

## CHAPTER 16

### From 'difference' to connectedness: A feminist view of the question of difference

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I have never listened to a white woman talk about what it means to be an oppressor.

*Brigalia Bam*<sup>1</sup>

We need also to address white women in our country and ask: what have you done with the relative power that you have had?

*Frene Ginwala*<sup>2</sup>

#### WHY 'DIFFERENCE?'

At a recent meeting of the South African Council of Churches, which sought to forge a vision for the churches in the present time,<sup>3</sup> a friend from Soweto remarked wistfully that 'things had been easier in the good old bad days'. He was not expressing a longing to return to apartheid oppressions, but rather was remembering times in the eighties when the churches had stood together in protesting against injustice. What had become apparent to him, and to many of us, was the fact that the churches had found it relatively easy to unite against the common foe of institutionalised racism. Since 1990, however, the tendency has been to return to our denominational laagers. Is the future of ecumenism

seriously in jeopardy? Are our differences so profound that we prefer to ignore a fundamental demand of the gospel contained in Jesus' prayer 'that they may be one?' (John 17:11) Is unity within diversity a pipe-dream?

Women who have rightfully claimed the common oppression of sexism, have also had to face the 'question of difference'. This article will examine 'difference' from a feminist perspective as a case study in grappling with the tension between our diversity and our confession that we are indeed one church.

## **WOMEN AND 'DIFFERENCE'**

Concepts like 'participation', 'inclusiveness', and 'connectedness' are appealing to those of us living in South Africa. Coming from a background of apartheid and exclusion, these notions are what we yearn for and what we are challenged to work for daily. A theology which accepts the idea that the community of the faithful is the Body of Christ - a gathering of believers which subscribes to the values of the reign of God<sup>4</sup> and longs for its coming - can promote the participation of all in whatever enables life to be fully lived. Why then the question in the title of this paper?

The answer lies in my experience of trying to articulate the yearnings of my heart for connectedness, while at the same time hearing my head ask an increasing number of awkward questions. I am compelled to accept the contradictions which shape women's lives, the diversity of women's experience and the fact that these have created problems between us.

Before dealing with the idea of connectedness, this article will explore some of these contradictions and differences. The challenge to me, as a white feminist theologian, is to explore the difference that race and class make in the appeal to 'experience' as a valid point of departure for my theology. My hope is that the naming of what is particular and what is different can clear a way forward towards participation and inclusiveness - notions we dare not abandon. This exercise is a strategy in the search for connections between women - indeed between all Christians - as we grapple for a common voice in these times of transition.

## **CLAIMING 'DIFFERENCE'**

What is meant by 'difference?' It is a sorting out and naming of our religious, racial, sexual, social, and cultural particularities that make us who we are. I write

as a white, middle-class, middle-aged, South African woman; an academic theologian who is married and has three children. This short description already encompasses seven qualifications of who I am. My class and my race have afforded me untold privileges in my society, while at the same time I have, as a woman, known exploitation, discrimination and even oppression. My own history has been one of discontinuous locations. Culturally, I am neither Afrikaner nor English; I am both. As I am descended from the French Huguenots who settled at the Cape in 1688, my ancestry is almost totally French. Yet I have no familial ties with Europe; I have no home other than South Africa. Such are some of my obvious particularities.

Claiming 'difference' as being fundamental to doing theology can be a dangerous exercise in South Africa - a society tainted and corrupted by the institutionalisation of racial 'difference'. Quite understandably, many women who support the transition process leading to majority rule and the ideals of non-racialism, find such a claim unappealing and contrary to their endeavours. My insistence on examining 'difference' is not, however, merely another reflection of the spectre of apartheid. It has to do with the tension which lies at the heart of feminism and the women's movement. On the one hand, feminists generally agree that women have been subjected to and oppressed by men. We need a *general feminist theory* which will examine the underlying causes contributing to this state of oppression. On the other hand, women, in the words of Caroline Ramazanoglu (1989:44):

... are not simply a mass of people, comparable to the Italian working class of Gramsci's day, but millions upon millions of people living in very diverse circumstances and cultures, with no common language or concepts. Materially, women's situations vary from extreme affluence to destitution and starvation. Some women have considerable power over the lives of others, some have no power even over their own lives.

Since 'universal generalisations about male dominance prevent us from seeing the contradictions in women's lives', (Ramazanoglu 1989:40) we also need a *specific feminist theory* which can take account of our differences and how they separate us from one another.

My years of wrestling with being a white member of the oppressor race, while at the same time knowing about oppression as a woman, have made me question my own assumptions about categories like 'experience' in my theology. 'Experience' as point of departure for doing theology is valid when it is an overt attempt to fracture the fallacy of the impersonal, objective 'knower'

(Ramazanoglu 1989:52). It also raises the question of how we know, and how the knowledge produced can be validated (Ramazanoglu 1989). In both my own and others stories, selection and interpretation are unavoidable. The aeons of male definition of our social world, presented as 'knowledge', have shown just how flawed this exercise has been. As a feminist theologian, I have tried not to fall into the trap of making assumptions on behalf of other women. Yet I have done so, simply because I have not analysed in sufficient depth my own place in my society and religious structures.

Three experiences have informed my thinking around the 'question of difference'.<sup>5</sup> The first occurred at a meeting of women, sponsored by the Institute for Contextual Theology and held at La Verna (Transvaal) in August, 1987. When I contended that black and white women could find common ground on issues of sexual violence, a small group of township women responded angrily that they were far more interested in issues of bread and housing than matters of sexual violence. This encounter set me thinking about the 'question of difference' as expressed in our priorities.

The second has been my membership of the Cape Town chapter of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians. While we share a common quest for healing, our stories have, however, disclosed our differences on many levels. Our diverse contexts and experiences determine not only the distinct areas in which we seek healing, but they also inform the ways in which such healing can come about.

The third experience involves an effort to explore whether women in my country of the same race, class, feminist consciousness, and levels of education, in fact, have common experiences as women. At two meetings with a group of white women this year I set out to determine our commonalties. While certain experiences were undeniably shared, what surfaced more vigorously were our differences. We had different concepts of spirituality. Our ideologies differed, as did our cultures (Afrikaans and traditionally English-speaking). Our experiences of sexism, though consistent in some areas, were not altogether similar. What was happening? Were these differences merely those which exist between people as individuals? Or were they of such a nature that one had to conclude that there was insufficient common ground for forging a coherent theology from women's perspective?

All three of these experiences have highlighted the fact that differences between women are complex and intertwined with matters of race, ideology, and culture. They have raised what is referred to as the 'problem of difference'.

What has become clear to a growing number of feminists<sup>6</sup> is the fact that the articulation of the concept 'women's experience' has almost always derived from white, middle-class women's experience. Women's experience - women's hopes for sisterhood, women's goals, women's sameness - have been described by white, middle-class women and, as such, are riddled with assumptions and presumptions. This exercise has, sadly, been a thinly disguised exercise in white women's power - usually over women who have had less privileges and less opportunity to indulge in such academic activities.

It is also clear that the view that gender can be dealt with as a separate category in analysis and theorising is problematic. Elizabeth Spelman (1988:102) says: 'All women are women, but there is no being who is only a woman.' Gender exists, but not alone. It has to be understood in relation to other factors making up our identity such as race, class, economic status, religion, culture, and sexual preference. Women are different, and our differences divide us from one another. For example, women are clearly divided by class. The differences between privileged women who are able to exercise choices over the course of their lives and women who struggle to subsist (even if they are of the same race), is prodigious. The danger lies where predominant importance is attached, often arbitrarily, to certain differences.

There are many different ways of categorising human beings. The moment we begin to see differences, we find that these differences cut across other differences. Our gender cuts across our nationality, class, and race. As Spelman (1988:104) points out, in a society which is both racist and sexist (like South Africa), relationships between white men and white women are affected not only by sexism but also by racism 'that interprets the difference between their shared racial identity and the racial identity of (for example) Blacks'. To illustrate the point: the sexual difference between a conservative white farmer and his wife is in part constructed by the alleged contrast between them as whites and other men and women who are black. What characterises their relationship is not meant to characterise the relationship between white men and black women or white women and black men. This shows that:

racism can be a factor in relations between people even when they are of the same race and not subject to racism; and even more particularly that racism can play a large role in shaping the sexism that exists between such people (Spelman 1988:105).

