

# The Bible and/as the Lynching Tree

## A South African Tribute to James H. Cone

Gerald O. West<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In this tribute to James H. Cone I reflect on his biblical-theological hermeneutics, drawing on work that spans nearly fifty years, but concentrating on his most recent book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. I identify in Cone's work radical hermeneutics of reception, which I then bring into dialogue with Itumeleng Mosala's radical hermeneutic of production. This dialogue, I argue, offers us significant biblical-theological capacities for a post-apartheid biblical hermeneutics of decolonisation, with specific reference to South Africa's land expropriation debate.

**Keywords:** Lynching tree, decolonisation, Hermeneutic of Reception, Hermeneutic of Production, Land

## 1. Introduction

All introductions to and surveys of South African Black Theology acknowledge the significant contribution of James Cone. Less attention, however, has been given to South African Black Theology's reception of James Cone's Bible.<sup>2</sup> Across Cone's work, and evident in his most recent work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, is a consistent understanding of the Bible.

<sup>1</sup> School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics & Ujamaa Centre University of KwaZulu-Natal South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> I offer this article as a tribute to the late James H. Cone as a White South African who was graciously received by him when I first visited Union Theological Seminary (as the guest of Vincent Wimbush and Phyllis Trible) in 1993. Prior to that, I had attended one or two Society of Biblical Literature/American Academy of Religion meetings in the U.S. in the late 1980s and had made a point of listening to as many of James Cone's papers as I could. James Cone made an immense impact on African Theology and South African Black Theology, and so I was eager to drink from his wells of living water. I was apprehensive meeting him for the first time in 1993. As a White South African I was not always sure how I would be received by Black theologians. James Cone was remarkably warm and welcoming then, and in the many years since. The School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics here at the University of KwaZulu-Natal has a formal PhD seminar relationship with Union Theological Seminar (and other theological institutions), which has provided times of in-depth conversation. We rotate between our institutions. This year we are hosting the PhD seminar, and we had tried our utmost to persuade James Cone to come as part of the Union group. His eyes would twinkle, and he would smile, but he would shake his head and say that he did not want to undertake such a long journey. He has taken people, such as myself, on a much longer journey. Hamba kahle, Baba.

Cut off from their African religious traditions, black slaves were left trying to carve out a religious meaning for their lives with white Christianity as their only resource to work with. They ignored white theology, which did not affirm their humanity, and went straight to stories in the Bible, interpreting them as stories of God siding with little people just like them. They identified God's liberation of the poor as the central message of the Bible, and they communicated this message in their songs and sermons (Cone, 2011:118).

Cone confirmed this understanding of the Bible forty years earlier when he participated in the 1977 Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, in Accra, Ghana. In the first section of my article, I will reflect on these two publications, nearly forty years apart, reflecting on how Cone's understanding of the Bible enables him to locate African American Black Theology with respect to African Theology and how his understanding of the Bible enables him to locate African American Black Theology with respect to the lynching tree. In the second section of the article, I turn to the second phase of South African Black Theology, reflecting in particular on how Itumeng Mosala analyses Cone's understanding of the Bible. Here I will argue that while Mosala is concerned about the sites of struggle that have produced the Bible, Cone is concerned with the Black sites of struggle that have interpreted the Bible. Black reception history of the Bible is normative for Cone. In the third and final section of the article, I draw on both Cone and Mosala's work in order to reflect on one of the most significant Black receptions of the Bible in South Africa, the anecdote about the Bible-and-the-land, arguing that in our contemporary South African post-colony of "a special type", the relationship between the Bible and the land share resonances with the relationship between *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* in Cone's work.

## 2. A biblical hermeneutic of reception

In attempting to locate his work, in particular, and work of African American Black Theology in general alongside African Theology at the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, in Accra, Ghana, James Cone argues that his "contention is that black and African theologies are not as different as has been suggested [by scholars like John Mbiti, Harry Sawyer, Edward Fashole-Luke, and 'to a lesser extent' Kwesi Dickson]" (Cone 1979:177 -178). He then goes on to "suggest two reasons why we ought to engage in a substantive dialogue" (Cone 1979:179).

The first reason is "a common historical option to both Africans and Black Americans in their different social contexts" to "make a choice that establishes our solidarity with the liberation of the Black World from European and American domination" in particular, and is "grounded in a common historical option for the poor and against societal structures that oppress them" in general (Cone, 1979:179).

The second reason is “a common faith”, specifically “our common faith in Jesus Christ” (Cone, 1979:179). While refusing to relinquish his own commitment to an “emphasis on the social context of theology”, Cone goes on to say that notwithstanding his primary commitment to the particularity of context, “it is important to recognize the limitation of our particularity so that we will not ignore the universal claims that the Gospel lays upon all of us” (Cone, 1979:180). “I believe”, continues Cone, “that we find our common vision of the Gospel through a serious encounter with the biblical message as defined by our common historical commitment in our various social contexts” (Cone, 1979:180).

This sentence length biblical hermeneutic manifesto is given content in each of Cone’s publications, an outline of which he gives in the “Introduction” to *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Cone, 2011:xiii-xix). In Ghana, nearly forty years earlier, he emphasised what he considered to be the distinctive feature of the biblical message: “There is a *political* ingredient in the Gospel that cannot be ignored if one is to remain faithful to biblical revelation” (Cone, 1979:181). In saying this, Cone recognises that “[t]his emphasis does not exclude the legitimacy of African Theology’s concern with indigenization and selfhood in its attempts to relate the biblical message to the African cultural and religious situation”. However, goes on to insist that “selfhood and indigenization should not be limited to cultural changes alone” (Cone, 1979:181). Cone finds resonance in the work of South African theologians like Desmond Tutu, Manas Buthelezi, and Allan Boesak, precisely because they “have challenged African theologians to give careful attention to the political ingredient of the Gospel as related to the contemporary problems of Africa” (Cone, 1979:182).

