

READING ON THE BOUNDARIES: Reading 2 Samuel 21:1-14 with Rizpah

Gerald West
School of Theology
University of Natal
Pietermaritzburg

Abstract

Contextual Bible Study is a process during which socially engaged biblical scholars read with ordinary readers of the Bible. This article presents - and draws its conclusions from - communal reading of 2 Samuel 21:1-14 with Rizpah, with readers from poor and marginalised communities. It emerges that, on the one hand, the reading is to a large extent shaped by the concerns, questions, needs and experiences of the ordinary readers while the process itself is one of empowerment for those readers as it enables them to utter previously unspoken words. For the biblical scholars, on the other hand, 'reading with' means to begin to hear that beyond the boundary there are questions raised that are different to their own.

Introduction

I came across Rizpah while teaching a course on the so-called 'Succession Narrative'. While for most commentators she is a prop in someone else's plot,¹ I recognized her as someone with a story of her own. She reminded me of others I had seen sitting silently. And so it was with excitement and expectation that I entered my class on the day we were to discuss this text.

By that time, we had been reading 2 Samuel together regularly and the class was familiar with the literary approach. I allowed the class to guide our reading, but I listened closely, waiting for Rizpah to speak. It was with growing disappointment that I realised that she would not speak. David, the Gibeonites, and even the almost absent Saul were given voice, but not Rizpah.

The class consisted almost entirely of black South Africans, the majority of whom came from poor and marginalized communities. But less than a quarter of the class were women, and they did not speak at all. The male discussion concentrated on the characters of David and the Gibeonites, and their stories and theologies were closely examined. Even when I intervened and said, 'We have heard the stories and theologies of the fathers, but what about the stories and theologies of the mothers?!', the women still remained silent, quietly shaking their heads. I know now that they were sitting silently in solidarity with Rizpah.

I have since used this text often in various other contexts, some of them safe sequestered sites in which women and some men were willing to read with Rizpah. This paper presents a communal, literary critical reading of 2 Samuel 21:1-14. The reading emerges from a series of contextual Bible Studies in various communities in South Africa. All of these Bible Studies were facilitated by me, and so were shaped by my interpretive and social interests. However, the contextual Bible Study process is an enabling process in which 'called' trained readers read the Bible 'with' (a reading process in which subject positions are vigilantly foregrounded and

1 The exceptions where Rizpah briefly tells something of her own story, are Wiberg 1987 and Cook 1989; the latter is a South African reading.

in which power relations are structurally acknowledged) untrained ordinary readers from poor and marginalized communities (see Spivak 1988; Arnott 1991; West). Therefore, the concerns, questions, needs, and experiences of these readers have substantially shaped the reading. But my hand is the final hand, and so the paper in its final form is my production.

As facilitator of the reading process in these various groups, I offered and enabled a variety of questions from literary, postmodern, and liberationist perspectives. So, for example, questions on the limits of the text enabled readers to recognize 2 Samuel 21:1-14 as a literary unit, and questions about the characters in the text encouraged a close and careful reading of the text, focusing on the text itself rather than on remembered reconstructions of the larger story of David. I also offered questions that probed the gaps, juxtapositions, presences/absences, and ambiguities within the text, and in so doing provided resources for a postmodern reading. Questions from our South African context were also brought to the text, particularly those that emerged from poor and marginalized groups.

The reading of the text offered here is a communal product which draws deeply on the readings of those who know Rizpah better than I do.² Rizpah has come to live with us and we have become her people. With her we have begun to recognize, recover, and revive the subjugated discourses and hidden transcripts of the biblical tradition and make them our own.

I have seen Rizpah often before, although I did not know her name. But I have only begun to hear her story by reading with others who knew her.

Reading framework

In each of the various groups in which this text was read a similar reading framework was used. This framework is an expression of the commitment of the contextual Bible study process to read the Bible from the perspective of the organized poor and marginalized, to read the Bible communally, to read the Bible critically, and to read the Bible for social and individual transformation (West 1995:216-238.) In reading 2 Samuel 21:1-14 we used the following instructions/questions, which provided the framework of the Bible study.

