

# Ebed-Melech's protest to King Zedekiah as a model of modern protest movement (Jr 38:1–17)



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Generally, there are three types of protest, namely prophetic, political and sacramental protests. The prophetic protest has to do with various prophets protesting against nations, kings and policies of the government. Political protests have to do with various groups of people protesting against government policies of oppression. Protest by a group of people of certain faith against the evil that is perpetrated by governments or other authorities is known as sacramental protest. This article is about an individual called Ebed-Melech who protested against the wicked act of King Zedekiah and his princes. The article discusses how Ebed-Melech's protest, just as the prophetic, political and sacramental protest, can become a model for modern protests all over the world. This article insists that Ebed-Melech's courage, concern for justice, love, kindness and compassion makes him suitable to be a model for prophetic, political and sacramental protests in the modern world. The Ebed-Melech protest is an example of individual responsibility in the modern world that is filled with injustice.

**Keywords:** Ebed-Melech; Protest; Old Testament; Prophets; Book of Jeremiah.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The book of Jeremiah includes two parts that discuss the person of Zedekiah: Firstly, Jeremiah 21–24 (the so-called Zedekiah cycle) and 37–38 that deal with Jeremiah and Zedekiah's encounter (Callaway 1991:253–265; 1999:260).<sup>2</sup> The second part includes the story of Ebed-Melech's protest which is our main subject of discussion.

What is a protest? According to *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, it means 'to state positively; affirm solemnly; assert; to make an objection to; speak strongly against; to make a written declaration of a non-payment of; to express, object; dissent' (Guralnik 1964:1124). *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* defines the word "protest" as a strong complaint or disagreement; something such as a meeting or public statement by people who strongly disagree with a policy, law, etc.' (Rundell 2007:1193). *Protest* is an all-embracing word to describe various kinds of opposition to something such as policies, oppression, cheating and marginalisation. The main purpose is to convey a message for change to take place.

There are different methods of protest actions. This can be divided into two major methods: passive and direct actions. While passive action methods have to do with displaying signs, distributing flyers, writing petitions, soapboxing and passive picketing, direct action method of protest include occupations, lock-downs, displaying picketing, demonstrations, boycotts, sit-ins and strikes.

Readers may ask why choosing Ebed-Melech, a black man of African ancestry who is a high-ranking court officer from Jeremiah 38, instead of one of the prophets? First, Ebed-Melech's courage, dispatch and compassion as well as the ability to bring out the best in one of the kings of ancient Israel, appear to be unsurpassed. When this story of Ebed-Melech in the Book of Jeremiah is examined critically, it is one of the fairest stories in the Old Testament (Adamo 2003:7–12). Second, his action reflects an example of fighting injustice in the world and how it can be challenged at all cost. Third, an otherwise unknown black man, not counting the cost, saved the life of one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament.

A protest is one of the common ways of registering dissatisfaction where cheating, oppression or any injustice exists. However, many people, especially those in authority, consider protest as

1.This article was originally presented at the African Biblical Hermeneutic session of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in Boston, US.

2.Widder (2013:492) argues that the Zedekiah-Jeremiah's text of chapters 37–38 corresponds to the earlier Zedekiah's cycle of chapters 21–24.

**TABLE 1:** Jeremiah 21–24 and 37–38.

37:11–21	38:14–18
A. The situation of Jeremiah: accusation and imprisonment	A. The situation of Jeremiah: accusation and imprisonment
B. The king sent for Jeremiah to consult him	B. The king sent for Jeremiah to consult him
C. Jeremiah presents his plea to the king.	C. The king presents his plea to Jeremiah
D. New situation: The king complied with Jeremiah's request – and Jeremiah sat in the court of the guardhouse	D. New situation: Jeremiah complied with the king's request – and sat in the court of the guardhouse

disobedience and rebellion. They frown at any kind of protest – no matter what method it takes. In fact, debates about whether protest does work in Africa or not has been going on. Many people think that it is a waste of time to protest in Nigeria. Jideonwo (2015:1) says, 'Because for me I don't think protests in Nigeria are effective, and I don't like to waste my time', when trying to protest.

