



MAIN ARTICLES

John 15,1-8: a Re-reading Through Earth, SDGs, Covid 19, and Cape Town Farms Contexts

João 15:1-8: uma releitura nos contextos da terra, ODS, Covid 19 e das fazendas da cidade do Cabo

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ABSTRACT: One of the targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 6 seeks to ensure equitable sanitation for all by 2030, with a special focus on women and vulnerable groups. However, women working on farms often do not have access to adequate toilets, facing safety, hygiene and privacy issues. These challenges become even more critical in the face of COVID-19 and concerns about new superbugs. In John 15,1-8, Jesus employs vineyard farming imagery to describe the relationship between himself and God the Father, and in turn the relationship between the disciples and himself. In this article, I employ a gender-critical hermeneutical framework, informed by ecofeminist concerns and the intersectionality of gender, race and class, to offer a reading of this biblical passage within the context of Black women working on farms in the Western Cape. I ask to what extent this expectation of submissiveness set by Jesus to his disciples, should be accepted at face value, alongside the use of Earth imagery to implore such submissiveness.

KEYWORDS: Gospel of John. Gender Criticism. Ecofeminist Interpretation. United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Contextual Theology.

RESUMO: Uma das metas do Objetivo de Desenvolvimento Sustentável 6 da ONU busca garantir saneamento equitativo para todos até 2030, com foco especial em mulheres e grupos vulneráveis. No entanto, as mulheres que trabalham em fazendas muitas vezes não têm acesso a banheiros adequados, enfrentando problemas de segurança, higiene e privacidade. Esses desafios tornam-se ainda mais críticos diante da Covid-19 e das preocupações com novas superbactérias. Em João 15,1-8,

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Jesus emprega imagens de vinhedos para descrever o relacionamento entre ele e Deus, o Pai, e, por sua vez, o relacionamento entre os discípulos e ele próprio. Neste artigo, emprego uma estrutura hermenêutica crítica de gênero, informada por preocupações ecofeministas e pela interseccionalidade de gênero, raça e classe, para oferecer uma leitura dessa passagem bíblica no contexto das mulheres negras que trabalham em fazendas no Cabo Ocidental. Pergunto até que ponto essa expectativa de submissão estabelecida por Jesus aos seus discípulos deve ser aceita pelo seu valor nominal, juntamente com o uso de imagens da Terra para implorar essa submissão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Evangelho segundo João. Crítica de gênero. Interpretação ecofeminista. Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS) da Organização das Nações Unidas (ONU). Teologia contextual.

Introduction

The context of farm workers in the agricultural sector of South Africa is impacted by many factors, and it is a particularly complex setting plagued by a wide range of challenges, limitations, and injustices. This, despite their tremendous contribution to the success of commercial farming in the country over centuries.

Current commercial farming activity in the Western Cape province of South Africa is firmly rooted in the history of slavery and colonialism.¹ Since its inception by the Dutch East Indian Company as a humble trading post for ships sailing to and from Asia in 1652, Table Bay and its surrounding areas became sought-after farming addresses for colonial masters. They depended on the knowledge and expertise of the local people, as well as the blood, sweat, and tears of imported slaves from the East, to work the fertile lands and ensure a range of good quality fresh produce which could be sold as an income.² Some of the earliest farms beyond the peninsula were wine farms, in what is known today as the Stellenbosch region.³ Gradually, colonial farmers moved inland and upward

¹ This is not to say that farming activity in South Africa only commenced during the 17th century. Based on archeological evidence, the first farmers from Africa – whose ancestors first started farming between 2000 and 4000 years ago in contemporary Cameroon and Nigeria – settled in contemporary South Africa approximately 1700 years ago (Whitelaw, 2007, p. 22).

² It is estimated that, between 1652 and 1808, which marked the end of slave trade, approximately 63.000 slaves were imported via the Cape. Slaves from Africa, Madagascar, India, and Indonesia each made up a quarter of the slave population of the colony. For more than a century slavery in the Cape was largely urban. As late as 1767, 40% of all slaves of the Cape colony lived in Cape Town (Shell, 2007, p. 53).

³ Simon van der Stel was tasked with the expansion of the Cape colony as successor of Jan van Riebeeck. He arrived in 1679 and established the town of Stellenbosch, 50 km from the fort of Table Bay, in the same year. He brought with him, from Europe, grape vines, and

towards mountain ranges further north, where the soil was better suited for crops and fruit farming. British colonial rule and the Great Trek led white Afrikaner migrants further afield in the 19th century, and gradually the options of sheep farming made way for mining and industrialization on the one hand, and crop and fruit farming in other provinces on the other hand. The expansion of white settler farmers into the interior directly impacted on the lives and livelihoods of black indigenous people, upon whom dispossession of their land and displacement to other areas were enforced – often in cruel and violent ways. Eventually the Cape lost its stronghold as sole locus of economic control to cities like Kimberley and Johannesburg, but farming remained a firm part of its economic identity. Despite the many historical movements and democratic developments since that time, the racial divide between white farm owners and black farm workers and dwellers, until this day, still largely persists – despite ongoing attempts to diversify the agricultural sector in the country.