Similarity is as crucial as difference. If racial difference is significant, then so is racial similarity - regardless of whether the persons in question are subject to racism. The same is applicable to sexual difference (Spelman 1988:106). A black

woman who enters into a relationship with a white male, in as much as she sees significance in his being a 'white male', she also highlights her being a 'black woman'.

Do women, then, have gender identity in common? Spelman (1988:113) concludes this way:

In one sense, of course, yes: all women are women. But in another sense, no: not if gender is a social construction and females become not simply women but particular kinds of women. If I am justified in thinking that what it means for me to be woman must be exactly the same as what it means to you to be a woman (since we are both women), I needn't bother to find out anything from you or about you in order to find out what it means to you to be woman: I can simply deduce what it means from my own case. On the other hand, if the meaning of what we apparently have in common (being women) depends in some ways on the meaning of what we don't have in common (for example, our difference racial or class identities), then far from distracting us from issues of gender, attention to race and class in fact helps us to understand gender. In this sense it is only if we pay attention to how we differ that we come to an understanding of what we have in common.

### ANALYSING 'DIFFERENCE'

Our differences are derived from the inseparable complexities of our social contexts. As a theologian, I am interested in confronting questions of difference in order to clear the air so that women of faith can find areas of connection. Such areas of connection will enable us to live as members of the universal community of faith - a community where diversity enriches rather than divides.

In attempting to develop a feminist theological theory which can deal with 'difference' in a constructive way, women will, both individually and communally, have to analyse our relationship to race, gender, and class. The pivotal question throughout this analysis is the question of power.

A hermeneutic of suspicion subjects the analysis to continuous scrutiny. Can I, for instance, trust my insights when I have been shortsighted before? I can, and must, claim the validity of my experience while simultaneously acknowledging

that the very stuff of experience cannot be kept out of the contradictions which permeate my society. I must know where the boundaries of my analysis are in order to respect them. Accepting that knowledge is power, am I embarking on this analysis as yet another exercise in power?

The very fact that white women are paying attention to questions of difference may in itself become another power ploy. According to Spelman (1988:139), investigations into the ways in which women are similar and different need to be looked at in the light of the following questions: 'Who is doing the investigating? Whose views are heard and accepted? Why? What criteria are used for difference and similarity?' With these (and many more) reservations, analysis must still be done.<sup>7</sup> But it must be done critically; acknowledging subjectivity and the interests<sup>8</sup> which shape inquiry and thought.

What divides women in my context? The critical interpretative starting point for analysis is the history and legacy of apartheid. *Racial discrimination* has been 'bred in the bone'<sup>9</sup> of white South Africans. South Africans have lived in bondage to the history of racial separation. It has been the pervasive social reality of my life. From my earliest years I have known about 'difference' in an odious, pervasive, and damaging manner. The history of white colonial power resulted in black women being the 'other' in the consciousness of white women.<sup>10</sup> According to Ramazanoglu (1989:121), 'Women are not divided by biological racial categories, but by the consequences of racism as historically specific systems of domination, discrimination, and exploitation.' She continues (1989:137):

We need to reconceptualize racism as intrinsic to all western experience in order to observe the many specific relationships in which women experience the divisions of gender, class, and race.<sup>11</sup>

Just as class divisions are intertwined with racial divisions, so are *nationality* and *ethnicity*. 'Ethnicity is an ambiguous category intermeshed in various shifting ways with class, race, and nationality' (Ramazanoglu 1989:122). Ramazanoglu (1989:117) points out that 'nationality can divide women on the basis of birth and citizenship. It can specify our civil rights or the lack of such rights'. Labelling usually reflects the interests of the dominant groups and is, at best, a dubious business. Feminists need to find political, social, and religious strategies for overcoming its racial, ethnic, and national differences.

In South Africa, 'the hidden injuries of *class*' have, in a number of respects, not been so hidden. Privileged white women have exploited black women over the centuries, from the early settler days, through owner-slave relationships,<sup>12</sup> to the

present. White women have exercised power over black women in the domestic sphere,<sup>13</sup> the work place, the academy, and rural settings.<sup>14</sup> The intersection of class and race in the South African context is insidious and profound.<sup>15</sup>

Divisions along class lines are neither static nor based on material considerations alone. Ideology, politics, and working roles contribute to contested relationships between women. Women, as Ramazanoglu (1989:115) points out, have power over women:

If women have opposing class and work interests, they cannot share a common interest in changing society, since their oppression as women can be consistent with powers and privileges shared by men.

The issue of *gender* in analysis does not simply run parallel to race and class. As Spelman (1988:81) rightly points out, feminists have assumed that sexism is different from racism and classism. Why was this done? Whose interests did it serve? She continues (1988:112):

Moreover, since in a racist and classist society the racial and class identity of those who are subject to racism and classism are not obscured, all it can really mask is the racial and class identity of white middle-class women. It is because white middle-class women have something at stake in not having their racial and class identity made and kept visible that we must question accepted feminist positions on gender identity.

Sexism, characterised by male-dominance and power, is a reality that all women experience, in some way or another, in our society. How we experience sexism, and interpret and understand our experiences, will depend on a variety of factors - not least of all social location. As women, we are not equally oppressed. My privilege has afforded me opportunities which other women in my society have not had. I claim my experience of sexism as a reality; I recognise it when it oppresses other women. At the same time, I acknowledge the variety of women's experiences. Since racism and sexism cannot be separated, I must continue with the re-examination of the traditions which enforce them.

There is no one definition of *culture*. In very general terms, it is understood as that which holds a community together, in terms of a common framework of meaning, which is preserved in language, symbols, myths, rites, art, drama, literature, and music. South Africa has a rich cultural diversity. Sadly, the concept 'culture' has also been highly politicised and made to function as a

legitimizing agent for apartheid's division of peoples on racial and ethnic grounds.<sup>16</sup> No wonder it has divided women.

With its roots in western culture, feminism, rather than uniting women, has often been a source of division between us. As a form of critical consciousness, it has enabled women to understand the roots of sexism in patriarchy and has challenged cultural beliefs, customs, and practices. This has been problematic for women who are not conscious of being oppressed and to whom their cultural identities are sources of stability and meaning.

A further difficulty surfaces here. Renato Ricardo (1989:202) points out that, 'although the notion of "difference" has the advantage of making culture particularly visible to outside observers, it poses a problem because such differences are not absolute'. They are, in fact, relative to the cultural practices of those who are doing the analysing. A peculiar phenomenon takes place: as analysts make the 'other' more culturally visible, their own cultural affinities become correspondingly less so.

The more power one has, the less culture one enjoys, and the more culture one has, the less power one wields. If 'they' have an explicit monopoly on authentic culture, 'we' have an unspoken one on institutional power (Ricardo 1989:202).

Analysing around difference is not an exercise without pitfalls!

While my experiences as a member of the Circle and my reading of African women theologians' writings have highlighted the differences of our cultural interests, they have also been enriching. I do not want to underplay the question of difference here. African rituals, polygamy, and bride wealth are, for instance, not part of my cultural experience.<sup>17</sup> The question raised here concerns who sets the agenda and what its parameters for discussion between women of faith are. For too long, western women have named the issues for feminist religious discourse. Women's cultural differences need to be recognised and respectfully and creatively explored as sources for identity and human worth.

Issues around women's *sexuality* have also been a cause of division, and are often linked to our cultural differences. The ambiguous nature of the pronouncements made by most political players on the issue of women's reproductive rights in the pre-election time in South Africa shows an awareness of the divisive nature of this issue.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, mention must be made of the present context of *violence* in our country. South Africa today is reaping the whirlwind as the pent-up anger of years of racist oppression surfaces. Criminal, political, and (not least of all) sexual violence are dislocating, damaging, and destroying women's lives. It is estimated that there are approximately 1000 rapes every day - of which only one in twenty is reported.<sup>19</sup> Over the past five years, more than thirteen thousand rape cases involving children under the age of fourteen have been reported to the South African Child protection unit.<sup>20</sup> In analysing violence and its impact on women's lives, social location plays a vital role. Women in the migrant labour hostels<sup>21</sup> and in the informal settlements which sprawl on the edges of Cape Town are, in most respects, more vulnerable than middle-class women living in protected suburban homes.