The purpose of this article is to critically examine Ebed-Melech's peaceful protest against King Zedekiah in Jeremiah 38:1–17. This article wants to examine how this protest, just like that of the Old Testament prophets' protests, is a good example of what a modern protest ought to be. It examines the courage, risk, sense of justice, peace and compassion that characterised Ebed-Melech's protest. Ebed-Melech spoke the truth in the time of universal deceit and it became a revolutionary act of deliverance of one of the major Old Testament prophets from death. I want to use the African Biblical Hermeneutic methodology to examine Jeremiah 38.<sup>3</sup> In order to achieve my objective, this article discusses the historical background of Ebed-Melech's protest action, the literary analysis of Jeremiah 38, the prophetic, political and sacramental protests, Ebed-Melech's identity and protest action in general.

## Historical background of the story of Ebed-Melech's protest action

King Jehoiakim, a vassal to the Babylonians after the battle of Carchemish, decided to continue his reliance upon Africans (Egyptians) since the days of the Assyrians. When Nebuchadnezzar suffered a defeat at the battle of Carchemish, he had to retreat home to reorganise his army. Because of the promise of African (Egypt-Kushite) support, he revolted against the Babylonians (2 Ki 24:1). In 598 BCE, after Nebuchadnezzar had reorganised his army with the addition of some Moabite, Ammonite and Aramaic guerrillas, he attacked Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died during the siege and was replaced by his 18-year-old son, Jehoiachin (2 Ki 24:8). In 597 BCE, Jerusalem surrendered and Jehoiachin and other Jerusalem officials were captured and deported to Babylon. The mantle of national leadership fell on Zedekiah, Josiah's son. Unfortunately, he refused to learn from history. Despite Jeremiah's preaching and counsel for surrender to Babylon, Zedekiah and his aggressive nobles rebelled against the Babylonians, and again, Jerusalem was under siege in 588 BCE. Jeremiah continued to preach submission to the Babylonians. When the siege was temporarily lifted at the approach of the Africans (Egyptians), the nobles and the

false prophets interpreted it as a sign of peace for Jerusalem. However, Jeremiah interpreted it as God's judgement and still counselled submission, because the lifting of the siege was temporary.

At the very time, when any criticism or opposition to the policy of the militant group of nobles who were determined to carry out the revolt considered treason, Jeremiah continued to preach submission to the Babylonians, because he claimed that God told him that Jerusalem would be destroyed. The nobles then believed that Jeremiah was anti-Judah. In 588 BCE, Jeremiah was arrested when he tried to leave Jerusalem and he was charged with treason. The militant nobles wanted him dead and they demanded that Zedekiah put him to death. Even though Zedekiah sympathised with Jeremiah, he did not want to offend the nobles. Zedekiah evaded his responsibility by giving the nobles authority to do with the prophet as they were pleased (Jr 38:5). The nobles took advantage of the king's evasion of his responsibility and threw the prophet into a pit to die (Jr 36:6).

## Literary analysis of Jeremiah 38

The narrative structure of Jeremiah 37–38 contains two accounts of the people attempting to destroy Jeremiah (Widder 2013:491–503). The first account is in Jeremiah 37:11–16 where Jeremiah tries to leave Jerusalem, and the king's officials arrest, beat and imprison him in the house of Jonathan. The second account is in Jeremiah 38:1–3 where the second group of officials report the treasonous words of Jeremiah to King Zedekiah and demand his death. The king evades his responsibility by washing his hand off the prophet and thus giving the officials the opportunity to throw the prophet into a cistern. These officials were Shephatiah, son of Mattan, Gedaliah, son of Pashhur, Jucal, son of Shelemiah, and Pashur, son of Malchiah. They wanted him dead because of his consistent message of surrender to the Babylonians. They consider such a message as treasonous.

What appears to be the hermeneutical key to the understanding the narrative, is found in Jeremiah 37:1, namely the theme of 'no one listens to the words of Jeremiah, the prophets, and his imprisonment'. The refusal to listen to Jeremiah and his imprisonment led to the appearance of Ebed-Melech, the black man of African ancestry, to rescue Jeremiah.

Because of the similarity of events and sequence of the narrative of Jeremiah's imprisonments, the chapters have traditionally been organised as parallel stories of Jeremiah's imprisonments or encounters with the king (Callaway 1991:262; Holt 1999:168; Holladay 1989:282; Martens

<sup>3</sup>African Biblical Hermeneutics is the examination of biblical passages in the African context. This methodology is also contextual. It is the rereading of the Christian Scripture from a premeditatedly Afrocentric perspective (Adamo 2015:31–52).

1987:33–49; Thompson 1980:637). Holt's chart (1999:168) below is a good example of such traditional organisation (Widder 2013:491–503) (see Table 1).

