

# Itulemeng Mosala: Giving Theology its World, Feet and Hands

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## Abstract

Worthy of celebration is the contribution made by Itumeleng Mosala (hereafter Mosala) to the Black Methodist Consultation, the theological community in Southern Africa, and the Black Consciousness Movement. This article attempts to give theology its world, feet and hands in the person of Mosala. The article departs from the narration of the history of Mosala. It locates Mosala within township life and Old Testament scholarship. Furthermore, the article searches for suitable and effective weapons of intellectual struggle in light of Mosala's life. The aim of this article is to celebrate the indelible footprints that Mosala made as he communed with black people.

**Keywords:** Black Methodist Consultation; Black Consciousness Movement; township life; Old Testament

## Introduction

The theological thought of theologians is undergirded and propelled by their social, political and economic histories and those of their people and nations. This means that it is pertinent to know and understand the material basis of all forms of theology by understanding the biographies of theologians and/or the histories of their people and nations. This is what I shall attempt to do in the case of Itumeleng Mosala's theological contribution in its early stages. This will be helpful not only for his critics but also for his supporters. May I add that it is important for readers to make their biographies known so that their appreciation, appropriation and critique of Mosala's theology can be understood. Neutrality is not helpful at all. Mosala insists in his writings that no one squats somewhere in the sky. We all have footprints somewhere in this world.

The honour of writing this article was bestowed on me when Mosala and I visited the Ecumenical Theological Institute at Bossey on Lake Geneva in Switzerland in 1978.



Mosala and I were invited by the highly celebrated scholar of African Theology, Professor John Mbiti from Kenya, who was the manager of the institute, to attend a colloquium on African Theology that was held there. Mosala was then a master's student of Theology at the University of Manchester and I a doctoral student at Kampen Theological Seminary in the Netherlands. Mosala, a Methodist Pastor steeped in the John Wesley tradition, and I, a Dutch Reformed Church pastor equally immersed in John Calvin's Reformed tradition, accidentally found ourselves in the same study group on that fateful morning. I had been requested by Professor Mbiti to lead our group in a study of Luke 1:46–55, and I concentrated on verses 52 and 53. These two verses speak about the coming of one who will usher in a time during which power relations will be turned upside down. The message is about the coming of a revolution. When I finished my presentation and the group was given an opportunity to comment or ask questions, Mosala stood up and to my surprise, bravely asked the group, which consisted of theological students from different countries of Africa, not to say anything more on the presentation lest the message be watered down, missed or, at worst, distorted. To my surprise, the group agreed and in that way Mosala subverted Mbiti's objective of a critical engagement with the text. After that session (39 years ago), we embraced warmly and started to call each other *ngwana'mme* until today. My parents and his, my siblings and his, Louisa (his wife) and MaMpho (my wife), his friends and mine, knew that Mosala and I were brothers bound together by love and commitment. Dr Khotso Mokhele, a very close friend of both of us, often says that he knows that he and I may be friends but that our friendship does not come close to that of *ngwana'mmao* and me.

I have always asked myself what was so attractive to Mosala in that text and my reading of it, which at that time was informed by the emergent materialist reading of biblical texts. The revolution in which the downtrodden would receive justice attracted Mosala to this text as much as it did me, and this attraction kept us together socially as well as in the study room.

## **Brief History of Mosala**

Mosala, coming from Four and Six in Bloemfontein and I from Gelukspan in the Lichtenburg Reserves, were brought together in Geneva by that revolutionary text and we pledged to search together for ways of overturning texts in the search for a theology that will overturn oppressive socio-economic conditions to the benefit of our people in South Africa. In our dialogue during that one-week encounter, we were convinced about the ideological centrality of the biblical text and Church dogma in the struggle to forge a new ideological foundation for a fighting church. Text and dogma constituted the house of bondage and the platform for an exodus. We agreed that we had to search for the material basis of theology as an ideology of oppression or liberation. Using tennis-match language, we used to talk about these two theological formation areas as the centre court where the struggle against theological hegemony had to be fought and won. We were determined.

