members from debt slavery, and to avenge murder. These functions were all restorative in that they were emergency means to restore the normal autonomous basis of a member family, and they were all actions that devolved upon the *mishpahoth* only when the

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beth-av was unable to act on its own behalf. The very existence of such a protective association gave vital reassurance to Israelite families, while the overt action of the protective association was always an exceptional measure of the last resort. (Tribes, p.267)

The protective association of Israelite clans (the *mishpahoth*) presupposed the freedom and autonomy of Israelite households (*beth-avs*). It is clearly the case, though, that this presupposition expresses a right to be free and autonomous on the part of the households. But as the *goel* - liberator function of the *mishpahoth* firmly indicates, the reality was often oppression, indebtedness, dispossession, and death. For a socialist, committed to a materialist reading of the Bible, it is difficult not to detect strong roots of socialism in the traditions of the Bible. Of course, in the canonical form of the Bible, these values of socialist organisation and action occupy a subordinated position.

The ongoing and resilient commitment to the values of solidarity and mutual help among many oppressed peoples of the world has caused some of us in Bible scholarship to return to similar concerns in the Bible. In South Africa today, therefore, three issues are bound up together in a significant way. They are the issues of Land, Class and Bible. It is almost impossible to touch on the one without touching on the other. The land question has always been at the heart of the South African struggle for liberation. No Liberation Movement worthy of its name could totally ignore this question. The Land issue actually defines, in significant ways, the real nature of the oppression of Blacks by Whites. Hence all the black Liberation Movements include something in their programmes about land. There are of course significant differences among the organisations of the oppressed on the extent to which the land question dominates their respective ideologies.

In the Bible and in the statements and programmes of South African political organisations, the land question is undergirded by an underlying social class perspective. It is this social class perspective which readers of the Bible who are committed to a reconstruction programme along the lines of liberation, need to isolate and interrogate. Already the absence of a class analysis both in the way in which we read the Bible and in the proposals for reconstructing the Azanian society are getting us into serious trouble.

The Land Question and the Bible.

The most important question facing Christians working with and, in popular movements in South Africa today, is: how does the most crucial issue for Africans, namely, the Land issue, inform our reading of the Bible? What kind of hermeneutics can we develop that can liberate us and the Bible for a future such as the one the people of the Bible seem to have always envisioned, if only in suppressed forms? I mean a hermeneutics that can make Micah's vision of liberated *mishpahoths/clans* come true:

They will hammer their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-knives. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again. Everyone will live in peace, among his own vineyards and fig-trees, and no

one will make him afraid. The Lord Almighty will has promised this. (Micah 4:3-4).

The task of Yahweh's people is to liberate the possibilities of their own liberation. Crucial among these is the struggle against patriarchy in all its forms. Micah's vision will, therefore, only be truly liberating when it shall itself have been liberated from its patriarchal prison. Once freed from its own enslaving tendencies, it can be asserted that it is more than what Professor Brueggemann is willing to permit. He writes:

Micah 4:1-5 is a radical assertion of a poetic promise, designed to lead Israel to an alternative reality. Admittedly, this is not a political strategy or a concrete action. It is only a practice of imagination which presents an unthinkable, underived future. Those who heard this oracle (as well as those who spoke it) were called to realities they could not see or identify. Nor could they discern how such an anticipation could become a reality. (1981:190)

According to Prof. Brueggemann in this text: *The poet is in touch with deep agrarian dreams. He presents what must be Israel's most elemental social hope. That hope is not simply for a disarmed world. It is much more personal. What one wishes for, is to be secure enough to produce and enjoy produce unmolested, neither by lawlessness nor the usurpation of the state... Obviously, there can be no such personal well-being as long as there is war and threat of war. But what denies that personal hope is not simply hostility and the threat of hostility, rather, the main threat to "vine and fig trees" is the economics that sustain and require war. What usurps vines and fig trees is not just invading armies, but the tax structure and the profit system which are both cause and effect of military dangers. (Ibid, p190f.)*

That Brueggemann is on target with these assertions, there is no doubt. The point needs to be made, though, that in the Hebrew Bible as in our times, the words of Micah do not reflect simply the deep dreams of poets. The many stories of the Israelite clans, like their Azanian counterparts, are rooted both in the historical reality and the social struggles of their past, present and future.

