

## INTRODUCTION

# The Seventies

IN 1974, nine South African activists were put on trial for terrorism. They were all officers in either the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) or the Black People's Convention (BPC)—organizations known collectively as the Black Consciousness Movement—and they were charged with threatening the peace, order, and security of the white minority-governed apartheid state. The trial stretched on for over seventeen months; it was the longest, to that date, of apartheid's innumerable security or terrorism trials. Along the way, the defendants, the state prosecutor, the judge, and other witnesses paused on numerous occasions to debate the character and political opinions of Jesus Christ.

The discussions revolved especially around a resolution SASO, the oldest of these two organizations, had passed in 1973, which described Christ as "the first freedom fighter to die for the liberation of the oppressed."<sup>1</sup> The resolution went on to detail how Christ had earned this reputation by associating with known Zealots, described as the anticolonial revolutionary radicals of first-century Palestine, and perhaps even the Essenes, described as an "Israeli guerilla warfare unit against the Romans." The judge asked witnesses to explain what this meant. Some demurred; others, perhaps recognizing that they were going to jail anyway, drew comparisons between the Essenes and the Front for Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), whose guerrilla forces had just taken power in neighboring Mozambique. Discussions about these and other theological issues went on and on, to the point that the state prosecutor, faced with defendants who repeatedly referred to the Bible and Christ to make their case, grew frustrated. "SASO and BPC are very fond of bringing religious connotations into lots of things," he finally complained.<sup>2</sup> He had a point.

These young activists appeared to have drawn rather interesting conclusions about the theory and practice of resistance to apartheid, based not exclusively on politics or ideology but on theology.

Consider the plea penned by Kaborane Gilbert Sedibe, the Student Representative Council (SRC) president from the University of the North, in preparation for the trial. Sedibe explained that the charges against him were “an evil indictment . . . an indictment against God for having created me black . . . [and] an indictment against Christ for having said that I am a free man.” Such evil, however, did not surprise him because “the ‘son of the soil’ — O.R. Tiro” — Sedibe’s predecessor as SRC president — had “prophesied of these accusations against the Black man before his fateful death.” Sedibe then used the Bible to rebut the charges: “God says to us in Galatians 5:1 that we must stand strong in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free and be not entangled with the yoke of bondage. For declaring this liberty I am being charged. This should not surprise us for the word tells us in II Corinthians 2:14 that ‘And do not marvel for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.’” Sedibe thus used Christianity against the white state that had long used that religion to justify its policies. He inverted state theology and countercharged that his prosecutors, as representatives of apartheid’s law, were in fact Satan, disguised in their whiteness as angels of light. And against them he wielded the words and warnings of a recently assassinated “prophet,” Ongkopotse Tiro, a student leader like Sedibe, who spoke with a righteous voice that sanctified “secular” politics. Sedibe’s plea was a profound political statement in a country that disparaged those with darker skins and claimed that God’s countenance shone especially on the descendants of white settlers. It was also a theological statement. Sedibe was a Christian; he knew his Bible and did not enlist the word of God without reflection. When he pleaded that “Black Consciousness preaches the freedom and liberation of the Black man from evil power representing Satan,” he meant it. When he claimed that “our struggle is [a] Godly and genuine one, and as the Word of God in the Acts of the Apostles 5:39 says: ‘Since it is of God, ye’ i.e. forces of oppression, ‘cannot overthrow it, lest ye be found to fight against God,’” he spoke in the political tongue of his time and place.<sup>3</sup>

This episode — adrift amid the flotsam of pretrial filings — was but one of many well-known conflicts between apartheid law and opposition prophets during South Africa’s 1970s. Yet that struggle is only part of the story. Although Sedibe stood accused of fomenting rebellion against the state and thus of black opposition to apartheid as conventionally understood, his plea’s structure alluded to less overt acts of rebellion. He began from a simple premise: he and his fellow accused were “advocates for the dignity of the Black man as created in the image of God.” The implications of this were legion and suggestive of more than a simple struggle against a particular legal system. Black