At the end of that colloquium, Mosala went back to Manchester and thereafter to the University of Botswana and I returned to Kampen, Netherlands. Two years after Geneva, Itumeleng and Louisa Mosala welcomed me and my family to Gaborone, Botswana. Up to this day, I do not know how it came about that I was appointed to teach with Mosala at the University of Botswana because I did not apply for a position there nor did I attend an interview. I assume that Mosala attended the interview on my behalf and performed excellently as only Mosala could do.

## **Gaborone: The First Site of Our Independent Theological Creativity**

At the University of Botswana we started with our search, research and writing in earnest. The refugee community living in Partial, a suburb of Gaborone, came to welcome us at our hotel. Thereafter, Mosala took me to visit Partial where the refugees resided. There we attended Sunday sessions at which Marx and Marxist texts were studied. One of the first events that Mosala took me to was a Thursday-night meeting of a small group of dedicated students of Marx and Marxism, which was called *Thapelo ya bomme ya Labone*.

At the university, Mosala, who was the head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, guided me in the design of a syllabus that attracted more students than any other department in the Faculty of Humanities. The materialist reading of texts and Marx and the Bible were part of our offerings.

At faculty meetings, complaints were that under the leadership of Mosala, the course offerings of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies were drawing students to that department and away from other departments in the Faculty of Humanities. Our response was simple: improve your menu and your approaches, and address relevant issues.

Mosala was also a very popular preacher at the local Methodist Church and advisor on the syllabus at the Interdenominational Theological School in Pietermaritzburg.

When the Institute of Contextual Theology was formed, Mosala was invited by Frank Chikane, Buti Tlhagale, Mokhehi Motlhabi, Bonganjalo Goba and Simon Maimela to help give shape to the structure of that institute and its theology. At one of the meetings, the issue of a journal of black theology was mooted, and when Mosala came back to Gaborone, he invited me to join him in starting that journal. Convinced that black pastors and theologians needed a vehicle for their thinking and actions, he spent a lot of time reflecting on how that journal could differentiate itself from existing theological journals of that time. Three journals existed already and dominated the theological space: *The Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*, *The Journal of African Theology* and *The Journal of Theology*. When he announced the birth of *The Journal of Black Theology* to his colleagues at the University of Cape Town where he was teaching at the time, his white colleagues had nothing but scorn for black theologians. Before that month ended, Mosala proudly showed them the first copy of *The Journal of Black Theology*. During the first 10 years of

that journal, Mosala used it as a black-owned intellectual platform to inform pastors, theological students and black churchgoers of thinking about God, people and the world.

I am listing all these places and activities to indicate the broad social and academic context within which Mosala's theological pursuit emerged and flourished. It is here where he, with his tenacity and clarity of thought, left his footprints. The broad communal theory and praxis in which he was involved also influenced the evolution of Mosala's theology.

Mosala cannot be understood outside of his personal formation and family history. The origins of his commitment cannot be understood without the song of praise of his people:

*Bakgwathleng.*

*Bakgwathleng*

*Ditlou*

*Batho ba ga Mmathari,*

*Batho ba Khunoana ya Moeng*

*Batho ba ga heena heena*

*Batho ba ga pheshana ya moshwagadi*

*E e sa tshwarweng feela*

*E tshwarwa ka shokwe*

*Batho ba matshaba le kgomo matlogela temo*

*Ba thula ntja ka sehuba*

*E be e sale e kaname.*

This song of praise reveals his people's wanderings, their landlessness and struggles as they searched for land, their township captivity and parental hold on a piece of land in Thaba 'Nchu. All these aspects are deeply engraved in Mosala's heart and mind.