However, Widder (2013:491–503) thinks that a better organisational structure should be based on repetition, especially when one notices the repetitions of the following exact phrasing and of a related idea in Jeremiah:

- 37:16: 'Jeremiah was put into ... a dungeon, where he remained many days.'
- 37:21: 'So Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.'
- 38:6: 'And Jeremiah sank down into the mud.'
- 38:13: 'And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.'
- 38:28: 'And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.'

The five statements about the imprisonments of Jeremiah focus the readers' attention on the overriding theme of the prophet's unjust captivity (Widder 2013:491–503). Widder (2013:495) divides Jeremiah's imprisonment into five scenes:

1. Jeremiah's first arrest/imprisonment (37:11–16).
2. Jeremiah's first secret encounter with Zedekiah/first rescue (37:17–21).
3. Jeremiah's second arrest/imprisonment (38:1–6).
4. Jeremiah's second rescue (38:7–13).
5. Jeremiah's second secret interview (38:14–28).

Jeremiah 38 parallels the previous chapter (37). The prophet's message of destruction filled these two chapters and was repeated several times in Jeremiah 37:6–10, 16–17; 38:1–3, 18, 22–23 (Keown, Scalise & Smothers 1995:222). It appears that, in the two chapters, repetitions are used to emphasise the harsh response to the Word of God preached by Jeremiah. According to Carroll (1996:679), after studying the repetition pattern and the differences, he suggested the presence of doublets (Keown et al. 1995:222). Carroll also suggested a rearrangement of the text. Thompson (1980:637) considered the event in Jeremiah 37 and 38 as different accounts of the same events. Bright (1965:233–234) also noted the similarities in Jeremiah 37 and 38, because in both chapters Jeremiah was brought before princes; he was charged with treason; he was confined in either a cistern or cistern house – the house of Jonathan played a great role; secret interviews took place; Jeremiah request for intervention; and he ended up in the court of the guard. Bright also thought that they are consecutive events. According to Carroll (1996), it might be because of the 'art of story-telling' that is responsible for the repetitions. When one considers the various strands individually (Jr 37:3–10, 11–15, 16–21; 38:1–6, 7–13, 14–28), they stand out like scenes in a play with each having an important contribution to the larger tradition of the prophet (Keown et al. 1995:223). In each strand, there is an emphasis on the importance of the Word of God in these events (Carroll 1996:669). The fact that the transitions between some of these stories are not quite smooth and consistent, betrays the mark of editorial activity (Keown et al. 1995:223).

The evasion of King Zedekiah is apparent when his reaction to the charges against the prophet was so brief, 'Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you' (Jr 38:5). It seems as if the narrator was bent on displaying the weakness of King Zedekiah by making him opt out of the case. Another spectacular and fascinating scene is the elaborated description with details of the prophet's rescue. It was carefully narrated as if the narrator is a master narrator or editor:

Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, 'Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies'. So Ebed-Melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of the storehouse, and took old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. Then Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, 'Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes'. Jeremiah did so. Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard. (Jr 38:10–13, NRSV).

No one is certain why the translation above speaks of three men instead of 30 as in the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint (LXX). Apparently, the 30 could be understood if one takes into account the terrible hatred of the princes. Thirty men were probably used for security reasons in case the princes needed to prevent someone trying to rescue the prophet.

The major element in this story is secrecy (Carvalho 2016:125). The editor or narrator made use of 'secrecy'. In Jeremiah 38:14–26, King Zedekiah went to Jeremiah in secret and sought counsel from Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 38:24–28, the king pleaded for secrecy from Jeremiah in case any of the princes ask him about the encounter. Jeremiah also kept their discussion secret. In the narrative, Ebed-Melech functions as a contrasting character to the king's officials, the Judahites and Zedekiah.

The entire Jeremiah 38 seems to be the conclusion of the 'amalgam of various accounts about the prophet imprisonment, the king's dilemma and the various intrigues surrounding the last days of Jerusalem' (Keown et al. 1995:225). Jeremiah 38:28b supposed to be part of the beginning of Jeremiah 29:1 (Keown et al. 1995:225)

## Brief survey of prophetic, political and sacramental protests

Before discussing the Ebed-Melech's protest action, it is necessary to give a brief survey of the prophetic, political and sacramental protests, because that may assist readers to understand Ebed-Melech's action and the challenges to both prophetic, political and sacramental protests as well as all types of peaceful protests in the modern world

### Prophetic protests

An examination of ancient Israel's history reveals that many of its prophets were deeply involved in prophetic protests even though it was not their primary function (Lindars

1966:3–10).<sup>4</sup> The prophets of ancient Israel who have a consuming zeal for Yahweh and his exclusive claims had no choice but to protest most of their time. Given that this article is not mainly about the prophetic, political and sacramental protest, a very few examples of prophetic protests will be mentioned and briefly discussed.