Women working on farms in the Western Cape province of South Africa are a particularly vulnerable socio-economic group, who experience multiple layers of oppression.⁴ As *women*, they find themselves in a country with some of the highest statistics of gender-based violence, rape, and femicide in the world. They are *Black women* in a country which is still socially and economically very much divided along racial categories, despite the democratic, post-apartheid political system which has been in place since 1994. They find themselves living and working in *rural* or *semi-rural* – and therefore often isolated – geographical settings, where socio-economic privilege and poverty still very much run along a white/black divide and where exploitation of workers on farms with very little legal protection is rife. Moreover, the rural setting of workers on farms is particularly hard struck by the toxic combination of domestic violence and substance abuse and dependency (especially of alcohol) among workers themselves (Kiewit, 2019, unpagged). In addition, so-called “seasonal” workers (temporary farm workers employed especially during the harvest season, of whom many are migrants who move into the area for the period of employment) have very little to no legal protection and

subsequently wine produce became an important part of the farming activity in the area. Other expansions included Drakenstein (later Paarl), Franschhoek, Tygerberg, Wagenmakers Valley (Wellington), Swartland (Malmesbury) and the Land of Waveren (Tulbagh) – all towns or districts which up to this day are still at least partly reliant on farming activity (Giliomee, 2007, p. 59).

⁴ The non-governmental organization, “Women on Farms Project,” continues to do valuable work towards raising awareness, addressing concerns, and putting pressure on various government departments to rectify and change the circumstances in which women on farms are living and working (Women on Farms Project). For information on the conditions of women working on farms in the Western Cape, see South African Human Rights’ Commission, “Final Report on the Inquiry into Human Rights Violations in Farming Communities” (South African Human Rights’ Commission, 2003, p. 64-65).

are not always welcomed by permanent dwellers and workers on farms.⁵ Working and living conditions on farms do, of course, vary, and not all farm owner-farm worker relations are exploitative. But workers often face long hours of physical labor outside in vineyards and orchards – for which they are not necessarily paid fairly. Safe and secure housing and access to reliable basic services (e.g., electricity, clean running water, flush toilets) are not always guaranteed, and children of farm workers and dwellers do not necessarily have access to good quality education close to where they reside (South African Human Rights' Commission, 2008, unpagged).⁶

1 Methodological framework: A gender-critical, ecofeminist reading of John 15,1-8, undergirded by intersectionality

In this chapter a range of factors need to be reckoned with, in considering a contextual reading of John 15,1-8: the context of black, poor women working on farms in rural or semi-rural environments, typically employed by white, male farm owners; the context of these women working with and depending on Earth while performing their work and duties; the focus of such a textual and contextual engagement within the framework of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 (specifically access to clean, running water and an end to using bush toilets); and the impact of the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic toward the UN SDG Goal 6, for this particular context.

Given that the multiple categories of gender, race and class all feature in this contextual reading of John 15,1-8, it is a reading firmly undergirded by intersectionality as a theoretical framework. According to Leslie McCall, intersectionality refers to “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771-1800). This term, first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is considered of great importance also within contextual theology and reader-orientated hermeneutical approaches to biblical texts (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241-1299).⁷ The South African context in particular, which has a history of not only legislated racial discrimination (most recently in the form of

⁵ In recent years, this has led to numerous violent protests in the Western Cape and subsequent hesitancy from farmers to employ migrant or contract farm workers.

⁶ Further research is required to determine to what extent, if at all, the experiences of farming communities differ in those instances where farms are owned and managed by women.

⁷ This article explores the ways in which the experiences of women of colour are directed by the intersections of both racism and sexism, and how neither feminism nor antiracism adequately address these intersecting experiences – specifically as it relates to violence against women of colour. More recently scholars have expanded the range of discriminations which can intersect, including e.g. based on gender identity, language, religion, ethnicity, age, and bodily ability.

apartheid), but also a religiously motivated history of racial discrimination and ongoing patriarchal and heteronormative discourses, requires a deep awareness of the situatedness of those living in South Africa – and the reality that not everyone shares the same experiences and privileges and that there are many divides in this society.

When considering the context of Black women working on predominantly white-owned farms in the Western Cape (especially the region of the Winelands), experiences and systemic realities of patriarchy, sexism, racism, and classism are not watertight containers that can be neatly pulled apart. It is precisely the combination of these various forms of discrimination and oppression, which constitute a multi-dimensional, complex context, where each speaks to and amplifies the other. Moreover, the geographical location of farms in rural or semi-rural settings, further adds to the dimensions of discrimination and oppression.

The contextual reading suggested in this chapter aims to focus not only on the contextual realities of Black women working on predominantly white-owned farms in the Western Cape, but also these realities in relation to the Earth. For that reason, I make a hermeneutical choice for a gender-critical reading⁸ informed by ecofeminist theological concerns⁹; that is, a textual engagement which critically examines power relations between male and female representations in the pericope, yet also attempts to move beyond anthropocentric, patriarchal concerns toward a reading which acknowledges and privileges the interdependence between humanity and Earth. Thus, Earth (as a female entity) is specifically included when examining the representation of gendered power relations (both concrete and symbolically) in the selected Johannine text, namely John 15,1-8.

2 The impact of Covid-19, and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 6

Under supposed “normal”, pre-Covid 19 circumstances, women working on farms already faced a range of challenges; inequalities, violations, and forms of violence. Access to clean, running water and to toilets are part

⁸ Gender criticism is an interrogative approach which focuses on the manner in which gender(ed) relations and gendered power are depicted in a particular text. Such an approach is not only interested in concrete depictions of male/masculine and female/feminine, but also in the symbolic representations of gender. It poses questions about who and what represents gendered power in particular situations or depictions, which actions, words and descriptions enforce stereotypes, and where subversion and/or non-conforming gender(ed) worlds are created.

