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NABOTH'S VINEYARD: THEOLOGICAL LESSONS FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN LAND ISSUE

ABSTRACT

This article is an appeal to South African political and ecclesiastical leaders to form a synergy in order to redress the land issue in the post-apartheid era. It surveys the historical development of land dispossession through various initiatives as a prima for national conflicts in Africa. From the Berlin Conference (1884) to 1990, when the apartheid government relocated millions of Black people to some Bantustans known as homelands, or newly created townships, the land conflicts continued. The dispossession stripped the masses of their dignity, integrity, and respect. The story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs. 21) is used as a theological framework to redress the land issue. The narrative is expounded to compare the African land perspectives with those of eighth-century Israel. There is an appeal for the ecclesiastical formations to form a synergy with the political stakeholders in addressing this matter.

1. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The ideological ownership of the land became the bone of contention from the 17th century when the Europeans encountered the Africans. Africans considered land ownership to be a communal matter, where the family or a clan collectively owned the land. This collective possession of the land (African) clashed with the individual possession (European) that was foreign to the indigenous people. This trend is also observed in the Old Testament passage that is used as the object lesson for this article. Eighth-century Israel held land possession as a family ownership that must be transmitted to the next generations.

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One of the salient features of the 19th century was known as the scramble for Africa. By that time, the European powers laid claim to nearly all of Africa. Each colonising power claimed some element of power and influence. Competition was rife and conflicts became inevitable. Negotiation was sought to abate the tensions and conflicts. The reality was realised in the latter part of 1884 when a conference was convened in Berlin. This conference birthed the current politico-geographical map of Africa:

> In November 1884, the imperial chancellor and architect of the German Empire, Otto von Bismarck, convened a conference of 14 states (including the United States) to settle the political partitioning of Africa. Bismarck wanted not only to expand German spheres of influence in Africa but also to play off Germany's colonial rivals against one another to the Germans' advantage. Of these fourteen nations, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal were the major players in the conference, controlling most of colonial Africa at the time.[1]

The French occupied most of West Africa, whereas the British occupied the east and the southern part of the continent. The Belgians acquired the vast territory in the centre of the continent – what was later known as the Congo (modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo). The Germans held four territories (Tanganyika, Cameroon, Togo, Namibia) in each of the four regions, whereas the Portuguese held a small colony in West Africa (Guinea Bissau) and two large ones in southern Africa (Mozambique and Angola).

The Berlin conference authorised the colonial powers to superimpose their domains on the African continent. By the dawn of the 20th century, Africa was a battleground for minerals, greedy acquisition of land, and the insatiable market for western colonisers. The land possession and repossession became a political hot potato, which the Independence Movement of the 20th century had to address. The majority of the conflicts of the past three to five decades in Africa can be attributed to land conflicts. This fact recalls the conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, etc. The unhidden fact is that

> [l]and was a major issue in the post-election outbreak of violence in Kenya in 2007. Nor should we forget that South Africa was in the early 1990s a post-conflict state, and that land was and remains a fundamental element of conflict within the state (Home 2011:4-5).

1 The information from http://wysinger.homestead.com/berlinconference.html [2014, 22 July] does not carry the author of the articles on the websites. It is a corporate historical site.

In South Africa, the dispossession process by European settlers started in the 17th century. The indigenous societies lost their land, as the dispossession process played a key role in creating a racially polarised and unequal society. The Glen Grey Act (1894), The Native Land Acts (1913 and 1936), dispossessed and disempowered the indigenous Africans of the land ownership. The situation was exacerbated between 1948 and 1990 when the apartheid government relocated millions of Black people to some Bantustans known as homelands, or newly created townships. The so-called Black spots were removed and resettled in these racial zones. This was known by the then media of South Africa as "forced removals".

Consequently, the

> productive land was lost and the small-scale farming that helped rural households to survive was undermined. In contrast, white commercial farmers were given massive financial support and subsidies, and over time they became highly productive (Cousin 2013).

