# The Story of Allan Aubrey Boesak: The Making of a Prophet

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## Abstract

Through the centuries it was believed that theological knowledge can only be obtained by studying the creeds and confessions. Contemporary literature has seen a turn towards biographies which disclose an emphasis on microhistory within a particular context. The "biographical turn" created new avenues to gain theological knowledge through the actual life experiences and decisions of religious people's biographies. This article aims to tell the story of Allan Aubrey Boesak through the biographical approach of narrative analysis. The influences and events that shaped Boesak's mind and theology of prophetic resistance will be discussed. Thus, the article provides a window, not only into Boesak's life, but into the life of an oppressed people amid injustice through faith and prophetic resistance.

**Keywords:** Allan Boesak; narrative analysis; biography; apartheid

## Introduction

It is virtually impossible to recount the narrative of the South African church's struggle against apartheid without mentioning the name of Allan Aubrey Boesak. For many, he is South Africa's Martin Luther King Jr or Jesse Jackson. From leading anti-apartheid marches to conducting fiery sermons and speeches that boldly confronted the tyrannical apartheid regime, Boesak was at the forefront of the anti-apartheid struggle. He was among the people who shared the experiences of the teargas, gunshots and police dogs. The chant, Boesak! Boesak! used to reverberate across community halls and sports stadiums as excited crowds anticipated his presence. The crowds carried him on their shoulders as he understood and spoke the language of the oppressed. Boesak, Desmond Tutu, Frank Chikane, Beyers Naude and several others embraced Steve Biko's challenge to liberate and interpret the gospel in order to bring hope to the oppressed.

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Boesak's contributions as a theologian and human rights activist are both locally and internationally recognised. Boesak (2009, 16) describes himself as an "accidental politician" as he "found it impossible to turn away from the calls for justice" as it was "too fundamental to my faith". During the early 1980s and the states of emergency, Boesak became synonymous with the United Democratic Front (UDF)[1] as he spoke at rallies all over South Africa. He conducted several funerals of activists killed by the apartheid regime. Boesak was the "face" of the UDF. The "public Boesak" is very well known and documented, but what factors and agents impacted and shaped the mind of Allan Boesak? What factors and agents birthed what I call Allan Boesak's theology of prophetic resistance?[2]

This article aims to address these questions by telling the story of Allan Boesak by recalling a formidable ancestral lineage of Boesak's resistance against colonialism and racial discrimination. Furthermore, the article focusses on Boesak's lived experiences under apartheid, from childhood to adulthood. Boesak's ancestry and life story offer key insights into the formation of his theology that would ultimately assist in exposing the heresy of the apartheid theology promoted by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and contribute to the dismantling of apartheid. Furthermore, Boesak's life story will indicate how his theological hermeneutical choices, understanding of God, and faith convictions have been profoundly influenced by the struggles of his ancestors and lived experiences, which, in my view, cannot be separated. The article employs a combined methodology of narrative analysis and biography as theology to engage with the lived experiences of Allan Boesak.

## Narrative Analysis

Riessman (1993, 25; 2008, 15) states that the methods of narrative analysis take on a range of approaches. In general, narrative analysis refers to organising the narrative data into a systematic account. Polkinghorne (1995, 6) states that research data can present itself in three primary configurations, namely: short answer, numerical and narrative. Narrative discourses present the engagement between human activity and the world as they acquire events and actions of human lives into "thematically unified goal-directed processes" (Polkinghorne 1995, 5). The term "narrative" is used in an assortment of ways, depending on the discipline, and often synonymously with "story". Broadly speaking, "narrative" can refer to an account with no specific sequence, while a "story" contains one or more plots (Garson 2013, 9). The plot, emphasised by the analysis, provides the narrative structure whereby events are designed into a story (Garson 2013, 11; Polkinghorne 1995, 7).

McKinnon (2022, 92) describes a narrative as a form of discourse with a plot that progresses from beginning to end. Polkinghorne (1995, 6–7) opts for a definition of "narrative" to refer to a particular story, as stories express human lived experiences in

1 For more on the UDF, see Van Kessel (2000) and Houston (2018).

2 For more on Boesak's theology of prophetic resistance, see Fortein (2020).

linguistic format. Labov (1972) believes all narratives to be stories of past events. Stories, not always fictional accounts, can also express "ideal life events such as biographies, autobiographies, histories, case studies, and reports of remembered episodes that have occurred (Polkinghorne 1995, 7). Narrative analysis results in a retrospective story of organised events of human experience (Polkinghorne 1995, 16).

