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## **Esther, Ideological Criticism, and the Theology of Liberation**

**Professor J. Patton Taylor**

Itumeleng Mosala was one of the most significant exponents of the African *Theology of Liberation* movement in the closing years of the twentieth century. Typical of his ideological-critical work is a reading of Esther 'from the ideological perspective of a revolt of the black, feminist, South African reader', resisting the more simplistic liberation-theology hermeneutics. Having offered a critique of Mosala's analysis, I offer an alternative ideological-critical reading, beginning with the premise that Esther is to be viewed primarily as satire and comedy. The first of Mosala's 'objections' to the text is that Esther affirms 'feudal tributary' values. On my reading, the book is a biting satire against the ideological absurdities of such a system. Mosala's second objection is that Esther is a mere 'survival text', whereas I maintain that the book offers an ideological critique of the 'pre-emptive strike'. Thirdly, Mosala objects to Esther as a 'patriarchal text' - whereas in fact, the text pokes a lot of satirical fun at pompous protestations of male supremacy. My overall conclusion is that there is much in the message that could well engage with the religious-political situations of conflict in the contemporary world.

Itumeleng Mosala was one of the most significant exponents of the African *Theology of Liberation* movement in the closing years of the twentieth century. Typical of his ideological-critical work is 'The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa',<sup>1</sup> a reading of Esther 'from the ideological perspective of a revolt of the black, feminist, South African reader'.<sup>2</sup>

The thoroughly political nature of the Bible, maintains Mosala, is evidenced above all else by the way in which it has been used to

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<sup>1</sup> Itumeleng Mosala, 'The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa', *Semeia* 59 (1992), pp. 129-137.

<sup>2</sup> Mosala, 'Implications of the Text of Esther', pp. 129-30.

bolster up Apartheid.<sup>3</sup> The white liberal-humanist agenda has traditionally countered this use of the Bible not by expressing fundamental disapproval of biblical texts, such as the conquest texts, but simply by contesting the *interpretation* of texts by Apartheid ideologues. The debate was thus dominated by ‘a hermeneutics of textual or authorial collusion / collaboration rather than by one of struggle or revolt’. This inevitably alienated black people, ‘as their reality constantly contradicted their supposed inclusion in the biblically based love of God’.<sup>4</sup>

Mosala begins the article by maintaining a distinction between the phrase, *Theology of Liberation*, on the one hand and *Liberation Theology* on the other. The latter (in Mosala’s usage) refers to the specific Latin American form of the former, associated with the names of activist scholars such as Segundo, Gutiérrez, Assmann, and Bonino. However, the broader expression, *Theology of Liberation*, is generic. It denotes a much wider ‘movement of Third World people involved in a struggle to break the chains of cultural-religious imperialism that help to perpetuate their political and economic exploitation’.<sup>5</sup> The use of the narrower phrase, *Liberation Theology*, to apply to all theologies of poor and oppressed peoples involves a form of ‘discourse imperialism’, in that it tends to subsume them all under the Latin America version, a mistake often made by white radical people who ideologically ‘identify more with the European descendants of Latin America than with Third World people’.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mosala contends: ‘No other political or ideological system in the modern world ... derives itself so directly from the Bible’ (Mosala, ‘Implications of the Text of Esther’, p. 130).

<sup>4</sup> Mosala, ‘Implications of the Text of Esther’, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> Mosala, ‘Implications of the Text of Esther’, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> Mosala quotes from Cornel West: ‘For oppressed coloured peoples, the central problem is not only repressive capitalist regimes, but also oppressive European civilising attitudes. And even Marxists who reject oppressive capitalist regimes often display oppressive European civilising attitudes towards coloured peoples (Cornel West, ‘The North American Blacks’ in S. Torres and J. Eagleson [eds.], *The Challenge of Basic Christian*

It was not until the closing years of the twentieth century that ‘revolutionary reading practice became an integral part of the social insurgency of the black masses’.<sup>7</sup> Black Theology became part of the ‘Revolt of the Reader’ movement, summed up by Terry Eagleton (the father-figure of Marxist-based Ideological Criticism in the UK) in these words:

That readers should be forcibly subjected to textual authority is disturbing enough; that they should be insultingly invited to hug their chains, merge into empathetic harmony with their oppressors, to the point where they befuddledly cease to recognise whether they are subject or object, worker, boss, or product is surely the ultimate opiate.<sup>8</sup>

As part of this process, the question of the *Black Feminist Theology of Liberation* has been firmly established as a high priority on the theological agenda in South Africa. Mosala therefore turns to the implications of the book of Esther for the Black African women’s struggle. His analysis sets out to be in the *Revolt-of-the-Reader* tradition, resisting the more simplistic liberation-theology hermeneutics. He seeks to ‘contend against the “regimes of truth” of these traditions as they manifest themselves in the text of the Bible itself’.<sup>9</sup> The Black African Women’s struggle takes the form simultaneously of gender, national, and class struggle. It follows that

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*Communities: Papers from the International Ecumenical Congress of Theology, 1980* [Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981], pp. 255-257 (256).

