Article

Foregrounding African Ontology/Epistemology: A Reading of Deuteronomy 23:3 and Ruth 4:18–22 Considering the Nature of God

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Abstract: Deuteronomy 23:3, says: "No . . . Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord". This verse is motivated by a discriminatory tendency embedded in the ontology of the Deuteronomist. Interestingly, Deuteronomy 23:3 was used by Ezra-Nehemiah to discriminate against the "Moabites" during the Second Temple. Such ontology is countered by the author of Ruth in the narrative of Ruth during the Second Temple. This demonstrates an ontological "war" within the Bible itself. The primary contestation lies in whether God is *exclusive* or *inclusive*. This development necessitates a hermeneutics of suspicion. In the course of history, the "theology" of Deuteronomy has been used to grossly violate the human dignity of many God-fearing African people and many other people of the South for colonial purposes. To exacerbate the situation, there were persistent attempts from some quarters to universalise such a discriminatory biblical perspective. This would feed into the centre–periphery arrangement, with the centre feeding the periphery with such hermeneutics. For this reason, African scholars are implored to be very vigilant against ardent pressures put on the biblical texts by ontological, epistemological, and contextual biases of interpretations. Accordingly, Andrew Mbuvi identifies African Biblical Hermeneutics perfectly when he says it seeks to undo "the very construct of the 'centre-periphery' binary by allowing the possibility of multiple centres"). Kenneth Ngwa, thus, rightly asserts that African Biblical Hermeneutics considers African epistemologies and conditions "to be invaluable and legitimate contexts and resources in biblical interpretation"), drinking from our own wells). In consequence, this paper intends to set a dialogue between Deuteronomy 23:3 and Ruth 4:18–22. This paper aims to examine the understanding of God behind these verses. This paper will then compare the two theologies with the African philosophical concept of God. Harnessing the African concept of Ubuntu, this paper will de-ideologise the two texts and thus will provide a recommendation concerning the two texts.

Keywords: African ontology; culture; discrimination; epistemology; ontology; Ubuntu

1. Introduction

The title of this issue is *African Biblical Hermeneutics and the Decolonial Turn*. In accordance with the title, this essay uses an African philosophical concept to understand two biblical texts. Hulisani Ramantswana argues that "African biblical hermeneutics has to be viewed as an African-minded reading of the biblical text by allowing experiences, culture, and knowledge systems to influence our reading of the text" (Ramantswana 2016, p. 420). According to Kenneth Ngwa, African hermeneutics is an interpretive act that utilises its own credible and constructive resources to create forms of being, belonging, and knowing (Ngwa 2022, p. 29). This essay hopes to promote a form of being that acknowledges the human dignity of every human being. This becomes even more imperative if one considers that, for a very long time, due to dominant Eurocentric biblical hermeneutics, the reality of Blacks has been reflected as contradicting "their supposed inclusion in the biblically-based love of God". Thus, biblical appropriation became alienating to Blacks (Mosala 1992, p. 131). It is in this light that Andrew Mbuvi identifies African Biblical Hermeneutics perfectly when

he says it seeks to undo "the very construct of the 'centre-periphery' binary by allowing the possibility of multiple centres" (Mbuvi 2022). Against this background, African ontologies, epistemologies, and contexts become crucial for biblical hermeneutics in Africa. It is in this spirit that "decolonial studies focus on the production of alternative discourses with and from a subaltern perspective" (Gallien 2020, p. 33). In line with this point of view, this essay explores the biblicallybased love of God from an African epistemological perspective.

The two texts referred to above are Deuteronomy 23:3–6[1] and Ruth 4:18–22. In the spirit of decoloniality, these texts are deliberately brought together to be read from an African epistemological perspective. The intention is to produce an alternative discourse on the biblically-based love of God from an African perspective. The strategy is to de-ideologise these texts to illuminate the debate within the Bible itself concerning the love of God. To de-ideologise is not to strip the texts of their theologies/ideologies as the word might misleadingly suggest. To the contrary, it is to foreground their theologies/ideologies. These theologies will be interrogated epistemologically and then be brought into dialogue with an African epistemology. Specifically, they will be brought into dialogue with Ubuntu[2] as an ontological, epistemological, and hermeneutical concept. This discussion will start by presenting African Biblical Hermeneutics and Decoloniality. It will then proceed to examine the concept of Ubuntu. The reading of the texts will then ensue by reading Deuteronomy 23:3–6 first, and then Ruth 4:16–22. After reading both texts, what transpires will be brought into dialogue with the concept of Ubuntu concerning the biblically-based love of God. Concluding remarks will bring the discussion to a close. Next, the discussion proceeds to present African Biblical Hermeneutics and Decoloniality.

2. African Biblical Hermeneutics and the Decolonial Turn

African Biblical Hermeneutics entails the Bible, African context, and appropriation. Specifically, according to David Tuesday Adamo, it is "the rereading of the Christian scripture from a premeditatedly Africentric perspective... the analysis of the biblical text is done from the perspective of African worldview and culture" (Adamo 2015, p. 63). Sadly, Adamo also laments as follows: "Unfortunately, whenever we submit academic articles that reflect African biblical hermeneutical methodology, our articles are often dismissed as fetish, magical, barbarous and unscholarly" (Adamo 2015, p. 63). Nevertheless, Adamo courageously continues and describes ABH as the principle of interpretation of the Bible for transformation in Africa" (Adamo 2015, p. 62). Then, Adamo lifts the discourse to a higher plane saying:

> The purpose of African biblical hermeneutics is not only to understand the Bible and God in the context of African experience and culture, but also "to break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed". (Adamo 2015, p. 63)

In Adamo's last remark, it is important to note ideology as a consequential factor in biblical hermeneutics. Many a time, some hermeneuts are reluctant to acknowledge the role of ideology in biblical hermeneutics.

