I Am the Woman

I look at her and remind myself that all those men need me. They need the strength that only a woman of faith can have.

I draw strength from Paul who, in an unguarded moment, spoke the truth.

There is no male nor female in Christ.

I draw strength from that stranger’s words. She has taken the best, and it will never be taken from her. I stand on Jesus’ words. I am come to free the prisoners and to release the oppressed.

Religion that enslaves us is false. True religion gives us freedom!

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Esther and Northern Sotho Stories: An African-South African Woman’s Commentary

Mmadipoane (Ngwana 'Mphahlele) Masemsa

Storytelling is a significant art, particularly in the oral and diverse cultures of Africa. This art was and is sufficiently portrayed when stories are told by word of mouth and dramatized in person by the performing storyteller. Telling African oral stories in writing carries potential dangers and or weaknesses. The written story, for example, lacks the vigor and vitality of the narrated story. The “free text” is transformed to a “fixed” text (Mazamisa 1995:11). The necessary modifications and additions that the oral performer can make as he/she retells a story are absent in a written, fixed, “lifeless” story. In this regard, Mazamisa (1995:12) argues: “Oral traditions that are verbally rich and sensuous suddenly become sterile and dead when they are translated into writing.”

In the present essay, this situation is exacerbated by several additional factors. First, the written story is retold in a language that is foreign to Africa, the English language. The latter, for example, as compared to many African languages, is gendered. As this essay reveals, certain stories, or even details in some stories,

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I prefer the term African-South African to southern African or black South African. The word “Africa” in “southern Africa,” in my view, defines a cultural group rather than a geographical position. The word black is problematic, because it might be understood in some circles to include colored and Indian women in South Africa. I am writing about a specific South African woman: an indigenous woman of South Africa, who were historically and are now known as Africans—the blacks of the blacks of South Africa. Included in the African-South African category are the different tribes of South Africa: Zulus, Vendas, Sothos, Xhosas, and so forth.
would read smoothly, without excluding persons of either gender, were the reading done in an African language. Further, some words, phrases, and sentences—such as the African wisdom sayings, many of which form an integral part of the storytelling process, or even the stories themselves—are difficult to translate meaningfully into the English language. One other challenge is that although the written word is immortal and has guaranteed longevity, it is used by a special class of people: the "haves"—the clergy, the officials, and the elite of society. The majority of people (particularly in diverse African contexts) only have access to the original oral literature (Mazamisa 1995:11).

With these and other difficulties in mind, I attempt a rereading of the African (Northern Sotho) stories in conjunction with the biblical story of Esther. Northern Sotho is singled out for more specificity about the African–South African context, although there are close similarities among the many Bantu African tribes in southern Africa. My reading of these stories is shaped by my experiences as an African–South African woman. As such, I am led to ask how helpful these stories are to women in patriarchal contexts. Do they have the capacity to provide African women with life and well-being in the midst of oppression, suppression, and death? In an attempt to answer such questions, each set of stories (both from Africa and from the Bible) is accompanied by an African woman's liberationist critique.

As we grapple with bringing the two canons together, it is important to address a number of questions. How may biblical stories meaningfully be read with African stories in mind? Is it possible to marry stories from two different cultures (the Northern Sotho culture and the Israelite culture) and still to end up with a successful union? In the case of these two cultures, it might be possible, since—as several earlier studies have noted—there are close resemblances between the Israelite and African cultures, including a common worldview and a common experience of reality (Masenya 1989:183; see also Masenya 1998; Dickson 1977; Burden and Bosman 1982). My earlier work has demonstrated that, due to those close resemblances, proverbs from the Old Testament can be contextualized with ease in an African (Northern Sotho) setting. Both the biblical proverbs and the African culture share a simplistic, optimistic outlook on life. As Burden observes, "What is important is not a common cultural milieu, or corresponding pivotal points, common customs or even a common belief in a Supreme Being, but rather elements in their world view, a relationship of spirit" (1982:74).

In addition to that common worldview, proverbs from the two cultures share elements of language, style, and subject matter. For example, Victor Zinkurairere (1999) has noted the close resemblances between the Hebrew language and African languages. In addition, proverbs in both cultures are sapiential in orientation, and they reveal a similar structure. They also share the theme of parent-child relationships in a family context. The Hebrew word ma'ashal, often translated as "proverb," has a broader meaning as well, encompassing parables or the sort of folktales and stories that are the focus of this study. For that reason, the insights of previous work on proverbs provide an important basis for the current study.