Jeremiah, who was delivered by Ebed-Melech, is one of the greatest protesters. I believe that it will be correct to call him a prophet of protest. He protested against the temple, kings, princesses and false prophets. As a result, he probably suffered more than any other prophet of the Old Testament. His protest is also prophetic, political, ethical and religious.

The book of Jeremiah started with a protest in chapter 4–6, that is, a lament of Jeremiah:

Declare in Judah, and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say: Blow the trumpet through the land; shout aloud and say, Gather together, and let us go into the fortified cities. Raise the standard toward Zion. Flee for safety, do not delay, for I am bringing evil from the North and great destruction. (Jr 4:4–6)

The major events in the life of Jeremiah are the protest in the Temple sermon. In his sermon, he protested against the popular belief that, as Yahweh lives in the temple, no power can destroy Jerusalem, that is, the inviolability of Jerusalem. Jeremiah emphasises that Yahweh will destroy the temple because of insincere and false worship. ‘Such a blatant attack on the foundations of their beliefs and on the monumental icon that they had come to consider their safety net’, would naturally attract punishment (Matthews 2012:147). They charged him with the sin of blasphemy. Because of this sermon, he was banned from the temple and was forced to temporarily hide, but he continued to protest against Jerusalem, the temple and their leaders. He then committed his subsequent sermon into writing through Baruch.

Jeremiah makes use of physical acts, symbolic gestures and street theatre in an effective way to deliver his message of protest, which was consistent with his mission and protest (Jr 16–19). These methods of presenting the message had the purpose for the audience to understand his message without much explanation and to react urgently to the impending doom (Matthews 2012:150–153). When King Zedekiah secretly came to ask him for prophecy, he continued his prophecy of submission. He still told the king that Judah must submit if they wanted to survive.

One of the earliest prophetic protesters is the prophet, Nathan. Nathan went to King David and challenged him for causing Uriah’s death in order to have his wife. It was a courageous act to deliver Yahweh’s message of rebuke. It means that the king was never immune to prophetic criticism. This can also be classified as ethical, political, religious or sacramental protest. It is political, because the purpose is to

<sup>4</sup>The primary function of ancient Israel’s prophets is to receive revelation from Yahweh and then proclaim such revelation to the people of ancient Israel. However, no one can deny that protest is one of the elements of the Old Testament prophets’ work (Lindars 1966:3–10).

rebuke or challenge the king that he has done wrong. Similarly, Ebed-Melech challenged King Zedekiah.

The prophet, Elijah, protested before King Ahab when he forcefully snatched Naboth’s land inheritance (1 Ki 21). When Ahab and Jehoshaphat wanted to go to war with Ramoth-Gilead and a whole company of prophets prophesied that he would be victorious, it was only the prophet, Micaiah, who protested against the company of prophets and prophesied the opposite message (1 Ki 22).

As Jeremiah, the prophet, Isaiah, was one of the most dramatic and vehement protesters in the Old Testament. Most of his major protest or pronouncements are prophetic, political and ethical (Matthews 2012:106). Isaiah protested vehemently by demonstrating against such reliance on the African military power by walking naked and barefooted for three years (Is 20:1–6). According to him, the reliance is in vain, because Africans’ trust will be taken captive.

Another occasion where Isaiah protested was in Isaiah 18:1–7. Isaiah advised the African messengers, sent to King Hezekiah in order to assure him of African’s support, to go back to Africa. This support is against the Assyrians at the Battle of Eltekeh in the year 701 BCE.<sup>5</sup>

### 1) Political protest

As the title of this article is not about the political protest, only a few examples of political protests will be mentioned briefly. It might be useful to narrate briefly in outline form the history of modern protest all over the world, especially in Nigeria, in order to show how protesters have demonstrated the type of protest with courage, compassion and risk (as Ebed-Melech) in their protest movements. Political protest, according to this article, has to do with registering dissatisfaction against the government policies of oppression, racism and actions against the constitution of the country or any other policies that are oppressive. The purpose of such protest is to pass messages to change such policies that appear inhuman and unethical such as Jeremiah’s situation. These protests worldwide show resemblance to Ebed-Melech’s political, ethical and religious protests.