## **Generational Baptism and the Identification of a Township Boy called Zithu**

When Mosala opened his eyes, he found himself in Four and Six, a small part of the sprawling Bloemfontein townships with their almost identical-looking houses built with light-brown baked bricks. Like most townships, there was nowhere to play but just outside his home in the narrow, dusty unpaved street where every boy kicked a self-made soccer ball with no boots on. It is there where his prowess gained him the name of Zethu which would accompany him wherever he went to school and for further education (the Federal Theological Seminary at Alice and at Fort Hare, and the Interdenominational Theological School at Pietermaritzburg) and everywhere else where he met Bloemfontein boys. He was born of parents who were people of faith to whom the Methodist Church with its highly

charged spirituality was the only religious home where they could hear the Barolong national anthem (*Modimo wa boikanyo, re ikanya mo go wena. Wena yo o gogileng bo rra etsho mo dinageng tsa lenyora...*).

Mosala went to the Federal Theological Seminary at Alice and at Fort Hare, carrying this entire history that had left scars all over his body and mind. While there he met Steve Bantu Biko, Sabelo Ntwasa and many other young black people who were battling to define what the black church should be about and what its approach to the biblical text should be. It was at this seminary where Mosala heard Biko posing the famous question whether African decolonisation should not be accompanied by African dechristianisation. This question accompanied Mosala throughout his entire training for the ministry. He had to find a strong and credible answer to this question. He could not simply ignore it and continue to call himself a Christian like many African pastors and church people. His soul could not find peace in the missionary answer to that question. Later in life, another question haunted him, namely: Why do the ungodly prosper while the godly suffer? It is this question and other questions that Mosala felt called upon and challenged to reshape into black questions and find appropriate answers to.

When the apartheid government decided to use bulldozers to uproot the seminary from its historical home in Fort Hare, Mosala and some of his fellow theological students sprang into action. When all talk had failed, they decided to lie down at the entrance of the seminary for those bulldozers to drive over them before the walls of their fountain of theological training were bulldozed. The act of barbaric political activity by the state and the young people's resistance to it was indelibly imprinted on Mosala's memory. That demonstration of evil taught him that, despite all theological arguments and concrete confrontation and resistance against it, evil had to be practically resisted and not talked about because it had no conscience.

When Mosala later served as a pastor at Wesselsbron and had to strengthen the faith of his parish of poor township people and farm labourers, he knew that his task was to prepare those people and their children for the inevitable day of reckoning somewhere in the distant future. With all his efforts to find sharp theological shields and spears which he could use to arm his people for the impending march to freedom, Mosala remained restless and sleepless, because his theological training did not prepare him adequately for the daunting challenges that an enslaved and dispossessed people faced. This black pastor of a suffering township community also experienced the hollowness of textual hermeneutics. He later studied and agreed with Karl Marx that the challenge faced by black pastors then and now was and is not to explain the evil of oppression but to change the reality in favour of the oppressed. He had to go somewhere to learn how to read the biblical text and other social texts with new eyes and hear them with new ears.

He made the decision to temporarily withdraw from pastoring and pursue the search for appropriate responses to his thirst for deeper meanings of the biblical text. Mosala left the

people he loved because he had become convinced that it was not sufficient to love God and his people based on ineffective messages. He decided to love God, his people and his neighbours intellectually, as the text teaches. Therefore, his decision was to respond to the struggle of black people as a theologian: love God and black people (as neighbours) intellectually. You know, towers<sup>1</sup> and friends, how difficult it is to love black people, especially the lowest in society, even just materially. It is easier to hate them. These days it is easier to fear them. Mosala, this tower of a man, loved black people so much that he decided to dedicate his entire intellect to the theological armament of the generation of young pastors who felt called to pastor black people and to be their intellectual and cultural guardians and prophets.

James Cone once said to me that even though black people are difficult to love, if we do not love them no one will. He told me a story of how black people were forgotten, mostly intellectually, by white theologians. They are forgotten in the sense that questions arising from their painful experiences are not asked and responded to in theological discourses. Mosala did not forget them when he was at the University of Manchester, and he did not forget them when he joined the University of Botswana. He did not forget them when he later moved to the lofty towers of the University of Cape Town.