Unfortunately, John Mbiti and Edward Fashole-Luke have been very critical of this South African black theology as being too narrowly focused on blackness, liberation, and politics. Both contend that Christian theology must transcend race and politics. I believe that their criticisms are misplaced because the theme of liberation, as interpreted by the particularity of the African economic and political situation, provides the most creative direction for the future development of African theology. If God came to us in the human presence of Jesus, then no theology can transcend the material conditions of humanity and still retain its Christian identity. Jesus did not die on the cross to transcend human suffering, but rather that it might be overcome. Therefore, any theology whose distinctive perspective is defined by Jesus is required to find its creative expression in the practice of overcoming suffering (Cone, 1979:182-183).

Here, then, are the ‘ingredients’ of Cone’s biblical-theological hermeneutics. The systemic political context of the poor and marginalised creatively finds and defines the message of the Bible, the Gospel, in the suffering of Jesus on the cross.

Nearly forty years later Cone asks not about the future of African Theology but about the future of the church in America. “The church’s most vexing problem today”, he argues, “is how to define itself by the gospel of Jesus’ cross”. “Where”, he continues, “is the gospel of Jesus’ cross revealed today?” (Cone, 2011:163) Cone’s answer is *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. His final testament not only summarises how he has answered this question in his earlier work but goes on to give his most definitive answer: the lynching tree: “The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other” (Cone, 2011:161).

Following the biblical-theological hermeneutic we have discerned in his engagement with African theologians, Cone interrogates “the material conditions” of the lynching tree in America. The lynching tree is the particularity of his African American material context. Significantly it is also the site from which he engages us South Africans in “substantive dialogue” (Cone, 1979:179, 2014).<sup>32</sup> In his dialogue with African theologians in Ghana in 1977, Cone reflects on the relationship between the particularity of context and “the universal claims that the Gospel lays upon all of us” (Cone, 1979:180). Cone places “much emphasis on the social context of theology” – its particularity but recognises that “our explication of the Gospel must be universal enough to include the material conditions in which people are forced to live”. He continues

There is only one history, one Creator, and one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is the centrality of this faith claim that brings us together and requires us to have dialogue with each other about its meaning in society. Our cultural limitations do not render us silent but open us up to share with others our perspective about the historical possibility for the creation of a new humanity (Cone 1979:180).

Cone’s theological hermeneutics of “substantive dialogue” requires that each dialogue partner speaks from a particular political context. “I believe”, he says (and I reiterate), “that we will find our common vision of the Gospel through a serious encounter with the biblical message as defined by our common historical commitment in our various social contexts” (Cone, 1979:180). He recognises that there “have been many debates in traditional [western] theology about the precise content of the essence of the Gospel, but seldom has the debate included political and economic realities that separate rich nations from poor ones” (Cone, 1979:180). Cone excludes from this dialogue “dominant European and American theologies” because they “have chosen an option that establishes their solidarity with Western imperialism and capitalism”, usually defining “the universality of the Gospel in

<sup>3</sup> 2 The latter was published in a South Africa based journal.

terms that do not challenge the white Western monopoly of the world's resources" (Cone, 1979:180). Cone proposes another solidarity, "in search for other theological options than the ones found in traditional [western] theology", located in "our common faith in the crucified Christ, as encountered in the struggle for freedom" (Cone, 1979:180). Cone locates "the crucified Christ" at the centre of African American and African substantive theological dialogue.

Writing nearly forty years later from within his own African American material context, Cone follows the contours of this theological hermeneutic, explicating clearly an encounter with the crucified Christ in the struggle for African American freedom. Drawing deeply on Billie Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit", Cone argues:

To understand what the cross means in America, we need to take a look at the lynching tree in this nation's history – that "strange and bitter crop" that Billie Holiday would not let us forget. The lynched black victim experienced the same fate as the crucified Christ and thus became the most potent symbol for understanding the true meaning of the salvation achieved through "God on the Cross" (Cone, 2011:160).

Cone's logic is clear: "humanity's salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity's salvation is available only through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst" (Cone, 2011:160). The theological logic of this 'faith' "is not a faith of intellectuals or elites of any sort"; this "is the faith of abused and scandalized people" (Cone, 2011:160). In terms of his own particularity, "[t]he lynching tree is the cross in America" (Cone, 2011:158). "Theological speaking", Cone argues, "Jesus was the 'first lynchee,' who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil. He was crucified by the same principalities and powers that lynched black people in America", so that, he continues, expounding his theological logic, "*Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus*" (Cone, 2011:158). In the words of the African American poet Langston Hughes, "Christ is a nigger, beaten and black" (Cone, 2011:114).

Cone's biblical-theological hermeneutic is a hermeneutic of radical *reception* of the Gospel by "the faith of abused and scandalized [black] people". I have emphasised the concept of 'reception' because this in marked contrast to Itumeleng Mosala's biblical hermeneutic of radical *production*. For Mosala, any and every biblical text embodies the contending ideologies of its site of production. For Cone, as he has argued above, "the biblical message" is "defined by" or "grounded in" "a common historical option for the poor and against societal structures that oppress them" (Cone, 1979:179). Each of the chapters of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* is Cone's attempt "to give voice to black victims, to let them and their families and

communities speak to us” in the context of an America in which “the cross [is] placed alongside the lynching tree” (Cone 2011:xviii-xix).

