The "Empty Land" Myth: A Biblical and Socio-historical Exploration

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Abstract

Persistent discourse on the contentious "empty land" theory remains relevant within a biblical and socio-historic milieu, especially in the history of a colonialised country such as South Africa. Seeing that there are still arguments in favour of the "empty land" theory, the authors of this article undertook a venture to engage with the "empty land" theory as a myth. This article consists of four parts: the first part discusses the myth of "empty land" in the Old Testament Bible in relation to the "empty land" myth in South Africa. Secondly the researchers will argue for the occupation of land by the indigenous people of South Africa as early as 270 AD–1830. The vertex for the third argument is of a more socio-economic nature, namely the lifestyle of the African people before colonialism. The article contends that people were nomadic and did not regard land as property to be sold and bought. There were no boundaries; there was free movement. Finally, the article explores the point of either recognition of Africans as human beings, or in a demeaning way viewing them as animals to be chased away in order to empty the land, thereby creating "emptied" land.

Keywords: empty land; myth; Old Testament; socio-historical

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to do a critical examination of the historical reconstruction that advances the idea that black people arrived in South Africa at the same time with white people, and thus all are not indigenous. Jan H Hofmeyr reconstructs the presence of blacks in South Africa as follows: "… no one can say with certainty what their original homeland was, but it is known that they moved gradually southwards by way

of the Great Lakes. … Towards the close of the sixteenth century they commenced the effective penetration of the future Union of South Africa …"[1] "Under apartheid South Africans were taught that before the advent of the white man South Africa was mostly uninhabited."[2] Elaborating on this assertion in the nineteen eighties, Shula Marks states as follows:

> … more sophisticated variants of these myths still permeate the history textbooks used in South African schools and the propaganda put forward sedulously by the South African Department of Information. They have even crept into textbooks used in British schools and on to British television …[3]

While some may say this quotation from Shula Marks is from 1980, the "empty land" theory is not dead yet, which makes this paper still relevant. The debate still rages on. On Wednesday, 15 February 2012, Pieter Mulder, a leader of the Freedom Front Plus, said in parliament[4]: "Africans in particular never in the past lived in the whole of South Africa."[5] Mmusi Maimane, the leader of the Democratic Alliance, responded: "Instead of denying our history, as Mr Mulder does, we must do everything we can to ensure that people have access to land. We have to put right the wrongs of the past."[6] Recently, on 3 April 2019, Hesti Steenkamp of AfriForum argued about how white people acquired land in South Africa as follows:

> It is regularly argued by many South African politicians that "whites stole the land." According to AfriForum, this is the single biggest historical fallacy of our time in the South African context. There are three ways in which white people acquired land in the country, namely: 1. Settlement on empty land; 2. Purchase of land through treaties, cooperation and agreements; and 3. The most controversial, but least significant, by conquest.[7]

The "empty land" theory shows its head again. For this paper's argument, it is of paramount importance to highlight that this myth is not unique to South Africa, but a

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1 Jan H. Hofmeyr, *South Africa* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1932), 50.
2 Richard W. Johnson, *South Africa: The First Man, the Last Nation* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2004), 1.
3 Shula Marks, "South Africa: 'The Myth of the Empty Land'," *History Today* 30 (1) (1980): 8. For example, cf. Cecil de K. Fowler, and Gideon J. J. Smit, *History for the Cape Senior Certificate and Matriculation,* fifth edition (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1962), 462–466; Cecil de K. Fowler, and Gideon J. J. Smit, *Geskiedenis vir die Kaaplandse Senior Sertifikaaten Matriek,* vierde druk (Kaapstad: Maskew Miller, 1964), 489–493.
4 Mulder's remarks opened a big debate among social media participants.
5 News24. 2012. "Mulder Stirs Hornet's Nest in Land Debate." *News24 Archives*. Accessed January 20, 2019. https://www.news24.com/ SouthAfrica/Politics/ Mulder-stirs-hornets-nest-in-land-debate-20120215.
6 News24. 2012. "Mulder Stirs Hornet's Nest."
7 Hesti Steenkamp, 2019, "AfriForum Responds to New York Times Article Containing South African Land Debate Inaccuracies." Accessed January 30, 2019. https://www.afriforum.co.za/afriforum-responds-new-york-times-article-containing-south-african-land-debate-inaccuracies/.

common strategy of the European colonisation of non-European lands.[8] As a premise to proceed with the discussion, the aims and the method employed in this research study will be highlighted below.

Aims and Method of the Study

The main aim of this article is to deconstruct the "empty land" theory, which is a psychological strategy to justify the land dispossession of the black Africans of southern Africa. This is especially important when one takes note that there are postcards and photographs from the 1940s to 1970s "published by the [then][9] South African Railways Publicity and Travel Department (SARPTD) that depict white people gazing at the supposedly 'empty' landscape." Referencing J. F. Meikle, Jeanne van Eeden[10] writes about these postcards as having "the ability to evoke artificial nostalgia for a past that never really existed, presenting 'an idealized self-portrait' [of a country] at a particular moment in history." It is against such background that she published a paper on these postcards in 2011. With the addition of the ongoing debate on the "empty land" this paper undertakes this venture. To accomplish this aim, the discussion will be structured in five phases.

Firstly, the myth of an "empty land" in the Old Testament biblical times will be investigated, and how the idea of the "empty land" was used to marginalise some sections of the population from the land. Secondly, the South African history will be explored to determine the occupation of the land by the indigenous people as early as 270 AD–1830, and to determine the first people to live and work the land in southern Africa. Thirdly, we investigate the socio-economic factors that led to the misconception about empty land. An examination will be done of possible reasons why Europeans insinuated that they arrived in South Africa at the same time with the indigenous people of the land. Fourthly, the discussion will be centred around demeaning portraits of black Africans by Europeans. The focus will turn to the notion of human dignity of black African people and the relationship between the acknowledgement of people's right to their land of origin and divinity. The article concludes with findings and recommendations, and suggests a theology of the land, premised firstly on the inseparability of humankind and the land. Secondly, it suggests a land theology that takes cognisance of humanity as image of God.