Tracing the history of ABH, Justin Ukpong (1999) provides its three broad categories since the 1930s, namely, (1) reactive–apologetic, (2) reactive–proactive, and (3) proactive. The periods of the development of these different approaches to theology in Africa are not as periodically compartmental as presented by Ukpong in reality. However, this periodisation provides legibility. According to Ukpong, the period between the 1930s and 1970s was apologetic. This apologetic theology reacted to "widespread condemnation of African religion and culture by the Christian missionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries". Some Western and later African scholars, focusing on the Old Testament, demonstrated that "in spite of the discontinuity, there was also continuity between the" biblical culture and religion, on the one hand, and African culture and religion, on the other. They identified themes in the Bible that they would compare with similar themes in African culture. The process continued to develop and improve. According to Ukpong, the period between the 1970s and the 1990s is "the most dynamic and rewarding in biblical studies in Africa".

During this period, the approach changed to confrontational. The African context became a resource in interpreting the Bible.

The inculturation and liberation approaches are the products of this period. He acknowledges the comparative approach of the 1930s to 1970s for leading to the recognition of African culture as a preparation for the gospel. For this reason, it remains "foundational to all biblical studies that link the biblical text to the African context". However, he also notes that "Christianity was still looked upon as a foreign religion, expressed in foreign symbols and idioms" (Ukpong 1999, p. 316). This realisation "generated the desire to make Christianity relevant to the African religio-cultural context". From the 1970s to the 1980s that desire "gave rise to the inculturation movement in theology". The African context then became the resource for biblical interpretation (Ukpong 1999, p. 316). Further, due to the influence of socialist ideology, theology also used the approach "to confront all forms of oppression, poverty and marginalisation in society". This is the liberation approach expressed "in *liberation hermeneutics, Black Theology and feminist hermeneutics*" (Ukpong 1999, p. 317). As the twenty-first century was approaching, biblical interpretation in Africa was "at the threshold of maturity", concludes Ukpong. However, he was also concerned about the extent to which this maturity would "sustain the African context as the subject of interpretation of the Bible so that the hitherto muted voices and concerns of ordinary readers will come alive in the academic forum" (Ukpong 1999, p. 327). With the advent of postcolonial and decolonial approaches, Ukpong's concern was addressed. Making the African context the subject of biblical interpretation intensified and proliferated. The "muted voices and concerns of ordinary readers" became even more alive and multidimensional in the academic forum. At this point, a brief look at postcoloniality and decoloniality might be enlightening.

Claire Gallien distinguishes between postcoloniality and decoloniality as follows: "… if postcolonial critique produced studies about the systemic subjugation of subalternized people, decolonial studies focus on the production of alternative discourses with and from a subaltern perspective" (Gallien 2020, p. 33). Michael Tsang provides the similarity between the two. Referencing Gurminder Bhambra, Tsang describes both the postcolonial and the decolonial as "concerned with the troubling notion of 'modernity', or, to be precise, with the way the West imposed a 'universal' model of 'modernity' on other parts of the world through imperial invasion and colonial governance" (Tsang 2021, online). Although not eager to differentiate between the two, Tsang also provides a distinction between them. According to Tsang, postcolonialism "has focused on the study of the political, economic, social, cultural, and historical impact of European colonialism as registered through texts such as literature". It refers to a complex understanding of the period after political "independence" from the colonisers "as being continuously constituted and affected by structures and institutions imposed during the colonial era" (Tsang 2021, online). Decoloniality, on the other hand, "is not so much a political project than it is an epistemological one: to 'delink' ourselves from the structure of knowledge imposed by the West, and then to 'reconstitute' our ways of thinking, speaking, and living" Tsang (2021, online) asserts. In the same spirit, this discussion foregrounds Ubuntu as an African epistemological concept. This is to delink African being, belonging, and knowing within the discourse of the biblically-based love of God from Eurocentric hermeneutical reflections. This should suffice to provide some light on African Biblical Hermeneutics and Decoloniality. The next step is to examine the concept of Ubuntu.

3. *Ubuntu*: The Fundamental Ontological Category in the African Thought

The discourse on Ubuntu is not just simplistic. Different people have different views on the use of Ubuntu and that needs to be taken note of. Mluleki Michael Ntuthuzelo Mnyaka postulates that "the word *ubuntu* has not been immune to misuse and overuse" (Mnyaka 2003, p. 159). Tinyiko Maluleke earlier reflected this sentiment in that Ubuntu must be understood within the context of a mainly feudal socio-economic system and thus, must not simply be transplanted from that context. "The mechanical extraction and

therefore separation of *Ubuntu* from the rest of African culture and its historic context is very problematic", he contends (Maluleke 1999, p. 13). In a strongly worded statement, he warns as follows:

> The global village is not an extended family; it is a village of fierce and vicious competition whose fruit is not enjoyed by all its citizens. To recommend that Africans, and Africans alone, practice *Ubuntu* in a context where no one else practices it, is nothing short of despicable cruelty. (Maluleke 1999, p 13)