Commenting on the common ground between the Old Testament and Africa, Phillips concludes:

In short, the church in this continent, though only partially acquainted with this part of the Bible, feels a natural affinity with it, and is not likely to neglect it when the whole becomes more accessible. Misuse, misunderstanding or overemphasis are likely to be more common than rejection or neglect; hence the Church in Africa has much to gain from a clearer and firmer grasp of the Old Testament's true place and function in God's self-manifestation to the world. (1942:13).

Before attempting to bring the two canons together, however, it would be helpful to introduce each canon independently.

**A Note on the Story of Esther**

This essay is an attempt to reread (not to misuse or misunderstand, to recall Phillips’s painful words in the above quotation) the biblical story/narrative of Esther with African stories. Indeed, the book of Esther is a story, not history (see Burger...
Esther and Northern Sotho Stories

1988:156). Although it is a narrative partially rooted in history, it has many unhistorical elements, revealing that we are dealing with a story about one of the Jewish heroes or heroines. Burger’s remarks are instructive:

Collectively these historical details would seem to constitute a convincing argument in favour of the historicity of the book, but they do not make it a chronicle. The author uses historical details merely as a background to his story. The arguments against the historicity of the book are far more persuasive. The non-historical elements of the book indicate that the author did not intend to produce a chronicle.

(1988:156)

Although the narrative of Esther is not historically rooted, it has realistic elements that lend most modern readers, not excluding the African Bible readers, to identify with the story, or rather with the characters in the story.

The question whether the book of Esther deals with Esther the Jewish heroine or Mordecai the Jewish hero depends on a particular reading. Interestingly, the nationality of Mordecai, much more than that of Esther, is foregrounded in the book of Esther (3:3; 5:13; 8:7; 9:29; 31). One would conclude that although the book bears the name of a woman, it is actually a story about the man Mordecai (9:4) and the Jew Mordecai (3:3; 5:13; 8:7). It is thus a national male story. Mosala (1993) is right when he argues that, in the book of Esther, Esther is used to achieve the national male agenda.

Even a superficial reading of the story of Esther reveals the androcentric nature of the book and, consequently, the patriarchal nature of the world that produced the book. Elsewhere I have argued:

Though elements such as these may make our reader (African South African female reader) identify with the story, as a whole she finds the story of Esther offering no liberative possibilities for oppressed women. It does not enhance them as persons in their own right. Instead, it perpetuates stereotyped ideas that women cannot act on their own (cf. Mordecai’s influence on Esther’s life), that they are evil (cf. Esther’s request for a second day of murder) and that they are tricksters (cf. Esther’s humility before the king on two occasions).

(Masenya 1998:9)

Not only is the story of Esther marred by its male-centeredness, a reading (particularly of chap. 1) reveals that we are dealing with a document that portrays a certain class. The class portrayed in this document cannot be helpful to many African women whose socioeconomic conditions render them largely invisible. In this regard, Mosala (1988:134) contends that the text depicts the surplus of the economy squandered on nonproductive luxury goods and a luxury lifestyle among the ruling class. It is silent on the conditions and struggles of the nonrulers: peasants, serfs, and the underclass.

One other troubling element as one reads the book of Esther, particularly from an African-South African perspective, given our history of marginalization as a race, is its foregrounding or “chosenness” of the one race or people (the Jews) over and against the other race or people (the Persians). The problem with the Jewish race’s special position in the divine plan is that the “other” race, which is not portrayed as chosen, can be plundered even in their own country, in the name of God. Esther is one of the rare books in which the Hebrew name for God is not used. If one reads the book carefully, however, there are veiled elements of the Divine. God’s hand is visible throughout the story (Loader 1998:18–24). It is in the name of the Divine that Esther the Jew—Esther whom we may rightly assume became queen through divine intervention (chap. 2)—can display such cruelty against many innocent Persians, as revenge against the evil plan of Haman against her people. More disturbing is that the evil intentions of Haman against the Jews (chap. 3) were never carried out, yet Esther still had the courage to request a second day of murder—the murder of many innocent people (chap. 9). Given my South African history, this story cannot help but remind us of how native inhabitants were plundered also in the name of God. The “chosen” race came in and found the “heathen” indigenous people, took their land, and colonized their minds and cultures in the name of the God of the Bible. The text of Esther is thus problematic for such factors as its class perspectives, its ethnic biases, and its ideology of colonization.
With these class, gender, and ethnic biases in mind, and given that the Bible is a highly esteemed book in the African–South African context, it is therefore important to think about new, empowering readings for such contexts. This is the main objective of the present essay: to read the book of Esther through the lenses of Northern Sotho stories. We may call it a folklorist reading of the book of Esther. The hope is that such a reading may rescue the story of Esther from the negative biases noted above, so that it can be embraced heartily by many of us, like the women of Africa, at the margins of society.