<sup>7</sup> Mosala, ‘Implications of the Text of Esther’, p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-85* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 182. See Mosala’s later article, ‘The Politics of Debt and the Liberation of the Scriptures’, in Roland Boer (ed.), *Tracking The Tribes of Yahweh* (JSOT Supp. 351; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 77-84, in which Mosala builds further on Eagleton’s concept of the ‘revolt of the reader’.

<sup>9</sup> Mosala, ‘Implications of the Text of Esther’, p. 132. The phrase ‘regimes of truth’ is a quotation from Cornel West, ‘The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual’, *Cultural Critique* 7 (1985), pp. 109-124 (120).

hermeneutics of liberation for an African women's struggle should simultaneously consist of *human*, *African*, and *feminist* hermeneutics.<sup>10</sup>

Mosala distances himself from preoccupation with questions of Esther's canonicity, historicity, and 'irreligiosity'. He accepts what he regards as the prevailing scholarly view that the story is 'novelistic', originating in the Maccabean-Hasmoenean era. However, he contends that traditional scholarship consistently fails to draw the *ideological* implications of historical and literary studies. This is because scholarship is often in *ideological collusion* with the text.<sup>11</sup> The task of Ideological Criticism, argues Mosala, is not simply to *explain* the story, nor even just to supply what is 'not said' in the text. In Terry Eagleton's words, criticism must 'install itself in the very incompleteness of the work ... to explain the ideological necessity of the "not-said", unmasking the 'unconsciousness of the work – that of which it is not, and cannot be aware'.<sup>12</sup>

The first question to be posed in classic (Eagletonian) Marxist Ideological Criticism is to determine the 'mode of production' and / or social formation dominant in the society from which the text emerges. Mosala, intriguingly, begins his analysis by describing Esther 1 as 'a fairly straightforward descriptive text', noting that the social formation implied by the text involves a tributary mode of

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<sup>10</sup> Such a hermeneutic has a threefold task:

It will be *polemical* in the sense of being critical of the history, the culture, the ideologies, and the agendas of both the text and itself; it will be *appropriative* of the resources and victories inscribed in the biblical text as well as its own contemporary text; it will be *projective* in that its task is performed in the service of a transformed and liberated social order (Mosala, 'Implications of the Text of Esther', p. 134).

The italicised terms are taken by Mosala from Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> Mosala, 'Implications of the Text of Esther', p. 132 (my emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> Mosala, 'Implications of the Text of Esther', p. 133, quoting from Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study of Marxist Literary Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1976), p. 89.

production. The depiction of Vashti portrays ‘the private property character of the sexuality of the king’s wife’. Indeed, for Mosala, ‘the fundamental problematic of this chapter, as indeed of the whole text of *Esther*, is the gender structuring of politics’. Mosala ‘objects’ to the ideology of the book of *Esther* on three fronts: *Esther* is a ‘feudal-tributary text’, a ‘survival text’ and a ‘patriarchal text’.

**A Feudal-Tributary Text** . The exploitation associated with the feudal-tributary system represented in the book is represented (as often for the Ideological Critic) by the ‘not-saids’ of the text. *Explicit* is the squandering of surplus production on luxury goods by the ruling classes. However, *implicit* and ‘not said’ is that the description of this wasteful expenditure:

... functions to obscure the social relations of production on which this consumptionist practice is premised. It mystifies the fact that behind these luxurious goods and extravaganzas lie exploited, oppressed, and dispossessed peasants, serfs, and sub-classes. This text which is otherwise excellent in its provision of socio-economic data is *eloquent by its silence* on conditions and struggles of the non-kings, non-office holders, non-chiefs, non-governors, and non-queens.<sup>13</sup>

It *may* be that *Esther* has functioned as a justification for ruling class extravagance at the expense of exploited underclassess. Modern readers who suffer oppression may, therefore, locate themselves in the ‘not-saids’ of the text as a radical reading strategy. However, Mosala’s claim that the text offers us ‘excellent provision of socio-economic data’ for the world of the Persian Empire must be questioned. If *Esther* is a *novelistic* account, as Mosala asserts, then, presumably, the implied exploitation of Persian sub-classes is as fictional as the luxurious exploits of the ruling classes.