### FROM DIFFERENCE TO CONNECTEDNESS

The preceding attempt at identifying 'difference' calls for a *feminist theological understanding of difference*. If we are to move towards articulating what participation, inclusiveness, and connectedness mean for us as women of faith, we have to acknowledge and understand where we are coming from. 'Difference' is not only a reality of the human condition, but it is also the single most enriching and challenging fact about being a human being. Imagine what a monochrome creation would look like! From the perspective of theological anthropology, every human being is unique, inviolable, and precious in the eyes of God. In some mysterious way, we all bear the image and likeness of God. Our differences are innately part of who we are and, as such, are to be celebrated and shared.

It is in the exploration and acceptance of our differences that the possibility of finding our commonalities lies. Differences, once acknowledged, open the way to becoming connected in an authentic and lasting way. The pipe-dream becomes a possibility. A *feminist theological understanding of connectedness* is founded on the biblical concept of 'kingdom of God' (which, for the reasons stated above, is here referred to as the 'reign of God').

The reign of God brings good news to people in terms of their life-situations. This news speaks of justice, love, equality, freedom, wholeness, the flourishing of righteousness, and *shalom*. Christians, in hastening the coming of God's reign, are called to participate in these. As a woman seeking healing from the effects of being both oppressor and oppressed, the quest for wholeness becomes central to my theology. Wholeness is not a reality within me or around me which disguises tension. It is a fruitful and dynamic integration of all polarities (women/men, spirit/body), and all divisions (rich/poor, black/white) in critical, non-hierarchical involvement with one another.<sup>22</sup>

Wholeness requires loving, just, peaceful, and right relationships. Jesus' actions disclosed the transforming vision of what it would mean for the fullness of God's presence to be known on earth. Seen from a feminist theological perspective, it calls us, like Jesus, 'to a radical activity of love, to a way of being in the world that deepens relations, embodies, and extends community, passes on the gift of life' (Harrison 1985:18). Striving to live in radical mutuality and reciprocity is difficult and risky, calling for vulnerability. Women instinctively and understandably resist being vulnerable. We have for too long been coached into vulnerability by the patriarchs for their purposes. But I know no other attitude as potent in the process of healing.

As a member of the Circle I have seen that the telling of stories requires vulnerability. My story as a white South African must, as an exercise in vulnerability, be told from what Sharon Welch (1990:139) calls 'a new, chastened perspective'. This sharing of stories contains a potent alchemy for healing. It is a process nurtured by participation with others in their search for wholeness and by the understanding that to be fully human means to live in relationship with others.

Connectedness, for those living in and for the reign of God, is based on Christ's injunction that 'You must love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:31). We all know how Jesus further defined 'neighbour'. He allowed no room for the 'isms' which divide the human race. Inclusiveness and connection lie at the very heart of the great commandment. Participation is the active response to the assent of connectedness. When we say 'yes' to Jesus' command, we are impelled to take part in healing actions, despite difference and division, because, by doing so, we hope for the wholeness in community that he promises.

The values of the reign of God are lived out in our relationships. My love for you and my love for myself do not happen in two separate compartments of my lived experience. It is common knowledge that people who do not experience a healthy love of themselves have difficulty loving others. Being in relationship with others and with oneself are inseparable in the quest for healing and wholeness, which is *the* common quest of the human race. While we each need to be healed in different areas of our lives, we all need healing. My analysis should help me clarify the areas in my life, my society, class, race, and gender that need to be restored and cured. 'To pay attention to context is to make connections' (Russell 1993:32).

Nowhere else than in the celebration of the Eucharist do we more visibly demonstrate our connectedness. Not only is the false separation of the material and the spiritual transcended, but authentic differences are bridged as the bread

and the wine become *the* means of grace in connecting us to one another. As we speak the words 'we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread', we confess both the reality of our differences and the reality of our unity as partakers in Christ's redemptive action in the life of the world, inextricably connected together by our web of faith and our hope for the coming reign of God.

If we are prepared to grapple honestly with our differences, acknowledging both their uniqueness and their potential for divisiveness, if we are open to change and willing to build bridges, if we are not afraid of disagreeing (because we know that to disagree means to take the other seriously), if we are willing to be accountable and vulnerable, difference need not alienate.

Christian women and men have the example of Jesus to show us what it means to live a connected life in solidarity with suffering humanity. We may not get bogged down in our differences but must learn to live with them truthfully and formatively. Then we shall not need a common foe to unite us, but we shall in truth 'become one', united in our common humanity.

## NOTES

- 1 Cited in Eck and Devaki 1986:17.
- 2 Ginwala 1991:64.
- 3 South African Council of Churches Vision 94 Conference, 16-18 February 1994, Johannesburg.
- 4 'Reign of God' is chosen deliberately in preference to 'commonwealth of God', a designation I have used previously. Negative images in my country of the colonialist and imperialist history of the concept have caused me to abandon it.
- 5 Publications by African women have also honed my thinking. I refer in particular to the works of Oduyoye (1986); Kanyoro and Robins (1992) and Oduyoye and Kanyoro (1992). My experiences have also been informed by the writings of Bell Hooks (1981; 1984; 1991), Audre Lorde (1984) and Beverly Harrison (1985).
- 6 See inter alia Spelman 1988 and Ramazanoglu 1989. From a Christian feminist perspective see Thistlethwaite 1989.
- 7 See Holland and Henriot 1984. I acknowledge the work of Ramazanoglu in my analysis.
- 8 All analysis proceeds from subjective interest. According to Habermas (1971), there is always a relationship between knowledge and interest which positivism denies by erecting models of objective scientific knowledge. Habermas resolves this problem by proposing an understanding of interest which is both material and ideal, thus allowing him to differentiate between types of knowledge according to the interests which produce them.
- 9 From Davies 1985.
- 10 Compare Hooks 1981:119-120 and Thistlethwaite 1989:27-43.
- 11 Racism is indeed intrinsic to western experience in a particularly odious way. Westerners, however, do not have a monopoly on racism.
- 12 According to Shell (1989:21), some settler women, whose lives were deeply imbued with the slave-holding ethos, nonetheless had to deal with their relationships with female slaves who often acted as wet nurses to their children and mistresses to their husbands.
- 13 See Cock 1980.
- 14 See Lipman 1984:57-64.
- 15 See Hassim, Metelerkamp and Todes 1987.
- 16 See Tlhagale 1985.
- 17 Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1992.
- 18 The only exception is AZAPO who are firmly in favour of women's freedom of choice.
- 19 Speak 1992:19-21.

- 20 *Argus* 6/5/1993.  
21 See Ramphele 1993.  
22 Halkes 1984:20.

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CIVIL SOCIETY AND  
SACRED TEXTS

## CHAPTER 17

# The individual versus the institution: The Prophet versus his<sup>1</sup> book

*Yehoshua Gitay*

### C.

#### INTRODUCTION

Historically, Bible scholarship has distinguished between the individuals who produced prophetic books and the institutions which produced prophetic books. Each of these categories has been treated as a separate and self-contained unit. The prophet is seen as the author of the prophetic book, and the institution as the publisher of the prophetic book. The historical prophet is seen as the author of the prophetic book, and the institution as the publisher of the prophetic book. In other words, who takes responsibility for the formation of history? Is it a synthesis of the deeds of great individuals? or is history a collective witness of the social movement which determines the official records? This paper shall seek to address these questions, focusing especially on the institutionalization of prophetic utterances in the Epistle of the Hebrew Bible. It shall argue that it is the sacred task of the contemporary interpreter to create a continuing dialogue between the historical dimension of the text according to its original location, and those responsible for its later institutionalization.

