

The Contemporary Theological Project

Chief Albert Luthuli's Autobiography *Let My People Go* As Political- Theological Critique

Dambudzo D. Mushambi

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the notion that autobiographies or life narratives contain and perform rhetorical acts, combined with the insights of narrative theologians that narratives are crucial for self-understanding and orienting oneself, the article focuses upon Chief Luthuli's *Let My People Go*. Reading it as an autobiography, the article outlines, chiefly, the rhetorical acts performed in the text, considering their deployment within the narrative as a critique of the political-theological arrangements during the apartheid era.

Introduction

"...merely for the black South African to continue to live, to cope as best he can, to survive at all is a political gesture: not because he chooses to be political...but because all the efforts of a huge and crushing political machine are directed at using, exploiting, and destroying his humanity. Thus any attempt to retain that humanity, to realize or protect or exercise it, must inevitably be political." - James Olney¹

Human beings are storytellers. We tell stories about ourselves to others which communicate basic facts of our personal history such as our name, place of origin and family background. However simple or complex those stories may be, their function is to let others know something of our identity.² Our life stories carry meanings beyond their current form. As individuals we are, as Stanley Hauerwas has pointed out, inheritors of stories that existed long before us, and we do not

1 James Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An approach to African Literature*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 257.

2 George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church*. (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 111.