1. Read this passage together.
2. What is this passage about? Share your responses with the group.
3. Who are the major characters in the story and what do we know about them?
4. What is David's theology in this text?
 - What is the Gibeonites' theology?
 - What is Rizpah's theology?
 - What is the narrator's theology?
5. Which theology do you identify with, and why?
6. What challenges does this text pose for the church in South Africa today?

Points 1,2,5 and 6 focus on community consciousness, concentrating on forms of engagement with the text and each other. Questions 3 and 4 focus on critical consciousness, concentrating on forms of critical distance generated by a close and careful reading of the text (West 1995). Our close and careful reading used many translations of the Bible in many languages, but only I read the Hebrew text.

² I wish to acknowledge the many ordinary readers who have made this paper possible, and those biblical scholars, like Fernando Segovia, Obery Hendricks, Carol Wayne White, and the Hermeneutic Workshop for their comments, support, and encouragement.

Contending readings

Not everybody read with Rizpah, and so our reading is a marginal reading which is located among other contending readings. Most readers initially read with David, a godly character whom they know and trust from their readings of other texts. And this story seemed to confirm their confidence in David; his response to the famine is to 'seek the face of God' (1a). But then some readers pointed out that the famine was already in its third year (1a). Why had it taken David so long to 'seek the face of God'? Did this suggest that David was not as close to God as he should have been?

Unease with David grew when he did not immediately choose the first of the options offered by the Gibeonites: restitution through 'gold and silver' (4a). How could he agree to restitution through blood?³ Did this mean that David was not as close to his people as he should have been?

Unless, of course, David was using this opportunity to rid himself of potential opposition from Saul's lineage. This line of reasoning appeared to be supported, some readers argued, by the reference to Saul's 'house of blood' (1b), the Gibeonites' reminder that Saul was 'the chosen of God' (6a),⁴ and what they knew from other texts. This would explain why David did not take the first of the presented options (4a), and might even indicate that David's refusal to take this option allowed or even prompted the Gibeonites to make a significant shift: the silver and gold are initially linked to 'Saul and his family' and the killing to 'anyone in Israel' (4a), but when David asks the second time, the killing is now linked to Saul and his family (5-6a).

However, while those reading with David became more and more uncomfortable with the David of this story,⁵ those reading with the Gibeonites, and this was often the majority, applauded David precisely at that point. They argued that David did the appropriate thing. Some form of restitution was clearly implied by God's statement (1b and 2b), and rather than imposing his form of restitution, David asked the Gibeonites for theirs. And when they behaved deferentially, David rightly recognized this as the behaviour of a vulnerable and marginalized group, and so persisted until they felt free to state their preference. David was being remarkably sensitive to the power dynamics in that situation.

These readers went further, arguing that the perspective of the Gibeonites was appropriate and right. Many of these black South African readers were adamant that the Gibeonites were right to demand blood restitution; they too knew what it was to be systematically slaughtered. Blood restitution was an appropriate response to a 'house of blood', particularly when the house was the house of the dominant who had used their power to oppress and decimate the weak.

This reading led to a heated discussion of capital punishment, which was at that time being debated by the new Constitutional Court in South Africa. Those reading with the Gibeonites insisted that the death penalty must remain and must be reactivated (there being a moratorium at that time), so that those guilty of apartheid blood could be appropriately punished. So those reading with the Gibeonites, and those reading with David, sharing as they did a similar theology, felt that David was right when he gave seven relations of Saul into the hands of the Gibeonites (9a) and the Gibeonites were justified in 'exposing them' (9a). Further, they

3. 'Restitution' is an important concept in South Africa at present, although it carries several connotations. As participants used different languages, I have used a term that we all identified with in some way.

4. This phrase is included in most translations.

5. The chronicler may also have been a reader who was uncomfortable with the David of this story, for he does not include this episode in his retelling of a story of David. I wish to thank Hendrik Bosman for drawing my attention to this omission in Chronicles.

showed that their readings were substantiated by the final sentence of the story: 'And God answered prayer for the land after that' (14b). The phrase 'after that', the concluding phrase in Hebrew, clearly referred to the handing over and exposure of the family of Saul.