#### THE HISTORICAL PROPHET AS PUBLIC FIGURE

There have been different approaches in this domain involving the individual and the institution in history. Thomas Carlyle, for instance, focused on the individual, since he saw history primarily as the study of its processes, brought to life by outstanding individuals. Hence, for Carlyle (1973 [3], 25) history is a

## CHAPTER 17

# The individual versus the institution: The Prophet versus his<sup>1</sup> book

*Yehoshua Gitay*

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, Biblical prophecy has been a product of the work of individuals who addressed original audiences. However, modern readers of the prophetic books are confronted with a significant hermeneutical question: does the prophetic book itself connote, in its final literary shape, the original meaning of the historical prophetic address? In other words, who takes responsibility for the formation of history? Is it a synopsis of the deeds of great individuals? or is history a collective written of the social institution which determines the official records? This paper shall seek to address these questions, focusing especially on the institutionalisation of prophetic utterances in the formation of the Hebrew Bible. It shall argue that it is the signal task of the contemporary interpreter to create a continuing dialogue between the historical meaning of the text according to its original intentions, and those responsible for its later institutionalisation.

### THE HISTORICAL PROPHET AS PUBLIC FIGURE

There have been different approaches to this dilemma involving the individual and the institution in history. Thomas Carlyle, for instance, focused on the individual, since he saw history primarily as the study of its message, brought to life by outstanding individuals. Hence, for Carlyle (1971:23, 25) history is a

compilation of innumerable biographies, and it is the task of the historian to write these biographies. Carlyle's was not the only voice in this endeavour to present the message of the heroic individual as an outstanding historical document. The lives of Biblical heroes have inspired the writing of biographical narratives. Recall the great monographs of Freud and Buber on Moses, which were popular among biblical critics of their time, as well as James Fleming's book, *Personalities of the Old Testament* (1939). Thus, the critics' premise has been that the biographies of the Biblical heroes pay tribute to their great influence as individuals responsible for the critical changes and developments that shape the course of history.

Furthermore, Biblical heroes such as the prophets, acting as individuals on the stage of the historical drama, also possess divine authority. That is to say, the monumental work of the prophets of ancient Judah and Israel is significant since these outstanding individuals maintained the authority, and hence the power, to dictate the historical movement. The prophets, these individual heroes, have been considered as leaders of quality whose charismatic powers affected their immediate public.

Max Weber has shed light on the notion of the charismatic figure, referring as well to the Biblical prophets. He applies the term *charisma* to a certain quality of an individual personality setting them apart from ordinary people. Such are treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional, powers or qualities. These powers are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded either as exemplary or of divine origin. Endowed with such powers, the individual concerned is treated as a leader. In primitive circumstances, this peculiar deference is paid to prophets, to people with reputation for therapeutic or legal wisdom, to leaders in the hunt, and to heroes in war. Thus, charismatic authority is specifically outside the realm of every-day routine and the profane sphere (Eisenstadt 1968:48, 51). The charismatic figure is exceptional; a natural leader.

In accordance with Weber's illumination of the charismatic prophetic figure, it might be worthwhile to mention the work of A C Welch, who, almost three generations ago, regarded the goal of interpreting a prophetic book as follows:

To understand the prophet's meaning, it is necessary to think of him, a child of his own nation, bred on its soil, saturated with its genius and especially with its religion, proud of its traditions .... He is sick at heart over the empty sensuous worship of his time .... What he feels of nausea and revolt ... he feels it as a son of Israel ... (1956:65).

Jeremiah's experience and ways of thinking are at the centre of his investigation. Welch's table of contents reveals a focus on the prophet's views regarding the major happenings of his time: 'Jeremiah and the Essentials of Religion' (chapter 4), 'Jeremiah and the National Reform' (chapter 5), 'Jeremiah and the Exiles' (chapter 8), 'Jeremiah and the Content of Yahwism' (chapter 9), 'Jeremiah's Political Attitude' (chapter 10), 'Jeremiah and the Future' (chapter 11). Hence, for Welch (and his contemporaries), the study of the prophetic book is, in fact, an intellectual-historical reconstruction of the prophet's religious concepts as outlined in his book.

However, for researchers of Biblical prophecy, the reconstruction of the individual prophet's views is a dialectical task. It is not only that the prophetic books fail to reveal personal biographical data, and as such the critic's imagination is called up to fill in the missing details as an historical, biographical puzzle. The issue is far more complex, since the critics are confronted with the impact of the prophet on the final shape of his book, as well as the prophet's effect on social-religious norms. Thus, there is a tension between the prophet's own society and the editorial form of his books.

The question evolves around the relationship between prophet and society. Did the prophet indeed succeed in affecting society? or did he or she mainly make pronouncements, without necessarily affecting society? The prophet indeed believed that he or she pronounced divine words; however, the prophet was unable to reshape - even by the power of rhetoric - the social and political norms of society. History took its own course independently of the prophetic speeches; and one might even question whether and how society has preserved those un-influential speeches. Weber's sociological observations shed light on this significant issue of preserving the historical prophetic speeches. He wrote:

if his prophecy is successful, the prophet succeeds in winning permanent helpers ... they are personal devotees of the prophet ... as a rule, the ethical and exemplary prophet is himself a layman, and his power position depends on his lay followers (1963:60, 66).

The public effect of the prophets does not depend only on their charismatic gifts. Weber pointed out that it is insufficient for the prophet to announce his message; the speeches are preserved by the hands of a supportive group. That is to say, ideas cannot be effective while delivered in a political vacuum: a party, political group, or community of believers is necessary to support and perpetuate the ideas of the charismatic figure, who emerges as their leader.

This fundamental social and political premise of public effect and leadership is not in accordance with the social and political performance of the prophets of the First Temple and early exilic periods. The literary evidence reveals a constant conflict between the individual prophets and their environment - specifically, the official institutions that maintained the Hebrew society of the First Temple. The dispute, reported in Isaiah 7, between the prophet Isaiah and King Ahaz of Judah, concerning the king's political realism versus the prophet's metahistorical belief in God, demonstrates this tension.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Amos's harsh prophecy of the destruction of the house of king Jeroboam (Amos 7:9,11) illustrates the prophetic criticism of the kingship of North Israel. The prophets' clash with the priesthood and the temple institutions is reflected in their rejection of the forms of worship of their contemporaries (see, for instance, Isaiah 1:10-15; Micah 3:15; Jeremiah 7:1-15). The prophets sharply criticised the social elite for their immodesty and their oppression of the poor (as Amos 4:1-3 and Isaiah 5:8-12 demonstrate).<sup>3</sup>

This constant prophetic criticism of the social, political and religious establishments of their society motivated a drastic official response. Amos was exiled from the scene of his prophetic activity since he criticised a monarchic institution: 'but never again prophesy in Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom' (Amos 7:13).

Jeremiah, too, was almost sentenced to death by the official leadership of Jerusalem:

And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak ... then the priests and the prophets and all the people said to him: 'You shall die!' Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord, saying, 'This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant?' (Jeremiah 26:8-9).

In short, the prophets speak harshly against the most sacred institutions of their time - and the audience reaction is not unexpected.<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel is considered by his audience as a 'singer of love songs' (Ezekiel 33:32), Hosea is regarded as fool - the 'man of the spirit is mad!' - (Hosea 9:7); Isaiah has to 'bind up the testimony' and to wait for a better time regarding the perception of his prophecy (8:16).

Thus, the prophets seem to be unsuccessful in their rhetorical endeavour to affect their audience, and to change the behaviour of the leaders of the existing institutions. In their own lifetime, the prophets of ancient Judah and Israel failed

to assume a leading role in their society through their teachings. Consequently, the prophetic speakers were not charismatic in the broad sense. While they had their small groups of supporters, their influence did not penetrate the main political and social streams of their time. The prophetic writings can hardly be considered social, political, or religious forces fundamental to their epoch. The individual prophets did not establish any synopsis of deeds which charismatically led their people.