Narrative analysis is helpful for telling life stories, as the narrative of an individual's life is distinct (Garson 2013, 9).[3] Riessman (2008, 5) and Garson (2013, 12), among several other scholars, recognise the great potential of the biographical approach within narrative analysis. While a noted feature of African historiography, Western historians have largely ignored the biographical approach during much of the 20th century. However, there has been a "biographical turn" as microhistory and biography fused to emphasise the individual as a subject matter (Magnússon 2017, 43). Microhistory focuses on an individual's life events and experiences, which can provide critical insights into the wider microhistory (Garson 2013, 11). Magnússon (2017, 47) regards the central focus of the individual as one of the critical features of the microhistorical approach. This feature magnifies the relationship between the individual's interior life and external environment. Very often, individuals oppose societal laws, particularly those they deem unjust. Magnússon (2017, 47) emphasises the importance of these individuals' stories, without which society would remain "in a condition of stasis or perpetual *status quo*". In his study, De Haan (2017, 58) emphasises the historical and critical qualities of biography as he argues for a "*personengeschiedenis*", or a "history of persons". Janesick (2013, 152) states that the product of a biography is the representation of an individual's lived experience by telling stories.

Theology can benefit immensely from the biographical approach of narrative analysis. Traditionally, theological knowledge was gained by studying theological creeds and confessions. Biography provides another avenue. In his groundbreaking book, McClendon (1974) argues that theological knowledge can also be gained from the actual life experiences and decisions of religious people's biographies. McClendon (1974, 85) states that clear themes can be identified when people's lives are studied. This is certainly true of Allan Boesak. These themes have undoubtedly affected Boesak's life and theological decisions. Historical theology, including practical theology (particularly homiletics) and systematic theology, can gain tremendously by engaging the life and faith of Boesak. The voices, lives and contributions from the "underside" of history can be heard by studying the lived experiences of individuals within microhistory. In this way, biographies contribute to the decolonisation project.

## The Dialectical Dance

I met Allan Boesak while I was a student at Stellenbosch University in 2006. Pursuing a full-time academic career was not on the horizon then. This all changed after reading

3 For more on the biographical approach of narrative analysis, see De Haan, Renders and Harmsma (2017).

Boesak's Black and Reformed. Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition (1984). It introduced me to a theology that would forever influence my biblical hermeneutics and understanding of God. It was only then that I realised what apartheid did and continues to do to the poor and vulnerable of South African society. I was inspired to continue the search for human dignity and to be the voice of the voiceless. I was (and still am) very fortunate to be acquainted not only with Boesak, the fiery orator and passionate theologian but also Boesak, the person, man, husband, father and human being, to the extent that I decided to pursue my doctoral studies on Boesak and his theology, which I coined as the theology of prophetic resistance (Fortein 2016). At that point, I realised that beneath the man's multifaceted layers lies a foundation that is extremely personal and profound. Furthermore, I came to realise that much more can be known from Boesak's biography than from his publications and sermons. Studying Boesak appealed to my curiosity to understand what life was like under apartheid, especially for those labelled as "coloured", as his life provides a wider window into a particular generation who experienced and resisted apartheid.[4]

Koorts (2023, 143) states that writing biographies "demands both scholarly and personal immersion". This duality is critical in studying biographies. It is also necessary for the biographer to engage in a vital relationship with the subject in what Hughes (2012) calls the "dialectical dance". I am well aware of the pitfalls when writing the story of someone you hold in high regard, as the biography may degenerate into hagiography (Koorts 2023, 143). Both Rassool (2010, 29) and Hyslop (2010, 110) have perceived the trend of hero-worshipping, particularly in South African political history, around the rise of the African National Congress (ANC). However, the article aims to unearth the theological themes present in Boesak's theology of prophetic resistance by telling his childhood story.

## The Makings of the Prophet

Most people will recall the name "Allan" upon hearing the surname "Boesak". After all, he was one of the leading faces in the liberation struggle for justice and freedom in South Africa during the 1980s. Allan Aubrey Boesak was born on 23 February 1946 as the second youngest of eight children to his parents, Willem (Willie) Andreas Boesak and Sarah Janetta Boesak (nee Mannel), in the rural Northern Cape town of Kakamas on the banks of the Orange River (Boezak 2023; Scholtz 1988, 1; Wallis 1989, 41). Willie Boesak was a school principal at a small school of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in Kakamas. Both the Boesak parents were devoted Christians and raised their children accordingly (Boesak 2009, 88; Scholtz 1988, 1). Three of the sons, Reginald, Willem Jr and Allan, became ministers in the DRMC, and one of the sisters, Edna, married Rev. Dr Samuel G. Pick.

4 According to the Population Registration Act of 1950, the apartheid government grouped those to be considered of mixed descent under the singular racial category of "coloured".