Consciousness, Sedibe indicated, was not just a resistance ideology; it was about “dignity”—about the essential wholeness of a singular being who knew herself (or, in his language, himself) as “Black.” Moreover, the “dignity of the Black man” for which Black Consciousness activists advocated came with a weighty stamp of approval, since it was in the divine’s own image. Following Sedibe’s plea, then, he and the others were accused of a crime altogether more fundamental than fomenting rebellion against the apartheid state. They had had the temerity to claim the existence of dignified black selves in South Africa, who were, in spite of apartheid’s ideological premises, the very “image of God.”

Conflicts between apartheid law and opposition prophets resonated on these multiple levels from 1968 until 1977. This period began during an ebb in the often spectacular struggles for change in twentieth-century South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Yet the opposition’s weakness and the white minority’s strength made this a pregnant pause, a time for reflection, and only after that could action be taken. This decade opened the intellectual space for a new generation of South African thinkers to explore the possibility that superficially simple statements—“I am Black,” “I am a Man,” “I have dignity,” “I am the image of God”—might be profoundly potent. From the depths of oppression, they argued that change was not impossible but would in fact come when people had faith and hope enough to imagine their way beyond their predicament. Between 1968 and 1977, South African students, clergy, and cultural and other activists donned the prophet’s mantle and spoke historical truths to the power of apartheid law. They did so first in student group meetings, in theological seminars, in sermons and newsletters and poetry; then came protests, rallies, trials, uprisings, death, and in time some sort of change. *The Law and the Prophets* is the story of this generation and about what their lives reveal regarding the potential and perils of thinking in time.

#### BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND AFRICAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

At the outset, I noted that Sedibe and his fellow accused were affiliated with antiapartheid organizations, which, by 1974, observers increasingly labeled the Black Consciousness Movement. That movement’s history is well known. It began with the founding of SASO, an all-black student group that broke with the multiracial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) in 1969, and emerged by the early 1970s as the critical center of internal resistance to apartheid during that decade. In the grand narrative of antiapartheid, Black Consciousness filled the gap between the 1950s and early 1960s and the younger generation of activists who emerged in the wake of the Soweto protests of June 1976. Black Consciousness leaders, exemplified by Steve Biko, inspired black South Africans with new ideas about dignity and self-worth,

and these in turn inspired a resurgence in popular pressure against apartheid, despite Biko's death while in police custody in September 1977 and the banning of Black Consciousness organizations the following month. Many scholars have narrated the movement's story during these few years, and although there is disagreement about the particulars, the consensus is that between 1968 and 1977, Black Consciousness organizations and activists reignited resistance to white minority rule. They lit a fuse, as it were, that burned through the furies of popular protest in the 1980s, until South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994.<sup>5</sup>

*The Law and the Prophets* is about these critical nine years, but it does not tell the same story. The literature on Black Consciousness and the 1970s is largely limited to political science and theory, and not surprisingly, it is consumed with the question of overt resistance to apartheid. Furthermore, since that resistance eventually came—exemplified by the Soweto students who took to the streets in 1976—the literature comprises retrospectively triumphant accounts. Yet as Sedibe's plea and the religious tenor of the aforementioned trial indicate, movement histories are rather reductive accounts of this past. Sedibe cast himself as a prophet, wielding the divine revelation of freedom against the constraints of the white state. Can politics—and conventional political narratives—capture this? Can movement histories capture the story of young students such as Malusi Mpumlwana, who joined SASO in the early 1970s not because he wanted to build South African democracy but because he wanted a more human society, “a totally new reality in South Africa”?<sup>6</sup> White supremacy would be resisted along the way, but the change that Mpumlwana sought outpaced apartheid's laws. His recollection resonates with that of another activist, Bongki Mkhabela, who was much younger than he when, imbued with the ideas of Black Consciousness, she helped to organize the 1976 protests that made Soweto famous. She spent years in prison for her activities at that time and was crushed to discover upon her release that her world had not progressed but regressed. Although she had come of age during politics' ebb and had left prison during the flood of protest that marked the early 1980s, she remembers the latter decade as “the saddest period in our history.” True, there were politics and opposition aplenty, as the flame that she had helped light was finding more fuel, but in her memory, “the place that used to be home, that used to be so embracing, so warm, was icy cold.”<sup>7</sup> A different, less triumphant, less determined narrative connects Mpumlwana's desire to create a totally new reality in the early 1970s and Mkhabela's abject disappointment in their generation's failure to do so, despite evident political success. That too is the story of Black Consciousness, and I think that it is more true to the historical experience of those who lived it, even, perhaps, if they themselves have grown more accustomed to the teleology those other narratives developed.<sup>8</sup> It is a story of thought first unbounded and then bound, of ideas that became an ideology, and of what was lost along the way.