⁹ Ecofeminism is one of a number of successive waves of feminism that emerged in the twentieth century. It describes a wide range of approaches to environmental discourse which

of these. Most commercial wine and fruit farms in the Western Cape have large land surfaces dedicated to vineyards and orchards, typically not close to permanent building structures. In some instances, there are portable toilets available for use. However, often workers must relieve themselves either in the vineyard or orchard, or they must wait until they return to their dwellings. Besides the obvious infringement on the rights to privacy and dignity when having to relieve oneself in an open-air work environment, this also holds serious safety hazards for especially women – given the reality of gender-based violence and rape in South Africa. Moreover, without either a temporary or permanent toilet structure, the availability of toilet paper or paper towels, soap for handwashing, sanitary bins (for safe disposal of tampons, pads, or other sanitary materials), or cleaning aids to ensure a sanitized space are extremely limited – if possible, at all. Moreover, farm workers are often exposed to dangerous and toxic pesticides while working, and do not necessarily have access to protective gear and clothing. Without adequate access to clean and running water and cleaning aids in the working environment, farm workers thus also risk their health and personal safety when handling pesticides or when they move in areas where pesticides are being sprayed.¹⁰

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 is to “(en)sure access to water and sanitation for all (United Nations, 2025)”. The UN unpacks this goal as follows on its website:

While substantial progress has been made in increasing access to clean drinking water and sanitation, billions of people—mostly in rural areas—still lack these basic services. Worldwide, one in three people do not have access to safe drinking water, two out of five people do not have a basic hand-washing facility with soap and water, and more than 673 million people still practice open defecation (United Nations, 2025, unpagged).

The World Health Organization, whose guidelines on the Covid-19 pandemic the South African government has taken as leading medical advice, continues to emphasize the importance of regular handwashing and cleaning of surfaces touched frequently:

typically reflect on the experiences of women and children across the globe who are the victims of environmental destruction. Ecofeminist theology is the theological engagement – from a wide range of theological disciplines, contexts, and hermeneutical frameworks – which engages theologically with eco-justice, patriarchal discourses, dualisms, and exploitation (Conradie, 2011, p. 55).

¹⁰ On 28 August 2019, a group of approximately 200 women marched to Parliament in Cape Town, Western Cape, to demand that the Departments of Labour and of Agricultural, Forestry and Fisheries work together to ban the use of 67 highly hazardous pesticides. The Women on Farms Project (WFP) conducted research in which they found that almost 75% of seasonal workers do not receive protective clothing to wear when dealing with these pesticides, almost 70% touch sprayed surfaces less than an hour after it had been sprayed, and that those residing close to where pesticides are sprayed do not have a means to prevent exposure when at home (Hendricks, 2019, unpagged).

Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. This eliminates germs including viruses that may be on your hands...Clean and disinfect surfaces frequently especially those which are regularly touched, such as door handles, faucets and phone screens (World Health Organization, 2025, unpagged).

The UN, in addition, adds the following to their description of SDG 6, in view of the Covid-19 pandemic:

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the critical importance of sanitation, hygiene and adequate access to clean water for preventing and containing diseases. Hand hygiene saves lives. According to the World Health Organization, handwashing is one of the most effective actions you can take to reduce the spread of pathogens and prevent infections, including the COVID-19 virus. Yet billions of people still lack safe water sanitation, and funding is inadequate (United Nations, 2025, unpagged).

In view of the above-mentioned brief overview of the realities of women working on farms in the Western Cape, it is evident that this goal speaks directly to their context, specifically then as it relates to basic hand-washing facilities (with soap and clean water), regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces (e.g. toilet seats, door handles of toilets), and/or the practice of open defecation. Considering that many women working and living on farms are often far from basic health services such as clinics, pharmacies, or hospitals, further exasperates their vulnerability in relation to the coronavirus. Should they fall ill, quick and efficient treatment is not guaranteed. This heightens not only the health risks for themselves, but also those living with them, given the speed at which the coronavirus spreads.

A woman who is ill and recovering at home, will not necessarily have the luxury of isolating herself from those with whom she shares a home – due to space constraints, but also the role of women on farms which is typically that of the traditional mother and caregiver who tends after the children and performs many of the household chores. Budget constraints will likely also impact the extent to which the household will be able to take additional hygiene and sanitizing measures, during such a recovery period, despite how important it is to prevent the spread of the virus to other members in the household and immediate environment.

3 John 15,1-8: Simply patriarchal, hierarchical imagery?

3.1 Close reading of the text

Vineyard and orchard imagery is often employed in biblical writings, and most often in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament (Scott, 2003,

p. 1198).¹¹ Considering the geographical environment in which large parts of the biblical writings are rooted and people's dependency on that which land provides, this comes as no surprise: biblical authors and their audiences would have been very familiar with such imagery in their ancient Mediterranean settings. All four Gospels in the New Testament contain references to "fruit" (καρπός) and "(grape) vine" (ἀμπελος). The only New Testament reference to "branch" (κλήμα) is found in the Gospel of John.¹²

Turning to the pericope under discussion, there is mention of a "(grape) vine" (ἀμπελος) in 15,1.4 and 5, and "branch" (κλήμα) in 15,2.4, and 6. "Fruit" (καρπός) is mentioned in 15,2.4.8 (and shortly thereafter, in 15:16). The Father is referred to as the "vinedresser" (γεωργός) in 15,1. "Wine" (οἶνος) is not referenced in this pericope, but is found in other places in the Gospel of John – 2,3.9 and 10 (the sign of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana), and in 4,46 (where Cana is identified as the place where Jesus turned water into wine). John 15,1-8 is, therefore, strongly rooted in agricultural imagery. Not only does Jesus refer to himself in metaphor, in this last of the seven "I am" sayings found in the Gospel of John; his Father, the disciples, and that which they do (or produce) are all depicted in metaphorical language (Hagner, 2012, p. 279).¹³