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8   Johnson, *South Africa: The First Man, the Last Nation,* 1; Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 178; Peter da Cruz, "From Narrative to Severed Heads: The Form and Location of White Supremacist History in Textbooks of the Apartheid and Post-Apartheid Eras. A Case Study." Unpublished Master's Dissertation: University of Cape Town, 2005, 59.

9   Our insertion.

10 Jeanne van Eeden, "Surveying the 'Empty Land' in Selected South African Landscape Postcards." *International Journal for Tourism Research* 13 (6) (2011): 600.

This article employs a qualitative research design by engaging in a literature review. It employs a multi-disciplinary approach by combing biblical and socio-historical research based on the principles of black theology of liberation. With the Old Testament as its departure, it deconstructs the myth of the "empty land" while reconstructing the black consciousness understanding of land possession in South Africa. It provides a two-pronged response to this historical distortion. Firstly, it exhibits that the "empty land" myth is an old-age strategy to marginalise indigenous people from their land traceable from biblical times. Secondly, it provides historical facts to refute this reconstruction of South African history. Let us then proceed to examine the myth of an "empty land" in the Bible.

The Myth of "Empty Land" in the Old Testament Biblical Times

This section on the "empty land" myth in the Old Testament covers the Babylonian exilic period and the Persian post-exilic period. Jeremiah 37–43, which deals with the "empty land," depicts the time of the Babylonian exile. Ezra-Nehemiah depicts the time of the Persian post-exilic period. Leviticus, although there is no consensus, was finalised in the post-exilic period. Chronicles—while depicting the pre-exilic period—was written in the post-exilic period. The focus, however, is on how the "empty land" myth is evinced in these books. Let us then proceed to examine the myth of "empty land" in the Old Testament.

The "Empty Land" Myth during Neo-Babylonian Exilic Biblical Times

As already indicated in the introduction, the myth of "empty land" is an ancient strategy to alter the history of human habitation of the land for ideological purposes. It is as ancient as the neo-Babylonian exilic biblical times or Persian post-exilic biblical times. Old Testament scholars may disagree on the spirit of this myth, however, they agree that it intended to alter the demographics of exilic Judah for ideological purposes. The forthcoming discussion will present different approaches to the "empty land" myth by different Old Testament scholars. While these scholars approach this issue from different angles, they all agree that it was meant to alter history for ideological purposes. The point that this section wants to emphasise, is that, from biblical times, the "empty land" myth's main objective has been to distort history for ideological purposes.

Let us start with Ehud Ben-Zvi's discussion of the "empty land" myth.[11] Ben-Zvi does not present a specific perspective of a particular book in the Old Testament on the "empty land" theory. He rather implies that the exiles were a homogenous group with one perspective on the "empty land" myth, which was also overwhelmingly adopted by the remainees. According to him, "… the Benjaminites and other non-returnee groups that constituted the vast majority of the population accepted these narratives."[12] Earlier

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11 Ehud Ben-Zvi, "Total Exile, Empty Land and the General Intellectual Discourse," in *The Concept of Exile in Ancient Israel and its Historical Contexts,* edited by Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010), 155–168.

12 Ben-Zvi, "Total Exile," 159.

he informed that "… those living in Benjamin and some other areas in Judah that were not completely depopulated after 586 BCE certainly knew that the land was not empty after the destruction of the monarchic polity; after all, they themselves remained in the land."[13] He then explains this rather confounding scenario in theological or ideological terms. He argues that the "empty land" myth was accepted, even by the people who did not go into exile, because not to accept it would be saying the land was still defiled. If God's wrath was the reason they were sent to exile because they defiled the land, remaining on the defiled land would thus be a threat to their future. The "empty land" myth, therefore, provided a fresh start on a purified land, hence even the remainees accepted it despite the fact that their presence during exile was being ideologically and narratively erased. The important point for this article is that history was being distorted to serve ideological goals.

A similar unifying spirit of the "empty land" myth is discernible in Louis Jonker, although he differs in the extent of the emptiness of the land.[14] Convinced that the Chronicler genuinely wanted unity, Jonker writes of "empty Jerusalem" instead of "empty Judah"; arguing that the Book of Chronicles meant that it was Jerusalem the capital and not the whole of Judah that was empty. He focuses specifically on the perspective of the Book of Chronicles concerning the "empty land" myth. In order to make full sense of Jonker's contribution in this discussion, let us start from the Chronicler's sources.[15] According to 2 Kings 25:12, Jeremiah 39:10 and 52:16, Nebuzaradan, the commanding officer of the Babylonian forces, left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen in Judah during the exile to Babylon. However, according to 2 Chronicles 36:21, the land lay desolate all the days until the establishment of the Persian kingdom, keeping Sabbath to fulfil 70 years. Very conscious that the Chronicler used the Book of Samuel-Kings[16] as the main source for his history writing, Louis Jonker comments on 2 Chronicles 36:21 as follows:

> A comparison with the versions of these final events in Judah's history as reported in the prophetic book Jeremiah confirms that the Chronicler has gone his own way in his description. In Jer 39:1–10 and 52:3–30 more or less the same version of these final events than that reported in 2 Kings 24–25 is presented. The question of course emerges from this comparison: Why? Why did the Chronicler provide another portrayal of this eventful phase in Judah's history?[17]

According to archaeologist Oded Lipschits, in reality, the land of Judah was not empty between the Babylonian exilic period and the return.[18] Jonker's question, therefore,

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13   Ben-Zvi, "Total Exile," 155–156.