## THE PRODUCTION OF THE BOOK

However, anthologies of speeches, purporting to be prophetic speeches, have been perpetuated in writing. These literary compositions constitute a significant part of the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Three major prophetic books have emerged: the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel; plus the Twelve, starting with Amos in the eighth century BCE, and ending during the sixth (or even the fifth) century BCE with the oracles of Malachi.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than being the product of a marginal group, the prophetic books have been compiled by the institution, and thus seem to represent the official records of their time. The institution, which previously rejected the prophets and their lessons, has adopted these historical, anti-institutional speeches as its official, representative voice. The historical prophets now represent the community, and the books bearing their names appear as historical, biographical books. The paradox inherent in the publication of these fifteen prophetic books as canonical raises the interest of the historian of Judaism. How should we read this ideological institutional metamorphosis? What has motivated these fundamental changes?

Severe political crises, such as the destruction of the First Temple in 587 BCE, created new situations. The Babylonian exile had forced the people to adapt their official structures to new political and religious circumstances. Those who had once been the singers of the Temple in Jerusalem cried in anguish at the rivers of Babylon: 'How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' (Psalm 137:4). This lament over the destruction of the Temple is not merely an expression of deep sorrow. It conveys a sense of despair: there is no way to worship God in the foreign land. The people in exile felt that their situation was hopeless, claiming that 'The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary' (Lamentations 2:7).

The exiled people could not absolve themselves, since they believed they carried the unforgivable sins of the previous generations - sins which motivated God's

destruction of the Temple. 'Our ancestors sinned; they are no more, and we bear their iniquities' (Lamentations 5:7).

Thus, the fall of Jerusalem created a deep religious and theological vacuum among the exiles. There was an immediate need to establish a new theological concept regarding the role of God in the course of this traumatic historical development. Furthermore, those stormy political developments severely harmed the validity of the political and religious institutions that had dominated pre-exilic society: the monarchy and the Temple. The entire religious and political establishment was shaken, urgently requiring a new form of divine authority. Hitherto, the society and its institutions had communicated with God by means of the cult. But the prophets had addressed the people, not through the means of the (now collapsed) institution, but by quoting God directly. God spoke through them. 'Thus says the Lord', starts a conventional prophetic speech, 'it was the Lord who made it known to me' (Jeremiah 11:18).

The philosophical theory of the speech act may further explain the new role of the once rejected prophets in the life of the exiled community. The illocutionary speech act, according to Searle (1969:47), does not require the audience to do anything except understand that a certain person under authority has spoken to them - even if this individual has not practically affected his listeners.<sup>6</sup> The prophets rebuked the old institutions through moral and ethical criticism, motivating the religious justification of their collapse. Thus, a major and dramatic change occurred as the prophetic charismatic movement - which, in its own time, had inspired only a small circle of lay supporters - became routinised. Witness the prophet Zechariah, who prophesied over Judah during the period of the Restoration (towards the end of the sixth century BCE), reminding his audience of the historical-theological role of the old prophets:

Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the former prophets proclaimed: Thus says the Lord of Hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds. But they did not hear or heed me, says the Lord. Your ancestors, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your ancestors? So they repented and said, The Lord of Hosts has dealt with us according to our ways and deeds, just as he planned to do (Zechariah 1:4-6).

## THE PROPHET IN RETROSPECT

The individual prophets of the First Temple had, by this time, gained recognition. There remains, however, the question as to how the early prophets were perceived by the institution after so many years. If the prophets indeed spoke with the voice of the individual, how could their speeches be perpetuated by the very institution which rejected them?

Here again, Weber's sociological reading is illuminating. He emphasises (1963:66) - as we noted earlier - that 'as a rule, the ethical and exemplary prophet is himself a lay-man, and his power position depends on his lay followers'. The term 'lay-man' is utilised in order to distinguish the individual prophet and his supporters from the officials (i.e. the members of the institutions). R Wilson's comparative sociological and anthropological survey indicates that the prophets whose sayings eventually became routinised had been surrounded by certain 'support groups' from the time of their institutional isolation (1980:76-88). These supporters, inspired by the prophetic charisma, preserved various prophetic speeches in writing. Baruch, son of Neriah, to whom Jeremiah dictated his words, and who read in public the prophet's speeches from a written scroll (see Jeremiah 32:12; 36:10, 14, 18, 32), serves as one example.

Nonetheless, this later recognition of the substance of the old prophets was not an end in itself. The institution which utilised those speeches could not present them in their original form. The institution left its own literary mark on the preserved prophetic speeches. There is a shift away from the original objectives of prophetic criticism directed to the prophet's contemporaries. The conclusion of the book of Amos reads:

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the Lord your God (Amos 9:14-15).

B S Childs (1978:49) comments on this passage:

An important problem within the book of Amos turns on how to interpret the sudden shift from a message of total judgment of Israel to one of promise for Israel ... the tradents effected a canonical shaping by placing Amos' words in a broader, eschatological framework which transcended the historical perspec-

tive of the prophet. From God's perspective there is a hope beyond the destruction seen by Amos. The effect of chapter 9 is both to confirm the truth of Amos' original prophecy and to encompass it within the larger theological perspective of divine will which includes hope and final redemption.

Through the addition of chapter nine, Amos' original 'no' prophecies of doom assume a new theological significance of hope and redemption.<sup>7</sup>

The process of producing a prophetic book for a new audience under different historical and geographical circumstances is a creative literary activity. The new scribes, now representing the institution, added the religious doctrine of the new theology of salvation and redemption to the original speeches (which had been preserved by the prophets' followers). This, in fact, reshaped the religious message of the historical prophets.<sup>8</sup> The process of editing, or even merely compiling, the book ultimately gives rise to a new literary creation.<sup>9</sup> For example, the production of the entire book of Isaiah creates a literary composition that transforms the meaning of the prophetic messages of Isaiah son of Amoz, who acted in Jerusalem under threat of the Assyrian invasions. Writing during the late eighth century BCE, he sharply criticises his contemporaries for their social misbehaviour and political mistrust in God:

Ah, sinful nation people laden into inquiry, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged! (Isaiah 1:4).<sup>10</sup>

Under the circumstances of the Babylonian exile, the previous tone of sharp criticism had to be replaced by a more positive outlook:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins (Isaiah 40:1-2).

These words of comfort are delivered against the specific historical background of the rise of Cyrus, founder of the new Persian empire during the second half of the 6th century BCE.<sup>11</sup> The optimistic speeches found in the book of Isaiah (from chapter forty onwards) are proclaimed in anticipation of the collapse of Babylon - the city responsible for destroying the Temple of Jerusalem. These speeches shift the book's message from doom and judgment to a theological cycle of punishment and subsequent hope and redemption. The book of Isaiah

as a whole comes to represent a theological, meta-historical manifestation of a religious cycle of punishment ending in redemption.

Consequently, the prophetic book now serves as the official proclamation of the religious congregation, rather than a series of prophetic anti-institutional speeches. The routinisation of prophecy - the transfer of the individual criticism into the literary and religious heritage of the permanent congregation - constitutes the transformation of an original meaning into a meta-historical meaning.<sup>12</sup> The new significance of the historical prophecy is ironic: the institution, the prophet's adversary of the past, continues to dominate. The institution has routinised the individual prophet by altering the significance of his original message through a book that bears his name.

### WHENCE COMES PROPHETIC MEANING?

Since B Duhm's (1892) 'epoch-making' commentary on Isaiah, critics have aimed to establish the distinction between the original prophecy and the additional material of the institutional scribes, with the objective of identifying the original prophetic speeches as the carriers of the historical prophetic meaning. Duhm's aim of interpretation follows the universal hermeneutical principle established by Schleiermacher (cited in Hirsch 1976:76) in the late eighteenth century:

Everything in a given text which requires fuller interpretation must be explained and determined exclusively from the linguistic domain common to the author and his original public.

The door has been closed to allegorical interpretations while establishing the principle of historical and scientific interpretation.

However, a hermeneutical shift in prophetic research has taken place in the last decade or so. The prophetic book is now perceived as the writing of the institution rather than a synopsis of the deeds of a great individual. The institution dominates, and again the historical individual prophet and his original message is ignored. The interest of current prophetic *wissenschaft* focuses on the entire message of the book, including its literary shape, while the original work of the individual prophet in its historical circumstances is dismissed. We briefly summarise this new shift in what follows.