The post-apartheid era faces the land-issue dilemma. There appears to be no way to annul apartheid and its fruits such as poverty, inequality, etc. without addressing the land issue. In 1991, the then state president F.W. de Klerk stated:

> Of all the processes which have brought about the inequitable distribution of wealth and power that characterises present-day SA, none has been more decisive and more immediately important to most black South Africans than the dispossession of land (Dlamini 2010).

Land issues have played a key role in the history of South Africa, and their successful resolution is crucial for stability, democracy and development. The new democratic government had to devise some legislative policies and procedures of land redistribution and restitution. The uneasiness this caused, especially to those who owned the farms during the era of Black spots relocation, became so great as to receive some backlash. Land plays a crucial role for Africans. Land ownership is the pillar of ego, dignity, and hope upon which one's humanness relies.

2. THE LAND ISSUE: THE DILEMMA FOR THE NEW DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA

The period 1990-1994 was the stage for the dismantling of the apartheid-created land distribution and occupancy. By that time, the apartheid regime had already balkanised South Africa into 11 territories. These were the greater South Africa for Whites, Coloureds, Indians and some privileged

Blacks; the four "independent" states of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda, and Ciskei, and the six Self-Governing Territories of Gazankulu, KwaZulu, Kangwane, KwaNdebele, Lebowa, and QwaQwa. The independent states and the self-governing territories, derogatively labelled Bantustans, were the vast, but sporadic rural areas set aside for the Black people in their tribal or ethnic conglomerates.

The De Klerk government led to the dismantling of apartheid by spearheading the Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act (1991). This piece of law was the orbit of notorious land denial laws such as, among others, Group Areas Act (1966), and the Land Acts (1913 and 1936). Throughout the history of the country, colonization, segregation, and apartheid have dispossessed Non-Whites of their aboriginal rights to land. Until 1991, this land had been either reserved for White settlement, or held as state land. The results of this long period of discrimination resulted in 20% of the population holding 87% of the land. Before any land reform could be considered, it was necessary to initiate the ongoing process of land restitution whereby the forced removals of the past could be rectified. This was never presumed to be a simple endeavour, and a balancing act ensued between the various diverse ethnic groups, many of whom could claim to have been dispossessed from the same region at different times in history (Hodson 1996).

The Commission on Land Allocation was initially established in 1991 to deal with restitution in relation to state land; it was granted the power to make direct orders in 1993. The government of the national unity in 1994 was faced with a challenge of passing the legislation known as the Restitution of Land Rights Act (November 1994). The aim of this legislation was to repeal the discriminatory land legislations of the past. As a result, the Land Claims Court was also established in 1996, and together with the Commission, is the instrument for dealing "with all cases arising from the actions of the state since the enactment of the Natives Land Act of 1913" (Christopher 1995).

The Land Claims Court specialises in dealing with disputes that arise out of laws that underpin South Africa's land-reform initiative. These include land-related legislations such as the Restitution of Land Rights Act (1994), the Land Reform (Labour Tenants) Act (1996), and the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (1997). The Land Claims Court has the legal authority almost similar to that of the Supreme Court. The appeals are heard by the Constitutional Court. The remedies available to the claimants are:

- an order of restoration where feasible;
- when restoration is not feasible, a determination of compensation, and

- the granting of an appropriate right in available state or public land where feasible and any other appropriate remedies (Hodson 1996:13).

These remedies were expected to lead to the acquisition of land. The deadline was reached (1998), but only 90% of the land claims were either scrutinized or settled. In 2013, the South African government intended opening the process of land claims again. On 24 February 2013, the Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform, Gugile Nkwinti, told *The New Age* newspaper and media at large:

> The department would like to reopen the process to allow those who missed the first deadline some few years ago to get on board … There were still issues about the racial identity of those who owned private land … it was not clear how many people in each race group owned land.

On 14 August, the Minister launched the reopening of the land claims process in East London, Eastern Cape:

> The move follows the promulgation of the Restitution of Land Rights Amendment Act which was signed into law last month. The previous window closed in 1998 and left claims of many communities not yet lodged (SAPA Press Release).