14   Louis Jonker, "The Exile as Sabbath Rest: The Chronicler's Interpretation of the Exile," in *Old Testament Essays* 20 (3) (2007): 703–719.

15   The author of the Book of Chronicles is referred to as the Chronicler in this paper.

16   The author regards the books of Samuel and Kings as one book.

17   Jonker, "The Exile," 712.

18   Cf. 2 Kings 25:12 and Jeremiah 39:10 and 52:16; Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 119.

becomes more pertinent as to why the Chronicler decided to change the historical facts of his source. One of the interesting responses he gives is a point made by Steven McKenzie that the Chronicler did not expect his readers to make the kinds of comparisons we make of his work and Samuel-Kings. Moreover, copies of those books were not readily available as they are today. The Chronicler reshaped the stories for his own purposes.[19] Jonker further argues that "… 2 Chronicles 36 is no attempt to show that all or only some of the people went into exile—it is rather about showing that the old divisions of the past have been restored by the Sabbath rest of the Exile, and that a New Israel … emerged who had the opportunity of a fresh beginning under Persian rule."[20] According to Jonker, there are no objective descriptions in the Old Testament of the exilic period—we only have theological interpretations.[21] This is a confirmation that history here is deliberately misrepresented to further a theological/ideological interest.

The Book of Leviticus is another interesting book on the matter of the "empty land." Leviticus 26:34–35 states that because of accumulating sins, the land of the Judeans shall enjoy its Sabbaths all the days of its lying desolate and its inhabitants will be taken to the land of their enemies. Esias Meyer refers to many scholars who interpret this verse as meaning that, for the elite in exile, the land was lying empty waiting for them to populate it again.[22] "For the authors of Lev 26 the land lay empty during the exile and the same people who were visible to the authors of texts from the books of 2 Kings and Jeremiah 38 became invisible to the authors of Lev 26," he elaborates. According to Joseph Blenkinsopp, Chronicles took the idea of the "empty land" from Leviticus 26:34–35.[23] Ndikho Mtshiselwa (2018, 125), an African liberationist theologian, comments as follows about Leviticus 26:34–35:

> Rather than being on the side of the poor, the idea of the "empty land" in Leviticus 26 and the "return of land" in Leviticus 25 seem to have served the interests of the rich. The view that Leviticus 26:34, 35, 53 present the idea of an empty land which probably attracted the élites who were about to return from the Babylonian exile presupposes an ideological position, which was meant to serve the interests of the rich Jews.[24]

Interestingly, Meyer (2014, 514) concludes that the "empty" land myth was an innocent literary necessity and not a political plot against the poor remainees. Mtshiselwa (2018),

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19 Jonker, "The Exile," 712–713.

20 Jonker, "The Exile," 715. Here Jonker is referring to the conflict that took place between the exiles and the remainees and the Chronicler distorts history to reconcile the two groups.

21 Jonker, "The Exile," 705.

22 Esias Meyer, "Returning to an Empty Land: Revisiting My Old Argument about Jubilee." *Old Testament Essays* 27 (2) (2014): 515. Although Meyer denounces this paper, I refer to it because it refers to many scholars who subscribe to this view.

23 Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, The First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the origins of Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 45.

24 Ndikho Mtshiselwa, 2018. *To whom Belongs the Land? Leviticus 25 in an African Liberationist Reading* (Peter Lang: New York), 125.

on the other hand, argues that these verses were meant to dispossess the remainees of land to the benefit of the exiles. Interesting for this article is that they agree that history is being distorted to serve ideological/theological interests.

Another version of the "empty land" idea is in Jeremiah 37–43, as presented by Hermann-Josef Stipp.[25] According to Stipp, "in the book of Jeremiah we encounter voices that offer an outlook similar to what we read in Chronicles."[26] However, in Chronicles, and Leviticus, the land was defiled so it needed to be purified, hence the exile and thus the emptying of the land. In Jeremiah, the scenario is different. When the Babylonians deported the Judeans, they deliberately left a remnant that the Lord wanted to stay in Judah. Stipp notes that the author of Jeremiah conspicuously emphasises that the Judeans, who remained in Judah after the Babylonian exile of 586, were a remnant of Judah. But, when Gedaliah was assassinated, the rest of the remnant fled to Egypt in fear of reprisals by the Babylonians and left the land empty. They fled against the advice of Jeremiah to remain in the land as the Lord wished. In their defiance of the divine order they even took Jeremiah with them to Egypt. Stipp argues, therefore, that in Jeremiah 37–43, the land was emptied against the Lord's will.[27] By defying the Lord, the Egyptian exiles initiated the process of their own extinction, leaving the Babylonian exiles as the only remnant of Judah. Stipp continues to argue as follows:

> This idea probably made a major contribution to forming a unique self-image of the Babylonian exiles, and in the long run gave birth to the conviction, witnessed to in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, that all postexilic Judeans were "sons of the *golah*" descended from the deportees.[28]

This remark by Stipp concludes the discussion on Jeremiah and propels us to the last discussion of the "empty land" myth as depicted in the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah. Ezra-Nehemiah is discussed separately because it applies the myth to a practical situation, and that is most relevant for us.

The "Empty Land" Myth during Ezra-Nehemiah during Post-exilic Biblical Times

A radically different version from the above versions is the "empty land" myth discernible in the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah.[29] Similar to Jeremiah, this book deletes people from history and thus denies their right to land. The myth is not explicitly stated in words as in Chronicles, but is expressed in actions. In Ezra-Nehemiah there are returned exiles who are represented as Judeans on the one hand, and foreigners who are

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25 Hermann-Josef Stipp, "The Concept of the Empty Land in Jeremiah 37–43," in *The Concept of Exile in Ancient Israel and its Historical Contexts,* edited by Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010), 103–154.