Today scholars are beginning to move from analysis to synthesis in the interpretation of the book of Isaiah. The established practice of separating the book into several discrete parts, each viewed in isolation from the whole, is giving way

to exploratory efforts to understand the overall unity and the theological dynamic of the Isaiah *tradition*.<sup>13</sup>

The analytical hermeneutical task is now replaced by a synthetic approach, which purportedly leads to a better understanding of the theological message of the book of Isaiah as a whole.

R P Carroll (1989:207-08) argues:

We know prophecy now as literature rather than as spoken word. Such a shift from orality to literacy has removed prophecy from the original social setting to a de-contextualised, timeless setting and any search for the *Sitz im Leben* of specific prophecies is irrelevant .... Changing situations have changed the import of the words. The time-conditioned nature of the original speaker's utterance has given way to the timeless reference of the written word addressed to future generations.

The book is timeless; a self contained meta-historical composition which, we ought to conclude, rejects both an historical reading and original meaning. That is to say, the perception of the book as a holistic, meta-historical literary document may explain the universalistic approach that suggests that the book is timeless. There is, therefore, no need to reconstruct the speeches of the original author, the individual force which generated the historical proclamation of the book.

However, there are scholars who are uncomfortable with this notion of prophetic (or editorial) anonymity, who still maintain that the book as a whole comprises several redactional strata reflecting particular historical circumstances. Coogins (1993:298), for example, says:

The composition of the book of Isaiah is currently attracting a good deal of attention. Gone are the days when chapters 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66 were treated as three unrelated units; and the idea of an 'Isaiah school', treasuring and adding to the master's words, is also out of favour. Instead, the discussion is of different redactional levels, developing over an extended period.<sup>14</sup>

The major issue is how to interpret the text, for one is inclined to question whether the given text is self-generating. The issue of the text's autonomy is dealt with by theoreticians of literature such as Robert Alter (1989:114), who says:

In one way or another all writers are forced to enter into a dialogue or debate with their predecessors, regarding bits and pieces of earlier texts, giving them a fresh application, a nuance of re-definition, a radically new meaning.

It is an illusion to assume that a literary text is autonomous. As Harold Bloom (1975:3) notes, 'There are no texts, but only relationships between texts.' The entire text is constructed on the basis of inter-textual allusions and references. The literary text may be compared to a building in which the upper floor stands on the foundations of the lower floors; or (to transfer our metaphor to the realm of literary terminology), allusion is an essential modality of the language of literature. Alter (1989:4) defines allusion in this way:

Allusion occurs when a writer, recognizing the general necessity of making a literary work by building on the foundations of antecedent literature, deliberately exploits the predicament in explicitly activating an earlier text as part of the new system of meaning and aesthetic value of his own text.

The writer provides new meaning by building on earlier texts.

Recent literary scholarship on the book of Isaiah tends to identify both literary and thematic allusions, reflecting an inter-dialogue between various parts of this book. For instance, Isaiah 40:1-8 has been compared with 6:1-13. In 6:6-7, D Carr (1993:65-68) summarises, a seraph pronounces Isaiah's sins 'turned away' and his blood guilt 'atoned for'. In 40:1-2, all Zion/Jerusalem experiences this same process. In 6:3, the seraphim sing praises to God's glory. In 40:5, 'all flesh' is allowed to see God's glory. Just as Isaiah is commissioned to bring a message of judgment in 6:6-8, so 40:6-8 describes the commissioning of a figure to bring the message to the new Exodus.<sup>15</sup> One is led to conclude that it is essential to grasp the meaning of the given text through its internal literary and thematic allusions.

Consequently, the aim of interpreting the prophetic book is to read the allusions in their original meaning. The later scribes, must have conceived the older text as meaningful; otherwise they would not have made the literary and thematic effort to allude to it. Hence the proposal to interpret the entire book as a timeless composition may ignore the insights of the internal thematic dialogue, which seeks to provide new meaning to the older texts. Indeed, a literary text has an original meaning which can be re-interpreted over the generations. The art of interpretation is the creation of a continuing dialogue between the historical meaning of the text according to its original intentions, and those who shaped

the prophetic book while building on its original foundations.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is evident that the speeches of the individual anti-establishment prophet cannot be ignored, and that the task of interpretation is to renew the dialogue between the editors of a book and the words of the historical prophet addressed to his contemporaries.

## CONCLUSION

The literary process of compiling the prophetic book is not the death of the historical prophet. The individual prophet is still alive. The objective of critical, scientific research into the prophetic literature is to reconstruct the dialogue between the redactors and the historical prophet. Hence, the historical reconstruction of the original prophetic speeches is a substantial hermeneutical objective of the study of the prophetic book as a whole. Even if the prophetic book in its given form reflects the collective writing of the institution, the book has an original start, particularly with respect to the individual prophets who confronted historical audiences.

## NOTES

- 1 This paper uses gender specific language for the writing prophets, since it is generally considered that they were male. It is not intended to convey a sexist impression.
- 2 See Gitay 1989:217-230 and 1991:128-145.
- 3 See Smend 1983:404-423 and Kock 1971.
- 4 For the social context of the prophetic message and the conflicts with the social, political and religious institutions, see Weber 1952:277-286.
- 5 For a useful discussion, of the canonisation of the prophetic books, see Blenkinsopp 1983.
- 6 See Houston 1993:177-178.
- 7 Compare Wilson 1980:307.
- 8 For a further striking demonstration, see Carroll 1986.
- 9 See Goody 1977.
- 10 For the text and its interpretation, see Gitay 1991:14-34.
- 11 For the text and its rhetorical matrix see Gitay 1981.
- 12 Compare Weber 1963:62.
- 13 Anderson 1988:17.
- 14 Coogins 1993:298.
- 15 See the bibliography in Carr 1993. The relationship between the restricted revelation of God in Isaiah 6 versus the 'openness' in 40:5 has been already observed by Buber 1961:188 (Hebrew). For further discussion regarding the unity of the book of Isaiah, see Clifford 1993.
- 16 See Hirsch 1967 and 1976.

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## CHAPTER 18

# Religion and civil society in the Gospels: Jesus and the liberation of symbols

*Bill Domeris*

### INTRODUCTION

The recent interest in the historical Jesus - as evident in the work of Crossan, Meier, Myers, and Theissen, among others - has raised to a new level the challenge of Jesus as an historical figure, and the peculiar problems involved in such an historical study. In the light of the recent use of the social sciences as a means to opening up new vistas on first century Palestine, it has become possible to locate Jesus with some degree of accuracy within his socio-political and economic context. An interesting feature of the newest quest for the historical Jesus is the increasing concern with his actions, as opposed to the focus upon his words necessitated by the more traditional literary approaches.

The understanding of Jesus as involved in an ideological struggle with the high-priestly elite was first put forth by Belo (1976) and developed in Myers' study of the Gospel of Mark (1988). Myers speaks of Jesus as declaring ideological war (1988:164), and as challenging the ideological hegemony of the priest and scribe (1988:164). From within this context, Myers introduces the idea of Jesus' symbolic action (1988:118), which will provide the basis for this paper. Our own contribution will be the linking of such symbolic action with the concept *liberating the symbols*. The priestly elite controlled the primary symbols as part of their hegemonic control over the population of Judaea and Galilee. Jesus seeks by means of his various actions, including his miracles, to liberate these

symbols, thus creating a rival hegemonic position based upon his understanding of prophetic Yahwism.

## THEORETICAL BASES

Gramsci defines 'civil society' as one of two superstructural levels, the other being political society or 'the state' (1971:12). Civil society is made up of the 'ensemble of organisms commonly called "private"'. Where the state exercises direct domination through the armed forces and juridical system, civil society is the locus for hegemonic control, by which persuasion supplants force. Gramsci describes such control as arising from spontaneous 'consent' accorded by the mass of the people to the dominant fundamental group, and consequent upon their prestige, power, and function in the world of production (1971:12). Whenever this 'consent' breaks down, then the state is obliged to use force to preserve its position of dominance.

