A Decolonial (Re)turn to Class in South African Biblical Scholarship

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Abstract

South African Black Theology of the 1960–1980s characterised its primary site of struggle as the racial capitalism of apartheid. Intersecting race and/as class has been a distinctively South African contribution to African biblical scholarship. Less common, but equally significant, is the intersection of culture and/as class. This article analyses this trajectory, reflecting on how three South African biblical scholars (Gunther Wittenberg, Makhosazana Nzimande and Hulisani Ramantswana) have discerned the need for the African decolonial project to recognise and recover the class divisions within a culture. A recurring cultural trope across the three scholars is their use of proverbs to discern class distinctions within culture. The works of each of these three scholars and their dialogue partners in South African Contextual Theology and South African Black Theology are interrogated for how they intersect notions of class and culture.

Keywords: Decolonial, African Biblical Scholarship, white culture, black African culture

Introduction

One of the contributions of South African biblical scholarship to African biblical scholarship has been its emphasis on class. Economic class as a formative factor in the production of biblical texts and in the reception of biblical texts is central to South African socially-engaged biblical scholarship. This has not meant, however, the neglect of culture or race, though there has been an extended debate about how to intersect class and culture. Buti Tlhagale’s 1985 analysis of “Culture in an Apartheid Society” is an excellent example, with him identifying “the peculiarity of South Africa” among other African contexts. Buti Tlhagale echoes here the analysis of the South African Community Party’s early 1960s
characterisation of South Africa as “colonialism of a special type” constituted by “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.”

It is this “decisive factor” that is the focus of my article, what Lebamang Sebidi refers to as “racial capitalism” in his remarkable analysis of the “dialectical relationship” between class and race within the “four historical phases of the black struggle in South Africa.”

Racial capitalism did not come to an end in 1994, notwithstanding the gains in political and juridical transformation. The long “history of inequality in South Africa,” dating back as far as 1652, at least (and I will go on to explain), has resulted in what might be considered a hybrid form of racial neo-colonial global democratic capitalism. Sampie Terreblanche, writing in 2002, uses the term “democratic capitalism” to characterise “a transition” since 1990 “from the politico-economic system of white political domination and racial capitalism to a new system of democratic capitalism.” While Terreblanche is correct in stating that South Africa’s “democratic political system” is “controlled by an African elite,” Gillian Hart, writing a decade later, is also correct in recognising “the historical depth and extent of racialised dispossession as the defining feature of South African political economy.” The Covid-19 pandemic has confirmed the analysis of both Terreblanche and Hart. Race and/as class continue to be the distinctive feature of South African reality.

But what about culture? In honouring the work of our colleague David Tuesday Adamo, who has done pioneering work in contributing to and providing conceptual analysis of ‘African biblical scholarship,’ foregrounding “African

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5 Terreblanche, A History of Inequality, 14–16.
6 Ibid., 15.
7 Ibid.
cultural hermeneutics” in various ways, this article sets out to analyse a neglected dimension of South African biblical scholarship, namely, the class distinctions within a culture. Tinyiko Maluleke has helpfully offered us a three-phase understanding of South African Black Theology, documenting shifting hermeneutical engagements with ‘culture’ in Black Theology. Whereas phase one of Black Theology, argues Maluleke, “ventured somewhat into cultural... issues,” phase two “became more and more concerned with the struggle of black people against racist, political and economic oppression.” However, even within phase two, he continues, “At crucial moments connections with African culture would be made – provided that culture was understood as a site of struggle rather than a fixed set of rules and behaviours.”

Culture remains problematised in phase three but there is now an envisaged rapprochement with African (Traditional) Religions (ATR) and African Independent Churches (AIC), locating within both ATRs and AICs an alignment between culture and class, so that phase three is characterised by a foregrounding of culture not found in phase two. Given the class dimension of Black Theology’s analysis of race – for “Black Theology is first and foremost not about the powerful but about the powerless and the silenced” – both ATRs and AICs offer Black Theology in its third phase “another chance of demonstrating solidarity with the poor,” for ATRs are the religion of the poor and AICs are the churches of the Christian poor.

My own analysis has followed Maluleke’s heuristic (overlapping and intersecting) three-phase analysis and I have gone on to discern a fourth phase, a phase in which class analysis is undertaken within a particular culture, both African and biblical. This article takes that work a step further, enlarging the discourse domain to include not only work within Black Theology, but also work within South African Contextual Theology and South African decolonial biblical hermeneutics.

The (re)turn to indigenous culture is central to both postcolonial and decolonial biblical studies. For example, Adamo is explicit about the cultural dimension of the decolonial African biblical scholarship project. In his 2004 inaugural lecture, Adamo reflects overtly on “decolonizing African biblical

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11 I have discussed these three phases more fully in Gerald O. West, The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2016), 326–348.
14 Ibid., 98.
15 Ibid., 99.
16 West, The Stolen Bible, 345.

