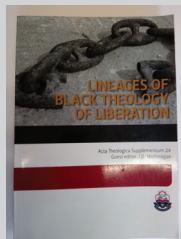


A review of lineages of black theology of liberation



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A review of lineages of black theology of liberation

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This book is an anthology of articles, some of which were presented at the Black Theology Conference held at the University of South Africa in 2012. The book could have been organised better if the articles had been grouped according to the broad themes covered. Therefore, in this review I reflect on the articles under the following themes: gender issues – sex locking, the black female body and dead males versus living females; black theology's legacy; black theology, the church and ministerial formation; and black theology's hermeneutical lineage – African, decolonial and postcolonial.

The category of *gender issues – sex locking, the black female body, and dead males versus living females* fits the following articles: Baloyi's article: 'The prevalence of women sexual locking in gender violence contexts – A pastoral perspective'; Mothoagae's article: 'Reclaiming our black bodies: Reflections on a portrait of Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman and the destruction of black bodies by the state'; and Masenya's article: 'Who calls the shorts in Naomi's life? Reading the Naomi-Ruth story within the African religio-cultural context'.

In his article, Baloyi reflects on the issue of sexual locking as a strategy used by some husbands to prevent their wives from engaging in extramarital affairs. In my view, sexual locking should be viewed for what it is: a shaming measure and not a preventative measure, as it does not prevent; rather, it functions as a locking mechanism for those engaging in sex. For Baloyi, the practice of sexual locking infringes on the rights of women and reflects the patriarchal tendency of making women the property of men to do with as they wish.

Mothoagae's article focuses on the treatment of black bodies, particularly black female bodies, during the colonial period. Mothoagae takes Sarah Baartman's body as an example how the British colonisers 'violated, exploited, destructed, penetrated, and subjugated to various inhumane conditions' those bodies. The treatment of Sarah Baartman's body reflects on the one hand the dehumanisation of black women, and on the other hand, white men's longing to penetrate black women to satisfy their sexual desires. Thus, black bodies could be objects of genocide, femicide, slave trade, or rape, or otherwise objectified. However, the dehumanisation of black bodies, as Mothoagae observes, continues in the current postcolonial period as exemplified by the brutal killing of Moses Tatane and the Marikana massacre. Just as black people affirmed their humanness during the colonial-apartheid era, it is necessary to affirm the same in the current context in which 'black lives' seem to matter less than 'white lives'.

Masenya's article tackles the issue of the role of the dead, particularly the male dead over the living, particularly the female living by reflecting on Naomi's and Ruth's lives as projected in the book of Ruth as well as on what Masenya refers to as the 'African Naomi' which is the African reader whose reading is shaped by the African religio-cultural worldview. Masenya notes a significant difference between the function of the (living) dead between the Ruth text and the African religious text: In the Ruth text, the (living) dead are not portrayed as mediators between Naomi and YHWH, they are not the final authority and they are not blamed (nor is witchcraft) for Naomi's calamities, as things like these would have been construed within the African religio-cultural context. However, Masenya argues, considering the textual indicators, Naomi views the *hesed* of YHWH towards her by the granting of a son through Ruth as a blessing not just to the living, but also to the dead. This, as Masenya argues, resonates with the African religio-cultural worldview in which dead males have an influence on the living. Furthermore, Masenya notes the role of Boaz as a link between the living and the dead. For Masenya, the book of Ruth is underlined by the religio-cultural patriarchal worldview which propagates the control of the male dead over the female living. Masenya serves not simply to draw parallels or indifference between the religio-cultural patriarchal worldview embedded in the book of Ruth

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and the Africa religio-cultural worldview. More importantly, it is to warn against the victimisation of women through the patriarchal mindset then and now.