A Note on the Northern Sotho (Folk)tales

Having said this, it must be acknowledged that although the Northern Sotho language, like many African languages, is gender-neutral, and that many folktales (dinonwane), particularly fables, are gender-neutral, many of these stories reveal the patriarchal nature of the culture that produced them. Oduyoye (1994:26–76) also identifies this male bias of African lore in her Daughters of Anova. She therefore approaches the lore with a feminist critique. Such painful elements in the Northern Sotho folk narratives will be dealt with in a critical way below.

In Northern Sotho, there are many folktales (dinonwane). In the Northern Sotho language, the word nonwane lexically stands for fable, fable, legend, or fairy tale, and its plural, dinonwane, for folklore (Ziervogel and Mokgokong 1975:863). Examples of Northern Sotho folktales include Nonwane ya kakanyathaloso (myth), Nonwane ya pheteletšanne te (legend), and Nonwane ya ishoko (fable). Folktales are popular fictional narratives about animals and/or human beings. Unlike myths and legends, folktales need not be taken seriously. That, however, should not perpetuate the unfortunate stereotypes that the “folk” in folktales refers to the “uneducated,” irrational, and unimaginative dwellers of small communities (Okpewho 1992:163). Folktales have a role to play in the community. They are handed down from one generation to another, basically for amusement. Apart from amusement, Northern Sotho folktales serve a didactic function; they support the discipline of young children, and they help to maintain cultural and social conformity (Makgamath 1991:7–9). Some of these functions will come to light as the Northern Sotho folktales interact with the biblical stories.

The Two Canons Interact

In this essay, parts of the story of Esther are read in the context of Northern Sotho stories, by virtue of the similarities in themes and worldviews between the two canons. The identity of the audiences being addressed in each case is less significant than the didactic purpose behind the narration. What lessons do the narrators portray in these stories? Can we then lend these narrators our ears?

Nonwane! Nonwane! (Tale! Tale!) is an introductory formula for the Northern Sotho folktales. The implied meaning of nonwane appears to be “I want to tell a tale.” The audience will then respond Kelekelit! The latter, like the word nonwane, is difficult to translate. Kelekelit is a responsive refrain the audience says through the narration. Its initial use is assumed to mean “Go ahead!” Probably the word has the same meaning as the Shona word Gwevegeta—that is, “Speak up!” This refrain is helpful, in that the members of the audience also become active participants in the storytelling process (Makgamath 1991:45).

Folktales: “Tšiwana ye e sa huwego e leta monono” (An Orphan Who Does Not Die, Awaits Treasure) and Esther the Orphan

The tenor of the proverb is that those who are powerless, the have-nots (such as orphans), if they remain persistent, will get out of poverty one day.

Nonwane! Nonwane! . . . Kelekelit!

Long, long ago, there was a widow who had only one son. The two lived in severe poverty. So poor were they that the people of the village were sick and tired of their requests. In their village, there was a sick kgosi (chief). All means attempted toward his healing were not successful. The kgosi sent a word out to inform his people that there was only one doctor who could come to his rescue. The doctor
lived in an isolated spot at the outskirts of the village. The men in the village chose two men to go and fetch the doctor. When they arrived, they started singing the song “Tematema re nyaka ngaka, tematema kgosi e a lwala tematema” (Tematema, we are looking for a doctor, tematema, the kgosi is sick, tematema). The doctor responded, “If I can come to you, if I can come to you, will you not run away, tematema?” The two replied, “How can we run away while we are looking for tematema? The kgosi is sick, tematema.” The doctor raised his head and half of his body out of the water. When they saw the big snake with a lamp on its forehead, they were so terrified that they did not have the courage to wait until it reached them, and they decided to run away.

So terrified were they that they went back to the village, admitting their failure to bring the doctor along with them. Then another group of men tried, but with no success. Finally, the orphan boy decided to go and try his luck. On arriving, he shouted the following words to the snake: “Tematema ke nyaka ngaka, tematema kgosi e a lwala tematema” (Tematema, I am looking for a doctor, tematema, the kgosi is sick, tematema). The doctor responded, “If I can come to you, if I can come to you, will you not run away, tematema?” “How can I run away while I am looking for a doctor, tematema, the kgosi is sick, tematema?” answered the orphan.