My starting point is my own ‘culture,’ White South African culture, in both its apartheid and post-apartheid manifestations. Alongside this first example, I analyse two examples of how Black African South African culture is interrogated for its class dimensions. The first example comes from the work of Gunther Wittenberg, the second from the work of Makhosazana Nzimande and the third from the work of Hulisani Ramantswana. My own contribution lies not only in the analysis of each example but in my weaving of notions of the decolonial across the three examples.

B DECOLONISING WHITE CULTURE—WITTENBERG

Gunther Wittenberg located his biblical scholarship within what came to be known as South African ‘Contextual Theology,’ with Black Theology as a significant dialogue partner in his work. Though he understood his work serving the anti-apartheid struggle in general, he had a particular commitment to a prophetic ministry to White South Africans. His book Prophecy and Protest: A Contextual Introduction to Israelite Prophecy is based on a series of lectures he gave as part of the extension programme of the Centre for Adult Education within the then University of Natal in 1980. These lectures, he says, were “aimed

19 Adamo, Decolonizing African Biblical Studies, 4, 5, 7, 10, 21, 22, 24, 27, 28.
Wittenberg had no need then to elaborate on his understanding of ‘White.’ ‘White’ was a settler-colonial-apartheid construction of social identity, regularly reinforced (though not always consistently with reference to a particular distinctive feature of ‘whiteness’) through what Gerhard Mare, drawing on Göran Therborn’s work on ideology as “social processes,” \(^\text{23}\) refers to as “hailing (or ‘interpellating’),”\(^\text{24}\) which “relate us to and get us to recognise the social world in specific ways.”\(^\text{25}\) Such hailings or summonings or interpellations ‘construct,’ ‘maintain’ and ‘confirm’ our social identity.\(^\text{26}\)

As a White of German settler origin South African, Wittenberg knew his place within the South African race and/as class landscape. However, he refused to be hailed by White voices, opting instead to be summoned by Black voices, serving their struggle directly with his biblical scholarship and/as activism and indirectly by using his biblical scholarship to address the White ruling classes and summoning them in turn to repentance and conversion (to use the language of Contextual Theology’s *Kairos Document* and *Road to Damascus Document*).\(^\text{27}\) Significantly, given his understanding of and commitment to the struggle against racial capitalism, Wittenberg recognised the peculiarity of the class struggle in South Africa. The class struggle was the Black struggle. As Robert Davies, writing in 1973, aptly puts it, “At present, there is no liberation movement in South Africa which seriously regards the white working class as a

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\(^{24}\) For related discussion on ‘interpellation’ and ‘whiteness’ within a specifically South African context see Gerrie F. Snyman, “African Hermeneutics' 'Outing' of Whiteness,” *Neotestamentica* 42/1 (2008).


\(^{26}\) Maré, “Race Counts in Contemporary South Africa,” 78.

potential ally, because of the benefits that this section of the settler community derives from Apartheid.”\textsuperscript{28} The White working-class had been coopted.\textsuperscript{29}

While Wittenberg was engaged in various anti-apartheid struggle projects, it is his biblical scholarship that has an enduring impact on European, White South African, and African biblical scholarships. The bulk of Wittenberg’s Old Testament biblical studies work was done during a time when the Old Testament Society of South Africa (OTSSA) was almost entirely controlled by White Afrikaner scholarship\textsuperscript{30} yet he continued to attend OTSSA annual conferences and publish in their journal, \textit{Old Testament Essays} (OTE). What Wittenberg shared in common with these Old Testament biblical scholars was a shared interest in European (mainly German) biblical scholarship. What they did respectively with this scholarship, however, was different. Wittenberg used the historical-critical and sociological work of European biblical scholarship in much the same way as the Black South African biblical scholar Itumeleng Mosala used Euro-American historical-critical and sociological work. For each, the biblical text itself was a site of struggle, incorporating contending ideological and theological agendas, rooted in political and economic contestation.\textsuperscript{31}

Summoned by the Black struggle, Wittenberg also published in the \textit{Journal of Theology for Southern Africa} (JTSA), a site in which both South African Black Theology and Contextual Theology published,\textsuperscript{32} among whose liberation discourse Wittenberg situated his work. As I have indicated,


Wittenberg challenged White culture while serving the Black struggle. A good example of such work is his 1991 article, published in OTE, forged in the final days of apartheid’s formal rule, “Job the Farmer: the Judean עם־הארץ and the Wisdom Movement.”

