

The Wise Women Tradition in 2 Samuel as Backdrop for Women Participation in Public Spheres in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

There are two cases in 2 Samuel where women are presented as wise and provided state security (2 Sam.14:1-20; 20:16-22). These stories provide the backdrop of women participation in public spheres. This research responds to the question: What stimulates women participation in public spheres like that in Zimbabwe? This research proposes that women participation in public spheres is stimulated by biblical evidence in text such as 2 Samuel. Originally the Hebrew word for wisdom is feminine in gender. This is supported by the two references of wise women who participated in the public spheres though not specifically employed for that purpose. It is from this point that women contribution to the liberation struggle and subsequently in politics should not be underestimated. Following the legacies established by Mbuya Nehanda and the rhetoric thereof during the First Chimurenga War, contemporary emphasis on female participation in politics should be understood in the backdrop of the biblical context as well. This research uses Biblio-drama as the model of biblical scholarship and legitimate for analysing the participation of women in the politics of the day in general and women participation in public spheres. Precisely this research stimulates women involvement in politician the current age where the bible and oral contemporary history is valued.

Keywords: Wise women; tradition; backdrop, political theological perspective, women participation; state security

INTRODUCTION

Individual conditions and circumstance play a role in the way one reads and understands the Bible. I have for various reasons been attracted to the book of 2 Samuel among which I cannot easily understand why. My recent publication "The Unmerited Marginalisation of Victims of Gender Based Violence in 2 Samuel". In this chapter I noticed how those females who fell victims of abuse are eventually drifted to the periphery of society.

I am equally prompted to note that although these abused women are pushed to the margins and seem to become role models for women in society, the society of ancient Israel also inform us of wise women who can equally undo the peripheral spirit which catches many women when they hear stories of the abuse and marginalisation of Tamar, and the ten concubines of David.

Women also played a significant role in the book of 2 Samuel that includes women who lied and women who were wise (2 Sam.14:1-20; 20:16-22). This research will study the Hebrew understanding of wisdom as a woman in light of the two wise women cited in the book of 2 Samuel.

BIBLIO-DRAMA

Biblio-drama is a scholarly model of enquiry that is informed by "sound critical methods with a disposition of faith that is open to the revelation of the living God through his word", for the purpose of appropriating Scriptures basis for church, theology and life (Craig and Bartholomew 2004). According to Oeming (2006: 94) 'Biblio-drama is a method of understanding the bible and an approach to self-understanding and healing'. It is always done in a group in which the participants read the text loud before each member begins to identify with the certain

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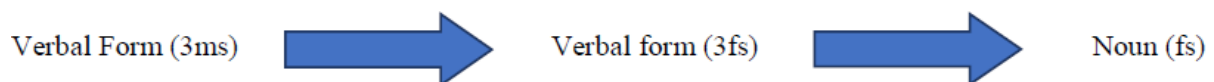
biblical characters. They may also make scenic representation of the text.

During the last three decades scholars had growing skepticism concerning the historicity and archaeological conclusions regarding the tenth century which is the period of the Davidic and Solomonic kingdoms. Scholars rather prefer to read the texts relating to David and Solomon as “fictional literature, theologically and ideologically motivated national sagas intended to glorify a supposed past golden era in the history of Israel” (Mazor, 2007: 117). According to Mazor (2007:118) the same scholars who deny the historical relevance of narratives concerning the united monarchy yet accept the historicity of the Northern kingdom of Israel which is evidence of the ninth century BC. However, there is archaeological evidence

that support a turning point in Canaanite pottery as the ancient Canaanite pottery paved way for new form of pottery in the tenth century. Bibliodrama is litmus taste to the historical relevance of the ancient records of that time by rationalizing the narratives among contemporary readers. Once that makes sense, it provides historical relevance.

HEBREW UNDERSTANDING OF WISDOM

The Hebrew noun, חֵכְמָה (Hokmah) which is translated to “wisdom” is feminine. According to the etymology of Hebrew nouns, this noun could have been derived from its feminine verbal form not the masculine form. However the feminine verbal form is derived from Qal perfect 3rd person masculine singular form (3ms). This can be illustrated as below:



The etymology of חֵכְמָה could have been derived from the adjectival form as below:



Although the verbal root and the adjectival root is masculine, its noun form is feminine. Wisdom therefore dwells in the bowels of a women. The Old Testament depicts God’s wisdom in which he formed human being in secret places. Women are therefore the agents for all wisdom.

