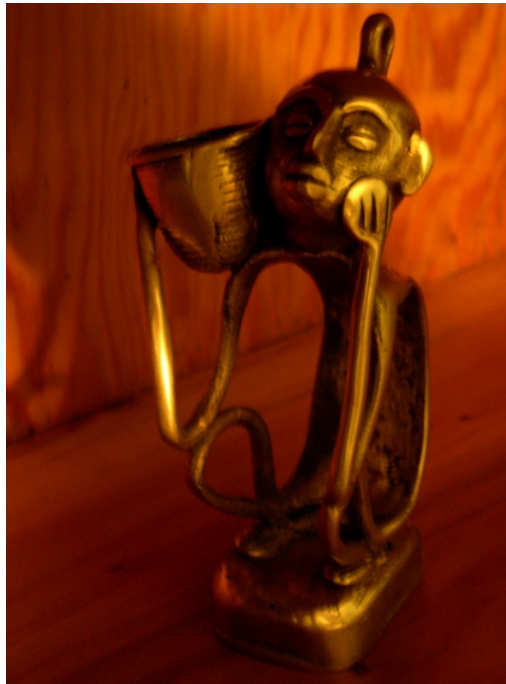


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# **Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual**



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**Produced by  
The Ujamaa Centre for Biblical & Theological  
Community Development & Research  
(formerly the Institute for the Study of the Bible & Worker Ministry Project)**

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# Part 1

## Chapter 1 Introducing the Manual

Welcome to this Resource Manual for Contextual Bible Study! The contents of this Manual have been produced over more than twenty years of doing Contextual Bible Study. It has been compiled from the work of the staff of the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, in the School of Religion and Theology, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa.

At the Ujamaa Centre, we have not only *done* Contextual Bible Study for more than twenty years, we have also *reflected* on Contextual Bible Study for more than eighteen years. So this Manual is the product of **praxis** – a cycle of action and reflection. For us, the Bible is a resource for social and individual transformation. Contextual Bible Study is methodology we have developed to do this.

We have done many hundreds of Bible studies in many hundreds of different contexts, all over the world, but mostly among black South Africans from poor, working-class, and marginalised communities. As we have done these Contextual Bible Studies we have also tried to understand *what* we have done, and *why* and *how* Contextual Bible Study is an effective methodology. The methodology and each Bible study in this Manual is a product of action and reflection. Reflection has led us to refine and revise what we do and how we do it; it has also led us to understand what we do in new ways. Each community we work with enables us to learn something new, both about a particular Bible study and about the methodology.

The picture on the front cover is of a bronze-caste figure which comes from Kolkata, India. It seems to represent praxis. The figure is frozen in the moment between action (the right hand) and reflection (the left hand). Work and analysis are beautifully captured in this moment. This figure, then, captures rather well the work of Contextual Bible Study.

This Manual is designed as a **pedagogical tool**. This means it is designed to teach the process of Contextual Bible Study. The only way to learn about Contextual Bible Study is to do it! Learning *is* by doing. So this Manual offers a number of Bible studies we have done, presenting them in a way that enables others to do them too. You will also find a number of Contextual Bible Studies in powerpoint on our website: [www.Ujamaa.org.za](http://www.Ujamaa.org.za), or <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za>

This Manual is not, however, a model answer. The Bible studies and the reflections on them are guides. Each study has itself been through a long process of reflection and revision. We have learned by doing, and encourage you to do so too. You need to make these Bible studies your own, be flexible in your use of them, adapt them for your own context, and construct others like these that will also meet the needs of your context. So **flexibility** is important.

The methods used here come from our understanding of our context, and as you proceed through this Manual you will have to decide whether these methods are of use to your context or not. Contextual Bible Study is a **methodology** – a way of working, rather than a fixed formula.

The Contextual Bible Study method is similar to many other forms of Bible study that have their

origins in the interface between socially engaged biblical scholars, organic intellectuals, and ordinary Christian ‘readers’ (whether literate or not) of the Bible. Many will be familiar with the **See-Judge-Act** method, where the Bible study process begins with analysis of the local context (See), and then re-reads the Bible to allow the biblical text to speak to the context (Judge), and then moves to action as we respond to what God is saying (Act). Social analysis enables us to understand our reality; re-reading the Bible enables us to judge whether our reality is as God intends it to be; and our plan of action enables us to work with God to change our reality.

Contextual Bible Study is a form of the See-Judge-Act method. First, Contextual Bible Study is always situated within the social analysis and needs of particular communities of the poor, the working-class, and marginalised. It is their perspective on reality that shapes the whole Bible study. Second, Contextual Bible study provides a way of doing theological analysis, “reading the signs of the times”. The Bible is read carefully and closely in order to hear its distinct voice within its own literary and socio-historical context, thereby providing a theological resource from which to reflect on and engage with our social analysis. And third, Contextual Bible always ends with emancipatory action. The process ends with a re-engagement with the local context, using the theological resources provided by the Bible study to plan for social transformation.

This Manual is a very practical resource as you begin to work with the Contextual Bible Study methodology. It has been designed to **complement and supplement** the resources already available in:

- *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993)
- *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003)

The studies are presented in a **step-by-step process**. The ‘steps’ are a guide to make you familiar with the process. Once you are familiar with the process, you can develop your own way of working.

There are **different ways to use the Manual**. Some might want to work systematically through the Manual, starting with the first study and following each study, one after the other, until the last. Others might want to work through the first part of the Manual and then choose a particular Bible study that relates to their context.

It should be noted that the studies are written in English, but all of them have also been done in other African languages. Please feel free to translate them into the language that you will be using.

Each Contextual Bible Study in this Manual has a number of components. The basic component is the Bible study questions. These are the ‘bones’ of the Contextual Bible Study. As you use these questions in a Bible study group, the group will put ‘flesh’ on the bones, and the bones will then live (Ezekiel 37)!

Alongside the basic component there is in some of the Bible studies some reflection on the Bible study from our experience. This may be useful in helping you to understand how groups work with the questions. But your group may respond differently! This component is called: “Summary of the Reading Process in a Typical Bible Study”.

Finally, in some of the Bible studies there is a section in which we reflect on the methodology of the Bible study. This section is designed for those who want to dig more deeply into the Contextual Bible Study process. This component is called: “Contextual Bible Study Methodology”.

**The studies in this Manual are for anyone to use.** The facilitator of a study does not need to be a trained person with a theological background. Nor do they need to be ordained clergy (or a minister). These studies are for any and everyone who wants to read and understand their own experiences and context in the light of the Bible.

## Chapter 2

### Introducing the Ujamaa Centre

The Ujamaa Centre is an organisation that locates itself in the interface between biblical studies in academic institutions and ordinary African ‘readers’ (whether literate or not) of the Bible in local communities of faith. Staff from the Ujamaa Centre are mostly ‘organic intellectuals’, coming themselves from among the poor, working class, and marginalised.

The Bible studies in this Manual all come from ‘real life’ situations and community contexts. They have been ‘constructed’ over a period of time, involving a number of people or groups of people. Typically, what happens is that the Ujamaa Centre is approached by a particular group to participate with them in Bible study or theological reflection. When invited, staff from the Ujamaa Centre first find out whether the invitation comes from a group that already has some degree of structured organisation. Organised groups tend to have a stronger sense of identity than unorganised groups. It is this sense of identity that enables a group both **to own** the particular project they are inviting the Ujamaa Centre to participate in, and to ‘talk back’ to the Ujamaa Centre. Implicit in any participation with church and/or community based groups are complex forms of power. Therefore, the Ujamaa Centre prefers to work with groups which will not be intimidated by the presence of the Ujamaa Centre staff and their resources, groups which have a fairly clear idea of what they want from a particular project, and groups which know what resources they themselves bring to the Contextual Bible Study process. A key commitment of the Ujamaa Centre is to work within the reality of a particular group, as it is experienced and understood by that group.

If the invitation comes from an unorganised group or if the organised group has only a vague idea of their project, then the Ujamaa Centre offers resources which would assist the group to structure itself and/or to formulate their project more carefully. It is important that the group itself has done some **social analysis** of their context (See). The Ujamaa Centre also encourages groups to draw in related groups from their community and/or church which share similar concerns. For example the Ujamaa Centre would suggest to an Anglican women’s group that they invite other women’s groups in their area to join with them to form an ecumenical project.

The contribution of the Ujamaa Centre is to facilitate a Contextual Bible Study workshop. Usually the workshop is based on a theme or issue that has come from the group. For example, the group may want to deal with the question of violence against women, or leadership, or unemployment, or HIV and AIDS. In many cases the workshop will include other activities and resources as well; Contextual Bible Study comes alongside these activities and resources to make its contribution. There are many resources for social and individual transformation; Contextual Bible Study is one resource, but an important resource in communities where the Bible is a significant text.