I have chosen this article for a number of reasons, as will become clear. First, the article is vintage ‘Old Testament’ scholarship, debating with Euro-American (mainly European) biblical scholars about the “origin” of “the wisdom movement in Israel.” Second, Wittenberg’s orientation to the question of ‘origin,’ a common focus of this generation of biblical scholarship, is however rather different from the consensus position. Shaped by South Africa’s liberation struggle and the summons to learn ‘from below,’ to be partially constituted by the epistemology of the poor and oppressed, Wittenberg is attentive, like Mosala, to class contestation within the biblical text. His class-based analysis leads him to recognise contestation within ancient Israel’s wisdom tradition. “Many scholars believe,” argues Wittenberg, “that pre-exilic wisdom is basically ‘school wisdom’... reflecting the interests of government officials and the ruling class.” However, he goes on to argue, “I want to challenge this view and want to maintain that the setting of Old Testament wisdom is not primarily the court but that it reflects the ethos of the עם־הארץ, ‘the people of the land.’” What follows is a careful and detailed analysis using archaeological, historical-critical and sociological method.

A third reason why this article is significant is how it reconstructs a redacted but identifiable struggle situated among the Judean עם־הארץ against the royal court. This is a recurring area of analysis for Wittenberg, shaped as is by the South African struggle, therefore, in what follows, I will connect articles and essays in which Wittenberg has established his argument. Like Mosala, Wittenberg locates resistance in real communities of struggle, both ancient and contemporary. The persuasiveness of Wittenberg’s argument for a pervasive “resistance theology” within the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible resides partially in his location of resistance theology within a particular sector of ancient ‘Israel,’ the עם־הארץ, the Judean, ‘people of the land.’

Though the resistance theology of the עם־הארץ takes form with the rise of the monarchy, Wittenberg is careful to demonstrate the political and economic significance of this sector prior to the changes wrought by monarchy. The “men

34 Wittenberg, “Job the Farmer,” 151.
35 Ibid., 151.
of Judah,” in Wittenberg’s analysis, are Judah’s relatively stable, relatively prosperous and relatively educated traditional Judahite leadership, representing the rural agricultural community of the עם־הארץ. Wittenberg sees this sector as the repository of an early Judean agriculture-based wisdom tradition, which drew on the Egyptian wisdom traditions that characterised “Judean towns which had long been under direct Egyptian control.” Importantly, the עם־הארץ retained a substantial independence, rooted in their ownership of rural land, their memory of “a period in their history when they were not ruled by kings,” their “segmentary” and “acephalous” social structure (similar to African societies, Wittenberg notes) and the leadership of clan-based “elders.” Taken together, such characteristics represented early Israel as a form of “democratic society.”

The resistance theology of this sector takes shape, Wittenberg argues, “within the context of historical struggles and conflicts”; it is a theology of struggle, both ancient and contemporary. Significantly, in the article in which Wittenberg uses this phrase, “Old Testament Theology, for Whom?,” he situates his contribution to the field of Old Testament theology clearly within the Black struggle, noting with regret that participation in annual congresses of the Old Testament Society of South Africa “is an almost totally white affair with little black participation.” Against this reality, Wittenberg is summoned by race and class formations other than his own, arguing that in his opinion the,

one central issue which proved of decisive significance for the development of Israel’s theology... is the establishment of royal-imperial power and the resistance to that power, the establishment of a hegemonic theology, on the one hand, which is challenged by a new type of theology, on the other.

This theology, he continues, connecting ancient contexts of struggle to the contemporary South African struggle is not ready to hand but is only formulated and developed in the process of resistance and opposition. In order

36 Ibid., 157–161.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
to make that theology relevant for our own situation, we would have to retell the story of this theology, concentrating not only on theological ideas or theological traditions but taking into consideration the historical context and the various social groups and their struggles, which gave rise to those traditions. Such a theology could serve as a model for struggles of resistance and theological reflection arising out of struggles in our own South African context.44

Critically and crucially, Wittenberg recognises that this kind of theological project cannot be done by biblical scholars and theologians on their own. Such theology requires participation and knowledge “from below.” 45 This is why Wittenberg devoted much of this work towards establishing the Institute for the Study of the Bible (what is now the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research), linked to the then School of Theology at the then University of Natal. The Institute for the Study of the Bible, states Wittenberg in this essay, “seeks to establish an interface between biblical studies and ordinary readers of the Bible in the church and community in order to facilitate social transformation.” Though the participation and input of “grassroots communities,” he continues, contextual Bible study “not only aims at empowering the poor and oppressed who take part in this process, but also seeks to transform the teaching of Biblical Studies at the School of Theology.” 46