**A Survival Text** . For Mosala, *Esther* ‘suggests a pure survival strategy, which is not underpinned by any liberative political

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<sup>13</sup> Mosala, ‘Implications of the Text of *Esther*’, p. 134 (my emphasis).

ideology'. This 'ideological capitulation' is summed up in these terms:

The price that the oppressed must pay for this turn of events favourable for them is at least two-fold. Firstly the oppressed must be seen to have bought heavily into the dominant ideology. ... Secondly ... the survival of the group is achieved ... by the alienation of Esther's gender power and its integration into the patriarchal structures of feudalism.<sup>14</sup>

Mosala comments on the thrice repeated statement in Esther 9 that the Jews did no looting: 'this principle of upholding the sanctity of property over the life of people is well known as part of ruling-class ideology'. However, against Mosala, the motive in the text for abstinence from looting was not to do with an ideology of private property. It was to underscore the text's claim that the killing took place as legitimate self-defence, not motivated by material gain. The text is seeking to credit the Jews with respect for the sanctity of life: taking life is permissible in self-defence, but not in the pursuit of property gain.

Interestingly, Mosala at this point misses the opportunity to engage the text with contemporary issues of the legitimacy or otherwise of revolutionary violence.

**A Patriarchal Text.** Mosala seems uncertain whether the text expresses approval of Vashti's actions. On the one hand, 'the audacity of one woman unleashed the political possibilities reflected approvingly in the rest of this book'. On the other hand, there is an 'explicit condemnation of Vashti in the text', with which the African Biblical Feminist cannot collude.<sup>15</sup> His main criticism of the book's ideology, however, is that Esther's preoccupation with *national* survival obscures issues of *gender-power*, parallel to the way in

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<sup>14</sup> Mosala, 'Implications of the Text of Esther', p. 135.

<sup>15</sup> Mosala, 'Implications of the Text of Esther', p. 135.

which contemporary oppression of African women has been subsumed, indeed undermined, by the wider struggle against colonialist oppression. The book of Esther similarly sacrifices *gender struggles to national struggles*: ‘it disprivileges the question of gender exploitation’.

For Mosala, there are two further objections that a biblical hermeneutics of liberation must raise against the book of Esther. Firstly is ‘the text’s choice of a female character to achieve patriarchal ends’:

The fact that the story is woven around Esther does not make her the heroine. The hero of the story is Mordecai, who needless to say gives nothing of himself for what he gets. ... African women who work within liberation movements and other groups will be very familiar with these kinds of dynamics.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, the discourse of Esther suppresses class issues, including the class-character of cultural practices such as the Feast of Purim:

The Feast of Purim ... is not located in class terms in such a way that proper ideological choices can be made about it. In this it is very much like many cultural practices that seem inherently autocratic in the demands they place on their people.<sup>17</sup>

Mosala, however, does not make it at all clear why he perceives Purim to be ‘inherently autocratic’.

Mosala’s overall conviction is that oppressed communities must liberate the Bible so that the Bible can liberate them: ‘An oppressed

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<sup>16</sup> Mosala, ‘Implications of the Text of Esther’, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> Mosala, ‘Implications of the Text of Esther’, p. 136.



Bible oppresses and a liberated Bible liberates'.<sup>18</sup> Liberation hermeneutics must 'raise questions of the material, ideological, and cultural conditions of production of the text' in order that 'the political issues affecting nations, women, races, age groups, and classes' may receive proper treatment.<sup>19</sup>

There seem to me to be two serious flaws in Mosala's analysis. The first arises from his insistence that liberation hermeneutics must 'raise questions of the material, ideological, and cultural conditions of *production* of the text'. This is an accepted canon of ideological-critical methodology. However, Mosala has not focussed on the conditions underlying the *production* of the text but rather on the conditions prevailing in the (in his view) fictional Persian society that the text purports to describe. There is no doubt a *connexion* between the material and social conditions described (or 'not-described') in the text and the writer's contemporary social conditions. It is no doubt also true that the ideology of the writer, which arises from his /her contemporary context, may somehow be inscribed in the text's description of the past. But these are not simple connexions. A much more nuanced analysis is needed to delineate connexions between the material conditions described in the text and the conditions that gave rise to the text's production and publication.