In our social analysis the Ujamaa Centre recognises that individuals and structures need be changed. The church has tended to emphasise the individual, but the Bible has much to say about evil and sinful structures and the need to change them. Contextual Bible Studies deal with both.

Each of the Bible studies in this Manual have been done by real groups in real contexts. Each of these groups has brought their own unique needs, experiences, insights, and resources to the Contextual Bible Study process. In the same way, you and the participants in your group are encouraged to make these Bible studies your own, and to use them in way that engages with your context.

The Ujamaa Centre works within a framework of **four basic commitments**:

1. A commitment to read the Bible from the perspective of the poor, working-class, and marginalised.
2. A commitment to read the Bible collaboratively.
3. A commitment to read the Bible critically, using the critical resources of both biblical scholarship and local reading communities.
4. A commitment to read the Bible for individual and social transformation.

Sarojini Nadar has characterised these four commitments as the 4 'Cs' of Contextual Bible Study: Context, Community, Criticality, and Change. This is a useful way to remember these four commitments.

Wherever the Bible is a significant and sacred text, Contextual Bible Study is a useful vehicle for mobilising religious resources in the transformation of society. Contextual Bible Study on its own cannot solve our problems, but it can create a sacred space in which to deal with difficult issues and it does offer additional resources for dealing with the issues that confront us in our contexts. Contextual Bible Study emphasises the **systemic dimensions** of our lives and the systemic dimensions of the Bible, bringing these two into dialogue through the Contextual Bible Study process.

## Chapter 3

### Introducing Contextual Bible Study

Much of what is discussed in this chapter will make more sense once you have actually participated in a Contextual Bible Study, or facilitated one. Nevertheless, some orientation to the Contextual Bible Study process is useful. In fact, it is strongly encouraged that you read through this section before using any of the studies in the Manual.

There are **five steps** which can be identified in the construction of a Contextual Bible Study. But please note once again that these ‘steps’ are a guide rather than a set formula.

#### Step 1 – Identifying a Theme (See)

Contextual Bible Study always begins with the reality of the local community. It is always guided by the issues or **themes** that a particular local community is dealing with. Groups which are already organised usually have a very good idea of the issues confronting them in their community.

Newly formed groups, however, may need some assistance in coming together to do social analysis of their context. This is an important first step! Contextual Bible Study always begins with the contextual concerns of the community.

#### *A Note to the User on Choosing a Theme*

Each of the studies in this Manual has a theme. Some studies can be used to address more than one theme. When you choose which of the studies to use, it is important to choose one with a theme which is relevant to the context of your group. In fact it is a good idea for the group to see a list of themes, and to decide for themselves which one is of the greatest concern to them and their community. The ‘Contents’ page provides a list which may be used when deciding upon a theme.

#### Step 2 – Discerning a Biblical Text (Judge)

Once the theme is determined, the actual planning of the Bible study can start. Now that you have discerned theme, you can identify a **biblical text** that might address this theme – that might ‘speak into’ this theme.

The Ujamaa Centre uses two approaches here. While we can and do read the texts that the group chooses, we also bring to them biblical texts with which they are less familiar. In other words, we read familiar texts in unfamiliar ways (by approaching them differently), *and* we read unfamiliar texts (those texts that are neglected, avoided, or forgotten by the church). Reading familiar texts in unfamiliar ways and reading unfamiliar texts allows the group participants to re-read the Bible, hearing it speak in a new way.

By linking a particular biblical text to a particular theme the Contextual Bible Study process



explores whether there are **lines of connection** between our own contexts and the biblical contexts. It is not always easy to identify an appropriate biblical text. So it is important to become a 'life-long' reader of the Bible, committing ourselves to read the Bible in all its breadth and depth.

### ***A Note to the User on Finding a Text***

For the studies in this Manual, certain scriptural texts have been chosen and worked with during the construction of the studies. You and the group participants should feel free to make the study your own by adding and exploring other texts relevant to the chosen theme. However, it is important to try and deal with one text at the time. We must avoid jumping from one text to another. Contextual Bible Study is committed to hearing the voice of each text in detail.

## **Step 3 – Formulating Questions (Analysing and Linking Text and Context)**

Contextual Bible Study is based on asking questions about our context and about the biblical text. Contextual Bible Study therefore uses two types of questions.

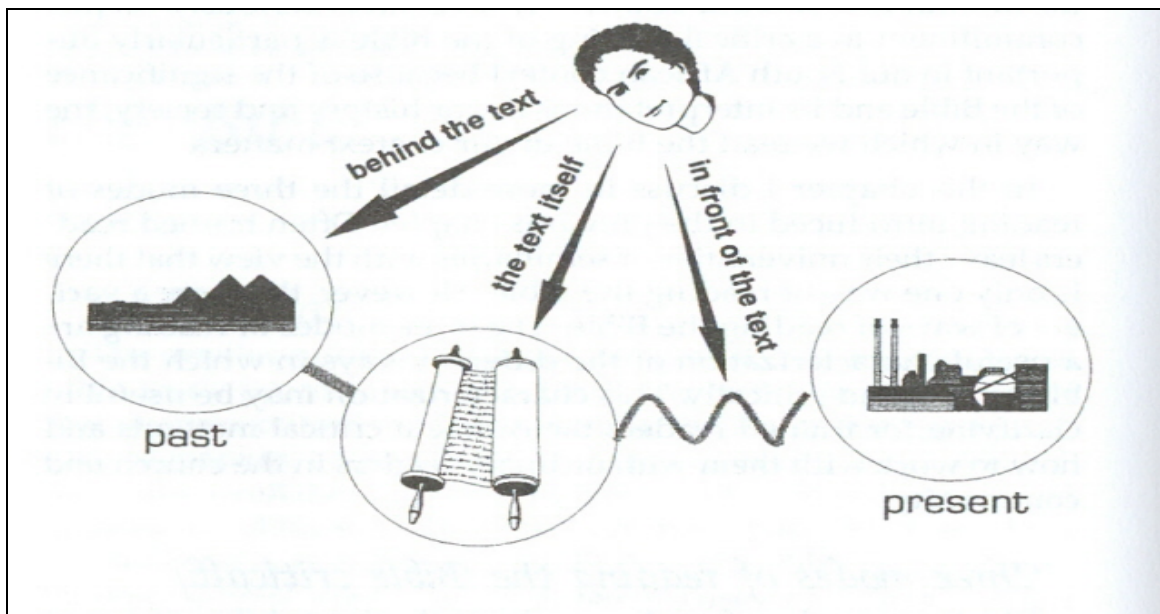
The Bible study begins and ends with **contextual questions** which provide the framework for the Contextual Bible Study. These contextual questions are also called '*community* consciousness questions', because they draw on the resources of the community. They draw on the lived experience and the embodied theologies of the participants themselves. They also draw on the kinds of interpretations that the community has heard from the church.

Within this framework of contextual questions, we construct carefully formulated **textual questions**, which force the group to constantly engage with the biblical text. These textual questions are also called '*critical* consciousness questions', because they draw on the systematic and structured resources of biblical scholarship.

The challenge for the socially engaged biblical scholar is to construct questions that open up the biblical text in such a way that it has the potential to address the context of the participants.

The resources of biblical scholarship focus on the three dimensions of the text:

- *Behind* the text (focussing on the socio-historical world that produced the text);
- *On* the text (focussing on the text itself as a literary composition); and
- *In front of* the text (focussing on the possible worlds the text projects beyond itself towards the active reader).



Each of these dimensions of the texts can be used with the Contextual Bible Study process. We have developed a methodology in which we usually use these three dimensions in the following way:

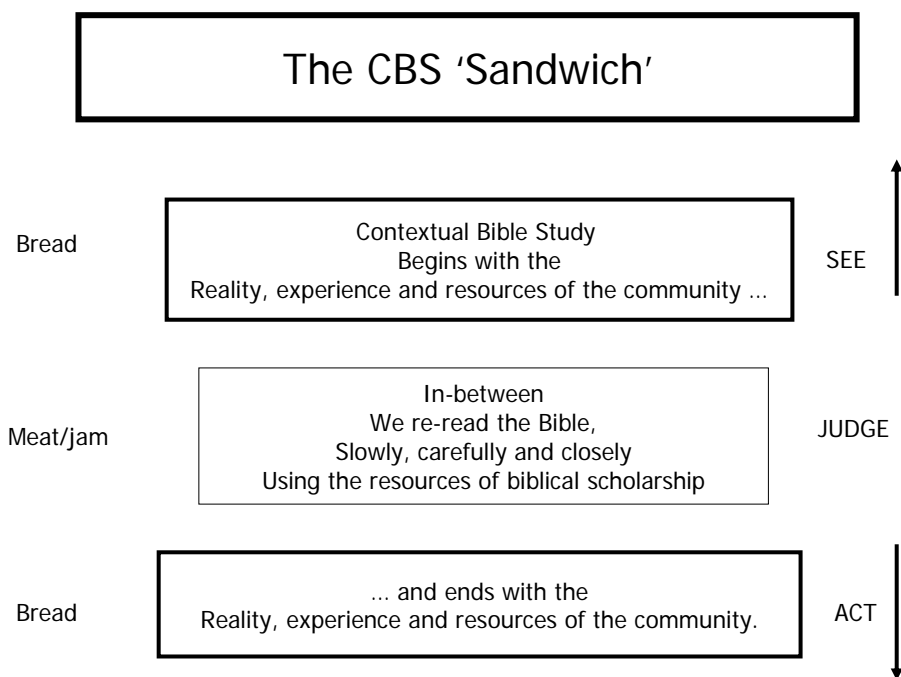
1. We begin with an *in front of the text* focus, asking participants what they think the text is about. Here they are asked to draw on their own understandings of what the text says or has said to them.
2. Then the focus moves *on to the text* itself, allowing the detail of the text to 'have its own voice' among the voices of the participants. Questions which draw the readers into a close, careful and slow reading of the text are used here.
3. Next, questions which invite the participants to probe the world *behind the text* can be used. Often these kinds of questions will be generated by a careful focus *on the text* (see above), but if not, the facilitator can construct a question or set of questions which explore the historical and social world from which the biblical text originates.
4. Finally, we conclude by focusing again *in front of the text*, to examine what the text now says to us. We have re-read the text using 'internal' (on the text) and 'external' (behind the text) resources, so we now need to ask once again what the text says to us.

Literary questions (point 2 above) slow down the reading process, enabling participants to read the text more carefully and closely than they usually do. John Riches from the Contextual Bible Study Group in Glasgow, Scotland, talks of the need to slow down the reading process, allowing readers more time with the text. Literary questions also open up the narrative world to the reader, inviting the reader to enter and locate themselves within this world. Any reader can do this, even if they have not had training in literary analysis. The questions of the socially engaged biblical scholar provide the participants with opportunities to re-read the text, recognising the details of the text. By focusing on the details of the text, many participants now want to know more about the world the text came from. This is now the opportunity to use socio-historical questions, which allow us to move back in time and space to enter the world from which the biblical texts have come.

In summary, when we have carefully re-read the text, having heard the voice of the text in its literary detail and having the voice of the text in its own world, we now in a position to ask again what it is saying to us and how we will respond to it. Through this process we allow the biblical text to have a clear and distinct voice among us; our voices join with its voice to hear God speaking

a new word to us; and we then commit ourselves to God and each other in a plan of action.

It is this **combination of contextual and textual questions** that constitutes the Contextual Bible Study method. By fusing community consciousness with textual consciousness, the text speaks in a new way to our realities. The **CBS ‘Sandwich’** diagramme illustrates this collaboration between community and critical consciousness. It is important to note that the process of ‘Seeing’ begins before the Contextual Bible Study, for the theme of the Bible study comes from the social analysis of the community with whom the Bible study is being shared. Similarly, the process of ‘Acting’ continues long after the Contextual Bible Study is complete, for the action plan is always the action plan of the local community and so is dependent on their resources and timing.



#### Step 4 – Articulating and Owning (Making the Bible Study Our Own)

Once the questions have been designed, the Contextual Bible Study now has a life of its own! What emerges now belongs to the group. The power of the Contextual Bible Study process is that it allows participants to **articulate and own** their own interpretation of a particular text in relation to their context. The combination of contextual and textual questions has the potential to establish lines of connection between the biblical text and the embodied local/contextual theologies of the participants. This connection between text and context often gives the participants an increased capacity to articulate these incipient (partially formed) and inchoate (not yet clear) embodied local theologies.

If the Bible study is a safe place for participants – a place of trust and affirmation – then they may begin to articulate their embodied theologies. **Embodied theologies** are those theologies that are formed within us, partly by our theological heritage and partly by our own experience of God and the world. For many marginalised people their embodied theologies are different from the public theologies of the church, so Contextual Bible Study is an important resource in enabling marginalised people to articulate and own their embodied theologies. In most cases, participants

from marginalised contexts have very little opportunity to test out whether their own embodied theology is shared by anyone else. Contextual Bible Study provides this opportunity to try to articulate and then own local contextual theologies.

In the normal life of most church-goers their embodied theologies are only partially engaged, affirmed, articulated and enacted within their own local church. Because of this, many Christians go to one church ‘by day’ and another church ‘by night’! Because they are made in the image and likeness of God, there is a deep yearning to have their embodied theology engaged by the church, affirmed by the church, articulated by the church and enacted by the church. Unfortunately this seldom happens in the church, but the Contextual Bible Study process provides an opportunity.

## **Step 5 – Developing a Plan of Action (Act)**

Contextual Bible Study always ends with action. Each small group that participates in the Bible study must develop an **action plan**. Contextual Bible Study is not merely about interpreting the Bible; it is about allowing the Bible to equip us to change our world so that the kingdom of God may come on earth, as it is in heaven! Because the Contextual Bible Study process empowers participants to articulate and own their local contextual theologies, there is now an increased capacity to act. Provided the group remains in control of the process, action is a necessary outworking of Contextual Bible Study. Groups usually know what can and cannot be done in their local communities. Certain actions may not be wise within the constraints of a particular context, but some kind of action is always possible.

The Ujamaa Centre usually encourages participants to plan action at three levels: first, to plan an action that can be done with no additional resources; second, to plan an action that can be done with some additional resources; and third, to plan an action that will require substantial resources.

Contextual Bible Study should make a difference in the **public realm**! So participants are encouraged to plan an action that moves from the Bible study group into the public realm of the church and/or society.

### ***A Note to the User on Developing a Plan of Action***

Contextual Bible Study on its own cannot accomplish the move from study to action. It is a good idea therefore, to provide participants with additional resources from non-governmental, governmental, and community-based organisations to take their plan of action forward.

## Chapter 4

### The Role of the Facilitator

Key to Contextual Bible Study is the role of the facilitator. Contextual Bible Study is a collaborative process and therefore requires a form of **leadership that facilitates**. We are all familiar with dominating forms of leadership. These styles of leadership are inappropriate for Contextual Bible Study. The leader must be a facilitator.

Facilitation is more than a technique; it is **an art and a spirituality!**

The primary role of the facilitator is to assist the overall purpose of Contextual Bible Study, namely **group collaboration**. Therefore, the facilitator needs to be someone who enables the group to work together collaboratively, sharing their resources and moving to some common action.

To be the facilitator of a Contextual Bible Study, you do not have to have a qualification; facilitation is for ordinary Christians! Anyone is welcome to organise and facilitate the studies in this Manual. The studies in this Manual are easy to follow and are designed to help you work with the group through the Contextual Bible Study process.

### Facilitating the Process of the Contextual Bible Study

The following are important ‘tips’ for facilitation, but remember that the more you practise facilitation in a ‘real life’ context, the better you will become. Facilitation is a skill and a spirituality that can be learned by doing it!

1. Fundamental to facilitation is the recognition that it is not just a technique; facilitation is a ‘spirituality’ that recognises the image and voice of God in everyone.
2. It is important to **understand the group** which is doing the Bible study. The facilitator should be familiar with the demographics of the group participants: age, race, denomination, language, gender, cultures, traditions, similarities and differences, the size of the group etc. Preferably the facilitator should come from within the group itself. If, not then the facilitator must become familiar with the social realities of the group and must do social analysis together with the group so the facilitator herself or himself understands the major concerns and themes of the group.
3. The style of these studies is one of **participation** and **discussion**. This means that they are compiled with the understanding that each and every participant has wisdom – the ‘answers’ are not all with one person. In fact, the participants play a key role and have a valid contribution to make (see Chapter 5 also). So when a study is done, it should not be undertaken as if in a school classroom (with the facilitator as the ‘teacher’), but rather like a round table discussion between equals.
4. The facilitator is **just one voice** in the Contextual Bible Study, so the group must be allowed to express its voices, even if they are different from the facilitator’s. This does not mean that the facilitator does not have a voice, but it does mean that the facilitator’s voice is not the most important one. The overall purpose is *group* collaboration.