In an earlier article, he is more specific about this sentiment. He disapproves of the association of "the ostensibly economically oriented Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)[3] . . . with *ubuntu* via the language of *Masakhane*".[4] "The *Masakhane* concept attempts to harness the 'African' spirit of community and mutual care for the attainment of a contemporary economic objective", he remarks (Maluleke 1996, p. 26). What Maluleke denounces here is to harness African spirituality for the attainment of objectives of a contemporary system, the values of which negate the very foundational presuppositions of African spirituality and identity. While conscious of the above warnings on the misuse of Ubuntu, this essay is not discouraged. Mogobe B Ramose is also correct to describe Ubuntu as "the fundamental ontological and epistemological category in the African thought of the Bantu-speaking people" (Ramose 2001, p. 3). However, it becomes imperative to be sensitive to the use or the misuse and abuse of Ubuntu. This essay's objective does not negate the foundational presuppositions of African spirituality but reaffirms them. This is especially true concerning umntu ngumntu ngabantu (a human being is a human because of other human beings). Now that we have highlighted the complexity of the use of the concept of Ubuntu, the discussion proceeds to demonstrate Ubuntu in operation.

Thus far, the misuse or abuse of Ubuntu has been brought to light. Its use in this discussion has been justified. Now Ubuntu is explained to prepare for reading the identified texts from the presuppositions of Ubuntu. According to the *Africa Study Bible*, "the word *ubuntu* means that there is a universal bond connecting all human beings. That bond leads us to care for others and to show humanity to all people (Jusu 2016, p. 1894). This means hospitality is central to Ubuntu. Similar to all traditional African ethical rules, this rule was not written down but was preserved through the culture of honour and shame (Mqhayi 1931, p. 118). It was expressed in the daily life experiences of community members. The custom of hospitality, therefore, was sustained through the fear of shame. In his novel published in 1931 titled *Ityala Lamawele* (*The Lawsuit of the Twins*), SE Krune Mqhayi, a late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century sage among amaXhosa, demonstrates the idea of hospitality and shame by saying:

> A person who has been seen dead in the field, even if he has been killed by cold, or by hunger, of course, the nearby villages will have to answer. Avoiding this guilt, every Xhosa man could not let a traveler pass by, without calling him and asking him about his origin and his destination and other questions, giving him a place to sleep, and giving him food to eat. A house that refuses shelter; there is no witchcraft beyond that, to let the traveller sleep with the wolves. (Mqhayi 1931, p. 130)[5]

Frustrated by the decline in Ubuntu that was beginning to show among community members, he expands on hospitality by explaining the ideal state of the traditional amaXhosa kingdom, utilising revealing rhetoric. He contends that no witchcraft surpassed refusing to give,[6] and no one owned their own thing alone in the Kingdom of amaXhosa. In the Kingdom of amaXhosa, such behaviour was absolute witchcraft (Mqhayi 1931, p. 131).[7] Anyone who understands how traditional Africans view witchcraft will grasp the gravity of Mqhayi's rhetoric to describe refusing to give as witchcraft of the highest order. Echoing the same sentiments, Archibald C Jordan narrates the disappointment of Tiyo Soga[8] in the inhospitality demonstrated by the early Christian converts of the early twentieth century in an essay Soga wrote:

The essay on *'The Believers and the Pagans'* also shows that the gulf is widening between the converted and the pagan. The converted has lost *ubuntu* (generosity, respect for man irrespective of position). The pagan can no longer expect hospitality amongst the Christians. Soga gives an instance of a pagan traveller who spent a cold night in the open veld because none of the Christians in the village would admit him into their homes. (Jordan 1973, p. 115)

Jordan's testimony is corroborated by Gideon Thom, who says: "Tiyo was terribly shocked when he realised that non-believers experienced little hospitality from 'Church-people' who stayed on mission stations, that, they in fact looked down on" the non-believers (Thom 2005). As these reports indicate, not being hospitable to strangers denotes a lack of Ubuntu. Being hospitable to others, including strangers, is at the core of Ubuntu. Madipoane Masenya comments on foreignness as follows:

The notion of foreignness basically carries with it some negative sentiments. It entails alienation from one's native context, real self, and familiar things, among others. In hospitable cultures like some traditional African cultures, foreignness (e.g., as it relates to visitors), undergirded by notions of *botho/ubuntu* (*hesed* in the book of Ruth), also entailed positive sentiments. The proverb, *Moeng tla ka gešo re je ka wena*, says it all. Its tenor reveals that delicacies get to be enjoyed with the arrival of visitors in a family. (Masenya 2013, p. 193)

The sentiments expressed here above show that hospitality, as an element of Ubuntu, was compelling. The context of this behaviour is explained by Sulayman Nyang, who said:

... the African's concept of the triangular relationship between God, man and the non-human elements in the universe, is the key to the understanding of traditional African philosophy ... traditional African man sees himself as a party to an ontological and cosmological partnership and because of this understanding of his life on earth, he always sees harmony as the best form of human expression. To the traditional African man, life is chaotic so long as man's links with God and others in existence are shattered. Because of this fear of breaking the ontological bonds, traditional African man always prefers harmony and social order. (Nyang 1980, p. 32)

It is in this light that Deuteronomy and Ruth will be explored. Harmony and social order expressed in hospitality are the presuppositions that underlie the reading of the Deuteronomy and Ruth texts. In this spirit, the discussion proceeds to read the texts with the concern of the biblically-based love of God.