Other histories demonstrate the implications of this approach. In his justly famous study *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, Roger Chartier drew our attention to what he neatly labeled “the chimera of origins.” Faced with explaining such resonant historical events as the French Revolution, Chartier argued, scholars frequently read history backward to suppose “a sorting out process that retains, out of the innumerable realities that makes up the history, only the matrix of the future event.” Like the French Revolution, so too do “events” such as Soweto 1976, elections in 1994, Truth, Reconciliation, and indeed the political struggle against apartheid itself impose themselves on our reading of the past, leading to studies whose fundamental assumptions privilege certain interpretations of the story before the telling. The present’s finger on the scale thus yields misleading readings of the past.<sup>9</sup> Black Consciousness was multiple and contingent, subject to debate and change. There is disagreement about whether it was responsible for planning the Soweto uprising in 1976—but it is inarguable that the ideas, discourses, and imaginations that inspired students to protest on 16 June belonged to the years that came before. With this in mind, I take cues from new literature on the Black Power movement in the United States that emphasizes process, not politics, and the contingent moments around which political movements cohered and fractured, thus moving beyond grand narratives that make the story triumphantly legible but less historical.<sup>10</sup> Subjecting Black Consciousness to a more historicist reading opens up new avenues for recapturing the late 1960s and early 1970s. In history, triumphant tales of students becoming politicians are still there—but as Sedibe, Mpumlwana, and Mkhabela suggest, they are not the only stories.

The recovery of these other stories demands inquiry into the intellectual past, a field with which African history is unpracticed at best.<sup>11</sup> One might speculate as to why this is so. After all, if we agree with Saul Dubow, “intellectual history is not by its nature democratic or popular,” and African history has long been a discipline in search of both.<sup>12</sup> Intellectual history as practiced elsewhere remains a redoubt of great men (and occasionally women), and if we want to mine the African historical canon for it, the nationalist movements would be a good place to start. Amílcar Cabral, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, and the like remain African history’s exemplary intellectuals, perhaps because their exceptionalism was in service of political transformations. Yet in *The Law and the Prophets*, I aspire to go beyond this. I do not want merely to add another statue—of Biko, perhaps?—to the Heroes’ Acre of African nationalist thinkers; instead, I hope to broaden the category of African intellectual history.

The students, clerics, and artists who comprised the Black Consciousness Movement came from South Africa’s small, black middle class, those privileged enough to spend time at universities and to read and reflect on their

situation.<sup>13</sup> They were thus the descendents of previous generations of African thinkers whose ideas figure prominently in works that examine the history of African theater and poetry, journalism and academia.<sup>14</sup> Yet they came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, when apartheid's laws most drastically limited the prospects of access and advancement that preceding generations had sought in education. They were at once a part of the colonial, modernizing, Westernized system and apart from the dominant society that squeezed their aspirations. In this, they shared the predicament of black thinkers throughout the African diaspora, such as those featured in the work of Paul Gilroy, Robin Kelley, and Gary Wilder, all of whom lobbed critiques from positions of relative privilege and thus more stinging alienation. Just as Wilder's interwar Francophone intellectuals were prompted by their circumstances to launch an "imminent critique . . . from a standpoint internal to the existing society . . . [but pointing] to sociopolitical alternatives beyond it," so too did 1970s activists develop ways of thinking through and beyond their predicament. Interwar thinkers had developed their imminent critique through intellectual exploration, through poetry and banquets, salons and dances, all moments that political narratives tend to ignore. For his part, Sedibe used the Bible. *The Law and the Prophets* follows the examples of Wilder and others and resists the comforting temptation to track political change. Instead, it dwells on the thinking without which progress was impossible.<sup>15</sup>

