

## CHAPTER 7

## CONCLUSION

Like Bernardino Ochino (Marais 1959a), who was not a “central” figure in the Reformation in Italy, Barend Marais will not be remembered as a “central” figure in the history of South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the struggle against Apartheid. Though, in Afrikaner circles and in the history of the NG Kerk in especially the 1940s to 1980s, Ben Marais played an influential role. The consequences of his influences in drawing attention to the principles of Christianity, faith in God and brotherly love, warning against the abuse of Scripture to justify political ideologies, remaining loyal to the church, and his tolerance of onslaughts against his person, will only be realised in a few generations time.

Where he is overshadowed in early 21<sup>st</sup> century international reflection on South Africa by such figures as Beyers Naudé and Desmond Tutu, both his juniors, Ben Marais played a significant, though not as flamboyant role in drawing the world’s attention to the imbalances in the country. Rather, he attempted to engage, consistently and continuously in dialogue to resolve the racial tensions. He had many strong qualities, many developed during his formative years.

It has been attempted, throughout this thesis, to present an integrated argument in Church History. Apart from considering a Church Historian, Ben Marais, and how he was influenced and influenced the course of the NG Kerk’s history through his person, faith, scrutiny, criticism hardships and loyalty, the study has paid particular attention to issues raised in the introduction. Reflection on the subject has not been comprehensive, but main themes have been alluded to throughout the study.

A balance has been maintained between chronological portrayals in history – of biography and organisational orientation – and thematic exposition. Concerning the chronological portrayals, it has been indicated that the particular advantages and

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shortcomings of periodisation are grasped and can be used to good effect. Furthermore, through the consideration of Ben Marais' life through his correspondence with the World Council of Churches, while being immediately restrictive, has made it possible to relate, direct and structure a biographic study, and at once to place the life of Ben Marais in the immediate context of international ecumenical relations and mission and in the local South African church, political and social context.

This study has shown that Ben Marais was a prophet of the church. Neither intentionally nor in self acclaim. In the conclusion to this study, the particular questions posed in the introduction will be considered, having been explored from various angles throughout the extent of the foregoing chapters. The hypothesis that helped formulate the line of thought is also tested. Furthermore the approach to the study, the methodological questions and research process has been accounted for, and without being too self critical, particular lessons that were learned were expounded.

Ben Marais made several contributions to Theology in South Africa. He placed a focus on the abuse of Scripture in the substantiation of ideology and political policies. Furthermore, he emphasised the unity of church, the brotherhood of all Christians, and the role of reconciliation, in a time when these characteristics were neglected. The most significant aspect of his contribution to Theology, Church and Society, is his understanding of the prophetic role, individual and broader, towards the church and society, in which he combined vision and insight with situation analysis and study and these with his convictions, his principles, which have been seen to be his deep rooted faith in God and in the power of the Gospel.

## 1. ANSWERING THE POSED PROBLEM

It has been found that the formulation of a problem and hypothesis has assisted in the structuring of an argument. It has helped in the formulation of a central theme which helped the research to remain focused.

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The following answers can be given to the general questions posed in the Introduction:

- *Why base a study on the life of Ben Marais?*

It has been indicated that a study on the life of Ben Marais and his contributions to the debates on Apartheid is an excellent access to many of the intricate relations between church, political parties, ideologies and faith systems, between localised and international pressure groups and opinion.

- *What happened during the 1930s to 1970s in South African politics and the NG Kerk? How was Ben Marais involved in these events? How did what happened affect him?*

The leadership of the NG Kerk started to play an increasingly significant role in South African politics, directly and indirectly. Ben Marais was a leader in the NG Kerk and objected against the church's sanctioning of ideologically biased policies. Simultaneously, Ben Marais was not an opponent of the supporters of the policies, rather insisting on peaceful negotiations, calling for unity and reconciliation between the various national and race groups. Ben Marais was isolated, but this did not deter him in his insistence on serving truth.

- *Who was Ben Marais? Would it be best to approach a study on his life, by considering him in the categories: churchman; church critic; family man; lecturer; author; radio personality; or ecumenical figure?*

Ben Marais was an Afrikaner, a Church Historian in the NG Kerk, and an ecumenical figure. He played a prominent role in the early debates of the World Council of Churches on Race Relations and played a significant role against the NG Kerk's formulation of a policy supporting racial segregation. It would be possible to approach a study on his life through various channels. There is sufficient primary and secondary source material to make any approach interesting and insightful.