The land question is not an issue for Africans only. Nor is it a purely South African concern. I submit that the oppression and exploitation of all communities and groups is in some way related to the power of landownership which oppressors and exploiters all over the world wield. That is the one matter.

The other matter, which we need to keep firmly in mind, is that the liberation of the land is for us Christians not simply a secular issue. The liberation of the land is a thoroughly spiritual business. For the Africans in Azania, the monopolisation of land by white people constitutes a double injury. It is at once a condition of spiritual impoverishment and a denial of the dignity of Africans.

Already, different perspectives have been emerging, influenced by the different and often conflictual positions of the different social and political players. It is instructive to see the influence that the historical popular movements and perspectives are playing in this matter, as well as to see how their social class commitments determine the use to which the Bible is put. The whole situation underlines the argument that there can be no neutral reading of the Bible. This is true even within the broad framework of liberation. In a recent newspaper article a white South African, evidently informed by rightist popular thinking of the kind that is supported in the Bible by, for example, the conquest traditions writes:

" Sir - Will somebody point out on a map of our country where this land is which the whites are supposed to have usurped from the blacks. Will such a person also try to explain why the whites were so stupid as to have driven these blacks from the arid western part of the country, instead of e.g. from the eastern Cape with its fertile soil and high rainfall...Black people traditionally do not, and cannot own land in their fatherlands. The land they live on belongs to the monarchs or the government." (S. Pretorius, in Sowetan, Monday, July 8, 1991)

Another report in the newspapers, representing a white business perspective on the land question which can also be linked to a particular perspective in the Bible, probably texts such as the one where Abraham buys land from the Canaanites to bury his dead or for his cattle and sheep, reads like this:

The Land Bank should provide direct financial support to prospective black farmers to enable them to buy land directly from owners, Development Bank of Southern Africa senior divisional manager Johan van Rooyen said. (Business Day, July, 1991). Evidently sympathetic with this approach, the African National Congress (ANC) unsuccessfully tried to buy land in an area adjacent to a white suburb. The Land was needed in order to house returning ANC exiles. The effort failed because the more powerful white rightists who, obviously, did not want blacks on that land combined their financial resources to defeat the ANC in an auction for the land. In another development reported in the media recently, Archbishop Desmond Tutu is said to have led a delegation from a section of the Xhosas known as the Fingos to Mr F.W. De Klerk, the white President of South Africa, to appeal for the return of their land in the Tsitsikama area of the Cape. Here also there are biblical connections which derive from where one stands in the popular movements. I am thinking especially of the Nehemiah project in the Old Testament. It is a return to the land under the sponsorship of the Persian oppressors of the Jews. A strain of the popular movement will be led by their political-ideological perspective to take this view of where we are in the struggle in South Africa.

Two other positions are identifiable. One corresponds to a community and a man who suffered a reversal of what appeared at first as a position of advantage for him. *The City Press*, a black news paper in South Africa, reported as follows: The mystery of an assault charge laid against Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (a right wing white organisation) leader Eugene Terre Blanche by a 70-year old farm labourer deepened recently when the Transvaal Attorney General referred the docket back to the Ventersdorp police. Instead, the old man will now be charged with possession of dagga (marijuana) *City Press*, June , 1991.

This experience will lead many activists in the popular movements to take seriously Jesus' decision not to utter a word to Pilate in self-defense during his trial. It is dangerous for black people to show any confidence in the institutions of white people. It is difficult for black people not to call into question the strategy of Paul when he appeals to his citizenship of Rome and of Judah as a source of power and strength in face of a repressive state. Finally, there is a story of a community in a black township called Alexandra where in desperation, African people have moved to take residence in a cemetery for lack of land to build their homes. The report goes:

In Alexandra, where close to 2 000 people daily go about their business skirting graves and tombstones, the answer given with monotonous regularity is "poverty". "Give us a place", the cemetery squatters said, "and we will move

immediately. We are not happy living here, but where can we go". They have been living on the doorstep of a cemetery for three years. Residents say they have been forced to live with the dead by Alexandra Town Council, which, they said, embarked on a shack-destroying campaign. (The Saturday Star, July 20, 1991.