In Chapter 1 of this memorial book, Cone provides a historical analysis of “The Cross and the Lynching Tree in the Black Experience”, analysing the reception of the Bible by “enslaved blacks”. “Enslaved blacks who first heard the gospel message seized on the power of the cross”, states Cone, for “Christ crucified manifested God’s loving and liberating presence *in* the contradictions of black life” (Cone 2011:2). The contradictions of the cross and Black life took on a particular theological weight when “the lynching tree joined the cross as the most emotionally charged symbols in the African American community – symbols that represented both death and the promise of redemption, judgment and the offer of mercy, suffering and the power of hope” (Cone, 2011:3). Cone notes that although “[i]nitially lynching was not directed primarily against blacks” (Cone 2011:3), “[t]he lynching of black America marked an important turning point in the history and meaning of lynching, as the racial component of lynching changed its meaning for both whites and blacks” (Cone, 2011:4). “Lynching was the white community’s way”, Cone and others argue, “of forcibly reminding blacks of their inferiority and powerlessness” (Cone, 2011:7). “By the 1890s, lynching fever gripped the South, spreading like cholera, as white communities made blacks their primary target, and torture their focus” (Cone, 2011:9).

The Black theological reception of the lynching tree was forged, Cone argues, “in the face of the ever-present threat of death on the lynching tree”, impelling Blacks “to cry out from the depth of their spiritual being: ‘Oh, Lord, Oh, My Lord!/ Oh, My Good Lord!/ Keep me f’om sinkin’ down!’” (Cone, 2011:19). This theological “dialectic of despair and hope in black life” found resonance and reception in the cross of Jesus (Cone, 2011:20). “The cross was the foundation on which their faith was built” (Cone 2011:21), and “it was Jesus’ cross that sent people protesting in the streets, seeking to change the social structures of racial oppression” (Cone, 2011:28).

Chapter 2 is significant in Cone’s reception hermeneutic because it demonstrates the failure of White America, including White religious leaders, to engage the lynching tree. “In fact, the lynching tree has no place in American theological reflections about Jesus’ cross or in the proclamation of Christian churches about his Passion” (Cone 2011:30), which is remarkable given that in “the lynching era” (1880-1940) “white Christians lynched nearly five thousand black men and women in a manner with obvious echoes of the Roman crucifixion of Jesus” (Cone 2011:31). Scandalously, Cone recounts how even at Union Seminary, “seminary professors ... did not say much, if anything, about episodes of lynching” (Cone 2011:59). In a telling comment, he notes that these theologians “chose to focus on academic theology

that could defeat fundamentalism”, instead of taking “a similar stand against slavery, segregation, and lynching”. They chose to take a stand with their colleague Charles Augustus Briggs (whose chair Cone occupies), “who was tried for heresy for using historical criticism in his interpretation of the Bible” (Cone, 2011:59), instead of taking a stand with Black lynched bodies and Black reception of the Bible.

In contrast to these White biblical scholars and theologians, Chapter 3 focuses on Martin Luther King’s theology of the cross, whose “perspective on the cross was not derived from reading theological texts in graduate school”, but “was shaped by his reading of the Bible through the black religious experience, and his ‘personal suffering’ in his fight for justice” (Cone, 2011:86). Chapter 4, “The Recrucified Christ”, follows this interpretive trajectory, expanding Cone’s analysis into the work of Black “artists, poets, and writers” (Cone, 2011:92), who “saw clearly what white theologians and clergy ignored and what black religious scholars and ministers merely alluded to: that in the U.S., the clearest image of the crucified Christ was the figure of an innocent black victim, dangling from a lynching tree” (Cone, 2011:93). This chapter is full of powerful imaginations, “grounded in historical experience”, uncovering “the great mysteries of black life” (Cone, 2011:94-95). “When black artists and writers looked at *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* and reflected on their relationship to Jesus and the mob violence of whites against blacks in American history, they saw a Black Christ hanging and burning on a white cross” (Cone, 2011:109). There is a biblical and theological hermeneutic that Cone affirms:

Cut off from their African religious traditions, black slaves were left trying to carve a religious meaning for their lives with white Christianity as the only resource to work with. They ignored white theology, which did not affirm their humanity, and went straight to stories in the Bible, interpreting them as stories of God siding with little people just like them. They identified God’s liberation of the poor as the central message of the Bible, and they communicated this message in their songs and sermons (Cone 2011:118).

In particular, Cone notes, “The spiritual anguish that lynching created connected blacks with the spiritual wrestling of the prophets, of Job, and the psalmist” (Cone, 2011:123). “Blacks identified with the way biblical characters wrestled with faith’s contradictions and incongruities”, especially with the suffering of Jesus, both in what were considered Christological references in the Old Testament, particularly the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 (Cone, 2011:123), and in New Testament accounts of “Jesus’ rejection in Jerusalem, his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and his suffering on the cross of Calvary” (Cone, 2011:124).

Adding a distinctive voice to the “prophetic voices” of Black artists (Cone, 2011:118), Cone next turns in Chapter 5 to the reception contribution of African American women, reflecting both on their faithful refusal “to believe that white Christianity was the true gospel” (Cone, 2011:133) and on their “persuasive critique of the idea of redemptive suffering” (Cone, 2011:149, 149-151, see also Cone, 2014:13). Cone rejects, with Delores Williams, a womanist theologian, abstract “theories of atonement as found in the Western theological tradition” (Cone 2011:150), preferring the reception orientated interpretation of womanist theologian Shawn Copeland: “‘By their very suffering and privation’, she writes, ‘black women under chattel slavery freed the cross of Christ. Their steadfast commitment honored the cross and One who died for all and redeemed it from Christianity’s vulgar misuse’” (Cone, 2011:151).