How was the snake transported to the royal kraal? The snake coiled around the orphan, and he took it there. At the village, the snake licked the kgosi, and he was healed. The orphan had to take the snake back to its home. The snake rewarded the boy with a big herd of cattle, goats, and sheep. On arrival at the village, a big feast was made for the orphan, and he was given another herd of cattle, sheep, and goats. The family of the boy came out of their poverty. Then the word spoken by mogologolo (the ancestor) was fulfilled: Tshiwana ye e sa huqo e lela monono (An orphan who does not die, awaits treasure). (See Masola 1988:26–26)

Is that not the case? . . . Keleketla!
There is yet another story I would like to relate to you. Keleketla! This story comes from the Bible. Keleketla!

Long, long ago, when the stones were still soft, there was an orphan whose name was Esther. Esther, together with her Uncle Mordeciai and fellow Jews, were taken captive to a faraway country (Esther 2:7). As a result, her situation as an orphan was exacerbated by the fact that they were exiles in a foreign land. They were under oppression. Therefore, they were not free, and hence even their identity was hidden at the beginning of the story (2:10). However, due to her ability to listen to elders like her guardian, Uncle Mordeci
Folk tale 2: "Mokgadi le Mokgatsana" and Esther, the Listener

Nomwane! Nomwane! Kelelela!

Long, long ago there were two daughters in one family. Their names were Mokgadi and Mokgatsana. One day Mokgatsana decided to refresh herself by going outside of her home, so that she could be exposed to life out there. On her journey she had several encounters, the first with an old lady. The lady was struggling through her journey, for she could not see very well. She asked Mokgatsana to remove some matter from her eyes. Mokgatsana did not hesitate to offer her help. The old woman was so impressed by Mokgatsana’s kindness that she remarked, “You are a kind-hearts child. Listen to my advice. Offer help to whomever you will meet along the way, just as you have helped me.”

Mokgatsana proceeded with her journey, singing a song and admire the beauty of nature. She met another old lady and asked her, “Where are you going, mum?” The old lady responded, “Far away. Could you please carry my luggage?” Mokgatsana helped to carry the old lady’s luggage without any complaint. The two of them reached a place where each had to go in her own direction. The old lady thanked Mokgatsana for her assistance and gave her a packet of salt, and she advised her to help whomever she would meet along the way.

As Mokgatsana proceeded with the journey, she met a frog. The latter requested that she fix a soft porridge for it. She quickly remembered the advice of the first lady whom she had met. She fixed the soft porridge for the frog and put in some of the salt she got from the second old lady. After eating the soft porridge, the frog remarked, “You are a very kind-hearts child. I will give you some advice. Take this mahela meal and proceed to the cave. A big snake lives in the cave. You will not find the snake, but you will find a rock with a hole next to the entrance to the cave. Prepare the soft porridge and put it in the hole of the rock. Wait until the snake comes back.”

When she arrived at the cave, Mokgatsana did exactly what she had been told. When the snake came back, it asked her, “Who fixed such a delicious soft porridge? Come out! Come out!” At first Mokgatsana was afraid, but she took courage and showed up for the snake to see her. The snake expressed its gratitude to Mokgatsana for the delicious soft porridge she had prepared, and it said, “You have fed me well. Go inside the cave, and you will find clothes, beads, and necklaces. Take as much as you can carry, for you have pleased me.”

On her arrival home, her elder sister Mokgadi became interested in her gifts. She decided to undertake the same journey. Before she set out on the journey, Mokgatsana advised, “Wait a bit. There is some advice I would like to give you.” Mokgadi responded skeptically, “What are you talking about? Young as you are, do you think that I never undertook a journey?” Mokgatsana replied, “You have not undertaken a journey like this one. On this journey there are things that you are supposed to do and those that are not supposed to be done.” Mokgadi was fed up with her younger sister. She said, “You are a fool, and you are young.” She slapped Mokgatsana in the face and set out on her journey.