The pericope starts with Jesus clearly identifying himself in the first person as the "true vine", and immediately emphasizes his relationship to his Father, who is "the vinedresser" (15,1). For Du Rand, the qualification of himself as the "true" vine implies that there are also false vines. With the first audiences being familiar with the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, they would likely have been reminded of the imagery in Ezekiel 5, 17 and 19, Hosea 10, Isaiah 5 and Jeremiah 2. These describe the people of Israel as God's vineyard. When this branch does not produce fruit, it comes under the judgment of God. Therefore, Jesus being the true vine is noteworthy: He will not fail. He is reliable and fruitful – the fruit of his ministry on earth is salvation and life (Du Rand, 1993, p. 45). According to Adeyemo, however, "(t)he word translated 'true' focuses on dependability. Jesus was not saying that he is the true vine and that all others are false, but rather that he is the dependable vine" (Adeyemo, 2006, p. 2821). For Brown it could also be translated as "real", thereby not directly

¹¹ He further notes that "(t)he image of the vine is common in Jewish literature, but it is usually connected with the theme of judgment (e.g. Isa 5,1-7; Ezek 15,1-8) ..." (Scott, 2003, p. 1198).

¹² Although καρπός is usually translated with "fruit", it can also be translated as "grain", "crops", and "harvest" – all words which have agricultural connotations.

¹³ The seven "I am" sayings in the Gospel of John are seven instances in which Jesus metaphorically refers to himself in the predicative nominative by using familiar imagery. This is done to describe himself in relation to his disciples and to the world: bread of life (6,48), the light of the world (9,5), the door/gate of the sheep (10,7), the good shepherd (10,11), the resurrection and the life (11,25-26), the way, and the truth, and the life (14,6), and the true vine (15,1).

polemicalizing against a false vine, but rather emphasizing that Jesus is the source of “real life”, “a life that can come only from above and from the Father” (Brown, 1970, p. 674).

The vine has “branches” that have been grafted into it, but not all of these branches necessarily bear “fruit” (15,2). Those who do bear fruit are pruned (“trimmed clean”) by the vinedresser to produce more fruit (15,3) (Brown, 1970, p. 676). Common practice in vine farming is to cut off those branches which do not bear fruit. This is to ensure that they will not drain away any of the plant’s strength – especially from those branches which are bearing fruit (Barclay, 1975, p. 174; Brown, 1970, p. 675).

The metaphorical description is briefly “interrupted” by a second person statement, directed at the disciples: they are “clean”, because of the “word” which Jesus has “spoken” to them. Of importance is the present tense of this state of their being clean: it is already true of them. The “word” here refers to Jesus’ teachings in its entirety (15,3).

Subsequently, a command follows: the disciples are to “remain” in him, and so too will he in them. Each’s “remaining” is dependent on the other. This theme of “remaining” in him, dominates the rest of the pericope. Jesus returns to the metaphorical imagery, now strongly drawing a parallel between a branch which is to “remain” in its source, the vine, to “bear fruit” – and the disciples who must “remain” in Jesus if they are to do likewise (15,4). The description is repeated and amplified. Jesus again reiterates that he is “the vine”, and now makes it explicit that they, the disciples are “the branches” to whom he is referring. The one who is “remaining” in him, and he in him, will bear much “fruit” – because apart from him, they can do nothing (15,5).

What follows is a disturbing and stark image, returning to the branches that were cut off. There are severe consequences for the one who does not abide in Jesus. Such a branch is cast outside, and subsequently withers or dries out. Such branches are gathered and cast into the fire and burned (15,6). This was common practice for dead and dried vine branches, as they were too brittle for repurposing in, e.g., woodworking (Scott, 2003, p. 1198). It also hints at Old Testament vineyard/vine passages which involve a rejection of Israel, which end on a note divine judgment (e.g., Ezek 15,4-6; 19,12) (Brown, 1970, p. 678).

Jesus again takes a step back from the imagery and reminds the disciples that if they “remain” in him, and so also his “words”, whatever they wish to ask they will, and it will be done to them (15,7) (Brown, 1970, p. 679).¹⁴

¹⁴ Interesting to note is that in verses 5 and 6, both the option of remaining in and not remaining in Jesus were set out. However, verse 7 only elaborates on the positive option. The context of Jesus speaking to his own (the disciples) in this pericope is thereby reaffirmed. Those whom he is addressing here, are the ones who remain in him.

This Jesus can say, because those who remain in him will place requests which are harmonious with what he wants. Therefore, it will be granted by the Father. Finally, this pericope closes with a reference to the Father (this time without depicting him as the vinedresser): such “remaining” is how the Father is glorified, that is, by their abundant fruit bearing. This will confirm their status as Jesus’ disciples (15,8).

3.2 Relationality and unity as overarching theological lens

As part of the farewell discourse of the Gospel of John (chapters 13 to 17), this pericope finds itself in the second part of the farewell discussions (15,1-16,33) (Groenewald, 1980, p. 322).¹⁵ As such, it serves the overarching purpose of strengthening the faith of the disciples and encouraging them to faithfully fulfill the commands of the Lord (Groenewald, 1980, p. 322). John 15,1-17 is generally recognized as a unit, with a subunit division for verses 1 to 8 and verses 9 to 17. Verses 1 to 8 deals with the vine and the branches, and verses 9 to 17 with the disciples’ love. One option is to view verses 9 to 17 as the explanation or “unpacking” of the image-laden verses 1 to 8 – a stylistic feature which is common in the Gospel of John (Brown, 1970, p. 665).