But it was not that clear to all that this phrase should be interpreted in this way. What about Rizpah, some asked, does she not have a part in this story? All the small groups, in working through the questions outlined above, had agreed that Rizpah was one of the major characters, and yet she had played no role in the reading thus far. So the question was pertinent. This question touched on a deep disquiet in all readers. Rizpah, it slowly began to emerge, had also done the right thing; she had shown honour to the dead.

Reading from a largely African culture, most readers were very uncomfortable with the 'hanging/exposing' (פְּחָא) of the bodies. Even those who were deeply committed to the perspective of the Gibeonites found this practice difficult to understand. Relatives of the dead must be allowed to bury the dead properly. Disrespect towards the dead was wrong. And so cracks in the dominant reading began to appear.

Those who read with David found fresh resources for their reading. While Saul had broken the oath of Israel to the Amorites (אֲמֹרִי), David had kept his oath (אֲמֹרִי) to Jonathan by sparing Mephibosheth (7). This showed that David did honour his relationships, even with those who had a claim to the throne. Moreover, David did honour the dead by bringing the bones of Saul and Jonathan, and the bones of their relatives that had been hung/exposed, and gave them a proper burial (12-14a). In this respect, then, David did have a different theology to that of the Gibeonites. So, some suggested, the phrase 'after that' probably included not only the right restitution but also the right burial.

But this reading in turn opened additional cracks and gaps. Those who read with Rizpah, mainly black women, located their readings in these places. In providing a proper burial for the dead of Israel, they argued, David had been responding to Rizpah's actions. It was only 'when David was told what Rizpah had done' (11) that he responded appropriately. She had shamed and challenged him by her solidarity with the dead. Verse 10, Rizpah's story, now became foregrounded. How were Rizpah's actions to be interpreted? What was Rizpah saying in her silence?

Among those who read with Rizpah were those who emphasised her silent solidarity with the dead. She was doing what women all over the world do, caring for the dead. And because she held no position and had no power, and was a woman and a concubine (אֲמֹרִי), to properly bury the dead, including her own children, she stayed in solidarity with them, doing what she could to honour them.

Others who read with Rizpah emphasised that although she remained silent, by publically associating herself with the victims of the king's policy, she was engaging in a political act of protest. She was caring for the dead while and because men with power did not care for the living. The hidden transcript of women's resistance to dominant ideologies and theologies ruptured the public transcript of deference and disguise; what was usually acted out and spoken offstage by women, behind the backs of the dominant, now found a public form at center-stage (Scott 1990; see also West 1995).

Those who read with Rizpah argued that the 'after that' in the final sentence (14b), referred to Rizpah's actions, not those of David! God's answering/responding was associated with Rizpah's resistance. This was clear from the narrative where the rains, which were God's response, were directly related to Rizpah's actions (10a). The narrator tells us that Rizpah stayed in solidarity with the dead 'from the beginning of the harvest until the rains poured down on them from the heavens'. The silent cries of Rizpah and the dead were heard by God.

While the narrator seems to suggest, these readers continued, that David might have heard God speak when 'he sought the face of God' (1a), and that therefore he had probably identified the problem as the need to provide some form of restitution for the Gibeonites, the narrator leaves David to find his own solution. God does not speak again. And Rizpah never speaks. But Rizpah's act of solidarity with the victims of the theology of David and the Gibeonites demands a response, from David and from God. God responds first, and the rain falls on Rizpah and the dead (10a). David then also responds, recognizing, we hope, another more accountable, responsible, and compassionate theology.

Finally, those reading with Rizpah pointed out, that Rizpah was not alone in her solidarity with the dead and her protest. While she was the only one to risk death by rupturing the public transcript of deference and devotion to male domination, she could not have survived day and night, month after month (10), without the support of her sisters from other sectors of society. Perhaps even Saul's daughter, Merab (or Michal)⁶ was among those who sustained and strengthened Rizpah. But maybe not. Merab, like the leaders of the Gibeonites, may have actively embraced the dominant theology of retribution and death. Perhaps the 'class' position that came with being a daughter of a king made it difficult for her to identify with her sisters. Certainly these readers knew that the class position of white women in South Africa often had this consequence. Similarly, their experience of black (male) leaders, both in civic and church structures, who had lost their community consciousness and who had abandoned *ubuntu*, made the theology of the Gibeonite leaders uncomfortably familiar. And the saddest aspect of this story for those who read with Rizpah, was that marginalized communities of people could embrace a theology of domination and death.