Under the category of *black theology's legacy* the following articles may be classified: Cloete's 'Allan Boesak: Innocence and the struggle for humanity'; Dolamo's 'Does black theology have a role to play in the democratic South Africa?'; and Mtshiselwa's 'Reading Isaiah 58 in conversation with I.J. Mosala: An African liberationist approach'. Cloete's article reflects on the legacy of Allan Boesak by critically engaging Boesak's concept of *innocence* as an epistemic category for critical reflection on the issue of race. The idea of *innocence* in Boesak's thought, as Cloete observes, was something that shaped the white supremacists' mentality in that they viewed their supremacy as a divine right and so justified the brutalities inflicted on the black others. It is this innocence that bred the idealisation of what was a horrendous situation which denied the black people their authentic existence. On the other hand, the idea of *innocence* also permeated the black mind through the failure to condemn the inhumane treatment of the black people and by regarding whiteness as the norm. Therefore, the situation required the black people to affirm their humanity and resist the structures of domination. Cloete also points out that, for Boesak, the liberation struggle was not just a secular-political matter, but also a spiritual matter. This, for Boesak, required the prioritisation of ethics over politics. This prioritisation of the ethical dimension was intertwined with Boesak's commitment to non-violence. Cloete notes that despiritualisation of the struggle in the process was a worry for Boesak, as it represented 'a betrayal of the philosophical significance of black consciousness thinking which foregrounds the liberation of the mind (the rational potential of every black person)'. Cloete further highlights that Boesak was disturbed by the continuity of apartheid racial thinking to shape relations in the postapartheid dispensation.

Dolamo asks the question: 'Does black theology have a role to play in democratic South Africa?' In answer to this question, Dolamo highlights that black theology in South Africa (BTSA) during the colonial-apartheid era was focused exclusively on political freedom and calls for the following five issues:

- BTSA needs to transcend racial-gender-political-geographical boundaries.
- BTSA should feature prominently in education and research, which would require a resuscitation of some of the BTSA projects that were halted post-1994.
- BTSA should play a role in developing a liberating future not simply through active participation in community projects, but it has to offer a critical voice by exposing tendencies of greed and by ensuring that government policies are benefiting the poor.
- BTSA must be practiced in such a way that it would be national, continental, and global in its orientation and in partnership with African theology.

- BTSA must engage with gender issues such as genital mutilation, levirate marriage, child brides and marriages by kidnapping, and end its neglect of confronting patriarchal culture.

Under the category of *black theology, the church, and ministerial formation* the following articles may be classified: Mdingi's article 'Black Soteriology: The physiological and the ontological process'; Modise's article 'Black church as a caring community: Southern synod as investigation centre'; and Naidoo's 'Liberative Black Theology: A case study of race in theological education'.

In his article, Mdingi begins by pointing out the sin of racism, or what may be properly referred to as the 'sins', because there are many. Among the sins that Mdingi points out are the sin of self-glorification by the white supremacist, the sins of violence, dehumanisation, deceit, decadence, oppression of the black people other and the sin of the cultural destruction of the black other. These sins, as Mdingi argues, are physiological and ontological sins that challenge and question the humanity and existence of the other as an image of God. In confronting these sins, Mdingi calls for black soteriology, which may be understood as the coming to consciousness of the destruction caused through white supremacy, which stripped black people of their humanity by asserting black humanity in the struggle to overcome the things that have come to characterise 'blackness': poverty, sickness, ghettos, objects of capitalism, marginalisation, and landlessness.

In his article, Modise focuses on the black church with attention on the church's obligation towards the poor. Modise does not engage the black church in general, but focusing instead on the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) as one example of the diversity that exists within the black church. He points out that the URCSA emerged as a black church as a result of black people's resistance to white supremacy. In addition, the black church is influential in shaping black values, and it is a fellowship of redemptive love. For Modise, the URCSA as a black church is not an exclusive church on the basis of race; rather, it is a church of those who resist racial oppression. The URCSA is a church that confesses that the triune God is the God of the poor and of justice; it is a church of unity, love and reconciliation, and it is a church in which the values of *ubuntu* and *ujamaa* are upheld. For Modise, the black church is not merely a church of the oppressed and the poor with which God sides, but it also is a caring community that engages in tangible projects that make a difference in the lives of the poor.

Naidoo's article reflects on the way that racialisation still shapes the landscape in the theological education sector, noting that in the current postcolonial, postapartheid era, some denominations have moved towards multicultural theological education training. Naidoo's study investigates the manner in which the issue of race is constructed and construed within church denominational theological institutions. One of Naidoo's key findings in the two institutions, which she

investigated, is that 'issues of identity and race were not embedded in the ministerial formation due to lack of broad understanding of ministerial formation'. For Naidoo, it is the long-established culture of the institutions which shapes the beliefs and practices of students and staff on the issue of race. She therefore argues for a liberative theological education that liberates ministerial formation from being Eurocentric and proposes a decolonial epistemic shift by allowing alternative forms of theologising as a way of decentring the Euro-Western forms of theologising. Considering the white dominance of the institutions' staff that she investigated she proposes that there is a need to develop anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices in theological training. Further, there is a need for empowering students, especially black students, to engage in critically rereading African histories. She calls for structural change and racial justice within the theological education sector lest racism continue to shape the theological education landscape.