That, perhaps, is this study's signature contribution: as intellectual history, it asserts the importance of both thinkers and their ideas. Historians have masterfully excavated the ways in which Africans have thought about political practice. They have recovered dense, vibrant political theory from beneath the weight of colonial paternalism and racist condescension and presented convincing arguments about what people must have thought at various points in the past.<sup>16</sup> This is what I aspire to do: to recast Black Consciousness, to show that before there was a movement, there were thinkers, activists, students at home with books and ideas who made the latter work in their particular historical context. My source base grants me access. Just as Jan Vansina upstreamed via words, I can follow ideas, track precedents, translations, domestications.<sup>17</sup> As Harry Nengwekhulu, a SASO founder from the University of the North, suggested, ideas were tools: "We read, man, [and then] we used to write articles on different topics . . . [and] we just wrote."<sup>18</sup> *The Law and the Prophets* is about the thought that went into this; it demonstrates how thinking bridged the 1960s quiet and 1970s events in a way that no movement could.

But about what did activists think? Sedibe again provides guidance here. Although he understood himself to be engaged in opposition to the state—how could it not be so, given the circumstances under which he wrote?—he was careful to note that Black Consciousness was, at its root, about the

“dignity of the Black man.” In the few years that followed SASO’s founding in 1968, activists took none of these concepts for granted; neither “dignity,” nor “black,” nor “man” was assured, let alone struggle against the state. Before politics, there was self-fashioning. As a 1970 issue of the *SASO Newsletter* put it, members needed to ask themselves, “Who are we? What are we talking about? Where are we today? Whither are we going?”<sup>19</sup> These were questions designed to promote insight—into oneself, into one’s circumstances, and into one’s future. The various aspects that made up individuals’ senses of themselves were taken apart and examined, embraced or rejected. That this later provoked a political response says a great deal about the time and place where activists lived and about the perils of intellectual exploration.

Under apartheid, identifications were politically charged. For his part, Sedibe claimed to be a black man, and following his lead, *The Law and the Prophets* is sensitive to the deeply gendered nature of the decade’s thought.<sup>20</sup> Scholars have frequently noted gender’s rather fraught place in the development and articulation of radical political movements across the African diaspora—and especially in the turn toward race nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>21</sup> In studies of the period, most agree with Michael Gomez, who, writing about the Nation of Islam, argued that “the agenda, quite simply, was the aggregation of power and prerogative among black men; indeed, given their relative disadvantage vis-à-vis white males, the disempowerment of black women became almost essential to the creation of a sense of empowerment within the collective psyche of black men; it was certainly a route more readily available to such an end.”<sup>22</sup> As Robert Morrell has contended, white masculinity was hegemonic across the African diaspora, and in South Africa, as elsewhere, black men frequently responded by fashioning a similarly hegemonic masculinity that was predicated on the use and control of black women.<sup>23</sup> To note this is not to diminish the ways in which apartheid was keyed to the “unmanning” of black men.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it is to open gendered assumptions, articulations, and outcomes to careful study and to reveal the multiplicities hidden within the category of black men.