## **Mokhwathleng<sup>2</sup> and the Old Testament**

Armed with the above history and questions, Mosala entered the University of Manchester. It was there that he made his first serious footprints in the world of the Old Testament. During his studies there, Mosala read works of English writers on the theory of texts. When he came to Botswana, he came with writings on the science of the text and taught some of us what texts were, about the tendency of texts to swallow their readers and how readers should struggle to free themselves from this grip. Many theologians who became Mosala's dialogue partners, many pastors who listened attentively to him as well as many of his students will attest to how Mosala opened their eyes to see the hidden tendency of texts to imprison readers. He empowered them in their lifetime struggle to free themselves from texts in order to derive benefits from the struggle against their grip.

The second contribution that the University of Manchester can be said to have made to Mosala's search to find building bricks that he needed to construct his intellectual framework through which he intended to build his theology, related to the area of Marxism. When he arrived in Botswana, he had several texts on Marxist doctrine with him, but he found that few of the university lecturers were using the insights of Karl Marx to understand the capitalist political economy. As an entrant in that community of researchers and analysts, Mosala distinguished himself as one who could dig deeper than the rest of his

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<sup>1</sup> This term refers to the revolutionary persons who subscribe to the ideals of Pan-Africanism and Black Consciousness. It is used to identify such persons as high and strong as towers. The concept of tower also emanated from the lexicon of AZAPO.

<sup>2</sup> Mokhwathleng is the clan name of Mosala.

comrades. It was not surprising that he could tower over all of them in respect of contributions because he came from a racist South Africa where racism had been such a formidable bedfellow of capitalism.

Botswana was home to many South African refugees, among whom were the adherents of Black Consciousness. They were involved in the reading and analysis of Karl Marx's writings as well as of many other thinkers of that school of thought. Here again, Mosala, a prolific writer and deep thinker, distinguished himself as a leader in understanding and critically interrogating Marxist theory. I have to add that Mosala was also a trusted unofficial chaplain of this community. It was inevitable that in his new pastoral work among these people who had fled their motherland and could not see any prospects of returning to South Africa, Mosala had to rise higher than his pastoral work at Wesselsbron and in other situations at home. These lonely and homesick people, who felt abandoned by the just God, would not easily accept any theological answer that derived from the former missionary pastors of their parents. Their plight was too intense, their search too radical and their expectations too socially ineffectual to be dealt with, even by comrade pastor Mosala. It is here that he listened to the notion of Karl Marx that in the past, philosophy had explained reality. He declared that when he ushered in his new philosophical school, it would assign philosophy the new task of changing reality to benefit the lowest in society. For him, the new and daunting challenge of theology was to change reality to benefit the poor and the downtrodden.

Being a committed theologian, having heard the cry of the exiles, and listening to Marx with them, he could not free himself from the task of developing a theology that would change the world to benefit the oppressed. In carrying out that task, he could not leave Marx behind in his pursuit of the search for theological weapons of struggle. He always recalled Biko saying that the most potent weapon in the hand of the oppressor was the mind of the oppressed. Mosala decided that his own theology had to free the mind of the black oppressed.

### **The Search for Suitable and Effective Weapons of Intellectual Struggle**

Mosala always cites the element theses of Feuerbach, chief among which is the clarion call for those who follow Marx to search for a liberating philosophy, and for the radical preacher from Nazareth to be radical in the Feuerbachian sense of descending to the roots of problems and situations of oppression and coming up with radical solutions and answers so as to empower the oppressed in their long march to freedom and justice.