26 Stipp, "The Concept of the Empty Land," 105.

27 Stipp, "The Concept of the Empty Land," 115–116.

28 Stipp, "The Concept of the Empty Land," 152–154.

29 This paper regards the Book of Ezra and the Book of Nehemiah as one Book of Ezra-Nehemiah.

referred to as "people(s) of the land(s)"; who the returning exiles found in "their land" on the other hand.[30] Nothing refers to the Judeans who were not taken into exile. What is implied by the manner in which the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative is told, is that when the Judeans were deported to Babylon the land remained empty and was later occupied by foreigners. These are foreigners that they collided with when they returned. According to Daniel Smith-Christopher, "the separation of the community in 597–586 began to create long-standing divisions that persisted after groups of diaspora Jews returned to Palestine under Persian patronage."[31] Complementing this statement, Dalit Rom-Shiloni says: "So Ezra-Nehemiah does not mark the beginning of the internal polemic in Yehud; this book rather carries on and transforms a long-lived polemic initiated in the early sixth century."[32] In the same vein, Fanie Snyman asserts that there was bitterness among the exiles toward those who had stayed behind.[33] The exiles even conjured up an ideological strategy of the "empty land" ideology to delete the remainees from the history of Judah.[34] Again, history is being misrepresented to serve ideological interests.

This section of this article was meant to demonstrate that the "empty land" myth is an old-age myth that can be traced back to biblical times. When the European colonisers used it, they did not come up with something new. As for South Africa, they used "widely shared notions current right from the beginning of the colonial era" and "apartheid historians merely turned these crude notions of cultural anthropology into a doctrine …"; so argues Johnson.[35] The discussion proceeds now to a historical exploration about the empty land. The question is: "Was the land empty, or was the land *emptied*?"

Exploration of the Occupation of the Land by the Indigenous People of South Africa as Early as 270 AD–1830

It is has been demonstrated in the above perspective from the Old Testament that the notion of "empty land" dates back as far as the sixth century Babylonian exile and the fifth century Persian post-exilic period. With regard to empty pieces of land, it did not necessarily mean they did not belong to people. The reasons for emptiness could range from being vacated for cleansing, to resting the land from grazing or planting, and so

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30 An extensive discussion on this topic can be found in Elelwani B Farisani, "The Use of Ezra-Nehemiah in a Quest for a Theology of Renewal, Transformation, and Reconstruction in the (South) African Context," PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2002.

31 Daniel L Smith-Christopher, "Exile," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible,* edited by D. N. Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 440.

32 Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "From Ezekiel to Ezra-Nehemiah: Shifts of Group Identities within Babylonian Exilic Ideology," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context,* edited by O. Lipschits, G. N. Knoppers, and M. Oeming (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 129–130.

33 Fanie Snyman, "Reading the Patriarchal Narratives (Gen 12–50) in the Context of the Exile." *Nederduitse Gerefomeerde Teologiese Tydskrif.* http://ngtt.journals.ac.za, 2010, 128.

34 Cf. Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "From Ezekiel to Ezra-Nehemiah," 142–144; Lipschits 2005, 119.

35 Johnson, *South Africa: The First Man, the Last Nation,* 1.

on. This section focuses on archaeological findings about the occupation of southern African land by the indigenous people as early as AD 270.[36] There is evidence that southern Africa was occupied by the indigenous people as early as AD 270. Paul Maylam (1986) indicates that the names of Jan van Riebeeck and his associates of 1652 are known to almost every student and learner of South African history, whereas the name Silver Leaves and the date AD 270 are not known to South African students and learners of history.[37]

Archaeological investigations have disputed the myth that black Africans arrived south of the Limpopo River at the very same time with the whites, who are alleged to be the first settlers in the Western Cape. According to Maylam, discoveries were made of many important archaeological sites, like Silver Leaves and Mzonjani, which were discovered during road-working operations.[38] Furthermore, Dr L. von Bezing, who was still a schoolboy in 1964, discovered some important terracotta heads near Lydenburg. This discovery was recorded by archaeologists and added more value to recent advances made on the understanding of the early societies of South Africa. The point being highlighted in this section is the fascinating insight that the discoveries contributed to the nature of South Africa's Iron Age societies.[39]

The Early Iron Age as the Historical Occupation of Land by Black Africans

The Early Iron Age marks the earliest recorded history of the occupation of the South African land by the black Africans, before the whites put their feet on this continent. Maylam (1986) indicates:

> The distinction between the Early Iron Age and the late Iron Age in southern Africa has now been drawn for several years. Archaeologists have discerned a noticeable break in the Iron Age sequence occurring at about the end of the first millennium AD. The evidence indicates changes in ceramic style, new patterns of land occupation, and perhaps a slight shift of emphasis from cultivation to herding. Important questions as to how and why these changes occurred remain largely unanswered, still in the realm of speculation. But as research progresses new clues are coming to light.[40]

In a similar vein, Menno Klapwijk and Thomas N Huffman (1996) state as follows:

> At the time of its discovery in 1972, there was little information on the Early Iron Age (EIA) in South Africa, especially in the north-east, and the controlled excavations at Tzaneen helped to clarify the economy of this period. The characteristic pottery, together with metal slag, *tuyeres* and pot sherds bearing the seed impressions of a

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36 Paul Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa: From the Early Iron Age to the 1970s* (London: David Philip, 1986), 2.
37 Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 2.
38 Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 2.
39 Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa*, 2.
40 Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 3.

domesticated *Pennisetum*, showed that these early people were iron-working agriculturists.[41]

These discoveries are testimony to the occupation of southern Africa as early as the first millennium AD. This dating makes a valuable contribution to the quest for facts about the occupation of the land by white and black Africans in the southern part of the Limpopo River, considering the contesting historical reconstructions of the "empty land" myth and earlier occupation. Archaeologists have discovered more than two hundred known Early Iron Age sites in Africa south of the Limpopo River.