Leaving aside how white people read the Bible, these are the different conditions in which the Bible is read. The specificity of the reading is highly influenced by popular political frameworks to which Christians belong. The question is, in these different situations which texts of the Bible will speak more fundamentally to the deep aspirations of the people, especially on the burning question of the restoration of the Land? Is it going to be the Jubilee texts in Leviticus; will it be the Nehemiah strategy of national reconstruction under imperial sponsorship; or can the Exodus speak to us despite having spoken to our oppressors and having provided them with the ideological arsenal to annihilate us ; will we resort to the abstract and elitist message of the prophets? How will we know what to choose? Is it possible that at different times we shall choose different texts? What are the hermeneutical implications of this?

One thing is clear: the Bible is yet to be the terrain of fierce struggles. Indeed, much blood may yet be shed as result of, over or through the Bible. I submit that the problem of a liberative biblical hermeneutics is not solved by choosing " the right " text for my situation or struggle. In reading the Bible from the people's perspectives, namely, the perspective of liberation, we must confront the fundamental question of the nature of the Biblical Text. Biblical study has to revisit this question in the light of the many formerly suppressed struggles, if it does not help to reinforce again the use of the Bible as an instrument of oppression and exploitation. For myself I find help in the suggestion by Terry Eagleton that as cultural workers, we should read all texts, written or historical, in 1. A Projective way, intending the effects of the political and human project to which we are committed. 2. A Polemical way, critically exposing the rhetorical structures of the texts and their underlying political and ideological mission. And in this regard it is not true that the experiences of ordinary people cannot offer the critical tools needed to undertake this task. The academy has no monopoly on the production of critical tools. 3. An Appropriative way, reading those texts that represent the perspectives of the dominant and oppressive classes against themselves.

Allow me at this point to engage some ideas which come out of the Economic policy, and especially the section on Agricultural transformation, of the Political Organization of which I am a member, and former President, The Azanian People's Organization. This is the Organization founded by Steve Biko who will be more familiar to you than me. I quote from one part: *A process of integrating the rural and modern industrial economic sectors will be set in motion and the national economic integration will be geared towards strengthening the predominance of the socialist mode of production, distribution, and exchange. In the rural and agricultural sector priority will be given to a process of transforming large-scale, and capital intensive farms that are historically and currently owned by white landlords towards into publicly owned enterprises. These farms will be expropriated without compensation by the socialist state and AZAPO government.* The biblical mishpachoths, in their role as goels/liberators are expected by Israelite tradition and social commitment to liberate/recover the

Land, restore the freedom and autonomy of the people, to rescue members from slavery, and to avenge murder. This is in line with the agricultural economic policy of the AZANIAN MISHPAHOTHES/CLANS as envisioned by the Black Consciousness Movement.

Furthermore, the Azanian clans, inspired by the values and strategies of the biblical mishpahoths, understand structural transformation and emancipation of agriculture in a liberated and reconstituted AZANIA to involve a two-fold process: " Firstly, to engage in a process of transformation of the racist capitalist mode of production, concomitant superstructures and tribal ownership of the land. Secondly, to alleviate and ultimately eradicate completely all forms of dependence upon the world market demand generated by the predominance of world capitalist dominance on the Azanian economy."

There is a great deal of materials we can draw from in the Bible to inform our struggle for human emancipation. The work of biblical criticism which engage social and economic issues which I know happens here at St Andrews should provide the tools for contributing to the struggles of oppressed peoples all over. In doing this work biblical scholars continue the venerable traditions in theology and bible study represented by the work of scholars like Robert F. Schnell.

We in Azania are greatly encouraged by the critical work of scholars who take seriously the struggle in the Bible and refrain from narrow idealisation of traditions whose class perspectives can never really emancipate and liberate our people. Without liberating the Land our people will never be genuinely liberated. To reconstitute One Azania and One Nation we need Mishpahothic structures nurtured in the best socialist traditions to restore the normal autonomous basis of member families, extend mutual help among member families, to preserve minimal conditions for the integrity of member families, to recover the land, to rescue members from debt slavery, and to avenge murder.