It would be nice to report that this is where our reading rested. But this reading too was deconstructed. Those who read with David continued to claim textual clues for their reading, contending that the juxtaposition of the final two sentences ('And they did all that the king commanded'. 'And God answered prayer for the land after that' (14) was clear textual attestation. Those reading with the Gibeonites responded to Rizpah by reminding those who read with her that theologies of compassion and life had been easily coopted by apartheid, and that such theologies were inadequate if apartheid and its architects were to be completely destroyed.

And so this text remains contested. Perhaps that is the narrator's primary point: that there are contending theologies, and that theologies of life and death coexist in our communities. The Bible, like the church, is a site of struggle. So some of us will continue to read with Rizpah. She is our sister and we are her people. We have been partially constituted by her story (see Welch 1990:151); we have also been strengthened in our struggle for survival, liberation and life.

Reflections on the boundaries

Rizpah reminds us of many important things to do with reading, particularly for those of us who have chosen to read on the boundaries. First, Rizpah is always and thoroughly represented. She is represented as a character in someone else's story, she is represented as other women read with her, and she is represented again as I re-present these various representations. My presence takes up her space, her place.

And yet, the traces of her presence remain, even in her absence, and so I must continue to

6 The name of Saul's daughter varies with translations. Some Hebrew and Septuagint manuscripts and Syriac read *Merab*, while most Hebrew and Septuagint manuscripts read *Michal*.

risk such readings, believing that others who encounter her through my re-presented readings will return to reread this text and in so doing read with her in a way that I perhaps cannot.

Two female facilitators, Malika Sibeko and Beverley Haddad, having read my re-presented reading of Mark 5:21-6:1 (West 1995), read this text with women from an informal settlement in Amawoti near Durban and found that in this context the women immediately identified with the woman with the haemorrhage in the text. While Jairus' daughter was known in relationship to someone, the woman with the haemorrhage 'had no name, no relationship, and was known only by her illness (verse 25)' (Sibeko, Haddad 1996:15). These women admired the ill woman's courage and strength in taking the initiative in her encounter with Jesus, as well as her resilience in surviving and her ability to maintain hope throughout the twelve years. They said she had 'the right to talk to Jesus' (16).

A key concern for this group of readers was how to interpret the statement that 'power had gone out from him' (verse 30).

They wrestled together to try and understand what this meant. A debate ensued as to whether this loss of power was the result of him having 'touched a bleeding woman', or whether it was necessary for the power to leave Jesus ('be revealed') in order for the woman 'to be made holy'. In other words, did the power leave Jesus because as a holy teacher he had been contaminated by an unclean woman, or was the power given by Jesus to the woman in order for healing and wholeness to occur? (16)

In forming this question, the women were focusing on a crucial interpretive issue in their lives. The male leadership of their churches cite this part of the story as the basis for refusal to minister to menstruating women. 'They argue that because power left Jesus when he was touched by a bleeding woman, they too would lose power in their ministry if they touched menstruating women'. However, the women now began to read this story differently, arguing that 'Jesus intended to use his power to empower the disempowered' (17). Like Rizpah, they began to recognize that there was more than one reading.

When the final question was asked on how the text applied to their situation as women, discussion again centered on this church practice. The women began to openly question and challenge the position of the male leaders of their African Independent Church, who insist 'that they cannot lay hands on a woman when she is menstruating as this will result 'in the loss of their power'' (16). In their type of church, where healing through the laying on hands is a central practice, this is a significant refusal.

One woman referred to feeling depressed while menstruating when she met other women who were able to receive the laying on of hands. She then felt like a sick person. The women began to voice their anger at the fact they were being denied crucial spiritual resources (laying on of hands, prayer and healing) by the male leadership who were 'forcing power away from them'. Their personhood was being defined by their state of 'bleeding'. So their 'bleeding' was more important to the church leadership than their spiritual, emotional or physical needs (16).

'A further issue raised', the facilitators reported, 'pertained to the practice of women not being allowed to wear church uniforms during menstruation and thus being forced to sit at the entrance to the worship area'.