After all, those Marlon Ross called “interested others”—notably black women—were deeply involved and invested in what has been largely conceived as a struggle between black and white men.<sup>25</sup> Young, female activists such as Bongki Mkhabela dedicated themselves to the pursuit of dignity; other women served in Black Consciousness community development organizations; women were vital voices in the seminars where thinkers first tested their ideas; some women articulated limited but potent feminist-inspired demands; and by the mid-1970s, the Black People’s Convention was led by a woman. These observations disrupt generalizations about the era’s gender politics. Even if the goal was the dignity of black men, black women fought for this as well: as one former

activist has contended, women made “a strategic choice” to shelve specifically female concerns “in the face of opposition from a seemingly invincible white national-party state that was quick to exploit any sign of division in order to subjugate Black people even further.”<sup>26</sup> As *The Law and the Prophets* demonstrates, such choices had histories. Much as the terms *black* and *man* were contingent and meaningful, so was the gendered pursuit of dignity muddled as well.

The contested politics of gender and selfhood resonated globally during the 1960s and 1970s. Black students in South Africa knew this, and they domesticated global intellectual currents—feminism, nationalism—and put them to work. Their context was both local and global. They came of age not only during the local lull in opposition politics that marked the 1960s but also in “the sixties,” a decade that saw young people the world over effect the new left turn away from movement politics to identity politics, participatory democracy, and the politics of authenticity. It was a time when individuals’ senses of themselves—when their ideas—were fashioned into tools with which to pursue postcolonial and postmodern protest. South Africans were still in the throes of their particular sort of modernity and coloniality, but they asked themselves questions in conversation with their peers and plotted an existentialist path toward a future predicated on who they were, what they were talking about, and where they wanted to go. Black Consciousness was built not with the raw materials of political Africanism or multiracialism—the ideologies with which it is most often compared—but rather at the interstices of intellectual debate and contestation about fundamental issues of being.<sup>27</sup>

This preoccupation with questions of existence spoke to a wider trend in African(a) intellectual history. From the 1950s on, typically white existentialism had enjoyed a fruitful tension with diaspora anticolonial and antiracist thought. Thinkers from Jean-Paul Sartre to Albert Camus, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire collectively probed the historical production of racial and other identities and debated the appropriate response. Not surprisingly, each of these thinkers featured at critical moments in the development of Black Consciousness ideas. Yet African intellectual history was not merely derivative of European or American intellectual history; South African students, for example, developed their ideas in a dramatically different context than their French or American peers—or even their Afro-American ones. All asked questions about “freedom, anguish, dread and responsibility,” but in South Africa in particular, the “teleological question of black liberation” and the actions necessary to realize it loomed.<sup>28</sup> Let me be clear here: this teleology is of a different order than that of the triumphant antiapartheid tomes. It is more eschatological than anything else, concerned not with how the very particular struggle against apartheid would end but with the undetermined ending

the SASO *Newsletter* suggested—“Whither are we going?”—within a context where going somewhere was a pressing need. Indeed, South African black thought during the early 1970s was frequently less about explicit resistance to apartheid and more about fundamental ethical questions regarding how one should live in service of the future.<sup>29</sup>

Such ethical questions have often been the purview of prophets, and *The Law and the Prophets* traces how South African thinkers developed their unique political philosophy. The three chapters that constitute part 1 first set the historical and intellectual stage and then follow the construction of the Black Consciousness idea-set from student seminars to the SASO *Newsletter* from roughly 1968 until 1972. That time period—as well as many of the characters and ideas prominent then—also figures in parts 2 and 3; in order to better situate later events within my new reading of Black Consciousness, part 1 disaggregates Black Consciousness thought in order to cast its details into sharper relief.

The three chapters in this part trace how students and other activists worked diligently to define and embody new black selves, even as they begged the question of what those selves would do. By the mid-1970s, however, new pressures and contingencies helped to effect a reconciliation of sorts between consciousness-raising and the pursuit of political power. Activists met these new challenges with another set of ideas about progress and change, ideas that had also developed over the previous years and were drawn, as Sedibe demonstrated, from Christianity.