I was once told a story on why some Colored communities in and around Cape Town are mentally ill. The story was that their fathers were taken as workers in the vineyards and were allocated wine every weekend. Their mothers were drunkards and hence produced children with “drunkenness”. This gives the assumption that the greatest source of wisdom apart from God himself, are women than man. While wisdom literature is generally related to the women more particularly in Proverbs 31. Narratives in 2 Samuel depict of “wise woman” twice reflect how wisdom can be associated with women.

Let me now examine the two texts which refer to “wise woman”. These are 2 Sam.14:1-20 and 20:16-22. Before dealing with this we should have an understanding that texts are not history but are agents of persuasion. However, in understanding the historicity of the book of Genesis, Harrison (1985: 309-310) appreciate the fact that some scholars found no historical

value in the patriarchal narratives regarding the stories as myths but some scholars no longer dismiss the “narratives” as Canaanite legends but situates the narrative to the bronze Age (2000 to 1500BC). This is because of the discovery of the Mari and Nuzi tablets. Kessler (2008) also refers to the historicity of the Davidic dynasty as evidenced by the Tel Dan inscription which refers to בֵּית־דָּוִד (house of David) validating the historicity of Davidic narratives. The allusion of wisdom as a teacher in the book of Proverbs reveal that all women imparted wisdom to their children including Proverbs 7 in which scholars vary in their interpretation as to whether the wise teacher was a male or female (Bellis 1996).

2 SAMUEL 14: 1-2

2 Samuel 14: 1-20 gives the story about Joab who wanted to inform David about the return of Absalom. The narrator paints a beautiful story in which Joab consulted the wise women of Tekoa. Were there no man to mention? Were there no other women to consult? Joab found the wise woman in Tekoa. After reading this story I asked myself was that wisdom?

Joab called the woman and told her to pretend as if she was (mourning Payne 1994: 328). She came like Nathan with a case for David to

respond (Payne 1994: 328). In presenting she was “to dress in mourning clothes” (v2). She also was not to use cosmetic lotions. The woman had to act like a woman who had spent many days mourning for the dead. If the woman was only able to follow the instructions this could not have entailed wisdom.

While imitating, Joab may not account for wisdom the woman’s ability to convince David. She went and fell before David and with greater innovation, pleaded with the king for help. The king noted the woman as a troubled woman (v5). This gave her an opportunity to extend the pretention by explaining that she was a widow who was troubled by here two sons who fought, and one killed the other. For that reason, he was being sought to kill him also. The women pleaded “they would put off the only burning coal left”. She worn the heart of the king. David sent her home promising that he would issue an order of protection on her son’s behalf.

The scene of the story promotes the views of Craig and Bartholomew (2004) who regards the Old Testament narratives as the drama that places us in the scene of divine plan. Here is one such drama as exhibition of wisdom. The wise woman’s pretention worn the king’s heat and sets the conditions in which the wise women could bring out her case.

In verses 11-20 the wise women reasoned for the king to decide on his own matter with Absalom who had fled after killing his brother. Wisdom is demonstrated in its power to preserve life. The wise woman like prophet Nathan in Chapter 11 brought wise counsel to the king. If the king sympathised with the circumstances pictured by the wise woman, why could the king fail to preserve his son Absalom who was still at large afraid of his Father for having killed Amnon. The king having understood the plight of the woman, he could not be found lacking when it comes to his personal experience. The king’s discernment on what is good for the woman, should also be enough for the king to preserve Absalom despite his murder of his brother Amnon. The moral of the wise woman was that of great importance was the welfare of the whole nation to preserve an heir for Israel as Absalom was to be recalled (Payne 1994:328-329).

Wisdom here may entail the ability to reason for life. If the wisdom in Proverbs points to life giving instructions, Christ can therefore be interpreted as the wisdom personified in

Proverbs 8 where wisdom claims to have been with the Father when all things were created and when the foundations of the mountains were laid down. The power to preserve life not because one is holy but because one has done one great sin of killing that deserved death penalty. Through wisdom, life is preserved.

2 SAMUEL 20: 1-22

2 Samuel 20 depicts of an incident of the rebellion of Sheba a Benjaminite. When Sheba saw David on his way back from his hiding place after the death of Absalom. Sheba despised David and influenced people to desert David (v1). All the men of Israel who were with David deserted him and followed Sheba and only men of Judah remained with him. David was afraid that Sheba could remain a great threat. Sailhamer (1994: 246) eludes that Sheba was going against the Pentateuchal promises which declare that Judah was the only legitimate tribe for the promised kingdom. David appoints Amasa to command the army to quell the resistance but when he realised that Amasa was slow he appointed a new commander (Elwell 1989: 226). David appointed Abishai to command an army that included Joab and Kerithites to quell the resistance.