- *There is hardly any documentation on Ben Marais' childhood. What were the circumstances he grew up in? What early influences helped govern his later perspectives?*

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This study has indicated that Ben Marais had a religiously conservative and politically open minded background. There were various early influences on his life that played a direct and indirect role on the choices he made in later life and on his approach to resolving conflict. The most important influence, groomed in childhood and as set out in this thesis, was his faith in God and love for the church.

- *Are the decisions made in youth, in terms of thought processes and execution thereof not a blue print to later decisions that are made in life? How can a reflection be made on Ben Marais' youth from decisions and attitudes later in life?*

This perspective has not been explored in full due to the incomplete picture of Ben Marais' youth. However, it can be ascertained that Ben Marais approached problems rationally and with great contemplation.

- *Ben Marais made calculated study, academic and ministerial decisions. What was the essence of these decisions?*

It has been assessed that the essence of the decisions Ben Marais made was not financial, neither political nor fame. Rather, it was how best to serve the church.

The thesis has given an elaborate answer to the central question that was posed in the introduction:

*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?*

It has been indicated how Ben Marais was a prophet of the NG Kerk who held on to his core principles while listening to perspectives from various sources. He studied with fervour and made these applicable to his situation and drew applicable insights from them. He had a strong character and was greatly respected. Various lessons can be learned from Ben Marais, it is not possible to isolate one. In the perspective of this study, which was built up around his correspondence with the secretaries of the World Council of Churches, it can be emphasised that Ben Marais had a questioning spirit that

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measured all insights and decisions against his confessions.

## 2. PROVING THE HYPOTHESIS

This thesis thus upholds its hypothesis:

*Ben Marais can be considered as one of the steadfast and humble prophets of the church in Southern Africa during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who serves as an example of Christian Brotherhood, regardless of the perplexities, to present and future generations on relations between the affairs of faith, state and society.*

The formulation of the title, *Ben Marais (1909-1999): The Influences on and Heritage of a South African Prophet During Two Periods of Transformation*, has been found suitable for this study, though the focus in the thesis on predominantly the NG Kerk could draw justifiable criticism.

## 3. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

Hermeneutic keys were used to direct and structure this study. The research focused predominantly on literary sources. Interviews provided vital information and insight. It has been attempted to work in constant dialogue with the available secondary sources and primary sources, moving between an understanding of the times and the issues and a knowledge of Ben Marais.

It could be determined that the scope of the study was too broad, and could, for example, have focused on an aspect of his work such as his travels or publications, rather than the general scope proposed. The general scope in this thesis, however, will make it possible to conduct more intensive study in various directions pertaining to Ben Marais life.

The thesis was developed from a central kernel, the biography of Ben Marais, outwards to the history of South Africa. A thematic orientation to Ben Marais was identified as to retain the scope of the study. Ben Marais' correspondence with the General Secretaries of the World Council of Churches has served well as an orientation to his life. Ben Marais is presented as a key or window through which the history of the twentieth century in South Africa can be approached.

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The chapters have both a chronological and thematic organization, thus, incorporating different writing styles, narrative, description, analysis and commentary.

## 4. CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The following chapter overview indicates how the argument has been developed.

- **Chapter 1: Introduction**

A short orientating synopsis of Ben Marais' life preceded a consideration on the nature of this study. The theological and scientific orientation to biographies and church histories was related within the scope of church and general historiography. The study's premises concluded the philosophical considerations in historiography and introduced the posing of the problem and hypothesis formulation. The formulation of the title was then discussed, along with the methodology and procedure followed in the study.

- **Chapter 2: The Life of Ben Marais**

A biographic relation on the life of Ben Marais was presented. Special emphasis was placed on his childhood. The orientation to his life was taken from the point of his singular communications with the General Secretaries of the World Council of Churches during the 1960s and 1970s. It was then suggested that Ben Marais could serve as key to the history of South Africa.

- **Chapter 3: The Times of Ben Marais**

The biographic relation of Chapter 2 was set within particular climates experienced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in South Africa. Thus, where Chapter 2 was more biographic, Chapter 3 was more contextual in nature. The context of the twentieth century Ben Marais knew was approached thematically, being designated under politics, culture, religion, academia, Theology and nationalism. The study placed particular focus on nationalism and in Ben Marais' understanding of its intricacies.