Some commentators note that the foundational relationship in this pericope (and the subsequent application of the imagery in 15,9-17), is that of the Father and the Son. It serves as source and as model from which love as fruit is initiated and fed. The unity between the Father and the Son should be the central characteristic and the witness of the disciples, as they are called to remain (be one) with Jesus and with one another (Du Rand, 1993, p. 44). The unity between the Father and Son is how unity between Jesus and his followers are possible, and subsequently also the unity between believers among one another (Groenewald, 1980, p. 322). For the author of John, “Father and Son are never regarded as separate entities each going His way regardless of the other. John sees them at work together” (Morris, 1971, p. 669). The fruit referred to in this pericope, is the faithful fulfillment of the love command which follows in 15,9-12 (Scott, 2003, p. 1198).¹⁶

¹⁵ It would appear as if the theological framework of the farewell discourses of the Gospel of John – that is, the call to unity between believers, based on the unity between the Father and the Son, and Jesus and his followers – is generally the preferred lens opted for by commentators when interpreting this pericope.

¹⁶ In a recent monograph, Musa Victor Mdabuleni Kunene explores the vine metaphor as means toward exploring communal holiness in the Gospel of John. He does so by dialoguing ancient understandings of viticulture, the roots of vine imagery in Ancient Near Eastern, Old Testament, and Second Temple Jewish contexts with the vine metaphor in John 15,1-17. He proceeds towards the description of mutual abiding as Johannine hospitality language as central theme of the pericope and relates this to views of Trinitarian theology in the Gospel of John, and his own Swazi background of communal and kinship hospitality. As such, he argues, this metaphor of the vine contributes to a Johannine theology of corporate holiness (Kunene, 2012, unpagged).

Although such a broader theological framework and macro structure is of importance when engaging a specific pericope in the Gospel of John, it does run the danger of then merely being made to affirm the overarching theme – without recognizing unique features or sub-themes. Moreover, when a sub-unit is simply neatly slotted into an established (and affirming) theological framework, it makes critical engagement with a specific pericope rather challenging. For this chapter – which is, in the first instance, a contextual reading within a very specific contemporary setting – critical engagement is required. This enriches, rather than discredits, such overarching theological themes which are rightly also present. Such enrichment lies in the creative tension between affirmation and critique, reminding again that biblical texts do not allow themselves to be neatly contained or categorized.¹⁷

3.3 Through the lenses of gender criticism and ecofeminist theological concerns

For all the emphasis on the command to the disciples to “remain” in Jesus as he “remains” in them, and the fruit-bearing which should subsequently follow (and increase), there is often little recognition of the patriarchal, hierarchical elements present in these eight verses – despite such reciprocal relationality. In what follows I briefly highlight two specific elements which may be critiqued when read with a gender-critical, ecofeminist lens: first, father language and hierarchical relations, and second, conditionality and dependency. In both cases I will dialogue these elements with the described contextual realities of Black women working on farms in the Western Cape.

3.3.1 Father-language and hierarchical relations

Language matters, because it creates concrete realities and systems of meaning-making, in which people navigate their lives. This is also true of religious experiences, doctrinal matters, ecclesiological structures, and biblical interpretation. In the Christian faith tradition, the Trinity (God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit) is the personal entity to which believers relate

¹⁷ Such critical engagement, attuned to the role of especially colonial and patriarchal power relations embedded within biblical texts as well as in biblical interpretative traditions, form a core motivation for the work of New Testament postcolonial African feminist scholar, Musa Dube. She describes her approach to biblical texts in the interrelated worlds which they represent, as follows: “Postcolonial readings of the Bible must seek to decolonize the biblical text, its interpretations, its readers, its institutions, as well as seeking ways of reading for liberating interdependence. Liberating dependence here entails a twofold willingness on the part of readers: first, to propound biblical readings that decolonize imperialistic tendencies and other narrative designs; second, to propound readings that seek to highlight the biblical texts and Jesus as undoubtedly important cultures, which are nonetheless, not above all, but among the many important cultures of the world” (Dube, 1998, p. 118-135).

and respond to in faith. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, states the following:

One of the most critical items on the agenda of feminists in Africa – albeit one that is sometimes seemingly less urgent – is the person of God. Who God is, what God does, what is of God – these issues are much more urgent for us than other gender issues highlighted by feminists in other parts of the world (Oduyoye, 1994, p. 179).

Language – the titles we ascribe to God – is the way in which we give expression to these “who” and “what” descriptors. In the Gospel of John, the designation of God as Father is of profound theological importance for the author and his audience. Portraying God in an intimate relationship to Jesus, the Son, and to the believers, is a very particular focus of the Gospel of John. Without such an intimate, relational portrayal of God, it would be very hard to exhort believers (through the teachings of Jesus to his disciples) to live in unity with one another.

The use of Father-language for God continues to elicit critique from gender-critical scholars across the board. Such a male designation for God might have biblical roots yet has and continues to be representative of exclusionary patriarchal discourses which, in very practical terms, keep all who are not male (enough), straight, and cisgender in the category of the (lesser) Other – including Earth. In many socio-religious contexts, there is a preference for male God-language, despite the range of imagery available in biblical texts.¹⁸ As noted by Thatcher (2011, p. 23), “(t)he language we inherit is never just neutral or natural”. Male God-language locates a particular type of authority and power in male symbolism and male power. The Gospel of John is especially characterized by male God-language and imagery.

Turning to John 15,1-8: God, the Father, is represented as the vine-dresser who prunes fruitful branches and cuts off unfruitful branches. The vinedresser holds the power to decide which branches remain, and which are removed. Such a decision is made based on productivity (that which the branch produces, namely fruit). The branch is useless if it does not contribute to the fruit-bearing expectation that the vinedresser has of the vine...only useful as firewood. There appears to be a clear hierarchy present between God, the Father, the Son, and the branches – with God, the Father at the top of this hierarchical chain.

