Ben Marais (1909-1999): The influences on and heritage of a South African Prophet during two periods of transformation

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BEN MARAIS (1909-1999):

THE INFLUENCES ON AND HERITAGE OF A SOUTH AFRICAN PROPHET DURING TWO PERIODS OF TRANSFORMATION

by

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SUMMARY

Ben Marais (1909-1999): The Influences on and Heritage of a South African Prophet during Two Periods of Transformation

by

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Degree: Doctor Divinitatis
Subject: Church History
Promoter: Prof. J.W. Hofmeyr

This thesis in Church History presents a biographic study on the life of Ben Marais against the political and ecclesiastic background of South Africa of the 20th century. The significance of Ben Marais’ life is approached through his correspondence with the secretaries of the World Council of Churches during the 1960s and 1970s. The letters, pertaining to the World Council of Churches financial and moral support for the organisations fighting against Apartheid, reflect on Ben Marais’ involvement with the World Council and his particular concerns. Through a study on the life of Ben Marais insight can be gained into the thinking of the leadership of the NG Kerk. The study presents Ben Marais as a prophet who challenged the then popular tendencies in the NG Kerk theology on policy justification and on the relation between religion and nationalism.

The central question in this study asks, what led an ordinary man, of humble background, to the insights he reflected, and guided him through times of transparent opposition to maintain his belief in what was right and just? What was the essence of his theology and understanding of the South African problem? To what extent could the church leaders of the present, and the future learn from his example and life, in terms of the tribulations faced, different schools of thought, and sentiments, both nationalistic and spiritual?
SUMMARY

The study then wishes to test the following hypothesis: Ben Marais can be considered as one of the steadfast and humble prophets of the church in Southern Africa during the 20th century, who serves as an example of Christian Brotherhood, regardless of the perplexities, for present and future generations on relations between the affairs of faith, state and society.

The thesis presents a broader introduction on Church Historiography. Ben Marais’ own historiographical reflection is considered. The approaches to history are summarised as background to the periodisation model adopted by the study. The study wishes to work with a thematic model set against a chronological framework. Sensitivity to geographical concerns is also expressed. Afrikaner Nationalism is not seen in isolation, but in relation to African, English and Indian Nationalism.

KEY WORDS

Ben Marais
Nationalism
Apartheid
Transformation
Prophet
Character formation
World Council of Churches
Policies of NG Kerk
Periodisation
Church Historiography
In memory of Oupa Flippie, Philippus Ludwicus du Plessis,

whose faith, life, and devotion to the church remain an inspiration.
LETTER TO THE IMPLIED READER

Dear Reader

The presentation of a study on Ben Marais as an academic study could be either a straightforward task, concentrating on the biographic details of his life, considering the length and state of his hair, the style of his clothes, and a caricature of his love for gardening, or it could be conducted with a greater challenge in mind – though also in a condensed format as is possible. This challenge is not to be the last or authoritative voice on the subject, merely an echo. It implies that the study on the life of Ben Marais be considered within various contexts, while maintaining a central theme.

The first context of this study is this thesis, intended for degree purposes. Ben Marais was a Church historian. Thus I refer to him in the introductory section, reflecting on his methodology and understanding of church history. The second context of this study is the 20th century, the third is South Africa, the fourth Afrikanerdom and nationalism, and the fifth context is church and state relations. These contexts are difficult to demarcate, as well as being rather contrived, by own admission. They need to be understood in as much as they are of service to this study, in light of the various transformations that took place, and the perspective that is argued, not in all their complexities. For this reason, a more thorough introduction has been considered necessary.

To relate how Ben Marais was part of each of these contexts, hermeneutic keys are used. Ben Marais is also used as a hermeneutic key to South African church/state/culture relations during significant periods in the 20th century. The selection of details from his life, as well as themes from the contexts and the hermeneutic keys are made representatively because they best illustrate the points to be made, as well as giving best insight into the problems formulated and thus help to understand an ordinary but illustrious man.

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1 This letter has been formulated to indicate the presence of an implied reader, who is neither a Church Historian nor a Theologian, but rather a general historian.
Ben Marais worked on so many topics and in so many contexts, that it would not be difficult to find myself thinking about these issues – often diverse. These issues could be seen as impulses (influences on and of) from Greek philosophy to Ecumenical relations to Nationalism to Church History to Scottish Evangelicals (also with a Scottish nationalism orientation).

In this regard, the current study is hardly an introduction to the man, Ben Marais (biographies are not always as popular as doctoral theses, while at the same time often being the best histories). Rather, it wishes to explore relations, draw comparisons, consider settings, and in line with African literary theory, indicate the change brought about by Ben Marais, to his contexts and to this study.

It is eventually hoped that this thesis does justice to Ben Marais, and to the study of Church History.

P.J. Maritz
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their patience and guidance, their words of encouragement, correction, advice and criticism, and their deeds of kindness, which all contributed towards the completion of this study.

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Tannie Sibs Marais

Ds Ockie Olivier and Mrs Petro Braetler

Mrs H. Steyn and Mrs H. du Toit, from Steynsburg and Middelburg respectively.
ABBREVIATIONS

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<td>AIC</td>
<td>African Independent Churches</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>African National Council</td>
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<td>B.B.C.</td>
<td>British Broadcast Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>C.I.</td>
<td>Christian Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Di</td>
<td>Dominees, Reverends, plural form of Ds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ds</td>
<td>Dominee, Reverend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.A.K.</td>
<td>Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maties</td>
<td>University of Stellenbosch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCRV</td>
<td>Nederlands Christelijke Radio Vereeniging, The Dutch Christian Radio Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ned. Herv. or Geref. Kerk</td>
<td>Nederduitsch Hervormd or Gereformeerde Kerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NG Kerk</td>
<td>Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUSAS</td>
<td>National Union of South African Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAC</td>
<td>Pan African Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SABC</td>
<td>South African Broadcasting Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.A.C.C.</td>
<td>South African Council of Churches</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPROCAS</td>
<td>Study Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWAPO</td>
<td>South West Africa People’s Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuks (Tukkies)</td>
<td>University of Pretoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wits</td>
<td>University of the Witwatersrand</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unisa</td>
<td>University of South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>US SALEP</td>
<td>US SA Leader Exchange Programme</td>
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