#### LIBERATING CHRISTIANITY THROUGH FAITH AND HOPE

Here is another Black Consciousness story. In 1967, a multiracial group of South African students met at Grahamstown to form a new ecumenical Christian group premised on “race relations rather than race separations.”<sup>30</sup> Black Christian students flocked to join this new organization, which shared the name University Christian Movement (UCM) with its American counterpart, ensuring that it soon had a black majority. In time, however, the importance of race relations within the UCM was gradually eclipsed by believers’ efforts to interpret Christ’s specific message to South Africa’s black oppressed. By dint of choice and circumstance, these explorations moved in a particular direction, as evidenced by the tone of a funeral held nearly a decade after the Grahamstown meeting. A SASO activist had died under mysterious circumstances in police custody, but the preacher did not bemoan his death. Instead, the minister hailed it as a “majestic closing of a career of public service.” “Christ’s death is the prototype of all deaths that are a mask of victory,” he continued, and so, like Christ, the dead activist had actually won.<sup>31</sup> South Africa’s Christ covered a great deal of ground during the seventies: it was Christ whose love brought people of all races together; it was Christ who had

a particular message for singularly oppressed black South Africa; it was Christ who died on the cross and taught that death was worth it.

South Africa's Christ thus tells another story, which part 2 explores in the context of the development of Black Consciousness thought in part 1. Black Consciousness initially begged off the question of the future, yet the question of liberation, however defined, remained. Lewis Gordon's recent study of Africana existentialism hinges on Christianity as the link between existentialist inwardness and the black quest for liberation; similarly, for South Africans Christianity was an essential and intrinsic tool. I will suggest that there are numerous reasons for this, some perhaps in keeping with Slavoj Žižek's stubborn insistence that Christianity contains vast, if typically unrealized, revolutionary potential. The faith plots an absolute break with the past and places hope in the future, he and others contend, and it therefore offers a revolution so total, so complete, as to be entirely free of teleology.<sup>32</sup> Black Consciousness philosophy probed the future in this undetermined Christian way; students counseled each other to prepare the people for "the day of reckoning" when black South Africa might "rejoice in the knowledge that we have been architects of our own future."<sup>33</sup> "No nation can win a battle without faith," Steve Biko wrote, and through faith came hope that change was not "an eschatological myth but an achievable goal."<sup>34</sup>

Such religiosity might not surprise us. After all, Gordon's quick turn to black Christianity to explain black philosophy is one of many recent moves in that direction. In African studies, the interpenetration of the political, the religious, the cultural, and the ethical has long been noted and is now enjoying a bit of a revival.<sup>35</sup> South Africa's Christ was carried on the shoulders of reams of theological and political critique, in conversation with similar trends around the world. As such, the seventies offer a privileged vantage point from which to watch this multifaceted process unfold and to observe thinkers engaged in the quintessentially modern project of self-fashioning, with tools—faith and hope—that secularization had been supposed to render out of date.

It is not exactly novel to note this. The Christian tenor of black South African politics stretches back to Tiyo Soga's nascent Africanism in the mid-nineteenth century—and perhaps even beyond, to his prophetic antecedents Nxele and Ntsikana.<sup>36</sup> Christianity has been an essential component of South African nationalisms—both black and white—from turn-of-the-century Ethiopian irruptions through Garveyite prophets in the 1920s to Anton Lembede's theologies of blood and territory to Sedibe's plea. Yet too much of this literature falls back on the language of anthropological curiosity—asking "Isn't it remarkable?" rather than the more satisfying "How did it work?"<sup>37</sup> *The Law and the Prophets* is less interested in noting that the sacred and secular were interpenetrated than in seeing how Christianity worked in late 1960s and early 1970s South Africa.