The discovery of Silver Leaves cannot be underestimated as the oldest dated site. The dating of the charcoal found at Silver Leaves, close to Tzaneen in the northern part of the former Transvaal Province, suggests that the site was occupied in the late third century AD. Other sites of interest for our discussion are outlined below. According to Maylam (1986), sites with similar dates are Klein Afrika and Eiland, also in the northern part of the former Transvaal province; currently known as Limpopo Province. Additionally, there are two other sites, namely, Broederstroom in the south of the bank of Hartebeespoort Dam, and Sterkspruit near Lydenburg in the eastern part of the former Transvaal Province, now known as Mpumalanga Province. These sites have been dated from the fifth to the sixth century.[42] Broederstroom in the Magaliesberg Valley, to the north-west of the modern Johannesburg, has been placed by the archaeological research as the most Westerly Early Iron Age site. Maylam (1986) states:

> A growing number of Early Iron Age sites have thus brought forth a relatively wide range of dates. A similarly wide range is discernible in the geographical distribution of the Early Iron Age sites. They are to be found as far north as the Klein Afrika site in the Soutpansberg, and as far south as the Chalumma River [Tsholomnqa], near East London. At one time the state of archaeological research placed the most westerly Early Iron Age site at Broederstroom in the Magaliesberg Valley, north-west of modern Johannesburg.[43]

This evidence illustrates that most of the land in the former Transvaal Province, which is now divided into North-West, Limpopo and Mpumalanga, was occupied as early as the late third century. As far as the three provinces are concerned, the land was never empty in terms of archaeological-historical evidence. This information should suffice for the former Transvaal. Let us now proceed to the former Natal Province, now known as KwaZulu-Natal, with regards to the emptiness of the land.

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41 Klapwijk, Menno, and Thomas N. Huffman, "Excavations at Silver Leaves: A Final Report." *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 51 (164) (1996): 84.

42 Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 3; cf. also Ronald J. Mason, "Background to the Transvaal Iron Age: New Discoveries at Olifantspoort and Broederstroom." *Journal of the South African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy* (1974): 211–216; Klapwijk and Huffman, "Excavations at Silver Leaves," 84–93.

43 Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 3.

In the then Natal Province, there is evidence of important sites that might be of great value in demythologising the "empty land" theory in South Africa. It was also discovered that there was a dense population in Natal/Zululand as early as the third century AD. The site called Mzonjani, located 15 kilometres north of Durban, was discovered during bulldozing for the North Coast freeway in 1977. Charcoal samples from Mzonjani have been dated to approximately the third century AD. The other site that was discovered in Natal is in the region further north up the coast near Lake St Lucia. The site is known as Enkwanzini. It is dated from fourth–fifth century AD. There was also the occupation of land in the Eastern Cape (Transkei).[44]

These are sites that have been discovered to have been occupied by the black African people of South Africa during the Early Iron Age. If this evidence can be made available for scholarly purposes, it can help deconstruct the "empty land" myth and help with the reconstruction of authentic theories about land occupation. It can also put into perspective the fallacy of an "empty" land during the arrival of the Europeans on South African soil.

However, it would be misleading and unrealistic to suggest that the dense areas of the Early Iron Age occupation covered the whole face of the land. Socio-economic reasons prompted the dense settlements near rivers, valleys and mountains. These socio-economic factors as determinants of settlement patterns in the Early Iron Age will be revisited to introduce the discussion of the nomadic lifestyle of the African people. Meanwhile, our argument proceeds to the second phase of the Iron Age in southern Africa, tracing the occupation of land by the black African people in the southern part of the continent.

The Late Iron Age as the Historical Occupation of Land by Black Africans

The main objective of this article is to deconstruct the theoretical assertion that claims Europeans found the land empty when they first reached the southern part of the African continent. Martin Hall postulates that research lends strong support to the view that, in southern Africa as a whole, there is a direct line of continuity from the first phases of the Early Iron Age to the current day. African languages in the southern part of the continent date back to the second century AD.[45] The continuity has never been broken since the Late Iron Age, and it is to this matter that our focus now turns.

The present occupation of the land by black people in southern Africa is a continuation of the occupation that already occurred in the Early Iron Age. There is an indication of occupation at two excavations in the vicinity of Pongola River. These site occupations are dated between 900 and 1400. However, more evidence is available from the then Transvaal Province. New dates from the well-known Mapungubwe site in the then

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44 Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 3; cf. also Tim Maggs, "Mzonjani and the Beginning of the Iron Age in Natal." *Annals of the Natal Museum* 24 (1) (1980): 71–96.

45 M. Hall, *Settlement Patterns in the Iron Age of Zululand* (Cambridge, 1981).

Northern Transvaal fall between the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Middle Iron Age site seems to have been widely spread in the Witwatersrand-Magaliesberg region of the then Southern and Western Transvaal. There is also evidence of the spread of the site in the Eastern Cape, in the region of the then Transkei and Ciskei as the expansion of the Natal region. Maylam indicates:

> … the Late Iron Age also brought a significant change in the patterns of land occupation and settlement. As we have seen, Early Iron Age societies preferred to settle in the low-lying coastal regions and river valleys. Occupation of these areas continued during the Late Iron Age, but at the same time higher ground came to be settled on in an extensive scale. There are known to be many Late Iron Age upland sites in Natal and Zululand. But the most dramatic manifestation of this trend towards high-lying settlement appears in the Highveld of the Transvaal and Orange Free State.[46]