Placing such patriarchal language and hierarchical relations in conversation with the context of women farm workers highlight specific

¹⁸ Examples of these are Deut 32,11-12 (God described as a mother eagle); Deut 32,18 (God who gives birth); Ps 131,2 (God as a mother); Isa 49,15 (God compared to a nursing mother); Isa 42,14 (God as a woman in labor); Isa 66,13 (God as comforting mother); Hos 11,3-4 (God described as mother); Hos 13,8 (God described as a mother hen); Matt 23,37 and Luke 13,34 (God as a mother hen); and Luke 15,8-10 (God as woman looking for her lost coin).

patriarchal, racial, and colonial patterns to which they are subjected. The role of women working on farms in the larger commercial agricultural system in the Western Cape is still very much framed by white, patriarchal ideals and ideologies: it is, by and large, a space dominated by white, male farmers and white, male farm owners. White men form the bulk representation of shareholders and stakeholders in all decision-making processes, and engagement with governmental and non-governmental agricultural entities – a role that has often been motivated either implicitly or explicitly by racist, patriarchal, and colonial views of God as Father. In this relational ordering, Black women working on farms serve the goal of ensuring large and healthy harvests, which will contribute to the success of the farm's business.

Although not mentioned in the pericope, the reader might imagine that a particular tool or instrument is required to prune the branches. In terms of the task of pruning or cutting of branches which is performed in the pericope by the Father, the vinedresser, the Black women farm workers could be likened to this “invisible” pair of shears by which such pruning or cutting off takes place. These women do not find themselves in the position of power, with the option of making independent choices, as the vinedresser can. They are subordinates to more powerful, typically white male employers. They are instruments toward the goal of good harvests, whether this is something they enjoy, or not, and are often rendered invisible. The shears also cannot function independently – it can only perform its function if being handled by the vinedresser. For Black women working on farms this raises the poignant question: if their only option for survival is to perform “invisible” labor duties in unfair, unsafe and/or unhygienic working conditions, how much power do they hold? Is independence, equality, or dignity even an option, if being cast in the invisible role of shears that need to be handled by the farm owners and farm managers – the vinedressers?

The Father-language and hierarchical relations extend to Earth as well. The produce on these farms is not only dependent on the hands which labor in them; Earth's ability to perform – be it through soil quality, rain cycles, and the correct turning of the seasons for enough heat and sufficient cold – can make or break an entire season's harvest. A range of factors, of course, influence the ability of Earth to perform and produce at its best. The relationship between Earth and commercial farming is vulnerable, and responsible farming practices are required to ensure that the soil can continue to produce quality fruit, year after year. Climate change affects rainfall patterns and average temperatures. The drought which has plagued the Western Cape for the past few years has had a big impact on especially the amount of fruit and crops which could be harvested (Theron, 2022, p. 208-222; Zwane, 2019, p. 562). This, in turn, has had a knock-on effect on job security and the amount of funds available on farms for employment of

farm workers. In some cases, farmland has had to be sold due to financial instabilities, which often leads to residential or commercial developments being built on land which for years has served farming communities and all those who depended on its produce. These new developments place particular strains on the environment, as population densities increase and human interaction tramples formerly fertile soil.

Thus, the subjugation of farm women workers, and the subjugation of the land are inextricably connected. The gendered dimension of hierarchical oppression experienced by farm women workers is not limited to their human experiences, but exceeds beyond the anthropological to include Earth. What is inflicted on the bodies of women farm workers, impacts on the land. The exploitation of the land, in turn, directly impacts the lives of women farm workers; if the one suffers, the other invariably does too.

3.3.2 Conditionality and dependency

John 15,1-8 contains two conditional clauses, namely in verse 6 and in verse 7. In verse 6 the focus is on the negative, “if *not*...then”, with reference to the one who does not remain in Jesus and is then accordingly thrown into the fire like a fruitless, cut off branch that has been collected for firewood. Morris encourages readers to take seriously the warning tone of this imagery:

The allegory of the vine brings before us the importance of fruitfulness in the Christian life and the truth that this is the result, not of human achievement, but of abiding in Christ. There is a stern side to this. Branches which are not fruitful are purged out. Jesus is not simply issuing some comforting advice. He is outlining the difficult, but important way of service (Morris, 1971, p. 668).

Whereas in the previous section Black women working on farms were likened to the invisible shears used for pruning the vine, here identification may lie with the fruitless branches – the discarded goods, who are deemed useless without performing and producing. One might argue, then, whether Morris’ interpretation of verse 6 provides any comfort at all – especially given these words’ place as part of Jesus’ farewell words to his disciples. Read against the contextual reality of Black women working on farms, who may be familiar with threats, abuse, and violence, this “encouragement” toward “production” (albeit as an employee, as a partner, or as a wife) is perhaps a rather chilling reminder of an all too familiar “if not...then” experience. For one accustomed to walking on eggs, for towing the line to avoid fury and physical attacks, for looking over one’s shoulder every time one leaves the house or is alone in the vineyard, this warning may be very triggering.

In verse 7 the focus is on the positive, “if...then”, with reference to the command to remain in Jesus, and to let his words to remain in them. Should

this happen, then they will ask what they will, and it shall be done unto them. Although this condition is less violent than the one preceding it, it may also raise questions about the dependency it presupposes between a “giver” and a “receiver”: the one petitioning, is dependent on the one petitioned to, to grant their petition. Should it not be granted, then the fault must lie with the one petitioning who then has not “remained” in Jesus or have not (sufficiently) let his “words” “remain” in them. The one petitioned to cannot be at fault. The petitioner is always dependent on the good will of the one petitioned to.