3. AFRICANS AND THE VALUE OF THE LAND

Like the ancient Israel of the eighth century, Africa believes that

> a person's independence, identity and civil rights are connected to his ownership of land and his family. These 'possessions' accord to him a 'place' in society (Engelbrecht *et al.* 1987:53).

Land is a livelihood of survival and progress in life. Africans find meaning of life in the land. It offers and facilitates some form of dignity, integrity, and ego towards prosperity. To be robbed of the land is to be stripped of selfhood. Land is a priceless possession that provides meaning to life. Professor Boone (2014) addresses the issues concerning the relationship between land rights, ethnicity, and conflict in Africa. She admits that the relationship between land rights, governance, and violence in Africa is far more complicated than much conventional wisdom and existing research suggests. She alludes to the fact that Africans' meaning of life revolves around the ownership of the land. The land is ontologically significant and is the primary driver for the African human ego. The spiritual realm cannot be divorced from land and its significance. Chimhanda (2014:36) rightly asserts that "the holistic religious orientation in creative dialogue with

Christianity acknowledges the ontological and sacramental value of land". The African land world view is intertwined with human dignity and integrity. Land is deemed as an equitable gift from God to humanity. It serves as a platform or an arena on which one has to address the basic life challenges such as food, shelter, survival and religious expression in general.

> Land as a gift from God … is a holy and catholic space from which all people and other created reality emerge, grow and return at death … Land is communal, spiritual, sacramental, healing and eschatological (Chimhanda 2014:37).

The African world view of the land is that land is the space in which all created things exist and move as absolute space. It is viewed as a spatial dimension of the divine Being. African socio-religious dogma about land is in line with the *makom kadosh* tradition – the Jewish traditional belief that viewed the land as a holy and absolute space where God in his glory (*shekinah*) dwells. Land is thus viewed as the "absolute space … which is the direct presence of God in the whole material world and in every individual thing within it" (Moltmann 1997:154). The land is the space for formation of humans-creator-creation relationships. The landless masses always find it difficult to express their life out of their land. It is for this reason that some South African farmers refuse their labourers to bury their dead on their farms. Africans connect with the Superior Being through the dead; hence, the regular pilgrimages to where their dead lie. In some instances, the labourers refuse to vacate the farms and leave their dead behind. Those with some biblical literacy will argue and appeal to Jacob's plea for burial with his ancestors in the field of Machpelah in Canaan (Gen. 49:29-50:14), and Joseph's plea for his bones to be carried to the promised land (Gen. 50:25). The land is a religious space where the deceased and the living connect. Abandoning the ancestral land is *anathema.*

4. THE NABOTH'S VINEYARD NARRATIVE IN EIGHTH-CENTURY ISRAEL

The arena of events regarding Naboth's vineyard focuses on socio-political life in the Northern Kingdom, widely known as Israel. This consisted of the ten tribes that seceded from Jerusalem under Rehoboam, by the rebel leader, Jeroboam. The Northern Kingdom was not controlled by a particular dynasty like that of the Southern Kingdom under the Davidic dynasty.

While the Northern Kingdom was steeped into the Mosaic traditions, the Southern Kingdom embraced the structural government as a way of political stability. The perceptions of social justice in the South were

intertwined with the nationalist theology. This nationalist theology embraced the protection by Yahweh based on the cultic centre (temple), the Zadokite priesthood inaugurated by David and, above all, the Davidic dynasty. "The king was viewed as someone who had been placed in office by Yahweh himself" (Engelbrecht *et al.* 1987:48).

The king of the north, Omri, introduced the syncretic laws that combined Baal worship and Yahweh's allegiance. His son, Ahab, and his wife, Jezebel, "continued to compete with the law of the Lord until finally the law of the Lord was almost forgotten and Israel was wiped out as a nation".[2] Corruption, chaos, and idolatry dominate the history of these two kingdoms. In the words of Linville (1998:197), "the people of Israel did not change their heterodox ways".

The eighth century was a time of dynamic socio-economic development. King Omri spearheaded the civilisation when he took over the reign over the nation that was politically threatened, geographically uninviting, domestically divided, and religiously syncretic. Ahab expedited national development where Omri ended. Under his rule,

> the social problems of the state were to be aggravated by the process of urbanisation: when the farmers were driven from the land by a variety of factors (Deist 1987:79).