4. Reading of Deuteronomy 23:3–6 and Ruth 4:18–22

Before we read the two chosen texts, it might be enlightening to make just one remark. The remark is by John Goldingay. According to Goldingay:

... Old Testament theology is different from Israelite theology ... For instance, books such as Kings and Ezekiel suggest that mainstream Israelite faith often included worship of Yhwh with the aid of images and recognition of a consort alongside Yhwh, and archaeological discoveries also indicate this. But the Old Testament books do not approve of such beliefs and practices, and Old Testament theology concerns itself with the stance taken by the Old Testament books on the nature of the "authentic" Israelite faith. (Goldingay 2003, pp. 15–16)

It is important to note Goldingay's distinction between Old Testament theology and Israelite mainstream faith. He identifies three distinct entities, namely, mainstream Israelite faith, Old Testament books, and Old Testament as an academic discipline. He asserts that the way mainstream Israelite faith understood God is not necessarily the same as the way Old Testament books understood God. He makes an example that when one reads the books of Kings and Ezekiel, one will realise that mainstream Israelite faith often worshipped YHWH with the aid of images and also recognised a cohort alongside YHWH. These details are also confirmed by archaeology, continues Goldingay. However, Old Testament books

did not approve of these beliefs and practices, observes Goldingay. He then develops a long discussion on this issue, but this short detail does make sense on its own for this discussion. A further remark by Goldingay is that "the Old Testament incorporates different, even clashing, theological convictions" (Goldingay 2003, p. 17). These remarks arouse some interesting thoughts. Having made these remarks, the discussion proceeds to Deuteronomy.

a. Deuteronomy 23:3–6

Deuteronomy 23:3–6 is part of a pericope including verses 1–8 about categories of people who must be excluded from the assembly of the Lord. Deuteronomy 23:1–2 bans people whose genitals are mutilated and who are borne out of illicit unions, respectively. They are excluded from the assembly of the Lord. Verses 3–6 are as follows:

> **3** No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, **4** because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. **5** (Yet the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you). **6** You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live.[9]

The Ammonites and the Moabites are banned from the assembly of the Lord. They are banned even to the tenth generation. Two phrases are used to state the time of banishment, namely, דּוֹר עֲשִׂירִי (Dôr 'asîrî, tenth generation) and עַד־עוֹלָם ('ad ôlām, forever). The tenth generation means forever (Craigie 1976, p. 297; Fishbane 1985, p. 17). Again, at the end, the word "forever" is used. Further, the Israelites are prohibited from promoting the welfare of the Ammonites and the Moabites as long as they live. It is important to note that these are apodictic laws. In contrast to the casuistic laws that use the "if. . ., then. . ." formula, "the apodictic laws generally employ a second-person imperative form: "You shall/shall not . . ." (Alexander and Baker 2003, p. 95). These laws are explicit and rigid. They cannot easily be misunderstood. Also interesting is that the Ammonites and the Moabites are said to be products of an incestuous union between Lot and his daughters (Genesis 9:30–38). In this respect, they are already banned by Deuteronomy 23:2, which bans people borne out of illicit unions. According to Michael Fishbane, they are "doubly tainted" (Fishbane 1985, p. 120). They are banned because they did not treat the Israelites well when the Israelites were moving from Egypt to Canaan (historical reason) and for being born from an illicit union (purity reason). For the purity reason, Fishbane says they are "impure 'forever'. Purification or conversion was thus unthinkable" (Fishbane 1985, p. 120). According to Deuteronomy 23, the situation of the Ammonites and the Moabites is irredeemable.

However, it is puzzling to notice that both these charges, in this same book of Deuteronomy, are contradicted. In Deuteronomy 2:9, when the Israelites were on their way from Egypt to Canaan, the Lord said to Israel: "Do not harass Moab or engage them in battle, for I will not give you any of its land as a possession, since I have given Ar as a possession to the descendants of Lot." In verse 19 of the same chapter, the Lord said to Israel, "When you approach the frontier of the Ammonites, do not harass them or engage them in battle, for I will not give the land of the Ammonites to you as a possession, because I have given it to the descendants of Lot". Lot was Abraham's brother's son. Because Ammon and Moab were Lot's sons, the Ammonites and the Moabites were relatives of Israel through Lot and Abraham. God in Deuteronomy 2:9 and 19 is accommodative of the Ammonites and the Moabites, in contrast to Deuteronomy 23:3. Two theological perspectives are thus discernible in Deuteronomy. However, the exclusive perspective is dominant. Ferdinand Deist confirms the dominance of the exclusive perspective in Deuteronomy when he says: "Deuteronomy is explicit in its prohibition of Israelites mixing with the indigenous people (7:3–4)" (Deist 1994, p. 25). Thomas Römer attributes this dominant exclusive perspective to the idea of Israel's "election". This election necessitates the separation of Israel from the "other" nations (Römer 2005, p. 170). He traces it from Deuteronomy 7 and describes it

as follows: "This election implies separation from the people living inside the land that the addressees are about to occupy (7.1); separation itself is described in a very aggressive way. They as well as their cultic symbols must be destroyed; no intermarriage is allowed" (7:2–5) (Römer 2005, p. 170). Interestingly, Römer says: "Deut. 23:1–9 also reflects the ideology of segregation" (Römer 2005, p. 171). Römer's assertion is confirmed in Ezra-Nehemiah doing "an exegetical blend of Deut. 7:1–6 and 23:4–9" (Fishbane 1985, p. 116; Blenkinsopp 2009, p. 126). According to Joseph Blenkinsopp, Deuteronomy 23:1–8 "has been interpreted intertextually and given a broader application in the light of Deut 7:1–6" by Ezra-Nehemiah (Blenkinsopp 2009, p. 126). Saul M Olyan describes this scenario as follows in Ezra-Nehemiah:

> In 9:12, the command of Deut 23:7 ("You shall not seek their welfare ever..."), uttered with respect specifically to Ammonite and Moabite males, has been recast to apply to all aliens in question. Similar exegetical moves are evident in Neh 13:1–3, where the exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites in Deut 23:4–7 is cited but interpreted to refer apparently to all who are classed as aliens, including the offspring of mixed marriages (כל ערב). (Olyan 2004, p. 15)

To conclude, Deuteronomy 23:3–6 is a discriminatory text carrying exclusive theology that exposes the "othered" people to the danger of being grossly violated. Ezra-Nehemiah, a later text influenced by Deuteronomy, is testimony thereto. The discussion now proceeds to Ruth.

5. Ruth 4:18–22

Before we examine Ruth 4:18–22, it is beneficial to look at the chapters preceding this conclusion. The Book of Ruth is a story of a Judean family: a father, a mother, and two sons, who left Bethlehem because of famine and went to the land of Moab. While they were in Moab, the sons took Moabite women as wives. Later, the father and the sons died, and the three women were left behind alone. The mother decided to return to Bethlehem in Judah and released the daughters-in-law to return to their homes. One returned home and the other one, by the name of Ruth, decided to remain with the mother-in-law. The mother-in-law, Naomi, returned to Bethlehem with Ruth. When they returned, according to the tradition of the levirate marriage, Ruth re-married a relative by the name of Boaz. They bore a son, Obed; hence, the genealogy in Ruth 4:18–22.

In his monograph titled *The Book of Ruth from a Lomwe Perspective*, Justino Alfredo investigates the use of the word חֶסֶד (ḥesed; God's mercy) from Lomwe, a language spoken in Mozambique. He argues that the Book of Ruth is a חֶסֶד story (Alfredo 2013, p. 11). Masenya Madipoane explains the word as follows:

> The Hebrew word hesed, variously translated as 'kindness', 'loving kindness', 'faithfulness', or 'loyalty' (Rt 1:18; 2:20; 3:10), used both by God and persons, is one of the key concepts in the book of Ruth. In it, God uses a non-Israelite woman from Moab to achieve God's plan for the world. (Masenya 2013, p. 2)

Although the word חֶסֶד occurs three times in the book, 1:8, 2:20, and 3:10, concerning Ruth, Boaz, and YHWH as subjects, the book is a חֶסֶד story. It represents the essence of YHWH's covenant with His people (Alfredo 2013, p. 11). It is important that, according to Alfredo, the essence of YHWH's covenant is חֶסֶד (God's mercy). This essence of the covenant, חֶסֶד, he argues, is demonstrated by the main characters of the story, unveiling the theological depth חֶסֶד brings to the understanding of the story. I emphasise this point, for it forms the theological core of the Book of Ruth. In Ruth 1:8, God is requested to restore and protect the daughters-in-law of Naomi (Alfredo 2013, p. 156). In Ruth 2:20, Boaz provides care and support for Ruth and Naomi (Alfredo 2013, p. 160). In Ruth 3:10, Ruth took care of Naomi, her mother-in-law (Alfredo 2013, p. 161). Alfredo argues that the author uses his characterisation technique to emphasise חֶסֶד (Alfredo 2013, p. 93). Georg Braulik observes that the story promotes sympathy throughout the whole book. According to him, the historical prejudice against the Moabites by banning them from the "assembly of Yahweh",

is being disproved by this counter-story (Braulik 1999, p. 18). Quoting Robert L Hubbard, Alfredo says: "Suddenly, the simple, clever human story of two struggling widows takes on a startling new dimension. It becomes a bright, radiant thread woven into the fabric of Israel's larger national history" (Alfredo 2013, p. 98). Lastly, Braulik contends that "the historical accusation of incest" and, I add, of inhospitality to the Israelites, which linger "about the image of the Moabites in the eyes of Israel", are contradicted "by means of the Moabite progenitrix in the genealogy of David" (Braulik 1999, p. 18). With this last remark, the discussion moves to Ruth 4:18–22.

Ruth 4:18–22 states as follows:

- ➢ 18 Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron,
- ➢ 19 Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab,
- ➢ 20 Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon,
- ➢ 21 Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed,
- ➢ 22 Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

These verses constitute a genealogy. Genealogies are a genre that is not attractive to many people because it just lists names. Many people are attracted more to narratives and, to a lesser degree, poetry. One needs to understand the objective of genealogies to appreciate them. Robert R Wilson defines genealogies as "a written or oral expression of the descent of a person or persons from an ancestor or ancestors" (Wilson 1977, p. 9). According to Wilson, it had been established by anthropologists that tribal societies frequently use genealogies to express social and political relationships between tribes (Wilson 1977, p. 4). I add that genealogies can also serve to express ideological sentiments. I will expatiate on this assertion below. Wilson identifies two types of genealogies, namely, segmented, and linear genealogies. Segmented or branched genealogies demonstrate many lineages from one ancestor. Such genealogies exhibit connectedness among several branches of a family. Conversely, linear genealogies express only one line of descent from a given ancestor and, thus, show no segments or branches. They put on view depth and want to legitimise a person by connecting that person to an ancestor whose status has been established (Eskenazi 1988, p. 25; Thompson 1994, pp. 25–26). To conclude this part, Wilson asserts that one receives status, rights, and obligations by virtue of kinship ties that link them to other people with whom they come into contact (Wilson 1977, p. 18). Let us now examine Ruth 4:18–22.