<sup>5</sup>Unlike the previous passage (Is 20:1–6), there are many scholarly controversies surrounding Isaiah 18:1–7. Hayes (1964) and Winward (1968) consider Isaiah 18:1–7 as part of the authentic oracle of Isaiah. Scott considers only Isaiah 18:1–6 as authentic (Hayes 1964; Winward 1968:93–95). Herbert (1973:117–119) divides this passage into three sections: Isaiah 18:1–3, 4–6, and 7. Isaiah 18:7 is considered as a post-exilic commentary of the Isaianic community. Marti (for detail analysis of Marti’s opinion, see Kaiser 1974:112–116) sees Isaiah 18:1–6 as directly linked with 17:1–11. According to him, Isaiah 18:3 is a later interpretation and verses 5 and 6 are the original conclusions of chapter 17:1–11. Kaiser considers the entire text (Is 18:1–7) as belonging to a late post-exilic redactor. There is also a problem concerning the proper identification of this text. Scholars have divergent opinions as to whether the prophet was asking Judah to send messengers to the Assyrians or was addressing the African messengers to return home to their people (Seitz 2012:145–149). Hayes (1964) considers the entire passage not so much as a judgement against a foreign nation as an oracle mainly intended for the prophet’s own people – Judah (cf. Kaiser 1974:112–116). According to Janzen (1972:60–62), Isaiah was summoning divine messengers to go to Assyria to tell the Assyrian ruler what was happening in Jerusalem. Clements (1980:165), however, thinks that the prophet was summoning the African (Kush) ambassadors to go to Assyria against which their plan is directed. As Bright (1972:281) has maintained, a very close examination of the text in question shows that the prophet was addressing the African messengers sent by King Shabako in Jerusalem, telling them to go back home empty-handed, because Judah did not need their alliance. Kaiser (1974:112–114) thinks that this passage refers to Africa, south of Egypt (Ethiopia) and gives several reasons for not believing otherwise.

Whipps (2011:21) lists 10 historically significant protests in the world, but only six of them will be mentioned here:

1. The nailing on a door of a German church as a treatise on the abuses of Catholicism by Martin Luther in 1517 later spilled blood and tore Empires apart.
2. During the French Revolution, on 14 July 1789, Parisians descended on the Bastille, which was a symbol of authority and excess, beheaded its governor and seized the prisoner. This became the beginning of a French Revolution.
3. In 1773, the 'Boston Tea Party' was a bitter protest against the new British taxation acts when many colonists secretly entered the British ships in the harbour and within 3 h threw 45 tons of British tea into the water. This was actually the beginning of the American Revolution.
4. On 26 of June 1950, Nelson Mandela's party, the ANC, stopped working and stayed home in protest against Apartheid rules. Hundreds of thousands of South Africans continued the protest for a decade. 26 June was celebrated as the National Freedom Day until 1994 in South Africa.
5. In August 1963, about 200 000 protesters gathered at the Lincoln historic 'I have a Dream speech' by Martin Luther King Jr in Washington DC, US. The purpose was to pressurise President J.F. Kennedy to draw up a firm civil rights legislation.
6. About 1 million student protesters gathered in Tiananmen Square, Beijing from 15 April to 04 June 1989 to protest against democratic reform. The Chinese military suddenly appeared and killed many of them. This action provokes very strong criticism against the Chinese government and military.

In the US, the Non-Violent Direct Action Movement flourished between the 1970s and 1980s. It all began with the anti-nuclear protest in New England and California, and influenced other movements such as non-intervention in Latin America, Environmental preservation, feminism and gay rights movements (Pierard 1991:319–321). They engaged in political action and practiced mass civil disobedience. By doing this, their political protest became a cultural revolution (Pierard 1991:319–321):

Tens of millions of Americans have joined protests and rallies in the past two years of President Trump rule. Their activism often is driven by admiration or outrage toward President Trump according to a Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll. (RallyingNations 2019:n.p.)

As a Nigerian, it will be good to close this section by mentioning some of the protest actions that may be an example or model of Ebed-Melech protest in Nigeria. In 2006, when a Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo, wanted to run for presidency the third time against the Nigerian constitution, the Nigerian Civil Society protested against it and went to the streets to demonstrate their revolt. As a result, Obasanjo had to jettison such a plan (Jideonwo 2015). In 2010 when President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua died, the cabal around him refused to transfer the power to his vice

president, which was against the Nigerian Constitution. With the help of several series of protests by a group called 'Save Nigeria Group', the transferring of the power to his vice president, Goodluck Jonathan, has been enforced.