Her first encounter was with the same old lady whom Mokgatsana met. She asked her the direction to the cave of a generous snake. The old lady replied, “Wipe away the matter that is in my eyes,” pointing at her eyes. Mokgadi answered, “Who are you that I must wipe stuff out of your eyes?” She answered arrogantly and continued with her journey. The old lady shouted at her and said, “Continue to behave to others as you did to me.” Later on, Mokgadi met a woman who was carrying a piece of luggage on her head. She refused to listen to the advice of the old lady. She could not understand why a well-dressed girl like her could be expected to carry a dirty piece of luggage belonging to an old lady. She proceeded with the journey, thinking that she was going to receive good gifts. The listeners will recall, however, that before she started her journey, she was not willing to get advice on how she should conduct herself from Mokgatsana, who, though younger, had experienced the journey. To use the Northern Sotho idiom, Mokgadi did not give her ear to lebo le leqaqo pitseng (the wooden spoon that comes from the pot), meaning “someone who comes directly from a particular situation or experience unchanged.” She thus went out empty-handed.

As she continued with the journey, she met a frog. The latter requested that she fix a soft porridge for her. She replied with ridicule, wondering why a frog would think that a person of her calibre would fix food for frogs. The frog remarked, “Then I will not show you the direction to the cave.” Mokgadi became confused. There were different paths, and she did not know which one to follow. She then decided to go and fix soft porridge for the frog. The soft porridge was not as delicious as that fixed by her younger sister, because there was no salt to make it tasty. As a result, the frog did not enjoy it. In spite of that, the frog gave Mokgadi a packet of meaty meal (though it was not as tasty as that which was given to Mokgatsana). The frog directed her to the cave and gave instructions on what to do on reaching the cave.

When she arrived, Mokgadi did not find the snake. She prepared a soft porridge, but there was no salt to make it tasty. Where would the salt have come from, since she neglected the old lady who could have given her some? Even the quality of the meaty meal was not the same as that prepared by Mokgatsana. When the snake came
back, it smelled the aroma of the soft porridge and started to help itself. As it licked the food, the snake found the food tasteless. The snake became angry with the cook and called her. She headed to the snake, being excited and thinking that she was going to receive some gifts. But that was not the case. The snake told Mokgadi that she came, basically, to receive gifts. It condemned her for not being kind and for having cooked a tasteless soft porridge. It promised Mokgadi that it would swallow her up. When Mokgadi realized how angry the snake was, she ran away very fast, continuing until she reached her home. On her arrival, her younger sister asked her about the gifts. So ashamed was she that she could not respond to Mokgadi’s question. Since that day, she changed her lifestyle. She learned to be kind and compassionate. Hers was a hard lesson, because she did not succeed in obtaining gifts from the snake. (Masola 1988:16–20)

What lesson do we get from this story? To listen is rewarding. Moreover, learning to cooperate with people—even if it does not seem to make sense at times, or even if the people with whom we are involved are considered “lowly” by society—can be a rewarding exercise.

The same applies to Esther in her story. She is a listening type, and she therefore proves to be a wise daughter. When her uncle advises her to join the beautiful women who were competing for selection as the Persian queen, she does not question it. Instead, she relies on the wisdom of her guardian Mordecai and acts accordingly. It is worthy to note that one of the duties of Jewish or Israelite children was to respect and honor their parents (Prov. 1:8–9; 6:20; Exod. 20:12). The meaning of parent extended beyond the blood boundary. Anyone who was the contemporary of blood parents was supposed to be respected as well—an understanding shared also in the Northern Sotho culture (Masena 1989). When under the custody of Hegai in preparation for the contest, Esther is cooperative (Esther 2:8f.). When her uncle charges her not to reveal her identity to the people, she obeys (2:10). When Mordecai advises her to appear before the king for the sake of her people, she listens (4:15f.). Her capacity to listen is rewarded because, in the end, her nation is saved.

The moral is the same as that in the Northern Sotho folktale: it is not a good idea to despise advice, even if it comes from those who might not meet one’s standards, even if it comes from the “powerless” (like the younger sister in the Northern Sotho story), and even if it sounds unwise. But particularly if advice comes from an older party, it is worth listening to; in most cases, the listener will not regret it.

The question worth asking is whether boys or girls in African cultures are still expected to be obedient to their seniors. Although one could argue that, in African–South African cultures, all children regardless of gender are expected to honor their parents (Masena 1989), it would not be an exaggeration to argue that more was and is expected from the female gender. What was noted in the preceding folktale (“Tšiwaná ye e sa hwego e lela monono”)—namely that, in the absence of their fathers, boys could take leadership responsibilities at an early age—points in that direction. In a patriarchal culture, with its emphasis on male leadership and female submission, it makes sense that female folk, regardless of their age, are expected to be more obedient to seniors than their male counterparts. Perhaps it is no coincidence that, in both stories, females are portrayed as models of children who listen.