'The lower classes', writes Gramsci, 'historically on the defensive, can only achieve self-awareness via a series of negations, via their consciousness of the identity and class limits of their enemy' (1971:273). The problem in first century Palestine was precisely a confusion regarding the enemy of the people. The Romans, commonly portrayed as the oppressors, were only the indirect cause, with the priestly elite being the direct oppressors. Jewish literature of the time, as catalogued by Evans (1989:522-539), shows a growing awareness of this situation, culminating in the Jewish revolt. Contrary to the manner in which this revolt is often understood, the primary target was the high-priestly elite. The Romans were only drawn in to defend the interests of this group once the revolt was well underway (see Domeris 1993). This is abundantly clear from a careful reading of Josephus (War 2:17:4).

One may use Gramsci to suggest that Jesus embarked upon the double task of identifying the source of oppression in Judaea, and then through a series of negations, arising from his deeds and words, stripped the elite of their hegemonic cover and their religious legitimation.

The world of the New Testament was one of society in transition. Modes of production were changing under the impact of the Roman slave-mode on traditional patrimonial land tenure. Pressure upon scarce resources increased as the balance of power shifted from community leaders to the high priestly families. Commenting on the features of the Mediterranean world, Gilmour writes:

The Mediterranean societies are all undercapitalized agrarian civilizations. They are characterized by sharp social stratification and both a relative and absolute scarcity of natural resources .... There is little social mobility. Power is highly concentrated in a few hands, and the bureaucratic functions of the state are poorly developed. These conditions are of course ideal for the development of patron-client ties and dependence ideology (1982:192).

Gilmour is referring to modern societies, but the geographical and economic factors are little changed from earlier times, and his description would easily fit the Palestine of Jesus' day - as Oakman (1986) and Moxnes (1988) make clear. That society knew well the sense of competition for limited resources. These were not evenly distributed in society. Consequently, a tension existed between those who had access to a greater number of resources and those who were marginalised. Coalitions, patronages, and social values, such as shame and honour, were manipulated in the interests of the powerful in order to protect what they had - and even to increase their resources (see Boissevain 1974:228-23).

We know, following Horsley, Oakman and Moxnes, that the society of Jesus' time was radically divided by status, wealth, power and gender. Boissevain, referring to modern studies of conflict and power, describes the manner in which such societies operate:

The establishment defends tradition. It has a vested interest in maintaining the status-quo. Tradition provides the charter for its existence. It claims to interpret the norms and defend the moral order. Because it controls most of the formal offices, it can often make use of legally sanctioned physical force, public funds, office and ritual to recruit followers and to defend itself. Moreover, because it defines, defends and interprets tradition and moral order and has more resources at its disposal than its rivals, it is able to monopolize the most important ideological symbols (1974:229).

Opposition groups, such as that led by Jesus, have a double task, namely to win followers and to create alternative symbols. Boissevain writes of the typical opposition leader:

Since he does not have access to the resources controlled by the establishment leader, and thus cannot recruit as many

followers through patronage, he is more likely to be attracted by new techniques and ideologies, which he may also develop himself to meet the anti-establishment interests of his potential follower. Besides using new ideologies and symbols to bind his followers to him and his cause, he will also try to fashion his coalition or party into a better, more tightly organized instrument (1974:230).

In the case of Jesus, he appealed to an older tradition; namely, that of prophetic Yahwism. Instead of inventing new symbols, he sought to liberate the old symbols from the hegemonic code of the priestly elite.

### **JESUS THE PROPHET**

Jesus stood firmly within the tradition of prophetic Yahwism. Properly understood, prophetic Yahwism has always represented a minority position within society - a view from the fringes of societal discourse, challenging any societal form which was in conflict with the supreme authority of Yahweh. Termed by some Old Testament scholars as the 'Yahweh only' party, such Yahwism stood in the tradition of the Exodus and manifested a rejection of both temple and cultus as the products of a corrupted, albeit popular, religion.

Amos (6:25), Hosea (6:6), and Jeremiah (7:21-6) were unified in their belief that the God of the Exodus did not require sacrifice but looked for justice and an end to oppression. Yahweh, even more than the great monarchs of the Ancient Near East (like Hammurabi), was the supreme protector of those people caught in the blades of the societal machinery, the widows, orphans, and the destitute among the poor. Yahweh, as the Divine Warrior, would take up arms against those who plundered the marginalised and who robbed the poor (Isaiah 12:1-4 and see Coote 1981:38). From their seemingly insignificant place in society, the Yahweh-only party challenged the combined forces of the traditional religion of the states of Israel and Judah, with their revolutionary and heretical message; namely, that Yahweh, the God of the poor, the desert God, brooks no rivals. This God has no consort as the temple proclaimed and popular religion celebrated (see Patai 1990). This, the God of Fire, was the real Yahweh. He was the God of justice who had declared eternal war on oppression, on poverty, on corruption, and on idolatry.

### **JESUS IN CONTEXT**

Jesus was not a social reformer, just as Jeremiah, Hosea, and Amos were not social reformers. The prophetic tradition of the Yahweh-only party was not

interested in reforming societies, creating new laws, and deposing unjust officials. They waged ideological war on society. They enunciated the judgment of God on both state and civil society, including among its superstructures, the temples of the popular religion. Prophetic Yahwism envisaged a programme which incorporated widespread death and destruction, plunder and war. One did not reform a corrupt society, one destroyed it. One did not reform idolatry, one destroyed it. One did not reform evil, one destroyed it.

Jesus understood his role as bringing an end to a religious tradition born a thousand years before his birth. He dared to proclaim the complete annihilation of sacrificial Judaism (Matthew 23:37-24:2). In this he shared the perspective of the Yahweh-only party that forced a choice on society between the popular cultic excesses and the austere aloneness of desert Yahwism (Hosea 6:6, Amos 6:25 and Jeremiah 7:21-26). For this reason, Jesus began his ministry in the desert, in the company of John the Baptist, a man who had proclaimed that the axe was biting into the roots of the state religion (Luke 3:9).

Like Hosea (2:14), John called upon the people to re-enter the desert and rediscover the rugged reality of the exodus (Luke 4:4-6). His call to baptism (Luke 3:3) represented a challenge far more radical than traditional Christian teaching usually allows (see Hollenbach 1979). To preach the coming of the age of God (Matthew 3:2) represented a complete rejection of the present age as being without god (Matthew 3:10). To baptise believing Jews was simultaneously a rejection of temple-Judaism and of its elaborate system dividing purity from profanity. Such baptisms were revolutionary gestures, in which the corrupt religion of the time stood condemned as deserving of the wrath of God. John's conviction, sharpened by his reading of the prophets, was that for some people even baptism was too late. The religious elite were like the snakes attempting to escape a grass fire, but in vain (Luke 3:7-9). When John challenged the legitimacy of Herod Antipas, he was executed (Matthew 14:3-12), forcing Jesus to flee into Galilee and to confine his ministry to the rural areas (Mark 1:32-45).

The Galilean ministry of Jesus is most frequently understood through the lens of his teaching; he is portrayed as an itinerant wandering charismatic (Theissen 1978), as a cynic philosopher (Crossan 1991), or as a religious reformer (Meyer 1979). Such approaches tend to avoid the activities of Jesus, relegating them to the realm of mythology. These studies are flawed by their predilection for starting with the final product - the edited teaching of Jesus in the Gospels - which underplays both his socio-political context and the catalogue of his actions. Redaction studies of the Gospels, however, indicate that the teaching of Jesus accumulated around the main activities of Jesus and not the reverse. By reversing the process and beginning with the deeds of Jesus in context, one is able to

lay the foundation for a thorough-going understanding of those words of Jesus belonging to the earliest strata of the Gospels.