In 2012, when the Nigerian government wanted to increase the price of petrol, the coalition of the Nigerian Labour Congress and the Nigerian Civil Society went to the streets to protest in order to change such a decision. The government had to shelve such an idea. It was the social media's protest and outcry that bring the decision of the Nigerian Senate to a halt when they wanted to introduce undesirable legislation ('Frisivolous Petitions': Prohibitions or the Social Media Bill) in 2015.

In 2017, when students of the Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho, who had been at home for nine months, protested, the governor of the Oyo State Government was forced to quickly open the university. In 2017, when everyone thought it was impossible to bring back the Chibok girls who were kidnapped from their secondary schools, because they thought that they had been married to people in Niger or Libya and that the Sambisa Forest was impenetrable, it was the protest of a group called, 'Bring Back Our Girls' that made the Nigerian Army and the Federal Government to recover some of the girls (Jideonwo 2015).

## 2) Sacramental Protest

Sacramental protest refers to the gathering of men and women of faith in protest against an evil act that has been committed or is about to be committed. They move to the streets or to the location of the place where such evil is being committed. In the process, they break and share bread in the name of God. They also share and drink wine. All bread and drink are considered holy. Words are also shared. The Eucharist of the Mass is considered the bread of life for the purpose of equipping the gathering community with strength (Tuck 1989:1–6). A common thing that binds Ebed-Melech's protest and the sacramental protest is that, instead of mere criticism at home, there were instant actions to change the unethical and evil situation. Another common thing is that they are both political and ethical. We certainly need more of Ebed-Melech's kind in our society where innocent people are languishing in prisons, and where many are dying innocently and no one seems to care to protest their cases like Ebed-Melech. The Ebed-Melech protest is a kind of sacramental protest, because it is a holy and righteous protest. That is the reason why it can be a model for sacramental protest for the modern world.

## Ebed-Melech's protest action

As the name *Ebed-Melech* does not appear in any other Old Testament passages except in the book of Jeremiah, it is important to determine who Ebed-Melech was.

The majority of scholars do not actually have a problem with his identification as a black man of African descent, because he was unambiguously called a Kushite twice in the passage.

What became a dispute about him is his position in King Zedekiah's court, because he was also identified as *saris*. Because Ebed-Melech was designated as *saris*, some scholars believe that he was a eunuch, keeping King Zedekiah's wives (Harrison 1979:155). Others have seen him as one of the royal officials or courtiers (Blank 1962:5, 211; Freedman 1949:254; Thompson 1980:1075). There are several probable reasons that Ebed-Melech was one of the highest royal officers and not a eunuch as some have maintained. If Ebed-Melech was an Israelite who worships Yahweh, as suggested by Jeremiah's saying (Jr 39:15–18) that he trusted in Yahweh, he could not have been a eunuch. Israelite law prohibits a eunuch from their congregation (Dt 23:1; Lv 21:17–21). It seems unlikely that Zedekiah would have placed his troops under Ebed-Melech's command if he had been a eunuch. If Ebed-Melech had been a eunuch, Jeremiah would probably have condemned him according to Israelite law. Consequently, Ebed-Melech would not have offered to rescue him. The original meaning of the word in question and its usage in several other Old Testament passages seem to support the view that Jeremiah 38:7 does not mean eunuch in the modern sense. The word *saris* comes from the Assyrian word *saresi*, which literally means 'he who is at the head of the king' or 'he goes before the king, one of his confidential advisors' (De Vaux 1961:121; Thompson 1980:639). In the Old Testament, the word appears about 45 times. In most of these places where the word is used, it means 'officers' or a person of great importance or great wealth.<sup>6</sup> In the few places where the word seems to mean 'a eunuch' it appears primarily in the material dating much later than the time of Jeremiah and in most cases in non-Israelite settings.<sup>7</sup> Although, no one can be certain why the LXX omits the word *saris* entirely. However, it could be that it is for the sake of avoiding confusion, because the word can mean both 'eunuch' and 'officer'. In this context of Jeremiah 38:7, it appears to mean 'officer'.

In light of the reasons mentioned above, it is more likely that Ebed-Melech was one of the king's officers who were highly respected by the king and Jeremiah, as African nations were held in high esteem and used for valuation in ancient Israel (Adamo 2014:500–530). Ebed-Melech was also one of the most trusted officials. That must be the reason why the king allowed him to lead the team of rescuers.