The second flaw in Mosala's argument is indicated by his opening statement that Esther 1 is 'a fairly straightforward descriptive text'. In fact, Esther 1 is far from 'a straightforward descriptive text'. It could, for example, be understood as satire, perhaps even as comedy.

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<sup>18</sup> Mosala, 'Implications of the Text of Esther', p. 137, quoting from Itumeleng Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Exeter and Grand Rapids: Paternoster and Eerdmans, 1989), p. 193.

<sup>19</sup> Mosala, 'Implications of the Text of Esther', p. 137. Mosala describes this process as the outworking of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's 'hermeneutics of consent'. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), p. 15 & *passim*.

Let me offer, by way of illustration, an alternative ideological-critical reading strategy for the book.<sup>20</sup>

It is generally assumed that Ahasuerus is another name for Xerxes, though it is difficult to fit the details of the biblical story with the Xerxes of Greek or Persian sources.<sup>21</sup> The Hebrew seems to connote something like King *Quiet and Poor*, an unlikely name for an all-powerful emperor. So it could be conceivably a 'nick-name' among the Jews for one or other of the Persian Emperors (or possibly even a 'stage name' for a *typical* Persian Emperor, signalling that this text was never intended to be a *straightforward* narrative-historical account).

The opening verses describe this new king as all powerful, ruling an empire from India right round to Ethiopia. Yet it quickly becomes clear that, in reality, he has no real power or control even over his own household. He does not know what is happening in his own court and those who surround him manipulate him at every stage!

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<sup>20</sup> Different ideological-critical reading strategies for Esther include: M.V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001); and David J.A. Clines, 'Reading Esther from Left to Right: Contemporary Strategies for Reading a Biblical Text' in D.J.A. Clines, S.E. Fowl, and S.E. Porter (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* (JSOTSup. 87; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), pp. 31-52, reprinted in David J.A. Clines, *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1968-1998* (JSOTSup. 292-293; 2 vols; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 3-22.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Herodotus, the Greek historian, tells us that Xerxes' wife's name was Amestris and there is no extra-biblical record anywhere of Vashti or Esther as wives for Xerxes. It should also be noted that LXX tradition seemingly identified Ahasuerus not with Xerxes (486 –465 BCE) but with the later Emperor Artaxerxes II (404 – 359 BCE).

This seemingly all-powerful potentate turns out to be more like a dim-witted buffoon, a figure of stage comedy.

At the end of seven days of feasting, the king, well under the influence of the wine, decides to show off the beauty of Queen Vashti to the assembled men-folk. She quite justifiably makes a principled stand against being an object for male entertainment. So the king summons those whom he is accustomed to consult for 'expert opinion on questions of law and order' (1.13)! This is an excellent example of the tongue-in-cheek way in which the story is told - pointing up the absurdity of the king's obsession (though possibly true enough of the kind of thing that typically happened in the courts of ancient potentates!). The absurdity intensifies when these top jurists give their legal opinion. If Vashti is allowed to get away with it, then, within days, every woman in the empire will refuse to obey her husband! And so these pompous menfolk devise a universal proclamation *that that every man should be master in his own house* (1.19). We began with a seemingly all-powerful king who was not, in fact, in charge of anything at all and now we have this facile emphasis on male supremacy, introducing a story in which all the men are eventually controlled or manipulated by women! Even Haman does what his wife tells him! Men cause all the problems in the story and a woman solves them. This is the very stuff of satire, as is the choice of the new Queen Esther, on the basis of a grand 'beauty' contest (not of course actually a beauty contest but a contest based on performance during a night in bed with the king!). The book is literary satire - not 'straightforward descriptive text'.

The two main male characters are Mordecai, the hero, and Haman, the villain. Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman sets in motion a chain of events that almost leads to the extermination of the Jews.

Haman is a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite ruler whom Saul had defeated in battle.<sup>22</sup> Mordecai, a Benjaminite, is from the tribe of Saul. This may not mean much to a modern reader but any Jew would have known of the age-old biblical enmity between Israelites (particularly Benjaminites) and Amalekites (particularly Agagites).