5. Including group participants in the practical aspects of the Contextual Bible Study is also crucial to the success of the study. The notes in this Manual make reference to tasks or **roles which may be taken up by group participants** – rather than the facilitator – adding a great sense of participation to the study. The facilitator should be aware of these roles and use them to include participants. Examples of these roles are as follows: someone who reads the biblical text/s; someone who writes summary notes onto the newsprint paper; the person who takes notes in each small group; the reporter from each small group; and someone who could open and/or close in prayer.
6. The facilitator needs to **enable the ‘group process’ to take place**. In other words, he/she should manage group dynamics, promote turn-taking, keep to time, summarise and systematise the reading results, find creative and empowering ways for participants to report back their findings to the plenary, and move the group from reflection into action.
7. It is important to be able to **manage conflict** when it arises between the participants. Conflict can be creative, so it is not a bad thing. However, it usually needs to be managed. Often the small group itself can manage conflict, but sometimes the facilitator may need to step in.
8. Since the Bible study is driven by questions, the facilitator needs to enable the participants to **engage with the questions** (and in so doing to engage with each other and the text of scripture).
9. The facilitator should try to **provide information when requested**, but always in a way that draws on the resources of the group. If the facilitator does not know the information, or an answer to a question, then he/she should say so! It is better to go and find out the information than to pretend to know.
10. It is important to stimulate the use of **local reading resources**. The facilitator must always be on the look out for the way in which the Bible is used in a community’s tradition and in popular culture. Local resources for reading the Bible can be an excellent way of drawing the group into an engagement with the details of the text.
11. The facilitator should be sensitive to the fact that **not all of the participants may be literate**. It is the role of the facilitator to ensure that there is sufficient discussion, explanation, or even repetition of any written material, so that those who ‘read’ through *hearing* are also able to participate fully in the study and not feel left out.
12. The facilitator should make sure that there is **sufficient time** for small-group discussion and report-back. If time is short, the facilitator can be creative in how groups report. For example, it is not necessary for each group to report in full on each question; instead, each group can be given a chance to lead the report-back on a question, and then the other groups only need to report on what has not already been covered.
13. The facilitator should keep the Bible study process **moving forward to the conclusion**. Anticipating how much time is needed to complete the process is important; this may need to be revised during the Bible study.
14. **‘Ice-breaker’ exercises** before the Bible study are an excellent way to help people to get to know one-another. Some examples of these are included at the end of the chapter.
15. **Dividing the participants into small groups** is a creative process that can be done in different

ways, depending on the nature of the Bible study. For example, in a Bible study on a gender-sensitive issue like sexual abuse, it is usually wise to divide people into groups of older women, older men, younger women and younger men. In other studies, where it is best to mix up the participants, then some simple exercises may be used to divide the participants, and examples of these are included at the end of the chapter.

16. Doing these studies may evoke great **emotion in participants**. This is because the themes may be painful and difficult for many people. The facilitator will need to be ready for this and sensitive to the needs of participants. Breaks for tea and meals can be used to 'debrief' participants. For some of the Bible studies it is necessary to have trained counsellors available. The facilitator should 'listen' not only to what people are saying with their words but also with their bodies.
17. There is value in doing some **preparation before the study** begins. You will need to:
  - Read through the whole study.
  - Read through the key text.
  - Read through all the questions within the study.
  - Write a few notes for yourself in preparation.
  - Decide how you will present the Bible study questions: on a blackboard, on a flipchart, on a powerpoint.
  - Gather the things you will need for the study (see the list below).

## **Facilitating the Practicalities of the Contextual Bible Study**

There are some very practical aspects to facilitating a Contextual Bible Study. A Contextual Bible Study requires careful preparation:

1. Contextual Bible Study preparation begins by recognising that the Bible study is just one component of a larger 'liturgical'/'spiritual' process; Contextual Bible Study includes worship, singing, prayer, etc. So it is important that preparations are made to include these dimensions and to make sure the local community 'takes charge' of these dimensions. In the process of Contextual Bible Study some of these 'spiritual practices' will themselves be transformed. Contextual Bible Study is concerned to transform all of reality, both the social and the spiritual.
2. Check that you have all the **necessary equipment** on hand, that there is enough of it, and that it works properly. These are some of the things which you will have to gather: pens, paper, a Bible, large newsprint paper (or a chalk board and chalk), large newsprint pens (kokis), a newsprint stand, and masking tape (or prestick, or drawing pins). If you are going to use powerpoint, then you need a laptop, a data-projector, a screen of some kind, and the appropriate electrical cords. Some of the Bible studies in this Manual require you to photocopy a picture which can then be handed out to the groups. Furthermore, you may need to find local reading resources (other than the Manual itself) which are relevant to the participants and their context.
3. Make sure that all the responses of the participants and their group reports are **written onto the newsprint** for all to see. The facilitator does not have to do this himself/herself, and could get someone else to do it. It is also a good idea to write the study questions onto the newsprint ahead of time, so that these can simply and quickly be stuck up for the participants to see when the time arrives during the study. When writing on the newsprint (or chalkboard), the following is important:

- Make sure the writing is easy to read and big enough for someone at the back of the room to see – the participants must not have to struggle to see what you have written.
  - Make sure the writing is legible and clear – handwriting is not always easy to read!
4. Think about the **venue** where the Bible study will be held: how big is it, does it have electricity, does it have chairs, can the chairs be moved, what kind of equipment is available, will it cost much (if you are paying), and will it generally be a good venue in which to hold the Bible study? Plan appropriately for the venue; it is important to try to visit and review the venue before you facilitate the Bible study.
  5. When you are facilitating a Bible study, it is important to ensure that there is **no obstacle between yourself and the participants**. Do not ‘hide’ behind a lectern, pulpit or table. Rather have a table to the side of the room, on which the equipment is available.
  6. In fact it is best to set out the **seating arrangements** in such a way that participants sit in a semi-circle and look at each other, rather than a ‘classroom’ style, where everyone is facing the ‘front’. It is best to not have people sitting behind tables. Remember that the role of the facilitator is to help participants play an active part in the Contextual Bible Study, and the way that participants are seated is crucial to this. Make sure the venue is set up before the study begins, so that when participants arrive, the study may begin right away.



## *Great Ideas for Facilitators*

### *'Icebreaker' Exercises*

**Taxis:** For example, people can be asked to join 'taxis', with a limit being placed on how many passengers the taxi has space for. So, for example, the facilitator will say, "Get into a taxi in groups of three!" Participants have a great time jostling and pushing and pulling each other as they try to form small groups of three. Each time this is done, those in the 'taxi' are asked to say something about themselves.

**Getting to know you:** Ask the participants to get into pairs. Each person should tell their partner something small and fairly unimportant about themselves that no-one else knows. This can be a different thing for different people. (Examples of 'something small' are: where their mother was born OR what their favourite colour is.) Their partner should listen carefully and also have a chance to say something. Then get each person to report back to the whole group on what their partner said e.g.: "Nonhlanhla told me that her favourite food is curry". The idea here is to get participants sharing comfortably in small and large groups without feeling threatened.

**Broken telephone line:** Ask everyone to be quiet. Whisper a short message into the ear of the first person. Only whisper once. Get them to in turn to whisper the message they heard from you into the ear of the next person. That person should pass on the 'telephone message' quietly to the next person. No-one should be allowed to repeat their message. Go around the room. The last person should share out loud the message which came through the broken telephone line!

### *Dividing Participants into Small Groups*

**Numbering:** Start with one participant, and number them as number 1. The person next to them is number 2, and the person next to them is number 3. Then the next person is number 1 again, the next number 2 and so on. Point at each person giving them a number: 1,2,3 ... 1,2,3 ... 1,2,3 etc. Then get all the number 1's to join together, all the number 2's and so on. This is an excellent way of dividing participants into mixed groups because it separates those who sit together.

**Mini-choirs:** Ask the participants to organise themselves into Mini-choirs. Each choir should have a person with a bass voice, a tenor voice, an alto voice and a soprano voice. (This is a particularly good way of dividing participants into groups where it is important for there to be a mixture of genders and ages.) Some small groups may need to have more than one type of voice. This is also a good way to make the point that everyone has a unique 'voice' to offer when doing a Contextual Bible Study, and that we all need to listen carefully to each other. Don't be surprised if spontaneous singing begins!

## Chapter 5

### The Role of the Participants

Contextual Bible Study always begins with the reality of the local community. Contextual Bible Study is always guided by the issues or **themes** that a particular local community is dealing with. Because of this, the role of the participants doing the Contextual Bible Study is as important as that of the facilitator. The Bible study is their Bible study!

Contextual Bible Study uses resources from biblical scholarship which have the potential to offer important insights to the church and community. And **ordinary readers of the Bible** who usually make up the majority of participants in a Contextual Bible Study also have important insights to offer the church and community. This Manual is designed for those who want to use their biblical training to serve the church and community, but who *also* want to learn from the insights and resources of ordinary readers of the Bible. The Manual promotes collaborative Bible reading!

We all bring our contexts with us when we read the Bible, and Contextual Bible Study recognises that we are all shaped by our contexts, and that our contexts are influenced by our readings of the Bible. Recognising the role that our contexts have on our reading of the Bible is important because we want to read the Bible explicitly from and for our context. The Bible itself shows that God speaks specifically to specific people in specific life situations.