Under the category of *black theology's hermeneutical lineage: African, decolonial, and postcolonial*, the following articles may be classified: Mtshiselwa's article 'Reading Isaiah 58 in Conversation with I.J. Mosala: An African liberationist approach'; Speckman's article 'African biblical hermeneutics on the threshold? Appraisal and way forward'; Ramantswana's article 'Decolonising biblical hermeneutics in the (South) African context'; and Tiroyabone's article 'Reading Philemon with Onesimus in the postcolony: Exploring a postcolonial runaway slave hypothesis'.

Mtshiselwa engages Mosala's hermeneutic of liberation; which hermeneutic demands that the modern biblical reader should pay attention to the class struggles within the biblical texts, or at the time of production of the biblical texts and, in turn, find liberative elements applicable to modern contexts. Mtshiselwa takes Mosala's hermeneutic of liberation a step further by arguing for an African liberationist approach that does not rely solely on Marxism which, although critical of capitalism, is still entrapped within the Euro-Western system. Mtshiselwa takes the concept of *ubuntu* as a liberative concept: the black masses are able to affirm their humanness and their shared equal rights. For Mtshiselwa, the African liberationist hermeneutic has the following values: communism as opposed to individualism, redressing of the inhumanness that poverty creates, redress of oppression and equal right to dignity. Mtshiselwa therefore proceeds to read Isaiah 58 in an attempt to find liberating possibilities applicable to the South African context.

In his article, Speckman opines that African theology came and left without leaving a methodological legacy. That is, Africans find themselves in a liminal space which he refers to as a 'betwixt and between'. He reasons that African biblical scholars have to undergo a three-step process: Step A: comfort

zone; Step B: self-emptying; and Step C: re-birth. Speckman finds the argument that African biblical hermeneutics is contextual to be unsatisfactory, as it is not uniquely African, and puts forward the concept of *celebration of life* as a framework through which to evaluate African readings of the Bible: 'A celebration of life is ... an apposite response to the effect of the shattering experience of colonialism and the balkanisation of Africa.' For Speckman, the framework of 'celebration of life' is observed in all cultures, although there are variations as to how life is celebrated, and it therefore plays a key role in shaping the questions through which the text is approached. I wonder, however, whether the framework is any different from Albert Schweitzer's 'reverence for life'.

In his article, Ramantswana argues that colonial structures and systems can survive even under the tag 'African'; it is not enough to simply apply the term *African* while what is being done is simply the recycling of Euro-Western practices or approaches. Ramantswana argues that African scholars have to realise that Africa, as a social location, is caught and entangled in the web of coloniality, and therefore it is necessary to engage the body-politics of knowledge and our epistemological location. To be socially located in Africa or to be a black African does not imply that one is producing alternative knowledge. He calls for an epistemological delinking from Euro-Western paradigms and a relinking with African knowledge systems and to allow those systems to shape the reading of the biblical text.

Finally, in his article, Tiroyabone focuses on the New Testament Book of Philemon to reflect on the slave-master relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. Tiroyabone critically engages the slave-master relationship in the book through a postcolonial lens and examines 'the hegemonic relations between centre and margins during the colonial and postcolonial eras in both the text and contemporary text'. By doing so, he drills in on the capacity of the slave or colonised to resist and overturn the structure of domination, arguing that Onesimus has to be viewed as someone who 'defies the system of slavery that determined his future. He reworked it, creating his own narrative, his own future.'

In conclusion, black theology in the South African context survives not as a monologic organised movement, but rather as a plurivoiced movement which lacks organisation. The Tshivenda saying '*Muñwe muthihi a u țusi mathuthu*' [One finger cannot pick the corns] speaks to the need for coordinated, cooperative efforts as people work together. Therefore, the obligation lies on black theologians to come together not simply to revive black theology and the past legacy of black consciousness, but to build a legacy as we address the structural and systematic patterns of coloniality which continue to condemn black people to the zone of non-being.