While the contemporary struggle Wittenberg is addressing is the struggle against apartheid and its legacy, the locus of the biblical struggle is the monarchy. The resistance theology of the עם־הארץ is forged in opposition to Egyptian colonial control of the towns of Judea, for though the עם־הארץ “shared in the great tradition of the ancient Near East... they no longer shared the royal-urban imperial values,” 47 nor the attempts of David and Solomon “to establish an empire according to the Egyptian model.”48 Wittenberg’s analysis is nuanced and he is careful to point out that though the עם־הארץ are clearly apprehensive about monarchy, given their memory of the Egyptian model (and their experience of the Canaanite city-states),49 they supported David’s kingship. Within the “stable world” of an agricultural community, “where wealth came from the land,” “everybody had a place, the rich and the poor, even the king, all of whom the עם־הארץ of Judah had come to accept as part of the just order of creation.” 50

44 Ibid., 237.
45 Ibid., 231.
46 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
50 Ibid, 162.
A fourth reason the “Job the Farmer” article is significant is that it is attentive to class divisions within a ‘culture.’ Incrementally, as the Davidic-Solomonic monarchical system developed ominous systemic features, so Wittenberg discerns a division among the עם־הארץ. The stable world on which so much of the agriculture-based life and wisdom was based became unstable. As Wittenberg shows, wisdom literature captures the emergence of a systemic relationship between wealth and poverty. With the shift in political, economic and religious system towards a city-temple state system, a division develops within the עם־הארץ, for a certain sector of the עם־הארץ not only benefited from this systemic shift but contributed to the exploitation of “the poorer Judahite fellow citizens who were sinking even deeper into debt and serfdom.” A sector of the עם־הארץ “in the latter part of the monarchy” “became a rich, land-owning class who participated in the oppression of the poorer sections of the people, together with the merchants and other feudatories in the city of Jerusalem.” However, rediscovering “their own ancient sacred traditions,” re-membering the Exodus tradition and Samuel’s poetic warning about the predatory practices of the monarchical system, there was a “prophetic counter-reaction” in alliance with “a counter-movement” “within theעם־הארץ.” It is this counter-movement and its resistance theology that is the focus of Wittenberg’s scholarship.

Like Mosala, Wittenberg uses historical-critical and sociological methods to identify this redacted resistance theology. Central to Wittenberg’s work is the recognition that the resistance theology he discerns is located within a particular social sector, the עם־הארץ in general and within a particular class-sector within the עם־הארץ in particular and that the resistance theology of this social sector was “aimed not at abolishing the Davidic dynasty but at curbing its power and checking its tendency to self-deification.” Even prior to Solomon, there are indications, according to Wittenberg, of resistance to David’s monarchy, when

53 Wittenberg, “Job the Farmer,” 159.
56 Ibid., 24–25.
57 Wittenberg, “Job the Farmer,” 159.
58 Wittenberg, “King Solomon and the Theologians,” 25.
59 “Absalom was proclaimed king in Hebron, the sacred city of Judah. His commander-in-chief Amasa was from Judah, as was Ahithophel who came from Gilo, one of the country towns (2 Sm 17:23)”; Wittenberg, “Job the Farmer,” 158.
an emerging counter-movement who had initially supported David “changed sides and supported the rebellion of Absalom.”\textsuperscript{60} The counter-movement among the עם־הארץ takes textual form alongside the emergence of prophets and as part of the Deuteronomic movement,\textsuperscript{61} re-membering the prophet Nathan as “the spokesperson of this opposition,”\textsuperscript{62} intervening in the name of Yahweh to prevent David from establishing a fully-fledged temple-city state.\textsuperscript{63}

A fifth and final reason for choosing Wittenberg’s “Job the Farmer” article as an example is how Wittenberg recognises the cultural resonances of proverbs but probes these ancient biblical proverbs for their class identity. Wittenberg is also attentive, like many African biblical scholars, to the resonance between biblical proverbs and African proverbs. In making his argument for the origins of a wisdom tradition among the homesteads of the עם־הארץ, Wittenberg draws extensively on Friedemann Golka’s work\textsuperscript{64} in which Golka uses a sociological approach to establish similarities and analogies between the “tribal cultures” of ancient, pre-exilic Israel and pre-colonial Africa.\textsuperscript{65} Golka concludes his argument as follows:

If the aspects of life depicted in the Israelite proverbs and those of tribal societies are basically the same, then the derivation of Hebrew wisdom from Egypt and Mesoptamia [and their associated ‘wisdom schools] is in doubt. It would then have to be explained as indigenous wisdom.\textsuperscript{66}