Ruth 4:18–22 is a linear genealogy that shows one line of descent from Perez, deepening the connections of the names mentioned with Perez. This genealogy could have been segmented by providing two lines from Perez, according to his two sons. It could then draw lines from Hezron, according to the number of his children, and from Hamul, according to the number of his children, and so on, to form a tree. However, such an approach would spread the attention of the reader across the many names. Some of the names that are now easy to note could be obscured by a tree-like genealogy. A linear genealogy, therefore, draws the reader to the names it wants to promote. Only ten names are in this genealogy, confining the reader to these ten names. Zvi Ron comments on this number as follows: "There are ten people listed in this genealogy, paralleling other such lists in Genesis . . . A list of ten generations is used to indicate a transition from one major era to another" (Ron 2010, p. 85). Ron argues that the list of ancestors in Ruth was written as a ten-generation list to evoke the earlier lists in Genesis. Noah is the tenth from Adam, Abraham the tenth from Noah, and Boaz the tenth from Abraham. In Ruth 4:18–22, David is the tenth from Perez. This indicates a new epoch, "the epoch of the Davidic monarchy. . . David began the dynasty that will ultimately lead to messianic times under the Messiah son of David" (Ron 2010, pp. 85–86). My conclusion is that David's status has been established and whoever is associated with this list is legitimised and vindicated.

Ron does not end here. He notes that while David is the tenth name, Boaz is the seventh of these ten names. Ron lifts the discussion to a higher level. He argues that the list in Ruth 4:18–22 is not meant to be understood as a historical record but as a symbolic one. He argues that "there were in fact more ancestors between Perez and David, but they were

excluded from the genealogical list in order to maintain the special seven-ten symbolism" (Ron 2010, p. 89). He asserts that "seven is always a significant number in the Bible; the seventh person on the list would draw special attention" (Ron 2010, p. 89). He continues and says:

> The figures who occupy the seventh position and its multiples from Adam onward and on all have either biblical or rabbinic significance; Enoch is the seventh, Eber the fourteenth, Isaac the twenty-first, and Nahshon the twenty-eighth. Even if the Bible itself did not always indicate that the seventh descendants were special, the Rabbis did feel this way and noted in the Midrash what was so significant about them. Note also that in I Chronicles 2:15 David himself is listed as the seventh son of Jesse. (Ron 2010, p. 89)

The fact that Ruth 4:18–22 is not meant to be understood as a historical record but as a symbolic one should not be difficult to understand because the Bible itself is not historical but theological. Now that Boaz holds a privileged position in the new Israelite messianic era launched by the advent of David, I argue that so does Ruth, the Moabitess. Steven James Schweitzer makes a profound statement when he says the conclusion to the Book of Ruth "provides David with a Moabite genealogy via this exemplary woman of foreign (and especially ostracized) descent. In Ruth, the great king of Israel acquires a Moabite heritage" (Schweitzer 2009, p. 118). This genealogy, according to Schweitzer, is a commentary on the position of foreigners in society. The comment says: "Even the greatest king of Israel was of foreign descent, so what is the problem with foreigners and with intermarriage with them?" (Schweitzer 2009, p. 118). One can take this remark even further to say even God carries the blood of a foreigner. Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph, is a descendent of David, and by extension, of Ruth. Now, it is time to make sense of the texts by the presupposition of Ubuntu.

6. Ubuntu as an Epistemological Perspective for Understanding

Bible reading entails explanation and understanding. Deuteronomy 23:3–6 and Ruth 4:18–22, thus far, have been explained. Now, the process of understanding them starts. My first presupposition is that understanding cannot take place without presuppositions. Accordingly, Ubuntu, as an epistemological perspective, is the presupposition with which these texts are to be understood. It might be enlightening to demonstrate that what is about to happen is not peculiar. It is a normal process of an encounter with the gospel in a new context. It is an age-old phenomenon that originated in the Bible itself (See Fishbane 1985). When the gospel entered new ground, two things were possible, uncritical acceptance or critical engagement resulting in either adaptation or rejection. Acts 15 is an example of critical engagement. When Judaism reached the Greeks, circumcision was non-negotiable. However, it was not part of the Greek culture to circumcise, so critical engagement took place. The result was an adaptation of Judaism so that circumcision stopped being compulsory. There are many examples within the Old Testament itself, Isaiah 56:1–8 being another example. Isaiah 56:1–8 accepts the eunuchs banned by Deuteronomy and thus abrogates Deuteronomy 23:1 (MT Deuteronomy 23:2). The Book of Ruth itself is another example. It contradicts Deuteronomy 23:2 and 3–6 (MT Deuteronomy 23:3 and 4–6).

Similarly, as the Judaic texts encounter African ontology and epistemology in the twenty-first century, critical engagement takes place. As indicated above, Ubuntu presupposes a universal bond connecting all human beings. This bond compels traditional Africans to care for others and to show humanity to all people (Jusu 2016, p. 1894). This is demonstrated in Tiyo Soga, the first African to be ordained in the Presbyterian church in South Africa.[10] Soga was disappointed by the early African Christian converts who suddenly abandoned Ubuntu and became inhospitable to African traditionalists. The context of Soga's response to those Christians who lost Ubuntu is "the African's concept of the triangular relationship between God, man and the non-human elements in the universe" which "sees harmony as the best form of human expression". Provided that human

relationships with God and other humans are shattered, life is chaotic for a traditional African (Nyang 1980, p. 32).