Those of us who accompanied Mosala on his journey are grateful to the University of Botswana for affording him study opportunities. There, Mosala could test the strength of his arguments and sharpen his formulations without sacrificing the deep foundations of his thought. Some students who grew up with the poisonous teachings of European and American missionaries resisted his new reading and understanding of biblical texts and resultant theological applications. They would accuse him of teaching Marx and not

theology and being enslaved by Marx. To them he would say that he supported the approach of Miguel Bonino that we did not belong to Marx, Marx belonged to us. Mosala believes people are free to use Marx as they wish and as they think is relevant. Many others appreciated his insights and teachings, and they helped those students who were struggling with the credibility of the Christian faith and trying to find intellectual peace and strength in their faith.

## **Mosala at Work**

We, who went to a seminary in the time of apartheid, cannot forget the abstractions and mystifications of the main or core message of liberation in the dominant approach followed in our churches. At first it was not easy for many of us to free ourselves and enter into dialogue with Mosala. The reader should understand that in South Africa at that time, the state was anti-communist, and anything that was associated with Marx was taboo and also punishable. The state had succeeded in possessing people's minds and using them as potent weapons against themselves and their own people.

With his friend and eminent biblical scholar, Gottwalt, Mosala introduced a concept of history of society to us. He taught us that the history of societies went through epochs and moved dialectically from one epoch to another, and that the same applied to biblical societies. If one sees things that way, it helps to explain contradictions in the Old Testament's presentations of stories of biblical societies.

He also opened our eyes to what one could call the world in the Bible and its concreteness. This relates specifically to the world of the Old Testament. A materialist approach to that world in the biblical texts enabled us to see concrete people, societies and dialectics in that world. He went further and related the world in the Bible dialectically to the contemporary world: Our people relate to people in the world inside the biblical texts; Our contemporary societies and our classes relate to classes in the world of the Bible; Our struggles relate to the struggles of people in the world of the Bible. Mosala discovered that the most fruitful way in which the people of our world could derive solidarity from struggles and victories in the biblical world was by relating the two worlds in that way.

When the social debate started on which direction we should take as a country, many people joined that debate. One topical issue was that of reconciliation. Mosala criticised the narrow view of reconciliation of the biblical Paul that Len Harley propounded. Based on the Old Testament's social concept of the jubilee, Mosala argued that there could be no reconciliation without justice. When Charles Villavicencio, his colleague at the University of Cape Town and fellow Methodist, hailed the creativity of John Wesley, Mosala remembered the social impact of Wesley's teachings when the highly exploited workers during the Industrial Revolution in England were ready to follow Marx and start a socialist revolution. John Wesley entered the fray and poured cold water on the simmering flames of the revolution with his teachings in the ghettos of Birmingham, Manchester and other



industrial cities in that country. When Villavicencio lauded Wesley's creativity, Mosala pointed out how he betrayed the working people of England.

While struggling to lead his comrades to understand and appropriate the biblical text that way, Mosala realised the difficulty in following him on this route. In order to make things easy for many of us, Mosala took some steps back to the science of hermeneutics. It is in this field that he made his greatest and lasting contribution to theology. His doctoral dissertation offers a foundation of everything that he taught and wrote while at the University of Cape Town and later. In it he offers a roadmap to students of biblical texts, pastors and theologians on how to start with the first footprints towards the text. Those footprints must be located where we are in our society, what choices we make in our society, the people with whom we declare our solidarity, and our struggles as we take the first steps to approach the struggles of biblical people. Where we stand in contemporary society is where we derive the concrete questions that we carry with us in our approach to the Bible. His own choice of interlocutors was the poor, actively struggling people in our society. Their questions were his questions. Their pain was his pain, their small victory was his victory.