We find a similar interpretive interest in the work of Adamo, who offers a useful historical overview of African biblical scholarship’s engagement with African proverbs as well as a contribution of his own, identifying and cataloguing forms of proverbial correspondence between biblical and African proverb-types. Adamo identifies the (re)turn to such oral resources as a feature of the decolonising of African biblical studies.\textsuperscript{67} Like Wittenberg, Adamo is of the view “that the Proverbs were formerly oral sayings of elders and wise people in ancient Israel.”\textsuperscript{68} It is this recognition that African proverbs reflect African

\begin{itemize}
  \item Wittenberg, “Job the Farmer,” 159–160.
  \item Wittenberg, “Authoritarian and Participatory Decision-making,” 89.
  \item Ibid., 89–90.
  \item Wittenberg, “Job the Farmer,” 154–155. Wittenberg cites two of Golka’s essays in their German original, published in 1983 and 1986 respectively. These two essays form the first two chapters of the book from which I cite below.
  \item Golka, The Leopard’s Spots, 15.
  \item Adamo, Decolonizing African Biblical Studies, 4, 9, 19.
\end{itemize}
indigenous wisdom that has drawn African biblical scholarship to comparative analysis. Madipoane Masenya (ngwan’a Mphahlele), as Adamo’s account acknowledges, is one of the earliest practitioners of this kind of “cultural hermeneutics,” building a body of work over more than thirty years. While aware of the kinds of interpretive interest that shape the work of Golka and Wittenberg, Masenya’s interpretive emphasis has been less on how African proverb-generating indigenous societies offer an alternative reconstruction of Ancient Near Eastern proverb-generating societies and more on how comparative cultural hermeneutics provides for an analysis of the “apparent resemblances” between “the Israelite worldview as embedded in some Old Testament... with (an) African worldview(s).”

While neither Adamo nor Masenya takes up a class analysis of African proverbs, Masenya makes a similar analytical move toward Wittenberg when she identifies the gender system within which proverbs are situated. Masenya is attentive to the gendered system of African culture, even indigenous culture. In two related articles on “singlehood” among women, Masenya provides a nuanced analysis of contending wisdoms within Northern Sotho-Pedi culture, demonstrating how normative hetero-patriarchal proverbs are challenged by the stories (and proverbs?) of women marginalised by hetero-patriarchal norms.

What is profound about Wittenberg’s analysis is that he identifies two similar sounding but systemically quite different proverbs in the biblical corpus. Wittenberg probes their cultural context with respect to their class identity. Wittenberg does not accept that “early Israelite wisdom presents a single world view, arising from a common setting,” arguing instead that the changing economic “social history of the עם־הארץ generates related but systemically distinct proverbs:

The rich and the poor meet together,

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73 Wittenberg, “Job the Farmer,” 162.
the Lord is the maker of them all (Prov 22:2).

The poor and the oppressor meet together,

the Lord gives eyes to the light of both (Prov 29:13).  

The first proverb, he argues, “reflects the experience of a well-to-do farming community,” whereby common experience taught “that laziness and mismanagement would lead to impoverishment.” The wealth of the rich and the poverty of the poor are not systemically related; the poor are not poor because the rich are rich. Wisdom’s view on the difference between the rich and the poor within an agricultural context where there is class parity is that those who engage with their agricultural world wisely would prosper, while those who did not would not. This economically “early” saying, argues Wittenberg, is part of the corpus of “early sayings” which “are dominated by the act-consequence sequence, where every good or evil deed is seen to have good or evil consequences.” However, the shift in analysis in the second proverb “from wealth as a desirable asset and a blessing of God typical of old wisdom, to wealth as a means of oppression... can be interpreted as a reaction of the old rural economy to the dynamics of a growing urban-based monetary economy.” In particular, continues Wittenberg, the introduction of Canaanite business practices, “especially interest on loans ... could be seen as being primarily responsible for the exploitation of the rural population.” In sum, “The wise realise that there is a type of wealth gained by unrighteous means.”

Wittenberg’s work, particularly his article “Job the Farmer,” does pioneering work in recognising and analysing the class dimensions within culture, both ancient biblical culture and South African apartheid culture. In the next two examples, I turn my attention to two equally pioneering pieces of work in which Black African culture is interrogated by Black South African biblical scholars.

C DECOLONISING BLACK AFRICAN CULTURE—NZIMANDE

My first example is the work of Makhosazana Nzimande. What makes her work truly pioneering is her insistence on a class analysis while Black African culture is being recovered as part of a post-apartheid postcolonial project. Wittenberg understood his work as being part of a decolonial contextual-liberation theology.

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74 Ibid., 163.
75 Ibid., 162.
76 Ibid., 162.
77 Ibid., 163.
78 Ibid., 163.
79 Ibid., 164.
trajectory; Nzimande locates her work overtly within a postcolonial and neo-colonial frame. Her work “seeks to place African women at the forefront of post-apartheid historical examination... changing black African women’s historical positioning as objects of history into subjects of history.”