But in any context we know that there are *different* realities/contexts. The Ujamaa Centre privileges the perspective of those who are **poor, working-class, and marginalised**. This choice is made because we believe that God is particularly concerned for the poor and the oppressed – those who are socially, politically, economically, or culturally marginalised and exploited. Throughout the Bible we read that God hears the cry of widows, orphans, women, strangers, those with disabilities, the poor, and the oppressed. Jesus himself was born amongst the poor and chose to live and work with the poor; he also died the death of one of the oppressed on a cross. So it is important that the perspectives of the poor and oppressed are heard in the Contextual Bible Study.

Those who have received biblical and theological training have important resources to offer to the church and community, but these resources can be used to dominate and control. Contextual Bible Studies recognises the experiences, concerns, and resources of ordinary people, and structures the Bible study so that these experiences, concerns, and resources can be shared (see Chapter 4). Contextual Bible Study is a sharing of the resources of socially engaged biblical scholarship and the resources of ordinary readers of the Bible from poor, working-class, and marginalised communities. Contextual Bible Study is committed to **reading the Bible collaboratively**. It is a collaborative process that respects the contributions of ‘ordinary readers’ of the Bible.

Contextual Bible Study can, of course, also be done with more privileged sectors of society, but in such cases the one of the roles of the facilitator is to remind those who are more privileged of the realities of the poor, working-class, and marginalised. This can easily be done by sharing with the more privileged group the kinds of contextual readings that have emerged from less privileged sectors of society.

## Chapter 5

### An Example of a Contextual Bible Study

Having introduced the Manual, the work of the Ujamaa Centre, the Contextual Bible Study process, the role of the facilitator, and the importance of the participants, we will now give a description of a typical Contextual Bible Study.

What follows is one typical example of a Bible study the Ujamaa Centre has facilitated on a number of occasions. It is described here to give you an idea of how a Contextual Bible Study ‘works’. It is based on the fifth study in this Manual, that of Mark 12:41-44.

Different communities have invited the Ujamaa Centre to work with them on the way in which structures and systems may become corrupt. For example, we have been invited to do Bible studies that address the experience of ordinary Christians whom the church often oppresses through the demands it makes on their giving; we have also been invited to do Bible studies that address the way in which economic systems in our country ‘create’ poverty. This Bible study addresses such issues. Again it should be stressed that this is not a ‘model answer’, but rather an indication of the process of a Contextual Bible Study.

Contextual Bible Study is an act of faith. So Contextual Bible Study is always immersed and saturated with prayer and singing; nothing happens among African Christians without spontaneous prayer and singing! Not only does every Bible study begin with prayer and singing, but nobody takes a position in the front of the group without being ‘escorted’ to the front with singing. Ordinary African Christians believe that God is with them, always, and that the Bible is a resource through which God speaks into their lives and contexts. So Contextual Bible Study always begins with an act of community, whether singing, praying, an ice-breaker, or some other opportunity to experience a sense of being a part of a community.

The people who make up our Bible study groups vary. As indicated above, we are invited to work with a broad range of believers, ranging from church leaders to local women’s groups. Our preference is to work with actual local groups of believers who have some ongoing commitment to each other in their context, but we do not refuse the invitation from church leaders. In our South African context, a call by the church leaders means that we are doing a Bible study primarily with men; a call by a local group of believers usually means that we are doing a Bible study largely with women.

Here you are invited to imagine you are participating in a Contextual Bible Study being facilitated by staff from the Ujamaa Centre. The Bible study begins with the following question:

Question 1: Listen to Mark 12:41-44 being read aloud. What is this text about?

The Bible study begins with all the participants together in a plenary session. The text is read aloud by a participant. This is very important, given that there will always be those present who are not fully literate; their ‘reading’ of the Bible is through hearing. Question 1 is then written on newsprint paper and the participants are invited by the facilitator to ‘buzz’ with their neighbour concerning what they think the text is about. After about five minutes the facilitator calls for responses to the first general question. Each and every response is then summarised by a note-taker

(from among the participants preferably) on the newsprint, in front of all the participants. The facilitator makes no judgements or comments, except to encourage participants to share their responses and to ask a participant expand on a response if it is not clear. When everyone has had an opportunity (and nobody is forced to speak), the process moves on.

By discussing the opening question in buzz-groups, the ice is broken and each and every participant is able to share something. Though tentative at first, there is usually a building crescendo of sound as participants discover that it really is 'okay' to say whatever they want.

Typical responses from ordinary South African Christians (and their pastors, ministers, and priests) concerning what this passage is about include the following: faithful giving, sacrificial giving, the importance of the right motives in giving, how the poor tend to give more proportionally than the rich, and other similar responses.

Once this question has been exhausted and the responses of the participants surround them on the walls where the newsprint has been hung, the next phase of the Bible study begins, this time in groups. For the rest of the questions the participants will work together in small groups of about 5-7 in a group. When the participants know who is in their small group, Question 2 is written on the newsprint:

Question 2: Now read Mark 12:38-40, the text that immediately precedes Mark 12:41-44. Are there connections between 12:41-44 and 12:38-40? If so, what are they?

In their small groups, Question 2 is discussed, but not before each group appoints its own facilitator and note-taker. The task of the facilitator in each small group is to enable discussion and the task of the note-taker is to summarise the key points of the discussion. Depending on time constraints, about 10-20 minutes can be allocated to this question. In our experience there is never enough time! When the time is up, each group is asked to report on their discussions, with the note-taker reporting on behalf of the group (after which, time permitting, other members can add to the report). Each group's responses are summarised on newsprint.

In our context, as participants move to and from their groups there is singing (and even dancing). Group work is enormously empowering and the energy of the groups finds expression in singing and dancing.

All groups with which we have done this Bible study detect connections between 12:41-44 and 12:38-40. Some of the connections they identify are the following: in both texts Jesus contrasts the powerful and the powerless; in both texts Jesus points to a difference of perspective between what society generally sees and what he (Jesus) sees; in both texts there is judgement; in both texts Jesus takes sides; in these texts there is a connection between the scribes "who devour widows houses" (40) and the "poor widow" (42). These and other connections are reported and elaborated by the groups.

By this stage in the Bible study there is considerable energy and excitement! Participants can hardly wait to get back into their groups.

Question 3: Now read Mark 13:1-2, the text that immediately follows Mark 12:41-44. Are there connections between 13:1-2 and 12:38-44? If so, what are they?

After the plenary reportback, the participants go back into their groups for Question 3. By now they have grasped the basic idea and readily take up Question 3. The facilitator usually comments on the chapter division, indicating that chapter divisions were not a part of the original text, but were added many centuries later, encouraging the participants to decide for themselves whether the chapter division is in the appropriate place. Such short inputs can be helpful throughout the Contextual Bible Study process.

Similarly, after sufficient time, each group reports (though in a different order). As with the previous question, all groups do find connections between 12:38-44 and 13:1-2. They find that Jesus again contrasts and compares differing perspectives – things are not what they seem! Furthermore, Jesus once again judges. And, as in 12:38-40, 12:41-44, here in 13:1-2 Jesus is dealing in and with the temple.

The plenary reportback again allows for each group to report on its findings, which are once more written up on newsprint.

Question 4: Jesus comes into the temple at 11:27 and leaves the temple at 13:2. In this literary unit who are the main characters or groups of characters, what do we know about them, and what are the relationships between them? Draw a picture of the relationships between the characters in the temple. What does your picture say about the literary unit as a whole?

Back in their groups, participants tackle Question 4. This is a demanding question, but one that groups enjoy. We usually give plenty of time for this question (about 30-45 minutes) and encourage groups to actually draw a picture of their findings on a sheet of newsprint. Here is an example of what one group drew: a football/soccer match between the leaders of the temple and the ordinary people (including the poor widow) with Jesus as the referee!



During the plenary reportback, each group puts up its picture and explains what they have drawn. The discussion which accompanies the drawing is usually wide-ranging and full of insight into the text. Sometimes a group will ask for additional information as they give their report; for example, participants might ask who the Herodians were, or how the temple functioned in the time of Jesus. At this point, or later under Question 5, the facilitator should be willing to share relevant socio-historical resources.

What emerges from Question 4 are readings of the text which can be summarized as follows (with different small groups discerning different features of the text). Most Christians are familiar with this passage in Mark's gospel. We have heard sermons and participated in Bible studies on this text. Most of us 'know' what the text is about; it is about being a good steward, faithful giving, sacrificial giving, the importance of the right motives in giving, how the poor tend to give more proportionally than the rich, etc. While such interpretations do capture certain important aspects of the text (12:41-44), we realise that we must be prepared to go deeper if we are to equip the Church in its work in South Africa.