Why did Mordecai refuse to bow down? Did he have a good *religious* reason for his refusal? Certainly, the faithful Jews would refuse to bow to any idol or image, as did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3). But was it forbidden for a Jew to show customary respect before royal officials? The writer of Genesis did not regard it as a problem for Joseph's brothers to offer such obeisance before the Governor of Egypt<sup>23</sup> and throughout the Old Testament there are numerous other examples that use the same Hebrew expression for obeisance as is used in Esther.<sup>24</sup> So it is not at all clear that there was any great *religious* reason for Mordecai's behaviour. The reason was rather the 500-year-old enmity between Jews and Amalekites. Mordecai might have argued that the Amalekites were God's enemies, in order to give a semi-religious justification for his actions. But I suspect that today we would describe his behaviour as motivated primarily by racism or sectarianism, albeit under the cloak of religion (a phenomenon which those of us who live in Northern Ireland understand only too well). One might further argue that the text caricatures the behaviour of both Mordecai and Haman as displaying a typically *male* pig-headedness!

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<sup>22</sup> See 1 Samuel 15. In fact, it was Samuel who eventually killed King Agag, after rebuking Saul for not doing so.

<sup>23</sup> See Genesis 43.28. The same Hebrew for 'obeisance' is used in Genesis 43 as in Esther 3.

<sup>24</sup> - for example, David before Saul in 1 Samuel 24.8.

I acknowledge that my reading strategy is influenced here by my own ideological background in Northern Ireland, in which a similar cocktail of religious, political, and gender ideologies prevails and in which ancient battles (from as long ago as the period from Mordecai / Haman to Saul / Agag) are still fresh in the popular memory.<sup>25</sup> This ideological undergirding to my reading of the text parallels the claim made in *Black Theology of Liberation* that only those with first-hand experience of struggle can see in a text dimensions that are not otherwise been apparent.<sup>26</sup>

Returning to *Esther*, notice how the king is persuaded to go along with Haman's diabolical plan by a promise of considerable income for the royal treasury. The kind of language used by Haman here has been used countless times across the centuries as a means of justifying persecution against minority populations (not least against Jews in many contexts across the centuries): *they keep themselves separate, they have strange customs, they do not keep our laws, and they have too much money!* Notice that the king authorised the plot without even asking who the race of people were: so it was not in fact a specifically anti-Jewish matter for the king. There is, in fact, no suggestion in the book of antagonism among the *Persians* (king or people) against the Jews – the aggression all comes from Haman, the Agagite. The extent of Haman's bitterness is vividly portrayed by the narrator. He cannot enjoy any of his wealth and power because of his personal resentment towards Mordecai. Governmental ideologies are often a masking of bitterness, hatred, jealousy, sectarianism, or racism, with deep and unconscious roots in the national *psyche*.

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<sup>25</sup> For example, the annual commemoration on 12 July (a Bank Holiday) of the Battle of the Boyne from as long ago as 1690.

<sup>26</sup> However, I readily admit that, unlike Mosala, my experience is not primarily from the *underside* of struggle, though I have lived and ministered in one of Belfast's most disturbed communities at the height of the 'troubles' in the 1970s and 1980s.

In chapter 4, Mordecai manages to get word to Esther of the crisis. After initial reluctance, Esther develops the strategy that saves the day. From this point on it is no longer Esther who obeys Mordecai: Esther now gives instructions and Mordecai obeys. A woman takes control of the plot. Once Haman is exposed, Mordecai becomes 'Prime Minister'. But the problem still remains of the Haman-inspired edict for the destruction of the Jews. It is still on the statute book. Not even the king himself could change the law of the Medes and Persians.<sup>27</sup> The king casually abdicates all responsibility for the matter and it is left to Esther to undo this bizarre situation, by devising a supplementary decree authorising self-defence by the Jews. However, in the event the Jews did far more than just defend themselves. They took the opportunity to rid themselves of their enemies, killing over 75,000 people throughout the Empire. In the city of Susa, 500 were killed on the first day and then Esther is granted permission for a second day of slaughter. Not one Jew was killed, which suggests that there were few who actually tried to attack them. It was of the order of a massive 'pre-emptive strike'!