Boesak's ministry strongly resembles that of the Old Testament prophets, who were steadfast in their witness, not being oscillated by the imminent dangers from the powerful to silence them. Bruggeman (2018, 129) states that the Old Testament prophets imagined and voiced a world vastly different from the one that their hearers experienced. The new imagination is done in the name of God, the Liberator, which almost always brings the prophet into direct opposition with those in power. Bruggemann (2018, xxiv) further states that prophets' voices are representative voices that give a social expression of important social issues. Throughout his ministry, Boesak (1984, 118) upheld the prophetic imagination of a "nonracist, open, democratic South Africa, a unitary state, one nation in which all citizens will have the rights accorded them by ordinance of almighty God". His prophetic imagination of a free and just society was strongly shaped by his lived experiences of apartheid, as this article aims to demonstrate. Boesak articulated the dreams and realities of the oppressed, providing them with the hope of a better future. Dibeela, Lenka-Bula and Vellem (2014, 1) consider Boesak's ministry to be that of Amos, who was and continues to be at loggerheads with the empires of the day. Boesak's ministry is as prophetic now as it was under the dark days of apartheid. It is worth mentioning that Boesak's prophetic witness came during a time when the brutality of the apartheid regime knew no bounds. Boesak is truly a "Prophet of the South" (Dibeela, Lenka-Bula and Vellem 2014).

## Boesak's Ancestry

### Captain Boezak

Allan may be the most well-known Boesak, but he stands in line for a series of Boesak resistance against injustices. Allan's older brother, Willa Boezak (2016) (who is a stalwart in the conservation of Khoi-San heritage), tells the story of one of their earlier ancestors of the Kat River region, the Khoi Captain Boezak. Captain Boezak, known as the most stubborn of the Khoi leadership, the brothers Dawid and Klaas Stuurman, Hans Trompetter and Bovenlander suffered the loss of land in the Eastern Cape after the British passed new land laws in 1797 (Boezak 2016, 178). This resulted in Captain Boezak and the rest of Khoi joining the amaXhosa in the Third Frontier War as resistance against British expansion.

Resistance against the injustice of land theft was the driving force of Captain Boezak until his death. In 1803, Captain Boezak and Bovenlander declined an offer of land from the British, due to their unhappiness with the conditions. One of the conditions was that Boezak and the rest would reside under the authority of the British government as part of the Cape Hottentot regiment (Boezak 2023). Captain Boezak was attacked with pangas and murdered cold-bloodedly by the amaXhosa in April 1804 after he refused to share his cattle with them in what he perceived to be an unfair transaction. His last words were: "*Ek was nog altyd lojaal aan die saak en bly dan hier tussen julle*!"[5]

5 "I was always loyal to the cause and live among you" (My translation).

(Boezak 2023). Captain Boezak died without reclaiming his land and it remains lost to the family to this day.

**Hendrik Boezak (The Evangelist)**

Hendrik Boezak was an elephant hunter known for his love of music. The story of Hendrik is intimately intertwined with that of the well-known missionary, Johannes van der Kemp. Van Der Kemp was called by the DRC and worked among the Khoi and amaXhosa in the Eastern Cape. In time, Van Der Kemp started with services for the Khoi and enslaved people in the local church building. The white Christians, who used the same building as a place of worship, were very disturbed about Van Der Kemp allowing Khoi and enslaved people to worship in the same building. Their argument with Van Der Kemp was as follows:

> *Kyk, ons is Christene en die Hottentotte is heidene. Ons is God se uitverkore volk. As die Here wou gehad het die heidene moes Christene wees, sou Hy hulle so gemaak het. Jy is besig om teen die wil van God te gaan. Die Hottentotte is Gam se geslag om vir ewig ons knegte te wees*.[6] (Boezak 2016, 181)

The white members later insisted that the chairs and walls be washed before they would use them again.

The racial tension reached its peak during a church service in 1801 when Hendrik led a Khoi choir to sing resistance hymns. It was as if the Frontier War was waging in church on that particular Sunday morning (Boezak 2023). Van Der Kemp asked the congregation to sing Psalm 134, "*Hef julle hande op in gebed, na die heiligdom, en prys die Here*"[7] (Boezak 2016, 185). Hendrik and his choir, as an act of resistance to the racism of white members, responded with the singing of verses six and eight of Psalm 118:

> *Die Here is met my, ek ken geen vrees nie; wat kan 'n mens aan my doen? Hulle het my omsingel, my van alle kante bestorm; maar in die Naam van die Here, het ek hulle aanval afgeslaan*.[8] (Boesak 2016, 186)

Van Der Kemp and his congregation were forced to relocate and settled at the well-known mission station, Bethelsdorp. Hendrik took it upon himself to visit neighbouring farms to preach the gospel to the poor and downtrodden slave workers as he went about his elephant expeditions (Boezak 2023). Afraid of liberal ideas, Hendrik endured several resistances from farm owners not to minister to their workers. Ten years later, Hendrik

6 "Look, we are Christians and the Hottentots are pagans. We are God's chosen people. If the Lord had wanted the pagans to be Christians, He would have made them so. You are going against the will of God. The Hottentots are Ham's generation to be our servants forever" (My translation).