As Cone concludes his reception history of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* in America, he shares the trajectory of his life-time’s work, confessing, “The struggle to make sense of being *black* and *Christian* in white America has motivated all my work as a theologian” (Cone, 2011:154). All of his work, he continues, has led him “inevitably” “to these reflections on *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*: the essential symbol of Christianity and the quintessential emblem of black suffering” (Cone, 2011:154). In language reminiscent of Albert Nolan’s argument that “the gospel message today must take *the shape* of good news for the poor” (Nola, 1988:17),<sup>4</sup> Cone claims: “The Christian gospel is God’s message of liberation in an unredeemed and tortured world”; “The gospel is found wherever poor people struggle for justice, fighting for their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Cone, 2011:155). Cone’s use of the concept ‘struggle’ echoes with Nolan’s use of the same concept (Nolan, 1988:157-179). The lynching tree is the primary receptor site of struggle for African Americans, whether the historical lynching tree or “[t]he lynching of black America ... taking place in the [contemporary] criminal justice system where nearly one-third of black men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight are in prisons, jails, on parole, or waiting for their day in court” (Cone, 2011:163).

“The lynching tree is a metaphor for white America’s crucifixion of black people. It is the window that best reveals the religious meaning of the cross in our land” (Cone, 2011:166). The lynching tree summons forth and constructs the centre of the gospel, the cross, to speak to Black America (and through Black America to White America). Cone invokes a radical biblical and theological hermeneutic of reception. “As I see it”, says Cone, “the lynching tree frees the cross from the

<sup>4</sup> 3 My emphasis, but following the emphasis of Nolan’s argument about the priority of “the shape” of the gospel. “Content” is context-bound, but “the shape” endures (Nolan, 1988:11-19).



false pieties of well-meaning Christians. When we see the crucifixion as a first-century lynching, we are confronted by the re-enactment of Christ's suffering in the blood-soaked history of African Americans. Thus, the lynching tree reveals the true religious meaning of the cross for American Christians today" (Cone, 2011:161).

However, Cone does not stop here, for "[t]he cross and the lynching tree interpret each other" (Cone, 2011:161). While the epistemological privilege is given to the Black experience of the lynching tree, 'yet', argues Cone, "the lynching tree also needs the cross, without which it becomes simply an abomination. It is the cross that points in the direction of hope, the confidence that there is a dimension to life beyond the reach of the oppressor: 'Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more' (Luke 12:4)" (Cone, 2011:161-162).

Cone's work is replete with references to the Bible.<sup>54</sup> But it is the Black experience of the lynching tree in America that summons the Bible (and theologians) to speak. Cone adopts a hermeneutic of trust in the Bible, especially in its central metaphor, the cross. The cross (in the Bible) can and does speak a liberating political message to the lynching tree. Cone recognises that the Bible has been abused by White Christians (Cone, 2011:116, 151), but claims its central message for Black Christians. He argues that the Bible's message is 'found' – as in identified and forged – in its clearest and fullest manifestation in the cross. The cross has a "message of justice in the midst of powerlessness, suffering, and death. The cross, as a locus of divine revelation, is not good news for the powerful, for those who are comfortable with the ways things are, or for anyone whose understanding of religion is aligned with power" (Cone, 2011:156).

### 3. A biblical hermeneutic of production

James Cone recognises that "the lynched Black Christ was not the only Christ that artists saw. They also saw a mean White Christ symbolized in white Christian lynchers, the ones who justified slavery and segregation" (Cone, 2011:112). Where, we might ask, do these White Christian lynchers get their theologies of slavery and segregation? Itumuleng Mosala's immediate answer is: the Bible!

In his *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (1989) Mosala analyses Cone's biblical hermeneutics in *God of the Oppressed* (1975). He cites the following as Cone's summary argument about the Bible:

The Bible is the witness to God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Thus the black experience requires that Scripture be a source of Black Theology. For it was Scrip-

<sup>54</sup> 4 The Cross and the Lynching Tree would provide a useful lens for an analysis of Cone's biblical theology of the cross, but that is not my focus. My focus is the next sentence, which is the shape of his biblical hermeneutic.

ture that enabled slaves to affirm a view of God that differed radically from that of the slave masters. The slave masters' intention was to present a 'Jesus' who would make the slave obedient and docile. Jesus was supposed to make black people better slaves, that is, faithful servants of white masters. But many blacks rejected that view of Jesus, not only because it contradicted their African heritage, but because it contradicted the witness of Scripture (Mosala, 1989 #2967:15, citing Cone, 1975:31).

He approves of Cone's first hermeneutic move, namely that "the black experience of oppression and exploitation provides the epistemological lens through which to perceive the God of the Bible as the God of liberation" (Mosala, 1989 #2967:15, citing Cone, 1975:31). However, Mosala rejects Cone's second hermeneutic move with respect to the Bible. Mosala is not as sure as Cone is that 'Scripture' "establishes limits to white people's use of Jesus Christ as a confirmation of black oppression" (Mosala, 1989 #2967:15, citing Cone 1975:31). More specifically, as the quotation above indicates, Mosala is concerned by Cone's assertion about "*the* witness of Scripture" or "*the* biblical message" (Cone 1975:31, 1979:180).<sup>65</sup>

Mosala rejects any claim about the Bible as the "nonideological Word of God" (Mosala 1989:16). While Mosala is willing to accept with Cone "that it is *a* biblical truth that God sides with the oppressed in their struggle for liberation", he is quick to counter, saying, "but, as any hermeneutics deriving from the crucible of class struggle will attest, the biblical truth that God sides with the oppressed is only *one* of biblical truths" (Mosala 1989:16).<sup>76</sup> The Bible, Mosala insists, "is rent apart by the antagonistic struggles of the warring classes of Israelite society in much the same way that our world is torn asunder by society's class, cultural, racial, and gender divisions" (Mosala 1989:16). The Bible is a site of struggle, inherently and intrinsically. Just as there is no non-ideological *interpretation* of the Bible, a proposition readily accepted by Cone, for Mosala there is no non-ideological biblical or 'scriptural' text.

Cone's hermeneutic is shaped by a theological assumption that 'Scripture' transcends the sites of its particular socio-historical productions.<sup>87</sup> Mosala's hermeneutic is shaped by the biblical studies conviction that texts embody their socio-historical sites of production. A significant contribution of biblical studies to contemporary appropriations of biblical texts, Mosala maintains, is that it has

<sup>6</sup> 5 In each case the emphasis is mine.