For Black women working on farms, who find themselves in a range of dependency relations (their employee, their partner or husband), this “petition condition” possibly represents experiences of helplessness. Some may experience that they have no other option than to bear with particular “trials and tribulations”, for the sake of survival. Or that they are never quite sure whether they are “on the right track” – whether measured against their “white master’s” approval, or their partner or husband’s satisfaction. If their prayers and petitions are not heard and granted, then the fault lies with them; if they do not receive better treatment or more just working conditions, if Earth does not produce a good harvest, then they have not sufficiently “earned” it. A punishment and reward system thus appears to be firmly in place.

4 Redemptive subversion?

The two points of critique mentioned above paint a grim picture of interpretative possibilities of John 15,1-8 for Black women working on farms in the Winelands of the Western Cape. One might ask: is there any justice or redemption in this passage – words which were meant to encourage Jesus’ disciples before his departure? Is there any way of drawing from this metaphor toward what Kunene calls communal hospitality and corporate holiness, in which the relationality of God, Jesus and disciples stands at the fore (Kunene, 2012, unpaged)? Moreover, is there potential to extend such community ideals to include Earth – not merely as a subject, but also as a valid partner whose voice may be heard?

In the case of John 15,1-8, the verses following it (15,9-17) may provide a restorative, redemptive connection. Verses 9 to 17 make much more mention of interdependence and a loving, reciprocal unity: there is explicit mention of the love between the Father and Jesus, and Jesus and his disciples (15,9); the link between keeping commandments and remaining in love is applied to both the disciples and to Jesus (15,10); joy in its fullest is the purpose of that which Jesus has spoken to the disciples (15,11); the commandment to love one another according to the example set by Jesus

is given (15,12-13; 17); Jesus affirms their status as his friends and not as his servants (15,14-15); and they have been chosen and ordained by Jesus to bring forth fruit that will remain (15,16).

I want to suggest that a subversive reading of the passage – one which deliberately reclaims the two points of critique and inscribes them with affirming content – may be a possibility. Biblical texts never speak for themselves; they are interpreted by the lenses brought to them by readers. As such, the reader has agency and has the option of making a passage their own, read afresh through their own eyes and from their lived reality.

4.1 God as loving Parent, Jesus as a friend

As much as the Father, the vinedresser, is depicted as the authoritative figure in this pericope, one should not lose sight of the intimacy and care such imagery is intended to convey – especially since it is framed by a close and caring relationship with Jesus, the vine, and in turn also the branches who bear fruit. According to O'Day, “the vine metaphor characterizes the Christian community as a community of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling...In their mutuality, Jesus and God anticipate the possibilities of life for the community” (O'Day, 1992, p. 303). Father-language for God may be problematic due to its patriarchal and hierarchical connotations; yet Rakoczy notes that “(i)f we use the word ‘God’ alone or almost exclusively, we obscure the sense of the personal character of God which emerges from the Scriptures.” She suggests that biblical writings contain a wide range of male and female images of God, which point to a rich diversity of personal symbols. The many names for God – also found in the biblical writings – help to deepen our sense of the mystery of God (Rakoczy, 2004, p. 71).¹⁹ O'Day notes that “God is called Father more times in John than in any other book in the New Testament...and to attempt to eliminate that term in the interests of inclusive language would destroy the particularity of the Johannine vision” (O'Day, 1992, p. 304).

One suggestion towards a subversive reading of John 15,1-8 would entail reclaiming the Father and vinedresser imagery as that which it is intended to portray: intimate, caring expressions of love; a reminder of the invitation extended to followers of Jesus to be part of a relationship which in no way can compare to any human relationship they know. By “remaining” as fruit-bearing branches in the vine, who is tended by the vinedresser, one agrees to a life-giving relationship which transcends the hierarchies of worldly relations, and which provides sustenance for

¹⁹ Examples of names for God which appear in the Scriptures include: the Lord our Provider (Gen 22,14); the Lord our Healer (Exod 15,26); the Lord our Banner (Exod 17,15); the Lord our Peace (Judg 6,24); the Lord our Shepherd (Ps 23,1); the Lord our Righteousness (Jer 23,6); the Lord is Here (Ezek 48,35).

a life which is more than merely survival. This opens the possibility of a call to solidarity with women farm workers, as God the Father is the Parent who sees their plight, who takes care of them in love, who does not leave them to their own devices. If God is the God who sides with the poor, the marginalized and the destitute, then surely God the Father is the loving Parent who sides with women farm workers. If it is God the Father who is recognized as the vinedresser – and not a human master – what are the implications for the shears, the women farm workers, who are included in the process of pruning, tending, mending, and caring in the vineyards for Earth? Emphasising that God, the loving Parent is not equal to human masters who use and abuse, exhorts the reader to a different and new way of thinking about the power relations between farm owners, women farm workers, and Earth – one which undermines the status quo, and which radically points toward a redemptive, healing way of living.