7 "Raise your hands in prayer, to the sanctuary, and praise the Lord" (My translation).

8 "The Lord is with me, I know no fear; what can one do to me? They surrounded me, stormed me from all sides; but in the name of the Lord, I repelled their attack" (My translation).

became a full-time preacher when several Eastern Cape Boezaks relocated to Theopolis, where they were instrumental in developing and safeguarding the mission station (Boezak 2023). The following highlights Hendrik's ordeal with distrustful from owners:

> He found great opposition, and in one place in particular where it was told him that it was the intention of the farmers to kill him, accusing him of persuading their people to go away. No sooner did he hear this than he entered the house against the persuasion of mother and wife, who advised him to run away. He attacked his enemies in the name of the Lord, and continued till he had gained the victory. They confessed their guilt, and acquiesced in his words as truth, and gave him full liberty to instruct the people. He gained such an influence that they were afterwards afraid to drink a dram in his presence. (Elbourne 1992, 23)

## Ruiter Boezak (Boesak's Great Great Grandfather), Willem I (Boesak's Great Grandfather) and Boezaksvlei

Ruiter Boezak was the owner of the farm Boezaksvlei (close to the Boezak River) just outside the town of Carnarvon in the Northern Cape. Ruiter died in 1857, and a portion of the farm was sold as part of his estate (Boezak 2023). Ruiter's heir apparent, Willem I, mysteriously went missing around 1900/1901 during the Anglo-Boer War. Due to his disappearance, ownership of the farm could never be transferred. Boezak (2023) states that there were seemingly several offers to buy the farm before Willem I's disappearance, but he refused to sell. At that point, Allan's grandfather, Andreas, his mother, Sarah, and the rest of the family lived in Boezaksvlei. In 1903, the Boezaks lost Boezaksvlei after Willem I could not be found, and the farm was sold under the "terra nullius"[9] rule without the family having any input (Boezak 2023).

The ownership of Boezaksvlei was transferred to J. G. Pieters in 1911, nine years after the war (Boezak 2023). The government annexed Boezaksvlei in 1939 without any form of compensation. The farm was surveyed again between 1946 and 1950 (Boezak 2023). This is how the Boezak surname disappeared from the map. The Boezak family is in the process of trying to reclaim their ancestral land, which the family claims, currently houses the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) (Jansen 2023b). Until today, Willem I's disappearance, death and grave are unknown to the family.

## Andreas Boezak (Boesak's Grandfather)

The story of Andreas Boezak is genuinely remarkable. De Buldt is a so-called "coloured" neighbourhood in Carnarvon that escaped the Group Areas Act 41 of 1950.[10] This was mainly due to the work of Andreas, who worked as a magistrate's clerk during the early part of the twentieth century. He was tasked to register births but refused to

9 Empty land that belongs to no one.

10 The Group Areas Act was enacted under the apartheid government of South Africa. The act assigned racial groups to different residential and business sections in urban areas in a system of urban apartheid.

distinguish between coloureds and blacks and registered every baby as coloured (Boezak 2023). With the advent of the Group Areas Act in Carnarvon in 1975, the government found it impossible to distinguish between blacks and coloureds despite the significant Xhosa constituent because everyone in the community was registered as coloured (Boezak 2023; *Mail & Guardian* 1998). This was Andreas' political legacy and act of defiance against an absurd racial system.

**Willem Andreas Boesak – Willem II (Boesak's Father)**

Willem Andreas Boesak, aka Willem II, was the eldest son of Andreas Boezak. It is unclear why Boesak's father spelt his surname with an "s" and not a "z" like the rest of the family (Boezak 2023). Boezak (2023) recalls his father being as dark-skinned as the Boezaks before and after him. Willem II passed away aged 47 when Boesak was only six years old (Boesak 2009, 87; Boezak 2023). It is evident from Boesak's recollections that the loss of her husband weighed heavily on his mother:

> "I wish your father was here." She did not at all feel herself inadequate, I think, or unequal to the task of bringing up her children – all eight of them, all on her own. But her inborn wisdom withheld her from denying that a child needs both parents and that sometimes, just sometimes, she found it hard to be both. (Boesak 2009, 88)