Folktale 3: “Kgomo ye tšhwana” (The White Cow) and the Story of Haman and Mordecai

Nomwane! Nomwane! . . . Keleketla!

Long, long ago, when one could still get greens [a relish of some sort] from the stones, there were brothers whose names were Mashilo (the elder one) and Mashilihwane (the younger one). One day the two brothers decided to go out of their village to be exposed to life outside the village. As they continued happily with their journey, they came to a point where the road branched into two directions. After an argument, they had to part ways. Mashilo headed in the eastern direction, while his younger brother Mashilihwane went in the direction of the West.

As he continued on his journey, Mashilihwane saw a big fire in front of him. There were many pots around the fire. He thought to himself, “Perhaps there is some wealth inside these pots.” He started picking them up one by one, until he was left with one extraordinarily heavy pot. After a short rest, he started struggling with the pot again. A big sound was heard, and the last pot rolled down, and—surprisingly—a big giant appeared at the place where the pot was.
The giant had big eyes and scary teeth. "What are you doing?" asked the giant. "Why do you destroy my home?"" The giant continued angrily. "Where do you think I must live?"

Mashilwane, frightened by the scene, replied, "I was not aware that I was destroying your home. Please let me mold your pot again." The giant refused Mashilwane's offer. He instructed Mashilwane to carry him on his shoulders. Mashilwane, realizing that one of the giant's legs was too big, said, "I do not mind carrying you. However, seeing that your leg is beautiful, we will need to wrap it with a beautiful skin." He then took his dogs, and off they went. Where did they go to? To get wild meat and animal skins for the giant. On returning, Mashilwane gave lots of meat to the giant and prepared a beautiful skin coat for him. In the process, the giant, who was full from all the meat, fell asleep. Little did the giant know about the disaster that was to befall him. While he was asleep, Mashilwane's hungry dogs devoured him. Only the big leg was left. Mashilwane then chopped the leg, and a herd of cattle came out of the giant's leg. Among them was a very fat, healthy, well-built white cow, known as Khama.

Later when the two brothers met each other, Mashilo, the elder brother, only had a flock of dogs. Mashilwane sympathized with his elder brother. He said, "If I found cattle, you too have found wealth. You may have the whole wealth, only let me have the white cow." Mashilo became jealous. He was not interested in the other cattle. His heart was also on the white cow. Hatred and anger filled his heart. As they continued with the journey, Mashilo told his brother about his thirst. They both planned to go by a fountain of water to help themselves, because Mashilwane also was thirsty. At the fountain, Mashilo, knowing the evil he had plotted against his brother, pretended to be caring by offering Mashilwane an opportunity to be the first one to drink. As Mashilwane bowed down to drink, Mashilo pushed him into the deep fountain.

After arriving home, Mashilo did not survive, for a bird [which in most of the Northern Sotho folktales is a symbol of conscience] kept on singing the following song:

_Mashilo! Mashilo o na le mana (Mashilo! Mashilo! You have jealousy) O botlole ngwane Mashiwane (You murdered your younger brother Mashilwane) Ka baka la mana ka dikgomo tša gogwe (Because of your jealousy for his cattle) Wa mo kgomoletša ka bodiheng (You pushed him into deep waters)_

_in a nutshell, the song revealed that it was Mashilo who killed his brother. Ultimately, the villagers took Mashilo and threw him into the same fountain into which he had thrown his younger brother (Masola 1988:3–7).

The lesson is that people must learn to be satisfied with what they have. They must remember that what goes around, comes around: the evil that one plans against someone will ultimately come back to them.

_Nonoane! Nonoane! . . . Keleketla!

Long, long ago, when the stones still could speak, there were two men whose names were Haman and Mordecai. The strife and enmity between Haman and Mordecai began when Mordecai refused to bow before Haman. Consequently to Haman's promotion by King Ahasuerus to a position above all his officials, the king commanded that all his servants who were at the king's gate should bow to this new appointee (Esther 3:2). Because of his Jewish religious convictions, Mordecai was not willing to bow to a fellow human being. Mordecai's defiance displeased Haman so much that he planned not only to murder Mordecai, but also to annihilate all of his people.