In what follows, I endeavor to listen to actors' explanations and understandings of their beliefs, aspirations, and actions. Recall Sedibe one last time. His tone was just so Christian, so assured in its faith in God and Christ and in the belief that the revelations revealed in scripture meant something. Scholars beyond African studies—and indeed, all people concerned with faith's often contentious role in public life—can learn a great deal from such sincere efforts to understand and apply revelation in the world.<sup>38</sup> *The Law and the Prophets* strives to be careful not to turn the Christian faith into a shorthand to talk about something else, as in other studies where the label *Christian* is applied in discussions about how people changed the way they dressed or began to handle money.<sup>39</sup> Rather, as J. D. Y. Peel has reminded us, “the redemptive sacrifice of Christ does not imply double-entry book keeping or vice versa.” If Christians are “irreducibly” Christian, we need to go where they are and were, to note that about which they spoke and wrote, and to see in the 1970s how the path from nineteenth-century conversion to twenty-first-century Pentecostalism was long and jagged, full of fits and starts and constant debate.<sup>40</sup>

The three chapters of part 2 elaborate on the development of Black Consciousness in part 1 by tracing South Africans' engagement with the Christian faith and Christian theology during roughly the same time period, the late 1960s and first years of the 1970s. This process led clergy and lay Christians—and even unbelievers—to look without flinching at the faith's history and failings in South Africa (and Africa in general) and to discard and reassess according to their moment's demands. Like their SASO counterparts, Christians affiliated with the UCM and other organizations read widely and vigorously translated ideas from the United States, Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere in Africa. In time, this process led many to a total redefinition of the Christian faith in the South African context, from one complicit in colonization and dispossession to a message of assured liberation, in spite of the manifold bonds of the present. Biko had argued that victory was a matter of faith, and *The Law and the Prophets* probes the past to consider how and whether this was so.

#### THE POLITICAL TURN

But critically, such faith came “in spite of” of present circumstances. Søren Kierkegaard argued that this was the very essence of faith, which meant “to see the sword hanging over the head of the beloved” but still to live with joy.<sup>41</sup> In the late 1960s, the theologian Jürgen Moltmann agreed and then added an eschatological dimension. Faith knows what it knows to be true, Moltmann wrote, “and hope awaits the time when this truth shall be manifested.”<sup>42</sup> The movement from faith to hope was a progression in time and space, from fraught present to as yet unknown future, from the land of Pharaoh to the land of milk and honey. The point was to look forward, to hope in spite of

the present—which, in 1970s South Africa, meant in spite of apartheid and in spite of politics.<sup>43</sup>

Keeping faith can be costly, however, as one more Black Consciousness story illustrates well. Onkgopotse Abraham Tiro was born in the northern Transvaal village of Dinokana in 1945. He attended government schools in his hometown, in Soweto, and in Mafeking, with breaks to work when money was short, and he was a diligent and enthusiastic lay leader and preacher in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. In the early 1970s, he matriculated to the apartheid-mandated university for Sotho-, Tswana-, and Pedi-speakers at Turfloop, where he joined SASO and became SRC president. In this capacity, he was asked to deliver a speech extolling education to parents, students, and government-appointed administrators; instead, he raised his voice against the inequities of Bantu education. He was expelled from the university for these sentiments and moved to Soweto to teach high school math, advise a Seventh-Day Adventist youth group, and organize for SASO in Johannesburg. Government pressure pursued him, and he soon left for exile in Botswana. He died there, killed by a parcel bomb in early February 1974. Tiro had been Sedibe’s “prophet,” the “son of the soil” who foretold future trials, and he had helped to determine activists’ responses. It was Tiro who introduced the resolution discussed at the outset of this introduction, which hailed Christ as the “first freedom fighter to die for the liberation of the oppressed.” Perhaps he had had this example in mind when, shortly before his death, he wrote and urged those still in South Africa to remain fearless and hopeful in spite of setbacks. His organization was part of a movement by that point; self-fashioning and ethical critique were increasingly part of a bounded ideology known as Black Consciousness. As Tiro’s example demonstrates, where there was politics, there would be suffering, and there would be setbacks.