Whilst Boesak (2009) dedicated his book, *Running with Horses. Reflections of an Accidental Politician*, to the memory of his late father, he spends very little time reflecting on him. Perhaps it was a case of Boesak being too young to remember his father before his passing. References to his father are sparse and sporadic, but not without a deep sense of noticeable absence and yearning. Willem II's passing permanently altered Boesak's life, leaving a void that will linger his entire life. For Boesak, the early loss of his father also meant maturing much quicker:

> The personal wrestling with life's demands, which came too early to a boy whose boyhood was lost too soon, needed the guiding hand of a father. (Boesak 2009, 88)

> I was seven years old when my father died. That was too soon, I thought. I still think so. (Wallis 1989, 41)

Seemingly, Boesak's father was either involved in politics or very politically conscious. Both would be a possibility since the National Party (NP), with their official policy of apartheid, came into power two years after Boesak's birth. Boesak's reflections on his political involvement and life choices disclose his fatherlessness, also how he carries the imagination of his father's guidance in his life. Furthermore, Boesak's reflections are no different than other people who lost their fathers at a young age, expressing a young boy's need for his father's affirmation:

> I could not guess where, had he lived, his politics would have taken him. But I hoped fervently he would have understood where mine had taken me. How many times had I wondered what he would have thought of the choices I'd made. (Boesak 2009, 88)

**Sarah Janetta Boesak (Boesak's Mother)**

After his father's passing, Boesak's mother, Sarah Boesak, continued the Christian practices at home. Church activities like Sunday school, children's ministry, youth brigade and choirs dominated the lives of the Boesak children (Boezak 2023). Bible readings and prayers were part and parcel of the everyday rhythm within the Boesak household. This was instrumental in the faith formation of the eight children as they came to know the Bible and God in a way they would otherwise not have known. Bible stories were discussed around the table and what it meant for faith in everyday life (Wallis 1989, 41). Understandably, the Bible became a source of comfort for the family. Due to extreme poverty, birthday gifts were no option as money was earmarked for household essentials. Boesak (Green 2012) remembers that they received no birthday presents. Instead, his mother would read a Bible verse to each child on their birthday. His mom would say: "*Ek het nie vir jou 'n geskenk, my kind, maar die Bybelwoord is groter as die grootste geskenk*" (Green 2012).[11]

> And when you are really poor, then the Biblical story is not just another story. When it is applied to your life, often in a very powerful way that it was in our lives, it becomes very meaningful; in fact, one of the very few meaningful things in your life. (Wallis 1989, 41)

As with poverty, racism was part of the Boesak family's existential reality. Growing up in the 1950s, Boesak was exposed to the far-reaching ramifications of racist apartheid legislation. From an early age, Boesak was exposed to the pigmentation classification system as directed by the Population Registration Act of 1950.[12] Sarah was very light-skinned as her grandfather, Henry Fryer, was Irish (Boezak 2023). Boezak (2023) recounts that family trips to Carnarvon were an inconvenience, with their father having to sit in the black designated train carriage, their mother in the white designated carriage, and the children in between with the coloureds. He recalls his childhood days when white was seen as the benchmark of humanity, indicating the pinnacle of South African society. Boesak recounts how everyone wanted to be white and how it influenced societal life.

> When I was a child everybody wanted to be accepted by whites. Other children were not allowed to play with us because we were too dark-skinned. And I remember my mother, who was very fair, being approached and told that if she would give us out for adoption it could be arranged for her to be reclassified white. (Sparks 2003, 73)

Boesak's father's passing left Sarah to raise her eight children all on her own. Her faith left a lasting impression on her children. Boesak (2009, 88) describes his mother as "a heroine of the faith, a marvellous woman whose footprints in the lives of her children

11 "I don't have a present for you, my child, but the word of the Bible is greater than the biggest present" (My translation).

12 The Registration Population Act of 1950 divided the population into four separate racial groups of white, black, coloured (mixed-race) and Indian.

will remain large and her memory for all of us unsullied". Raising eight children as a single parent was a daunting task, especially with constricted finances. Like most of her generation, Sarah did hold a high level of education, but that motivated her to ensure that her children would achieve the necessary education. Boezak (2023) states that of the eight children, five became teachers and three ministers. An article in a local newspaper described the family as an "exceptional family" with an illiterate widow as the matriarch (Boezak 2023). Boesak provides the following insights about his mother's sacrifices and determination to guarantee her children's education:

> Not having had the privilege of much schooling herself (she did not finish Primary School), she more than nothing wanted that for her children, and she would go to extraordinary lengths to make that possible. She herself worked day and night – by day as a seamstress in a women's clothing store, by night she would do people's washing and as a celebrated cook would sometimes cook special dished people would order. We would deliver those during the day and over the weekends. She would for instance take one of the older children out of school for a year, to work and augment our meagre income, and to give the child next in line an opportunity to have a year at school. She did this with all her children except me and my youngest brother. We were the privileged ones. It took my older siblings longer to finish school, but it did mean that all of us got schooling – all my older siblings became teachers. My oldest brother returned to school and like my youngest brother and me entered the ministry. (Maluleke 2017, 67)

Soon after the death of Boesak's father, the Boesak family moved to Somerset West in the Western Cape in 1953 (Scholtz 1988, 1). The limited employment options in Kakamas prompted their relocation. In Somerset West, Sarah bought a very old and dilapidated house as this was the only house she could afford. She would buy bricks for reparations with the extra money she made. At that stage, she earned around three rand and fifty cents a week (Wallis 1989, 43). The Boesak family would spend weekends working on the house (Wallis 1989, 43). Once, Sarah bought bricks from a very wealthy builder. The builder delivered approximately 250 bricks, although she had paid for 400. Upon her inquiry, the builder stated: "Don't bother me with this. I know that my men delivered all the bricks" (Wallis 1989, 43). Sarah replied: "I will never forget this. But that's okay, you don't have to worry about the other bricks. The God I believe in is the protector of the widow and the fatherless. And somehow you're going to know that" (Wallis 1989, 43).

The builder delivered the rest of the bricks a week or two later. Upon Sarah enquiring about it, he replied that two of the houses that he was in the process of building had mysteriously caught fire, and he interpreted it as "a sign from heaven" (Wallis 1989, 43):

> But I saw all this, at age twelve, and it made a tremendous impression on me because I saw in very tangible way, God does take care of the poor and the meek and the lowly and the oppressed. That was something I was never to forget for the rest of my life. So today I'm literally impassioned about these things. I keep on telling people that this is the biblical message and it doesn't matter what the situation looks like; God will make true the promises that God has made. And there is no doubt in my mind that God will. (Wallis 1989, 43)

Through the faith of his mother, Boesak came to know God as the God of the fatherless and the widow, who takes the side of the poor and the oppressed, as God is a God of justice. These hallmarks form the foundation of Boesak's theology of prophetic resistance and are identifiable throughout his theological engagements. Through his mother's faith, Boesak identified with the God of the Exodus, who hears the cries of His people and who brings about liberation for the oppressed. This led Boesak to believe that God was a personal God who was actively involved in the lives of the oppressed (Boesak 1976, 20). In this sense, one could argue that his mother was Boesak's first introduction to black liberation theology:

> … it was as a person of faith that she made the deepest impression. Her faith was strong, she shared it with her children, and taught us that it was the foundation of life. (Maluleke 2017, 67)

## Rev. Chris Wessels and the Beginning of Boesak's Preaching

At the age of ten years, Boesak joined the Association for Christian Students. Joining this association was influential in forming the young Boesak. This was where Boesak's relationship with his schoolteacher, Rev. Chris Wessels, would deepen into a lifelong journey. Wessels' search for justice and equality was extremely influential in Boesak's own search for justice (Wallis 1989, 42). As a teacher, and later a minister in the Moravian Church, Wessels believed in justice and "he dedicated himself to the upliftment of the poor and marginalised, the building of a better society, and the dismantling of the evil system of apartheid under which we suffered, and for this he was incarcerated by the security police" (Wolf 2018).

Boesak attended "beach missions" during summer holidays with the association (Wallis 1989, 42). Daily services were held in the morning and evening for children and adults, respectively. One morning, the young Boesak was thrust into the deep end as the woman responsible for the morning children's service did not show up. Wessels' instructions were, "Let Allan tell them a story and give his testimony" (Wallis 1989, 42). This would not be Boesak's first sermon, as he used to preach to some of his sisters and their dolls at home since the age of five (Wallis 1989, 42). That morning, Boesak preached from a pulpit, which they built from sand, and gave his testimony: "And they loved it. So day after day, I gave my testimony. I guess part of my love for preaching came from those times" (Wallis 1989, 42).

**Aunt Meraai Arendse (A Congregant)**

Boesak matriculated from Gordon High School in Somerset West at the age of 17 in 1962. Like in Kakamas, the neighbourhood where the Boesaks resided was declared a "whites only" neighbourhood (Scholtz 1988, 2). This resulted in their house being demolished and the family having to relocate elsewhere. This was not the first time that Boesak would be confronted by the Infamous Group Areas Act.[13] One can only imagine the psychological impact of the forced removals on a young man. Experiencing the injustice and trauma of being forced to relocate and seeing your family home being destroyed because of your skin colour, most likely caused anger and awakened a feeling of resistance.