One woman suggested that because this was the case they should not bother to go to church and 'just stay at home'. Another reflected that it did not make sense for her not to put her uniform on when 'her body is the temple of God'. As the temple of God she should not be obliged to participate in the customary purification rite that takes place after seven days. This

same reader indignantly noted that the purification ceremony sprinkled holy water on her uniform which she had not worn during menstruation, the church building which she had not entered, and on the congregation with whom she had not associated with. If the ceremony was important for 'purification', why was she who was regarded as unclean not sprinkled with water? This led to a recognition by others that perhaps they had a choice after all. They had the choice to either stay at home or to put on their uniform and go to church! (16)

A similar series of concerns emerged when the same text was read with African Methodists in the township of Sobantu in Pietermaritzburg. As Methodists, the women are not formally 'confronted with the same oppressive institutional church practice on the menstruation issue as the Amawoti women'. 'Yet', Sibeko and Haddad noted that, some of these women of their own volition choose not to take Holy Communion when they are menstruating. Some Sobantu readers were of the opinion that they did experience 'less power during this time of the month'. When this view was expressed, other readers challenged them strongly 'to sort themselves out' (17).

For both groups of women, reading with Rizpah enabled the faith of the bleeding woman to become 'the source of faith for these women in their daily lives of cultural, economic and ecclesiastical oppression' (17). As the facilitators acknowledged,

it would be arrogant to suggest that these women readers have been definitively transformed and empowered through this particular Bible study. There are, however, tentative indications that a process of empowerment has begun from their reading of this text. Meeting together as women, to study a text facilitated by women, enabled the readers (and the facilitators!) to explore the oppressive effects of menstruation on their lives, perhaps for the first time publicly in a group. The contextual Bible study process as a process became liberatory as it enabled women to speak unspoken words. This liberating experience led to a request for further Bible studies as the readers yearned for more unspoken possibilities. Empowerment had thus resulted through both the process and the product of the reading (17-18).

So I must continue to risk such represented readings in the hope that they may serve others who read with Rizpah more closely than I can and who enable unspoken words to be spoken. But more than this, I must continue to risk such readings because I need to be partially constituted by Rizpah and those women who have read with her. My becoming self requires that the traces of her story be put next to mine, enabling me to become more whole. And even further, I must continue to risk such readings so that I can participate in collaborative⁷ work to transform the world with Rizpah and the many millions who stand in continuity with her struggle for survival,⁸ liberation and life.

7 See Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's discussion of the conversation versus collaboration (Schüssler Fiorenza 1989).

8 Evelyn-Tashi, in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, who is about to be executed for killing M'Lissa, a *tsunga* (the woman who circumcises young women in an Olinka community), is one example: 'Every day now, down below my window in the street, there are demonstrations. I can not see them, but the babble of voices rises up the wall of the prison and pours right through the iron bars.

What I am really hearing, says Olivia, is the cultural fundamentalists and Moslem fanatics attacking women who've traveled from all parts of the country to place offerings beneath the shrubbery that is just below and around the corner from my view. The women bring wildflowers, herbs, seeds, beads, ears of corn, anything they can claim as their own and that they can spare. They are mostly quiet. Sometimes they sing. It is when they sing that the men attack, even though the only song they all know and can sing together is the national anthem. They hit the women with their fists. They kick them. They swing at them with clubs,

Second, reading with Rizpah reminds us that the process of 'reading with', in which socially engaged biblical scholars and ordinary readers of the Bible in poor and marginalized communities read together with vigilantly foregrounded subject positions, is in itself no guarantee of an uncontested reading. Rizpah, and the subordinate groups she represents, tend to disguise their resistance and defiance, and so finding their texts and tales is far from easy. This, of course, is quite a deliberate disguising of their resisting and dignifying responses in the face of domination. Further, dominant texts, also quite deliberately, not only subjugate and marginalize the tales and texts of the dominated, they also subsume and co-opt them. This is particularly so with texts. The oral culture of subordinate groups offers seclusion, control, and anonymity, and is therefore a useful vehicle for ideological resistance (Scott 1990:160). Each enactment is unique as to time, place, and audience, as well as different from every other enactment. Gossip, rumour, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre are taken up, performed or learned at the option of the listeners and, over time, their origins are lost altogether.