The shattered relationship between God and the Ammonites/Moabites, on the one hand, and between the Israelites and the Ammonites/Moabites, on the other hand, does not fit into African ontological bonds. It represents a chaotic life in the mind of the traditional African. Deuteronomy 23:6 says: "You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever". For a traditional African mind, that is a chaotic life. Exegetically blended with Deuteronomy 7:1–6 as in Ezra-Nehemiah, Deuteronomy 23:3–6 produces a theology of no-mercy to a non-Israelite. Deuteronomy 7:2b says: "You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them". Above, Mqhayi says: "A person who has been seen dead in the field, even if he has been killed by cold, or by hunger, of course, the nearby villages will have to answer" (Mqhayi 1931, p. 130). Mercy is central to Ubuntu. To have no mercy on another person, even a stranger, is a breach of African ontological bonds. The conclusion, therefore, is that the Deuteronomistic theology evinced by Deuteronomy 23:3–6 is incompatible with Ubuntu epistemology.

The merciful relationships between the Moabites and the Judeans demonstrated in the Book of Ruth are reminiscent of Ubuntu. Masenya likens the notions of Botho/Ubuntu discernible "in hospitable cultures like some traditional African cultures" to ḥesed in the Book of Ruth (Masenya 2013, p. 193). When Elimelech fled from famine in Judah, the land of Moab became his refuge. Above, Mqhayi says that, to avoid guilt, every umXhosa does not let a traveller pass by, without calling them, asking them where they come from, where are they going, asking any other thing, and then giving them a place to sleep and food to eat. Contrary to Deuteronomy 23:6, which instructs the Israelites to never promote the welfare of the Moabites, or their prosperity, as long as Israel lives, the Moabites promoted the welfare of the Israelites who came into their midst. The treatment this Judean (Israelite) family received in the land of Moab is similar to what is described by Mqhayi. Both these communities promote the peace and the welfare of the stranger. When Naomi invokes the name of God in blessing the young Moabite women in Ruth 1:8, most probably, she had God who is for all humanity in mind. Such understanding of God evokes "the African's concept of the triangular relationship between God, man and the non-human elements in the universe" (Nyang 1980, p. 32). When the author of the Book of Ruth infuses Moabite blood in David in the genealogy, and by extension, in Jesus and thus, in God, they create a universal bond connecting all human beings. The *Africa Study Bible* describes Ubuntu as meaning "there is a universal bond connecting all human beings". Given the points presented, the conclusion is that the theology of the Book of Ruth is compatible with Ubuntu.

Now, the question is what should the modern reader do when confronted with contradicting theological perspectives in the Bible? All texts in the Bible are authoritative. This is where the understanding of the text becomes crucial. To realise that the texts contradict each other is because the texts have been explained. However, the process of reading the Bible does not end with explanation; understanding should take place. Understanding involves one's presuppositions. In a situation like this, the reader has no choice but to choose between the texts. This is a moment of taking responsibility for one's theological perspective. Many a time, Christian believers avoid taking personal responsibility for their theological perspectives, hiding behind the Bible as being obedient to the "Word of God". To choose one "Word of God" from two "Words of God" is personal. Of course, a biblical text that is compatible with one's presuppositions is easier to embrace than one that contradicts one's presuppositions. However, the choice one makes also calls for ethical responsibility. Against this background, I make two propositions. The first one is that I embrace and promote the inclusive ethnic theology of the Book of Ruth because it is compatible with my presupposition of Ubuntu. The second one is that I take personal responsibility for my actions because I have a choice to choose the exclusive Deuteronomistic ethnic theology. My conviction, guided by Ubuntu, is that all humanity deserves to be included in the "biblically-based" love of God.

7. Concluding Remarks

This discussion used an African epistemological concept of Ubuntu as a resource to understand the two texts. It delinks itself from the "xenophobic"[11] theology that provided the raw material for the discriminatory theology of Ezra-Nehemiah during the Second Temple period. It also delinks itself from the exclusive Deuteronomistic ethnic theology coated with the doctrine of election, which was "involved in the impact of colonialist ideology and practice in different regions and from different periods" (Prior 1997, p. 14). The consequences of this Deuteronomistic theology, through the ideology of colonialism, "have been, and continue to be, the irreversible suffering of entire communities and, in some cases, their virtual annihilation as a people (Prior 1997, p. 14). Today, Deuteronomy 28:43–44 is quoted in South Africa to fan the fires of xenophobia. The verse says: "**43** The sojourner who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower. **44** He shall lend to you, and you shall not lend to him. He shall be the head, and you shall be the tail". Whether read naively or not, it does fan the fires. Commenting on the naïve reading of Deuteronomy, Ferdinand Deist says: "... the *religious* justification of much of the system of apartheid was founded on a naive reading and application of concepts from the book of Deuteronomy to the South African situation (Deist 1994, p. 26) ... Perhaps Deuteronomy *does* contain dangerous ideologies and therefore might very well *be* a dangerous book" (Deist 1994, p. 28).