Boesak (2009, 33) would experience the ramifications of the Group Areas Act again during his ministry in the DRMC congregation of Immanuel in the Boland town of Paarl in 1968. The area in which Boesak's congregation was situated was declared a white group area, which resulted in the church building and houses being demolished. Boesak (2009, 33), being around 23 years old, was once again confronted with the reality of forced removals as he did in Somerset West. Only this time, he was forced to respond theologically when a congregant confronted him about the injustices of apartheid.

The incident involving one of Boesak's congregants, Aunt Meraai Arendse, would prove to be a critical moment in his life from then on out. Three weeks after his ordination, a serious-looking Aunt Meraai challenged Boesak after receiving the news that her house was going to be appropriated. She stated:

> What is God saying about this injustice? Why is God allowing this to happen? I am going to lose my home, the place we built ourselves and loved, where my children grew up. I am going to lose my memories. What is God thinking? I will be in church on Sunday. I want you to tell me about God and this injustice. (Boesak 2009, 33–34)

The Boesaks, who experienced the same trauma of losing their home, could identify with Aunt Meraai. The Boesaks also experienced the brunt of the Group Areas Act as the they had to relocate from Somerset West to the designated coloured township of Eersterivier (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2018, 7). Her words of anger, confusion, and loss may very well embodied Boesak's own sense of anger and confusion at that stage. Her words certainly left Boesak "silenced and shaken" (Boesak 2009, 34). Her words exposed a flaw in Boesak's theology since nothing in his theological training could have prepared him for the realities of apartheid:

13 The Group Areas Act designated living areas according to the various racial groups. Whites ended up securing and residing in prime areas, while the other racial groups were relocated to the desolated areas of the country.

> The theology taught me by the white Dutch Reformed missionaries was totally inadequate to deal with the crises of faith that grew out of poverty, socio-economic injustices and political oppression. This would continue to haunt me. I would not rest until I had found the words. (Boesak 2009, 34)

Aunt Meraai's challenge set Boesak on a path of learning, unlearning and relearning. In the Netherlands, Boesak would rediscover Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper and the real heart and value of the Reformed faith (Boesak 2009, 35–36). Aunt Meraai was a major turning point in Boesak's theological journey, as her challenge consolidated his childhood faith with the (re)discovery of old and new theological acquaintances into the theology of prophetic resistance:

> This was like nothing I had ever heard in those mind-control sessions called Theology classes back home. As my knowledge grew, so did my anger. The anger born out of my experience under apartheid blended with the anger that comes from knowledge. It was, I had found, a most potent and creative mix. (Boesak 2009, 36)

In spite of Boesak's (2009, 34) feeling of inadequacy, he recalled his mother's faith in "knowing God as the God of the poor, the fatherless and the widow":

> What I remember most was our daily devotions after supper: a Bible reading and prayers. Somehow, despite the lifelong indoctrination by white missionaries and their apartheid theology preaching and teaching, she found in the Bible a different God. She always spoke of, and prayed to the God who was the Father of Jesus, the Father of the fatherless, the Defender of the widow, the weak and the helpless, the protector of the stranger. This was a God who was "an ever present help in times of trouble". It is this image of God and of Jesus which stayed with me even when I, as a seminarian, was taught an other-worldly, apartheid theology by my white DRC professors in Bellville. And when I was confronted with the challenges of my ministry under apartheid and the challenges posed by Aunt Meraai, and discovered the inadequateness of my training, I was saved by what I heard my mother say about God. In a sense, one could say, her theology was my first exposure to what I would later recognize as liberation theology. I guess she had a critical intuition about the Bible which resisted apartheid thinking without her being overtly "political", but which also had what I now call an intuitive ingenuity for the deepest, most consistent message of the Bible: a book of a God who seeks justice and liberation, who takes the sides of the poor and the defenceless. (Maluleke 2017, 67)

## Conclusion

Allan Boesak's story is the story of millions of South Africans who were born and lived under apartheid. It resonates with those who suffered and continue to suffer from past injustices. Restitution and reparations continue to evade those who bore the brunt of apartheid, even more than 30 years since the democratic elections were held in 1994. Apartheid affected all spheres of life, but its devastating impact on family life was

perhaps the most calamitous. Even the "born-free"[14] generation is not escaping the injustices of the past. They are confronted with realities in Democratic South Africa, similar to those in the generations before them. The struggle of the "born-frees" was manifested in the Fallist Movements[15] that swept through South Africa and inspired a global towards a decolonised, just and fair society.