Turning to the clauses referring to the branches that are to bear fruit, it is important to note that when Jesus addresses his disciples in John 15, he is speaking to those who have been “pruned” (and not those who were cut off) during three years of fellowship with him. They are the ones who have already agreed to “remain” in him, and they have shared in the “words” of Jesus as their teacher. Already in John 13, after washing their feet, he affirmed their relationship as one of friendship, not of mastering and servanthood. In John 15,14-15 this is repeated, and one wonders whether it is to assure them that the ominous words of 15,6 refers rather to the one who has already chosen not to “remain” in Jesus (that is, Judas Iscariot), rather than to any immediate choices they might make. O’Day suggests that the metaphor of the vine provides a radical nonhierarchical, “perhaps even antihierarchical image”. Branches are not distinguishable from one another, they are rooted together in the one vine, and it is only because of their common root that they can bear fruit (O’Day, 1992, p. 303). Such an interpretation opens the possibility of likening women farm workers and farm owners to branches. Moreover, the assessment of fruitfulness falls to God alone (15,2) – God is the one who works to prune and shape the vine, and God is the one who decides what is dead wood. Such nonhierarchical or antihierarchical interpretation of the metaphor of the vine turns the familiar master-worker and human-Earth relations on their head: again, it calls for a radically new and different way of imagining who fulfills which role in the relationship, and to what extent mastery over submission is appropriate if the flourishing and fruit bearing of the entire vineyard is at stake.

4.2 Interdependence and agency

Following the previous descriptions of relationality, a subversive contextual reading of John 15,1-8 may be to focus on the interdepen-

dence and agency – rather than mere dependence – of Black women working on farms. Thereby these women could be recognized as having a form of agency, and that they are not (only) victims of unjust and unfair exploitative systems in which they, and Earth, are expected to perform and produce.

Such interdependence and agency affect the way the women farm worker relates to the farmer, and to the Earth. It draws from the above discussion on the relationship of closeness between Jesus and the Father, and the interwoven relationship between the branches of the vine. God recognizes the toil and the struggles of women farm workers, and sides with them. It is the closeness between Jesus and the Father that serves as model for human relations, for working together in caring and cooperative relationships of communality. This is radically different from the party in the position of power, assuming that the position of God is up for grabs in relation to other humans, or to Earth. As such, for both the farmer and the women farm worker, God is the loving Parent – a loving Parent whose concerns extends also to a relationship of care and nurture for Earth.

Contextual realities reveal that the female farm worker is the one toiling on Earth, yielding the Earth to do what the master orders and expects (H)er to do. She is dependent on the Earth for her livelihood. Earth's performance and produce determines whether there is food on the table and a roof over her head. Should Earth not perform and produce, the security of not only an income but also of a place to live is in jeopardy. Yet there is a relationship of interdependence present, as Earth will not produce healthy and strong fruit and crops on this scale, without some form of human intervention. Fruit and crops can grow wild, yet without respectful involvement from human hands, these will not be sufficient to support the number of livelihoods which an average commercial farm in the Western Cape does. Both gain from the relationship, should it be done within fair and just measures.

By affirming interdependence between these women, Earth, and their employers, women working on farms have agency. They depend on the just and fair treatment of their typically male, white employers whilst earning a living. Yet they are the multitude of hands which perform the tasks needed in the vineyards and orchards, to ensure successful businesses. Commercial agricultural activity cannot run at a loss if it wants to contribute to the economy and provide employment for the thousands who depend on it. Women working on farms are frontline workers – their hands are in the soil, touch the fruit, harvest the crops. They are involved in every step of growth process. Therefore, they can and should demand fair, safe and just working conditions, and have their voices heard loud and clear through dialogue, protest and action. Employers must be chal-

lenged and brought to accountability, and this is increasingly being done by both the South African Human Rights Commission, as well as a range of non-governmental organizations who work with women farm workers. Greater civil support, including support from religious communities in especially these farm environments, needs to take place. John 15,1-8 is a stark reminder of the alternative community which disciples of Jesus need to proclaim. It cannot be business as usual, when God, the Father is the vinedresser.

By affirming interdependence, the need to be respectful and sustainable towards the Earth, in terms of agricultural activity, is also amplified.²⁰ The organic imagery of John 15,1-8 is a helpful reminder that women working on farms, not only work on Earth, but also work with Earth. The relationship with Earth as source of life echoes the relationship with Jesus as source of life. Workers share the responsibility of Earth-keeping – they are not only farm workers, but they are also Earth-keepers. Through their daily interaction with Earth, they have an intimate knowledge of Earth and her abilities, which can and should be relayed to farm owners and managers. Earth may whisper, but women working on farms have the advantage of tactile, sensory engagement with every cycle of the vine, tree, and fruit. Whilst history can attest to the silencing of both poor, Black women, as well as Earth, these voices are precisely those which need to be listened to if both Earth and humanity are to continue “bearing fruit in abundance”.

Conclusion

In this article, I set out to do a contextual reading of John 15,1-8 – one which considers the lived realities of Black women working on farms in the Western Cape province of South Africa. This reading was dialogued with the limitations to access to safe toilets, and hygiene measures which can ensure a sanitized working environment during this time of the Covid-19 pandemic. A first contextual reading of John 15,1-8 in dialogue with these realities, may well raise valid critique against the Father-language and hierarchical relations represented in this pericope, as well as the portrayal of conditionality and dependency between the branches, the vine, and the vinedresser. However, a subversive contextual reading may, in turn, reclaim the relational imagery as that of God as loving Parent and Jesus as friend, and a sense of interdependency and agency for especially women working on farms and for Earth. Thereby,

²⁰ In practical terms, this entails e.g., ecopreservation and the regulation of genetically modified products which destroy Mother Earth.

the already increasing protest and activism movements, which highlight both the plight of women working on farms and of ecological injustices (e.g. Women on Farms Project), is theologically framed. The undergirding hermeneutical lens then becomes one of justice for all (men, women, farm owner, farm worker, white, black, human, Earth) which transcends hierarchical, patriarchal, and racist relations, toward life-giving, organic relations of intimacy and care.

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