If Haman's plans would succeed, much innocent blood would be shed because of the greed of one man. So greedy for power was Haman that the refusal of just one man—Mordecai—was enough to make Haman furious. So power-hungry was he that he would do anything to keep his status. His greed to have everybody bow to him reminds us of the greed for material possessions, and perhaps also for power, that is reflected in the above Northern Sotho tale. Haman's anger against Mordecai is captured in the following verse: "Yet all this does me no good so long as I see the Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate" (5:13). As a response to his anger and frustrations caused by the uncooperative Mordecai, Haman's wife and friends gave the following destructive, or foolish, advice: "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged on it; then go with the king to the banquet in good spirits." This advice pleased Haman and he had the gallows made" (5:14).

In both tales, the perpetrators of evil do not wait to carry out their evil plans; they do not waste a minute in deciding to
take the lives of their opponents. Indeed, the gallows were prepared for hanging Mordecai. What happens ultimately? Kelekela! The tables are turned against Haman, and he is the one hanged on the same gallows. Such an occurrence reminds us of the Northern Sotho proverb that says, Moepalebile, o a leke-pela (The one who digs a grave, digs for her/himself). Haman’s greed for power results not only in his own death, but in the deaths of his ten sons and of many innocent Persians. That which goes around, comes around. The same lesson as that derived from the Northern Sotho proverb can be derived from the Haman-Mordecai story: The evil that one plans against others will ultimately return against the plotter. Then the word of the ancestor becomes fulfilled: Le ge o ka buela leopena, magokobu a a go bona (Even if you can skin it [your victim] in the veld, the wild birds are looking at you).

Both stories shed light on masculine violence—men abusing fellow men for material gain and fame. Although both stories remind us that perpetrators of violence, irrespective of their gender, will reap accordingly, the Haman-Mordecai story is problematic because it appears that violence is punished only if exercised by a non-Jew. Violence done by the Jews seems to be tolerated. One may ask why Esther and Mordecai are not punished for shedding innocent blood. When the Jews under the leadership of Mordecai, who is depicted in 9:4 as “powerful in the king’s house,” used that power and “struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them” (9:5), it does not seem to cause the narrator concern. Is that because the enemies are not the Jews’ neighbors?

We are, however, empowered by the Northern Sotho folktales with regard to justice. The story of Mashilo and Mashilwane teaches readers, including those who identify with Mordecai’s and Esther’s violence in the biblical story, that greed and power, irrespective of the power wielded by the perpetrator, cannot be tolerated.
head)? It is no wonder that at some stage the hare had to take the lion’s skin off of its body. The baboon rushed to go and inform the others that it was the hare and not the lion. They came back and began to chase the hare. Along the route, the hare found Mrs. Protruding Eyes in a cavity in a tree trunk. When the animal was threatened, it left the hole, and the hare got inside. When the baboons came to the tree, they asked Mrs. Protruding Eyes: “Have you not seen the hare pass here?” She responded: “The little dust is the hare’s!” They passed and left the hare there. (Makgamatho 1991:137-42)

The lesson of this folklore, of course, is that the hare survived through its tricks.

*Nonwane! Nonwane! ... Keleketla!*

Long, long ago, when the rocks were still soft, there was a Jewish girl by the name of Hadassah. Others called her Esther.

*Keleketla!* Her wits remind us of the wits of a hare. Esther also plays the role of a trickster, the same role played by the hare in the above tale. Small as she is, particularly by virtue of her position as a woman in a patriarchal world—coupled with her “powerless” position as a daughter vis-à-vis her Uncle Mordecai, and her diasporic condition—she manages to manipulate even the king of the empire and emerges a winner. Two examples will suffice to illustrate Esther’s role as trickster. In chapter 2, when the beautiful virgins of Persia gather before the king for a contest, Esther, knowing that disclosing her identity would have harmed her chances of winning, hides her identity (2:10). In chapter 4, Esther appears to be “humble” before Ahasuerus the Persian king, not for the sake of the Persians, but for the sake of her own people. Esther does all she can to save her own people (4:16).

In this essay, characters in the Esther story take on the names of the animals. For example, Esther is a hare and King Ahasuerus is a lion, but *tau ya go hloka meno*—literally, a lion without teeth, a harmless lion. We may therefore call Ahasuerus an old lion. Although Ahasuerus has a powerful position as a king (like the lion, which is a leader of the animal world), Ahasuerus is inefficient and thus can be easily manipulated by his subjects. Haman can be referred to as the snake:
veal the Hare's determination: "After that I will go to the [Old Lion], though it is against the law; if I perish, I perish" (4:16). The Hare's initial reluctance to appear before the Old Lion is understandable; in that context, no one would dare appear before the Lion unsolicited. That act by itself could result in their assassination. By its wits, the Hare commanded that a fast be held on its behalf, even as it was about to take the risky step of appearing before the Old Lion.

