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RESTORATIVE READINGS: THE OLD TESTAMENT, ETHICS & HUMAN DIGNITY

PROGRAMME

WEDNESDAY 4, September 2013

08:30 - 09:00	Registration
09:00 – 09:10	Welcome and Arrangements <i>Juliana Claassens, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Stellenbosch University</i>
09:10 - 9:30	Meditation <i>Yvette Moses, Vice Chair of the Cape of Good Hope District of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa / Acting Bishop</i>
09:30 – 10:30	Foundations for Hope in the Midst of Exile <i>Bruce Birch, Professor of Old Testament, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington DC</i>
10:30 – 11:00	Tea
11:00 – 12:00	Building Exilic Communities of Hope <i>Bruce Birch, Professor of Old Testament, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington DC</i>
12:00 - 13:00	Manna and Mercy: Reading the Bible from the perspectives of justice and God's preference for the poor <i>Alan Storey, Superintendent Minister of the Table Bay Circuit of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and Minister of the Central Methodist Mission on Greenmarket Square, Cape Town</i> <i>Dion Forster, Chairman 'EXPOSED - Shining a light on corruption' and Program and research manager at Ekklesia</i>
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch (delegates' own responsibility)
14:30 – 16:00	Ethical Formation through the Psalms/Etiese formasie deur die Psalms <i>Chris van Wyk, Pastor, Dutch Reformed Church Somerstrand, Port Elizabeth and Moderator Eastern-Cape Synod</i>

THURSDAY 5, September 2013

08:30 - 09:00	Registration
09:00 – 09:10	Welcome and Arrangements <i>Juliana Claassens, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Stellenbosch University</i>
09:10 – 10:10	The Moral Trajectory of the Old Testament Drama: Creation, Exodus, Exile <i>Bruce Birch, Professor of Old Testament, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington DC</i>
10:10 – 11:00	Contending for Dignity in the Bible and the South African Public Realm <i>Gerald West, Professor of Old Testament, School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal</i>
11:00 – 11:30	Tea
11:30 – 12:00	The Strangers in the Second Half of Leviticus <i>Sias Meyer, Senior Lecturer in Old Testament, University of Pretoria</i>
12:00 – 12:30	Versions and subversions (or "I can't tell the bottom from the top") <i>Douglas Lawrie, Professor of Old Testament, University of the Western Cape</i>
12:30 – 13:00	Conversation
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch (delegates' own responsibility)
14:30 – 15:00	De-Ideologising Ezra-Nehemiah: Challenging Discriminatory Ideologies <i>Simon Cezula, Recent PhD Graduate in Old Testament, Stellenbosch University</i>
15:00 – 15:30	"It's the price I guess for the lies I've told that the truth it no longer thrills me...": Reading queer lies to reveal straight truths in Genesis 38 <i>Charlene van der Walt, Coordinator: Gender, Health and Religion MTh focus, Stellenbosch University</i>
15:30 - 16:00	Violence, Mourning, Politics: Rizpah's Lament in Conversation with Judith Butler <i>Juliana Claassens, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Stellenbosch University</i>
16:00 - 16:30	Conversation
19:00	Dinner for Conference Speakers

ABSTRACTS FOR WEDNESDAY PROGRAMME

Bruce Birch, Proclaiming God's Word To Exiles

Israel's experience of Babylonian exile was an experience that completely reshaped the life of God's people. But the modern church has not given the witnesses from Israel's exile experience much attention in its preaching and teaching ministries. Perhaps a focus on an admittedly catastrophic experience seems like a negative exercise, but the biblical voices out of exile are some of the most hopeful witnesses in scripture. In these two sessions we will primarily use the message of Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 40-55) to explore what makes hope possible in the face of exile realities and how our understanding of God's work and God's community is expanded by this hopeful message.

Chris van Wyk, Etiese formasie deur die Psalms

Die betekenis van die Psalms vir die nadenke oor die etiek kry nie die aandag wat dit verdien in OT navorsing nie (Gordon Wenham – *The Psalter Reclaimed*). Daarmee word die didaktiese, formatiewe, transformatiewe en normatiewe krag van die Psalms ontbeer. Deur die Psalms persoonlik en publiek te bid en te sing, leer die geloofsgemeenskap om die betekenis van hulle eie geloofstradisie te omhels. Hulle leer om die Psalms se etos van geregtigheid en deernis, vertroue en verantwoordelikheid as lewenspraktyk te omhels. Hulle leer om die pad van die regverdiges te onderskei van die pad van die goddeloses. Daardeur skep die Psalms 'n eties vaardige geloofsgemeenskap wat kan omgee, mekaar se laste kan dra en die lot van die wat swaarkry ter harte kan neem.

ABSTRACTS FOR THURSDAY PROGRAMME

Bruce Birch, The Moral Trajectory of the Old Testament Drama: Creation, Exodus, Exile

Our tendency in seeking ethical resources from the Old Testament is to look at individual texts, and there are certainly many that warrant our moral reflection as well as some that make us morally uncomfortable. But there is a larger narrative drama to which most of the Old Testament canon relates that allows us to see the moral address of the Old Testament in a broader perspective that has considerable power to shape the moral character and identity of both individuals and communities. Using only three of many scenes in this biblical drama as examples this lecture will suggest that attention to this larger narrative framework is crucial in appropriating the Old Testament as a resource for the church in shaping its ethical character and decision-making in the face of contemporary moral challenges.