Post-apartheid Black African women’s identities, she argues, are “in dire need of decolonisation.” Central to her understanding of the decolonial project is that, “black cultural consciousness should be placed within the context of a globalised cultural hegemony and utilised as a decolonising strategy of resistance against the colonially imposed amnesia,” while avoiding “the creation of false nostalgic cultural memories and post-colonial ethnic identities that conform to colonially inscribed identities.”

Nzimande deploys the “multivocalic symbol” of “Imbokodo” as her central hermeneutical concept, “construed from the freedom song sung at the South African Women’s Defiance Campaign against apartheid pass laws at the Union Buildings in Pretoria in 1956: ‘Wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo, uzokufa!’ translated as ‘You strike a woman, you strike a grinding stone, you will be crushed!’” Following overtly in Mosala’s (which are also Wittenberg’s) theoretical and methodological footsteps, Nzimande locates Black African women within three intersecting oppressive systems. These are (1) the “post-apartheid economic condition” in which “black women continue to suffer from the socio-economic legacy of the racial capitalism of apartheid,” (2) the gender struggles of South African Black women who, quoting Musa Dube, “not only suffer the yoke of colonial oppression but also endure the burden of two patriarchal systems imposed on them,” both settler-colonial patriarchal systems and indigenous African patriarchal systems and (3) “the pervasive injustice that reigned supreme in African political systems of governance.”

It is this (re)turn to class analysis within indigenous cultural systems that marks Nzimande’s contribution as distinctive, ushering in what I have argued might be considered a fourth phase of South African Black Theology. Nzimande’s careful theoretical and methodological analysis of 1 Kgs 21:1–16

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82 Ibid., 227.
83 Ibid., 227.
84 Ibid., 224.
85 Ibid., 231.
86 Ibid., 229.
88 Ibid., 243.
brings this text into a postcolonial imbokodo mediated dialogue with “African Queens and Queen Mothers in Africa.” It aligns her scholarship with African and African American scholarship, following in the footsteps of Adamo and Randall Bailey by rejecting the “de-Africanisation” tendency “prevalent in Eurocentric biblical scholarship.” Having located alongside Jezebel “the Zulu Queen Mother Mkabayi kaJama Zulu [c. 1750-1843] of the Zulu nation in South Africa and the legendary Queen/Queen Mother of the Swazi [c. 1859–15 December 1925],” as hermeneutical dialogue partners, Nzimande’s analysis slowly proceeds towards the third and final oppressive frame. It argues that:

The common thread that binds the roles of Queens and Queen Mothers in the Hebrew Bible... and in Africa, is the politics of exploitation whereby the women concerned, alongside the men, selfishly hoarded power for their own benefit at the expense of the poor and the downtrodden.

She becomes quite specific, making it clear that, “the beneficiaries from the Queens and Queen Mother’s reigns are themselves and their sons, rather than the general grassroots populace they are expected to represent by virtue of their royal privileges.”

Refusing to follow the White feminist focus on Jezebel, Nzimande asks, “Whatever happened to the struggles of Naboth’s wife”? Postcolonial readers, she insists, “refuse to identify with Jezebel in the text and choose instead to foreground and underscore the hidden struggles of Naboth’s wife from their own experience of similar situations of oppression and forced removal although there is no mention of her in the text.” She explicitly invokes Naboth’s wife and children, bringing them into a critical class dialogue with the indigenous African “marginalised and dispossessed, those at the receiving end of the Queens’ and Queen Mothers’ policies.” While not denying the gender oppression and marginalisation of women both in the Hebrew Bible and in contemporary postcolonial settings, accentuating gender oppression over and above the pernicious [class] social dynamics and ramifications of the royal abuse of power

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90 Ibid., 239.
91 Ibid., 242.
92 Ibid., 243.
93 Ibid., 246.
94 Ibid., 243.
and the exploitation of the poor in the hands of women, as Jezebel’s dealings with Naboth so clearly demonstrate, is a dangerous exercise. It is therefore regrettable that the immense social standing of Queens and Queen Mothers, both in Africa and in the Hebrew Bible, confers upon them the opportunity to exploit and dehumanise those over whom they reign. Such is the disposition of women of higher *classes* who are divorced from the everyday realities of women at grassroots.  

Nzimande’s metaphor of the *imbokodo*—grinding stone is indeed appropriate. The proverb ‘*Wathint’abafazi, wathint’imbokodo, uzokufa!*’ rather aptly recognises class divisions among women within Black African culture; not all women use a grinding stone equally.

**D DECOLONISING BLACK AFRICAN CULTURE—RAMANTSWANA**

My second example of Black South African decolonial analysis of class divisions within culture makes overt use of local African proverbs in order to make an argument about class within culture. Hulisani Ramantswana is among a generation of African biblical scholars who explicitly do their decolonial biblical scholarship drawing on African (indigenous) proverbs.