Significantly, the narrator maintains a studied 'absence' of comment on this revenge slaughter: judgment is left to the reader. Traditional interpretation assumes that the text implies approval of the actions of the Jews - and across the centuries this interpretation may well have provided an ideological undergirding for violent self-assertion in a variety of contexts, right down to the contemporary Israel-Palestine conflict (for some Israelis) and to contemporary southern Africa (for Mosala). However, if the book is primarily satire rather than 'straightforward descriptive text', it would be unwise to take this (or any) section of the story at face-value. Mordecai's refusal to bow

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<sup>27</sup> It should be noted in passing that there is in fact no extra-biblical evidence for this constitutional principle that the law of the Medes and Persians could not be changed, not even by the King.

down may have appeared, at first sight, to be on religious grounds, as in the Daniel parallels, but, on closer inspection, it proved to be more to do with sectarian politics. Similarly, the revenge-slaughter may at first appear to be in same tradition of slaughter of enemies as (say) the book of Joshua but, on closer inspection, it is not at all clear that the narrator expresses approval. Certainly, there is a studied ‘absence’<sup>28</sup> of imputing any *divine* approval to the slaughter (which is significantly different from the Joshua accounts). For the Ideological Critic, ‘absence’, that which is ‘not said’, is always a hermeneutical key.

The chapter ends with the institution of the Feast of Purim. A proclamation letter from Mordecai is not enough to establish this new feast. The matter has to be confirmed by Esther, a woman, for it to be authoritative. The book, which began with a satirical parading of male supremacy, ends on a note in which a woman’s word is required as the final authority, even in religious matters (a point that Mosala appears to have missed).

The closing chapter of the book seems on the surface to be a happy-ever-after ending. However, there is a sting in the tail. The final words of the book speak of forced labour imposed on peoples of the Empire. It is surely an irony for the Jews, who traced their origins to deliverance from slavery in Egypt, that the last ‘historical’ episode in the Hebrew Bible points to ‘Prime Minister’ Mordecai’s complicity in the enslavement of others. Though the book may overall be satirical, even comic, arguably, it thus ends in tragedy. Satire or comedy as literary devices can be used to convey a serious message: satire is an ideal medium for undermining official ideology and / or suspect theology.

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<sup>28</sup> This is so of the MT. The longer version of Esther in the LXX introduces a range of quite different ideological perspectives, which would make an interesting avenue for comparative ideological study.

This alternative reading leads to very different conclusions from those drawn by Mosala. The first of Mosala's three 'objections' to the ideology of the text is that Esther affirms 'feudal tributary' values. On my reading, the book is a biting satire against the ideological absurdities of such a system.

Mosala's second objection is that Esther is a mere 'survival text'. The book may well have arisen out of the survivalist ideologies of Jewish groups in the Maccabean-Hasmonean era. However, the book does *not* represent a 'pure survivalist ideology'. The opportunity taken by the Jews to go beyond self-defence and to make a pre-emptive strike against their enemies moves them well beyond pure survivalism. Where Mosala may well be right is that the actions of the Jews are seemingly 'not underpinned by any *liberative* political ideology'. Instead, they outpace the Persians at their own game. The same might be said of Mordecai's complicity in the enslavement of others. For those seeking to 'locate themselves in the text', there is a warning here against the tendency for the oppressed to become oppressor, a warning that is surely as relevant to Black African Liberation movements as to (say) populist uprisings in 'the Arab Spring' of 2011 or those involved in the contemporary Israel-Palestine conflict.

Thirdly, there is Mosala's objection to Esther as a 'patriarchal text', in which gender issues are subsumed and a patriarchal nationalism affirmed. But, in fact, the text pokes a lot of satirical fun at pompous protestations of male supremacy. The crisis of the plot is caused by a typically male display of sectarian pig-headedness. The problems are resolved by a woman's ingenuity, with even Mordecai adopting a position of obedience to Esther. And when it comes to the founding of the Festival of Purim, Esther's word is final. So I submit that the book has a great deal more to say on the 'gender structuring of politics' than Mosala allows.

From a feminist perspective, the book may still be open to the criticism that Esther obtains her goals by colluding with male, imperial ideology. Who is the heroine: Vashti, who takes an



uncompromising stand against an outrageous display of patriarchy, achieving nothing except banishment, or Esther, who 'plays the system', achieves her goals, and saves her people? This is a dilemma that I imagine is understood only too well by Black African women.

My point, in summary, is that if one adopts a reading strategy that does not simply assume that Esther is a 'straightforward descriptive text', the book does much to undermine, or deconstruct, feudal-tributary, survivalist, and patriarchal ideology. It may be that a more nuanced reading would enable the Black African *Woman's* perspective to be located within the core of the book itself and not just in the 'not-saids' of the text. Furthermore, there is much in the message of book that we would do well to engage with the many religious-political situations of conflict in the contemporary world.