What happened? A small, powerless, yet clever animal approached a big one—the Lion, the leader of all the wild animals. The Hare found favor in the eyes of the Old Lion. If we know the Hare's wits, we are not surprised by this positive outcome. We are not surprised that, not only did the Old Lion give the Hare an opportunity to speak, but it promised to give the Hare anything, including half of its animal kingdom. A wise and clever being does not jump quickly into serious matters. Instead, it first gives some room in order to prepare the ones from whom it is begging. Or perhaps to give the powerful ones a long rope to hang themselves?

Instead of quickly disclosing the mission, the Hare proposed to organize a banquet for the Old Lion and the Snake. Little did the Snake know that the banquet would lead to disaster. That is how the Hare works: small and harmless though it is, it uses its wits to subvert the powerful and the cruel. The Snake was so happy that it boasted to its friends that it was the only one invited by the Hare to the banquet with the Hare's partner, the Old Lion. On arriving at the banquet, the Hare disclosed the Snake's evil plans against Hare's animal family. The tables turned against the Snake. The deep, big pit into which the Snake had prepared to throw the Elephant was to serve as the Snake's pit! Ultimately, because of the Hare's wits, its family was saved, while the Snake's family was destroyed. By its wits, the Hare triumphed in a situation in which the big, powerful animals had more influence. At the same time, the Big Elephant was also saved from destruction and elevated to the high position that was formerly the Snake's.

The moral is that one should not despise those who appear small or powerless, for through their survival tactics they may take control. Furthermore, the powerful and oppressive people will be overcome, in one way or another, by the powerless and oppressed. The oppressed will always triumph over their oppressors.

A concerned woman may ask why, in Esther, a woman in a world ruled by men is portrayed as a trickster. And a trickster she is. Esther, a foreigner, appears before Ahasuerus as a candidiate for queen, and she never discloses her foreign identity (2:10). Supposedly a Persian queen, she appears before a Persian king "unsummoned," in order to pursue her own Jewish agenda against the Persians. She ultimately succeeds in reversing the evil that was supposed to befall her own people by "trickling" the king to join her side. This is one of the survival strategies of the powerless—in this instance, of women in the world of men, and of exiles in the world of their captors.

A folklorist reading of the book of Esther such as the reading above—in which human characters take the names of animals—may, to a certain extent, help to get rid of negative biases like that against "woman as trickster." Thus, the more inclusive narration of the story of Esther may have empowering possibilities for those at the margins of patriarchal societies. The story is even more empowering when narrated in a gender-neutral language like Northern Sotho.

**Conclusion**

The storytelling approach is helpful in several ways. First, it makes the stories in the Bible—which is an important spiritual resource in African Christian settings—come alive, particularly in oral cultures. As a result, even those who cannot read the biblical story will feel themselves included, because of the similarities between their folktales and biblical narratives. Second, a comparative approach helps confirm close resemblances between the African and Israelite worldviews. That recognition may help many Africans embrace the Old Testament—and not only the New Testament—as a resource. Third, a storytelling approach reminds readers that the Bible is not only history, but that it consists of many stories with lessons behind them. Finally, a narrative approach may help to get rid of some of the Bible's biases against the powerless, such as non-Jews, women, and the poor.

*Mpho! Sa mosela wa seripa! (Mpho! is an ideophone signifying the spitting of saliva, and Sa mosela wa seripa! means "That which has a short tale!") This is the closing formula for the Northern Sotho folktales. By these words, the storyteller is
moving from fantasy to reality. With these words the present storyteller would advise those who have been listening not to be preoccupied only with fantasy, but to ponder the lessons behind it. It would be a good idea not only to ponder these lessons, but to make the wisdom portrayed in them an integral part of one’s everyday life.

Notes

1. Correspondences and similarities between these languages could be helpful in various ways: (1) for those contemplating writing a Hebrew grammar for Bantu-speaking students; (2) for African Bible translators who will find it easier to translate from Hebrew directly into the Bantu language, without going through a European language; and (3) for African Old Testament scholars who can be encouraged to consider using mainly African Bible translations (in place of European translations), together with the Hebrew Bible.

2. Her endeavors on behalf of her people remind us of the Ghanaian story of how Eku, the matriarch, saved lives by being the first to drink the waters of which the people were afraid. The two women have in common that they are willing to take risks on behalf of their people. The Ghanaian story is more empowering for women, because there is no male figure behind Eku; rather, she acts on her own.

References


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