Much like Adamo, Ramantswana is deliberate about his use of the concept of the necessity for ‘decolonial’ readings and of ‘decolonising’ biblical studies. As I have done with Wittenberg and Nzimande, I will focus on a particular article in which there is an explicit recognition of class contestation within a cultural corpus of proverbs. Like Wittenberg, Mosala and Nzimande, Ramantswana is clear that “a decolonial reading also seeks to uncover the voices of those who have been marginalized and the suppressed voices of resistance within the same Bible.” In order to discern, identify, and analyse contending biblical voices, Ramantswana makes use of proverbs from his own Black African Tshivenḓa culture.

The article which is my focus is “Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics in the (South) African Context,” in which Ramantswana offers not only a detailed account of his understanding of the ‘decolonial’ task, including interrogation of the notion of ‘social location’ and the issue of ‘epistemology’ but also an example of what a decolonial interpretation looks like within African biblical

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95 Ibid., 243, my emphasis.
hermeneutics. There is a clear decolonial logic in this movement from social location, to epistemology, to practice.

Social location in the South African context is contested terrain, deeply inscribed even now by race. “The White social location of privilege is,” insists Ramantswana, “not a thing of the past; it remains a current reality,” which is why a decolonial perspective requires that “the concept of social location is not simply concerned with place, be it Africa or South Africa.” “Reading from this place,” continues Ramantswana, invoking the (grudging) recognition within biblical studies that all biblical interpreters read from a particular place, “without engaging the social location of the reader in the racialised world in which we live, does not necessarily address the problem.” Therefore, “In the South African context, the issue of ‘race’ can be neither evaded nor avoided, as it has to do with the question of who is producing knowledge.” This is in fact the case within South African biblical scholarship, argues Ramantswana, where “[t]he demise of the colonial-apartheid regime in South Africa did not result in a radical shift in the production of knowledge,” particularly in the post-apartheid history of South African biblical scholarship—both Old Testament and New Testament—where “[t]he continuance of the status quo basically implies the continuity of White dominance in the production of knowledge in the field of biblical studies.”

In moving towards his practice of decolonial biblical interpretation Ramantswana engages with the concept of ‘Whiteness’ and the “epistemological location of White Africans” but his primary emphasis is on the “epistemological location of Black Africans.” This leads him directly into his decolonial interpretive practice, which requires the “production of alternative

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98 Ibid., 180.
99 Ibid., 182.
100 Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States (vol. 1; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective (vol. 2; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).
102 Ibid. 182.
105 Ibid., 185–187.
106 Ibid., 187–189.
knowledge from an African social location.” Given the history of colonisation and the continuity of the structures of coloniality in Africa as a social location, African biblical scholars should have a two-fold commitment. They need to be committed to understanding the workings of the current global system in order to avoid perpetuating the structures of coloniality, and from our social location, and they need to be committed to producing alternative knowledge on the basis of our own African knowledge systems and experiences.

As indicated, a significant feature of Ramantswana’s understanding of the South African decolonial project is the inclusion of ‘White Africans.’ However, Ramantswana recognises that White South African biblical scholars are “faced with two options.” The one option is to continue to maintain White privilege through the subterfuge of a claim to being a minority through which they “tend to cling to their position of privilege in the postcolonial and post-apartheid period and to perpetuate the structures of coloniality from within the subaltern location.” “The other option is for subaltern Whites to accept that the colonial system has thrown them onto the underside of the colonial matrix of power and to understand that their liberation has to become intertwined with that of the Blacks.” “This position,” Ramantswana continues, and Wittenberg and I would concur, requires White (South) Africans,

[to] give up their continuing attempts to maintain their privileged position and to let their struggle become one with the Black struggle. For as long as the White (South) Africans do not embrace the Black struggle and let it envelop them, they remain linked to the colonial system of power, which will continue to work through them to maintain dominance.

For both Black Africans and White Africans, Ramantswana’s twofold commitment, turning away from neo-colonial global systems and (re)turning to African knowledge systems, “requires a dual process of epistemic delinking and epistemic relinking.” Building on the work of Walter Mignolo, who argues

107 Ibid., 189.
108 Ibid., 189.
110 Ramantswana, “Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics,” 186. I do not think however that the use of the concept ‘subaltern’ is appropriate for White South Africans. The notion of ‘subaltern’ is a foundational ‘postcolonial’ concept that should be reserved, I would argue, for those colonialism has marginalised, not those who were previously part of the colonial power who now find themselves a ‘minority’ within the South African post-colony; see for example Chaturvedi Vinayak, ed., Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial (London: Verso, 2000).
“that both ‘liberation’ and ‘decolonization’ points toward conceptual (and therefore epistemic) projects of de-linking from the colonial [racial and/as capitalist] matrix of power,” Ramantswana calls for “an epistemic shift [delinking] from the imposed colonial mindset and the continuing dependence on Euro-Western categories” and an “epistemic relinking” to “African cultures, heritage, and knowledge systems.” Crucially, he adds,

The idea of a ‘relinking’ is not some obsession with time-travel to the long-gone, outmoded, precolonial past; rather, it is an epistemological reorientation in the present that refuses to abandon the rich heritage of the African ancestors and draws knowledge from the experiences of suffering from colonialism and coloniality.