This evidence proves the fact that the land in South Africa was continuously occupied by black Africans from as early as the third century. The Sotho and Nguni, which together account for the largest percentage of the total black population in South Africa, occupied the land in the areas cited in this discussion under the section on the history of occupation by blacks. However, this does not mean that these were the only occupied areas. Another group of Africans, known as Khoi-San, occupied the areas now known as the Western and Northern Cape. Because these groups were nomadic, they occupied these areas seasonally. The point being made here is that the whole country was occupied. The article takes note of Jonker's explanation of the "empty land" theory of Chronicles. He argues that it is Jerusalem that was empty and other parts of Judah were populated. For him, it is an endeavour to make sense of why the Chronicler disregarded the evidence at his disposal. Nevertheless, a similar argument can be used to reconcile the "empty land" theory with archaeological findings in southern Africa. One could argue that South Africa had inhabitants, but the Cape of Good Hope was empty. However, the holistic occupation invalidates any argument which might purport partial occupation with the intention to argue that the unoccupied areas were freely open to be occupied by any newly arriving group.

It is true that there were vast open lands. However, recent archaeological revelations in African Iron Age research are significantly valuable for the reconstruction of the history of southern Africa; not only to archaeologists, historians and anthropologists, but also to all people who are interested in the South African society. The greatest value of this archaeological research is the manner in which it has contributed to the deconstruction of certain well-worn myths and stereotypes with regard to the past and present African societies in South Africa.[47] Regarding the limited occupation of land along rivers and valleys, this article contends that socio-economic factors account for that. Flowing from this argument of continuity of the occupation of land from the Early Iron Age and Late

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46   Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 10–11.
47   Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 16–17.

Iron Age, is the following discussion on how socio-economic factors have led to seasonally "empty lands."

The Socio-economic Factors that Led to the Misconception about "Empty Land"

Socio-economic factors have played a major role in the settlement of people throughout the world. Various economic dynamics forced indigenous people in the southern part of the African continent to settle near coastal areas and rivers, as is indicated in the argument above. This article argues that ecological considerations have assisted in understanding the changing settlement patterns and building techniques of the people. They also assist people in defining shifts in economic behaviour. The main economic behaviours were crop farming and animal farming. Maylam (1986) indicates:

> More direct evidence of cultivation is extremely limited, but impressions of millet seed have been discovered on the third-century site at Silver Leaves. Furthermore, it seems that Early Iron Age communities occupied large villages for relatively long periods of time. This suggests that agricultural production was an important means of subsistence. Cultivation was probably a primary economic activity, but one should not ignore other Early Iron Age branches of production.[48]

As already indicated above by Klapwijk and Huffman, "the characteristic pottery, together with metal slag, *tuyeres* and pot sherds bearing the seed impressions of a domesticated *Pennisetum*, showed that these early people were iron-working agriculturists."[49] The economic behaviour, which is related to the ecology, also impacted on the duration of the occupation of land in the Early Iron Age, as it is stated that the people were living in the productive areas with sufficient water to live and to irrigate their crops. Hence, Maylam argued that Early Iron Age communities occupied large villages for a relatively long period. As long as the land is productive and arable, the people will occupy that land. But, once there is scarcity, the people will shift to other economic means or they will move to other areas.[50] The movement to the other area will create a seasonal "empty land" which does not mean that the land is indefinitely "empty" but that the people of the land are resting the land.

In the Early Iron Age there were other economic means except for cultivation. According to archaeological evidence there were domestic cattle, sheep and goat herding in the fifth century, not ignoring the other economic means like iron working. For example, Klapwijk attests that "for a number of years interest and research in the iron-smelting sites on the north-eastern regions of the Transvaal has increased. In 1980 in the excavation of an almost complete iron-smelting furnace on the farm Longridge a

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48 Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 6.
49 Klapwijk and Huffman, "Excavations at Silver Leaves," 84.
50 Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 6.

large number of *tuyère* sections and fragments were found."[51] Albeit less important, for Early Iron Age communities, hunting and gathering are also recorded as other means of subsistence. Maylam indicates that there are teeth of domestic cattle, sheep and goats which were found at the fifth century site of Broederstroom. There is also evidence of the residues of cattle and goats that have been found at Msuluzi Confluence, a sixth-seventh century site in the Tugela Valley, and at Ntshekane, a ninth century site near Greytown. It is evident that cattle remains are more abundant at the late Early Iron Age sites, postulating that herding may have become a more vital branch of production during the course of time.[52]

It is generally known that climatology also plays a vital role in cattle herding. In terms of grazing, during the wintertime the Broederstroom areas would be experiencing winter and grazing would be problematic, so the farmers would move with their cattle to places where there were greener pastures. Women, children, disabled people and old people may have had to remain behind, just as we noticed in the exilic time in the Old Testament section above that during times of migration weaker people of the community are more likely to be left behind. That applies to both forced migrations (as in the Old Testament section) and voluntary migration in the case of the communities referred to here. The people who would arrive in that land thereafter might not have recognised these people as human beings and declared the land "empty." This is a possibility that cannot be ruled out when studying the course of South African history. As has already been mentioned, hunting and gathering was another mode of economy during that ancient era. People would go hunting wild animals, following animals for long distances over long periods. By going away for long periods, a misconception of the land being "empty" could be created. A similar migratory tendency occurred in the Late Iron Age, an era in which the emphasis was on cattle-keeping as the distinguishing characteristic of the Late Iron Age. The shift of emphasis can be located to the more extensive settlement on higher ground. Hall (1981) indicates:

> Although rainfall is often higher and more dependable [in the higher regions], soils are in consequence more leached and poorer for agricultural purposes. In addition, the lack of tree cover severely restricts swidden cultivation, which is dependent on the cutting and burning of trees and bush for enriching cleared plots. On the other hand, the higher areas offer far more potential for stock rearing, particularly if the territories are large or are linked by seasonal transhumance with a winter-rich grazing on the fertile river valley soils. Consequently, it may be implied that the early second millennium saw a shift in the economic emphasis, with livestock increasing in importance against the production of cultivation.