By the mid-1970s, whether by design or by accident, the Black Consciousness Movement was swept into the antiapartheid struggle, with the ideological conflict and violence that that entailed. Violence befell narratives as well, forcing faith and hope in a “totally new reality” to give way to the far more limited, if laudable, goal of ending apartheid. To be sure, faith still had a role to play—graveside orators celebrated activists killed by the police, declaring, “Lord, we are sure we shall win, because You are on our side”—but political setbacks and political determinations reduced the struggle’s scale.<sup>44</sup> Part 3’s chapters move the story from the late 1960s and early 1970s to its end in 1977. I first trace the theory and practice of spreading what activists referred to as the gospel of Black Consciousness. Ideas become ideologies as they move from mouth to mouth and tract to tract; they freeze, as it were, because frozen, they are blunter tools, more easily wielded in political trenches. Part 3 most explicitly gives the entire study its title, as prophets associated with the Black

Consciousness Movement faced the law in protests, strikes, streets, courtrooms, and funerals and assumed the form familiar from the grand narrative of the struggle against apartheid.

Yet this encounter—and the study’s title—can be read in a second, more insidious way. When the Black Consciousness Movement joined the political struggle to end apartheid, it lost the truly revolutionary potential Žižek saw in Christianity. Apartheid limited its opposition’s dreams. The system’s laws would bind South Africans for only two decades more; the idea that ending those laws had been the goal all along has lasted far longer. As the seventies dawned, activists had sought to raise consciousness, to transform identity, to preach and instill dignity and confidence worthy of the image of God. By decade’s end, they comforted themselves with the notion that dying to end apartheid was worth it because to do so was to be like Christ.

In what follows, I have sought to rediscover and explicate the thinking that attended this process. I have done so by mustering both old and new sources. I interviewed nearly sixty former activists during many months of formal research in South Africa. Many of my informants had been prominent Black Consciousness and Black Theology activists—such as Barney Pityana and Allan Boesak. Many more are somewhat less well known, including Anne Hope, a Christian Institute (CI) employee who spent critical months training Biko, Pityana, and others in radical pedagogy during 1972, and Tau Mokoka, a University of the North dropout who organized for SASO’s Pretoria branch between 1972 and 1977. Typical interviews lasted between one and two hours, during which time I asked my informants open-ended questions about their backgrounds, their activism, and their reflections on the past. As I found myself working through the density and depth of the Black Consciousness ideas that I had recorded, it became more and more apparent that those ideas were the story and that by tracking changes there, I would be able to see this period in new ways.

Thankfully, archival and published sources offered ample documentation with which to complement and complicate these reflections. I have revisited whatever records are available for this period, but it was especially invigorating to find new sources, especially the bits and pieces hidden in the archives of church groups and other organizations, as well as the press and government archives. Although the National Archive holdings on Black Consciousness are rather scant, evidence collected during the law’s pursuit of these prophets is not. This study opened with a trial, the records of which stretch across thousands of pages of argument, debate, and supporting documentation. I wallowed in sources such as these like a pig in the muck, in pursuit of what people thought they were doing as they went about their lives during this decade. What has resulted is a less determined narrative, which follows a generation

of activists as their struggle gained momentum and human warmth was lost along the way.

It is almost inappropriate to note this. Such conclusions test the limits of scholarly objectivity, and what is more, they depress somewhat by refusing to accept the triumphant tale that is typically told.<sup>45</sup> But no one can study the struggle against apartheid objectively; it is a human story brimming with pathos and emotion, and that is what I imagine draws us to it in the first place. These Black Consciousness stories are not intended to undermine such tales of change with their contingent endings and alternative ways of remembering the past, merely for the sake of historical accuracy or cynicism. Rather, these stories seek to restore to tales of change some of the possibilities that have been lost, the dreams that had motivated a generation, at least for a moment. Here, the very words of the title—*The Law and the Prophets*—resonate on another level. They come from Christ's Golden Rule, from the Sermon on the Mount's summation of humanity's accumulated wisdom: "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." This law is altogether more fundamental than those of any legal system or movement, but these others have the power to make people forget that this is true. We thus have a great deal to learn from the dreams, trials, and histories of prophets.