<sup>7</sup> 6 My emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> 7 This does not imply that Cone ignores the Bible's sites of production. In the case of the cross, as we have seen, Cone recognises the continuity between the socio-historical cross and the theological cross. In general, however, Cone does not give much attention to the socio-historical sites or sources of the biblical texts he uses.

“always been aware of the tendency in biblical literature for older traditions to be reused to address the needs of new situations” (Mosala, 1989:101). What Mosala adds to this understanding is the ideological nature of the such reuse. Biblical texts have ideological ‘grain’ as particular biblical texts or particular edition-redactions of texts have an ideological orientation deriving from the socio-historical struggles of the sites in which they were produced, the appropriation of any biblical text “is always a contradictory process embodying in some form a ‘struggle’” (Mosala, 1989:32). The contemporary Black interpretive struggle consists, then, Mosala argues, depending on the class forces involved, “either to harmonize the contradictions inherent in the works and events or to highlight them with a view to allowing social class choices in their appropriation” (Mosala, 1989:32). The contention of Mosala is not that Black theologians *cannot* read any biblical text, no matter what its socio-historical ideological origins, against the grain, but that they *ought not* to do this without recognising what they are doing. Texts of terror, whether class or gender terror, cannot be tamed (Trible, 1984; West, 2004; Nadar, 2006).

The enduring problem, according to Mosala, is that the final form of the Bible we have, and use is a form shaped by the dominant classes of particular historical periods in the Bible’s production-formation. Dominant classes have through the redactional processes of the Bible’s composition co-opted the ideological perspectives of other marginalised social sectors for their own ideological purposes. By refusing to recognise that the Bible has no single witness or message, Cone, among many other Black theologians (Mosala, 1989:14-42), has succumbed to the danger of collaborating with the Bible’s dominant ruling class ideologies. In so doing, Mosala indicates, they engage in a “useless sparring with the ghost of the oppressor, whom ... [they] have already embraced in the oppressor’s most dangerous form, the [final] ideological form of the [biblical] text” (Mosala, 1989:28).<sup>9</sup> The same Bible that gives us the cross gives us the lynching tree.

In the struggle for justice James Cone offers a biblical-theological hermeneutic of radical reception. The locus of the poor and marginalised is the site from which the biblical witness is appropriated. It is the poor and marginalised, in their struggle for justice, who discern the shape of the Gospel. In the specific case of African Americans, the lynching tree is the decisive locus of lived reality from which the Bible is read, summoning forth the gospel of the cross. In the struggle for justice Itumeleng Mosala offers a biblical hermeneutics of radical production. The locus of the poor and marginalised is the site from which biblical texts are appropriated. It is the poor and marginalised, in their struggle for justice, who discern the

<sup>9</sup> 8 For a fuller analysis of Mosala’s argument and its relevance to the contemporary South African context see West, 2017a, b.

ideological identity of particular biblical texts. In the specific case of poor and working-class Black South Africans, if (and only if) through their struggle trained eyes (Mosala, 1986:196), they do “discover kin struggles in biblical communities”, then there is the potential that “[t]hese biblical struggles ... serve as a source of inspiration for [their] contemporary struggles, and as a warning against their co-optation” (Mosala, 1989:188).

What, I ask in the final section, would the respective hermeneutical emphases of Cone and Mosala offer us by way of a biblical hermeneutics in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa, particularly with respect to the land question, for in significant senses the land is our lynching tree? In what follows my focus is on *the shape* of a decolonial biblical hermeneutics rather than on its detailed content. My analysis of the biblical hermeneutics of Cone and Mosala has concentrated on their respective shape.

#### **4. The land and/as the lynching tree**

When the White man came to our country he had the Bible and we Blacks had the land. The White man said to us, “let us pray”. After the prayer, the White man had the land and we Blacks had the Bible.

This well-known anecdote reflects rather well both the centrality of land and the matrix of factors that constitute land in South Africa. The South African post-colony, among other African post-colonies, is distinctive, and so any post-colonial, post-apartheid biblical hermeneutics must pay attention to the distinctive contours of the South African post-colony. The variant form of colonialism, “colonialism of a special type”, that constitutes South Africa includes, argued the South African Communist Party (SACP) in the early 1960s, the following elements: “a relatively extensive European settler occupation of the territory; the survival of indigenous African people and their societies as an oppressed but overwhelming majority; and the decisive factor – the imperialist implantation of a highly developed ‘mature’ capitalist system into this colonial setting” (SACP, 2012:5). The three features identified by the SACP provide a useful conceptual analysis within which to locate the African anecdote about the Bible and land.

The South African Communist Party does not distinguish the Bible as a significant feature in its analysis of the South African post-colony. However, as I have indicated, the Bible is integral, succinctly captured in the African anecdote about the Bible and land. This anecdote has been exegeted by generations of South African Black theologians, with each offering a distinctive insight (West 2016:318-348). Having lamented the Bible-for-land transaction reflected in the anecdote, acknowledging the Bible’s African entanglement, Mosala recites the anecdote with the following

addendum: “The task now facing a black theology of liberation is to enable black people to use the Bible to get the land back and to get the land back without losing the Bible” (Mosala, 1989:153). But, insists Mosala, “[i]n order for this to happen, black theology must employ the progressive aspects of black history and culture to liberate the Bible so that the Bible may liberate black people. That is the hermeneutical dialectic” (Mosala, 1989:153).