Expansion in Jezreel positioned King Ahab's palace closer to the traditional farming land.

The Baal worship, which encrusted the religious life of Israel, was at its zenith. This Phoenician religion had been a competitor with Yahweh. Ahab was enticed into this religion, and this was enhanced by his idolatrous

> Phoenician wife, Jezebel, champion of foreign culture, a woman as imperious and able as she was vindictive and unscrupulous, was his undoing (Lockyer 1971:156).

In his apostasy, Ahab's greed overshadowed the laws of God regarding land ownership. He never questioned "Naboth's property rights, which were guaranteed to him by the testament (21:4)" (Payne 1982:111). He failed to recognise the divinely established title to the property that Naboth possessed. His proclivity towards the Phoenician religious and ethical laws made him compromise the Mosaic laws regarding the land.

The Northern Kingdom with its Mosaic doctrine viewed land ownership with a great regard and esteem. Their consciences rang with commandments

2 This is a corporate website containing information without authors. [Online.] Retrieved from: http://www.landreform.org/be4.htm [2014, 20 August].

such as "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants" (Lev. 25:23), and "No inheritance in Israel is to pass from tribe to tribe, for every Israelite shall keep the tribal land inherited from his forefathers" (Num. 36:7). Generally, the central theme of the theology of the land was "the divine ownership and divine gift" (Wright 1990:23). It was for this reason that, when Ahab offered an exchange of land for another, Naboth responded negatively. He viewed the sale of his ancestral land as the transgression of God's law. The statement: "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers" was an appeal to Yahweh's protection from selling his inherited land.

> This can be interpreted as an expression of Naboth's sincere piety and fidelity to the traditions of his people – a tradition in which evidently he believed that he could not sell his inheritance (Cronauer 2005:127).

According to Gray (1977:439), the attitude of Naboth regarding his ancestral land reflected the solidarity with his family and the freedom he needed to enjoy depended on the ownership of the land. Naboth's reply

> epitomizes the sense of responsibility to one's ancestors that shaped an Israelite's use of the land. He was not the sole owner, it belonged to the whole family line (Wright 1990:152).

This doctrine was understood as God being the owner of the land, and that He generously entrusts it to humanity for stewardship and utilisation for livelihood. The land could only be transacted to the kinsman redeemer, who will hopefully return it to the rightful owner in the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:25-27). It is clear that Ahab and Naboth, though they were the Jezreelites, were not blood relatives to allow the sale transaction of the immovable property. Naboth's "refusal to sell was based upon his fidelity to these traditions" (Gray 1977:439). It was not out of rudeness or disrespect that he refused the sale transaction. It was due to the binding Mosaic doctrine regarding land possession and ownership.

The religious values and convictions were automatically affected by the social changes. Inevitably,

> the state was now geared to the principles of overproduction and trade, whereas the traditional (religious) values continued to reflect a subsistence economy. This led to violent action by the state, as in the case of Naboth, whose property was confiscated with a view to consolidating agricultural land into economically more viable units (Deist & Le Roux 1987:86).

The lust and greed for land deeply dyed the social justice system of the Northern Kingdom. The Phoenician cultural system treated land as a commodity, not as an inheritance. The foreign cultural law was applied to annul God's law. Ahab's greed for the land and Jezebel's application of Phoenician law to Israel became the climax for Ahab's downfall. The illegal invasion of the land was executed through lies, deceit, and murder.

Eighth-century prophets such as Amos (2:6), Hosea (13:4-6), and Micah (2 & 6), in particular, focused their ministry on greed and land-grabbing enterprises. These prophets' theological perspective was that the "historical land gift tradition is integrally related to the demands of the relationship between Israel and Yahweh" (Wright 1990:25). The prophetic sentiments were ringing soundly at the time:

> You have observed the statues of Omri and all the practices of Ahab's house; you have followed their traditions … (Mic. 6:16).

> They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance (Mic. 2:2).