First, we discover that it is useful to take account of the literary or linguistic context of the passage we are reading. Initially, there may not appear to be much of a connection between 12:41-44 and those texts that precede and follow it. However, a careful reading reveals that there are a number of interesting connections between Mark 12:35-40 and Mark 12:41-44. In Mark 12:35-40 Jesus is arguing against the teaching (verses 35-37) and the practices (38-40) of the scribes. One of the practices of the scribes which Jesus warns his disciples and the crowd to beware of is that they "devour widows' houses" (40; NRSV). While it is not quite clear from the text what this means, what is clear is that in the very next verse, as Jesus watches people putting money into the treasury, there among them is "a poor widow" (42)! The attentive reader can therefore make the connection: the scribes who devour widows houses are probably the reason this widow is poor! She is not simply a faithful giver; she is also a victim of the oppressive practices of the scribes. This connection shifts our focus from an individual (the widow) to an oppressive system (the practices by which the scribes devour widows' houses). Of course, knowing now that her poverty is as a result of an oppressive system only makes her giving that much more remarkable. But in addition to portraying this widow's sacrificial giving, Mark also wants us to notice the connection between the practices of the scribes and this woman's poverty.

When we turn to the section that immediately follows the text we began with, we find similar connections. Unfortunately, however, there is a chapter division here, but disregarding it we find much of that resonates with we have already discerned together. So when we ignore the chapter division and carry on with our reading we find that Jesus leaves the temple in 13:1 and then pronounces judgement on it (the temple) in 13:2. Clearly Jesus has been in the temple until this point in the story. Another connection now emerges: while in the temple Jesus criticises the scribes; while in the temple Jesus watches a victim of the scribes, the poor widow, put her money into the temple treasury; and finally Jesus leaves the temple and predicts its destruction. The temple is common to each passage: 12:35-40, 12:41-44, and 13:1-2. Is there something about the temple that Jesus is opposed to? What is the relationship between the temple and the scribes? What is the relationship between the temple, the scribes, and the ordinary people that were "listening to Jesus with delight" as he denounced the scribes? Does the literary context provide us with some answers to these questions?

Question 4 gives us a literary context in which to explore these questions. Jesus leaves the temple

in 13:2, and the scene then shifts to Jesus discussing the future with his disciples on the Mount of Olives (13:3). If the temple is a key issue in the passages we have read, and if Jesus leaves the temple in 13:2, then we will need to go back in Mark to find when Jesus entered the temple. Jesus enters the temple for the first time in Mark's gospel in 11:11, but he does not stay long. Rather strangely, he goes to the temple, looks around, and then leaves the temple and Jerusalem, returning to Bethany. The next day he returns to Jerusalem and enters the temple again (11:15). This time Jesus acts: "he began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple" (11:15-16). Having acted, Jesus then teaches, saying, "'Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers'" (11:17). Immediately after this we read that "when the chief priests and the scribes heard it [all that had happened in the temple], they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching" (11:18). Once again, Jesus does not stay in Jerusalem, he leaves Jerusalem and returns to Bethany (11:19). The next day Jesus enters Jerusalem and the temple for the third time (11:27), and this time he does not leave the temple until 13:2! Given that the passage we began with, Mark 12:41-44, is a part of this section, it is important that we read the literary unit 11:27-13:2 carefully, in order to establish its main concerns.

The entire literary unit is located within the temple in Jerusalem; the temple is the setting in which all the action of the literary unit takes place. The literary unit 11:27-13:2 contains a number of smaller sections which have a number of common elements. The literary unit begins with Jesus being confronted by the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders as he enters the temple (11:27). In the first section of the literary unit (11:27-12:12) Jesus argues with the temple leadership – the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Conflict with the temple leadership characterises each of the sections of the literary unit, as we will see. Moreover, when we read the literary unit as a whole, it is clear that Jesus is supported by the crowd (12:12). This is an important feature of the literary unit: that the crowd is on the side of Jesus and that Jesus is on the side of the crowd (see 11:32, 12:12, 12:37). It is Jesus' support among the ordinary people that prevents the temple leadership from acting against him.

In the second section of the literary unit (12:13-17), we are introduced to more of the temple leadership, the Pharisees and Herodians. Once again, they attempt to trap Jesus, but he is able to counter their attempts at entrapment. Similar encounters then take place with other sectors of the temple leadership, in the third section of the literary unit (12:18-27) where Jesus is confronted by some Sadducees, and in the fourth section (12:28-34) where one of the scribes engages Jesus in discussion. Jesus responds quite positively to this lone scribe, recognising, that he is genuinely interested in understanding who Jesus is and what he is doing. However, after this discussion, and having been confronted by the full array of temple leadership, Jesus turns to the crowd and begins to offer them his own analysis of the temple and its leadership. This brings us back to the sections we began the Bible study with, but now from the perspective of the literary unit as a whole.

In the fifth section of the literary unit (12:35-40) Jesus provides a devastating critique of the scribes. As we have seen, he analyses both their teaching (12:35-37) and their practices (12:38-40), much to the delight of the large crowd that is now listening to him (12:37). Without a pause in the narrative, Jesus then sits down opposite the temple treasury and watches the victims of the teaching and practices of the scribes – and of the whole temple system – making their offerings. In this penultimate section of the literary unit, Jesus attempts to demonstrate to his disciples how the temple system exploits and oppresses – he shows them one of its victims, the poor widow. But the disciples are slow to understand, as they often are in Mark's gospel, and so when they leave the

temple in the final scene of the literary unit (13:1-2) they admire the beautiful temple building. But Jesus does not see a beautiful building, he sees an oppressive institution that is administered by corrupt and oppressive officials. This institution, this system, Jesus says, and all those whose teachings and practices that sustain it, “will be thrown down” (13:2); God will not tolerate such an oppressive system.

We now have a quite different reading of Mark 12:41-44 than the one we began with. A careful reading of this passage in its literary context has generated a reading that opens up a whole range of other (related) possible interpretations.

Question 5: How did the temple function in first century Palestine, in the time of Jesus?

The request for and/or the offering of socio-historical information enhances our picture. For example, a socio-historical understanding of the temple recognises that the temple ordered/structured the religious, social, political, and economic life of Israel. That the temple was not a religious institution only is useful information for most participants, particularly as they have begun to recognize, from their own ‘close’ reading of the text, that something more complex is ‘going on’ in the temple. First, the temple ordered each person’s status and social location in the social order. The outer walls of the temple identified the holy people, Israel, setting this people aside from all others. Within the temple there was a separate court for women, men, priests, and then the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest entered once a year. Significantly, the sick, the maimed and mutilated, the mentally and physically disabled, and ‘unclean’ women were excluded from temple worship.

Second, the temple ordered time through its annual cycle of festivals, including, for example, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Booths, Passover, Pentecost, and many more. And, as we will see, these festivals were integral to the economic functions of the temple. Third, the temple ordered the political life of Israel. After the Roman procurator, the High Priest was the most powerful individual in Roman occupied Palestine. The High Priest controlled the governing body of the temple and the high council of the Sanhedrin. The 70 members of the Sanhedrin (a sort of parliament under the Roman procurators) were drawn largely from the chief priests, Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes – all of whom were closely connected with the temple. Members of the Sanhedrin were also drawn from the Jewish secular aristocracy – the elders and the Herodians. So the groups mentioned in Mark are not just religious figures, they are clearly political figures too. Furthermore, there are additional political dimensions to the relationships between the temple and its leadership and Roman imperial power. The Roman procurators, when resident in Jerusalem, were quartered, together with their military troops, in the fortress of Antonia, which looked down on the temple court from the north-west corner; furthermore, the fortress Antonia also housed the high priestly vestments, a sign of Rome’s control and the subjection and collaboration entailed in the appointment of the High Priest.

Finally, the temple ordered the economic life of Israel. In fact, the only groups that were hostile to the temple, the Essenes and the Jesus movement, focussed on the economic dimension of the temple system. The Essenes, for example, rebelled against what they saw as a corrupted temple, mainly because it compromised “for the sake of riches”, and piled up “money and wealth by plundering the people” (*Damascus Document*). Jesus, as our reading has already suggested, had similar reasons for acting prophetically against the temple. The temple was the primary economic institution in Judea; it gathered its income from the people through taxation, tithes and offerings, and tribute. The regular festivals were times when devout Jews were encouraged to visit the temple and make



contributions to it. The temple treasury held considerable resources, some of which were used to minister to the needs of the people, but the bulk of which were used to buy land and make loans. Through the rent charged on temple owned land and through the interest charged on loans and the foreclosure on bad-debts, the temple amassed considerable wealth. This wealth was controlled by the temple elite, whom we meet in Mark 11:27-12:37.

In addition, the scribes “devoured widows’ houses” in two ways. Scribes sometimes administered the estate of a widow on behalf of the deceased husband, draining the resources of the estate as part of their ‘levy’. Scribes also encouraged pious young men to bequeath their property ‘to God’; one of the consequences of this was that if their parents had need of their support they could argue that they could not support them because they had given their property to God! In this way the scribes “devoured” the resources a son might use to support his widowed mother. Jesus attacks this practise, known as Corban, in Mark 7:9-13, and may be alluding to the practice here as well.