The land and the Bible, to use Cone’s hermeneutic formulation, interpret each other. But, as another generation of South African Black biblical interpreters recognises, with Mosala, interpreting the Bible from the perspective of the landless – “which is a characteristic of blackness in the South African context” (Ramantswana, 2017:78), often requires re-reading biblical texts about land against their ideological grain (Ramantswana, 2017). A post-apartheid biblical hermeneutics of decolonisation requires both a radical hermeneutics of reception and a radical hermeneutics of production. I will briefly delineate how this is being done by South African biblical scholars, each of whom is working within the conceptual analysis of South Africa as a post-colony of a special type.

Makhosazana Nzimande, in her “*imbokodo*” (grinding stone)<sup>10</sup> hermeneutics draws deeply on Mosala’s work, seeking to locate the struggles of “the oppressed and exploited in the text”, and taking up his challenge of what it means to use the Bible to get the land back (Nzimande, 2008:230). Nzimande’s contribution to the post-apartheid land restitution project is to bring her South African context into dialogue with kindred struggles “over stolen lands” in the biblical text (Nzimande, 2008:234). Hers is a hermeneutic of radical reception located within the realities of South African stolen land; hers is also a hermeneutic of radical production, using historical-materialist sociological reconstruction “to detect various forms of covert exploitation and oppression” beneath the surface structure of the biblical text (Nzimande, 2008:233).

Her first interpretive move follows Mosala, using historical-critical resources to locate the story of Naboth’s stolen vineyard (1 Kings, 21:1-16) historically. She then draws on feminist literary analysis in order to provide a detailed characterisation of the leading female character (queen Jezebel). This is followed by historical-materialist sociological analysis, where she locates the text within its imperial setting (Phoenician imperialism), giving attention to both the narrative’s imperial setting and the socio-historical imperial site of the text’s production. Her final interpretive move is to delineate the class relations within this imperial context (including Jezebel as part of a royal household) (Nzimande, 2008:234-237).

<sup>10</sup> 9 “Wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo” (You strike a woman, you strike a grinding stone).

She then brings this carefully located and *Imbokodo* interpreted text into dialogue with the South African context. With respect to land restitution, “reparation and the return of stolen wealth” are “mandatory” on the side of the imperial powers and their apartheid beneficiaries (Nzimande, 2008:234). But, she continues, “for black African women in post-apartheid South Africa and in related postcolonial contexts where patriarchy reigns supreme, land restitution would not be beneficial unless there is a radical change in the patriarchal family structures”; in other words, “neo-tribal” patriarchal family structures are part of the problem (Nzimande, 2008:234). Furthermore, while her reading of the biblical text recovers the identity and roles of African queen mothers in their governance of African land, she goes beyond most postcolonial biblical interpretation by pushing the boundaries of feminist postcolonial criticism to include decolonial matters of class, recovering the ‘voices’ of “those at the receiving end of the Queens’ and Queen Mothers’ policies” (Nzimande, 2008:243). She uses her *Imbokodo* hermeneutics “to read with sensitivity towards the marginalised and dispossessed”, recognising that “the beneficiaries” of such indigenous elites, including the queens and queen mothers, “are themselves and their sons, rather than the general grassroots populace they are expected to represent by virtue of their royal privileges” (Nzimande, 2008:243). Remembering these powerful African women is a postcolonial imperative, insists Nzimande; but so is de-ideologising them, for in so doing we also remember those women from the lower classes these elite women had power over (Nzimande, 2008:244, 252-254).

Nzimande laments the “absence of justice” in the story of Naboth’s vineyard (Nzimande, 2008:252). Following Nzimande, but taking as his starting point the Natives’ Land Act of 1913 and the “slow progress on land reform” in the contemporary South Africa post-colony site of reception, Ndikho Mtshiselwa returns to this biblical text to see if he can find evidence of land redress that might speak into the South African context (Mtshiselwa, 2014:205-206). Mtshiselwa uses a site of production-based socio-historical analysis of 1 Kings, 21:1-29 to ascertain whether there was any socio-economic redress and/as land expropriation following the injustice done to Naboth. He reflects on whether Jehu’s “elimination of the Omri dynasty (with its relations with the Phoenician) in 2 Kings (10:1–17)” contains aspects of justice, but concludes, using South African decolonisation logic, that “because the land that was forcefully acquired by the Omri dynasty was not returned to the original owners or farmers, it is doubtful that justice was obtained” (Mtshiselwa, 2014:219). Coming to similar conclusions to Nzimande, Mtshiselwa argues that “after killing Ahab and his family Jehu probably did not redistribute the repossessed fertile land to Naboth’s family but rather claimed it and subsequently passed it to his sons” (Mtshiselwa, 2014:223). Unfortunately, he finds, a socio-historical analysis demonstrates

that expropriated land “was not returned to the original owners but retained by those in power”, benefiting political elites rather than their own poor (Mtshiselwa, 2014:224). While “the portrayal of socio-economic redress and the restoration of seized land in Jehu’s story could empower a marginalised South African reader, who is by and large poor and landless”, the marginalised South African reader must still contend with “the black political élites and the white farmers who continue to reap the agricultural wealth of the country” (Mtshiselwa, 2014:225). Furthermore, a substantive part of the problem of land redistribution in the South African post-colony, argues Mtshiselwa, are forms of neo-liberal globalised neo-colonial capitalism: “The influential neo-liberal economic globalisation, with its emphasis on privatisation, competitive production, and economic growth, does not appear to be helpful in the pursuit of socio-economic redress in particular of land redistribution” (Mtshiselwa, 2014:212). The “compromise” the post-apartheid South African state has made with globalised capitalism (Mtshiselwa, 2014:209), mitigates against contemporary decolonial land redistribution.