Firstly, the economic factors in both eras have indicated that the land was occupied and utilised effectively to guarantee food security for the Early and Late Iron Ages.

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51 Klapwijk, Menno, "A Late Iron Age Furnace Excavation on the Farm Longridge, Agatha, North-Eastern Transvaal, South Africa." *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 41 (143) (1986): 17.

52 Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa,* 6.

Economic activities during that time have assisted the researchers in finding the remains of the products of economy that justify the occupation of land. Secondly, every same activity has provided the opportunity for the Europeans to claim the resting land as "empty land," while the occupants of that land were still looking for greener pastures for their cattle or they had moved to chase the wild animals. It is co-incidental that Jan Van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape of Good Hope during winter, on 6 April 1652, while transhumance had taken place for that season. They then assumed that the land was empty while the land was in fact seasonally resting. A nomadic lifestyle creates seasonal empty lands. The next argument against the "empty land" myth is derived from the (non)recognition of blacks as human beings by the Europeans when they arrived in the southern part of the African continent.

Demeaning Portraits of the Black Africans by Europeans as Declaration of "Empty Land"

There are two ways to interpret this myth of "empty land." Firstly, the land might be physically empty without any person occupying the land at that moment. This interpretation has been convincingly deconstructed historically and archaeologically in the above argument. The second argument is to disregard the people that are found in that territory as human beings, and by equating them with animals, it becomes acceptable to say the land is "empty" (of human occupation). This section will investigate how the Europeans viewed the first people they found in this part of the world, and how that demeaning view has contributed to the myth of the "empty land."

The question of who black people are, is of profound relevance for all, because it concerns human existence; and human existence requires land for existence. The reason emanates from the fact that blacks, being human, cannot be separated from their land. Fundamentally, because of the fact that blacks' blackness was the reason for their oppression, dehumanisation and land dispossession, this was the main principle responsible for the denial of their humanity based on their colour classification.[53] The land determines the people of the land, but the Europeans demeaned the people of the land so that they could claim that the land was "empty" when they arrived in the southern part of Africa. It is recorded that the Europeans who came to South Africa first, did not recognise blacks as people. Magubane (2007) writes:

> In various entries in his dairy, Van Riebeeck referred to the Khoisan as "dull, stupid, and odorous" and as black "stinking dogs." There was some compulsion among other colonists to convince themselves that they were not committing any crime by perpetrating savage injustices against the Khoisan. … They are very reverse of human

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53 H. M. Mdingi, "What does it Mean to be Human? A Systematic Theological Reflection on the Notion of a Black Church, Black Theology, Steve Biko and Black Consciousness with regard to Materialism and Individualism." Master's dissertation. Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2014.

kind. So that if there's any medium between a rational animal and a beast, the Hottentot lays the fairest claim for that species.[54]

Van Riebeeck and his fellow Europeans, with their limited knowledge of human beings and the image of God from a European perspective, demeaned the Africans they found in South Africa and likened them to animals. This justified their reasoning that these "animals" cannot own land but can be chased and killed to empty the land for the benefit of the Europeans. Magubane (2007), citing the *The Times* of 18 June 1819, indicates:

> The natives in the vicinity of our settlement are now in arms against us. The surface, which we might people with hardy English men, is upward of 100 000 square miles. Make the Cape a free part for the nations of Europe, and we banish North America from the Indian seas. Carry out as settlers all families who have not bread or labour here, and we lay for posterity another England, with which by skilful government, the mother country will be joined in bands indissoluble.[55]

The phrase in the quotation above "Make the Cape a free part for nations of Europe," illustrates that the land was not empty but emptied by force to create another country inside Africa. These people were equated to Springboks that were chased away from the Cape Colony, so the Khoisan and ama-Xhosa people were chased away from the land to empty the land because they were considered less human.[56] Bowker (1864) indicates in his famous speech:

> The days when our plains were covered with tens of thousands of Springboks, they are gone now, and who regrets it? Their place is now occupied with ten thousands of merino sheep; whose fleece finds employment to tens of thousands of industrious men: are they not better than the Springbok? Yet I must own that when I see two or three of them on the wide plains, and know they are the last of their race, my heart yearns towards them. … My feelings towards the Kaffir are not of that stamp. I know he has disregarded the zealous missionaries for years. I know that rapine and murder are all his thoughts, and I see them in his looks, and hate him accordingly … I begin to think that he too, the Kaffir as well as the Springbok, must give place, and why not? Is it just that a few thousands of the ruthless worthless savages are to sit like a nightmare upon the land that would support millions of civilized men happily? Nay, heaven forbids it; and those dreamers who have been legislating for protection of the aborigines, have unwittingly been aiding in their downfall … the extinction of races even amongst men is a palpable fact which we have every day experience of, and over which we have no control. … And Scripture shows too, in the destruction of the Canaanites, that God at times wills it that one race should SUMMARILY make room for the other.[57]

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54 Magubane, B, *Race and the Construction of the Dispensable Other*. Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2007, 182.