6. In Genesis 37:36 and 39:1, Pharaoh's captain of the guard, a married man, was called *saris*. The chief baker and the chief cupbearer were also called *saris* (Gn 40:2, 7). The officials of Israel are divided into several categories—officials of the tribes who served the king, commander of thousands, of hundreds, in charge of the properties, and all the warriors (1 Chr 28:1). The official, sent to bring the prophet, Micaiah, ben Imlah (1 Ki 22:9; 2 Chr 18:8), and the officer of the king who restored the house and the land of the Shunammite woman (2 Ki 8:6) were called *saris*. The high military or diplomatic officer of the Babylonian and Assyrian armies were termed *Rabsaris* (2 Ki 18:17; Jr 52:25). During the fall of Jerusalem, the commander of the Israelite men was called *saris* (2 Ki 25:19; Jr 52:25). Nathan-Melech whose name has the same compound word than Ebed-Melech's and who has his dwelling in the area of the temple was also called *saris* (2 Ki 23:11). The fact that those who were deported by the Babylonians were the people in the class of *saris* and were the leading men of Israel, shows that the people called *saris* could be people of high rank or of great wealth (see Rice 1975:98–99).

7. However, the following passages are what seems to be the clearest instances where *saris* could mean eunuch: Isaiah 56:3, 4; Esther 1:10, 12, 15; 2:3, 14, 15, 21; 4:4, 5; 6:2, 14; 7:9; and Daniel 1:3, 7–11, 18. All these passages occurred later than the period in which Jeremiah lives. However, 2 Kings 20:18 and Isaiah 39:7 could be earlier, but there is no certainty that *saris* in these passages mean eunuch.

Because the Hebrew word can be translated to 'prince', 'royal official', a 'courtier', or an 'officer', 'servant', 'eunuch' or 'slave', many Western scholars prefer to translate the word to a 'eunuch' or a 'slave' who kept King Zedekiah's wives.<sup>8</sup>

At this critical moment when Jerusalem was under siege and the prophet was between life and death, a man of African ancestry, called Ebed-Melech [*king's servant*], appeared. When Ebed-Melech heard about the incident of throwing Jeremiah into the cistern to die, he immediately sought the king and vehemently protested. He did not only inform the king about the condition of the prophet, but he also charged the people with the sin of attempted murder (Jr 38:8–9).

Although King Zedekiah had earlier evaded his responsibility of saving the prophet, Ebed-Melech's courage and sense of right made him act immediately to save one of the greatest prophets in Ancient Israel. King Zedekiah chose Ebed-Melech, the protester, to be in charge of the men who were to rescue Jeremiah. The process of deliverance was vividly and elaborately described. Ebed-Melech got rags from the storeroom, and carefully and gently let them down to the cistern and instructed Jeremiah: 'Put the rags and clothes between your armpits' (Jr 38:12). The consequence of his action got him a reward of life (war survival). Jeremiah 39:15–18 records the consequence of his protest. Some time after the prophet was rescued, he sent a message to Ebed-Melech and promised him that he would survive the fall of Jerusalem. The basis of this prophecy was that he trusted the Lord and refused to follow popular opinion (Jr 39).

When Ebed-Melech heard that Jeremiah was thrown into a pit to die, this black man walked straight to the king in protest in order to challenge him. His protest was able to restore the sense of right and wrong to the king. Ebed-Melech's protest to King Zedekiah saved one of the most popular and important prophets of the Old Testament from death. This is an example or a model of courage, risk and compassion. This is also a model or example of how a protest movement should be in the whole of Africa and the world at large. Although the three other protests, as discussed above, are not completely or radically different from Ebed-Melech's protest, they should assist us in our understanding of the different types of protests that are needed in today's world: prophetic, political and sacramental protests (Lindars 1966:3–10; Middleton 2016:51–65; Pierard 1991:319–321; Tuck 1989; Whipps 2011:21). Such different protests should help to prove that Ebed-Melech was on the right track with his protest.

When some scholars examine Ebed-Melech's courage, dispatch, compassion and his ability to bring out the best in one of the kings of ancient Israel, this story in Jeremiah 38:1–17 was considered one of the fairest stories in the Old Testament (Smith 1929). Moved to save the life of one of the most important prophets through protest action, the otherwise unknown black man of African descent became a model of true and peaceful protest.