It becomes impossible to recover some *ur* version from which all subsequent renditions are deviations. In other words, there is no orthodoxy or center to folk culture since there is no primary text to serve as the measure of heresy. The practical result is that folk culture achieves the anonymity of collective property, constantly being adjusted, revised, abbreviated, or, for that matter, ignored. The multiplicity of its authors provides its protective cover, and when it no longer serves current interests sufficiently to find performers or an audience, it simply vanishes forever (Scott 1990:161).

It could be argued that written forms of communication, largely the territory of the dominant, are more effectively anonymous. Anonymous tracts and circulars, for example, can be prepared, produced, and circulated in secret. However, once a text is out of the author's hands, control over its use and dissemination is lost. The advantage of communication by voice (including gestures, clothes, dance, and so on) is that the communicator retains control over the manner of its dissemination - the audience, the place, the circumstances, the rendition. Control, then, of oral culture is irretrievably decentralized (Scott 1990:161).

To illustrate this point more fully, we can consider the well known story of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob in Genesis 27. What was probably a trickster tale, told by women (Bledstein 1991), has become the property of the patriarchs. A female story has been coopted by the fathers. The woman is now a character in a story which is obviously a story about males matters, including lineage, succession, blessing, and inheritance. However, the trickster tale, a common form of cultural resistance among subordinate groups (Scott 1990:162-166), celebrates the guile and cleverness of the woman, Rebekah. By inserting this narrative into an apparently innocuous context, other women could identify with the protagonist, who manages here to outwit and ridicule her more powerful adversary.

Within this relatively veiled context women are able to express *publically* a form of

bruising the women's skins and breaking bones. The women do not fight back but scatter like hens; huddling in the doorways of shops up and down the street, until the shopkeepers sweep them back into the street with their brooms.

On the day I was sentenced to death the men did not bother the women, who, according to Olivia, simply sat, spent, hidden as much as they could be, at the base of the dusty shrubbery. They did not talk. They did not eat. They did not sing. I had not realized, before she told me of their dejection, how used I had become to their clamor. Even with my family beside me, cushioning the blow of the death sentence, without the noise of the battle from the street I felt alone.

But then, the next day, the singing began again, low and mournful, and the sound of sticks against flesh' (Walker 1993:183-184).

resistance. Such tales would not only be told offstage in the women's quarters as a way of socializing a spirit of resistance, they would also have a place in public discourse because of their disguise. The story has a form which is both acceptable to men and empowering of women. Clearly, such a tale also has an instructive and cautionary side. Identifying with Rebekah, women - including young women - learn that in a context of overwhelming male domination, safety and success often depend upon channeling resistance into forms of deception and cunning (Scott 1990:164). While it may seem 'that the heavy disguise this reply wears must all but eliminate the pleasure it gives', it 'carves out a public, if provisional, space for the autonomous cultural expression of dissent. If it is disguised, it is at least not hidden; it is spoken to power. This is no small achievement of voice under domination' (Scott 1990:166).

But as this trickster tale illustrates, resistance stories like these are frequently lost on us because they have often been inserted into a larger literary context which is so completely concerned with male matters that we easily miss the female resistance part. The hidden transcript has had to disguise itself and to speak warily, and so reading 'the dialogue from the public and oral traditions of subordinate groups', particularly when these have been incorporated into a larger more ideologically diverse written corpus, requires 'a more nuanced and literary reading' (Scott 1990:165). So, reading with Rizpah reminds us that the text, like us readers, is not innocent, and there is always more than one voice to read with.

But, Rizpah would want to remind us, there are resources within biblical studies (and in other resisting communities) which enable us to attempt to track and trace the boundaries of the text in search of her tale of terror and resistance. We, socially engaged biblical scholars, have reading resources for 'a more nuanced and literary reading' of the public transcript, provided we read with those who have the other reading resources we require for this task. So the third thing that reading with Rizpah reminds us of is that we have resources for participating in the construction of power/knowledge, to use Foucault's formulation (Foucault 1980). In offering our critical reading resources to ordinary readers we provide them with additional critical resources to construct knowledge through their readings of the Bible and so to have potential forms of power in their interactions with dominant forces in the church and society. Knowledge is power, and to have knowledge of the Bible offers them a place in the space that is usually taken up by others like us (see Mandew 1993:99-101).