Mosala cut himself loose from what he was taught at the seminaries. He understood Steve Biko's argument that you cannot use a gun borrowed from your enemy because he will give you an unloaded gun to use in your polemical struggle against him. You have to build your own gun with your own hands. Mosala wrestled to free his mind from the minds of his teachers in order for it to no longer serve as a potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor. He insisted that all theologians had to struggle against the tools we inherited and not just assume that they were universally applicable or that they would serve our purpose as they would serve the purpose for which they had been fashioned. We had to make our own tools, we had to read texts with our own eyes and listen to them with our own ears. Black theologians of every generation have to know that there is a hegemonic struggle for hermeneutical supremacy in all churches and that this struggle also rages in the realm of political ideology. There is a subtle struggle about whose ideas should be the leading ideas in society in general and in the church in particular. Mosala warned against textual collusion. He warned that if one was not alert in one's reading and appropriation of the message of the Bible, one may find oneself colluding with one's opponents and furthering their course. He insisted that the good news in the biblical text was not transparent. It did not lie on the surface for one to easily see and pick up. He taught that sometimes the good news in the text lay under the surface; sometimes it spoke through its silence; and sometimes the news was the opposite of what was said. To develop into committed students of the biblical text, Mosala contended that, to use the words of Allan Boesak, students had to say farewell to innocence.

Those who have followed Mosala in his application of the class concept to the prophetic tradition will remember that, when the Kairos Document referred to state prophets and radical prophets, Mosala opposed that analysis of the prophetic tradition. He postulated that

there were actually three classes of prophets and not two as Kairos theologians argued. According to him, every class in biblical societies had its prophets. The ruling classes had their prophets, the middle classes had their own prophets and so did the working classes. Furthermore, as antagonism existed among different classes, it also existed among prophets. That explanation helped to understand the conflicting prophecies and messages of different prophets. Each prophet acted in solidarity with his or her class. This view is based on the Marxist relationship between infrastructure and superstructure. This reasoning by Mosala caused him to decide not to sign the Kairos Document. Understanding and appropriating his position, we also did not sign that document.

## **Textual Readings: Conclusion**

As an avid reader, a prolific writer and a very eloquent speaker, Mosala would spend the night reading and preparing for the following day. Like his friend and mentor Gottwalt, Mosala made a habit of, after having been out and returning home, going straight to his office and writing one paragraph before doing anything else. He would struggle with biblical texts at night and wake up in the morning to share and test their acceptability with his friends.

Mosala was constantly in dialogue with textual scholars internationally and he was acknowledged and highly respected by many of them. Eminent scholars such as James Cone, Cornel West, Randy Bailey, Dwight Hopkins, Josiah Young and many others met and conversed with him and enjoyed his company. He taught the subject of Theology in many schools of theology in the world and was highly appreciated wherever he taught.

As he charted his new course, being relentless in his pursuit of a new direction in biblical hermeneutics, Mosala remained respectful to those black theologians who had gone before him. He remained generous in his critique of his theological predecessors and acknowledged the contributions of the first generation of black theologians. He referred appreciatively to theologians like Desmond Tutu, Drake Tshenkeng, Ernst Baartman, Sqhibo Dwane, Dr Mgotjo, Dr Qubule and many others. Having acknowledged them, in his work he went beyond them and further than they could go in their own time and era.

He regarded himself as part of the second generation of black theologians. Reading his works one finds recurring references to Bonganjalo Goba, an ethicist, Simon Maimela, a systematic theologian, Lizo Jafta, a Church historian, Buti Tlhagale, an African-oriented theologian, Mokhethi Motlhabi, an ethicist, Cecil Ncokovane, an ethicist, Takatso Mofokeng, a systematic theologian, Allan Boesak, an ethicist, and many others. He lovingly criticised them for remaining captive to what they inherited from their mentors but he also acknowledged their noble efforts at freeing themselves and never doubted their commitment to the struggle for liberation.

This article celebrates the indelible footprints that Mosala made as he communed with us and walked among us. The best way of honouring him is by not standing beside him but

moving beyond him. The third generation of black theologians has to be mindful of the challenge he has set for them. They should accept that each generation of committed scholars has to search and discover its challenges and its mission, and respond creatively and honestly to them. When they do that, even when they have to criticise him in their efforts to be true to their calling, Mosala will smile at them with the typical Mosala smile as he rides towards the setting sun when the time comes.