55 Magubane, *Race and the Construction of the Dispensable Other,* 189.

56 Bowker, John Milford, *Speeches, Letters and Selection from Important Papers* (Grahamstown: G Greg, 1864).

57 Milford, *Speeches, Letters and Selection from Important Papers*, 123.

Throughout the history of the Europeans, from Van Riebeeck right through to democratic South Africa, they have not regarded blacks as human but as animals to be chased and killed. At times animals are even better than blacks to them. Malema (2016) indicates:

> Anti-black racism has been the order of the day in South Africa and our 22 years of democratic rule have dismally failed to uproot its causes. Why do white people despise blacks? Why is it that they find it easy to look at us with disgust and undermine our humanity? One only needs to look at how cheap a black life truly is to white people by comparing the fact that 34 black mineworkers are massacred in broad daylight, and white people never even run a petition online. This tells you, right here in South Africa, a country with a majority of blacks, that black people are worth less than rhinos. If you do not buy the rhino story in relation to mineworkers who were massacred by the government in protection of white monopoly investment, then the other example is white people's pets. Here, you find that the dogs and cats of white people have medical aid, while the black gardener and kitchen workers do not and cannot afford it. Although rhinos are poached daily, we do not see poachers poaching them like we did when the police shot and killed the workers. Yet, there is a big campaign and a huge investment in saving the rhino. People have statues of them everywhere, they even organise marathons where they "run to save the rhino." (*Sunday Times*, 10 January 2016, Online)

Demeaning the humanity of African people is evident from the consciousness of Europeans to brutally murder blacks in order to "empty" the land. This was the same story line in the Old Testament; the people who remained in the land during exile were not regarded as human beings or the people of God, based on the narratives of the "empty land" in the Old Testament. In this case, Europeans have made it easy for them to wipe out the people of the land; to "empty" the land and create the myth of "empty land" to ease their conscience, so that they can justify having murdered people in order to own the land. Land, in the European context, is a commodity to be bought and sold, while to the African it is a birth right. If it is a commodity to be bought and sold, then it must be owned by human beings, and the only human beings according to them, are Europeans. Africans are not regarded as human beings, therefore people found in this land were regarded as "animals"; like Springboks to be chased away or killed to "empty" the land.

Conclusion: Findings and Recommendations

This section concludes the discussion and outlines findings and recommendations. Firstly, in both the Old Testament and discussions on the historical sections, archaeologists have played a vital role to correct historical reconstructions that serve ideology. It has become clear that history writing is not necessarily separate from ideological interests. A multi-disciplinary approach for historical reconstruction is, therefore, a valuable approach to counter-balance the presentation of facts. This article found that the "empty land" myth was used to deny the presence of a section of the population on the land at a specific time in history. Archaeological studies have proved that this theory is not based on facts, and thus invalidated it. For this reason, the "empty

land" myth needs to be abandoned as a theory to reconstruct the history of South Africa. The author contends that this myth reinforced xenophobic attitudes in the Old Testament and racist attitudes in South Africa. Robert P Caroll (1992) describes the "empty land" myth as a "derivation of pollution-purity values in the second temple community." The logic here is that the Judeans emulated the abominations of the other nations. This led to the pollution of the land and thus called for the purification thereof. The process of purification entailed sending all the Judeans to exile to pay for their sins, leaving the land uninhabited to enjoy its Sabbath rest and consequently be purified. Describing the concept of "empty land" Robert P Caroll states as follows:

> A land empty over a lengthy period of time is simply a construct derived from the ideology of pollution-purity values in the second temple community.[58] … So the people(s) of the land were now part of the pollution. … That is to say, they were to be avoided at all costs and could not be regarded as part of the holy enclave focused on the rebuilt temple. (cf. Ezra 4:1–5; 10:1–5)[59]

The fact that foreigners had to be avoided induced the ordinary returnees to fear the foreigners and thus they became xenophobic. In a similar vein, in the case of South Africa, the "empty land" myth is also linked to the ideology of the Promised Land and the values that it produced. This idea is clearly expressed in Michael Prior (1997) when he writes about the Great Trek in the 1930s:

> … the Bible served as the source of Boer identity, and that as they trekked, the Boers considered themselves to be chosen people, rescued from Egypt (British oppression), on their way to the promised land. The indigenous black people were the "Canaanites who served foreign gods," whom "Israel" should not marry.[60]

This portrayal of indigenous black people aroused racist attitudes as evinced by Bowker above. Both xenophobia and racism lead to gross violations of human rights. At this phase of our history, with a national constitution that upholds human rights, South Africa cannot afford xenophobia and racism. For this reason, the "empty land" myth and other related perceptions that alienate people from the land, so that their human dignity is violated, need to be abandoned. The discussion has also shown that land and human dignity are inextricably intertwined. Landlessness strips people of their human dignity. For this reason, the problem of unequal distribution of land in South Africa needs to be resolved urgently to bestow human dignity upon all citizens.

Finally, of paramount importance, both societies dealt with in the above discussion are highly religious societies. Despite that, they have been involved in the dehumanisation of fellow human beings. This evinces a crisis in understanding God to whom loyalty is owed. Differently expressed, this demonstrates a theological crisis in dealing with land distribution. This article recommends a theology that is premised on Genesis 1:26–27

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58 Carroll, Robert P, "The Myth of the Empty." *Semeia* 59 (1992): 90.
59 Carroll, "The Myth of the Empty," 85.
60 Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism*, 81–82.

and 2:7. Two things provide principles for understanding the land issue theologically. Firstly, these verses refer to humankind as אָדָם (ʾādām/adam) and the ground as אֲדָמָה (ᵃdāmâ/adamah). The ground is the solid surface of the earth that we walk on; the land. The spelling and sound of these two words reinforce the connectivity between them. This connectivity is even reinforced more by Genesis 2:7, by stating that the dust of the ground was used to create humankind. A principle that transpires is that it is a divine sanction that humankind and land are inextricably intertwined. Thus, this article charges that it is a sin to separate people from the land. Humankind is made in the image of God. Since it has already been argued that landlessness strips human dignity, it has theological implications in terms of humans, being the image of God. The article therefore suggests a theology of the land premised firstly on the inseparability of humankind and the land. Secondly, it suggests a land theology that takes cognisance of humanity as the image of God.

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