Rarely are miracles given their proper place in studies of the Bible. The miracles of Moses, the prophetic prototype, were acts against an oppressive and unjust political regime. They were revolutionary signs - perhaps even actions (see Pixley 1987) - aimed at the authority of the pharaoh and culminating in the assassination of the Egyptian first-born. Elijah's miracles were designed to undermine the popular Yahwism of the time - intermingled as it was with the cult of the Tyrian Baal - and should be connected to Elijah's deliberate undermining of the dynasty of Omri, which ended with the successful revolution of Jehu, anointed at the command of Elijah. The miracles of Jesus were also signs aimed against the religion of the state and the civil society of his time. They proclaim the coming of age of God's wrath, the end of sacrificial Judaism, and the destruction of the priestly elite of the time.

#### HEALING WITHOUT PRIESTHOOD

The high priest, by virtue of his office, defined and demarcated purity from impurity, the realm of the holy from the realm of the profane. Alone, the high priest or his deputies could declare a person cured from illness, released from debt, set free from sin, or made clean from some impurity. According to both Belo and Myers (1988:147-148), Jesus subverted this system through his miracles. He pronounced people healed, cleansed, purified, and forgiven - all by virtue of his authority, which he claimed stemmed from the coming reign of God. In this way, Jesus claimed an authority which rivalled that of the highest religious office in the land. The carefully constructed Sadducean pyramid which relegated the mass of the people of the land to the bottom of the pile and lifted the high priest to the place of capstone was under attack. To heal was one thing, but to pronounce 'clean', 'saved', or 'pure' was a revolutionary action, an assumption of the priestly prerogative. Myers writes:

In sum, Jesus' symbolic acts were powerful not because they challenged the laws of nature, but because they challenged the very structures of social existence (1988:147-8).

The prophet of desert Yahwism pronounced a religion without priests, privilege, or status. The austerity of the Yahweh-alone party had no place for high priests, temples, or elaborate codes of purity designed to protect the interests of the rich and powerful. The disciples had the power to trample on (human) snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy (Luke 10:18), for

symbolically the Satanic high priest had fallen! The miracles, for Jesus, were the signs of the wrath of God upon a corrupt and corrupting human system that had made healing and forgiveness the sacred preserve of the rich and powerful.

### **FEEDING WITHOUT SACRIFICE**

Sacrifice was the place par excellence for the sharing of meals. In a society where meat was seldom enjoyed, sacrificial meals were times of societal celebration and religious entertainment. As such they fell within the preserve of the temple aristocracy, making up a part of civil society and the hegemony of the ruling elite. From their seat of power, they fed the hungry and divided the meat of sacrifice. No wonder, therefore, that the common peasants, for whom hunger and starvation were constant companions, longed for a new Moses, who would bring food for all people. This was the vision of at least some of the prophets of the time, falsely labelled 'terrorists' by both Josephus and some modern writers (Domeris 1993:151). They were no more terrorists than Desmond Tutu!

Jesus feeding of the crowds in a desert region is a deliberate emulation of the Exodus miracle, as is evident in the ordering of the people in fifties and hundreds and by the collection of the baskets of crumbs (reminiscent of the collection of manna by the twelve tribes). He is the prophet like Moses (John 6:14), and he offers bread and meat (fish) in abundance. So Jesus subverts the temple ideology and the ancient tradition that proclaimed the high priest as the mediator between the realm of the divine and humankind. Jesus, and not the high priest, is the Holy One of God (John 6:69).

### **EXORCISM WITHOUT RECOGNISED AUTHORITY**

Rabbinic Judaism saw Phineas the high priest of Moses' time as the great champion of Yahwism against evil (Hayward 1978:22-34). The Dead Sea Scrolls understood the high priest's role in the eschatological war as the leader and director of the war and the one who curses Satan (IQM 13). By exorcising demons on the basis of a non-priestly authority, Jesus again crossed the forbidden line. Myers uses the context to argue that the focus of the exorcisms is the scribal elite, even going so far as to say that the demons speak on behalf of the scribes. 'Exorcism has everything to do with the struggle between the authority of Jesus and that of the scribes' (1988:141). Jesus has entered 'the symbolic space acknowledged to be the domain of the scribes' (1988:142). Myers does not trace the strange connection with the high priest, and so elevates the scribal aspect above the priestly one. Nevertheless, Jesus by his exorcisms challenged

'the consent' of the people to adhere to the strictures of civil society, and exposed the 'demonic' powers at work in the oppression of the people. Even Jesus' method bypassed the norms of the time which included and involved dialogue with the demons. Jesus' normal style was a curt command for the demon to exit the afflicted person.

## **PURITY THROUGH IMPURITY**

Myers finds another indication of Jesus' ideological war on the hegemony of the priest and scribe in Jesus' interaction with the lepers of his time. Jesus, in one instance, touched the leper. Myers (following Belo 1981:106) writes, 'But whereas according to the symbolic order Jesus should have contracted the contagion, instead Mark reports that the leper becomes "clean"' (1988:153). In sending the leper back to the priests, the angry Jesus intended him to be a witness against those representatives of the system. Thus Jesus again undermined the basis for the code of purity and impurity.

## **THE TEACHING OF JESUS**

Against the backdrop of the socio-political situation and in the context of the actions of Jesus, certain teachings stand out. These teachings provide a kernel for determining the earliest stratum of the Jesus tradition. The primary focus of this teaching concerned the primary symbols of Jewish teaching - temple, law, sacrifice, purity, priesthood, and the authority of God. In essence, both the actions and teaching of Jesus served to liberate these symbols from the stranglehold of the Sadducean hegemony. So Jesus flouted the sabbath law, dismissed the dictates of ritual purity (washing hands, touch lepers or the dead, interacting with unclean women or Samaritans), and in his climatic activities condemned the temple, dying in solidarity with the social outcasts of his time.

Standing as Jesus did within the tradition of prophetic Yahwism, his rebuttal of sacrifice in a quotation from Hosea (6:6) and his emphatic pronouncements of the destruction of the temple (akin to those of Jeremiah) opened the way for a redefinition of worship and prayer and service of God. Tax collectors stood forgiven and Pharisees received their just deserts. The community of Jesus became the locus of revelation through the Spirit and of the presence of God, while the high priests were castigated as the terrorists of the time, with the temple ranked as a den of violent robbers.

Jesus also liberated the law from being a symbol buried under a plethora of detail to becoming once again the law of liberation, of Jubilee, and of justice. Purity was redefined as purity of the heart, with a reverse thrust away from the external purity of the state religion. The marginalised, rendered 'impure' in the official table of shame and honour, were declared 'pure' through the table-fellowship of Jesus. Lepers, tax-collectors, the dead, and a bleeding woman were each recognised by Jesus. Through his physical contact with them, he affirmed them as people of dignity and purity, thus upsetting, as Myers notes, the ordering of the civil society in which illness implied exclusion. 'Jesus seeks always to restore the social wholeness denied to the sick/impure by this symbolic order.' (Myers 1988:145 following Pilch 1985:142-9). Thus does Jesus liberate in, word and deed, the symbol of purity from its place in the hegemony of the priestly elite.

Finally, the symbol of God, manipulated by the priestly elite to serve their own interests and made the legitimating principle of their hierarchy of physical purity, was overturned by Jesus' words and deeds. The double side of God revealed both his compassion for the pure and marginalised and his judgment upon the rich and powerful. Here the prophetic heritage of Jesus is obvious.

## CONCLUSION

In the words, and particularly the deeds of Jesus, we see how he sought to expose the oppression of the priestly elite, and to challenge their manipulation of the dominant symbols of the civil society. By standing in the tradition of prophetic Yahwism, Jesus was enabled to liberate the symbols of the Exodus and to set in motion an alternative hegemony, a counter ideology.

The task of the church in a new South Africa is to remain true to the radical nature of that same prophetic Yahwism, and to challenge the dominant hegemony whenever it comes into conflict with that message. Where the state has co-opted religious symbols, the role of the church is to liberate them. Where the state has prescribed a purely spiritual role for the church, the church is obligated to wage ideological war and, if necessary, to undermine the state. Where there are poor, orphans, and marginalised people, where humanity is under attack, where dignity is lacking, there is the place for the Church to struggle, to join God's war on evil and oppression. This was the calling of Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Jesus, and this is the calling of the Church if it claims to stand within that same prophetic tradition.

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