- **Chapter 4: Nationalism: The Two Periods of Transformation**

The considerations on nationalism were approached from a model of rise and fall, or

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growth and maturity. Thus, it is considered using the model of two periods of transformation. The various forms of nationalism prevalent in South Africa was discussed, and it was indicated how they are invariably related.

▪ **Chapter 5: Underlying Principles and Influential Presence**

A closer look at the underlying principles and influential presence of Ben Marais was made. Where Chapter 3 presented various climates, Chapter 5 considered the different perspectives on Ben Marais. This was accomplished taking personal, political, ecclesiastic and academic considerations into account.

▪ **Chapter 6: A prophet for His Times, But For Others Too**

Chapter 6 dealt predominantly with the legacy of Ben Marais. The incomplete pattern in the transformation and rise and fall of a nationalism served as background to his prophetic voice, which was based as much on Ben Marais' underlying principles as it did on his analysis of the situation.

▪ **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

The Conclusion to the thesis intends to present a contemplative church historical consideration on the role and significance of Ben Marais.

## 5. REFLECTION

Greater emphasis could have been placed on the two periods of transformation, and on the view that Ben Marais was disjoined from time, speaking a language and communicating a message that was relevant but not understood. In the first period he was well known and active, but his contributions were against the contemporaneous trends. He was not too well acquainted with the plight of the black people, and was arguing almost purely from a theoretical point of view. His visits and exposures substantiated this view internationally. Interestingly, he gained insight on the situation in South Africa through international eyes. During the second period he isolated himself by remaining in the church and moving over to politics or becoming politically active, rather finding solitude in the security of the student communities. His contemporaries isolated him through various means, and thus he experienced years of loneliness, in

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contrast to his years of being outspoken at the synods. This isolation was made more tormenting by the intimidating and life threatening hate mail and telephone calls he received. Furthermore, the church went into isolation mode, as did the country (media coverage etc), as it was also isolated by international pressure groups. Sports, religion, politics and trade. Ben Marais was thus cut off from a part of his world. In contrast, African nationalism broke the barriers of suppression, ANC and PAC being banned, its leaders being imprisoned, and grew in strength. Ben was effective in making a contribution more through his students, than he did personally in bringing his African nationalists –Afrikaans on the one hand and African on the other to the same table, to share and eat together (Codesa – Eucharist) and negotiate a resolution.

On the greater trends within South African history, it could be argued that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the region was governed predominantly by regulation through policies, a sentiment that carried through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There would then be no definite break between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is of particular interest to follow how the church and the leaders of the church relate to these policies, whether progressive and reactionary, conservative and supportive, prescriptive, positive or negative.

#### 6. WHAT DID WE DO WITH OUR TROAS?

Ben Marais travelled to Stellenbosch to become a minister of a church. He ended up as a minister to a country. He remained true to his calling, where the Spirit led, he followed. Not only considered geographically, but also regarding the contents of his message.

In reaction to the implied question by Meiring (1979:86) on his calling to be minister, and the possibility that he had considered entering politics, he answered that he had never felt a calling to enter politics, and maintained that what a minister of the church could not achieve in and through the church for the Kingdom of God, could probably not be achieved if that person were outside the church. Furthermore, Ben Marais maintained that he thought that this was the lesson history taught us. This lesson had few exceptions, and he concluded with a reference to possible alternative roads (Meiring 1979:86):

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“I clearly felt the calling with which the Lord called me uniquely to stand in the service of His church. For me that was determinant.”

## 7. FINAL REMARK

The argument argued, perspectives explored, the thesis concluded, were I to be granted an interview with Ben Marais, with tea and biscuits, assurance could not be given that I know everything about his life, work, what influenced him and how he thought. I would surely need to ask him many more questions on various subjects. Most probably, though, future studies will be conducted that will bring more light into the life of Ben Marais. How well we might believe ourselves to know, we can only grasp in parts. It remains though, to mention, in the slightly adapted words he used in his letter to Dr Potter (1978):

“In conclusion: I hear someone out of your corner say: This is a typical reaction of a white South African. No! You are wrong. [He had] consistently – all [his] life, been a critic of much of what [was] happening in Southern Africa, and of our systems. [He had], as a result, often been treated as the filth of the earth and experienced extreme forms of ostracism, organised boycott and loneliness. [He] could not wish that to happen to [his] greatest enemy ... [He had] no regrets. A man can only stand up for what he believes. Faced by the same issues [He would] make the same decisions once again. Freedom for human groups [meant] much to [him]. But that does not mean that [he] supported or condoned any sort of action in the name of freedom....”