As the Contextual Bible Study participants delve into the literary and socio-historical detail of the text their excitement is tinged with awe; they are amazed that the Bible can be such a rich resource and that they have been empowered to make sense of a complex text for themselves. The next phase of the Bible study enhances their sense of contribution, for it shifts now into how the text speaks to our contexts.

Question 6: Summarise your key understandings of how Mark 11:27-13:2 ‘frames’ the text we began with (Mark 12:41-44).

This Question gives the group a chance to assess what they have learned in their re-reading of Mark 12:41-44. There has been a lot of discussion and many new insights have been gleaned from the text and from other participants. Different small-groups may emphasise different dimensions of the text. For example, some small-groups have reported that Jesus and the widow are co-teachers! They are both, in different ways, teaching about God’s priorities. Other small-groups have emphasised the role of the crowd, reporting that Jesus offers the crowd a choice between the ‘old’ theological traditions and their effects and the ‘new’ theological traditions and practices of the Jesus movement. Other small-groups focus on the temple-based economic system and how it fails to care for the marginalised in society, but how it allows the leadership to accumulate wealth.

This question should not silence the different voices in the group; instead it should demonstrate the depths of the text and the various potential meanings that the text has for us.

Question 7: How does this text speak to our respective contexts?

Question 8: What actions will you plan in response to this Bible study?

The final two questions are again answered together in groups. Once more, groups are encouraged to summarise their responses and their ‘action plan’ on a piece of newsprint. If time permits, there should be plenary reportback on these questions so that all the participants can share in the contextual responses of the other groups and learn from their various action plans.

The responses to these questions are as various as the groups that come together to discuss them. All participants find resonances between their corporate reading of the scripture and their context. With respect to Question 7 some South African groups have argued that our liberation government’s post-liberation macro-economic policy, by buying into global neo-liberal capitalism,

actually ‘produces’ unemployment, though it is designed, we are told, to create more jobs. Others argue that there are structures and systems in their churches and/or cultures that exploit and exclude the powerless (whether they be women or people living with HIV and AIDS) when they should be protecting and providing for them.

When it comes to their action plans, groups are very local and very creative. In some cases groups have decided to design a liturgy that can be incorporated into the worship of their church which calls the church to be a safe place for people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. Other groups have planned more political actions, and have begun to lobby our government for a Basic Income Grant to provide for and protect the poor.

All our Bible studies begin and end (and are interspersed) with prayer and singing. The Bible study described here is a ‘real’ Bible study, not an academic exercise. The description hardly captures the energy and excitement of ordinary African Christians engaging deeply with the Scriptures.

Having ‘done’ this Contextual Bible Study together, we turn now to reflect on the methodological processes shaping it.

### **Methodological reflections on Contextual Bible Study**

Contextual Bible Study works within the framework of the ‘See-Judge-Act’ approach to social transformation. This approach, or process, or method was developed by Fr. Joseph Cardijn in the 1930s in Belgium, where he was working as a chaplain among factory workers. The See-Judge-Act method has been one of the basic genres of contextual theology propagated in South Africa. This method meant starting with a social analysis, then proceeding to the reading of the biblical text and then to action. ‘See’ involves careful social analysis of a particular context ‘from below’, by organized groups of the marginalised. This ‘reality’ is then ‘judged’ by the biblical and theological tradition of ‘God’s project’. ‘The shape’ of God’s will for the world, on earth as it is in heaven, as reflected in the Bible as re-read from the margins, is used to interrogate ‘lived’ reality. The discrepancies between the shape of God’s project and the shape of lived reality for the marginalized give both the energy for and a shape to the ‘action’ that must be taken to transform lived reality so that it conformed more closely to God’s project.

Contextual Bible Study locates itself within this process of See-Judge-Act. Indeed, Contextual Bible Study is itself a form of See-Judge-Act. Before we take up an invitation to do a Contextual Bible Study with a community or church group, we make sure that they are an organized group, with a clear sense of their own ‘agenda’. The overall workshop is then controlled by them and not the Ujamaa Centre. We come in to offer additional resources, alongside the resources they already have. Such a group will usually have done their social analysis, and will have invited us to engage with this ‘reality’, whether it be violence against women, HIV, or economic justice.

We may make our contribution to the group’s social analysis, using creative resources like drama or posters to focus the group’s attention on a particular dimension of their context. This kind of activity also acts as an ‘ice-breaker’, encouraging engagement and participation, and is an excellent way of beginning a Contextual Bible Study.

The first question in the Bible study described above continues the process of ‘Seeing’, inviting participants to share their receptions of the text, and provides an implicit analysis of how the group ‘sees’ theologically: “Question 1: Listen to Mark 12:41-44 being read aloud. What is this text about?” We usually do this first question in plenary, with all the participants present. We write down every response offered, waiting for that first response. Many ordinary Christians do not

believe that the facilitator really wants to know what they think about the Bible, and so they are often silent, waiting for the authority figure to tell them what the Bible says! But we out-wait them, and eventually someone responds. We immediately affirm the response and write it up. By the third or fourth response the group is beginning to believe that this is ‘their’ Bible study, and then they cannot be stopped; the responses flow. This is an outpouring of what we call ‘community consciousness’; the voices of the participants are heard, affirmed, and ‘recorded’ on newsprint.

The second and third questions shift the pace of the Bible study. The ‘quick’ responses by the participants to Question 1 are now replaced by ‘slower’ small group work. As the Glasgow based ‘Contextual Bible Study’ project says, contextual Bible reading slows down the interpretive process, enabling an in-depth engagement with each other and the scriptures. Most ‘ordinary’ biblical interpretation is quick; biblical interpretation within Contextual Bible Study is slow. So enough time is needed to maintain a slow pace to the interpretive process. In addition, duration in itself is important. If, as some of us argue, ‘ordinary’ readers inhabit contending realms – the realm of the hidden transcript and the realm of the public transcript – Contextual Bible Study has to forge a safe and sequestered site before the poor and marginalised will be willing to share, tentatively at first, aspects of their hidden transcript.

Questions 2 and 3 offer the participants forms of what we call ‘critical consciousness’ with respect to the scriptures. These questions offer an opportunity to explore the internal relationships between sections of text. What the lectionary divides, Contextual Bible Study reconnects! In this case a very well known text, Mark 12:41-44, is ‘reconnected’ to the less well known sections that precede and follow it. The Contextual Bible Study does not do the work for the participants, it enables them to work ‘critically’ with scripture. Many Christians worry about working critically with scripture; while they regularly question and interrogate newspapers, radio and television, they wonder whether they are ‘allowed’ to question and interrogate scripture. We give them permission.

Question 4 extends the search for the literary unit to which Mark 12:41-44 belongs. Mark often uses shifts of setting to signal his literary units, so offering the participants the unit from Mark 11:27, when Jesus enters the temple, to Mark 13:2, when Jesus exits the temple, is a resource that most ordinary readers would not be familiar with, but also a resource which tries to be responsible to the textural integrity of Mark’s gospel itself. But Question 4 also breaks with the verbal emphasis of the Bible study to this point. Instead of reporting back from their small groups verbally, each group brings forward its drawing. Reporting back with a drama is another option, if there is time for the small groups to prepare a drama.

These drawings are placed on the walls of the venue alongside the sheets of newsprint with the plenary responses and the reports of each small group to Question 3 and Question 4. The participants are surrounded by their own words and images!

Question 5 is closely related to Question 4, and often flows from it. In their descriptions of their drawings, some of the small groups either share their understandings of the socio-historical dimensions of the temple or ask about them. Question 5 enables this kind of information to be shared and explored. For many ordinary Christians ‘what really happened’ in the time of Jesus is important. They want to know to what extent the world of Jesus is like their world.

As we have indicated in our description of the Bible study above, we draw on particular trajectories of biblical scholarship when we offer literary and socio-historical resources to local communities. The work of other ‘socially engaged biblical scholars’ informs our offerings, particularly the work that takes the structural or systemic dimensions of life seriously. Our life in ‘the south’ or ‘third

world' is indelibly shaped by overlapping systems of structural injustice, or structural sin.

Question 6 is a summary question: "Question 6: Summarise your key understandings of how Mark 11:27-13:2 'frames' the text we began with (Mark 12:41-44)". This type of question enables each small group to gather up their ideas and discussion, and can be asked in a variety of ways. We sometimes ask groups what they would 'sms' or 'text' to their friends from this Bible study.

Questions 7 and 8 shift the Contextual Bible from 'Judging' to 'Acting', and from 'critical consciousness' back to 'community consciousness'. The Contextual Bible Study belongs to the local community, and so this component is crucial, for the participants are asked to appropriate and act on what they have discerned from their re-reading of scripture. Each small group again reports what they have decided to do, placing their action-plans on newsprint as a formal commitment to action. Contextual Bible Study is a collaboration between ordinary Christians in local marginalized communities and socially engaged biblical scholars. It involves the sharing of resources and the sharing in a struggle for social transformation.