8. This is also true of the translators of the following versions: Jewish Version, the New American Bible and the Living Bible.

Modern Bible readers may probably be surprised to encounter such a high-ranking African officer in the Judean court. It is important to understand that Ebed-Melech does not appear in the narrative by chance at this critical time of Judah's history without some important purposes. According to the narrator(s), Ebed-Melech functions as a contrasting character in the narrative (Widder 2013:491–503). He stands in contrast with the king's officials. While the king's officials wanted to destroy the prophet, Ebed-Melech tried to rescue him (Jr 38:12). Ebed-Melech also stands in contrast with the Judaists. While no one in Judah tried to rescue Jeremiah, Ebed-Melech accepted and took the responsibility of rescuing him from the cistern.

In the narrative, Ebed-Melech represents a contrast to Zedekiah. Although Zedekiah rescued the prophet during the first imprisonment (Jr 37:21), he refused to rescue him during the second imprisonment at the point of death. Although Ebed-Melech was not the only rescuer, he took the risk to rescue the prophet during the second imprisonment. While the narrator allots only one verse to Zedekiah's rescue, he or she allots five verses to Ebed-Melech rescue.

In this narrative, Ebed-Melech appears and functions as 'the true servant of Yahweh', because he is the only one (except Jeremiah) who acted justly and righteously, while Zedekiah, whose name means 'Yahweh is my righteousness', refused to act according to his name. Because Ebed-Melech acted justly and righteously, one will be right to say that the narrator makes him appear as the one who prefigures 'the righteous branch' as foretold in Jeremiah 23. If this is so, one will be correct to consider Ebed-Melech's protest and deliverance action as a sacramental protest. That is the reason why Jeremiah (Jr 39:15–18) rewarded him with survival later.

Ebed-Melech's appearance shows that black people of African ancestry have been part and parcel of ancient Israel throughout the Old Testament Scripture as has been attested to by Adamo (1998).<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

There are some important facts that need to be noted in the above story of Ebed-Melech: God can use anyone for a redemptive purpose. A Christian's responsibility includes saving and defending the weak and the oppressed. God will always have his remnant in all places and will always raise someone for salvation in the time of distress. The need to oppose injustice should be the watchword for all, especially Christians, as Ebed-Melech's sense of justice seems to be the driving force in his life. Christians should be awakened to their religious and political responsibility in Africa.

There is a need for courage to enable one to challenge the wrong that authorities commit. This type of courage includes taking a great risk, especially in the time of

<sup>9</sup>It has been argued by an African scholar that black people, called Cush in the Old Testament, contribute religiously, politically, economically and militarily to ancient Israel (Adamo 1998).

military events (Adamo 2003:11–12). One should not count the cost, because that may involve life. Ebed-Melech demonstrated this kind of courage, which is absolutely necessary for our society.

Compassion is also necessary. The need for compassion has to do with the sanctity of human life, which drove Ebed-Melech to protest to the King Zedekiah and told him that, 'the prophet will die of hunger' (Jr 38:9). That is what could be considered as genuine compassion, which led Ebed-Melech to protest to Zedekiah. It teaches us to maintain biblical principles as a moral foundation for our society. Ebed-Melech's story teaches us to take immediate action in all our dealings instead of procrastinating. As Ebed-Melech took immediate action and accepted the leadership of the rescuers of the prophet, it is important for Christian leaders in Africa and the world to take instant action instead of mere criticism. It teaches that it is our responsibility to bring the best out of presidents, governors, ministers, commissioners, directors, vice-chancellors of universities and other leaders in Africa. Ebed-Melech's action teaches us that all our actions, good or bad, will be rewarded.

A protest may not bring the exact outcome or exact immediate actions as is in the case of Ebed-Melech, but they provide good pressure or give popular validation to those who are on the throne to make necessary and important decisions. A protest may fail, but that is not supposed to be an excuse not to protest peacefully. A protest should not be judged by their failure, but how it increases people's sense of right or wrong and what lessons are learned (Jideonwo 2015). Jideonwo (2015) is correct when he says:

The sum of all this is simple: if anyone tells you protests don't work, disregard them. Ignore them. They quite simply don't know what they are talking about. And they are not the kind of people you should be paying attention to, either in the first place or at the end of the day. (p. 5)

Finally, a black man of African ancestry (Ebed-Melech), a model of the biblical and modern protest movement, is gratifying to Africa and Africans. It further shows that, after all, Judaism and Christianity are not foreign religions as branded by the anti-colonialists.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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