5. THE CURRENT SITUATION: A POLITICAL HOT POTATO

There is no doubt that the land issue is emotional. The conversations regarding land in South Africa have become emotive and sensitive. The bottom line is that land was and remains a fundamental element of conflict in South Africa. The following extract captures the sentiment of people affected by the slow pace of land reform:

> The desire for land remains a persistent theme amongst South Africa's rural poor and urbanized unemployed population. This has been the case for the urban-based with no access to secure plots (or even semi-urban farm land). Those living on communal land have expressed the shortage of land for the number of people living there. Farm workers and labour tenants are, furthermore, increasingly confronted with evictions due to new labour and land laws, that are (ironically) aimed at protecting their rights. For the long-term unemployed and those without formal employment, access to land is often a last alternative. The slow pace of settlement of restitution claims and the limited number of land redistribution projects raise concerns amongst this group (Anseeuw & Alden 2011:36-37).

As far back as 2005, the then Deputy President of South Africa highlighted that "the pace of (land) restitution has been negatively influenced by the 'willing buyer/willing seller' principle" (Anseeuw & Alden 2011:28). Between 1999 and 2004, the aborted GEAR Policy shifted the focus of land reform. The promotion of subsistence farming was effectively shelved and the development of an emergent commercial farming sector became the over-arching priority. The land reform no longer focused on the transference of land to the Black people to promote self-sufficiency. The land reform instead created and promoted some structured small-scale commercial farming sectors. This was aimed at improving farm production, revitalising the rural environment and creating employment opportunities. As can be expected, "the impact of this change in government policy was especially felt in the land redistribution and land tenure reform programmes" (Anseeuw & Alden 2011:30).

There was a mixed reaction from the African National Congress (ANC) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) on the 30 June 2014 when President Jacob Zuma signed into law the restitution of land rights amendment bill and the property valuation bill. ANC saw this as a victory for millions of South Africans dispossessed of their land as a result of past discrimination. Their spokesperson, Zizi Kodwa, hailed it as a "bold and decisive step that expresses the urgency for comprehensive land reform expressed by the people of South Africa" (Kodwa 2014). In the same press release, the EFF labelled this move as unethical and expensive, as it distorts the history of land dispossession, and continues to divide the people into ethnic groups instead of equitable distribution. Their student command team leader from the University of Pretoria, Jaco Oelofse, told South African Press Association (SAPA) on 5 September 2014 that "the land was violently stolen. There should be no compensation, it must be given back to the rightful owners" (Oelofse 2014). This clearly shows the tug of war between the government and the radical politics (revolutionaries) of South Africa regarding the land. There is a thin line between the proponents of justice and the victims of the same justice. Caution and radicalism are at loggerheads. The ideological clashes delay the process. The victimised masses are at the receiving end of the politics of power. The detached involvement has become normal politicking of the day.

The question still remains: Who is a winner in this battle for the land? The land claims have recently been opened and it is of great interest to see the process unfold. Ultimately, the current government does the crisis management of Ahab's greed (the past colonial and apartheid regimes). Jezebel, his wife (radical politicians whose ego is to devise some disruptive laws), is out to accuse the innocent dispossessed for treason and murder. Naboth (the victims of land grabs) are dying of starvation, shame, and

disrespect, because what gave them meaning was dispossessed from them, takes time to come to them.