As we say in the Ujamaa Centre, to do Contextual Bible Study you have to be born again, again! The first time we are born again, we are, according to John 3:3, born "from above". Contextual Bible Study requires that biblical scholars be born again "from below". Our struggle for survival, liberation, and abundant life for all, requires us to collaborate with the social movements of the marginalized; our collaboration in this struggle is what generates the call to come and do Contextual Bible Study together. This is how Contextual Bible Study began in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in the mid-1980s. And this is how Contextual Bible Study will continue if it is to be of use in struggling for a world in which God's 'kin-dom' comes *on earth*, as in heaven.

On the next page, readers will find some further reflections about the methodology that shapes this Bible study. Most have been discussed already, but they serve here as a reminder and as further clarification.

## Contextual Bible Study Methodology

Two types of questions are used in the Bible study process:

- **Contextual or community consciousness questions** – which draw on the experiences, resources, and feelings of the community, as well as the reception history of the text in the community (e.g. questions 1, 7, and 8).
- **Textual or critical consciousness questions** – which draw on the structured and systematic resources of biblical studies (e.g. questions 2-6).

Two forms of textual or critical consciousness were used:

- **Literary modes of reading** were used which facilitate a careful and close reading of the text. The focus here is on the internal relationships within the text: beginning and ending of text, character, plot, setting, role of narrator, etc. Ordinary readers of the Bible do not normally read the Bible like this, so these are additional resources for their use.
- **Historical and sociological modes of reading** are used to explore the relationship between the text and the world that produced the text. The focus here is on the world behind the text: historical origins, author, date, and social, cultural, economic, political, economic, and religious analysis of the society that produced the text.

We tend to **begin** with literary modes of reading for two reasons:

- Because they offer more **equal access to the text**, and make the people less dependent on experts.
- Because the historical and sociological questions that then emerge in the reading process are **questions of the people** and not those of the scholars.

The role of the biblical scholar is to **‘read with’** ordinary people, not to ‘read for’ them. So we should facilitate the reading process by offering questions rather than answers. Knowledge is power, and belongs to the people. Ordinary people must discover that they too are producers of knowledge; this is empowering.

**Feedback and affirmation** of all responses is important. Ordinary people seldom have the space or the place to speak what is hidden in their hearts. Writing up their responses is empowering.

Notes or **minutes** should emerge from the Bible study process which capture the voices of the participants. These notes or minutes are a valuable resource because they embody the articulation and owning of local incipient readings and theologies.

Bible study is a communal and socially transformative process and so must lead to various forms of **organising and acting**.

Summary of questions	Summary of methodology
<p>1. Read Mark 12:41-44. What is the text about?</p> <p>2. Now read Mark 12:38-40. What are the connections between 12:41-44 and 12:38-40?</p> <p>3. Now read Mark 13:1-2. What are the connections between 12:41-44 and 13:1-2?</p> <p>4. Jesus comes into the temple at 11:27 and leaves at 13:2. Who are the characters and what are the relationships between them? Draw a picture of the relationships.</p> <p>5. What was the role of the temple in 1st century Palestine?</p> <p>6. Summarise in one sentence what Mark is saying in Mark 11:27-13:2.</p> <p>7. What does this text say to your context?</p> <p>8. What actions will you plan in response to this Bible study?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community consciousness question, drawing on interpretive resources and local knowledge of participants</li> <li>• Textual/critical consciousness questions, constantly returning to biblical text to read it carefully and closely</li> <li>• Sustained textual/critical interpretation</li> <li>• Uses creativity of participants</li> <li>• Invites socio-historical questions from participants; move from 'internal' to 'external' information</li> <li>• The summary helps participants to capture their own understanding of the text</li> <li>• Community consciousness questions, returning to draw on the resources and experiences of the participants</li> <li>• The Bible study begins and ends with community consciousness</li> <li>• The Bible study belongs to the community</li> </ul>

## Chapter 6

### An Example of Creating a Contextual Bible Study

This example takes as its starting point the reality of HIV in our contexts.

**See:** The process of creating a Contextual Bible Study begins with ‘Seeing’. Social analysis identifies, for example, the question of what ‘causes’ HIV and the question of where HIV comes from – the issue of HIV as “the illness of sinners”, as “the salary of sin” – as a key question.

**Judge:** Once the context of HIV has been analysed, the CBS then moves into bringing this ‘reality’ into dialogue with ‘other’ biblical resources for a more redemptive interpretation. The challenge is to develop a CBS that will address the ‘causal’ question. In this case we will use John 9, focusing on ‘the shape’ of the text.

**Act:** The CBS begins the process of moving into action through the action plan, but the actual action goes beyond the CBS into the life of the community. In this case the CBS seeks for forms of action that can be used in the church to challenge and change its stigmatising responses to those who are HIV-positive.

This is the kind of CBS that might be used:

Questions	Analysis
1. Listen to the dramatic reading of John 9:1-41, and then share briefly in twos how this text has been interpreted in your context.	Community Consciousness questions. This is a long text, full of dialogue. With good preparation it can be very powerful when read dramatically.
2. Jesus engages with a man born blind in a number of ways: Jesus saw him (v1); Jesus touched him (v6); Jesus spoke to him (v7); Jesus found him (v35); Jesus has a conversation with him and draws him back into community (v35-41). Re-read each of these encounters; what do these encounters say about Jesus and his attitude to the man born blind? Draw a picture which 'captures' these encounters.	Critical Consciousness questions. Literary resources are offered to the participants, showing the structure/shape of John's narrative.  You could simply ask: In what ways does Jesus engage with the man born blind? But, by offering the basic structure of the narrative, you speed up the process and keep the participants focused on the detail of the text.
3. The question the disciples ask in verse 2 reveals what they have been taught about sin and sickness. What is this teaching? What is their attitude to sickness?	The narrative begins with Jesus 'seeing' the man born blind, so the CBS begins with Jesus in Question 2. We now shift to the disciples; their question is the question of our churches! Though the focus is still on the narrative, this may be an opportunity to discuss the views of sickness and suffering in the time of Jesus.
4. What Jesus says to his disciples in verse 3 and his subsequent actions (see Question 2 above) reveal an alternative teaching. What is this alternative theological orientation?	This is an important question as it leads the participants to reflect on what the argument of John 9 seems to be. Jesus seems to be saying that the disciples are asking the wrong question! The right question is: 'What will we do when we see the man born blind?'
5. What is the theological orientation/teaching of your church towards those who are HIV-positive? Is it like that of Jesus or that of the disciples?	Here the CBS shifts back into community consciousness. By asking the participants to compare Jesus and his disciples you enable them to see that their responses and the responses of their churches are not 'like Jesus'.
6. How will you respond to this Bible study in your context? Egs. How would you preach about HIV and AIDS in a way that counters the dominant theological position that HIV is a punishment from God? What structures could be put in place your local congregation to make HIV-positive people welcome?	This question can be more general: 'What will you now do in response to this Bible study?' However, specific questions like these invite participants to actually prepare for change.

### John 9, Part 2

This Contextual Bible Study does not exhaust the riches of this text. There are other characters and relationships that we can also study more fully and more carefully. But this is best done in a second, related, Contextual Bible Study.

By doing this Contextual Bible Study on John 9 in two parts we can see how easy it is to link a



number of Contextual Bible Studies or to spread a Contextual Bible Study over more than one workshop.

Here is an outline of a second, related, Contextual Bible Study on John 9, following the same methodological format as the first.

Questions	Analysis
1. Read the text together again. Then summarise together what you did and discovered in the first Bible study.	This is an excellent way to ‘remember’ and re-experience what was done in the previous Bible study. It will also indicate what the group considered significant from the Bible study.
2. Four other groups of people also interact with the man born blind: his neighbours and acquaintances (v8); the Pharisees (v13); the Jews/Joudaioi/leaders of the Jews (v18, 24); his parents (v20). What do these encounters say about each of these groups and their attitudes to the man born blind?	These are characters that were not discussed in detail in the previous Bible study. They provide other theological orientations; other examples of stigma and discrimination.
3. What is the theological orientation of the Pharisees and the Jewish leadership?	This question opens up ‘space’ for further discussion about the kinds of theology that ‘surround’ HIV and AIDS.
4. What prevents the neighbours and family from being in solidarity with the man born blind?	This is a very important issue in our communities. This question enables us to analyse how stigma and discrimination ‘infect’ us all.
5. What does this text say to our context of HIV?	The final two questions are further opportunities to hear the challenge of this text and to respond to the challenge.
6. How will we work against stigma and discrimination in our churches and families?	