Boesak's story comprises an assortment of themes. One main theme is that of loss: the loss of generational land, the loss of human dignity, the loss of power, the loss of words (as in the case of Aunt Meraai) and the loss of a father. Looking back at the trajectory of Boesak's life, it shows a life of empty spaces with important landmarks and history erased as if they never existed and were buried underneath whatever apartheid decided to build on it. From the Kat River to Carnarvon; from Kakamas to Somerset West. Only a series of quiet, empty spaces, yet their cries for justice are deafening.

Boesak's own fatherlessness was key in identifying with the fatherless Jesus of Nazareth. Boesak's study (2011) seems to be partially biographical. The theme of fatherlessness is constant and pertinent to Boesak's theological reflections (Coetzee, Müller and Hansen 2015, 130) and Maluleke (2017, 69) states that Boesak often refers to Jesus as one who knew the pain of fatherlessness.

For Boesak, Jesus, being fatherless and poor, living in occupied Palestine and raised by his mother, resembled his situation and that of blacks. In the black situation, God provides the framework for blacks to understand the revelation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ (Boesak 1976, 12). Boesak (1984, 11–12) is convinced that Jesus, as revealed in the Bible, cannot be the same Jesus whose name was carved out in the bows of the Dutch slave ships during slavery. At Jesus' circumcision, his parents were so poor that they were unable to bring the sacrifice as prescribed by the law (Lev. 12:6–8). Instead, they brought the sacrifice of the poor, two turtle doves (Luke 2:21–24). Jesus remained poor. Acts 2:1–42 portrays the genesis of the Christian Church as a gathering of peasants, mostly Galileans, who were possibly the most devalued of all first-century Jews within the Roman Empire (Hendricks 2006, 89). This Jesus, Boesak declares, is Lord over every sphere of life, which is central to do faithful public theology (Koopman 2014, 36):

> He knew what it was to live like a hunted animal. He knew what it was to speak with care at all times so as to evade the clutches of "informers." He lived on earth in a way familiar to blacks. He identified Himself completely with us. He is the Black Messiah. (Boesak 1984, 13)

14 In South Africa, the term refers to a person who was either born or grew up after the end of the Apartheid era in 1994.

15 The Fallist Movements refer to the Rhodes Must Fall, and Fees Must Fall Movements, which demanded the removal of Cecil John Rhodes' statue from the University of Cape Town's campus and a stop to the increase of tuition fees, respectively.

At the core of Boesak's theology, is the fundamental belief that God is always on the side of the oppressed. His belief is seated in the God of the Exodus, who publicly liberates His people by seeing and hearing the suffering and cries of the oppressed (Boesak 1976, 17; 19). These acts, Boesak (1976, 19) states, are acts of justice for the sake of the oppressed: "The bias is clear beyond any doubt. God sides with the oppressed. The oppressors are on the wrong side. It is as clear as that" (Boesak 1976, 14).

Boesak's first-hand experiences of the injustices of apartheid, the inadequacies of his theological training, along with his mother's faith inspired his shift towards Black Liberation Theology. Boesak did not only meet the poor, fatherless Jesus, but the God who openly and deliberately chooses the side of the poor, the wronged and the destitute. This theological force continues to shape Boesak's quest for justice for the voiceless and vulnerable in South Africa and globally. Boesak has continued to be the vanguard of the poor, marginalised and voiceless since 1994, as he advocates for a "spirituality of politics",[16] that the ANC has purposefully ignored to the detriment of public life. In recent times, Boesak has pursued justice and dignity as he challenged the debilitating effects of globalisation (Boesak, Weusmann and Ali 2010), patriarchy (Boesak 2019) and global apartheid, as in the situation of the Israel-Palestine conflict (Jacobs 2023). Boesak continues to be a critical voice against the ANC-led government's policies and the quest for restoration of South Africa's indigenous people. Boesak's experiences of injustices and powerlessness drive his activism to be the voice for the voiceless. His story is one of exploitation, loss and injustice, but it also a story of faith and resilience amid fierce oppression. His story can inspire action towards justice and peace.

Boesak is unquestionably a "struggle surname", as Boezak (2023) reminds us.[17] For some, Boesak is an ambiguous figure due to particular life choices and the avenues his life has taken. Others see him as a "Moses" who led his people to freedom. Whatever people's opinion of the man, however, he remains steadfast in his prophetic criticism against injustices.

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16 For more on the spirituality of politics, see Boesak (2005).

17 Allan Boesak's aunt, Louise Boesak, was also a stalwart in the fight for justice and liberation in Carnarvon and elsewhere. Louise was part of the Labour Party (LP) but walked out when the party decided to collaborate with P. W. Botha's tricameral parliament proposal. Louise was also the chief whip of the ANC in the Northern Cape from 1994 to 2004. See Jansen (2023a).

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