Joab and the army besieged the city of Abel Beth Maacah where Sheba took refuge. Payne (1994;331) says that Abel Beth Maacah was not a good place for refuge for it was well known for wisdom. When the troops were buttering the wall, the wise woman instructed the city people to call Joab so that she could talk to him. The wise woman could tell the ancient stories of her time. She had a testimony that Abel was the city from which wisdom was obtained and, in this way, claimed she had answers for Joab (v18). “We are the peaceful and faithful in Israel. You are trying to destroy a city that is a mother in Israel. Why do you want to swallow up the Lord’s inheritance?” (v19).

The wise woman gave a wise counsel. She knew the history of her city and how this city became the Lord’s inheritance where all enquiry was responded to. It was of cause not Joab’s intention but to alarm that the entrance of Sheba into the city to seek for refuge caused him to be angry with the entire city. The woman had to use wisdom. She had to decide on whether to allow the city to be destroyed or find Sheba and hand him over to his pursuers. The wise decision was to hand over Sheba since it was

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better for one person to die and preserve the rest.

This can also be pictured by the redemptive history also referred to by Christ who said it is better for one to die to preserve the lives of many.

The text says the women “went to the people with her wise advice” (v22). The head of Sheba was cut, and his head thrown over the wall and Joab blew the trumpet to instruct the army that it was over. It is not over until it is over. The death of a single person settled the matter (Payne 1994: 331). Jesus in his wisdom proclaimed, “it is over”.

COMMON FEATURES OF WISE WOMEN

From my reading of the two texts I realise that what is common in the wisdom of the women is that at the core is preservation of life. The women was the one to give wise advice. In both incidence wisdom is central. Both cases were life or death cases. Both stories question why the whole plan of Yahweh can be put to risk by failing to adhere to the right life principle.

This takes us to realise that like Craig and Bartholomew (2004) we try to appreciate wisdom in the book of Samuel as dramatized in the two stories of wise women.

THE ROLE OF WISE WOMEN IN THE LIBERATION STRUGGLE

Mbuya Nehanda is associated with the spirit behind the war of liberation by claiming that mapfupa edu achamuka “our bones will rise” (Fontein 2006:144). Self-sacrifice was stimulated by the spirit of belonging together with the generations to come. Death is not the end for those whose wisdom is invincible and can never be silenced in to the eternal future. Life for those whose sacrificial death would bring life for the new generations would also mean after death there is life hence “mafupa achamuka”.

Fontein (2006) explains how Nehanda became the central figure for educating young guerrillas. The fact that she gave herself unto death through hanging in 1897 stimulated the spirit of uprising. New recruits were instilled with a sense of dedication as they admired Mbuya Nehanda and acting as the resurrected bones which she had prophesied. Many women are stimulated to identify with the ancient mythical cadres if one may query their historicity. As much as one query the historicity of these characters we do not cease to discover our place

in the liberation history. Equally, it is prudent to uphold the validity of the ancient Israel’s myth as well and still finding our place in the literary records.

During the war of liberation, Zimbabwean youth who fled to join the liberation struggle were taught how the country got colonized and the violent suffering of the forefathers as they resisted the colonial government. The figures of Sekuru Kaguvi and Mbuya Nehanda were hanged by colonial settlers. Despite that they were poorly armed, their resistance inspired new generations (Fontein 2006:144). Their sacrifice for the liberation was self-giving for the future benefit to the entire nation. Those who live today draw precaution not to violate what our ancestors had began and finished in us. Women are also in the same vein embraced as part of the entire posterity and hence should also enjoy the fruit of liberation.

The use of nationalist legends which engaged mythology on the role played by the spirit Mediums was also associated with Mwari shrines. The spirit was believed to inspire liberation fighters through instructions by the spirit medium (svikiro). The mythology of the past liberation wars of 186-97 restored memories, provided historical precedence and a means to co-opt masses into the struggle for independence (Fontein 144-147). The freedom is hence the prerogative of everyone despite gender.

CONCLUSION

The narratives on wise women in 2 Samuel provide the scene in which women participation in public spheres should inform the need for gender balance in political leadership or public life. Regarding Scripture as drama situates readers in the context of the text as they identify with certain biblical characters. Women should find themselves as sources of human wisdom so as to claim their leading role for the benefit of the nation of Zimbabwe. While the biblical stories created various views concerning their historicity, they assimilate with the historical or unhistorical heritage that continue to impart courage in women to participate in public life.

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