An emphasis on economic analysis is common to South African decolonisation biblical hermeneutics, but so too are race and ethnicity. Shortly after political liberation, Tinyiko Maluleke, reflecting on what he considers to be the third phase of South African Black Theology, reminded South Africans that in a context “where race is no longer supposed to matter”, racism often takes on different guises and becomes “more ‘sophisticated’” (Maluleke, 1998:61,62). With respect to radical hermeneutics of reception, Hulisani Ramanswana is clear that, “The South African context as a social location, given the history of colonialism and apartheid, requires us to scrutinise the body-politics of knowledge, on the one hand, and the epistemological location of the African reader, on the other” (Ramantswana, 2016:181). The body-politics of knowledge in this context has specifically “to do with the issue of race and racial ordering of the world” (Ramantswana, 2016:181). Epistemologically we must recognise, argues Ramanswana, “[t]he idea of a postcolonial world deceives us [both Whites and Blacks] epistemically into thinking that we are free of the colonial structures. We are not yet free; we continue to live within the global structures of coloniality” (Ramantswana, 2016:189). With respect to a radical hermeneutics of production, Ramanswana refuses to read biblical texts, such as the story of Joseph’s acquisition of land (in Genesis 47), “along the grain” (Ramantswana 2016:192). An epistemology of decoloniality requires reading this and other biblical texts about land ‘against the grain’, following in the hermeneutical footsteps of Mosala.

Ramantswana is clear that a return to African epistemology as a resource for reception is not a romantic “obsession” with “the long-gone, outmoded, precolonial past; rather, it is an epistemological reorientation in the present that refuses to aban-

don the rich heritage of the African ancestors and draws knowledge from the experiences of suffering from colonialism and coloniality” (Ramantswana, 2016:190). Decolonisation requires ‘relinking’ “with our African ancestors through rethinking, remembering, and preserving the rich heritage left for us. Epistemic delinking from Europe without relinking with our own indigenous knowledge system is”, he insists, “to remain trapped within the structures of coloniality” (Ramantswana, 2016:190).

The recognition that African proverbial wisdom is a significant site of indigenous knowledge has a long history in African biblical scholarship and theology (Dickson, 1972; Mbiti, 1978b; a, 2002; see also Avoseh, 2013). But, the work of Madipoane Masenya (ngwan’a Mphahlele) has added a feminist-liberation dimension to the predominant inculturation/postcolonial orientation (Masenya, 1997; Masenya, 2001), giving the appropriation of African proverbial wisdom an overtly decolonial emphasis (Masenya, 2002, Masenya (ngwan’a Mphahlele) 2004). Working within this trajectory, Ramanswana uses a Tshivenda proverb in reading Genesis 47, a proverb that is “a critique of those in positions of power “*Dza musanda dzi kumba thole* (literally, ‘The chief’s livestock draws a heifer,’ i.e., attracts a poor family’s heifer to mingle with, and thus become legally part of the herd); that is, those in power tend to thrive at the expense of the poor”. This proverb reflects, he continues, “a critical stance towards those in power, especially when they deprive the poor of their basic necessities” (Ramantswana, 2016:191). Ramanswana’s intersection of economics and indigenous knowledge, ‘choosing’ “to read the text with the interest of the poor, suffering, and exploited”, becomes clear in his choice of this particular proverb. “For ordinary people”, he explains, “a heifer, that is, a young female cow that had the potential to produce other cattle, was a valuable asset and with which they were not willing to part. To lose a heifer simply because it mingled with the chief’s livestock was to be disempowered economically, and this hurt ordinary people the most” (Ramantswana, 2016:191). Read from the perspective of African indigenous cattle culture, “the unwillingness of the Egyptians to give up their livestock comes as no surprise to the African mind” (Ramantswana, 2016:192), and generates an ironic reading of Genesis 47:25. “The Egyptians’ sarcastic denouncement of Joseph should be viewed as a critical stance against oppression” (Ramantswana, 2016:192), precisely because “two contrasting ideas stand side by side in this instance: the Egyptians are saved (or given life), on the one hand, but they are turned into slaves, on the other” (Ramantswana, 2016:194).

In a typical African tri-polar biblical hermeneutical move (West, 2018), recognising both African contexts of reception and the biblical literary and socio-historical sites of textual production, Ramanswana brings the South Africa text (pole one) into dialogue with the biblical text (pole two), using a decolonial ideological frame (pole three). The focus of his contextual engagement, echoing Nzimande’s



class analysis (and echoing the story of Naboth), is the expropriation of land neighbouring then South African President Jacob Zuma's homestead. "The pinnacle of the Nkandla saga is the injustice inflicted upon the four neighbouring households of Jacob Zuma's Nkandla homestead. They were forced to give up their ancestral lands in order to create security in comfort for President Zuma and his family" (Ramantswana 2016:195-196). The Tshivenda proverb, *Dza musanda dzikumba thole*, "calls for the denouncement of oppressive tendencies among those in power, irrespective of who that power might be" (Ramantswana 2016:197).

Ramantswana's appropriation of indigenous ethnic-cultural knowledge is a critical appropriation. Like Nzimande, he interrogates what she refers to as an "oppositional ethnicity", evident, Nzimande argues, within the story of Naboth's vineyard "whereby the reigning Queen [Jezebel] imposes her own Phoenician identity on the whole community while in the process of deliberately and harshly silencing any other identity prevalent" (Nzimande 2008:250). Black South African women, Nzimande argues, "know first-hand the negative ramifications of ethnic superiority and prejudice in their own context under the British and Afrikaner apartheid brutality" (Nzimande 2008:250). The use of the story of Naboth's vineyard, like the use of the story of Joseph, in the contemporary South African post-colony "prompts readers who are interested in decolonising the Bible and those in solidarity with them to seek practical ways and means of protesting and dismantling contrastive ethnicity and identity constructions while promoting unitary and aggregative paradigms" (Nzimande 2008:251).<sup>110</sup>

The work of these Black scholars then is part of an emerging decolonial trajectory in South African biblical hermeneutics, exhibiting both Cone's emphasis on the local sites of reception of biblical texts and Mosala's emphasis on the particular sites of production of biblical texts.