Gerald West, Contending for dignity in the Bible and the South African public realm

The Kairos Document (1985) identified three theological trajectories within which the struggle for dignity in South Africa could be located. It argued that State Theology, the theology of the apartheid state (and its ecclesiastical alliance partners), constituted a direct attack on the dignity of certain sectors. Racial discrimination was an assault on human dignity. Church Theology, the mainstream theology of the churches, had a similar effect. By steadfastly refusing to locate the individual, the focus of its theology, within political and economic structures, Church Theology denigrated aspects of human dignity. Against these two dominant theological trajectories, the *Kairos Document* called the churches in South Africa towards a Prophetic Theology in which human dignity was central.

However, the *Kairos Document* erred in arguing that both State Theology and Church Theology were not biblical theologies. Indeed, the contestation in the 1980s between these three theological trajectories is mirrored in the Bible. Or, more accurately, the Bible offers theological trajectories that are ambiguous about human dignity. This paper reflects on what

has become of these three theological trajectories in post-liberation South Africa and proposes that public theology must become more intentional about contending theological trajectories in the Bible itself. Human dignity within social systems, it is argued, becomes a litmus test for the recognition of redemptive (biblical) theology.

Sias Meyer, *The Strangers in the Second Half of Leviticus*

The paper starts by providing an overview of the occurrence of the terms stranger (ger) and sojourner (toshav) in Leviticus 16-25. What is expected of the strangers? What is the purpose of the laws about them? Were the laws an attempt to protect them, or to protect the land and thus the interests of the authors of the book? The paper also offers a very brief summary of current research on the strangers and where this fits in with on-going redactional critical debates on the Pentateuch and the book of Leviticus. Lastly the paper attempts to explore the potential of these texts as a resource for Old Testament ethics.

Douglas Lawrie, *Versions and Subversions (or "I can't tell the bottom from the top")*

Texts, being "open", allow for a multiplicity of different readings, and, moreover, it is possible to read texts "against the grain", subverting the explicit or implicit intentions of the authors. Though both these notions are entrenched in postmodern hermeneutics, they may sometimes be contradictory. How can one "subvert" if one cannot tell the bottom from the top? This applies in particular to texts that allow for both a "straight" and an ironic reading. This problem is explored by looking at Judges 19-21, particularly Chapter 21. In this notorious "text of terror" women are treated without any apparent regard for their human dignity. Yet according to a perfectly possible reading of this text, the rhetorical point of the narrative presupposes precisely the human dignity of women. I shall argue that this reading - an alternative one and not a subversive one - can be strongly defended from the extant text.

In the conclusion it is argued that the *defence* of human dignity against assaults upon it depends on a capability to feel shame. Notions of shame, shaming, shamefulness and shamelessness belong in the same conceptual space as "dignity" and its derivatives.

Simon Cezula, *De-Ideologising Ezra-Nehemiah: Challenging discriminatory Ideologies*

This paper will investigate the way in which the book of Ezra-Nehemiah has been read in order to influence a social group's consciousness, that is, to channel social behaviour into a particular direction. Due to Ezra and Nehemiah' unrelenting campaign of separating the returned exiles from the people they called foreigners, some activists of discriminatory ideologies have employed Ezra-Nehemiah in order to justify their actions. For example, the separatist policies of some Nazi proponents in Germany and apartheid activists in South Africa are examples of ideologies that constitute gross violations of human rights. And in future there may be others.

The paper argues that such a reading is an out-of-context reading of Ezra-Nehemiah. Instead, this paper argues that Ezra-Nehemiah narrates a genuine story of God's greatness and faithfulness to His people. However, the book is coated with an ethnic ideology of one section of the Judean Second Temple community which competes with other counter-ideologies of the same time, place and people. This paper intends to separate the two in order to understand the narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah in context. By separating the two positions, the paper further wants to argue that the divine element of the biblical story is of prime importance for countering the discriminatory ideologies viewpoint which, in light of its potential for abuse, should be treated with caution. This paper proposes that such a rereading of Ezra-Nehemiah is of vital importance for our context in the new South Africa.

Charlene van der Walt, "It's the price I guess for the lies I've told that the truth it no longer thrills me...": Reading queer lies to reveal straight truths in Genesis 38

Negotiating queer identity within a heteronormative society is a complex and often treacherous exercise. Within a heteronormative society heterosexuality is considered the norm

and therefore does not need to be stated, revealed or explained. Being other than the norm, being queer, implies/demand moments of self-revelation. Being queer implies 'coming out'. Revealing too much too soon can leave one sidelined, voiceless or nullified. Revealing too little too late easily leads to one being accused of public and private falseness, lying and betrayal. What to say? To whom to say it? How to say it? These are the questions emerging in the process of 'coming out'. In Genesis 38 lies are told to reveal the truth, faces are masked and names become obscure as Tamar pursues justice by way of trickery. The paper interrogates life-denying truth and the lies of self-preservation in the process of navigating the complex play of sexual identity expression. Tamar's trickery is explored as a hint to a possible life affirming strategy for queer people within a heteronormative society.

Juliana Claassens, Violence, Mourning, Politics: Rizpah's Lament in Conversation with Judith Butler

One of the most haunting images of a woman resting violence regards the image of Rizpah, the widow of king Saul, who laments the brutal death of her two sons as well as her five stepsons in 2 Samuel 21. In this paper, I will read the story of Rizpah's silent resistance which in the end compels David to finally bury not only the bodies of Rizpah's sons but also that of Saul and Jonathan through the lens of human dignity with particular reference to Judith Butler's work in *Precarious Life* on violence, mourning and politics. I argue that Rizpah's resistance against violence extends to not only herself but also to other people who find themselves in a situation of precarity. So this mother can mourn for another woman's grief, her wake extending to another mother's sons. This story not only considers the importance of lament and resistance but also challenges us to have solidarity with other groups who are suffering violence due to petty politics.