6. THEOLOGICAL LESSONS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN LAND ISSUE

The results of the land policies in South Africa left many people dispossessed and without a viable means of livelihood. The majority of the people were banished to the arid and unarable territories (Bantustans). These areas were without significant industrial development. Of the land, 87% was allocated to the White minorities and 13% to the Black majority. The scenario of Micah's era, where the social elite occupied the influential positions of power, repeated itself in South Africa, from the inception of the Glen Grey Act (1894) to the Land Act (1936). The spirit of Ahab dominated the affairs of the government of the day. The colonial elite amassed massive areas of land for their benefit at the expense of the indigenous inhabitants who were defenceless, disenfranchised, and marginalised. Greed for land occupation took over or ignored the property rights of the poor. Engelbrecht *et al.* (1987:52) concur that, like the political rulers of eighth-century Israel, they "misused their positions of authority for the sake of financial interests". The majority of the population was *defrauded of their inheritance*. They were stripped of dignity and meaning of life to make them the landless poor. The so-called Western civilisation and development, like in the days of Omri and Ahab, undermined the people's property rights. The dispossessed opted for "The Lord forbid that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you" and were forcefully removed and dumped into the designated areas. They lost dignity, civil rights, and respect. These are defined better as that, if someone loses these, he "in fact loses his human dignity and is bereft of independence and self-reliance. From then on his life is in the hands of others who can capriciously use or abuse him" (Engelbrecht *et al.* 1987:53). The majority of the apartheid legislations are intertwined with land ownership and occupation. They are all designed to make the dispossessed a dependent or subsidiary.

The shortfall of the ruling elite of the time was the disregard of the comprehensive theology of social justice. They exploited the legitimate citizens in their economic field, which is the land. The text, Micah 2:1-2, enlightens the reader that they devised plans of how to exploit the majority poor to their advantage. Political authority and prestige were used to gain both economic and social privilege. Land was confiscated unlawfully to enrich the elite of the time.

7. CONCLUSION

The theological task is primarily to return to the biblical exposition about the land. Top of the list should be the willing or the voluntary steps towards land restoration. Restoration goes hand-in-hand with self-examination. The depravity of humanity and its lamentable consequence is all-encompassing. Both the perpetrator and the victim must realise their incapacity for self-redemption. They both have to acknowledge the historical injustice and in Christ-like manner enter into discourse that may lead to mutual understanding of land transaction. One cannot restore something and still hold onto it. On the other hand, one cannot coil into despondency and lull into victim mentality. Discourse about the land in theological circles is important. Negotiated settlement through discourse should be reached amicably. Remember the power of negotiations.

> God chose language to communicate power … We use words to establish communion – or discord – among and within ourselves. The 'word' is the fulcrum of history, both personal and universal (Berghoef & Dekoster 1984:149).

All the extremes of political and ecclesiastical ideologies must hold to *canonical* truth as *hermeneutically u*nderstood in Naboth's vineyard narrative. All ideologies must be scrutinized by the *exegetical* and *hermeneutical* truth extracted from this narrative. The authentic liberation is based on this truth:

> Truth, not ideology, liberates! Truth, not ideology, recreates! Truth, not ideology, takes constructive incarnation in progressive practice and socio-economic justice (Berghoef & Dekoster 1984:127-129).

It appears that the land discourses in the corridors of the political houses do not satisfy the victims. Incomplete justice is similar to justice denied. The ecclesiastical formations are mandated by Scriptures (Elijah's prophetic role to Ahab's government) to enter into some synergy to expedite the land restoration in South Africa. The land-restoration dialogue is cautioned to guard against leading South Africa into a totalitarian state, which embraces oppressive systems so brutal, so un-liberating, and so anti-human, that *realpolitik* (politics of power) cannot be balanced with *vox populi* (voices of the masses). Theological *orthodoxy* (sound opinion based on canonical rule) must carefully be balanced with *heterodoxy* (expression of human opinion ungoverned by canonical standards). The continuing dialogue, as difficult as it may seem, is a tool towards symphony regarding the land redistribution. It is true that "words guide praxis and weave the web of history" (Berghoef & Dekoster 1984:129).

Restoration involves renewal, revival, re-establishment, restitution, renovation, reconstruction or reproduction. It is all about putting back into a former position or returning the dignity that was lost. The theology of land restoration is restorative justice that brings reconciliation and prosperity. The prosperity in the land is dependent on the accessibility and utilisation of the land. The symbiotic relationship between the government and church formations can realise this. Then, "justice and shalom will kiss each other" (Lampman & Shattuck 1999:113).

It is, therefore, conclusively legitimate for the ecclesiastical communities to return to the *canonical* mandate of restorative justice. The dialogue regarding the land issue must continue, in order to forge justice and socio-economic progress towards peace, prosperity, and patriotism.

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