## 5. Conclusion

James Cone's biblical-theological hermeneutic summons us to a radical hermeneutics of reception, enabling particular focal realities like the lynching tree to re-interpret the Bible. The land is our contemporary South African focal reality, summoning us to a biblical hermeneutic of decolonisation. But However, as we take up this task we would do well to remember Mosala's biblical hermeneutics of radical production, recognising recognizing that biblical texts carry the imprint of their sites of production. While it is true that we must use the Bible to decolonise decolonize the land, we must remember that this same Bible colonised the land.

<sup>11</sup> 10 We must include here the contrastive identity constructions of hetero-patriarchy; see (Punt 2011, Naidoo 2016)

## Bibliography

- Avoseh, M.B.M. (2013). Proverbs as Theoretical Frameworks for Lifelong Learning Indigenous African Education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 63(3), 236-250.
- Cone, J.H. (1975). *God of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Cone, J.H. (1979). "A Black American Perspective on the Future of African Theology." In *Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana*, edited by Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, 176-186. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Cone, J.H. (2011). *The cross and the lynching tree*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Cone, J.H. (2014). Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 148, 5-15.
- Dickson, K. (1972). "African Traditional Religions and the Bible." In *The Jerusalem Congress on Black Africa and the Bible, April 1972/Le Congres de Jerusalem sur l'Afrique Noire et la Bible: Proceedings*, edited by Engelbert Mveng and R.J.Z. (eds.) Werblowsky, 155-166. Jerusalem: The Israel Interfaith Committee.
- Maluleke, T.S. (1998). "Black theology as public discourse." In *Constructing a language Language of religion in public life: Multi-Event 1999 Academic Workshop papers*, edited by James R. Cochrane, 60-62. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Masanya, M. (1997). "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: a reading for the liberation of African (Northern Sotho) women. *Semeia*, 78, 55-68.
- Masanya, M (ngwana' Mphahlele). (2001). "A *Bosadi* (womanhood) reading of Proverbs, 31:10-31." In *Other ways of reading: African women and the Bible*, edited by Musa W. Dube, 145-157. Atlanta and Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature and WCC Publications.
- Masanya, M (ngwana' Mphahlele). (2002). "Is white South African Old Testament scholarship African? *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* 12, 3-8.
- Masanya, M (ngwan'a Mphahlele). (2004). Struggling with poverty/emptiness: rereading the Naomi-Ruth story in African-South Africa. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 120, 46-59.
- Mbiti, J. (1978a). "Christianity and African Religion." In *Facing the New Challenges: the Message of PACLA (Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly), December 9-19, 1976, Nairobi*, edited by Michael Cassidy and Luc Verlinden, 308-318. Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House.
- Mbiti, J. (1978b). "Christianity and Culture in Africa." In *Facing the New Challenges: the message of PACLA (Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly): December 9-19, 1976, Nairobi*, edited by Michael Cassidy and Luc Verlinden, 272-284. Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House.
- Mbiti, J. (2002). The African Proverbs Project and After. *Lexikos* 12, 256-263.
- Mosala, I.J. (1986). "The use of the Bible in Black Theology." In *The unquestionable right to be free: Essays in Black Theology*, edited by Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale, 175-199. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Mosala, I.J. (1989). *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

- Mtshiselwa, N. (2014). "A Re-Reading of 1 Kings 21:1-29 and Jehu's Revolution in Dialogue with Farisani and Nzimande: Negotiating Socio-Economic Redress in South Africa." *Old Testament Essays*, 27(1), 205-230.
- Nadar, S. (2006). "Texts of Terror, the Conspiracy of Rape in the Bible, Church, and Society: the Case of Esther 2:1-18." In *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Odoyoye*, edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, 77-95. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Naidoo, L. (2016). Hallucinations. *Mail & Guardian*. From <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-08-17-leigh-ann-naidoo-delivers-compelling-speech-at-ruth-first-memorial-lecture> [Accessed: 16 March 2018].
- Nolan, A. (1988). *God in South Africa: the Challenge of the Gospel*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Nzimande, M.K. (2008). "Reconfiguring Jezebel: a Postcolonial *Imbokodo* Reading of the Story of Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-16)." In *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: in Quest of a Shared Meaning*, edited by Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West, 223-258. Leiden: Brill.
- Punt, J. (2011). "Queer Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Biblical Interpretation." In *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, edited by Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, 321-341. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Ramantswana, H. (2016). Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics in the (South) African Context. *Acta Theologica Supplement*, 24, 178-203.
- Ramantswana, H. (2017). Decolonial Reflection on the Landlessness of the Levites. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 158, 72-91.
- South African Communist Party. (2012). "The South African Road to Socialism: 13th Congress Political Programme of the SACP 2012-2017: SACP's 5-year plan." SACP, <http://www.sacp.org.za/docs/docs/2012/draftpol2012.pdf>. [Accessed March 15, 2015].
- Trible, P. (1984). *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- West, G.O. (2004). "Taming Texts of Terror: Reading (Against) the Gender Grain of 1 Timothy." *Scriptura* 86:160-173.
- West, G.O. (2016). *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*. Leiden and Pietermaritzburg: Brill and Cluster Publications.
- West, G.O. (2017a). The Co-Optation of the Bible by 'Church Theology' in Post-Liberation South Africa: Returning to the Bible as a 'Site of Struggle'. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 156, 185-198.
- West, G.O. (2017b). Redaction Criticism as a Resource for the Bible as a 'Site of Struggle'. *Old Testament Essays* 30(2), 525-545.
- West, G.O. 2018. "African Biblical Scholarship as Tri-Polar, Post-Colonial, and a 'Site-of-Struggle.'" In *Present and Future of Biblical Studies: Celebrating 25 Years of Brill's Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Benny Tat-siong Liew, 240-273. Leiden: Brill.