Having outlined his understanding of the logic of the decolonial project, Ramantswana provides “an example of how a relinking with our African knowledge system can be applied in the reading of biblical texts, by reading Gen 47, informed by knowledge systems derived from our African ancestors.” From the outset, Ramantswana uses a Tshivenda proverb in order to “relink with African knowledge systems,” appropriating “afresh the heritage our ancestors left us” and making “a deliberate move to anchor the Bible in indigenous discourse”: “U nala tshau ndi u lata” (“to abandon what is yours is a loss”). From this starting point, Ramantswana then uses a particular Tshivenda proverb to “inform our understanding of reality and of biblical texts,” in general, and specifically in the case of Gen 47 to critique “those in positions of power”: “Dza musanda dzi kumba thole” (“The chief’s livestock draws a heifer”). Ramantswana elaborates on his translation, arguing that the proverb uses the image of how the chief’s livestock “attracts a poor family’s heifer to mingle with and thus become legally part of the herd”; “that is,” he continues, explicating the proverb further, “those in power tend to thrive at the expense of the poor.” Ramantswana draws his decolonial ideological orientation from such indigenous knowledge.

“Decoloniality,” Ramantswana argues in another article, “is a perspective through which structures of domination are questioned and challenged.”

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115 Ibid., 190.
116 Ibid., 190.
117 Ibid., 190.
118 Ibid., 190–191.
119 Ibid., 190, 191.
120 Ibid., 191.
121 Ibid., 72.
while also seeking “to uncover the voices of those who have been marginalized and the suppressed voices of resistance within the same Bible.” Ramantswana’s Tshivenda proverb does both:

This proverb reflects a critical stance towards those in power, especially when they deprive the poor of their basic necessities. To read Genesis 47 through our proverb of interrogation is to enter into a dialogic process of questioning, challenging, and understanding of the biblical text.

My emphasis in this article is on Ramantswana’s recognition of a class dimension to Tshivenda proverbs (and so to indigenous African knowledge). Ramantswana goes on to deploy this proverb to critique the class contestation within the Joseph narrative, identifying an Egyptian elite economic agenda driven by Joseph and a resisting economic and/as cultural ideology of the masses of ordinary Egyptians who are systematically deprived of their cattle and land and then enslaved. Turning from biblical text to South African context, Ramantswana uses the same proverb to interrogate a similar kind of economic contestation. He identifies President Jacob Zuma’s economic and/as cultural exploitation not only of South African citizens in general but of “the four neighbouring households of Jacob Zuma’s Nkandla homestead,” who “were forced to give up their ancestral lands in order to create security in comfort for President Zuma and his family.”

What is particularly significant in terms of my focus on class-within-culture is how Ramantswana’s Tshivenda proverb offers indigenous African resources for interrogating any form of ‘political elite,’ whether an African chief or an African president or an imperial Egypt co-opted Hebrew. Ethnicity in each case is interrogated for its class commitments.

E CONCLUSION

Both African postcolonial and decolonial projects emphasise the recognition and recovery of indigenous African ‘culture.’ Both are overt in bringing to the fore what missionary-colonial ‘culture’ sought to eradicate or at least regulate by relegating to the margins. African biblical scholarship, led by scholars like David Tuesday Adamo, has brought local African cultural resources alongside biblical texts, using such resources to interrogate both the missionary-colonial brought Bible and the pre-missionary-colonial Bible. What is less usual within African biblical scholarship is the interrogation of class, both class within biblical cultural contexts and class within African cultural contexts. South African

122 Ibid., 74–75.
123 Ibid., 191.
124 Ibid., 192–195.
125 Ibid., 195–196.
126 Ibid., 196.
biblical scholarship has led the way in demonstrating class divisions within culture, whether African culture or biblical culture.

In this article, I have analysed three different yet related decolonial examples of South African biblical scholars at work, spanning a time period of more than thirty years. In each case, the ‘cultural’ indigenous knowledge of proverbs has been used to discern the class dimensions within culture. What these scholars offer us, I would argue by way of conclusion, is that the ‘decolonial’ project requires not only a recognition and recovery of culture but also the recognition and recovery of class within culture. African decolonial biblical scholarship requires attentiveness to class (while affirming African culture).

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