The fourth and related feature Rizpah reminds us of, is that reading methodologies are there to be made use of. Various modes of reading were made to serve us, not for us to serve them. While ordinary readers are not as particular about how they use reading resources as we, the biblical scholars, we too are aware of the eclectic and strategic reading moves we sometimes make. The ordinary readers with whom we read teach us, as does Rizpah, that this is okay if it frees 'the meanings struggling to be freed' (Hendricks 1993:4). Certainly, we will only hear the margins of the text when we abandon notions of methodological purity and begin to make use of multiple methodologies.

The fifth, and again related, feature that reading with Rizpah reminds us of is not readily discernible in the reading presented above, but sits behind it. The Bible studies that produced this reading are themselves sites 'in which communicative practice engenders democratic values through the enhancement of communicative competence [in Habermas' sense of these terms]' (see Cochrane 1996:115). Contextual Bible study, where forms of community consciousness and critical consciousness find moments of intersection and transaction, provides resources and a place where members of poor and marginalized communities can

meet, communicate, construct knowledge, and co-ordinate their actions.⁹ Moreover, the point of presenting readings of particular communities, re-presented as they are, 'is precisely to bring a wider audience directly to the challenge confronting all of us which the communicative activity of the local community represents'. The *particularity* of these readings, produced as they are in a struggle for survival, liberation, and life, against the forces of dehumanization, destruction and death, is the point. The process that produced the readings is the challenge (Cochrane 1996:56).

Reading with Rizpah reminds us, sixthly, that there are other questions, the questions of others, which we can bring to our research as biblical scholars. By only talking among ourselves, we, the biblical scholars, curtail the questions that can be brought to the task of biblical studies. Through the process of reading with Rizpah we encounter new questions. The reading of Mark 5:21-6:1 recounted above is an example in which other, sometimes strange, questions are asked of the text. The reading of the Joseph story outlined elsewhere, is another example (see West 1994).

In reading that story using Azaria Mbatha's woodcut as a resource, we recognized that we could draw on other African resources and questions to recover aspects of the story which are only partially present in Mbatha's reading. African women readers began to probe for ways of uncovering the only partially told story of the women characters. Although the story appears to be about a father and his sons the movement of the plot is really determined by the respective relationships between the wives (Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah) and their husband (Jacob) and between these mothers and their sons. African readers have resources in their own traditions and cultures which could uncover and recover this matrilineal presence and power.

In probing the presence and power of women in the story we could draw on the distinction in Nguni culture between *indlovukazi* ('first wife': Leah), *inthandokazi* ('favourite wife': Rachel), and *isancinza* ('helper to the wife': Bilhah and Zilpah) as a resource for exploring the relationships between the women and their husband and their respective sons. That Reuben and Judah are the sons of *indlovukazi*, who is also the sister of *inthandokazi*, may help us to understand their attempts to spare his life (37:21-22, 26-27), and later in the story Judah's intervention on behalf of Benjamin (44:18-34). Joseph's demand that Benjamin be brought to Egypt is clearly connected to him being 'his own mother's son' (43:29).

We might not always find appropriate the resources and experiences of ordinary readers, and the questions their experiences and resources generate, but perhaps through the process of 'reading with' we can begin to hear beyond the boundary that there are questions other than our own.

Conclusion

The boundaries reading with Rizpah may remake us so that we are unable to return to where we have come from. This is the final effect of reading with Rizpah, to realize that readings have effects and to begin to experience these effects as they are felt by others. Readings matter, they have social effects. To read with those who are usually the victims of our readings is profoundly transforming. To feel the effects of our own dominating readings as we read with those who are struggling to resist such forms of domination will change us forever.¹⁰ But enough of talk, it is time once again to stand with Rizpah as she remembers the dead and fends off the forces of death and destruction in the struggle for survival, liberation and life.

9 For a more detailed analysis of these aspects of the contextual Bible study process see Cochrane 1996:62.

10 Jim Perkinson makes a similar point when he argues that knowledge, both social and self-knowledge, is possible for an oppressor 'only as the growing effect of a 'dislocation' into concrete, politically committed relationship to (on their own terms) those who are oppressed' (Perkinson 1995:3).

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