This discussion embraces and promotes the theology transpiring from the Book of Ruth enveloped in the doctrine of ḥesed that seeks and promotes the peace and the welfare of a refugee. It is a theology that brings together widows from different, traditionally inimical communities. It is a theology that encourages rich people of our communities to come to the rescue of the poor fellow residents within our communities, irrespective of their social identities, even if they come from traditionally inimical communities. It is a theology that infuses the blood of different races and ethnic groups into the body of One God, creating a universal bond for all humanity. A similar theology is discernible in the Book of Judith. Achior, an Ammonite, talked favourably about Israel while he was in the enemy camp of the Assyrians. He was rejected and ended up among the Israelites. He proved to understand Israel's God more than the Israelites. He was ultimately circumcised and integrated into Israel. Commenting on the matter, Pieter Venter says: "As Deuteronomy 23:3 forbids any Ammonite to enter the assembly of the Lord, Achior's acceptance in the religious community seems to be contrary to prescriptions of the Law" (Venter 2011, p. 1). During the post-exilic period, it seems there was quite a wave of resistance to the exclusive ethnic Deuteronomistic theology. The books of Chronicles and Jonah are among the books that show an inclusive ethnic theology against Deuteronomy and Ezra-Nehemiah. Sidnie White Crawford says: "We know, of course, that the Torah, including Deuteronomy, was authoritative in the Second Temple period" (Crawford 2005, p. 136). By indicating that there was a wave of resistance against the exclusive ethnic theologies in Ancient Israel, I am trying to reconstitute the African church's way of thinking, speaking, and living the Scriptures. We should refrain from saying "the Bible says..." but say "Deuteronomy or Ruth says..." In the Bible, there is theological contestation. We must bear in mind what Goldingay said about mainstream Israelite faith and Old Testament books. Acknowledging the fact that there is theological contestation in the Bible limits the chances of abusing the Bible to justify discriminatory tendencies without taking ethical responsibility as readers. To adapt Ferdinand Deist's words: Perhaps the Bible *does* carry hazardous theologies and therefore might very well *be* a dangerous book. The tragedies resulting from the so-called obedience to the Bible are consequences, "not so much of wrong or dangerous exegetical *methods* (about which scholarship seems to be arguing forever) but the result of a lack of critical self-awareness on the part of the *exegetes*" (Deist 1994, pp. 28–29). Finally, adapting Itumeleng Mosala, the reality of people different from us does not necessarily have to contradict "their supposed inclusion in the biblically-based love of God" (Mosala 1992, p. 131).

> Old Testament theology is different from Israelite theology . . . For instance, books such as Kings and Ezekiel suggest that mainstream Israelite faith often included worship of Yhwh with the aid of images and recognition of a consort alongside Yhwh, and archaeological discoveries also indicate this. But the Old Testament books do not approve of such beliefs and practices, and Old Testament theology concerns itself with the stance taken by the Old Testament books on the nature of the "authentic" Israelite faith (Goldingay 2003, pp. 15–16).

Notes

1.   The Hebrew Bible, 23:4–7.
2.   Given the nature of the present volume with its foregrounding of the African continent, and in the interest of inclusivity as well as recognising the role played by African languages in the African context, Ubuntu will be captured in regular font, thus deviating from the standard norm of italicising non-English words.
3.   The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) is a socio-economic policy used by the 1994 South African (SA) Government of National Unity (GNU) to reverse the socio-economic imbalances brought about by the apartheid policy from 1948 to 1994 in SA.
4.   The literal meaning of Masakhane is let us build one another. It has become a political slogan for solidarity in South Africa. The concept was used by the post-apartheid government to name its campaign to motivate residents to pay for municipal services. The culture of non-payment that developed during the struggle against the apartheid government did not cease when the new government took over. As an endeavour to motivate residents, the new government launched the Masakhane campaign. This is what Maluleke refers to here.
5.   Umntu eboniwe efele endle, nokuba ubulcewe yingqcle, nokuba liphango, kakadc imizi ekufuphi apho iya kukhe iphcnduliswe. Ngokulumkela eli tyala ke indoda nganye emaXhoseni ibingenako ukumyeka umhambi agqithe, ingambizi imbuze imvela-phi ncntsinga phi neminye imibuzo, imnike nendawo yokulalisa, imphe ukutya atye. Umzi olandula indawo, akukho bugqwira budlule obo, ookulalisa umhambi ezingcukeni (Mqhayi 1931, p. 130).
6.   Of course, this excludes the war times, which may be viewed as states of emergency.
7.   "Ukuvimba ngumnye nokuthakatha". "Akukho mntu unanto yakhe yedwa elizweni". Butsho obukaXhosa ubuKumkani. . . . ekubeni kobukaXhosa ubuKumkani zazibubugqwirha poqo. (Mqhayi 1931, p. 131).
8.   "Tiyo Soga was the first African minister to be ordained into the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in South Africa. He was born in Gwali in 1829. . ." (Millard 1999, p. 63).
9.   The translation is from the NRSV.
10.   Soga was ordained in Glasgow on 23 December 1856, having been licensed on 10 December. Soon afterwards, on 27 February 1857, Soga married a Scottish lady, Janet Burnside; this was symbolic of his integration into Western culture. On 13 April 1857, Soga left Scotland to return to South Africa (Duncan 2018, p. 4).
11.   I am aware that I might be using "xenophobic" anachronistically here, hence in inverted commas. However, I am also convinced that my readers will grasp the core of the sentiment I am trying to convey with this word.

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